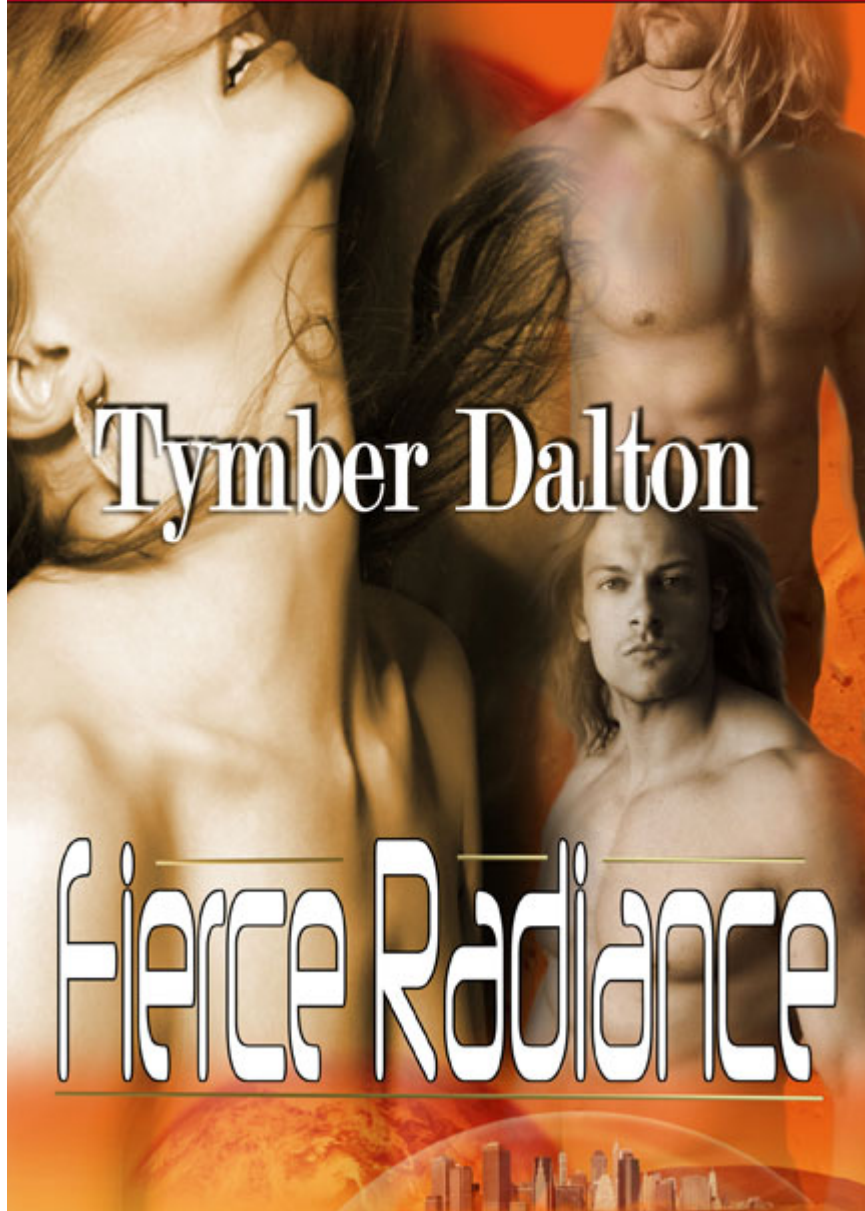


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Space Confederation 1

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With deep gratitude,

Tymber Dalton

DEDICATION

For the only man in my life, who wears many hats, holds my heart,
and suffers his way through reading my m/m scenes all in the name of
love.

FIERCE RADIANCE

Space Confederation 1

TYMBER DALTON

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Chapter One

Long, reddish-brown hair, matching the little girl's large brown eyes, flowed past her shoulders. She giggled as her older brother, Agnath, playfully held a cookie just out of reach over her head.

"Jump for it, Little One. Aine, jump!" He teasingly drew out the first syllable of her name in his usual playful way. *Annnnnnya*. Their parents had given them old family names. He quit counting the times he corrected people who wanted to spell hers "Anya." She lived up to her name's meaning—radiant. She was a radiant child, bringing smiles to those around her. Never petulant or bratty, always sweet and well behaved.

She giggled as she snatched the treat from his hand, quickly drawing her arms in as he scooped her up and gave her the usual tickling.

He spun her around. "You will be a whole four years old next week, Little One. I'll have to give you a birthday spanking." He'd talked to his parents and found a simple recipe for a birthday cake. Her presents were already safely wrapped and stashed in a compartment in their parents' closet.

"Nooo, Aggie! No spanking!" she squealed as he spun her. At sixteen, Agnath knew she saw him as an adult through her little eyes. With his basic studies completed until the new dependents' college

campus opened in three years, his only responsibility while their parents worked as mine engineers was to care for his little sister and the house.

Not that he'd ever admit it to his friends, but he didn't mind in the least. He loved his baby sister. He wanted her to have the carefree childhood he didn't get.

He kissed the top of her head before gently setting her on her feet and holding out his hand. "Come on, Little One. We need to go start dinner."

Their parents would return home in an hour. The Apaphax 4 diryllium mines ran around the clock, but because they had young children on-planet with them, Margo and Lyrill Padron could work the same shift during the day and be with their family in the evenings.

The two siblings walked down the hill from the bakery shop. Agnath carried a small cloth bag of fresh bread for their evening meal and his parents' lunch the next day. They were almost home when a loud rumbling sound, followed by an earth-quaking explosion, broke the relative quiet of the residential neighborhood kept separate from the mining company's harsher processing and freight districts.

Aine jumped and let out a terrified scream. "What was that?"

He immediately scooped her into his arms and ran back up the hill. In the distance, beyond the barren valley that marked the start of the mining sector, an ominously large, dark cloud of smoke arose from behind the foothills.

From the direction of the mines.

Others stepped out of the shops and small company houses. Agnath walked over to Mr. Tansy, who ran the produce market.

"What happened?" Agnath asked.

Grim-faced as the faint sound of warning sirens drifted across the valley to them, the grocer shook his head and glanced at the little girl cradled in Agnath's arms. "Take her home, Aggie. Lock your doors."

Agnath's face drew tight. There'd been rumors of raiders hitting diryllium mines throughout the sector. With Confederation forces too

far away to render assistance, the mining company hired mercenary fighters to help. They were slow to arrive.

Aine dropped the remains of her cookie and wrapped her arms around her brother's neck. "What's wrong, Aggie?"

He nuzzled her nose with his. "Don't worry, Little One. I'll keep you safe. I promise."

* * * *

Agnath did as Mr. Tansy suggested. Praying all was well despite the disturbing development of finding communications lines inoperable, the teen set about keeping his little sister occupied as he prepared their evening meal and kept her on her normal routine. When his parents didn't arrive at their usual time, he tried to distract Aine from looking out the windows by activating the protective shutters and setting the replacement vids to an undersea program. The fish usually distracted her.

Not tonight.

She sat in her chair at the table, her brow furrowed with worry. He sat next to her and curled a lock of her long hair around his finger. "Your face will freeze like that, Little One."

"Are they hurt?"

Nearing dark and still no word from his parents. He'd heard the rumble of large vehicles pass in the street outside their house, a discordant and unusual sound at any time of day, and especially eerie now.

"I don't know, Little One. Let's not think that. You need to eat."

He finally coaxed her into eating half of what she normally did and bribed her with an extra helping of fruit pudding for dessert. Three hours past sunfall, a soft knock sounded on their door.

Aine was distracted watching a vid in the den. Agnath took hold of the plasma pistol before he looked through the peephole. Their neighbor, Jahn Darxon, stood on their stoop and looked nervous and

filthy.

Agnath quickly let him in and quietly shut the door behind him. In his heart he knew. If his parents were safe they would have found a way home or sent word for their children not to worry.

“Tell me,” the teen demanded without hesitation.

Jahn grimly shook his head. “I’m sorry, Aggie. Raiders. Me and ten others got out because we were on the far side of the complex near a transport vehicle. Bastards blasted the main shaft.” He swallowed hard. “Your parents were still inside, on their way up. The hit destroyed the lift system. I’m so sorry. Everyone else died besides us. Over three hundred.”

Agnath nodded tersely, trying to remember the secret talk his father had with him not weeks earlier. What to do, how to best care for the baby. How to be the man should something happen to them. His father suspected a possible raider strike on the mine but hadn’t been able to evacuate their family without available outgoing transports.

“What’s going on? There’s no news at all.”

“A group of mercenary fighters arrived and drove most of the raiders off, but there’s talk of the raiders coming back with reinforcements, maybe some left here planet-side. The mercenaries are a very small troop. The merc leader told the district president that their back-ups are several days away. Confederation forces at least two weeks or longer.”

“Are they evacuating the families?”

“They can’t yet. The raiders destroyed the main transports at the passenger depot. Freighters aren’t allowed to take us since the raiders were mostly driven off. Confederation doesn’t consider it a ‘dire emergency.’ The mercs are in a small troop jumper. They’re hoping they can get us all out in two days, but you need to get over to the east freight depot. They’ve got it heavily guarded. All the families are assembling there for the evac.”

“That’s on the other side of the district!”

"I know." He looked past Agnath to the den doorway. Agnath turned and saw Aine standing there, clutching her stuffed bear in her arms.

"They're not coming home, are they?" she asked.

When he knelt down and motioned to her, she slowly drifted across the kitchen floor and took refuge in his arms. He hugged her tightly and closed his eyes as he fought his tears. He shouldn't cry in front of her. She needed him.

He promised his father to protect her with his life.

Jahn dropped his voice. "I'm going across to Parton's house. They both died. He once told me where he stashed his weapons. I'll bring you something."

Agnath nodded. "Thanks." All he had was the customary plasma pistol. His father wasn't a huge believer in weapons.

Hadn't been, he corrected himself.

Jahn let himself out. Agnath stood, Aine in his arms, and backed against the door before fumbling for the lock.

Aine hadn't cried yet, but her soft sniffing signaled the impending storm.

"Please don't leave me, Aggie."

His tears slipped down his cheeks. He kissed her forehead, her cheeks. "You're all I've got, Little One. You think I'll leave you alone to finger paint the ceiling, think again."

She laughed, but her tears started and they cried together until Jahn knocked again.

Agnath let him in. The man set a plasma rifle and three boxes of cartridges on the table. "I've got the rest. I need to find my brother's kids." He studied Aine, watching Agnath stroke her long hair. "Do you want some of my son's old clothes for her?"

Agnath's eyes snapped open in shock. Jahn's grimly calculating look told the teen more than his unspoken words.

"Is it that bad?"

Jahn nodded. "I've heard some reports. Or rumors. I don't know."

Better safe than sorry.”

Agnath nodded.

Jahn left again and returned less than an hour later with a small satchel. “I wish I could take you kids with me, but now I have mine, my brother’s, and my wife’s sister’s kids to take care of. Thank the gods my wife had the day off.”

“I understand.” Agnath looked into the living room. Aine lay on the couch, where she cried herself to sleep a few minutes earlier.

Jahn dropped his voice. “Get to the east freight depot. It’s rough going on foot, but you can make it in less than a day. They’ll keep you with her since you’re her only family. That’s another reason I can’t take you with us, you know that.”

Left unsaid, the Confederation rule that in emergencies where merc forces had been called in, healthy male residents sixteen or older could be forcibly conscripted—unless the sole caretaker of a minor child.

With both sets of grandparents dead, and with no aunts and uncles, they were alone.

* * * *

By the next morning, after a sleepless night packing and preparing, Agnath whittled down what he had to take into a knapsack. Knowing the little girl and that he’d probably have to carry her at some point, he didn’t take anything but bare necessities—the electronic cards holding all their family pictures and vids, their identity and custody documents, and extra plasma cartridges for the weapons. That would leave him able to carry their gear and her.

When he awoke her before sunrise, he gave her a quick bath, a light breakfast, and dressed her in Jahn’s son’s clothes. They were a little big on her, but once he bound her hair into a knot on top her head and stuck a cap on her, she could pass for a young boy.

Her face looked solemn. “Can I take my bear?”

“Of course you can.”

She threw her arms around his legs. She hadn’t asked him for details about what happened to their parents, hadn’t cried since last night. “I love you, Aggie! I’m never leaving you!”

He scooped her into his arms for a hug and a kiss, then set her on her feet. “I’m never leaving you, either, Little One.” He took one last look around before he shouldered the knapsack, holstered the pistol on his hip, and slung the rifle across his back. “Ready for adventure?”

She hugged her bear and grabbed his hand. “We leaving?”

“Yes.” He sighed. “We have to.”

He studied maps after packing and realized they could make the east freight depot in half a day if they cut through the processing sector. It would be more dangerous, but in the long run it would lessen the risk to them both if it reduced their travel time and got them to the depot faster. There were no available land transports. His parents had taken theirs to the mine.

After an hour, he heard explosions and deep rumblings in the distance. They saw no one on the streets, the district eerily still around them. In the growing heat of the day, sweat ran down his back and darkened his shirt where it touched his skin.

Aine clutched her bear and huddled close to Agnath’s leg. Then he heard the sound of a vehicle.

He grabbed her hand and ducked around a fence behind an abandoned processing plant. A minute later, a loud, open rover carrying six well-armed men rolled by. From the looks of the vehicle and its occupants, they weren’t mercs.

Raiders.

They stopped half a block down and backed up.

“This way, I think. I know I saw something on the sensors.”

Agnath tried to stay calm. He unshouldered the pack, deactivated the safety on the rifle, and turned to Aine. “You know our hide and seek game?”

She nodded, her eyes wide in fear.

“This isn’t a game anymore. You must be totally silent and stay here. Do not move. Understand?”

She nodded again.

He crept around the corner and tried to keep his anger from ruining his aim. He laid the rifle barrel over the top of a packing crate and sighted on the back of the driver’s head. The first shot took him out. The vehicle spun out of control into a concrete barrier.

Seven more shots quickly finished off the other five men before they could free themselves from the rover. For extra measure Agnath put an extra shot into the head of one who didn’t look badly injured, even though he wasn’t moving.

It felt good. At least the class in weaponry the year before paid off.

Aine, wide-eyed and trembling, huddled in her hiding spot. Agnath reshouldered the pack but left the rifle at the ready. Scooping her into his arms, he kissed her forehead. “It’s okay, Little One.”

“Are they gone?”

“I took care of them. We must stay totally silent from this point forward. Understand?”

She nodded.

He forced a smile and rubbed noses with her. “My radiant little sister. You’re a *very* good girl, you know that?” Her hair had come loose and flowed down her shoulders, but he couldn’t take time to rebind it.

She straightened her cap. “I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you, too, Little One. Let’s go.”

* * * *

They found a merc checkpoint on the other side of the processing sector. One man stepped forward. He had nasty grey eyes and wore a dirty, ragged merc uniform. Agnath didn’t like the way he eyed his baby sister.

“Where are you going, kid?”

Agnath turned slightly, putting himself between the man and Aine on his hip. “To the east freight depot. I was told we had to go there to wait for off-planet evac.”

The man’s eyes fell on Agnath’s weapons and narrowed, calculating. “How old are you?”

“Our parents died yesterday at the mine. I’m her only family.”

“Answer my question!”

“He did.” Another man stepped forward, apparently in charge from the rank stripes on his better-kept uniform. He looked Agnath up and down, then nodded. “I’m sorry about your parents.”

“Thank you.”

“Let them through, Tamil,” he told the first man.

“Kid’s gotta be legal!”

“I said let them through. Enough people died yesterday, families destroyed. We don’t need help so bad we have to take a baby away from her brother.”

Aine stayed silent the whole time, her arms tight around Aggie’s neck. He adjusted her on his hip and stepped forward. As he passed through the checkpoint, the second man caught up to him and hissed, “Cut her hair, dammit! There’s still several bands of raiders we haven’t got yet. You won’t make it to the freight depot if the raiders see her.” He pressed a sonic knife into the teen’s palm before returning to the checkpoint. “Good luck,” he called out as he raised his hand in farewell.

Agnath hurried away from the mercs and found a shadowy entryway on the back alley of another warehouse to stop in. He set Aine down and gave her a protein bar to eat and a bottle of water.

“What did that man mean about my hair?”

Agnath fought more tears. Aine was too damn young to learn about the universe like this. He remembered barely escaping from Tamarind Alpha with his parents seven years earlier when raiders attacked and the fear in his parents’ faces until the rescue freighter

lifted the mining families to safety. Aine had been born on this rock. A supposedly safe rock until the raiders figured out the location of the carefully concealed diryllium mine.

Aine had never known fear or loss like he had. Their parents hoped she never would.

Agnath took out the sonic knife and studied it in his hand. "Sit down and turn around. I need to cut your hair."

As always, she complied without question or hesitation. He let his tears flow as he plaited her long hair one last time and put bands at the base and end of the braid to hold it. Then, carefully, he cut it free and tucked it into the pack. He trimmed a little more. Not a great haircut, choppy and ragged in places, but good enough to pass her as a boy.

When he finished he rubbed his face on his sleeve, drying his tears before letting her turn around. "Finished, Little One. The heat won't bother you now."

She felt her short hair. She never had a haircut before. "Why did he tell you to cut it?"

How much should I tell her?

He needed her to feel a little fear, to keep her listening to him and not running off or making noises that would betray their position.

He pulled her into his lap. "Remember the first man at the checkpoint?"

"The bad man?"

Agnath's heart chilled. Always perceptive, very precocious. Combined with her being tall for her age, most people thought she was at least two or three years older when they talked to her. She already read at a six-year-old level. "Yes. The bad man. Some bad men don't treat little girls right. They don't protect them."

She felt her hair again. "What about little boys?"

"Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. There's less risk of trouble if people think you're a boy."

"Bad people?"

"Bad people."

She snuggled close and held her bear. “We won’t come back here, will we?”

“Never, Little One.”

“Tell me about the ships. About other planets.”

He remembered three planets before here. She’d never been off-planet, and it was one of her favorite things to ask him about, especially the transport ships. “We don’t have time, Aine. I’m sorry. Once we’re safe, then I’ll tell you all about the space ships.”

“Okay.”

* * * *

Ten minutes later, they started on their way again. Even knowing how good she normally behaved it surprised Agnath that she never complained, never fussed, simply stayed quiet and either clutched his neck with one arm when he carried her or tightly held his hand while walking next to him. After two more hours of walking, he stopped them again to rest and check the map. They were close to the freight depot, maybe a kilometer away, if that.

“Aggie, how *do* boys act?” she asked, surprising him.

He smiled. “You’re not a boy.”

“We’ll be close to people soon, right?”

“Little One, you’re too smart. Just stay quiet, don’t cry, don’t fuss. You’re being a very brave girl for me.”

An explosion ripped through a building close by, casting debris over their hideout and into the alley beside them. Sounds of weapons, men yelling, and more explosions reached them.

Aine didn’t scream as she shrank against her brother.

“Time to go,” Agnath said. “Now.”

Aine grabbed her bear as Agnath scooped her into his arms and raced away from the fighting. The battle raged directly in his planned path. He found a back route around it and quickly ran in what he hoped was the right direction. Ten minutes later, the sounds of the

fight faded behind them. Then they rounded a corner and in front of them sat the depot.

Relief streamed in. While he didn't like the idea of crossing nearly half a kilometer of open tarmac and dodging moored freighters and stacks of shipping containers to reach the well-armed and protected depot terminal, it was a far safer option than trying to go around and risk trouble.

No workers visible, two of the freighters raced to load cargo pallets of shipping containers full of mined ore with automated hover lifts, raising the pallets into the holds faster than he'd ever seen. Agnath didn't take that as a comforting sign. Then he heard the sound of a land bike's whining engine heading their way.

The only hiding place was a group of cargo palettes clustered under the closest freighter. Quickly covering the distance, he wiggled through the piles of crates and found Aine a hiding spot on one of the pallets.

The bike pulled up to where they disappeared into the stacks. Then it shut off.

Agnath pulled another plasma cartridge from the knapsack, shoved Aine's bear into it, then closed it and strapped it to her front. "Stay here," he ordered. "Stay silent. Do not cry or make any noise. Do not let go of this knapsack. You asked me how little boys act?"

She nodded.

He stroked her cheek. "Little boys are very brave. Little boys do not cry. Be very strong for me and stay here and hide well. Do as I say. Little boys obey orders, and they are strong and fierce. And you are strong and fierce, my radiant little Aine. I love you, Little One." He kissed her and ran his hands through her short hair before setting the cap back on her head. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, Aggie."

He stood, holding the rifle at the ready. With a wink and his finger pressed to his lips to remind her to stay silent, he quietly slipped through the stacks, off the palette. That's when the familiar, coarse

voice bellowed, “I know you’re in there somewhere, kid. I saw you.”

The merc, Tamil, from the checkpoint. Agnath didn’t reply. He held his breath and tried to listen, to hear where the man stood.

“You can’t take care of a girl, you know.”

Agnath’s blood chilled. His father had been brutally honest with him. Little girls were frequently captured and sold by raiders and unscrupulous mercs. Sometimes adopted, sometimes for use as household workers. Sometimes as worse.

Much worse.

* * * *

Aine shivered despite the heat and pressed deeper into the small hidey hole between the shipping containers. She kept her arms tightly wrapped around the knapsack, her brother’s comforting smell still permeating the coarse canvas. She heard the bad man yell at Agnath. Too scared to listen, she promised she’d stay still and quiet, and that’s what she’d do.

Aggie appeared, visible if she stretched a little. That’s when she saw the bad man sneak up behind him and fire his gun.

The little girl bit down on the knapsack to keep from screaming, to keep from breaking her promise to Aggie. To keep from being a weak girl instead of being a fierce, strong boy.

Just like her brother.

Aggie fell to the ground. As the palette lifted into the belly of the freighter, she peeked over the side and saw the merc standing over the still body of her beloved brother.

Chapter Two

“Captain Lorcan, we’ll only be able to grab this palette and one more before we’re out of time. We’re only leaving two. Extras, not the planned load.”

The captain nodded from his command chair. “Leave them. I don’t plan on being raider bait.” He turned to his yeoman, Malvous Dentry. “Mal, is everything ready?”

“Yes, sir. As you ordered.”

“Good. Let’s get the hell off this fucking planet before we end up a permanent part of it.” He wearily dragged himself from his chair and pulled his shoulder length brown hair back with a band. Only a little grey, he looked younger than his forty-five years even though wrinkles creased the corners of his brown eyes. “Number One, you’re in charge. As soon as that last palette is secure, lift, break orbit, and jump immediately.”

“Aye.”

Mal followed his captain from the bridge and down a short corridor to the captain’s private quarters. Captain Edmund Lorcan, a twenty-five-year veteran of the Confederation Merchant Freighter Corps, wasn’t about to break his perfect record and lose a load or a ship at this point. Mal set his meal out for him, the first food he had in almost a day with the stress of trying to finish jump engine maintenance and load their cargo in record time to escape the planet.

“That looks fantastic, Mal.” He sank into his chair with a tired grunt and reached for a fork. “Smells great!”

“Thank you, Ed.” He rubbed the captain’s shoulders, earning an appreciative groan in response. Some of the crew suspected the two

men had a deep and intimate relationship considering how long they'd worked together—nearly nineteen years—but it was never a topic of open discussion. The captain got results, made them money, and kept them safe. In front of the crew, there was nothing but professionalism between them. If Lorcan also fucked his yeoman behind closed doors, it wasn't anyone else's business.

An hour later, Lorcan slumped in his chair, feeling full from a fabulous meal and almost totally relaxed from the fantastic neck rub. "You need to sleep tonight," Mal chided him. "You aren't a spring chicken anymore. You can't keep this up."

Lorcan patted Mal's hand, squeezed it, left his covering it. "We can retire, you know." He looked up into Mal's hazel eyes. "Or you can, if you want. You're eligible to retire."

Mal looked at him in mock horror. "Trying to get rid of me?"

Lorcan laughed, knowing the oath-bound man wouldn't leave even if released. "Never. Just making sure you weren't tired of following my sorry ass around space."

"Never. Where you go, I go."

* * * *

The first officer, Darius Winter, quickly checked the departure list one last time and gave the break orbit command. As the engines strained against the planet's gravity, he kept close watch on the command console overview. Two hours later, they cleared orbit and activated the jump engine, putting them a safe distance away from the planet and the converging raiders.

With the worst over, he settled back in the command chair. He could relax, knowing the captain would probably be gone for a couple of hours at least. The man had missed two sleep cycles that he knew of. He had to be approaching exhaustion.

He started to make himself comfortable when the engineering officer looked up from his console. "Sir? Can you check the cargo

sensors from your console?”

Winter pulled up the sensors on his display and frowned. “What the *hell* is that?”

“I don’t know. It’s about the size of a dog, but there aren’t any dogs on Apaphax 4.”

“That’s not a dog.” He mentally groaned as he hit the direct com link to the captain’s quarters. Mal answered. “I’m sorry to disturb him,” Winter said, “but I need to talk to the captain immediately. In person.”

“Is it urgent?”

“Very.”

“He’ll be right there.”

A moment later, Captain Lorcan, looking exhausted beyond measure, appeared on the bridge with Mal shadowing him as usual.

“What’s wrong?”

Winter stood so the captain could sit. He pointed at the console. “There’s an unusual reading in cargo.”

Lorcan frowned as he leaned forward to study the reading. “What the fuck?” He turned to Mal. “Get two sidearms.”

* * * *

The Bagtopy Yau, a large, interstellar freighter, could carry a year’s supply of food and general supplies for small mining colonies as well as transport mined ore. Mostly automated, its crew of twelve was exhausted from non-stop preparations for their hasty departure. Captain Lorcan had ordered sleep shifts for the crew to recover, with only four currently on duty.

He’d do this job himself.

With Mal following a step behind, the two men made their way through the bowels of the ship to cargo. “Stun,” Lorcan ordered as he set his plasma pistol. Then he punched in an override code and the cargo hatch slid open.

Mal followed, flanking him, his pistol also ready. The men swept through the cargo bay until the overhead com chirruped, Winter's voice coming through. "The palette in front of you, sir. On the far side."

Lorcan nodded to Mal and waved him to the other side. Together, they slowly circled around, puzzled when they didn't see anything.

That's when they heard the snuffle.

Lorcan dropped to one knee and looked into the small recess formed by the cargo containers. The child scrabbled backward, futilely trying to press deeper into the dark hiding place. Lorcan handed his gun to Mal and sat down to coax the child out.

"Hello there. Where'd you come from?"

The child, he suspected a boy from the haircut and clothes, didn't respond. He had his arms tightly wrapped around a knapsack and looked frightened out of his mind. He couldn't be more than five or six from the look of him.

"You can't stay there, you know," Lorcan said. "It's dangerous for a little one. We need to get you someplace safe."

When the boy spoke, his voice barely above a whisper, Lorcan strained to hear him. "I can't. I promised my brother I'd stay here and stay quiet."

The two men exchanged a look. Lorcan had heard about a merc killing someone nearby before they departed, but it wasn't his business as long as it didn't involve his crew or get in the way of his ship safely leaving. Lorcan turned back to the child. "Who is your brother? Where is he?"

"Aggie. He told me to stay here and hide from the bad man. Said little boys are strong and fierce and brave and don't cry."

"Your brother isn't here. How did you get here?"

"We were running from the bad man."

Lots of possibilities ran through Lorcan's brain. The worst being that he'd have to return this boy to that damn planet or face kidnapping charges if the parents wanted to bitch. *Shit*. "Where are

your parents?”

The little boy didn't reply at first. Lorcan couldn't get a good look at him in the shadows of his hiding place. Finally, the child said, “They died in the mine yesterday.”

Lorcan felt relieved that he wouldn't have to return to that stupid rock and ashamed for thinking it. An orphan. His brother dead, too.

“I'm sorry. You can't stay here, Little One. It's dangerous here in cargo.”

“Where?”

“You hid on a cargo palette. You're on my ship.”

“I'm on a ship? A *space* ship?”

Lorcan extended his hand toward the child. He desperately didn't want to frighten the little boy by forcibly dragging him out. “Yes. My ship. I'm Captain Lorcan. Now tell me your name.”

“Aine.”

He frowned. “Anya's an unusual name for a boy.”

“Aggie says everyone spells it wrong. It's A-i-n-e. But it's said ‘Anya.’”

“Well, Aine, this is my yeoman, Malvous Dentry. You can call him Mal. Are you hungry? He's a really good cook.”

As the child crept closer to the opening, Lorcan spotted fear in his big brown eyes.

“I'm hungry. Where is Aggie? I saw the bad man hurt him.” His face twisted for a moment, like he was about to cry, then cleared. “Did the bad man hurt him?” he whispered. “We're all alone now.”

Lorcan nodded. “I'm afraid so,” he admitted. “I promise you, Little One, no one here will hurt you. Mal and I will personally take care of you. You're safe.”

The child sat still for a moment before crawling to the edge of the opening. “Aggie said I had to hold on to this. Can I keep it? My bear's in it.”

“Of course you can.” The boy's sad eyes pulled at Lorcan's heart. Here was a child not only suffering the loss of his home and parents,

but the loss of his big brother, too. “How old are you, Aine?”

“I’ll be four next week.” He again looked like he might cry, then he sniffled and wiped his face with a grimy hand.

Only four? Holy gods, this child sounded older than that. “Wow, four years old. You are a big boy, aren’t you?”

He vigorously nodded. “Yes. I’m a big boy.”

Lorcan finally coaxed the child into his arms. He picked him up and carried him out of cargo while Mal updated the first officer.

Aine was filthy and probably in need of food and a long nap. In their quarters, Mal immediately prepared a quick meal for the child, who wolfed it down before asking for more.

Aine asked for help taking off the knapsack, but he held it in his lap. “Aggie told me to hold it.”

Lorcan sat across the table from the child while Mal went to get supplies for Aine’s bath. “Can I look in the bag?” Lorcan asked.

Aine stopped chewing his food and stared at him. “Will you give it back?”

He held up his hand. “I promise.”

Aine considered the request, then let Lorcan reach over and take the knapsack. Lorcan decided to wait to look until the child was in the shower.

Mal returned a few moments later. “We need to get you cleaned up, kiddo.”

Lorcan studied the way Mal looked at the child. He knew his lover’s only regret was that because of their career they couldn’t adopt a child of their own. Perhaps Fate had stepped in.

“Mal, how long would it take you to clear room in your old bunk for our new friend?” They used his old quarters, which opened onto Lorcan’s private stateroom, for storage since he bunked with his captain every night.

Mal grinned. “Not long at all. I can make room while he’s taking a bath. Can you take a bath by yourself?”

Aine sat up straight. “I’m a big boy. I can do it myself. I don’t

need help.”

Lorcan smiled at the indignant tone of his response. “Good. Then if you’re done eating, Mal will take you to the head and we’ll wait out here for you.”

Mal led the child into the head, showed him how to use the facilities, then stepped out and pulled the door almost completely shut behind him. “Yell if you need help.”

“I don’t need help! I’m a big boy!”

The two men laughed. Mal returned to the table. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t laugh.” His face turned sad. “We’ll have to give him up at the next stop, won’t we?”

“I wanted to talk to you about that. We could adopt him.”

“What if he has family?”

“What if he doesn’t? He said they were all alone. If he’s on here for five years, he’s legally adoptable. We sign him on as a cabin boy. Junior yeoman, bonded crew.”

“As long as the Confederation wonks don’t know he’s here and make you kick him off. Child labor laws, you know.”

“He’s an orphan. He’s also technically a stowaway and a refugee. Complicated matter. You really think some asshole will challenge me on this and face months of paperwork? They’ll make a special exception. It’s easier on them in the long run. Besides that, who’s going to lodge a complaint in the first place?”

Mal nodded toward the knapsack. “What’s in the bag?”

“I’m going to look. Answer me first.”

Mal studied him. “Are you serious? Adopt him?”

“Why not? If he doesn’t have any family.”

Mal went quiet. They heard the boy climb into the sonic shower. “Do you think it will work?”

Lorcan nodded.

Mal’s face broke into a beaming grin. “Holy Hades, you’re serious! You’re really serious!”

“Duh.” He opened the flap on the knapsack. “Want to give me an

answer?”

Mal leaned in and pressed a deep kiss to his partner’s lips. “Yes, of course. Absolutely.”

“It’s extra duties for you. Keeping him safe and schooling him and stuff. I’ll help out where I can, of course, but you of all people know what my day is usually like.”

“I don’t care!” He threw his arms around Lorcan. “Thank you!”

He patted Mal on the arm. “You’re welcome. Now go fix him a place to sleep.”

The yeoman disappeared into the other cabin while Lorcan fished through the bag. The stuffed bear lay on top. He set it on the table with a sad smile. He removed and set aside the plasma cartridges. He’d have Mal take them to the armory locker. A sonic knife. Then he frowned as his fingers touched something soft and silky.

He pulled out a small braided plait of hair about the same color of Aine’s hair.

Staring at it and envisioning the child’s recent choppy cut, his heart hit the floor. “Mal,” he called.

The yeoman entered the room, his smile dying on his face. “What’s that?”

Lorcan laid it on the table and rummaged deeper in the knapsack. In the bottom he found the picture and vid cards and activated them, browsing. Mom, dad, older brother—Aggie, probably—and a little brown-haired girl.

Then he located the identity and custody documents for the child.

Aine Padron. Almost four, according to her date of birth. Her older brother, Agnath. No other relatives. The emergency custody order prepared only weeks earlier gave Agnath full custody and declared him a legislative adult for the purposes of caring for his baby sister in case their parents died.

Mal read the cards over Lorcan’s shoulder and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Holy gods, he was only sixteen. Damn. We can’t let her go regardless. There’s no place safe anywhere in this sector for a

young orphan girl. Too many black marketeers.”

“It also means when she’s older she’ll have to go to a boarding school. We can only hide her true gender for so long.”

“Why did she say she was a boy?”

Lorcan sadly stared at the picture card showing the family in happier times. One showed Aggie holding his baby sister and giving her a kiss on the cheek. “Aggie was wise beyond his years, poor kid. He coached her well.”

* * * *

When Aine returned to the table after her bath. The old T-shirt Mal gave her to wear hung almost to her ankles, even though he’d cut it shorter. At Lorcan’s urging, she climbed back into her chair. When she spotted her cherished teddy bear on the table she grabbed it and pulled it into her lap.

The men sat flanking her. Lorcan kept his voice low and calm. “Little One, we know you’re not a boy. I found your custody and identity cards.”

Her face twisted again, pained. Lorcan thought they’d finally witness her inevitable breakdown. Still, she didn’t let herself go.

“Yes I am! I *am* a boy. Boys don’t cry. Boys are strong! Aggie said so!”

Mal tried. “Honey, it’s okay. We know why you had to pretend. We have an idea.”

She studied the two men. “What?”

Mal smiled. “You keep pretending you’re a boy. Only the captain and I will know the truth. I’ll keep your hair cut short for you, and you can stay here with us and be our...be our son.”

“But,” Lorcan interjected, “you need to pretend you’re a boy. That’s very important. It’s for your safety. At least until you’re older.”

She eagerly nodded. “I can do that.”

“You’d be living here on the ship, all the time, with us. Is that okay?”

For the first time, the child actually smiled. “I can stay on the ship? I don’t have to go to a planet?”

“That’s right.”

She nodded.

Lorcan turned and tapped information into his private terminal, then spun it around to her. “One day, many years from now when you’re much older, you will have to go to school. I will pay for it. Until you’re grown up, you can stay with us. We’ll be your fathers. You have to listen to us and act the way we tell you so you stay safe.”

“Okay. Then the bad men won’t hurt me like they hurt everyone else?”

“That’s right.” He reached for her right hand and pressed her thumb to the reader pad on the console. It registered her thumbprint. “This says you now belong to me, as part of my crew. You’re what’s called bonded crew, like Mal. You’re now known as Aine Padron Lorcan, Junior Yeoman. In a couple of years we can officially adopt you and make you our daughter...son.”

“I can stay with you for a long time?”

“Forever. I swear it.”

* * * *

Later, Captain Lorcan called his crew together on the bridge. Mal stayed behind in their quarters and watched over the sleeping girl.

“We’ve had an unexpected addition to our crew roster. An orphaned boy. A merc killed his brother. He hid on one of the cargo palettes when we loaded.

“I expect all of you to look after Aine as if he’s your own child.” He eyed the men. Half of them short-listers, some had children or grandchildren. The rest were long-termers or lifers whose only home was a ship. He’d worked with all of them long enough to know they

had integrity and honor and would heed his words to the letter.

“Any harm comes to that child, the man who does it or who is responsible for allowing it will be blasted out an airlock. Try me if you think I’m kidding.”

* * * *

Mal jumped when Aine snuck up behind him and threw her arms around his waist. Almost nine years old and she’d been counting down the days until she was officially named Lorcan. Tall and willowy for her age, she hadn’t yet developed any rounded curves that would betray the truth to outsiders. Judging from the pictures of her mother she took after her, slim and almost boyish in build. That would work to her advantage if the trend continued.

Tomorrow was the big day. With the exception of a few space station visits in safe territory to get her medical check-ups and vaccinations, she’d never set foot off the freighter since her arrival. As lifers replaced their short-listers, they let more of the crew in on the secret. Lorcan and Mal felt confident their men would die to protect Aine as if she was their own daughter, or at the very least a beloved niece.

Brilliant, she’d already completed high school level studies and knew more about most of the ship’s systems than many Confederation academy cadets upon graduation. Mal started her on collegiate level studies the month before.

“What are you up to?” Mal asked her.

“Bilden was quizzing me on the jump engine.”

“How did you do?”

She frowned. “I missed two of his questions. I need to study harder. I shouldn’t have missed any. He usually gives me harder questions.”

“Don’t wear yourself out.” He handed her a carrot from the batch he was chopping for their dinner. She took it and sat next to him,

munching as she watched him.

“Da, does it bother you you’re never in charge?”

He arched an eyebrow at her. It wasn’t unusual for her to come up with left-field questions, but this one sounded odder than most. He put down the knife and gave her his undivided attention. “What do you mean, Little One?”

She shrugged. “You’ll never be a captain, like Father. Does it bother you?”

“I serve the captain. I wouldn’t trade my job for anything. I have a very important job, because someone has to take care of him. Where did this question come from?”

“I overheard Bing and Winter talking about Bing’s promotion. That’s all.”

“Overheard? Young lady, I specifically ordered you to stay out of the ventilation ducts.”

“I was tracing wires.”

“You were eavesdropping.”

“Not until they started talking.”

He sighed as she mischievously smiled. “All right. Again I ask, what prompts the question?”

“I just wondered.”

He studied her. “Service is a high calling. What I do is service to one man, the captain. By doing that, in a way I serve the whole ship because the captain can do his job and keep us all safe. I take care of him, he takes care of the ship and me in the process. And you, too. I don’t mean just as part of our jobs. I love him, you know that.”

“Is that normal?”

Please, Hades, not the birds and bees talk!

“No, many captains are not partnered with their yeomans, if that’s what you’re asking. We just happened to fall in love. It worked for us.”

Apparently satisfied with that answer, she snagged another carrot to snack on. “So it’s okay to not want to be a captain?”

“Absolutely. Not everyone can or should be a captain. My talents are best utilized by taking care of the captain so he can do his duties without being distracted. Regardless of what your job is, if you do it well and to the best of your abilities and with full effort, there is absolutely no shame. Whether you’re a captain or a yeoman or a sanitation engineer or navigator. It doesn’t matter. There is a reason that the Confederation’s slogan is *Service Before Self*. It doesn’t just mean military service.”

Lorcan walked in and she flung herself at him, wanting her usual hug. He smiled and spun her around. “There’s our Little One. Are you badgering poor Da with your questions?”

Mal went back to chopping carrots. “Not too many. Today, at least.”

“Good girl.” He set her back on her feet. Not long, and she’d be too big to do that. He sat at the table and patted his lap. “Come here. I have something for you.”

She climbed into his lap. He produced a small jewelry box. “Tomorrow is your big day, when you officially become rostered as full crew and legally become our daughter. I wanted to give this to you tonight.”

She opened it, squealing with delight when she saw the small holographic charm embedded in a golden rune signifying his captain’s crest. It hung from a delicate-looking chain.

He took it from the box and draped it around her neck. “Unbreakable chain, but always keep this on. Never remove it. It signifies you’re oath-bound to me until released. It will help keep you safe.”

“Thank you, Father!” She hugged him. Then, one of the rare times the men ever witnessed it, she cried. She raced over to Mal and threw her arms around him. “Thank you, Da!”

He laughed. “Don’t thank me, thank him. He’s our captain.” He knelt and pulled his matching necklace out from under his collar and held it up to hers. It was an exact twin, except for the more delicate

chain on hers. “It’s a great honor to be oath-bound to a captain and to wear his rune. Never forget that. Very few people ever get to do that.”

“Service Before Self,” she solemnly repeated.

He nodded. “That’s right, Little One. Service Before Self.”

Chapter Three

“No! You can’t make me go! I won’t!” Fourteen, and Aine was throwing a fine temper tantrum. She rarely acted contrary, usually more obedient and disciplined than the most experienced crewman. Breaking the news to her, however, had pushed her over the edge.

Lorcan kept his voice calm. “You have to attend a school before the Confederation Academy will accept you, Little One. We talked about this. It’s only two years, just a formality, and then you’ll go to the Academy.”

“You promised me! You promised me I’d stay with you!” While taller in height and still slim, it was hard to insist, even with her unruly, short hair and lack of make-up, that she was a boy. Her beautiful face and slight curves betrayed her.

“I have to enroll you or you’ll be too old. Then how will I get you into the Academy? Don’t you want to be a captain? You said that’s what you want to do, and if you do, you have to go to the Academy.”

She’d been planet-side a total of ten times since joining them. Each time she hated it. She much preferred the security of a ship, the ability to flee if trouble presented itself. She’d already seen more near misses in space than many experienced servicemen.

She handled each of those instances with a calm rarely seen in experienced officers. Certainly a thousand times calmer than she now acted.

Lorcan looked to Mal for assistance. He had a different touch with her. Mal took over. “Listen, sweetheart, we’re retiring soon, you know that. Then we’ll move planet-side and be nearby. We can come see you every day. I promise.”

Sobbing, she crumpled to her knees. "Please, Da, *please* don't leave me!" Not once in the time since she joined them had she ever been away from them off-ship. The only weakness she ever showed, her fear of being abandoned, left behind.

Alone.

The men went to her, kneeling beside her, their arms around her. Lorcan held her to his chest and rocked her. "You have to do this. Service Before Self. Never forget that. You will make us so proud, Little One, my Fierce Radiance."

It became Lorcan's special nickname for her once he researched and found that Aine meant "radiant," and he already knew his last name meant "fierce."

It fit her. As brightly as her intelligence and personality burned, she was fiercely radiant.

Now she was distraught, inconsolable.

Mal took her from Lorcan. "You are very brave. You can serve your captain by following his orders. He needs you to learn all you can, to make him proud. Aggie would be very proud of you, too. So would your mother and father. I know they would even though I never met them."

Eventually her sobs quieted to sniffles. "Okay," she whispered.

* * * *

Lorcan didn't release her hand. Not that he could if he tried, Mal thought, from her death grip on both of them. The head dean of the private school noticed. The old bat didn't frown, but from her disapproving demeanor she apparently thought Aine's clinginess inappropriate.

"I'm sure you will be very happy here, Aine," she tried to assure the girl. "All our students are a little nervous when they first arrive."

Mal's fingers felt numb in Aine's hand as she clamped down on him.

"I'm not your other students." She spoke softly, barely louder than a whisper.

Mal knew her deceptive tone masked the true depths of her stress and anxiety. She usually possessed nerves of steel, but ever since Lorcan broke the news to her six months earlier, she'd withdrawn into a hard shell Mal feared he might never penetrate. She rarely smiled or laughed anymore, even though there were no more bouts of tears. She resigned herself to following orders and serving her captain, but she damn sure didn't like what he wanted her to do.

Mal gave the dean credit for trying.

"I'm sorry, Aine, I didn't mean to sound flippant. I am familiar with your past and understand this is very difficult for you."

"Thank you."

They'd put off the good-byes long enough. Lorcan pulled her to him for a long, strong embrace. "Do me proud, Little One. My Fierce Radiance." He kissed her cheek. "I love you, daughter."

She kissed him back. "I love you too, Father."

He stepped back and snapped her a crisp salute. It brought the faintest of smiles to her face. She came to attention and returned it with precision. "Make me proud, Yeoman Lorcan," he said.

"Yes, Captain."

Then Mal hugged her tightly. "Please don't beat up the other girls, Little One. Or the boys."

"I'll try not to, Da." They kissed, and he also saluted her.

Aine watched them walk out the door and from her distant past she heard Aggie's voice drift back to her.

Boys are very brave...boys do not cry.

She took a deep breath and turned back to the dean. "What do I do next?" she softly asked.

* * * *

Aine despised being on-planet. She hated the denser gravity. She

hated weather—any weather—especially hot, dry weather that triggered ancient nightmares and reminded her too much of her long-ago escape with Aggie. She missed the comforting cocoon of the freighter’s reinforced deck plates and the familiar noises lulling her to sleep.

She missed her dads and her crewmates, whom she considered family.

The classes bored her. Aine spent most of them sitting in the rear of the classrooms, staring at her fellow students’ backs. She already knew all of the material they covered and would take quarterly advancement tests to hasten her graduation.

Her four hundred-odd classmates bored her, too. She found herself ostracized and ridiculed by them, boys and girls alike. She wanted to talk plasma induction ratios while they wanted to talk arts and entertainment or sports. They all teased her about her hair and lack of make-up, said she looked like a boy.

They teased her even more when she didn’t act like she considered that an insult.

The other students had aspirations of higher education for lucrative professional jobs. Not a single one planned to attend the Academy and enter the Confederation military or merchant corps.

In her fencing and martial arts classes, the only partner they allowed her to spar with was the teacher. Mal had spent many an hour with Aine in the cargo hold, teaching her multiple ways to defend herself. Now only the teacher could hope to stand up to her blistering attacks, which were as much an attempt to release her anger, anguish and loneliness as they were to silence her classmates.

Upon hearing of her reputation with weapons, not a single boy would approach her.

At least she didn’t have to share a room. With Captain Lorcan’s considerable fortune, he spared no expense with Aine’s education. She bunked on the “rich girl floor,” as less fortunate students snarkily dubbed it, but she was just as much an alien to her fellow floormates

as she was to everyone else.

She spent her spare time studying texts about new engineering and ship technology advancements and exchanging e-mails with Mal and Lorcan. She didn't bother them with how miserable she felt, knowing it would upset them and still not change a thing. Instead, she opted to count the days until their first visit at the end of the term.

Despite subtle and not so subtle urging from the faculty and school counselors, she refused to grow her hair longer. She learned about hair products and spiked it, giving it an even wilder look and earning her more nasty nicknames.

She didn't care. She eagerly counted down the days until her fathers returned to see her. She had her old knapsack, bear, and necklace to comfort her, and her picture and vid cards to keep her mind occupied. When the day came for the men to visit, she didn't care who saw her when she flung herself at them as they walked through the front door. She stopped short of crying when they tightly hugged her.

Boys don't cry.

They spent a month on the planet during a semester break so she could stay with them. When it was time to say their good-byes again she swallowed back the urge to cry.

Service Before Self. Boys don't cry.

* * * *

Eight months before the end of her forced tenure at the school, she received an unexpected vid message from the men instead of their normal e-mails. Mal's face filled the screen with a beaming smile.

"Guess what, Little One? We're coming home! We've received our final orders and we're coming home after one last run!"

Home! She smiled, her first real smile since the last time she saw them in person almost five months earlier. They considered her their home. As much as she hated the planet, and as much as she wanted to

be a captain, she was tempted to not join the Academy just so she could stay with her dads. She could always go to regular college and get a planet-side job there so she could live with them. It wasn't what she wanted to do, but the thought of leaving her fathers to go to the Academy left a deep ache in her heart.

She started another countdown, and more vid messages flew back and forth between them as their arrival day grew closer. When they dropped the Bagtopy Yau off at its retrofit dock, they sent a final message. They were close enough that it arrived only hours after they sent it. They would jump a transport and be there in three days.

Her fathers' smiling faces filled the vid screen. "We are so proud of you, Little One," Father said. "You'll be in the Academy soon, and I know our little girl will be kicking ass and making us just as proud there as you have at school."

Da agreed. "We love you so much! We've been bragging to everyone that you'll be one of the youngest Academy students ever accepted, and with the highest grades, too! We'll see you soon! I just hope you're not too grown up now to hug us when we get there. We're so proud of you, sweetheart."

Giddy with joy, Aine walked around school with a smile on her face, which puzzled and unsettled classmates used to her usual bland disinterest or piercing scowl. On the third day, she sat in the foyer in a chair by the front windows and anxiously waited.

And waited.

And waited.

At sunfall, she nervously looked up when she heard footsteps echoing on the tile floors behind her in the foyer. The dean looked uneasy. "Aine, could you come to my office please?"

"I'm waiting for my dads. They said they'd be here today. We're going home." She turned to the window again, her knapsack in her lap, and scanned the road for any sign of a vehicle.

They had always come when they said they would.

"Please, Aine. We need to talk."

Aine's bland mask slipped back into place as she stood and followed the dean, her knapsack tightly clutched to her chest. The dean closed the door behind them and indicated Aine should sit on the sofa, not in a chair in front of her desk.

When the dean sat next to her, Aine knew it was bad.

Aine tuned out after, "I'm so sorry to have to tell you this..."

Boys are fierce and brave and don't cry. Service Before Self.

"...asteroid..."

Service Before Self...

"...all aboard killed..."

SERVICE BEFORE SELF!

Grief took Aine's sanity.

* * * *

The dean and the attorney knocked on Aine's door before entering. For three days since hearing the news she sat in her room, refusing to talk, refusing to cry, refusing to eat. She drank water because the bottles brought to her by the medical staff were emptied on a regular basis even though her food went untouched.

She stayed in bed, mostly unmoving and unresponsive.

The attorney pulled up a chair next to her. "I'm Rolf Gregory. I'm the attorney your fathers hired to take care of their paperwork here locally." He opened his satchel and pulled out a hand-held console. "I need your signature so I can transfer everything to you."

Aine stared at the wall. At first she made no indication she heard him. Then she slowly looked at him, sat up, reached for the console and stylus, and signed.

He handed her a small bag. "Their personal effects. I already had their baggage transferred to the house they purchased here in town. The recovery crew retrieved their remains. Their ashes will be delivered by private courier later this week."

The transparent bag held Edmund Lorcan's signet ring bearing his

rune crest, and Mal's matching necklace, the twin to the one she wore. She put the ring on her left thumb, the only finger it fit, and draped the necklace around her neck, kissing the pendant before tucking it under her shirt.

"What do I do now?"

He didn't realize she'd spoken at first and asked her to repeat herself. "Well, you're eligible to graduate and attend the Academy, if you wish. They have your placement test grades, which are, may I add, quite impressive, young lady. The highest scores they've ever received."

When she didn't respond, he cleared his throat and continued. "I have their wills here for you to look at. Considering the circumstances and the fact that you were bonded crew, not technically a legislative minor, you can do whatever you want. You might only be sixteen, but you are, in the eyes of the law, an adult." He handed her a vid chip and stood to leave. "I'll give the other information to the dean. She'll help you or put you in contact with me."

Aine waited until she was alone again to watch the video.

She did not cry. Even though she really wanted to.

Chapter Four

One of the underclassmen snickered. “Ice Queen on deck.”

Aine stopped beside the freshman’s helm chair. “Did you say something?” She was a stickler for the high protocol, ran her classes as tightly as any ship should be run. In her opinion, the grunts better get used to it.

He shook his head, nervous. “Um, no ma’am.”

“*Sir.*”

He gulped. “Sir. Sorry, sir.”

He was a year older than her, but she’d already graduated and worked as an Academy teacher. She’d been put on staff only because she couldn’t be given a full officer’s commission until she turned twenty. Her superior officers didn’t know what else to do with her, and they didn’t want to waste her talent, experience, and skill on a menial office job. She knew from scuttlebutt that the Academy brass couldn’t wait to get her out of their hair because students placed under her command faced the highest wash-out rate in the Academy—over seventy-five percent. She was ruthless, she was brutal.

She was cold.

Hence her nickname.

She settled in her command chair. “Take us out of dock, Ensign.”

“Yes, sir.” The freshman’s fingers flew over his helm board. They thought it was yet another real trial cruise, only Aine and the station crew knew this was a simulation, that they would never leave the space station’s dry dock.

Two hours into the simulation, they faced an enemy party of raiders. She let her “crew” hang themselves with a series of bad

situations that left them panicking in a matter of minutes. When she felt they had enough, she walked to the front of the bridge and pulled out the remote to stop the simulation.

As pulse rates returned to normal and the students wiped sweat from their brows, Aine proceeded to inform them all of their mistakes, their shortcomings, and their probable time and manner of death had it not been a sim. She spoke in the same soft, cool tone of voice they struggled to hear.

When she dismissed the class, all but one stampeded to vacate her bridge.

Hector was tall, dark-haired, with golden amber eyes she imagined stole many hearts.

“Was there something else, Ensign?” she coolly asked.

He smiled. She knew he was a third year grad student sitting in on her class to take notes for a graduate class about teaching sim situations to underclassmen. “Yes, sir, there was.”

“Well?”

“Would you like to go out for coffee?”

* * * *

Even more surprising than Hector’s offer was her acceptance. She’d never been asked out before.

Ever.

She rarely spoke to anyone other than her students, teachers and superior officers, and usually only to teachers and superiors when spoken to first. She didn’t like to get close to people, didn’t want to let them in.

That way, it wouldn’t hurt when they had to leave.

“Why did you agree to go out with me?” he asked after they were seated in a quiet corner of the coffee shop.

“I don’t know,” she softly replied, usually the only tone she spoke in. She learned people had to pay attention to hear her, it discouraged

students from idle chatter in case they missed something vital, and it was all the energy she cared to expend on others. “I guess I wanted to find out if you made a bet with someone or are terminally curious.”

“You do have a reputation, sir.”

She nodded. “I don’t deny it.”

“I looked you up. You have an interesting history.”

She stifled her outrage at the invasion of privacy. “Get to the point.”

“I think you’re pretty, and I’d like to go out with you. Direct enough for you?”

Stunned, she stared at him for a moment. “What?”

“I would like to take you out for more than just coffee. Dinner, maybe a movie, something. I’d like to spend time getting to know you. Talking to you.”

“I don’t talk.”

“I noticed that, too.” He didn’t shy away from her direct gaze. “I’m not saying I want to psychoanalyze you. I’m saying I’m tired of dating women who want to pretend they’re something they’re not just to try to get a ring on their finger. I want a real person. An honest person.”

“A brutally honest one?”

He grinned. “I’m a masochist. What can I say?”

* * * *

Three weeks later, she let him take her virginity. She found it enjoyable, a lot more fun than she thought it would be. She’d discovered vibrators and orgasms a year earlier and never thought it was worth seeking out a man for something she could easily and quickly do herself. So technically she’d still been a virgin, as far as men were concerned, until her night with Hector. She didn’t know if she could or would call her fondness for him love. She never told him she loved him.

Her ability to love died with her fathers.

On her birthday her captain's commission came through, along with her first orders for her own ship. Hector took her out for a nice dinner and then to a fancy hotel for their farewell night together.

"I am going to miss you, Aine," he said.

"I'll miss you, too." It was the truth, as much as she could say. She'd miss him, but she'd missed space more.

She wanted to be where she could at least feel close to her fathers.

When she left his bed that night, she kissed him good-bye one last time. He opened his eyes and stared at her. "Let me know if you ever want to let anyone inside that fortress of yours. I wouldn't mind being that person."

It was the first time she almost cried since finding out about the death of her dads. "I wouldn't mind if it was you, either."

It was the truth.

But boys don't cry...and neither would she.

* * * *

The Keenoipai Rawlins was a turbo-jump destroyer-class brigand, a fancy way of saying a pint-sized battleship. Fast, well-armed, and lightly crewed, Aine's first mission was to accompany a group of freighters on a supply run to the sector where Apaphax 4 had recently been liberated. They reopened the mines, and with a heavy contingent of Confederation ships in the area it was an almost guaranteed safe journey.

Despite being the captain she was the youngest crew member on board. Her nine highly experienced men had all specifically requested assignment to her command.

Ironically, the three young graduating ensigns offered a chance to crew with her respectfully declined.

She must have scared them shitless at their last sim.

Weeks later, she stood beside the newly dug graves of her father,

mother, and Aggie. When the mine had been reopened, her parents' remains were finally recovered. She researched where they buried Aggie and had him moved there as well.

All these years later they had grave markers and their long overdue final respect. Plus another marker, a dual marker like for her parents, for Lorcan and Mal. She had long ago mixed their ashes into the same urn, wanting them together in death as they had been in life. With a small hand trowel, she lovingly excavated a hole large enough to hold their remains and carefully tapped them in. Once she covered the hole she sat back on her knees, closed her eyes, and took a deep, ragged breath.

Later, she returned to her ship and didn't look back.
She did not cry.

* * * *

The helmsman called for her attention. "Sir?"

Aine looked up from her command console. "Yes?"

"Scanner signature indicates unknown presence."

She turned, her fingers racing over her board. Four years patrolling the outer sectors for raiders earned her a reputation on both sides of the conflict. At twenty-four, she'd already received more honors and commendations than most other captains in Confederation history. She'd scored more raider kills than any other captain.

She'd also earned a huge bounty on her head, placed there by a raider coalition tired of her disrupting their operations.

She considered that an honor.

"Activate scatter shield."

"Aye, sir." She used her technical skills to experiment over the years between skirmishes and came up with an electronic version of ancient aerial force radar chaff to confuse the enemy. When scanners hit them, they saw not one destroyer-class brigand but what looked like a fleet of slightly smaller ships.

A moment later, the helmsman smiled. “They’re on the run. Pursue?”

She studied the scanner. “No. Not yet.” The raiders changed tactics lately, experimenting, trying to draw Confederation forces deeper into the lesser patrolled areas. While the bounty on her head didn’t bother her personally, she wouldn’t foolishly risk her crew just to satisfy her disrespect for her own life.

Sure enough, a few minutes later when the enemy realized they weren’t being pursued, three more small ships appeared from a nearby asteroid field.

Aine grinned. That expression usually creeped her crew out and she damn well knew it. “Open fire.”

Three hours later, all four raider ships had been destroyed. Aine ordered the navigator to return them to base. Aine’s Kee-Raw crew had developed quite the kick-ass reputation during her time in command. Her men proved fiercely loyal to their young captain, a tightly-knit group who would readily lay down their lives for her.

Back at base she allowed shore leave for the men while the station’s maintenance crew took care of the Kee-Raw. She never took shore leave. She didn’t need it, didn’t want it. She preferred the comfort and safety of her ship.

Later that evening, she was alone on board when her com link buzzed.

“Captain Lorcan.”

“Captain, this is Vice-Admiral Iago. I would like to speak with you in my office.”

Her heart quickened. He commanded the entire sector. “Sir?”

“Immediately, if possible. I will send one of my aides to escort you.”

“Of course. Right away.”

“Very good. My aide is on his way. I’ll see you shortly.” He ended the com link before she could utter anything else.

After she swallowed back her initial shock at the vice-admiral

personally contacting her, she jumped to her feet and raced for the hatch. She stood waiting, calmly composed by the time the aide emerged from the berth lift a few minutes later.

“Captain Lorcan?”

“Yes.” Despite her racing heart she kept her voice chilly.

“Please come with me.”

She followed the man into the lift and through the secure section of the station to the vice-admiral’s office. She’d never met with a superior officer of his rank before.

Every last one of her instincts hummed, almost as good as the adrenaline rush of a battle.

When the aide escorted her into the vice-admiral’s office, Aine formally bowed before snapping Vice-Admiral Iago a precise salute. “Sir, it is an honor to meet you.”

He returned her salute with a crisp one of his own before indicating she should sit in the chair on the other side of his desk. He waited before he took his own seat, then he dismissed his aide.

Once alone with her, he clasped his hands on his desk and studied her. She wondered what he saw besides a petite young woman barely five-five in height, her short, dark hair still wildly spiked.

After a moment, he spoke. “You are an interesting study, Captain Lorcan.”

“How so, sir?”

“I have been through your personnel file. Orphaned, adopted, growing up in a lifestyle that would wear most adults out, orphaned again. Yet you seemed to thrive.”

“Lifestyle, sir?”

“Being raised on a ship that saw active duty, including some pretty risky situations. I’ve been through Captain Lorcan’s dossier. Senior,” he added with a smile. “He taught you well. I can only imagine what he could have accomplished had he been in the military and not the merchant corps.”

Aine hardened her heart against the sudden inflow of memories

threatening to disrupt her equilibrium. “My fathers were both good men, dedicated to their duty and service.”

The vice-admiral leaned back. “Yes, absolutely. And they have given us their daughter, the terror of many Academy cadets.” He smiled again, even more broadly. “My nephew said he ran from a sim session with you and headed straight to a head. Puked his guts up. You scared the shit out of him.”

“I make no apologies for how I taught my classes, Vice-Admiral.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to. He also said you were, by far, the best teacher he had. That it was nice hearing from someone close to his age who’d seen action instead of young teachers going by textbooks or older ones recounting their memories and reliving their glory days.” He studied her again for a moment. “I have a proposition for you, Captain.”

“Sir?”

“We’re about to embark on a widespread blitz of the raiders in this sector. We need to ferret out their regional base of operations once and for all. Are you familiar with the Act’hurans?”

“Vaguely. I know there’s a lot of open and unclaimed space between Confederation space and their territory. They aren’t hostile, and their merchant vessels are allowed to trade at Confederation stations as needed. They allow us the same courtesy.”

“Correct. We do not have diplomatic relations with them yet. Not officially, anyway. Hopefully that will happen within the next few years. They have been, however...” He paused. “What I am about to tell you is strictly classified. It is not to be repeated anywhere. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We have covertly conducted joint missions with them for years. Over a century now. Usually with technology exchanges as payment. Works for both of us. Your scatter shield technology is a boon not only to our own forces, but would be for theirs as well. The Act’hurans will play a large role in helping us dismantle the raider

network in this sector.”

“But a silent role.”

“Absolutely. For now.”

“Where do I come in, sir?”

“I want you to head our forces in this venture.”

She felt her breath catch as she struggled to keep her Ice Queen mask firmly in place. “Me, sir? I’m a captain, not a commander.”

“Bullshit. You’re a brilliant tactician, and you’ve seen enough action with these raiders that I would put you up against our brightest and most experienced strategists without hesitation. You would still captain the Keenoipai Rawlins. You’d be at the front lines, coordinating with intelligence on this end. I can’t think of a better person to spearhead this effort than yourself.”

She studied the older man. “You do realize there’s one helluva bounty on my head, right?”

“Absolutely. If you want honesty, I’m hoping that draws more raiders into the net and allows us the chance to destroy more of them.”

Well, at least he was honest. She gave him credit for that.

He let her think about it for a moment.

“So what do I do next?” she asked.

He smiled again. “Excellent, Captain. Glad to have you on board.”

* * * *

Only weeks into the mission, Aine’s reputation grew by leaps and bounds as the raiders grew more desperate in their attempts to beat back Confederation forces. She knew she had three Act’huran shadow vessels, as they’d been dubbed, working with her forces. Their ships bore special nav beacons identifying them to the Confederation vessels to protect them from friendly fire.

Aine had no direct interaction with the Act’huran captains. The Vice-Admiral’s office and higher command handled that. She’d never

met an Act'huran in person but gave thanks for their stealthy hit and run tactics that always took the raiders by surprise before their shadow vessels faded into the background again.

The latest skirmish would take place in the icy and very rocky ring surrounding the uninhabited planet Yaumahn 2. Used as an emergency base by the raiders, Aine knew several gathered there to regroup from the last attack. One major problem for Confederation forces was the raiders mastered using the planet's treacherous ring for cover and evasion. All a raider vessel had to do was thread its way through the ring and make it around to the far side of the planet to escape relatively unnoticed. The iron-ore chunks in the ring, along with its dense thickness, made it nearly impossible for scanners to accurately penetrate. A nearby asteroid belt lay close enough a ship could escape there and then lose pursuers.

Aine decided this would be one of their major showdowns. She took great pains to use the secure com channel the raiders had already cracked. Her ships were aware of this. All priority com traffic took place on a scrambled channel the raiders didn't even know existed.

Another of Aine's inventions.

Her trap set, she drew her forces close to the thick ring and cast her net. With only a skeleton crew of four in addition to herself on board—her other crew already transferred to another vessel for safety—she was the bait. She wouldn't risk any more of her men than absolutely necessary on this dangerous venture.

The prospect of losing her own life in the process didn't bother her.

Her crew pointed the Kee-Raw into the Yaumahn 2 ring and crept their way through the debris field, trolling.

Waiting.

Finally, her helmsman alerted her. "Sir, three raider vessels converging upon our location."

She allowed a pleased smile to slip across her face. "Excellent. More will follow."

Pretending their modified sensors hadn't picked up the raiders' propulsion trails, she instructed her helmsman to maintain course. Another four ships drifted into sensor range.

If they scanned her vessel, they would see an entire crew contingent on board the Kee-Raw, not just five.

"You want me, you fucking bastards?" she muttered under her breath. "Then come and get me and make it good."

Three more raiders slipped out of hiding.

Their forces, as well as the Act'huran shadow vessels, also waited, drifting, cloaked by a new sensor system she designed and perfected. To the raiders' sensors, the vessels looked like more debris in the ring. The Confederation ships had moved into place days earlier in preparation for this showdown.

"Okay, this is it. Get ready." She activated her sensor show, a pre-programmed simulation that, to the less sophisticated raider ships, would make it look like a major disaster just occurred on board. Aine tapped her com button to the unsecured channel. "Mayday, mayday. This is Captain Lorcan of the Keenoipai Rawlins. We've had an engine failure and fire. Request immediate assistance. Over."

There was only a moment's hesitation before the raider ships increased their speed toward her vessel.

When last updated, the raider bounty on her had reached five hundred million dollars, if she was taken alive. Nothing if she died.

They all wanted her alive.

An automated response, also part of the simulation. "Keenoipai Rawlins, we read you. This is Confederation battleship Axleterra en route to your location. Over."

"We've just had an explosion. Ordering all hands to life pods. Abandoning ship. Over."

"Roger, Captain."

She plugged data into the computer, waited a reasonable time, then launched the first life pod via her command station. Two raider cruisers on the far flank immediately changed course to intercept.

They'd be in for a rude awakening when they brought it on board and it exploded.

"Prepare to cloak on my command," she ordered.

"Aye, sir," the engineer said.

She launched another life pod. The raiders would know each one could hold up to four individuals. This one had been set to a different trajectory than the first, and another two raiders peeled off after it.

She repeated the action three more times, then waited. They still had two life pods on board, real ones not rigged to explode, just in case.

The first life pod had almost reached the raiders' tractor range. Then she laughed as they watched the two raider ships fire on each other in an attempt to pull the pod in. While they were distracted fighting over it, a third raider approached and was immediately fired upon by the first two raiders attempting to protect their prize.

Aine smiled while her men laughed. "Maybe they'll do the hard work for us." She anticipated this but never imagined it would work so well.

The interplay was repeated by other raider ships as they attempted to reach the life pods first. She knew the other Confederation ships had to be laughing their asses off over the show. One raider ship had already been destroyed by its own comrades, another terminally disabled. With five more converging on the scene, things really got interesting.

None of the raiders headed toward the Kee-Raw. According to their sensors, it was empty. Another of Aine's inventions.

As a tractor beam snagged the first life pod, the second also fell victim to a raider's pull.

Once the first pod exploded, the others were rigged to soon follow. Then the Confederation ships would step in and clean up the leftover raider forces as they caught on to the trap.

But what a hell of a surprise.

In the confusion, the raiders would be taken unaware by the

Confederation vessels suddenly stepping out of cloak mode.

“Commence cloak.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Gently push us out of position, idle speed. I don’t want them stumbling into us.”

The Confederation and shadow vessels could see them on sensors, but there was a risk of the raiders accidentally running into them. After making their way out of the debris field, they’d wait until the raiders were defeated. She wouldn’t break radio silence until the support captain gave the all clear.

“Aye.”

The battle raged between the raiders until the first pod, pulled inside the cargo bay of a raider cruiser, exploded. The blast not only destroyed the raider, but the shockwave destroyed the two closest raider vessels.

Aine smiled again as her men cheered.

With the trap discovered, the second raider couldn’t dislodge the life pod they’d snagged in time to escape that blast. Neither could the other three. With the raider forces in disarray, the Confederation forces stepped in and took over, decloaking and catching the raiders by surprise as she predicted.

The Kee-Raw had almost reached the edge of the debris field when a raider ship late to the party blasted around the far side of a piece of rock that created a sensor blind spot. It clipped the back end of the Kee-Raw as it passed. Fortunately, the raider vessel was much smaller than them, and the impact destroyed it.

Unfortunately, the collision breached the Kee-Raw’s hull in the engine room and disabled most of their systems. Bulkhead doors slammed shut in the aft section to protect the crew, but the Kee-Raw was mortally wounded considering the circumstances.

“Abandon ship,” she ordered. Another benefit, the raiders should leave the real life pods alone, assuming they were similarly booby-trapped, and too damn busy defending themselves to fire upon them.

She programmed the scuttle command to trigger after her life pod blasted free, and she issued the final order.

The men looked stunned as she bolted from her chair. “I said abandon ship, dammit! Life pods, now!”

This spurred them to action. She stepped into her cabin on the way past and grabbed her old knapsack from her bunk. She always kept it packed and ready to go, the things she couldn’t bear to lose, the only things of any value to her beside her ring and necklaces.

She followed steps behind her men, running as she slung the pack over her shoulders.

The men hesitated at the life pod bays. “All in,” she ordered, pointing to one. “Go!”

The engineer, fifteen years her senior, tried to argue. “But sir, you’ll...be alone.”

She knew what he wanted to say but didn’t dare. “That’s an order, mister. I’ve been alone most my life. Go!”

He finally dove through the hatch. She slammed her hand against the panel, sealing the life pod and launching it. Its trajectory would blast it safe of the debris field so they could hopefully soon be picked up by one of the Confederation vessels.

She dove for the other, used the command panel inside to seal herself in, and launched.

As she looked through the view port at the Kee-Raw growing smaller behind her, she authorized the final scuttle sequence and her ship self-destructed. She prayed her men made it safely out of harm’s way. They had been picked because they were single, without children, and good at their jobs.

She wouldn’t put them at additional risk by allowing any of them to remain with her.

Aine settled in, her pulse slowing.

This is it.

Either she’d be rescued, die at the raiders’ hands, or crash land on the planet.

Regardless, the fact that at last count they'd already destroyed eight large raider ships was something to be proud of.

Dying wasn't a bad option, either. All the people she loved were dead.

Not long after, she saw on the sensors that a Confederation ship safely retrieved the other life pod. One worry off her plate. She couldn't signal for help due to more raider ships converging on the area. As her life pod drew closer to the planet's surface, she wondered how badly it would hurt to die like this.

Hopefully, it won't last long.

* * * *

The life pod skipped off the atmosphere as the autopilot computers tried adjusting the magnetic shields to change approach angle. With the next skip, it plunged through. As the pod's hull temperature increased, she buckled herself into a seat and pulled Mal's pendant from under her shirt. Kissing it while she rubbed her thumb over her father's ring, she did the one thing she'd never done before in her life.

Prayed.

Although she prayed for a quick and painless death, not survival.

The life pod violently shook and would have fatally bounced her around if she hadn't been secured. She squeezed her eyes shut and held on for what felt like infinity, until the wind sounded like an inhuman scream slipping past the hull plates even as the landing thrusters struggled to slow her descent.

Just before the final impact came, she screamed, "Aggie!" before she lost consciousness.

Chapter Five

When Aine opened her eyes, everything lay still and quiet around her. Taking a breath hurt, between her chest feeling caved in and acrid smoke filling the cabin. From the angle of the landing she lay on her back while still buckled into her seat.

Correction, *everything* hurt. Moving wasn't an option, but she tried wiggling her toes.

Those still worked.

She heard a noise outside, something on the hatch.

Raiders!

She jerked her head up, trying to see the harness buckle so she could unfasten herself. A flare of agonizing pain took her consciousness.

* * * *

The man's severe face floated into her field of vision. For such a harsh-looking man, his touch felt exceptionally gentle as his finger caressed her chin. His lips moved. She knew he spoke to her but a dull roar filled her ears and she passed out again.

* * * *

She woke up screaming. Jagged bolts of agony ripped through her abdomen. She could hear the man's voice. Deep, yet soothing.

"I know it hurts. I am sorry."

Raider.

She tried to lash out, to hit at him. She'd die fighting.

He grabbed her wrist in a firm, unbreakable grip. "Stop. You will hurt yourself worse."

"Let me go!"

"I am not going to hurt you."

She tried thrashing more, then felt the sharp sting of a hypo against her neck before her world went black.

* * * *

She wasn't in the life pod. She still hurt, worse than before. When she opened her eyes she found herself looking up into damp, tall trees towering over her in a hazy, grey mist. She swiveled her eyes, in too much pain to move anything else.

A large man knelt close by, his back turned to her as he hunched over something. A long blond braid hung down his back. When she felt a brush of air against her bare flesh, she realized she was naked.

Then she saw her knapsack lying nearby.

That snapped her control. She tried to reach for it, realized she was restrained, and cried out as pain splintered through her body again.

Whether he was just that fast or the pain twisted her perception, he suddenly knelt next to her before she ever saw him move. He made soothing noises as he checked her over.

He looked...worried?

"Let me go," she croaked through the pain. "You don't know who you're fucking with."

"I am not fucking with anyone, Captain Lorcan."

Shit.

His clear, dusty green eyes bored right through her. "You are seriously injured. I am sorry I had to move you, but the crash site was too exposed."

"Afraid one of your buddies will try to steal your prize?"

He arched an eyebrow at her. “Just who do you think I am, Captain?”

“Fuck. You. Asshole.”

He rummaged through his medical kit. “You certainly have a mouth on you.”

Another wave of pain ripped at her guts. When she moaned he pressed his palm over her mouth to muffle the sound, held his body protectively over hers, and looked around as if to verify they were still hidden.

“I wish you would not do that,” he said when she composed herself.

“What? Scream in fucking agony?”

“No. The swearing. It is beneath a captain of your caliber.”

She couldn’t have heard him right. “My swearing offends a raider asshole?”

He held up another hypo. “I am not a raider, and I am not an asshole. And you will rip open those sutures if you do not lie still.”

His English wasn’t accented but she didn’t miss his formal speech pattern. “What’s that for?”

“Painkiller and healing accelerant.” He jabbed the hypo into her upper arm. She remained conscious long enough to watch him move her knapsack closer to her before he covered her with a blanket.

* * * *

The world swam into focus. He sat a few feet away, leaning against a tree. “How are you this morning, Captain?”

She glared at him. She still hurt, but not as badly. Her mind also felt clearer.

“If I free your hands, will you promise not to move?” he asked.

“Why?”

“Because three different times you nearly bled to death last night and I am out of emergency plasma. I cannot move you yet.”

She was still naked, but covered by the blanket.

“Move me where?”

“My lander, so I can get you back to my ship.”

Another stab of pain. She must have winced, because he was over her in a flash, pulling the blanket back and checking something. His face changed, his calm demeanor gone. He said something in a foreign language she assumed was an epithet. He threw the blanket off her, and she felt his hands doing something. Another sharp pain tore through her abdomen.

“Sorry,” he apologized. His eyes drifted to hers for a moment.

“Wouldn’t want your prisoner to die. I’m worth too much money.”

“Right now you are a beautiful pain in the ass, Captain Lorcan, but not my prisoner.” He grabbed something out of his medical bag and reached up to her mouth. “Open.”

“Gagging me?”

“Because you are going to scream. I do not want you giving our position away in case the raiders have sent landing parties. I cannot risk giving you any more sedatives right now. I am sorry.”

She finally opened, and he carefully slipped a roll of gauze into her mouth so she could bite down on it.

“Take a deep breath, let it out, then take another.”

Despite the pain, she kept her eyes on him. She did as he said.

He looked at her. “I am sorry, but this is going to hurt. A lot.” Before she could react, agonizing pain seared her, graying her vision as she screamed into the roll of gauze. After a moment the worst of the pain eased and returned to a more tolerable degree of discomfort.

She never thought she’d be glad about something like that.

When he reached up to remove the gauze roll from her mouth she saw blood on his hand. “I am sorry, Captain,” he said, his voice gentle. “I had to cauterize it. The sutures were not holding. You have an artery in your abdomen that keeps bleeding. I am not a skilled surgeon. I am only trained as a field medic, so I am doing the best I

can.”

He noticed his hand and wiped her blood on the blanket.

“Who are you? What are you going to do with me?”

“Captain Lorcan, do you always talk this much when injured so badly?”

“Tell me!”

“I am Commander Sammuel Jorvis of the Act’huran battle destroyer Ab’yoika Maru.”

Relief flooded her. “You’re not a raider?”

He sat back. “I believe I told you that earlier. Did you not understand me?” He reached into his bag and withdrew a bottle of water. He carefully slipped his hand under the back of her head to lift it and helped her take a sip. “Not too much.”

Once she had a little to drink, he gently lowered her head again. “Will you promise to hold still if I free your hands? I do not wish to keep you restrained. I will not hurt you.” He frowned. “I mean intentionally. I cannot promise I will not have to do more treatment.”

She nodded.

Aine got a better look at his face as he leaned in and removed the energy shackles from her wrists. A man used to being in command, definitely, from the steely set of his strong jaw. Depth and strength in his eyes. For some reason he looked vaguely familiar, although she couldn’t figure out why.

He rubbed her wrists after he removed the energy shackles. “I am afraid to give you too much painkiller or sedative. I have given you more than the maximum dosage of healing accelerant as it is.”

“Where’s your lander?”

“Hidden. Cloaked. Nearly a kilometer away.” He looked amused. “You are a very talented woman, Captain. I am most suitably impressed by your engineering skill.”

“Let me walk. I can make it.” Now that she knew he wasn’t a raider, trying to stay alive seemed like a damn spiffy idea.

“You will die if you try to move. You need at least another six

hours to lie still and allow the medicine to heal the worst of your internal injuries. We can treat the rest once we return to my ship. Besides, I cannot risk taking off in daytime.”

“I’m not good at waiting around.”

“A woman after my own heart.”

“I hate planets.”

“You really talk too much.”

“Fuck you.”

He smiled. Despite her pain, something about the expression touched her in a pleasant way.

“It would be my extreme pleasure to oblige you in that,” he said. “Perhaps after you have healed more, Captain. I would not wish to love you to death. For now, sleep.”

His voice had a soothing, deep rumble to it. Funny, she did want to sleep. And that’s what she did.

* * * *

Sammuel watched her sleep. He couldn’t help but reach out and stroke her cheek, touch her short, spiky hair.

Why did he have to meet someone like her under these circumstances?

He’d heard about her, of course. Studied her battle record. Yes, she did impress him. Meeting her in person...

He closed his eyes as he inhaled.

His t’wren. She was perfect.

If she would agree.

Unfortunately, with someone like her—married to her career—he suspected he had little chance of persuading her to change her way of life. She might not even feel a connection to him. Not to mention he had a not-so-minor matter of keeping her alive and getting her to the safety of his ship.

How he’d prayed to every god he’d never believed in while he

worked on her throughout the night! Terrified she would die, afraid to take his eyes and hands off her.

Ker would laugh, no doubt about it.

Sammuel always swore he was no soft, silly man, would never simply fall in love as he'd made fun of others for doing.

Ker's teasing aside that he might one day see the truth for himself, he'd never wanted a t'wren. Never wanted to share Ker with anyone, male or female. Ker always sat back, patient, never urging him to seek out a t'wren, content to wait until Fate struck on its own. But with Captain Aine Lorcan's scent coating his skin, Sammuel couldn't imagine her not joining them.

Completing them.

He shook himself from his reverie.

First things first—save her life.

* * * *

The light had changed when she next opened her eyes. Commander Jorvis sat close beside her, his eyes on her. She suspected he hadn't moved much since she was last awake.

He touched her arm when she tried to move. "Please do not sit up yet, Captain."

"How long have I been out?"

"A few hours. I risked giving you another dose of healing accelerant while you were out." He picked up a scanner and she didn't try to stop him when he pulled back the blanket and held the scanner over her belly. "The cauterization is holding and healing, but I would prefer to wait a little longer. Besides, it is not dark yet."

"How long?"

"Three hours until dusk, another hour until full dark."

"How badly was I injured?"

"Very, internally. A few minor external lacerations from debris bouncing around inside the life pod."

“How did you know where I was?”

“I positioned my ship on the outskirts of the battle, cloaked, prepared to catch any raiders who escaped. I watched your ship. I saw the collision and the last two life pods jettison. I knew I needed to go after you.”

“One of the shadow ships?”

He nodded.

“Are my men really safe?”

“Yes, the Confederation safely retrieved them. I left my ship in a small landing skiff to follow your life pod. I figured the smaller the vessel, the less likely I would be detected. I did not wish to draw attention to you from the raiders and I knew you would not call for help.”

“How did you know which pod I was in?”

“Captain, I have studied your career. You are definitely a strategist after my own heart. There is absolutely no way you would allow any men to remain on board while you yourself left. Your pod had to be the last to depart.” He smiled. “That was a brilliant plan, by the way. We laughed over the show the raiders put on trying to retrieve the life pods. My most sincere admiration.”

She felt herself blush at the compliment. “How long until you return me?”

She didn’t miss the cloud that crossed his expression. “It is too risky. We will rendezvous with my ship and get you safely from the area and make sure you are physically healed. Then we can decide what to do.”

Her eyes fell on her knapsack. He must have followed her gaze because he reached for it and moved it even closer. “What is in there that is so precious to you? I did not look, if that is your concern.”

“My family’s in there. All that’s left of them.” She curled her fingers around the straps and held on to it but didn’t open it.

She didn’t share her past with others, especially not with a strange Act’huran commander.

Which brought her to another point. “You don’t look like a normal Act’huran. I thought you were a human.”

“I am human.”

Human? “What are you doing with them?”

He shrugged. “I am happy. I have been with them longer than I was with the Confederation.”

Bells went off in her memory. Sammuel Jorvis...

“Holy crap, are you related to *Captain* Sammuel Jorvis of the Confederation?” Jorvis, one of the Confederation’s most decorated captains, was standard study material in the Academy. His battle tactics were hailed by most as genius. She even wrote a paper on him.

He had been listed as missing in action over eighty years earlier, when he disappeared at the age of thirty-two after having to abandon his ship. His crew survived, but the life pod he’d been in was never located.

This Jorvis looked barely older than thirty-five. Forty, max. He looked a lot like pictures she’d seen of him, but Jorvis had brown hair, not blond, and he didn’t have green eyes...

He sat back, looking amused. “Captain Lorcan, I *am* Sammuel Jorvis.”

* * * *

Stunned, she stared at him. “No. Fucking. Way! How is that possible? What happened?”

He ran the scanner over her abdomen again. “What do you know of the Act’hurans, Captain?”

“Not much. Technologically advanced, brilliant in battle, but not a hostile race.”

“Of their physiology?”

“Nothing other than their physical appearance. Act’hurans are usually larger than the average human, eyes set wider apart.”

“Our lives are very similar, Captain Lorcan, yours and mine. I

also crashed upon an uninhabited planet in hostile territory. I was also rescued. Act'hurans have been fighting alongside Confederation forces for a long, long time.”

“You decided to stay?”

“In a manner of speaking. You need to rest. You can ask more questions later.”

She studied his profile as he ran a detailed scan over her entire body. Every time his eyes drifted to hers his expression softened. Since her pain had eased somewhat due to the healing accelerants, she could enjoy the tingly feeling his gaze filled her with. He smelled good, too. His natural light, sweet and slightly spicy scent filled her lungs every time he leaned close.

What the hell is wrong with me?

It had to be the situation, that's all.

She closed her eyes and tried to relax, but her awareness of how close Jorvis' large body hovered kept her from sleeping.

By the time dusk fell, Jorvis had her sitting up. It hurt, but he felt it safe enough to try. He gave her another dose of healing accelerant and wrapped the blanket around her.

“Where are my clothes?” she asked.

“Sorry, Captain. I had to cut them off you for the scan and to operate. You were near death, and I had very little time for proprieties.” He shrugged off his long, light uniform coat, which hung almost to his knees. Beneath that he wore snug uniform trousers and a long-tailed shirt that fell past what she assumed was a tight ass, if the rest of his hard physique was any indication.

Heat filled her face.

Totally inappropriate thought.

He helped her stand and made no effort to avert his eyes as he helped her put the coat on and roll up the sleeves. Huge on her, the hem fell almost to her ankles.

Once on her feet, Jorvis appeared even larger compared to her slight frame, well over a foot taller than her.

He gathered his things, including her knapsack. "Will you please allow me to carry this for you? I do not wish you to strain yourself."

Even she realized the stupidity of refusing. "Okay. Thanks."

He slung her pack and his medical bag over his right shoulder. He wore an energy pistol on his right hip, she finally noticed. He slipped his left arm around her. "Do you want me to carry you?" he asked.

He could probably do it, as big as he was. "No, that's okay. I'll try to walk."

He'd salvaged her boots and pulled them on her feet. Then they carefully made their way across the terrain. He had much better night vision than she did because he didn't hesitate or stumble and she could barely see two feet in front of them.

When they finally reached his lander Aine felt shaky, weak, and in a lot of pain. He helped her through the hatch and carefully laid her on a padded bench. "I need to check you again."

The pain took away any thought she had of protesting. She nodded and closed her eyes. He unbelted the coat and parted it. She didn't even care that he could probably see how her nipples puckered and tightened as the cool air hit them. She was aware of him passing the scanner over her, then finally opened her eyes again when he pulled the coat closed and tied the belt.

"You did not rip anything loose, thank the gods. I think it is safe to give you more painkillers now."

She reached out and touched his arm. "Not much. Please."

"You are in pain."

"I want to stay awake."

He hesitated and finally nodded. "As you wish, Captain." He adjusted the dosage and she felt the sting of the hypo. The pain eased to tolerable levels.

He started to strap her in when she touched his arm again. She liked touching him, another thing that surprised her in addition to her reaction to him. Normally she didn't want any kind of physical contact with others since she left Hector.

“Thank you, Commander Jorvis.”

“Please, call me Sammuel.”

She surprised herself with her reply. “Aine.”

The bright smile she received in reply warmed her heart and she didn’t know why. “Aine. Captain Aine Padron Lorcan. Thank you. I had wondered how you pronounced your first name.”

“When can I ask you more questions about how you look as young as you do?” Now with her pain at manageable levels and in the safety of his ship, she wanted to know.

She didn’t mind when he curled his fingers around her hand, brought it up to his mouth, and kissed it with sinfully hot lips. “Let me get us off this godforsaken rock. We will have at least six hours before we reach my ship. You can ask me as many questions as you wish during that time.”

* * * *

Once they broke free of the atmosphere, Jorvis turned his command chair around so he could face her and talk. The small lander was less than twenty-five feet long inside, meant to hold up to four crewmen comfortably for missions and transport.

“Tell me, why are you so well-preserved, Sammuel?”

He settled back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. “It is a rather long answer, so I appreciate your indulgence. After I crashed I was found and rescued by D’arsolan Ker-Pythan, who at that time was an Act’huran captain on a shadow ship working with our Confederation forces.

“Act’hurans are not like humans, one species of many races. Act’hurans have two distinct but related species. The majority species is the t’amen-ra. Greater in number, but they were the second, lesser species to develop. The first, the t’amar-te, are much older and highly revered and are the dominant force in our society. They are similar in physical appearance to the t’amen-ra, although usually larger. Over

the millennia, they have evolved in such a way that they are now always male.”

“Okay, I’m no doctor, but how do they reproduce?”

He smiled. “The t’amar-te, unlike their brethren, have particular needs in that they seek out first a t’arn, a mate. Male or female, it does not matter, but it is nearly always a male they claim first. Their physical senses are more highly developed, as are their clairvoyant senses. When they meet someone, they know immediately if he or she is their perfect mate. When they do, if the person is willing, they take them and they mate for life. Eventually, most t’amar-te add a third to their pair, making them a completed triad. Both mates are then collectively known as t’wren. They are joined not just in body and heart, but in mind and soul.

“While a pair can live many, many centuries, triads live much longer. Act’hurans live very long anyway, rarely get sick, and age very slowly. Unless injured, they normally live extremely long lives compared to humans. If the second t’wren is a female, the t’amar-te can reproduce their line. If both t’wren are male, which sometimes happens, then they do not. I willingly chose to stay with the t’amar-te who rescued me.”

“So...he’s your mate?”

“I am his t’arn. We do not yet have another t’wren.”

For some reason, the look in his eyes made her breath catch, her heart race, and she knew it had nothing to do with her injuries. “But you’re human.”

“Humans are close enough to Act’hurans that it does not matter. When they take a mate, because of certain...properties, the t’wren both change in many ways, even if they are not t’amen-ra. I used to have dark brown hair and blue eyes. That is how t’amar-te can mate with t’amen-ra. Both t’wren become, in many ways, t’amar-te. And as long as one of the t’wren is a female, they can reproduce and carry on their line.”

His green gaze burned into her.

“What are you saying, Commander?” She felt it safer to revert to the formality.

“Do not worry, Aine,” he said with a smile. “We do not ever force t’wren. Ever. It is not allowed. No one wants an unwilling mate.” With that he turned to face the front again, leaving her with loudly jangling thoughts and a body that, while still wracked with medicine-numbed pain, reacted to him in a way she’d never reacted to anyone before in her life.

* * * *

Commander Jorvis wouldn’t let anyone else help her after they landed in the hangar bay of the Act’huran battle cruiser Haltoran-dey. He personally carried her knapsack and kept his arm around her for the walk to the ship’s medical bay. He barked orders in Act’huran to his men, who immediately scrambled to comply. The men, most not quite as tall as Jorvis, all dwarfed Aine. While at first glance they looked human enough, a closer look exposed the subtle differences in the face, wider set eyes, longer skulls, and tanner skin.

“I thought you said your ship’s name was the Ab’yoika Maru?”

“It is. This is one of our fleet. We are on our way to rendezvous with the Ab’yoika Maru.” He walked her through the door of the medical bay and immediately started giving orders in Act’huran to the staff. One man, the doctor she guessed, looked a little annoyed until Jorvis growled another command at him.

The doctor paled and scurried to get something, chirruping orders to his staff.

Jorvis had no plans to leave her side. He picked her up as if she weighed nothing and lifted her onto a medical bunk. A male medic brought a hospital gown and blanket and activated a privacy screen for the alcove after leaving them alone.

Jorvis reached for the coat’s belt. Aine clamped her hands over it. “I can undress myself, Commander.”

He smiled but remained undeterred. He simply lifted her hands away and continued to untie the belt. "Then tell me to stop." His eyes bored into hers as she felt the words wither in her throat.

He helped her sit up and remove the coat, then don the gown. He pulled his coat back on and called something to the medic, who then returned with the doctor.

When the doctor started speaking in Act'huran, Jorvis growled at him. "In English. Have respect."

The doctor, a man Aine suspected wasn't used to taking orders, colored in the face. "My apologies, Commander. Captain Lorcan, I need to do a full scan to check the status of your injuries. Commander Jorvis said he performed emergency field surgery."

"Okay."

Aine thought Jorvis would leave the alcove for the exam, but he didn't. He stood at the head of the medical bunk with his hands firmly planted on either side of her head. Normally the close intrusion would irritate the snot out of her.

At one point, something the doctor did hurt like hell. She involuntarily gasped as she reached up and grabbed Jorvis' arm.

"Shh, it is all right, Ki'ato," Jorvis soothed. "I am here." He laid his other hand over hers, trapping it against his warm arm.

His low, rumbling voice. What the hell was it about him that made her want to melt into a puddle?

"I'm sorry, Captain," the doctor apologized. She felt the sting of a hypo. "I'm giving you a local anesthetic. I must check the incision." The pain ebbed away as the medicine took effect.

Jorvis' thumb rubbed along her knuckles. She closed her eyes and tried not to process the confusing jumble of thoughts and emotions entwined with her pain. There would be plenty enough time for that later—once she put on some real clothes and had a sealed cabin door between her and the sinfully sexy Commander Sammuel Jorvis.

After what felt like forever, and more doses of antibiotics and painkillers, the doctor grudgingly admitted Jorvis had done an

adequate job and nothing needed repairing. “I suggest a very light meal of broth and tea, nothing heavy for a few more days. Let the intestines fully heal and strengthen again without having to struggle to digest a lot of food.”

“Otherwise?” Jorvis asked.

“Otherwise, she is healing. I will not use any more of that accelerant. She’s had more than enough and I do not want to risk ill effects.”

“Then I can take her?”

Her eyes popped open. *Take me where?*

The doctor shrugged. “I would prefer she remain in bed for a few days—*resting*,” he added for emphasis, as if he felt a crystal-clear clarification was necessary.

Oh boy. Aine had an idea that maybe her definition of “take” and Jorvis’ were two totally different beasts.

“Excellent.” He shouldered her knapsack again and, wrapping the blanket around her, scooped her into his arms before she could protest. “Tell my yeoman what her diet is and have him bring it to my quarters immediately,” he called over his shoulder.

Aine tried to protest, but he’d already carried her out of the medical bay and down the corridor, heading gods knew where.

Jorvis would have none of it. “You are going to rest. You heard the doctor.”

“In *your* quarters?”

“They are the best on the ship. Is that a problem?”

“I would prefer quarters of my own, thank you.” She tried for a cold and chilly tone and knew it came out sounding rather temperate despite her best efforts. Dammit, she couldn’t think around this man, which was totally not like her.

“You have quarters of your own—they just happen to be my quarters. If you think I will allow someone of your status out of my sight, you are sadly mistaken.”

He glanced down at her again. She knew for damn certain the heat

she felt flare in her belly had nothing to do with her wounds.

They turned a corner. A moment later he entered a huge stateroom cabin. He gently laid her on his bunk and pulled the covers over her. Before she could argue with him again, the yeoman appeared with a tray. Jorvis took it and immediately dismissed the man.

After he removed his sidearm, he sat next to her on the bed and helped her eat.

“I am capable of eating by myself!”

“Did I say you were not?”

“What’s going on, Commander Jorvis?”

“Sammuel.”

She glared at him, but he smiled.

“You look beautiful when you are angry.”

“That is the universe’s oldest and worst pick-up line.” She finished the broth. “And what did you call me earlier?”

“What?”

“Ki’ato. What does that mean?”

“It means ‘Little One.’” His gaze lingered on her face, pulling more heat from her core. “It is a term of endearment.”

Her mouth dried up. She took a drink of water and tried to control the nervous tremor in her hand. “I get the feeling you have something up your sleeve, Commander.”

He put the tray aside and caught her chin between his palms, cradling her cheeks. “I will call you whatever I want, Ki’ato, because I know you feel what I feel. You and I are cut from the same cloth, lone warriors with steel-plated hearts. Right now, you are afraid of what you are feeling because you’ve never felt it before. The loss of control, the instinctive response to me. I know because I once was where you are.”

She couldn’t speak. Her heart raced. He continued. “You say one word—stop—and I will. Any other word, any other protestation, I will ignore because I know you need to pretend to fight this to preserve your sanity until you can accept it. I speak from experience.

Tell me I am wrong.”

He leaned in and kissed her, gently at first, then with more passion, his tongue demanding entrance.

She wanted to fight, wanted to bite and yell and scream and tell him stop.

She couldn't. Her body wanted him.

He lifted his head and stared into her eyes. “Tell me to stop.”

Her chest heaved, not in pain but from trying to catch her breath from that earth-shattering kiss. She wanted more and hated herself for her body's betrayal.

He kissed her again, this time his tongue tracing the shape of her lips before one hand cupped the back of her head, his fingers curling in her short hair. “You will grow your hair long, Ki'ato. So it looks proper.”

“What?” Okay, so a crack about her 'do could pull her out of the mood?

“You must have a braid, as will suit your status.”

She tried to put a hand to his chest to push him away and her body betrayed her again. She grabbed his shirt instead, holding him in place. “You sound rather sure of yourself, Commander,” she breathlessly said. “Taking advantage of a woman unable to fight back.”

“You are an expert in hand-to-hand combat. You would not lie still even on Death's door. Severely wounded, and yet you tried to fight me when I pulled you from the wreckage.” He used his free hand to unfasten the top two buttons on his shirt and drew the collar aside. Along the base of his throat a deep, ugly gash was healing. “You did this to me. I certainly did not do it to myself. That is why I had to put the energy shackles on you until I could make you understand I would not hurt you. You would not stop fighting unless you were unconscious.”

“What exactly do you think you're going to do with me?” She already knew. Or strongly suspected, if her body's reaction was any

indication.

“You are my t’wren. While I cannot fully claim you tonight, I plan to do so as soon as the doctor says you may safely engage in physical activity.”

“Whoa.” She started laughing. “Dude, you are sooo crazy. Nice joke, Commander, but time to knock it off.”

“Then say that one word and I will.”

She wanted to force the sound through her lips and couldn’t. One simple syllable.

“Then until you can say it,” he continued, “I will assume you accept.” He kissed her, and this time she didn’t bother trying to hide her response. She closed her eyes and let him explore, tasting his breath, slightly spicy like his scent. When he lifted his head she wanted to follow, to not break their kiss.

He shifted position on the bed, stretching his body along hers and cradling her against him. His other hand burrowed under the blanket, down to the hem of the medical gown, and lifted it above her hips.

This can’t be happening. “I—I—”

“Say the word,” he rumbled as he nuzzled her neck. “And I will stop.”

“No...”

“That is not the word and you know it.” His fingers brushed along her thighs. They parted before him. “Tell me to stop.”

“No.” She closed her eyes as her thighs opened wider.

“No you will not tell me to stop?”

Her voice sounded barely louder than a whisper even though her pulse pounded in her ear. “Don’t stop.”

It felt like forever that he teased her. She’d only been with Hector, and he’d been pretty decent in the sack. So far, the passion she felt just from what Jorvis did far surpassed anything she’d ever felt before.

His fingers lightly stroked her clit, then teased her slick flesh. She knew her juices flowed for him, her body telling him what her voice

could not.

“Do you want me to stop?” he rumbled against her neck.

“No!”

“Spread your legs wider.”

Her breath came in hitching gasps as she did. Maybe they drugged her. Maybe that was it, and in the morning she’d be able to think straight.

He cupped his hand over her mound, slipping one finger into her wet passage as his palm kept steady pressure against her clit.

He nipped her earlobe. “I will teach you to come on command for me and Master,” he whispered. “Just as he taught me. I promise you we will love you and cherish you and protect you for all of our lives. You will never feel alone again. Your soul will be joined to ours, entwined, a completed triad.”

Heat coalesced under his hand. She couldn’t think straight between the thick, deep sound of his voice, his scent, and the feel of his finger fucking her.

“You are so tight. I cannot wait to slide my cock inside you. The first time, I will fuck you hard and fast and make you mine. It will not be loving or tender, and you most likely will not come. I will mark you as mine and claim you.” He plunged his finger a little deeper. “The second time I fuck you, I will fuck you long and slow until I have felt your body milk my cock many times with your orgasms.”

She gasped.

“The third time,” he continued, “I will fuck you until you scream my name and beg me to let you come, because by then you will be totally mine.”

Her belly clenched, tight with need. His finger plunged deeper, then pressed up, finding that magical spot she’d heard about but never located in her limited time with Hector.

“Come,” he ordered.

She moaned as her body obeyed even while her mind struggled to comprehend the command. He kissed her, crushing her lips with his.

His finger continued whatever magic motions he used to conjure the response from her, prolonging her reaction until she lay trembling on the bed beside him.

He withdrew his hand and, his gaze firmly on her, sucked her juices off his fingers. She watched him as she gasped for breath.

What the fuck? I crash land, nearly die, and now I'm letting a guy I barely know make love to me?

A slow, seductive smile curled his lips. "You never said stop."

Speechless, she continued to stare at him.

He got out of bed. He stripped off his coat and draped it over a chair by the small table, then removed his long-tailed shirt, which he accidentally dropped on the floor. The torso revealed was strong, well-muscled, his broad chest dusted with curly blond hair the shade of his braid. When he leaned over to retrieve the shirt she realized the back seam of his trousers must have split open at some point because the fabric parted, exposing bare, pale flesh.

She laughed despite herself.

He looked over his shoulder. "And what is so funny, Ki'ato?" he asked.

"You need a tailor. You mooned me."

He realized what she meant. He sat to pull his boots off. "No, they are deliberately made that way." One boot hit the floor with a heavy thud. "Master prefers instant access to me when he desires it. Even when I am not with him, he wants me dressed as he specifies."

The laughter dried up in her throat as his meaning slammed into her. Her expression must have amused him. "I look forward to helping him decide how to appropriately attire you." His other boot hit the floor, then he stood and unbuttoned his fly. He removed his trousers and added them to the pile of clothes accumulating on the other chair.

She'd seen cocks before, Hector's up close and personal, and others in vids and the occasional accidental glimpse in the course of being the only woman on a ship.

This cock, large and thick with a full, heavy sac hanging beneath it, looked more like a weapon than something belonging on a human male. Fully proportioned, well befitting its rather large and bulky owner and doing him proud justice.

It also looked rigid and anxious to get back to the business at hand.

So why the fuck did her mouth water?

“What are you doing?” she managed to ask.

“I would think that is rather obvious.” He returned to the bed and knelt beside her head. “It is getting rather tiring to remind you that all you have to do is say *stop*.” He caressed her cheek. She lay eye to...well, one-eye with his member.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“What I know you want. Open.”

She wasn’t going to. She was going to say stop, but her mouth opened and she moaned as she eagerly sucked him between her lips. She’d never found the taste objectionable with Hector, but the sweet, almost fruity flavor of Jorvis’ pre-come took her by surprise. She greedily sucked his cock as deeply as she could, closing her eyes and using one hand to cup and caress the sac dangling below.

He stroked her head. “Very good, Ki’ato. You know it is what you want. You are meant to be with us, that is why you cannot resist.”

Damn it was good. She could easily spend hours doing this. She closed her eyes and burrowed her head deep between his legs, his musky, spicy scent filling her lungs and nearly making her dizzy.

He rested his large hand on the back of her head. “Gods, I understand now,” he whispered.

She wanted to ask what the hell he meant by that, but she couldn’t bring herself to part with the luscious hunk of meat between her lips. Then the sound of the cabin door opening startled her out of her reverie. She tried to sit up and cover herself, but Jorvis didn’t release her head, kept her in place.

He said something in Act’huran, received a male-sounding

response, then the cabin door opened and closed again.

The pressure of his hand on her head relaxed but didn't disappear. "Sorry, love. My yeoman. Do not worry, he has seen much more shocking sights than this between Master and myself on many occasions. I have instructed him to leave us until I call for him."

She felt she should be horrified, embarrassed. Instead, the taste of him filling her mouth washed all other thoughts away and formed the sum of her existence.

He let out a loud sigh. "Oh, gods, I wish I could hold back and let you do this all day. Master forbade me from self-release when I left him. Only if I found a t'wren was I allowed to climax. It has been almost an Earth year since I last saw him." She felt his cock tense even more as his other hand also cupped her head. "If you do not tell me to stop, I cannot."

He briefly let go of her. She knew she should lift her head, say the word, and end this insanity.

Instead, she deep-throated him.

His hands returned, holding her, caressing her, and he let out another sigh. "Then prepare to swallow, love."

With that warning she tasted him, hot and thick and creamy and every bit as sweet and tangy as his pre-come. It felt like she swallowed mouthful after mouthful, like he wouldn't stop, until finally he did. Even then, his member didn't totally soften like she expected, only lost some of its rigor. And still, the taste! Delicious and rich and—

He gripped her hair and attempted to pull her off. "You are finished for now, Ki'ato."

She tried to keep him from dislodging her. He laughed and pressed his thumbs into the corners of her mouth and gently pushed her away, gathering her into his arms when she tried to nuzzle back into position.

His hand caressed her back as he pressed her face against the crook of his neck. "Sleep, Ki'ato. Rest."

* * * *

Sammuel watched as her eyes closed. He knew she wasn't aware of the way her lips pursed and puckered even as she dropped into sleep, as if still latched onto his cock. He smiled when he stroked her cheek and her head turned toward his hand. He let her suck one of his fingers into her mouth. His cock stiffened slightly, only a little appeased by her earlier attentions.

He could easily spend weeks in bed with her. Hopefully would, once reunited with Master.

That thought stiffened his cock even further.

He lay there beside her for hours and watched her sleep. Every so often she sucked on his finger for a little while before her mouth went lax again.

Just wait until she tastes Ker.

He nuzzled her hair. He understood, utterly, why Ker had been so certain all those years ago. He remembered his own doubts at first, his mind insisting he should resist, his body unable to. He also understood why Ker had been willing to sit back all these years and let him find his way when it came to locating their t'wren.

He remembered their last night together, before this mission began.

"Maybe you will not return alone this time, Ki'ran." My love. Ker had smiled after his comment.

"I do not wish to share you, Master."

"We do not choose who we love or do not love. Fate strikes us down in the most unlikely of places and at the most inconvenient of times."

"Are you saying I was inconvenient?"

"There are far better times to find a t'arn than to rescue a feisty, temperamental, half-dead human in hostile territory."

Sammuel closed his eyes and tried to hold back his laughter so he

didn't wake her. Master would laugh his fucking ass off when he learned the details of finding her.

And still he would look down at him with those beautiful green eyes and smile and nuzzle his lips against his forehead even as he squeezed his shoulder to show him how pleased he truly felt.

Sammuel tried to sleep.

Chapter Six

Aine's first thought upon awaking was *what the fuck happened to my cabin?*

Then the events flooded back with a whiff of Sammuel lying in bed with her. Immediately upon the heels of that, she felt shame for letting him have his way with her.

Then the craving hit her system.

She lay there, eyes squeezed closed, trying to will her mouth to stop watering. She clenched her hands as she realized she was draped over the man's wide, hard chest, her lips pressed against his flesh.

Her traitorous tongue flicked out and licked him. Salty, tangy, sweet and spicy all at once.

Something took control of her body, an unstoppable urge to burrow under the covers and find his cock and suck on it. It was the only thing, the only thought that soothed her frenzied need.

He had awakened because he chuckled and stroked the back of her head. "Be my guest, Ki'ato. I won't always give you this latitude."

Oh, fuck it!

She threw back the blanket and scooted down the bed while Sammuel laid back, his hands clasped behind his head. Peace and calm settled over her soul as she wrapped her lips around his semi-stiff cock and began to suck. When his taste filled her mouth, she happily moaned.

He reached down and stroked her head. "I know, love," he gently said. "I tried to rip Master's trousers off once on the bridge. He whipped my ass for disobeying him, but then he let me suck him later. You will have to learn to control that mouth of yours, or you may feel

my belt across your ass. But not yet. Definitely not today.”

Aine suspected she should feel angry or at least indignant over his comment, yet she couldn't muster outrage. She felt too...

Happy.

“I am going to signal for our breakfast. You can keep doing what you are doing.” He sounded amused. He must have reached back with his other hand and hit a com button because she heard a male voice over the intercom. A few minutes later, the cabin door opened and Sammuell pulled the covers over her, shielding her.

She closed her eyes and rested her cheek against his iron-firm thigh. He spoke to the yeoman for several minutes, even laughing at one point. Then the door opened and closed again.

His other hand never left the back of her head, stroking, twining his fingers as much as he could through her short hair.

She didn't know how long she lay there. Time drifted away with his sweet, tangy taste filling her senses.

He eventually tugged on her hair. “Ki'ato, we need to eat breakfast. I, for one, would like a shower.”

She made a negative sound around his cock, not wanting to relinquish her prize.

“Yes, love. Now. You are lucky I cannot spank you yet. Tear yourself away. I promise I will let you have plenty later.”

Laughing, he finally pinched her ear between his fingers and gently pulled her up the bed to get her to release him.

She looked into his eyes and found his gaze already upon her. “You are beautiful,” he whispered.

She wanted to mount him, to ride that enormous cock, but as she shifted position he seemed to anticipate her intent and he laughed again, carefully rolling her onto her back. “Not yet. When the doctor says it is safe.” He caressed her cheek, his fingertips lingering, brushing across her lips. “Remember what I told you last night.”

She remembered, all right. Just the memory of his words and tone of voice churned her insides and made her instantly wet again.

The outer corners of his eyes crinkled with his amusement. “I will take care of you after our shower. I still have the matter of training you properly.”

* * * *

The yeoman prepared her a light breakfast and hot tea. Sammuell, as she quickly became comfortable calling him, didn’t bother dressing and didn’t let her get dressed either. He sat and pulled her into his lap, one arm around her waist as he fed her breakfast.

The conflicting mix of emotions infringed on her bliss again. Shouldn’t she fight? Object?

Tell him to stop?

After he felt satisfied she ate enough and he took his meal, he carried her into the head and climbed into the shower with her. He slowly washed every inch of her body, lightly caressing the wounds she was finally able to see. They’d been bonded with surgical sealant and would heal as good as new in another day or two.

He knelt in front of her. “Put your hands on my shoulders,” he instructed.

She did.

Then she felt his breath, warm against her clit. She thanked the gods she kept herself closely trimmed down there. His tongue flicked out and stroked the sensitive nub of flesh from top to bottom and back again. She moaned, her knees trembling.

“I know,” he cooed. “It feels good, does it not?”

“Yes!”

He did it again and again, not enough to push her over the edge, just to bring her to the brink of frenzy.

“Please,” she begged.

“Please what?”

“Please make me come!”

He pushed a finger inside her at the same time he stroked her clit

with his tongue. That same magic movement, finding the exact spot inside her, and her insides lit up as her climax closed in.

“Do not come yet, Ki’ato,” he dangerously rumbled.

His words and tone helped her hold on to her fraying control. “What?”

“Do not come yet. I have not given you permission. If you obey, I will let you suck my cock all afternoon.”

Okay, so she wasn’t immune to bribery.

He played with her for what felt like forever, teasing her, learning her body. Finally, he sat back on his heels, his finger still deeply embedded inside her. “Come now, Ki’ato!”

She cried out as her fingers dug into his shoulders, the hardest, strongest orgasm of her life hitting her. He wiggled his finger, pressing down, and leaned in again.

“Come again. Now.” He latched on to her clit with his lips, and the protestation died on her lips as she cried out, another cataclysmic shock rocking her to her very depths.

That seemed to satisfy him. He stood and gathered her into his arms, murmuring soothing Act’huran endearments as he stroked her back.

As she caught her breath she realized she was crying, sobbing, holding on to him as if he alone stood between her and drowning in the sea of emotions flooding her soul.

He must have sensed her tears were not about him because he buried his face in her hair. “Let it out,” he said. “Let it out because you are not alone anymore. You do not need to carry this burden in your soul any longer. From this point on, your life is about love and celebration, not grief and loneliness.”

She wasn’t aware of him picking her up and grabbing a towel as he carried her into the cabin. He wrapped her in it and laid her in his bed, and still she cried.

He kissed her forehead, her cheeks. His tongue lapped at and caught her tears, caressed her lips. “Give me your pain, Little One,”

he insisted. "Let me love it from you."

He wrapped his arms around her, tucking her head against his neck. When she felt his flesh under her lips, her instincts took over. She licked his chest, then worked her way down his body. He let her.

She found his cock, which grew semi-erect in her hand before she latched on and settled against his thigh with a happy sigh. The feel of coarse hair and warm flesh against her cheek, his taste filling her mouth.

Heaven.

With her other hand she cupped his sac. It felt large, heavy in her palm.

Sammuel stroked her damp hair. "Please do not take offense if I fall asleep, Ki'ato. I stayed up most of the night watching you sleep. I will explain later the whys of this."

She didn't care. He promised she could suck him all afternoon, and that's exactly what she planned to do.

* * * *

When he attempted to coax her into letting go several hours later after he napped, she finally allowed him to cuddle her close.

"I will warn you," he said, "if you think the craving is strong with me, once you taste Master it will take some doing for us to pry your mouth from his cock." He stroked her cheek. When she turned her face to his hand and sucked in a finger, he let her.

"It is part of the bond we share. Part of his physiology." He laughed when she started wiggling free to head south again. He let her go.

She sucked him for several minutes before she finally forced herself to ask a question. She found she didn't mind releasing him so much if she kept her cheek pressed against his thigh. "Why do you call him Master?" she asked before sucking him again.

Maybe it was something they drugged her with, even though she

instinctively sensed that was more wrong than ancient flat-earth theories back on the Terran home planet.

He stroked her hair again. “Because he is. He will be yours, too. I call him Ker as well, especially around others, for protocol’s sake. But he is our Master.”

Okay, she had to release him again for that. “I don’t want to be a slave.”

“You are a slave to your career, to your previously chosen path, to your past and your grief. This is not slavery. This is love. It is every Act’huran’s dream to be selected as t’wren, and precious few ever are. They are regarded almost as highly as the t’amar-te themselves. It is not a position of slavery—it is a position of esteem and honor. Of reverence.”

She didn’t want to argue semantics. She wanted to suck his cock again, so she did.

He let her stay there for another hour before he summoned the yeoman. She didn’t even care he didn’t pull the blanket over her. He spoke to the yeoman, who then left again.

“Dinner, love.” He tapped her on top of her head. She didn’t want to let go but her stomach rumbled, finally forcing her to relinquish him.

He helped her to her feet. Before he covered himself, he picked up one of his clean shirts, pulled it over her head, and buttoned it for her. It hung well past her knees.

He grabbed a robe and pulled it on just in time for the yeoman to walk in with their dinner.

Sammuel spoke English. “Jarl, this is Captain Aine Lorcan.”

Heat flooded her face. She couldn’t look the man in the eye now that she realized he saw her, more than once, with Sammuel’s cock down her throat. “Hi,” she muttered.

Jarl bowed. “Ma’am.”

She started to correct him, to tell him to address her as “sir,” but couldn’t bring herself to do it.

“Jarl, you need to speak English around Captain Lorcan until she learns Act’huran.” He stroked her cheek, and a different kind of heat flooded to her face...and between her legs.

“Do you want me to contact the Admiral?” the yeoman asked.

“No. Not necessary. How long until we arrive at the Ab’yoika Maru?”

“Captain said six weeks.”

“Thank you.” He dismissed the yeoman, then held out a chair for her at the table.

Her dinner was, as expected, lighter fare, while Sammuel had something resembling steak. He watched her eat. “You have yet to tell me to stop, Ki’ato.”

She felt her face redden again. “No.”

He broadly smiled. “We will have plenty of time to talk on our journey. They do not need me at the helm. We have a captain who can get us to our destination. That leaves me plenty of time to properly take care of you.”

He said the last five words with something akin to a growling rumble. She felt moisture pool in her sex and suspected she might have left a wet spot on Sammuel’s shirt.

“You have so much to learn,” he said, his voice gentle. “I cannot wait to teach you.”

After they finished eating Sammuel summoned the doctor. He examined her with a portable scanner and declared her healing on track, but she needed at least one more day of rest.

If this was Sammuel’s idea of rest, part of her couldn’t wait to see his idea of a vigorous fuck. She used the facility before quickly rejoining Sammuel in bed.

She wanted to go down on him again. He stopped her. “No, time for another lesson.” He went down on her, making her hold back her climax until she thought her head would explode. Then he made her come three times in quick succession, leaving her limp on the bed.

He stretched out beside her, propped on one elbow and looking

rather proud. "How do you feel?"

She nodded.

"When you sufficiently recover, I am ready to give you something else I know you want."

She quickly sat up despite a faint protest from her healing wounds. He laughed as she dove for his cock.

Her clit still tingled from his ministrations, and yet when he grabbed her head in his hands and thrust his hips toward her, she felt her sensitive nub of flesh throbbing again, wanting him.

"I will come twice, Ki'ato. You are very skilled with your mouth, but fortunately for you, I have a lot of control."

He grew hard and large against her tongue, hot, slick and so, so sweet. In just a moment he rewarded her with another thick load of sweet essence.

"That is one, love," he said, gasping a little after he finished. His cock softened slightly, but not completely. After a while, she made him fully hard again.

"Take me deeply," he ordered. "Down your throat."

She did, and he quickly climaxed again.

Finally spent for a little while, he relaxed and let her stay where she was. He gently stroked her head. "I need to sleep, love. So do you." When she whined in protest, he laughed. "You may stay there, if you wish."

She fell asleep with the comforting feel and taste of his cock in her mouth.

* * * *

"You don't even know he's going to like me." Fear tugged at Aine's heart as she ate breakfast the next morning. Sammuel once again dressed her in one of his shirts and nothing else, but he let her sit at the table in her own chair instead of on his lap. He pulled on a pair of his trousers, his bare chest a tantalizing view.

Sammuel laughed. “Ki’ato, he will absolutely love and adore you because I love and adore you.”

“How do you know I’ll even like him?”

“Because you love me. So you shall love him.”

She wanted to argue she didn’t love him, but she would have been lying and he damn well know it. She couldn’t deny she loved him, as crazy and surreal as it felt.

He clasped his hands together, elbows on the table. “Aine, it is okay to let your mind struggle with this even though your heart and soul have effectively settled the issue. I well remember how I felt. I tried to protest that there was no way I could love Master even while at the same time I begged him to let me suck his cock again, even though in my life had I never been attracted to another man. What happens is beyond our control. It is not like when two humans meet and take time to get to know each other and learn to like before they love.”

“Why do you talk like that?”

“Like what?”

“Formally.”

He shrugged. “I have been with Master for so long, speaking Act’huran, and his English was very proper. I just eventually mimicked his speech patterns, I suppose. It does not matter, does it?”

“Doesn’t it?”

He laughed. “You are very spirited, Ki’ato. I love that about you.”

He was still eating after she finished. She used the facilities, then walked around the cabin, exploring. “It’s been a year since you’ve seen him? How do you know he hasn’t been sleeping around on you?”

She turned at Sammuel’s dark tone. “When you truly understand the bond we have, you will understand the utter nonsense of that statement. When t’wren are taken, the bond is, literally, for life.”

“But you’re eager to fuck me, aren’t you?” Truth be told, she was getting pretty eager for him to fuck her, too.

“Because you are my t’wren. I have never once been tempted by another until I met you. The t’arn always picks the other t’wren. Only if our bond were broken by death would I possibly conceive of being with any other. It is not the mind, but the body and heart and soul that picks the triad and completes it.”

She had an easier time accepting her strange affection for the commander based upon extreme horniness and a dried-up love life than she did a supernatural or biochemical bond.

“Once we complete the ritual,” he said, “you will feel it the way I do, totally, and you will understand without question.”

He finished eating and summoned the doctor to his cabin.

Aine’s nerves tightened even as her body wanted to drop to her knees and devour Sammuel again. She could mentally try to fight it all she wanted, as he said, but her body wanted him.

The doctor arrived and examined her. “Exactly what do you want me to say, Commander?” he finally asked Sammuel. She had a suspicion the doctor still felt a little miffed over how Sammuel took control in his medical bay upon their arrival.

He crossed his arms over his bare chest and glared down at the doctor. “She is my t’wren. You know what I ask.”

The doctor shrugged. “If you absolutely cannot wait any longer, then I would judge it’s safe to—” He couldn’t get anymore out because Sammuel crossed the cabin in three strides and grabbed him by the arm.

“Good day, Doctor,” he brusquely said as he threw him out the door. “I will summon you if you are needed.” When the door closed behind the doctor, Sammuel laid his hand over the control panel, locking it, she guessed.

Then he turned to her. His eyes fiercely burned, making her gasp. She involuntarily took a step back, butting against the wall as she watched his cock grow and swell beneath the snug fabric of his trousers.

“Bed. Now.”

She felt frozen as an animalistic wave of passion almost visibly flowed from him.

He started to unfasten his trousers. “Do not make me ask again, Ki’ato,” he dangerously rumbled as his pants hit the floor and he stepped out of them.

She edged her way around the cabin, never turning her back to him. Okay, now she felt truly afraid since the first time she realized he wasn’t a raider. Maybe she could get around him—

“I do not wish to wrestle with you today, Aine. I do not wish to risk hurting you so soon in your healing. Perhaps another time you can pretend to want to run. Get on the bed. Now.”

Where before she lusted after the stiff shaft proudly waving in the air before her, now she wondered how she’d escape it.

He looked like he would stalk her and bring her down, a predator after game.

“Ki’ato, if you truly do not wish this, then tell me to stop. Otherwise you are treading into very dangerous territory by testing my patience in this matter.”

Her feet slowly shuffled her closer to the bed as she kept her eyes on him. He watched her, not moving from his place beside the door.

“Remove your shirt,” he ordered.

She did, then felt herself climbing onto the bed. Her mind struggled, wanted to say that one word to end this madness she knew would only grow deeper once she let him fuck her.

Her body refused to comply, her pussy already slick and wet as her juices flowed in eager anticipation of the fucking she was gladly about to receive.

His voice softened in volume, although the intensity didn’t fade. “Spread your legs wide for me.”

Her face reddened, but she complied.

“Are you wet for me?”

She nodded.

So fast she almost couldn’t follow the movement, he crossed the

cabin and leapt onto the bed, his body covering hers.

With his face an inch above hers, his eyes so close they looked like one intense green orb, he whispered, “I claim you, Aine Lorcan, as my t’wren. This is your final chance to tell me to stop if you do not desire it.”

Her breath came in hitching gasps. She couldn’t say it.

“Then if you want it, tell me so.”

“I want it.”

He plunged into her, hard and fast and larger than anything she ever felt, stretching her, making her cry out in surprise and shock at the erotic sensation of her muscles giving way to this huge invader. Hell, the sex toys she used had never been this big!

He drew up onto his knees and pushed her legs back until her thighs touched her chest. “I warned you this first time would be hard and fast,” he growled as he fucked her. No other word for it, the enormous head battering her deep inside as her muscles clenched and struggled to accept the onslaught.

He braced his hands on the bed on either side of her head as she grabbed on to his arms. All she could do from the way his heavy body pressed her down into the mattress.

“You are mine, Aine,” he said as he fucked her even harder, the entire bed shaking with the force of his thrusts. “Say it.”

“I’m yours!”

He picked up speed as he plunged deeper, totally owning her, her muscles protesting even as her body longed to catch up and come with him buried inside her.

Among the sensations bombarding her, she suddenly became aware of warm heat flooding her from the inside out—not a metaphorical sensation, but a literal one.

Sammuel.

“This is it, Ki’ato,” he grunted. “No going back.” His last, final thrust, harder and deeper than the rest, made her cry out as she dug her nails into him. She felt his hot juices inside her, her body urgently

welcoming them and whatever changes they were already working on her, wave after wave, filling her.

He lowered her legs and wrapped them around his waist as his forehead dropped to her chest. He gasped for breath, his cock still hard and throbbing inside her as it pumped his essence into her body, marking her.

Claiming her.

He wouldn't let her move, even long moments later. "Wait," he hoarsely said. "It is not done." And he wasn't, his cock just as hard as it had been at the start and still pulsating inside her.

Her own need had taken over, her clit swollen and throbbing for his touch. She tried to wiggle her hips against him, but he simply pinned her to the bed with his weight. "No, not yet."

After a half-hour joined, she felt the warmth begin to ebb and fade as his cock gradually softened to its familiar semi-flaccid state. If he'd been coming that entire time, she had a feeling they'd need to change the sheets.

He propped himself up on his elbows and kissed her, tenderly, lovingly. She wrapped her arms around him as he shifted his hips just enough so she could move. He nuzzled the base of her throat. "Oh, Ki'ato," he whispered. "How I love you so."

He finally withdrew. He laughed at her surprise when she sat up and the expected gush did not occur.

He lightly laid his hand upon her belly. "Your body drank me in just as your mouth usually does," he said, smiling. "It is how the changes will begin to occur."

That's when a thought struck her. "I'm not going to get pregnant, am I?"

He threw back his head and laughed, long and hearty. "No, love, you'll be happy to learn your menses will cease. When Master wishes to reproduce—after consulting with you, of course—it is his body that determines our fertility."

"Our?"

He leaned in and kissed her. “Mine too. I cannot get you pregnant unless Master makes it so.”

Okay, so it was too late to have this conversation, but her post-coital bliss had receded a little. “Dude, you mean I can only have a baby if and when he decides it?”

“If you wanted one, it would be so. If you did not want one, it would not happen. He will never force you.”

She didn’t want to think about getting back to her duties in the Confederation. She also didn’t want to think about the fact that in all likelihood she wouldn’t be with the men long enough to worry about the question of kids. At some point, she’d have to return to her fleet.

He stroked her cheek. “Within a few days you will start to feel me in your mind, and you will be in mine. Then perhaps you will feel safe enough to tell me about the thoughts that make you frown so.”

Chapter Seven

Even Sammuel the stud needed time to recover from that session. Aine didn't feel the craving the way she had before. A new peace had crept in, allowing her to snuggle in his arms and relax without wanting to dive south between his legs.

His fingers brushed up and down her spine. "May I ask about the pendants around your neck? And the ring? That ring is much too large for a woman to normally wear."

She stiffened, afraid her memories would bring a return of her tears. "The ring belonged to Father. Captain Edmund Lorcan." She touched one of the pendants. From the difference in the chains, she knew which was the one he placed on her neck and which had been Mal's. "This one belonged to Da. Malvous Dentry. His yeoman...partner."

"Lover?"

"Yes."

"And the other?"

"Mine. I was bonded crew before they could legally adopt me. My birth parents died in a raider attack. My older brother died trying to save me."

He lay quietly for a moment. "I would like for you to tell me the story, if you can," he gently said.

She rolled on top of him, her face pressed against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, sensing her need for his strength.

"I don't know if I can. I've never told anyone before." Not even Hector. All she told him was she'd been orphaned and adopted. It was all he could find out from his snooping anyway. Never the story.

Never the memories of that horrible escape and her last view of Aggie's still body as the cargo pallet lifted into the belly of the Bagtopy Yau. Even as young as she'd been, that image was forever seared into her brain.

Beneath her body Sammuel's cock stiffened again. He grabbed her hips and slid his member inside her as if she weighed nothing.

With the return of his shaft came a return of the calming peace she felt.

"Now then, love," he whispered into her hair. "As part of you, you part of me, does that help make you stronger?"

Strangely enough, it did. Her sexual need temporarily abated, she told him what she remembered of that hot planet, their escape, Aggie's voice faint in her memory, her two fathers who loved and raised her and gave her their name. Their death.

Returning to bury them all together.

Aine lost track of time as she told the story, her tears rolling hot and heavy down her cheek and onto Sammuel's chest. She cried, she sobbed, until an hour later she lay limp in his arms, her eyes glassy and staring into a distance of time, not space.

"I hate being alone," she whispered.

This is when he finally spoke, after listening in silence as she ripped the ancient hurt from her soul, debriding the wound, cleansing her heart. "You will never again be alone. Ever. Never again, Ki'ato, for as long as there is breath in my body, and in Master's, you will never again suffer." He gently held her inside the iron fortress of his arms.

For the first time in her adult life, she felt safe.

Loved.

Also for the first time in her life she considered possibly giving up her career in exchange to keep feeling that way.

"I understand why you hate planets so, Ki'ato," he said as he stroked her hair. "Your experiences outside of ships have not been pleasant."

“If I never set foot on a planet again in my life it will be too soon.”

He rolled them onto their sides with Aine cradled in the crook of his arm and his cock still deeply embedded inside her. “I promised you that the second time I fucked you, love, it would be long and slow and you would come many times.” He shifted his hips against her, his thick shaft sliding along her clit and drawing a soft gasp from her. “I keep my promises, Ki’ato.”

He thrust so slow, torturously slow, then let her shift position a little until she found exactly the right angle that his strokes made her gasp with each glide of his cock in and out. His free hand cupped first one breast, then the other, back and forth. He rubbed his thumb over her nipples, making them hard and only adding to the hot throbbing in her clit.

He kissed her, sweet and long, his tongue gently caressing hers. “Come,” he whispered.

Her eyes dropped closed as a tremor swept through her, not as intense as some of the others, but enough she felt his hard shaft inside her as her muscles clamped down around it.

He chuckled. “That is one. I promised you many.”

“You never specified a number!”

His deep, rumbling laugh warmed her heart even as the juices flowing from his cock warmed her insides. “I know. Master always says I am an overachiever.”

“Many” turned out to be ten over the next hour before her body finally quit responding to his commands.

He rolled her on top of him. “That was very good, love. Excellent.” He slid his hands down her sides to her hips. With two quick thrusts he came, another flood of heat making her shiver in a good way.

“Why does that happen?” she weakly asked.

He kissed her damp forehead after he pulled the covers over them. “I told you, being a t’wren, your body will change in some ways. If

you think I last a long time, just wait until you meet Master.” He deeply sighed. “I miss him so much.”

She heard, or was it felt, the melancholy in his voice. Maybe those changes had started already. “You love him a lot, don’t you?”

He laughed again. “Love is an English word. It does not do justice to the emotion you will feel once we are officially a completed triad. There are twenty different words to describe deep, passionate, soulful love in the Act’huran language. That does not even begin to cover other types of love, like parental or friendship. When I tell you ‘I love you,’ it is too simple, too basic a statement. It does not encompass the light you have brought into my soul.” He touched her chin as a smile curled his lips. “I cannot wait until you understand our language so you will properly understand how I feel.”

With that out of the way, they eventually made it to the shower where he held her, caressed her. He dried her with a towel, kissing her flesh as he did. Aine watched his eyes, mesmerized by the intensity within. His blatant, obvious need and desire for her.

Then he pulled one of his shirts over her head. “I shall have to find more for you to wear so I can show you around the ship, Ki’ato. For now, this will suffice.” He pulled on a robe and summoned his yeoman again to order their food.

While they ate, he surprised her with a question. “Do you ever laugh?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

He waggled his eyebrows at her. “I have seen you smile and cry and scream with passion and pain, but I have yet to hear you really, truly laugh in joy.”

She felt her face color. “I laugh,” she mumbled, her gaze dropping to her plate. “I just haven’t had much reason to do a lot of it until now.”

“Then we shall make sure laughter is a large part of your life.”

* * * *

Laughter wasn't next on Sammuels agenda, though. After they ate and napped, the agenda held more screaming with passion as he fulfilled his last promise, to fuck her until she screamed his name and begged him to let her come.

"Look at me, Ki'ato," he ordered.

She forced her eyes open, his intense green gaze staring down at her.

His cock filled her. Her thighs strained from keeping them wrapped around his huge body for so long, as he wouldn't let her come and kept her hovering on the brink of climax.

"Hold it," he ordered, even as his thick shaft pressed upon her G-spot, pulling her closer.

"Please let me come!"

He grinned. "No, not yet. I must fulfill my promise."

She tried to wiggle her body against him, to gain pressure on her clit or even more inside her, but he simply pressed her deeper into the mattress with his large body and held still.

"Please!" She knew she'd lose her mind if he didn't let her come soon.

"Not yet. I am enjoying the view."

Her fingers clamped around his arms, her hands not even able to span his massive biceps. "Please!"

He bumped his hips into hers. "No."

Before long, Aine squirmed beneath him, whining. "Sammuel, please!"

"And finally, after all the begging, she says my name." He bent his head to her neck and grazed his teeth along her flesh. "Ki'ato?"

"What?"

"Come hard, now!"

Her back arched as the supernova ripped through her body. He sat up and clamped his hands around her hips as he fucked her hard, deep, fast. "That is it, love. Come hard for me and milk my cock!"

The sensation, nothing like she'd ever known, pulled a loud cry from her as she felt him come again, triggering yet another orgasm as her body welcomed him, drinking him in, wanting to become one with him.

With every last ounce of strength wrung from her body, he rolled over and pulled her onto his chest, draping her over him, his cock still pulsating within her.

Aine slept.

* * * *

Aine didn't know how long she'd been unconscious, just that every muscle in her body seemed to ache in a pleasant way that made her poor clit throb...

No, correction, that was a hot, wet tongue stroking her clit and making it throb.

She tried to pull her legs together, to sit up, but two large, meaty hands pushed her thighs apart again.

"No," Sammuel said. "Enjoy it." He lapped at her, his tongue flicking and stroking, soothing and fucking her at the same time, even as his scratchy morning stubble coarsely rubbed against her oversensitive flesh. By the time he let her up, he pulled two more orgasms from her.

He looked rather smug as he propped himself up on his arms. "Good morning, love."

She couldn't help it. The look on his face drew a long, loud, crystal clear laugh from her.

His smile broadened. "And now I know what to do to make you laugh. One way, at least."

"Ah, is that what you were up to?"

He kissed his way up her body until he planted one last kiss on her lips. "Not entirely. I wanted you to wake up happy."

"What about you? Are you happy?"

He rolled onto his back. His stiff cock rose like a flagpole from his body. "I am sure I soon can be."

Despite achy protests from her thighs, she quickly changed position and went down on him, sighing with contentment at the now-familiar taste.

"I will not bother holding back, Ki'ato," he said as he cupped the back of her head. "So prepare."

She was ready for him, swallowing him, refusing to let go even after he spent himself.

He tapped her on the head. "Up, love. I wish to have breakfast."

She reluctantly released her hold on his member after placing a final kiss on it. "I thought you already did."

Time for him to laugh. "Oh, Ki'ato, such a precious treasure you are."

* * * *

Aine happily lost track of time. Jarl scrounged her a uniform, trousers from the ship's stores, shortened so they didn't trip her, worn under Sammuel's shirts and belted to keep them from falling down her slender hips.

Hips that, if she were forced to swear to it, had developed a decidedly rounder shape than she had before.

One morning in the head, she stood in front of the mirror and studied her form. Sammuel stepped in behind her and cupped her breasts in his hands. He could rarely keep his hands off her if she was naked. Even clothed he frequently molested her, whether in their cabin or on a deserted lift, or even with her sitting in his lap on the bridge and his hand hidden between her legs by the loose folds of the shirt.

"You are beautiful, love."

"My breasts are bigger."

"Are they?" He hefted them. "Perhaps a little. That is normal."

“What the fuck?”

With dizzying speed, he bent her over the counter and spanked her ass. “I warned you about your mouth, love. That type of speech does not befit you.”

She came up off the counter, enraged, embarrassed, and more than a little horny. “What the hell was that for?”

“I am your Master, and I am telling you I do not like hearing you speak like that.”

“Okay, for one, you said you’re my t’wren, not my Master, so back. The fuck. Off.”

He glared at her for a moment before bursting into laughter. Even as confused as she was over his reaction, she let him pull her to him. He smoothed his palm over her pink ass. “Because as t’arn, while we are equal under Master’s eyes as t’wren, I am also your Master because you are my responsibility. I brought you into our triad. It is my job to teach and protect you.”

“I don’t need protecting.” She forced herself to push away from him. “I’ve been taking care of myself for most of my life just fine, thank you.”

He pulled her back against him. “Do not argue with me, Ki’ato, or you will feel my hand on your ass again.”

“You cannot be serious.” She suspected he was.

“Be glad I cannot bear to take my belt to your sweet backside the way Master took his belt to mine.” He stroked her ass again. “Although I am sure I will pay for that lacking of strength when he finds out.”

“You and me are going to butt heads if you think I’m going to sit back and let you paddle me like a child.”

“Ah, but you are a child in many ways, just as I was a child when Master picked me. He was over two hundred Earth years old by then. I was in my early thirties. You are even younger than I was.”

Okay, so he had a point. “I’m not going to tolerate being disrespected.”

“You disrespect yourself by talking like some low-class trash, Ki’ato. Considering Master’s status, it would reflect upon him very poorly for you to act that way in public. T’wren are considered extensions of their t’amar-te. It would look even worse to those around us if you speak like that. They expect much more of you.”

“They can kiss my ass.”

He dug his fingers into her ass and pulled her tightly to him. “No, only Master and I may kiss this ass, Little One.” The way his eyes crinkled told her he struggled not to laugh. Over the past day, she thought she had clearly heard whispers of his thoughts, could feel his emotions. SammuEL was already keying into hers, or so he claimed.

“You’re saying I’m not allowed to express myself?” she asked.

“On the contrary, you are encouraged to express yourself and speak your mind. You can do so without swearing like that, however. You can even disagree with Master and myself in public. It is how you do it and knowing when to drop it when told to do so.”

That took a little of the mental sting out of the spanking.

She draped her arms around his neck and stood on tiptoe to kiss him. “Then exactly how am I supposed to ask you to fuck me?”

He threw his head back and laughed loud and hearty. “That is a perfectly acceptable usage of that verb, love.”

She ground her hips against his. “So if I come up to you and ask you to fuck me, I won’t be punished for that?” She batted her eyes at him.

“No, love, you would not be punished for that. You would, however, be fucked.” His hands slid down her ass to the backs of her thighs. He lifted her and she wrapped her legs around him. “Like this.” He lowered her onto his cock, which had predictably grown hard.

He nipped the side of her neck, behind her ear, where he discovered she was extremely sensitive. “Now, love, is this what you wanted?” He thrust hard and deep.

She held on for the ride. “Oh, yeah.”

“Since you baited me, I think your punishment this morning is to not come and think about what you do to me when you tease and torment me.” He thrust harder, quickly coming with a deep, satisfied grunt.

Aine closed her eyes and dropped her head to his shoulder as she felt his seed flowing into her. Every day the sensation became more intense, her body yearning for his release.

With her body still wrapped around him, he carried her into the shower. He patted her rump. “Stand up, love. Let us take our shower.”

She glared at him. Her clit throbbed, screaming for him now that her body had another taste of him. “You’re mean.” She stuck her tongue out at him.

The corner of his mouth quirked in a smile. “No, love, I am not mean. I am simply figuring out the best way to keep you simultaneously happy and in hand until you have learned our ways.”

* * * *

She awoke from a nap the next afternoon to find herself alone in the cabin. It didn’t worry her. She imagined Sammuel probably had official business to take care of.

She lay there for a few minutes, her nose pressed against his pillow. Even his scent wrapped around her, a comfort despite being alone in the bed.

Was this love? Did she even care anymore if it was or not?

She caught sight of her knapsack on a shelf. Sammuel never asked to see the contents. When he returned to the cabin a little while later, he found her dressed in his robe and sitting at the table with the items spread out before her.

And she was crying.

He looked handsome dressed in his uniform, his coat making his already broad shoulders appear even more impressive. When he spotted her tears he raced to her side and dropped to one knee,

unmistakable concern on his face. “Ki’ato, what is wrong?”

She sniffled and wiped at her face. “Nothing. I was just taking a trip down memory lane.” She started to reach for the items, to put them back, but he caught her hand and kissed it.

“Would you do me the honor of sharing them with me?”

She studied him, trying to decide if he was serious or not.

Of course he was. He made it perfectly clear that he wanted to know as much about her as she would tell him.

She nodded.

He stood, picked her up, then sat again with her tucked on his lap. She went through the items, one by one, as she put them away.

Her old ID and custody cards, identifying her and Aggie and her parents. Picture and video cards of them. The hat she wore that day.

Her braid of hair. The copy of her ID paperwork renaming her Lorcan. Picture and video cards of her with her fathers.

Last but not least her old bear, thread-worn in places but still in good shape.

“Aggie gave it to me,” she said. “I was just a toddler but I remember it. I think maybe my third birthday.” She wiped her tears away before slipping it back into the knapsack.

“I would have liked him,” Sammuell said. “Even though just a boy, he took his responsibility seriously—to protect his baby sister no matter the cost.”

“I remember the sound of the shots when we hid from the first group of raiders. I thought Aggie was a man. He was so tall, so much older than me. I thought he was an adult.” She laughed even through her tears. “Da—Mal—said he’d never forget how indignant I sounded the night they found me. How I insisted I was a ‘big boy.’ That I told them I asked Aggie how boys acted and he told me boys were very brave and strong and didn’t cry. I tried so hard to be like that.” She broke down crying again.

He stood with her in his arms and carried her to his bed, where she finally sobbed herself to sleep.

* * * *

He spent her nap staring at her less than peaceful face. He had no doubt she lived her entire life like that, trying to be something she wasn't, keeping herself closed off to hide from the pain. Not deep in her mind yet, but he sensed old memories troubled her, the pain she didn't know how to release still as sharp and jagged as it felt when just a scared orphaned child hiding in a cargo hold.

When he stroked her cheek she nuzzled more tightly against him.

How did Master tolerate being away from him? Just pulling himself away from her long enough to file his status reports and receive his updates had been torture, and she was on the same ship!

She awoke a little while later. Her soft brown eyes had already lightened. In a few weeks, they would turn the same dusty green as his and Master's eyes.

"How did you meet him?" she asked. "You know my dirty laundry. Tell me how you ended up here. You were a highly decorated, brilliant Confederation captain. I studied you in the Academy. You're required reading."

"We do not pick our fate, Ki'ato. It picks us." He smiled as he thought back through the years, several lifetimes it sometimes felt like, to that day.

"Like you, I was alone. Not orphaned, but estranged from my family. I grew up on a mining planet farther within the Confederation borders than you. Raiders were not an issue, but my father was a drunk. As soon as I turned sixteen I signed myself onto a cargo freighter and ended up at a space station where a Confederation battle cruiser had docked. I ran into a group of crew, talked with them, and they introduced me to their captain.

"He took a liking to me. Not in an inappropriate way, mind you, but as a mentor. An older brother. I crewed on his ship for six months until he obtained me a place at the Academy. And from there, as you

already know, history was made.”

“No, I don’t already know. How did you meet him?” She reached up and played with his long braid, fascinated by it compared to her short hair.

He also noticed she still had problems deciding how to refer to their Master, but it didn’t matter. Once they completed the ritual she would totally understand it wasn’t slavery, but freedom, joining a triad. As he recalled the events, he opened his mind to her even though he knew she couldn’t quite read his thoughts yet. At least she could easily feel his emotions.

“We were on a mission patrolling a hostile border region where the raiders made frequent incursions.”

Chapter Eight

“Dammit! I said I want a status report!” Captain Jorvis yelled at his engineer. The raider’s lucky shot had nearly pierced their hull.

“Working on it, sir!”

“Work faster,” he growled.

The raiders had separated their ship from the rest of their troops, using the asteroid ring to draw them in and cut them off. Jorvis knew the plan had risks, but he hadn’t counted on a stray radiation burst weakening their shields and making them vulnerable to enemy fire.

The other Confederation forces were fighting their way back to them, but Jorvis had a raider bounty on his head. The raiders, seeing their chance to take him, wouldn’t let him slip away again.

Six hours later, with their engines disabled and shields practically nonexistent, he gave the order he dreaded. There were enough Confederation forces in the area keeping the raiders busy that the life pods should be safe until their retrieval.

He ordered everyone off the ship, himself last. He set the self-destruct sequence before taking the final life pod. He hoped it would blast him out of range of the explosion and clear of the asteroid ring. The nearby planet, Ectar 9, wasn’t his first choice for a hiding spot, but his departure might not be noticed because of the blast.

Unfortunately, his luck didn’t hold out. A raider managed to get off a shot at his pod, disabling his sensors before another Confederation ship took it out. Busy with the fight, they couldn’t retrieve him.

The crash landing didn’t kill him. As he unbuckled his safety harness and dropped to what had been the ceiling of the life pod, he

suspected maybe survival wasn't a good thing.

He'd been prepared to die, but not this soon. And the rocky, harsh surface of Ectar 9 wasn't his first choice of gravesites either. A quick death during re-entry would have been preferable to slowly and painfully dying of thirst and his injuries over several days.

The atmosphere was thin and more than a little on the sulphurous side, but still breathable. He dragged himself out of his life pod and toward a rocky hillside where it looked like several caves could provide shelter.

Later that night, he felt his fever grow. The crash shattered his right leg. It had only been through sheer force of will he crawled across the rocky hardpan to hide in the caves. All he had in the way of supplies were one water bottle and his sidearm.

He wondered what it felt like to die by his own hand.

Before dawn the next morning, he gave serious thought to testing the theory when he heard rocks skittering down the hillside below his hiding spot. Pressing himself against the wall, into the shadows, he waited with the energy pistol in his lap.

A voice from outside called to him. "Captain Jorvis?"

He didn't want to answer, knowing it could easily be a raider, but something about the depth and timbre of the voice pulled at him, comforted him.

"Here," he gasped.

A large head appeared, silhouetted in the dim, grey pre-dawn light behind him. "Captain?" Two raised hands appeared, empty of weapons. "Captain D'arsolan Ker-Pythan, Act'huran fleet."

For the first time since his childhood, Sammuel felt like sobbing. He dropped his pistol. "Oh, thank the gods!" One of their shadow ships.

The Act'huran had to stoop to enter the cave. At least several inches taller than his own six-seven, his large body made Sammuel feel small by comparison.

As the man's face came into view, Sammuel saw his green eyes

first, dusty green like summer grass just past spring prime, intense, drawing him in. His long, blond hair had been tamed into a braid. “How badly are you injured, Captain?”

“Pretty bad. My right leg’s fucked. They sent a captain for a recovery mission?”

The other captain’s brow wrinkled. “Would you prefer a lesser rank? I can leave and return with my yeoman if you would prefer.” Then he slowly smiled.

Despite his pain, Sammuel laughed. “Holy crap, you’ve got a sense of humor, don’t you?”

The Act’huran put down his bag and removed a medical scanner. “I try, Captain. I try.”

“Sammuel.” He caught a whiff of a scent, almost like wildflowers in bloom with an undertone of tangy musk, but not cloyingly overpowering.

His cock hardened despite his pain, shocking the hell out of him. That’s when he realized the delicious scent wafting to him came from the Act’huran.

“If we are to be informal, you may call me Ker.” He smiled. “Until such time you can bring yourself to call me Master.”

Sammuel laughed, sure Ker was joking, but he didn’t push it.

Ker scanned his leg and grimly nodded. “It is bad, but nothing we cannot take care of on my ship. However, it will hurt as I carry you to my lander.”

“You don’t need to carry me, just help me walk.”

“No. It is too badly broken. I can electro-splint it to stabilize it, but you cannot walk on it.” He ripped Sammuel’s trousers up the leg, being careful not to jostle the appendage. At the feel of Ker’s warm hand on his flesh he shivered, his cock screaming bloody murder for a good hard fucking despite his pain.

What the everloving fuck?

He’d never been interested in guys before, ever!

Ever!

And especially since he felt the worst pain of his life, the last thought on his mind should be his goddamned cock!

“I will give you medicine for the fever.” He prepared a hypo and injected it into Sammuel’s arm. “Your leg is shattered in several places. Infection is already trying to set in. But we should be able to save it.”

“I hope so. I’m sort of attached to it.”

Ker’s lips curled again in another smile. Sammuel hoped his pounding heart was due to the medicine and not in reaction to the man’s expression.

“It is a very handsome leg.” Ker glanced at him, his green eyes nailing him. “It would be a shame to not have a matching pair on an equally handsome body.”

Ooookay, that should freak him out. So why the hell did it make his cock throb even harder?

“Relax while I splint your leg. Do you want pain medicine?”

“No. I need to stay alert.” Sammuel closed his eyes and tried not to imagine if this guy’s cock was as largely proportioned as the rest of his body. After what felt like forever, Ker had his leg securely splinted.

“I do not dare give you any healing accelerant in case the leg is not perfectly straight. They would have to break it again to repair it.”

“No problem. Greatly appreciated, dude.”

Ker packed his supplies and slung his bag over his shoulder. “Let us go, Sammuel.”

I’ll follow you anywhere.

Ker helped him stand on his good leg, then carefully stooped and turned, hoisting Sammuel piggy-back. Almost immediately, Sammuel realized there was no way in hell the Act’huran couldn’t feel his throbbing cock digging into his back.

Then again, maybe from the comment he made earlier, he didn’t mind.

* * * *

It was slow-going back to Ker's lander. The rocky terrain stymied even the sure-footed Act'huran.

It didn't help that Sammuel didn't want to be let down, despite not understanding the urge. The nearly intoxicating smell of the Act'huran didn't help tame his cock either. Screw a cold shower, he needed to sit in a bucket of ice for a week to get rid of this boner. With every breath he took the man's scent filled his lungs and made Sammuel want to crawl under his skin and be a part of him.

By the time they reached the lander, Sammuel's pain was the least of his problems.

Ker gently lowered him into a seat as if he weighed nothing. When he turned to look at Sammuel there was no mistaking the blatant need painted on the Act'huran's face.

"Tell me what you feel, Sammuel," Ker said, his voice almost sounding choked.

"I'm...not gay."

Ker arched his eyebrows at him. "Neither am I. That label is a human invention, not one my race even has a word for because it is inconsequential. Love is love." He reached out and touched Sammuel's chin. "So you feel it too. That is very good. I had hoped you would." With that cryptic comment, he lithely slid into the command chair and prepared for their launch.

"Feel what?"

Ker didn't look away from his command console. "The connection. Buckle your harness."

Sammuel didn't want to ask any more questions. He buckled in and held on as they lifted. His leg hurt, but the splint kept it immobile. It took them four hours to reach Ker's ship. Upon their approach, Ker spoke over the com in Act'huran. Once safely docked in the hangar bay and the hatch slid open, med techs stood there waiting with a gurney. Ker barked orders at them and they hurried inside the lander

to help Sammuel out.

Ker walked beside him the entire way to their medical bay with his hand on Sammuel's shoulder. When the doctor arrived to examine him, he tried to get the captain to leave.

Ker growled one word in Act'huran. "T'arn."

The doctor's eyes widened.

Sammuel might not understand a damn word of their language, but body language he could interpret. "What? What's going on?"

Ker's voice turned soft, gentle. "Nothing, Ki'ran." He squeezed Sammuel's shoulder. "The doctor will take good care of you."

* * * *

Sammuel awoke in a dim cabin, lying on a damn good bunk. They gave him sedatives while they set his leg, which was fine with him at that point. Safe on a ship, he didn't mind getting knocked out. In fact, he preferred it.

He realized he was now—he looked under the sheet pulled up to his chest—naked. But his leg felt a hell of a lot better even though it still ached somewhat. The splint had been removed.

Ker's voice startled him. "Do not worry, Ki'ran. I did not undress you until I got you to my cabin."

He looked in the direction of the voice. Ker sat at his desk in the dim light. No longer in his uniform, he wore a loose dressing gown.

He looked even larger, if that was possible.

And why the *fuck* did he have to smell so goddamned good? When Sammuel's cock stiffened again, it pushed the sheet up into a tent over his hips. He quickly sat up and pulled a pillow into his lap to hide the offending member. "Why am I in your cabin?"

"Where else would I take you?"

"Well, you could have left me in the medical bay, for starters. Guest quarters, VIP cabin, hell, even put me in with the enlisted men. Why...here?"

Ker smiled and leaned forward in his chair. “Why would I want you any of those places when I would rather have you here in my bed?”

“What the hell’s going on, Ker?”

The Act’huran stood and walked over to the bed. “Tell me you look at me and feel absolutely nothing.” He leaned close, their eyes inches apart, Ker’s green gaze daring Sammuel to lie.

His mouth went dry. When he finally choked words out, they sounded weak. “I’m not into guys.”

“And still you hang on to that. I am going to kiss you. And hopefully more. You can fight all you want, but unless you say stop, I will not stop.”

Before Sammuel could decide if he was kidding or not, Ker leaned in and kissed him.

His heart felt like it would rip out of his chest. The Act’huran tasted even better than he smelled. Sammuel’s right hand automatically lifted and wrapped around the back of Ker’s neck. He pulled him closer, tighter, wanting Ker’s tongue deep inside his mouth.

When Ker finally lifted his head from Sammuel’s, he smiled. “I did not hear you say stop.”

Sammuel couldn’t talk, wouldn’t have known what to say if he could. He opted for what seemed to be the best course of action, leaning in and kissing Ker again.

After it felt like Ker sucked the breath from his soul, Sammuel threw himself backward, onto the bunk. “No! This...I can’t...I’m not...”

Ker sat on the edge of the bed and with two fingers tugged the sheet down and off Sammuel’s body. “It is all right for you to feel fear and confusion. That is a normal reaction for you since you do not understand our ways.”

“What the hell?”

“We mate for life, Ki’ran. There is so much I have to teach you. I

can give you hundreds or even thousands of years of happiness and love and pleasure. But only if you are willing to release your fear and let me.”

“Mate? Did you say *mate*?”

“So you are paying attention. Very good.” He leaned in and kissed him again, and this time Sammuel wrapped both arms around him, not wanting to let him go.

Ker pulled away and stood. He unbelted his dressing gown and let it fall to the floor. His tanned, nearly hairless body looked practically flawless, well-muscled, including his huge cock...

And there went his own cock again, throbbing and leaking and traitorously betraying him.

Ker noticed. He arched an eyebrow. “Some things cannot be lied about.” He knelt on the bed next to him. “You are my t’arn. My mate. We feel an attraction to each other because we are meant to be together.”

“Whoa. Not looking for a boyfriend, buddy. Sorry.”

Ker smiled. “I am not looking for a boyfriend either. I am looking at the one I am meant to spend the rest of my life with.”

Sammuel swallowed hard.

His body wanted it, wanted to lie back and let this man possess him, no matter how it went against everything he ever thought about himself. Ever.

His brain wanted no part of it.

Well, on general principles.

He didn’t know what to say.

Ker’s eyes traveled his face, his hair, down his body. “Your eyes will change color, to mine, as will your hair.” He reached out with one finger and drew it down Sammuel’s chest to his cock, where he stopped. “Certain other changes, like you will most likely become larger, at least slightly.”

He knew his cock was above average to begin with, even if Ker’s massive frame dwarfed him in comparison.

“Tell me to stop, and I will. Once I reach that point of no return, I suspect you will not want me to stop either.”

Sammuel couldn't make his lips form any words, much less that one word. His mouth watered as he watched a glistening drop of pre-come form and swell at the tip of Ker's gorgeous cock.

Okay, so he never thought he'd be calling another guy's cock gorgeous, but if the adjective fit...

Ker reached out and lightly rested his hand on the back of Sammuel's head. “You will grow your hair like mine, so we can braid it. That is traditional as well as functional.” He started guiding Sammuel's face down to his groin.

He knew he should fight, or at least make a token resistance. “I can't do this.”

“Then tell me to stop.”

His body tensed against Ker's hand, but he didn't fight. “No.”

“That is not the word I told you to use.”

Sammuel got another strong whiff of Ker's natural scent, sweet and deeply tangy. His eyes never left the drop of pre-come just begging to be licked off his massive cock.

“I've never done this before.”

“Neither have I.”

Closer still.

“You can reach out and touch it, you know. It will not bite you.”

Sammuel groaned, need and passion and will all battling each other.

Ker released him, lay back in bed, and crossed his arms behind his head. “We shall be here a very long time if you cannot make up your mind.”

Sammuel felt part of his sanity snap, but his desire overruled and exiled his mind to a deep, well-locked section of his brain for the duration. With a strangled cry, he fell on Ker and grabbed his cock. He could barely wrap his hand around it.

He closed his eyes and engulfed it with his mouth, moaning again

when he found not only did Ker taste awesome, his own body seemed to crave as much of it as he could get when his tongue tasted Ker's nectar. As fucking stupid a word as that was, it was as close as he could come to describing the warm fluid now rolling down his tongue as fast as he could suck it from the source.

One of Ker's hands settled on the back of Sammuel's head. "That is it, Ki'ran." His voice sounded hoarse. "Just like that. Take as much as you need."

Sammuel didn't know how long he lay there, sucking, eventually curling up on his side with one arm draped over Ker's hip as he continued to suck and lap at Ker's cock. At one point, Sammuel realized Ker's cock was only semi-erect and he couldn't be coming that entire time unless Act'huran physiology was totally different than humans.

He felt better than drunk, a buzz without the loss of senses. He knew he could lay there forever and do that to Ker. Every time he thought about sitting up and trying to talk his body rebelled, refusing to give up this delicacy.

Eventually, Ker's other hand also caressed the back of Sammuel's head. "It is time for me to start this, Sammuel. If you wish me to stop, this is your last chance to tell me so before I cannot control myself."

Sammuel took him even deeper into his mouth in response.

Ker chuckled, his grip growing more firm as his cock hardened against Sammuel's tongue. "Get ready then," he grunted.

That was all the warning Sammuel had before a hot flood filled his mouth, even sweeter and thicker than before. Just when he thought it couldn't get any better, this was, he realized, much better. Sammuel happily moaned, greedily swallowing as Ker climaxed.

After several minutes, Ker's cock finally softened back to its former semi-erect state. Despite his own cock almost painfully throbbing, Sammuel couldn't bear to stop.

Ker patted him on the head. "Come here, Ki'ran."

He held on tighter, not wanting to let go of Ker's hard body.

Ker tapped harder. "Now, Sammuel."

Something in Sammuel's brain recognized the harder edge in Ker's tone. Finally, reluctantly, he let go and allowed Ker to pull him up the bed so he lay nestled in his arms.

"What's happening to me?" he asked Ker.

Ker rubbed his face in Sammuel's hair. "Do not bother trying to make sense of it. You will understand one day, when you find and mate our t'wren."

"What?"

Ker chuckled. The warm, deep rumble stirred Sammuel's insides. "Act'hurans usually mate in triads. While it is uncommon for us to mate with a humanoid other than our own race, it is not unheard of. One day, you will most likely meet someone you react to the same way I reacted to you. You will claim them, if they are willing, and then our triad will be complete."

Even though Sammuel's mind still tried to wrap itself around the concept of being mated to this guy, he rebelled against the idea of sharing him with anyone. "I don't want anyone else!"

Another low, rumbling chuckle. "You will understand, one day. This is why the t'arn always finds and selects the other t'wren. There will be no jealousy that way, and I will automatically love them the way you will. For now, let us take care of something else." He sat up and smiled. "Relax, Ki'ran."

"What does that mean?"

"My love." He fisted his cock, stroking it, milking it, coating his hand with that delicious juice that Sammuel struggled not to jump up and suck down again. Once he coated his hand, he reached over and grabbed Sammuel's cock and began stroking it. "I will teach you so many things," he promised.

Sammuel's head dropped to the pillow as his hips bucked in time with Ker's strong grip. Wordless sounds escaped him as Ker brought him close to release time and again without bringing him over. "As your body changes, you will learn how to master climaxing upon

command, as many times as I desire you to. You will find many benefits to this new life. That is just one of them. For now, come for me.” Ker squeezed hard, drawing a cry from Sammuel as his cock exploded his own juices all over Ker’s hand. And he kept climaxing, harder and longer than he ever had in his life, pearly ropes of come spurting from him. Finally, Ker released him and lifted his hand to his mouth. He licked his palm, smiling as he tasted Sammuel’s seed.

“Very nice, Ki’ran,” he mumbled with his eyes closed. He let out a deep, relaxed sigh. “You have no idea how long I have hoped I would find you.”

Sammuel felt a wave of emotions he instinctively knew came from the other man. “What other changes?” he asked. “You said I would change.”

His eyes still closed, Ker lay next to Sammuel and gathered him into his arms again. “We will soon start to feel each other’s emotions, be able to read the other’s thoughts, talk without opening our mouths.” He nuzzled Sammuel’s head. “Truly connected at every level.”

They dozed for a while. When Sammuel awoke, he felt a deep craving to have Ker’s cock in his mouth again. When he tried to slide out of Ker’s grip, he held him tighter.

“Where do you think you are going?”

Sammuel felt his face redden. “I...I need to...” He couldn’t say it.

Ker laughed and loosened his hold. “For a few minutes. Then I must get down to the business of properly fucking you.”

A wave of conflicting emotions hit him. He’d never fucked or been fucked by a guy before. Then again, before today, he’d never been remotely interested in a guy before. He didn’t know how to process the conflict—his body craved being fucked by Ker even more than wrapping his lips around Ker’s cock again.

“Fucking me?”

“To complete the mating.” He looked into Sammuel’s eyes. “The first time hard and fast to properly complete the connection.” He

stroked Sammuel's chin. "The second time long and slow and meant for your enjoyment. I shall make you come until you beg me to stop."

Sammuel's cock hardened even more.

"The third time, Ki'ran, is to teach you the beginnings of what you must learn, how to hold back when I tell you to, how to climax when ordered. You will beg me for release by the time I am finished with you."

Sammuel's heart pounded in his chest, wanting it now, needing it all.

An amused smile curled the Act'huran's lips. "Go on, do what you must. Your body craves more of me. That is natural, especially in the beginning."

Not needing any more encouragement, Sammuel quickly changed position so he lay with his feet at the head of the bed. As he engulfed Ker's cock again, that sweet taste hit his tongue and he felt the buzz return, the calming peace, his body relaxing.

That is, until Ker's hot lips took his cock into his mouth.

Sammuel groaned at the sensation, unable to release Ker as his own need took over. He buried his face deep into Ker's groin, feeling his heavy, smooth sac brush against his nose. Ker's tongue swept up and down Sammuel's shaft, then he released him and licked his balls.

"You are delicious," Ker whispered against his flesh. "I want you to come for me again."

Sammuel's eyes squeezed tightly shut as Ker swallowed him. His cock almost immediately exploded, an orgasm even stronger than the one he just had rocking his body.

Ker moaned, then his cock hardened before he also came. Nearly dizzy from the pleasure in his own body's reaction, with the added treat of Ker's release, Sammuel's mind retreated as his body pressed against Ker's, sucking, licking, needing this almost more than breath.

After several minutes, Ker released him and lay back. "That was absolutely amazing, love." His fingers tangled in Sammuel's hair. "Enough. Release me."

He didn't want to. Finally, Ker managed to grab a handful of Sammuel's short hair and haul him up the bed. "I cannot do more if you do not let me out of this bed," he said, sounding amused.

Ker climbed out of bed. Standing next to it, he grabbed Sammuel's hips and easily shifted him over to the edge so he stood between his legs.

Ker grabbed his cock and began stroking it, milking it again, slicking his pre-come over it with his hand.

His voice grew stern. "This is it. If you wish me to stop what we have started, this is your absolute last chance to do so."

Sammuel shook his head.

"Then tell me what you want."

His heart racing, he heard himself say the words. "I want you. I want to be yours."

Ker smiled as he reached between Sammuel's legs and found his virgin rosette. He started rubbing it, lubing it, preparing it. Ker's juices felt warm against his skin. At the sensation, his own cock hardened again.

"That is a very good sign," Ker said, noting his reaction. "I had heard human men were not able to keep up with Act'hurans. I can see that information was wrong. Or else your body is accepting me very quickly." He worked more of his juices into Sammuel, his fingers gently probing.

"Pull your legs up," Ker ordered.

Sammuel hooked his hands behind his knees and drew his legs up to his chest, fully exposing himself.

Ker sucked in a sharp breath. "Gods, that is beautiful." He stroked Sammuel's sac and cock before returning his attention to his ass. "This will not hurt, but it must be hard and fast and deep." Sammuel felt Ker's hard cock press against his opening.

The thought that he should struggle and fight briefly crossed his mind before his body beat it into submission. Open, vulnerable, he stared up into Ker's eyes.

“Ask me,” Ker ordered.

“Please, fuck me!”

Before he finished the sentence, and before he could wonder how Ker would manage to stuff that gigantic cock inside him without ripping him apart, Ker’s hips shot forward and he sank his full length inside Sammuel’s ass.

Sammuel cried out, but from shock at the sudden intrusion, not in pain. Maybe Ker’s natural lubrication eased what should have been a nearly excruciating experience with so little preparation.

Ker held still, his balls pressing against Sammuel’s ass. “Are you okay? Any pain?”

“Please don’t stop!” he blurted out.

Ker smiled. “Then I will not stop. Not until I have fucked you well and deeply and marked you completely as mine.” He grabbed Sammuel’s hips and proceeded to do just that. The entire bed shook as Ker’s stiff cock slammed into him time and again, faster, harder, his balls slapping Sammuel’s ass and his own rigid cock waving between his legs.

Then with a loud roar, Ker thrust one last time and Sammuel felt it, a hot flood of seed filling his body as Ker’s cock throbbed and swelled inside him.

Ker leaned forward, pressing Sammuel’s thighs into his chest as he deeply kissed him. “Relax,” he gasped, winded. “We shall be here quite a while.”

“What’s happening?”

“For the first mating, my cock locks me inside you for a while.”

Sammuel shifted a little and felt something hard pressing against a sweet spot inside him. His own cock throbbed in response. “Will that happen all the time?”

“After this time, only when I will it.” He grinned. “Perhaps there will be times I need to remind you that you belong to me and I shall take you like this.” He bumped his hips against Sammuel, drawing another low, needy moan from him.

Ker stood up and pulled Sammuel's legs around his hips. Then he grabbed him by the arm and hauled him up, holding him, carrying him from the bed over to a chair by his desk where he sat with Sammuel still impaled in his lap.

Sammuel tried to get over feeling small next to this huge and powerful man, but the weight of his body driving Ker's cock even deeper into his darkest recesses overwhelmed him. He dropped his head to Ker's shoulder and tried to rock his hips against Ker. Ker slapped his ass.

"Stop. It is not your turn." Still, he sounded amused.

In his life, Sammuel had never, *ever*, begged for anything before. From anyone.

Until now.

"Please," he whispered, feeling desperate as the sensation of that hard knot digging into him drove him nearly mad with need. "Dammit, Ker, please!"

Ker's hands stroked his flesh. "Not yet," he soothed. "Relax, enjoy it."

And still Sammuel felt that deep throbbing, accompanied by the sinfully enjoyable hot flood of Ker's juices still pumping into his body.

"What's happening?" he asked. "What is this doing to me?"

Ker's hands still stroked his back. "I told you, it is joining us. Your body will begin to change."

Sammuel didn't know how long they sat there like that, and he didn't care. Finally, Ker stood and carried him into the head where he stepped into the shower. "Put your legs down," he said.

With his arms still draped around Ker's neck, he did, feeling wobbly and weak. Ker's cock finally softened and slid out of his ass. He thought for sure he'd be sore, but all he felt was a loss, wanting to be connected to him again.

With one arm around Sammuel, Ker reached over and started the shower. "It is okay," he assured him. "I will not let you go."

Sammuel let Ker wash him as he closed his eyes and tried to process what had happened. Jesus, a day ago he was leading his forces into an attack, and now...

And now.

Now he was...

What?

"Does this make me your slave?" he asked.

Ker chuckled. "No, you are not a slave." His hand hesitated on Sammuel's ass. "You are my mate, my love, my partner. My reason for living from this day forward. But you are my t'arn, meaning I am your Master."

Ker's comment back at the cave returned to Sammuel. "How can you be my Master if I'm not a slave?"

"Semantics again. I am the dominant anchor of our coupling, hopefully one day to become a triad. It is my job to not just love you, but to protect and provide for you. To teach you our ways. When you one day find the one who will complete us, you will be their Master too, even though in my eyes you will both be my t'wren. It will be your duty to bring that person in who sings to your soul, to love and instruct them the way I love and instruct you."

"How old are you?"

Ker kissed the top of his head. "Very young by my people's standards. Old by yours. I am two hundred and ten Earth years old."

Sammuel's eyes widened. "What?"

"I told you, we live a very long time. So shall you. We rarely get sick, we age slowly. Most untimely deaths are due to severe injury. As a result, our race can control its fertility to prevent overpopulation. There is so much I must teach you."

"I...I'm not going to age?"

"Oh, you will age, but even now your body is changing. Your aging will dramatically slow. It will take you decades or longer to even look a year older."

Holy crap.

Sammuel didn't know if he wanted an answer to this question, but he felt he had to ask it. "How many people have you been with before?"

Ker smiled. "None. I told you, we mate for life."

The revelation staggered Sammuel. "All these years, and you're telling me you were a fucking *virgin*?"

"If that word means never having relations with someone, then yes, you are correct."

Strength eventually returned to Sammuel's legs, allowing him to stand on his own. Ker's hands skillfully washed him, exploring, probing him, only adding to Sammuel's need.

"Turn around. Place your hands against the wall," Ker ordered.

Sammuel complied.

Ker knelt behind him and, after rinsing the soap from him, he nudged Sammuel's feet even wider apart. "Come if you can," he said before his mouth engulfed his balls.

Sammuel groaned and pressed his forehead against the wall. His eyes closed as Ker's hand fisted his cock. Then, the delicious sensation of Ker's tongue rimming him and probing his anus finished him off. He bucked his hips as he climaxed, coming hard and long until his legs felt shaky again.

Ker sat back and chuckled. "I believe you enjoyed that. I shall have to remember that."

He stood and took him like that after lubing Sammuel's rim with his juices again. With his chest pressed against Sammuel's back, Ker reached around him and stroked his cock until it grew hard. "I promised you this time you would come many times."

Sammuel couldn't think, his ass erotically stretched by the enormous cock possessing him, the warm flood of Ker's juices already starting again.

His hands curled into fists against the shower wall.

"Come for me," Ker ordered.

His body obeyed. Then Ker seemed to impossibly get him hard

again almost immediately. “I can’t,” Sammuel protested. “No more, I can’t.”

“Oh, you can, and you will.”

By the time Ker finished with him, Sammuel lost track of how many times he climaxed. It should be impossible. Ker was right that his body was already changing. Ker wrapped his arms around him and thrust, finishing, another hot flood of juices filling him from the inside out and inflaming his body’s need yet again.

He let his head limply rest against Ker’s shoulder as the man carried him from the shower into his cabin. Ker curled around him on the bed and pulled the covers over them.

“Sleep now,” he ordered. “And in the morning, I will fulfill my third promise.”

Chapter Nine

And boy, how Ker fulfilled that promise, and more.

Perhaps this was what parents talked about when they issued their children their dire warnings, Sammuel thought. “Just wait until you have children. Then you’ll see.”

Oh, Ker would most definitely laugh at this.

Aine fought as fiercely as she loved. They could be at each other’s throats one moment over something inconsequential and be fucking each other’s brains out the next.

He understood a fraction of Ker’s early exasperation with him and his rebellious spirit. Aine was admittedly every bit as feisty and then some. It was not uncommon for a fight to be followed by a spanking over her seemingly untamable mouth, followed by them making love for hours.

But her laughter, ahh, that made every weary moment more than worth it a thousand times over. Her tears came less frequently as her heart and soul healed, replaced by her crystal clear laughter that could stiffen his cock even faster than a look from her beautiful eyes.

Eyes now nearly the same color as his.

Many nights he awoke to her rolling on top of him, impaling herself simply to lie upon his chest and go to sleep again with her head tucked under his chin. Usually leaving him wide awake but pleased to know he was her source of security and peace. Her hair grew out, not nearly long enough to braid, still beautiful as it swept her shoulders.

They spent very little time outside his cabin. Even if not making love, he preferred the private sanctuary of her presence unmarred by

any other. Soon, it would be the three of them. She was already learning their language, no expert in it, but he had no doubt she one day would be.

He closed his eyes and summoned Ker's face to his mind, his heart throbbing with longing, wanting him, needing him more than ever. He hated leaving him, especially for long periods of time, but he enjoyed the missions and Ker never wanted to deny him that.

Perhaps now, with their t'wren to train, he would not feel wanderlust anymore.

The morning of their arrival at the Ab'yoika Maru, he donned his full uniform. Jarl found a plain deck coat for Aine to wear over Sammuels shirt and the trousers she usually wore when venturing outside their cabin.

Once the docking signal sounded, he reached for her hand. "Ready?"

"What if he doesn't like me?"

He pulled her to him, wishing he could immediately erase her fear. "He will love you as much as I do. Let us go to him so you may see for yourself."

* * * *

She shouldered her beloved knapsack and let Sammuels lead her through the ship to the hatch. The Ab'yoika Maru's docking bay was more than large enough to berth several ships the size of the much smaller Haltoran-dey. Jarl would follow shortly, Sammuels told her, clearing their cabin and overseeing the transfer of everything to the Ab'yoika Maru.

She felt Sammuels urgent need, his eager anticipation thrumming through him like signals through a wire. His thoughts, while clear in her mind, sounded jumbled and mixed in his desire to be reunited with Ker and introduce her to him.

His love for Ker overwhelmed all else.

With sure, confident steps, he led her from the Haltoran-dey and through the docking bay. Act'huran men snapped to attention as he passed without even acknowledging them. She imagined if they knew how long SammuEL and Ker had been separated they understood where his priorities lay.

They made their way through the huge ship, a vast maze of passageways unlike any other she'd been in. He didn't speak, although he did stroke her hand with his thumb as his pace quickened until she almost had to jog to keep up.

He punched in a code at a closed hatchway. It slid open, revealing an inner chamber where two men guarded another door. Both men snapped to attention when he barked something at them, presumably introducing her to them. She still had trouble with their language although she'd managed to pick up some basic phrases.

Sammuel stopped before the hatch and took a deep, calming breath. He squeezed her hand before he reached for the control panel with his other and punched in an access code.

The hatch slid open, revealing a large private cabin. They stepped inside. As the hatch slid shut behind them, he squeezed her hand one more time.

"Remain here, Ki'ato," he mentally told her. *"Until we call for you."*

She bristled at that, but her nerves told her it might be a good idea to comply. He walked across the large cabin, even larger than some bridges on ships she'd commanded, until he stood beside a very large, comfortable-looking high-backed chair, which faced a darkened vid screen on the far wall.

He whispered something before falling to his knees in front of the chair.

She heard a deep, rumbling man's voice speak in Act'huran and a large hand appeared, laid on SammuEL's head.

She wanted to summon jealousy, both at being left standing there and that someone else was touching the man she loved, but she

couldn't. The sound of the strange man's voice washed through her, familiar even in its newness to her ears. She heard it before, in her thoughts.

Sammuel's thoughts.

Sammuel let out a low moan as he rested his head against the man's thigh. Then the voice spoke.

"Aine." The visible hand left Sammuel's head and reached back from the chair, toward her.

When the fingers waggled at her, she realized she had been summoned.

Slowly, nervously, she crossed the cabin. Sammuel knelt before the man, mumbling to him in Act'huran. As she rounded the chair and the man's face came into view, she felt desire and passion stab her soul. He was gorgeous, his green eyes and blond hair the same shade as Sammuel's.

Correction, Sammuel's is the same shade as his.

The man smiled down at Sammuel, said something to him, and patted him on the head again. Sammuel dove for the man's groin. He burrowed through layers of tunic until he happily groaned when he found and engulfed his cock.

The man smiled up at her. She stood, in shock, watching.

Wanting to join Sammuel.

"Aine," he said again, his hand still extended to her.

She nodded and put her hand in his. She belatedly realized he pronounced it correctly. Sammuel must have told him.

He drew her closer, his eyes never leaving her. "You are beautiful," he softly said in English. "You are a very welcome surprise." His long, blond hair lay loose around his shoulders.

Her throat went dry. The same enticing scent washed from him as from Sammuel.

In his lap, Sammuel happily moaned again.

His eyes never left her. "He is a little distracted, Ki'ato." She wondered if he kept his voice that soft so as not to scare her. Then he

smiled again. “Normally I would not be this rude, but as I am sure he already told you, we have been apart for quite some time. I cannot bear to deny him this.”

She watched, her clit throbbing. She desperately wished to be where Sammuel knelt. Hell, her mouth watered as she was immediately reminded of her first several days with Sammuel. While her frenzied need abated somewhat from those early times, making love with him still felt just as intense. Sometimes her body craved him, needed to go down on him. Many evenings after dinner she did just that, lying in bed with him while he read, one hand on her head as she happily sucked him.

If she felt that way about Sammuel, he must feel that times a thousand about Ker.

“What do I call you?” she managed to ask.

He lovingly stroked Sammuel’s head. “As he does, in public you will usually address me as Ker, or Admiral, depending on the circumstances. Privately, you will eventually feel comfortable addressing me as Master.” He smirked. “Although there are times he addresses me with much less amorous titles when he is annoyed with me.”

Her eyes met his again. He squeezed her hand. “You may join him, if you wish.”

She dropped her knapsack and knelt beside Sammuel. Ker scooted forward in his chair and spread his legs wider to make room. Even though Sammuel’s eyes were closed, he hooked an arm around her shoulder, drawing her near.

The sweet, tangy, musky scent nearly bowled her over, like walking into a brewery and feeling dizzy from fumes. Then Sammuel released Ker’s cock just long enough to deeply kiss her. That’s when she tasted Ker for the first time, through Sammuel.

The effect hit her tenfold. If she thought Sammuel tasted good...this was indescribable. Ker’s huge cock, only semi-erect, filled Sammuel’s other hand.

Jesus! If she thought Sammuels cock large, how the holy hell was *that* supposed to go inside her? That wasn't a cock, that was a fucking fire hose.

Sammuel chuckled. "Believe me, Ki'ato, it will feel wonderful." He licked Ker's cock again, then urged her closer, making more room.

She felt weird and right all at the same time. With one last reassuring glance up at Ker, she bent to his cock and wrapped her lips around it.

Holy. Fucking. Hell.

Her eyes dropped closed as she let out a moan she was fully aware mimicked the happy one Sammuels let out earlier. If she had a hard time pulling herself off Sammuels cock, she had no clue how she'd keep herself away from Ker. So large she could barely take him in, but she sucked and licked for all she was worth, her body melting with the reward of his sweet juices in her mouth.

Ker's other hand rested on the back of her head. "Oh, Ki'ato," he said. "Love, that is wonderful."

Sammuel didn't leave. He nosed in and licked Ker's sac, his hand stroking that huge shaft until it finally grew stiff and hard against her tongue.

"This is your only chance to stop, Aine," Ker hoarsely warned. "I cannot hold back otherwise."

She tried to go deeper, but Ker tangled his fingers in her hair and forced her head off his cock, much to her disappointment. "I need to hear you say it. You have to ask me."

"Please! I want it! I want to be with you!" He released her hair as she frantically dove for him again.

"Then it is so." His cock swelled, the only warning she had before hot ropes of sweet come hit her tongue.

She shivered and felt Sammuels arms wrap around her, supporting her even as she had trouble supporting herself, but she refused to let go, kept sucking and licking as he continued to pump

out a seemingly endless supply.

Finally, her body trembling and desperate for release as his cock softened in her mouth, she let go. She rested her head against his thigh.

Sammuel scooped her into his arms and kissed her. “My love, we are almost done.”

Her body cried out for their touch, alternately screaming to come and shaky with exhaustion. She draped her arms around his neck and he carried her over to a very large bed, even larger than the one in their cabin on the Haltoran-dey. Ker joined them and lay on her other side.

He stroked her cheek. “I know you are tired, but we must complete this if it is what you want.”

She nodded. It was what she wanted, to continue feeling this way.

To never be alone again.

Ker looked at Sammuel. “The box is in our storage locker. Bring it and prepare.”

“Yes, Master.” He gently turned her over to Ker and jumped from the bed.

She felt safe snuggled with him. He smelled...

Just like Sammuel.

“I cannot wait until you complete us,” he said. His large hands felt very tender and soft against her flesh.

She loved him. She didn’t understand it, and after the events of the past several weeks, she wouldn’t question it. But she knew to the depths of her soul she loved him every bit as much as she loved Sammuel.

With equal certainty, she knew he loved her, too.

Sammuel returned with a small, ornately carved onyx box. He opened it and withdrew two red candles and a white candle—all with carved onyx holders—and a small onyx bowl holding a cone of incense.

“Place them on the headboard,” Ker instructed.

Sammuel arranged them, the white candle in the middle, the bowl of incense at the front. Ker sat up, keeping an arm around her to support her. Sammuel handed him a lighter.

Ker looked into her eyes and kissed her. "Do you wish to complete our triad?"

"Yes!" It was the only thing she wanted.

"I will be your Master, as will he." He glanced at Sammuel and she suspected a silent communication passed between them. "It is not slavery as you are thinking. It is love. Master is a title and a responsibility, to care for those beneath us, to protect those we love. I swear with my life. Can you accept that?"

She nodded. "Yes."

He flicked the lighter, lit the incense, then the white candle. "I promise as Master to you both, my t'wren, to love you, protect you, and provide for your physical and emotional happiness until all breath leaves my body." He handed the lighter to Sammuel.

Sammuel lit one of the red candles. "I promise as Master, t'arn, and t'wren, to serve our Master by your side, to love you, protect you, serve you, teach you and live my life to make you happy."

He handed her the lighter.

"What do I say?" she asked.

Ker smiled. "Whatever your heart tells you to say. And to pledge yourself to our triad."

She thought for a moment, then lit the candle. "I promise to serve you both, to love you, to trust you to care for me and never leave me."

Sammuel damn well knew how hard that was for her to say and the meaning was not lost on him. His eyes rimmed with red, suddenly bright with tears. "Oh, Ki'ato!" He leaned in and kissed her deeply as he took the lighter from her.

He sat back and wiped at his eyes before putting the lighter into the box and setting it on the shelf beside the candles.

Ker touched her chin. "I know the two of you will tell me more about that in the future. For now, we need to complete the ritual." He

released her and climbed out of the bed, as did Sammuel. Both men disrobed, dropping their garments to the floor.

Her first good look of Ker's naked body filled her with need...and a good kind of fear. Even flaccid, his cock looked huge.

Her pulse raced as desire wound through her, coiling tight and fast as she felt Sammuel's thoughts, his eagerness to finally make her theirs. Then both men climbed onto the bed. Ker reached for her.

She welcomed his hungry kiss as if she'd kissed him a thousand times before. Sammuel helped her out of the coat, then began to unbutton her shirt.

Ker smiled as he lifted his head. "Ah, my Sammuel is very ingenious. You did not often wear trousers, did you?"

"No," she admitted. "He preferred easy access."

Ker laughed. "I wonder where he developed that fondness?"

Sammuel smiled. "I can blame you for that, then, Master?"

"Of course, love."

Once she lay naked between them, Ker spent long minutes letting his hands roam her body, gently caressing her all over, familiarizing himself with her.

"You are so beautiful, Ki'ato. And already your eyes have turned. What color were they?"

Before she could answer, Sammuel must have mentally replied. "Ah, I see. They were beautiful then. They are even more so now."

Sammuel changed position, cradling her in his arms while Ker knelt between her legs. "You are sure this is what you want?" Ker asked.

"No offense guys, but please! Yes, it's what I want!"

Ker smiled and looked at Sammuel. "You have had your hands full."

"You have nooooo idea, Master."

Ker heartily laughed. "Excellent." He leaned in and kissed her. "Do you understand what is to happen?"

"Hopefully you're about to fuck my brains out."

“Very true. This first time must be...” He looked at Sammuell. She sensed another silent communication. “He told you about our first time together, when I claimed him.”

“Yes.”

“Then you understand what will happen. I must claim you, then we take you together.”

She didn’t care. All she wanted was a dick inside her to scratch the erotic itch threatening to take her sanity. “Fine! Do it! Please!”

He bent to one of her nipples and teased it with his lips and tongue and teeth until it stood taut. He repeated with the other. Each deliciously hot pull of his mouth against her breast coiled her need more tightly within her.

He nuzzled her chest. “Are you wet for me, Ki’ato?”

“Yes!”

He pushed her thighs farther apart and began stroking his cock with his hand. It grew, thickened, hardened as he pulled on it, milking it, slicking himself with pre-come. She hadn’t seen it in its erect entirety earlier, and its massive proportions widened her eyes.

He smiled. “Relax.” He pressed forward, the large head bumping against her body, rubbing it between her labia until he was in position. He hooked his arms under her knees and lifted her legs, spreading her even wider. His eyes never left hers. “Hard and fast, Ki’ato,” he said. “This time.”

She nodded and reached behind her for Sammuell’s comforting strength.

He plunged into her. She gasped, then realized he wasn’t splitting her apart at the seams as she’d worried. Filled her, yes, almost uncomfortably so, even more than when Sammuell’s large member claimed her. The first stroke plunged deeper than she knew even Sammuell had gone.

Sammuell laced his fingers through hers and bent his lips to her ear. “You are ours,” he murmured.

Ker lifted her off the bed as he thrust, her ass resting on his

massive thighs as his balls slapped her flesh with every stroke. She immediately felt the anticipated warm flood, her body opening for him as she arched her back and tried to take him even deeper.

Ker said something to Sammuel in Act'huran. Sammuel kissed her. "Come hard, now!"

Even her toes curled as she screamed, the coiled wire suddenly snapping at his command. Ker's fingers dug into her thighs as her body clamped down on him, hard, only strengthening the force of her climax.

Sammuel squeezed her hands. "Come again, now!"

She sobbed as her body obeyed him while Ker still fucked her, driving his seed deep into her body.

Ker said something else.

"One more. Come now!"

She closed her eyes as exquisitely painful pleasure rippled through her body. Her muscles clenched tightly around his already huge cock when she felt him harden, grow even larger as he pounded into her body. Then he let out a roar and thrust one last time, deeper than before, and a hot gush of his seed filled her womb.

She felt herself lifted into Ker's arms. "Wrap your legs around me," he ordered.

She did, letting her head limply rest on his shoulder. His arms encircled her, and she felt him move, carrying her still impaled upon his member.

He sat. She cracked her eyes open just enough to realize he'd moved them to the chair.

Okay, that's all she wanted to know. She closed her eyes again and shivered, truly exhausted, ready for sleep.

He said something to Sammuel in Act'huran, and a moment later she felt a blanket tenderly draped over her shoulders. Sammuel kissed her cheek. "You were beautiful, love."

Her mind churned even as she felt safe and cherished in Ker's arms, his cock tightly knotted inside her, joining them.

Ker stroked her back. "I love you so much, Aine," he said as he kissed her forehead. "You are so beautiful, perfect, wonderful."

She felt new whispers in her mind, different from Sammuel's presence.

"Yes," Ker softly said. "This soon. What Sammuel started, we are completing. Almost, still something else we must do."

She didn't care. She felt like she floated in his arms even as his cock continued to pulse and throb within her. This had to be the most perfect moment of her life.

Sammuel stood behind her, his body pressed against her back. Ker stroked her cheek. "Open."

She did and felt Sammuel shift position. His cock brushed her lips.

Automatically, her lips took him in, her tongue sweeping across the slit to immediately taste him before sucking.

The sensations in her body intensified, expanded with the taste of him filling her mouth. He didn't grow fully hard even as his hands cradled her head, supporting her.

All she had to do was lay there and let them hold her.

She lost track of time. When Ker shifted position beneath her, she realized his cock had finally softened. "All right, Ki'ran," he said. "Help me move her."

Move her? She just wanted to go to sleep. They wore her out.

When Sammuel made her let go of his cock she didn't fight him. He removed the blanket and picked her up, turned her around, and sat her back on Ker's lap with her legs draped outside his.

Sammuel stepped in and kissed her. "One more, love. Then you are completely ours."

"I'm so tired."

"I know," Ker said. "We will sleep uninterrupted after this." He reached around and cupped her breasts. His fingers pinched her nipples, rousing her, making her body respond. "Slick me," he ordered.

At first she thought he was talking to her until she felt Sammuell reach between her legs and grab his cock. His rhythmic motions bumped against her already sensitive clit, stirring even more interest from her.

Ker nipped her neck. "One more, love. You must ask for it. The two of us together, making you completely ours forever."

Her head lolled back on his shoulder. "Okay. Please. Yes."

She wasn't sure what they meant, too tired to contemplate it.

Then she felt Sammuell's lips on her clit and her mind managed to stir a little.

"All right," Ker said.

Sammuel draped her arms around his neck. "Hold on to me, Ki'ato." She felt him lift her. She froze, her mind shocked from exhaustion at the feel of Ker's hard cock pressing against her virgin ass.

"Wait, I've never been fucked there before!"

Sammuel kissed her. "Then tell us to stop."

She couldn't. She didn't want to.

"It will not hurt, love. I swear it. Relax."

He slowly lowered her onto Ker's cock as her body struggled to accept his massive girth. It didn't hurt, but she felt oddly stretched, full.

Then Sammuell dropped his mouth to her clit again. Ker pressed his lips to her ear. "Come," he growled as he pinched her nipples.

She did, not knowing how they managed it, but Ker wrapped one arm around her waist to hold her in place as her body trembled, weak.

Sammuel stood and pressed forward. That's when she felt his cock against her pussy, sliding between her swollen lips and preparing to enter her, too.

She weakly shook her head. It was too much. "No...you can't."

"He can, love," Ker assured her. "You can and will take it. You are ours." He spread his legs wider, forcing hers open even more. Sammuell slowly slid his member inside her body, adding to her

muscles' screaming protest. He held still once fully seated, while her mind struggled to cope with the barrage of sensations assaulting her body.

Ker said something in Act'huran, and both men slowly stroked their cocks in counterpoint, one in while one withdrew, alternating, sawing back and forth and creating an erotic friction her body couldn't deny.

"Hold it, Ki'ato," Sammuel ordered. "Do not come yet. Come with us. Complete us."

She whined, beyond reason or even coherent speech as Ker held her tightly immobile while they fucked her. Their rhythm built, harder, faster, until both men pounded their cocks into her.

"Now!" Ker commanded. "Both of you, come now!"

Sammuel and Aine both cried out as their climaxes hit them, then Ker followed. Aine felt his cock knot inside her again, adding even more pressure inside her pussy as it pushed Sammuel's cock into her G-spot.

"Come again, Aine," Ker whispered.

Shivering, she did, her body beyond the point of any control.

Sammuel cradled her face in his palms and kissed her. "*Very good, Little One. You are so beautiful, and I love you so much.*"

She forced her eyes open and realized that was the clearest his voice had ever sounded in her mind.

"*I love you, too, Aine. Beyond the capability of me to speak it.*"

Ker.

She managed to tilt her head back enough she could look into his eyes. He smiled, then nodded. "*Yes, I am now in your mind. It is complete.*" His lips never moved.

She closed her eyes and crashed into oblivion.

* * * *

She awoke, barely, sitting in Ker's lap, his cock still deeply

embedded in her ass. Her thighs ached from the extended romp, and she had a sneaking suspicion her ass and pussy would both feel a little worse for wear the next morning.

She felt his worry, and Sammuel's, their fear that maybe they'd injured her.

"I'm okay guys," she mumbled. "Just really tired."

Their combined relief washed over her, nearly overwhelming. Ker nuzzled the back of her neck. "Go back to sleep," he soothed. "Sleep all night."

She felt him moving, Sammuel's hands also on her, helping him, then the feel of the mattress sinking beneath their combined weight.

Sammuel curled up next to her and kissed her. "We will be here when you awake."

"Okay..."

* * * *

The light in the cabin was dim when she next opened her eyes. Both men softly snored. She lay on her side, Ker curled around her. When she tried to shift position, she realized, yep, he was still inside her.

How long could he stay like that anyway?

Despite the exhausting lovemaking, her clit throbbed at the thought of possibly sleeping with him embedded inside her pussy instead of her ass.

Ker's arm tightened around her waist. She felt his lips along the nape of her neck. "I thought I told you to sleep all night, Ki'ato."

She let her head relax against his arm. "Sorry. I don't take orders well sometimes."

"So he says."

"He" still softly snored in front of her. Sammuel's face looked more relaxed than she remembered ever seeing him in their time together. And she'd spent a lot of time staring at his sleeping visage,

trying to figure out her emotions about the situation.

“I guess you two had a lot of time to talk while I was passed out with your cock up my ass.”

“My cock is still up your ass, love. Do you object?”

She smiled as another flood of comforting warmth filled her. “No.”

He kissed her neck again, making her pleasantly shiver. “Good. Are you all right? Are you in pain?”

Thighs achy, check. Pain? “No, no pain.”

She felt his relieved sigh. “Good. I would have felt horrible if we had hurt you.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

She tipped her head back to look at him. “Why do we crave sucking you like that?”

He caressed her cheek. “Well, it feels good for me, obviously, but there are differences depending on whether I wish to climax or simply let you suck.” She waited him out while he gathered his thoughts. “It is part of the bond, it is how my body makes the changes in your body. You noticed, no doubt, you felt the same way about Sammuel, especially at first. If you had felt no bond with him, you would not have reacted the way you did to him and your body would not crave him, and myself, the way it does. It is not just a mental connection, it is a sign our bodies, for whatever reason, are also compatible. And so it becomes a comfort for the t’wren, a way to quickly re-establish a strong bond with their Master, especially if they have been apart for a while.”

“What do you get out of it? Besides the obvious.”

He kissed her. “I get both of you. I feel your love, and it is a way for me to show you how much I love you both.”

Chapter Ten

Echoing thoughts in her mind awoke Aine the next morning. The men were discussing things and catching up, personal and business. She lay there for several long moments with her eyes closed, just listening, absorbing, until Ker chuckled.

“What is that old Terran phrase, Ki’ran?” he asked aloud.

“Playing possum, Master.”

She opened her eyes and looked at them. “Don’t stop talking on my account.”

Ker leaned in and kissed her. She lay on her back between the two men, which meant at some point in the night she slept right through Ker withdrawing.

Sammuel also leaned in and kissed her. “Good morning, love. You also slept through us getting up and taking a shower a while ago.”

A brief mental image of the men making love in the shower flashed through her mind. Despite her body feeling like she’d been tossed out an airlock, she felt a tug of desire.

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

Ker propped himself on one massive elbow. “Because you were tired. And you needed sleep. And I did not want Sammuel to feel like I ignored him earlier. Are you jealous?”

“No, not jealous. I just don’t want to miss out on anything.”

“Ah, you are a stubborn child, are you not, Ki’ato?” Ker said, a teasing smile playing across his sexy lips.

“I’m *not* a child.”

“Yes, she is,” Sammuel said. “Stubborn.”

Ker stroked her cheek. The contact with him sucked her indignation away. She nuzzled his hand. "Sammuel told me as much as he thought he should," he softly said. "About your past. The very basics. He told me it is your story to tell in your own time and way. I would very much like to hear it when you are ready."

Tears threatened, and she fought them back tooth and nail. She didn't want to dredge up memories today, not this morning at least, not when her soul felt light and she didn't feel...

Alone.

Aine closed her eyes and rolled to face him. "Not right now. Please."

He pulled her to his chest. "I am sorry I upset you, love. Of course not right now. If and when you feel you can, never before."

She took a deep, shuddering breath as she felt his love envelop her, not just her body, but her mind as well.

She felt connected to him.

"Are you really all right, Ki'ato?" Sammuel asked. "We did not hurt you?"

She ran through a quick inventory. "I'm a little rough around the edges, but overall I feel pretty good." She kissed him.

Sammuel kissed her cheek. "I need to go to the bridge for a meeting, love. I will leave you here."

She closed her eyes and relaxed in Ker's arms. "Okay."

At least she understood what Sammuel meant about her loving Ker. She did. Utterly.

The men briefly conversed in Act'huran. Aine only understood every few words. Then Sammuel climbed out of bed and dressed before leaving.

When the thought about how she used to run captain's meetings tried to flit through her mind, she pushed it and the accompanying flood of melancholy back into its hole and locked the door.

Ker didn't move, didn't speak. She knew he thought about her, taking in the sight of her lying in his arms, staring at her.

Finally, after a long silence he softly said, "I will give you everything within my power to make you happy. I promise."

"I know. I...I miss flying. I miss my ship and my crew."

"We will have plenty to keep you busy, Ki'ato."

Bitterness broke through. "I suppose."

"I meant outside of our bed." He sat up and tipped her chin so she had to look at him. "You are not merely some concubine for our use. You are our heart and soul, our partner. We will find something for you to do that will make you happy, even if it means you have to leave on missions to do it."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Sammuel goes on missions all the time. Obviously I prefer it when we can work together, and we arrange that as often as possible." He smiled. "I would prefer neither of you leave my bed immediately, however. It was a long and lonely year, and now that I have you, I would rather not have to bid either of you good-bye again so soon."

She threw herself into his arms and hugged him. "I'll go crazy just sitting around. As long as you can find me something to do, great."

He stroked her back as he sighed, relieved. "That is very good to hear, Ki'ato."

* * * *

Later that morning, after she and Ker ate breakfast, Sammuel returned from his duties and she found out firsthand why the braid was functional as well as fashionable when he dropped to his knees in front of Ker and burrowed into his tunic again.

At the time, Ker had been discussing dinner arrangements with Jarl.

Aine, who'd been curled up on the bed and swaddled in Ker's dressing gown, looked on in amazement as Ker didn't even miss a beat in the conversation. He simply laid his left hand upon Sammuel's

head and kept talking with Jarl.

Jarl acted as if it wasn't happening.

Aine fought a sudden throbbing in her clit as she watched Sammuel eagerly devour him. Although her body felt sore in a good way and she spent the morning with Ker, cuddling and gladly sucking his cock while he mentally talked with her. Okay, so another good use for that skill, it allowed her to multi-task without talking with her mouth full.

Ker must have sensed her urge because he held up a staying hand to her just as she moved to climb off the bed and join Sammuel on the floor in front of Ker.

Struggling to suppress her pout, she remained on the bed. Ker finally finished with Jarl and dismissed him. Then Ker looked down at Sammuel with an amused smirk. "Are you quite happy, Ki'ran?"

He mumbled something around Ker's shaft. Aine heard his thought. "*I will be happier after a few minutes here.*"

Ker laughed. "Off. Now. To the bed, where our wife can participate."

Even more thrilling to her than the sight of Sammuel greedily sucking Ker was Ker's use of that word.

Wife.

Her husbands.

Sammuel held on even more tightly, his hands clamped around the backs of Ker's thighs.

Ker sighed and wrapped Sammuel's braid tightly around his hand and tugged. "Now."

Sammuel whined, pleading for more time.

Ker used Sammuel's braid to wrench his head back and keep him from recapturing his cock between his lips. "I said *now*, Ki'ran." Still fisting Sammuel's braid, Ker forced him to his feet and over to the bed, where he pushed him down before releasing him. "Disrobe."

Ker's eyes darkened with passion. She sensed the hard edges to his expression meant he wanted to fuck Sammuel's refusal to obey

right the hell out of him.

He glanced at her and smiled, softening his face. “Exactly,” he said.

Sammuel hastily yanked his uniform off and carelessly threw it to the floor beside the bed.

“Hands and knees,” Ker ordered.

He complied, his head resting on the bed, his hands fisted in the covers.

Ker crooked his finger at Aine, and she crawled across the bed to him. He disrobed and caught her chin in his palm. “How do you feel, Ki’ato? Could you stand to have his lips upon you, or are you too sore?”

“Oh, I could stand it, all right.”

The corners of his eyes crinkled. “Would you like to get me hard?”

“Hell, yeah!” She dove for his cock, moaning at the taste of him as his juices hit her tongue. Damn, this was *definitely* worth it.

Sammuel looked back at her. “Master—”

“Quiet,” Ker ordered. “Wait your turn.”

She silently laughed at Sammuel’s slightly whiny tone. Big bad commander was a total softy when it came to Ker.

She loved the feel of Ker’s fingers stroking her hair. He grew large and hard until she could barely fit more than just the head in her mouth.

“Excellent, love,” he cooed. “Use your hands to slick me so I can fuck him. Make sure I am well-lubed so I do not hurt him.”

Using both hands, she milked his cock, rubbing the pre-come leaking from his head over the entire shaft. An unspoken question popped into her mind.

“Yes,” Ker said. “It is exactly why it did not feel uncomfortable when I took you. It is not just a lubricant, it also has properties to relax the muscles and prevent pain. The t’arn, our first found mate, is usually male. Our bodies evolved to make sure the process was as

pleasant as possible. Now take your robe off and crawl beneath him so you can suck his cock while I fuck him.”

He didn't have to ask twice. She slid into place and closed her eyes as she swallowed Sammuel's shaft. He lowered his mouth to her clit and gently swirled his tongue around it, mindful of the workout she had with them the evening before.

When she felt Ker kneeling behind Sammuel, between his legs, she opened her eyes and found herself staring at the head of his shaft poised at Sammuel's rim.

Ker stroked Sammuel's back. Sammuel shivered, and Aine felt it through her own body. “Ki'ran, you may not come until I tell you. I am going to knot with you and spend a while reminding you who you belong to. Ki'ato, you may come as many times as you wish.”

Sammuel whined again in frustration at the order. Aine watched, fascinated, as Ker pressed forward, his massive member slowly disappearing inside Sammuel until he fully embedded himself to the root.

Holy crap!

The sight was enough to make her forget to swallow, and she nearly choked until she remembered what she was supposed to be doing. Sammuel hardened, like hot, living steel within her mouth as he wiggled his hips against Ker and tried to get him to move and fuck him.

She heard a light slap and knew Ker smacked him on the ass. “Hold still,” Ker ordered.

Sammuel let out a frustrated sigh even as he continued licking her, but he stilled his hips.

“I am going to fuck you long and slow, love,” Ker told him. “With my cock tightly knotted inside you and stroking against your gland and driving you nearly mad in the process. Our little interlude in the shower this morning was not nearly enough to satisfy me, nor enough to give you what I know you crave.” He took a long, slow stroke out before sheathing himself inside Sammuel's ass again.

Sammuel groaned, his cock throbbing, but unable to come without Ker's order.

Fortunately for Aine, without such a prohibition the sight pushed her over the edge. Her cry muffled by Sammmuel's member, he lifted his mouth from her and blew across her clit, allowing her to come down from her orgasm. Once he sensed she was ready, he returned to lightly swirling his tongue around her sensitive nub of flesh, dipping inside her, slowly tracing every intimate fold.

Ker chuckled. "Very good, Sammmuel. Aine, love, I am not going to force you to come. If it gets to be too much for you, simply push his head away." He took another long, slow stroke.

Sammuel groaned, which changed to a whine at the very end.

"Ah, I knew you needed this," Ker teased. "I just did not realize how badly. You have been gone for much longer periods of time and not returned this desperate."

Sammuel apparently felt too overwhelmed by the sensation to even reply mentally. He rested his forehead against her thigh, his breath hard and heavy against her mound as he struggled to maintain control.

Ker fucked him without mercy, alternating periods of long, slow, teasing strokes where he ground against his prostate at the bottom of every thrust, with hard and fast ones that made Sammmuel grunt with pleasure and buck his hips backward to meet every impact.

After two more orgasms of her own, Aine reached down and gently patted Sammmuel's cheek. He rested his head against her thigh and wrapped his hands around her lower legs to hold on.

For her part, Aine happily enjoyed the view of both men's sacs swinging and bouncing overhead as she continued licking and sucking Sammmuel. She knew when Ker finally took mercy on him and allowed him to finish, it would be a doozy.

Unable to resist, she reached between their legs and palmed first Sammmuel's sac, then Ker's larger, heavier one, smoothly hairless and hot against her hand.

Ker drew in a sharp breath. “Oh, love, that feels beautiful.”

Sammuel, beyond coherent speech, was reduced to passionate grunts, moans, and whines.

Aine lost track of time, unsure how long she lay there and not caring, either. Ker picked up the pace of his strokes, harder, faster, pounding, his balls slapping against Sammuel’s ass with each thrust. “What do you think, Ki’ato?” he gasped. “Have I tortured him enough?”

She remembered she could think her answer back to him. “*If it was up to me I’d lay here all day like this. I’m having fun.*”

Sammuel groaned. “Please,” he begged. “Master, please, let me come!”

Ker laughed and slapped Sammuel’s ass again. “Is my knot too much for you now?”

“My come is going to explode out my eyeballs if you do not release me soon!”

He grabbed Sammuel’s hips. “In that case, come hard now!” He buried himself deep inside Sammuel, and she sensed his release as he held still and his sac pulsed and throbbed as his climax began.

Sammuel let out a shout as his cock erupted in her mouth. He came harder and longer than she ever remembered him doing before, and in their time together she spent quite a bit of time learning how hard and long he could come with her mouth on him.

His entire body trembled as he collapsed on her with Ker’s cock tightly locked inside his ass. Ker looped an arm around Sammuel’s waist and pulled him off her. They sank to the bed, spooned together on their sides with Sammuel cradled in Ker’s arms.

“Very good, Ki’ran,” Ker murmured to him. He kissed the back of Sammuel’s neck.

Sammuel, his eyes still closed, shivered and tried to press even closer to Ker’s body.

Aine watched them, her heart full nearly to bursting at the love enveloping them and spilling over to her. Ker tilted his head so he

could look into her eyes. “Come here, love,” he said to her.

She knelt beside them. Ker laced his fingers through hers and drew her hand to his lips. He kissed it. “You are a part of us. There will be times this is you in my arms. Sometimes it will even be myself in the middle.”

Her worn-out clit throbbed again. “Wow!” she breathed, the mental image stunning her with its hotness.

He released her hand and patted the bed in front of Sammuel. “Lie here with us for a while.” He chuckled as he lay his head down again. “I do not expect you to stay here the entire time, but perhaps I will let you torture him for while.”

Sammuel snored, already asleep.

She giggled. “I think you wore him out.”

“So I did. He desperately needed it.”

* * * *

In fact, it was over six hours later before Ker finally released Sammuel from his erotic embrace. They all napped in that time. Ker led them to the head, where they showered together.

Aine had to admit Sammuel seemed much more relaxed and in control now, much like she remembered him being in their early days together. Gone was the buzzing undercurrent of desperation and need that had crept up over the past few days as their return to Ker loomed in his mind.

Ker knew it, too. He kissed Sammuel under the spray. “Feeling better, love?”

“Yes, Master.” Sammuel hugged him, resting his head on his chest. “Much. I needed that.”

* * * *

Jarl located her suitable female uniforms to wear until he could

have some custom-tailored for her. Act'huran women generally stood much taller and larger than Aine, and there were few of them on the ship. At least the garments were a better fit than the male uniforms. With Sammuel's return to command the ship, the first officer transferred to his new permanent assignment as captain of his own vessel. Sammuel promoted the second officer to first and installed Aine as second. Between her job duties and the men, she had little time for thoughts about her left-behind life.

Remembering not to swear in a colorful fashion, at least around her men, was getting easier. Especially after three more spankings by Sammuel, one of them for letting a loud "fuck" fly in engineering one afternoon when she bashed her knuckles with a sonic wrench while trying to repair a faulty relay.

After that incident, they mutually agreed she could substitute the old vernacular word "frak" in its place.

Her ass certainly appreciated that concession, especially since Ker made Sammuel use his belt on spanking number three.

After six months she knew the Act'huran language well enough the men no longer had to speak to her in English. The crew came to accept her as not only one of them, but as a superior officer. With her engineering skills, she helped make modifications to their systems that were implemented throughout the Act'huran fleet. Her hair now hung past her shoulders, and while still short, she could pull it back into a ponytail and plait it. Streaks of blond appeared at the roots as well, more changes as she melded with her men.

The only thing missing...

Her own command.

She chided herself one day about the thought when alone in engineering and going through a systems check. Most women would kill for what she had, and yet there she was, complaining.

She looked at her father's ring, stroked it with her thumb. Was it wrong to settle for a life of well-loved luxury?

Aine forced the disquiet away and returned her focus to her work.

Chapter Eleven

Eighteen months after her rescue by Sammuel, Aine had almost learned to control her swearing, and the Confederation needed another group of Act'huran ships for a shadow mission. Aine's pulse raced as she listened to Ker and Sammuel discuss it one evening at dinner until, finally, Ker smiled across the table at her.

"You shall explode if you do not say it, so say it."

"All right, fine. Can we go?"

Sammuel frowned and leaned back. "I was not planning on any of us going anywhere. The Ab'yoika Maru would simply be the base ship the shadow vessels depart from."

"But I know the raiders in that sector! I've fought them dozens of times. I know how their commander thinks. I could be useful!"

Sammuel started to put his foot down to absolutely forbid it when Ker spoke. "I think we should."

Sammuel's head swiveled. "What?"

Ker nodded. "I think she is right. No other captain, perhaps other than yourself, Ki'ran, knows their ways like Aine."

"But Master, that would put her in danger!"

Ker lifted an eyebrow at him. "Have I ever denied your requests to go on missions? Does it not put you in danger?"

"But that..." His face reddened as he stared at his plate.

She felt what he'd been ready to say. *That's different. I'm a man, she's a woman.*

Aine battled between love and anger at Sammuel for wanting to protect her and not having confidence in her skills.

His head whipped around again, this time to her. "I did *not* say I

do not have confidence in your skills!”

Whoops. Her turn to redden. She didn’t realize he’d heard that thought.

“I just want to keep you safe. Is that a crime?”

“We will all go,” Ker said, ending the argument. “Ki’ato, it is simply his old human ways of thinking. Do not judge him harshly. Anyway, I cannot bear to be away from either of you yet. So we all go. If we die, we die together.”

* * * *

Regardless, dying wasn’t on their to-do list. When it was revealed the Confederation wanted a new sensor beacon installed on the surface of an uninhabited planet the raiders frequently used as a stop-over station, Sammuel grudgingly admitted Aine was the best qualified for the job.

She had, after all, designed the sensor beacon.

Triumphant and more than a wee bit nervous, the three of them, accompanied by a contingent of six guards and techs, loaded into a lander for their trip to the planet’s surface. Temperate in some places, the equatorial region consisted of many thick rainforests dotted with active volcanic peaks. The planet was otherwise encased in an ice age, with the polar ice sheets extending to almost thirty-five degrees north and south of the equator. Raiders braved toxic plants and highly venomous insects, as well as voracious reptilian animals, to refill their water tanks and hide out in deep canyon crevasses of volcanic rock to evade sensor sweeps by Confederate forces. An orbiting satellite would simply be destroyed by the raiders.

But the sensor beacon Aine developed wasn’t detectible unless there was a receptor beacon on a ship with the proper frequency codes to access it. This meant nearby Confederation forces could check to see if any raider ships entered or left the planet’s atmosphere without having to get into firing range and risk being ambushed.

When they landed, Sammuel skillfully guiding them down to the rocky outcropping where the sensor would be placed, he turned to the crew. "Keep careful watch for any animal or insect life."

Before he opened the hatch Aine had second thoughts. "I frakking hate planets," she muttered as she looked out the front view ports.

Sammuel laid a soothing hand on her shoulder after playfully tugging on her braid. Plaited, her hair now hung past her shoulders. She loved it when the men took hold and tugged or used it to keep her where they wanted her. Loose, it fell halfway down her back. Large patches of blond now competed with brown. While she was tempted to dye it all blond to speed the process, Ker and Sammuel wouldn't let her.

"It is part of the process and a badge of honor, showing everyone you are a t'wren," Sammuel had insisted. "It took my hair nearly five years to fully turn."

Ker stepped close and spoke, pulling her out of her reverie. "Ki'ato?"

She ran her hands up and down her arms to soothe her nerves. The last time she set foot on a planet had been when Sammuel rescued her. She associated planets with death and dying. Her parents and Aggie died on a planet. She got the news about her fathers while on a planet. She nearly lost her life on one, as did Sammuel. Space was much safer.

Space felt like home. "I'm okay. Let's get this done."

Two men kept close watch while the others helped move the beacon out of the cargo bay and up the hill into position. Working quickly, they anchored it to the ground and stepped away so Aine could program it. It had been camouflaged to blend in, and being solar powered, it shouldn't need maintenance. Aine worked quickly, her skin creeping in waves of gooseflesh as she hurried to complete the calibrations.

When she stepped back to switch it on with her remote controller so she could test it, her boot slipped on loose gravel, sending her

tumbling backward. With her right hand securely holding the controller against her stomach to protect the device, her left arm instinctively shot back to break her fall.

She hit the ground hard, knocking the wind out of her and skinning her left palm.

Sammuel turned just in time to see her go down. "Aine!" He rushed up the outcropping to help her.

She looked at the controller. It was okay.

That's when she felt a hot, stabbing pain in her left wrist.

She screamed and jerked her hand up. She spotted the grey spider, nearly the color of the surrounding rock.

Sammuel finally made it to her. "Love, what's wrong?"

Still stunned, and with her arm feeling like fire raced up it, she fought a dizzying wave of vertigo.

Following her gaze, he swore and crushed the six-inch wide arachnid with his boot. "Did it bite you?"

She nodded. "I have to finish the setting." Her tongue already felt large in her mouth. She wondered what the fuck the venom did to her to hit her that quickly.

Despite Sammuel trying to pull her to her feet, she dialed in the settings and activated the beacon. Seconds later, she received an acknowledging signal from the Ab'yoika Maru that the beacon was working.

Her vision grew blurry. By this time, Sammuel's initial cry of alarm drew Ker and two of the men back to the outcropping.

"What happened?" Ker asked.

Sammuel scooped her into his arms. "Tosky spider nailed her in the hand."

"Oh, no!"

"I told you I fucking hate planets," she mumbled before her tongue felt too thick to talk anymore. She had just enough time to register fear on Ker's normally strong and placid face before her conscious faded.

* * * *

Shouting, angry voices woke her. She shivered, then felt a wave of heat wash through her. Struggling to open her eyes, she realized she was back in the lander. Sammuel bent over her, yelling at someone over the com link for instructions.

She spotted the back of Ker's head in the command seat and a blanket of stars in the front vid ports. They were on the way back to the Ab'yoika Maru.

Oh, good. Off that fucking planet. Thank the gods.

Hot pain engulfed her arm, slamming her momentarily into full awareness, so much that she let out a scream of agony.

"I know, love," Sammuel soothed. "I am so sorry. I know it hurts. Please hang in there. Please hold on for me." He injected her with something. She had just enough time to catch his thoughts before fading out again.

"Please do not let her die. Please do not take her from me."

* * * *

Pain washed through her, making her scream. Yet, she couldn't because of the tube down her throat.

Panicked, she tried to rip it out when she realized her arms had been restrained.

She looked up and saw what she thought might be the ceiling of the Ab'yoika Maru's med bay, but she couldn't tell for sure.

Everything hurt, deep, excruciating, fiery waves of pain rolling up her left arm and throughout her entire body. And still, it felt like she couldn't breathe.

Aine thrashed against her restraints before Ker's face came into view. He placed his palms against her cheeks and lowered his face to hers as far as he could because of the breathing tube.

“Relax,” he murmured. “Relax, Ki’ato. Please, do not fight. They are trying to treat the venom. They cannot give you more drugs for the pain right now.”

She heard doctors talking in the background, frenzied tones and lots of activity she knew centered on her.

Sammuel appeared on her other side. Her eyes flicked to his worried face before Ker spoke to her again. “Look at me, Ki’ato.”

She finally remembered how to communicate with him. “*I can’t breathe!*” she mentally told him. It felt like the breathing tube choked her. She couldn’t even swallow.

“Yes, yes you can,” he soothed. “Take a breath.”

She finally tried to pull air into her lungs and marginally relaxed when she realized she could, in fact, get air.

“See? It is all right. They had to stabilize your airway when we returned to the ship.”

“*Am I going to die?*” Hot tears ran down her face.

Ker looked angry. “You are *not* going to die! You are strong and fierce, and the doctors are working on formulating an antivenom that will work on your anatomy.”

“*I love you.*” Another blistering wave of agony took her focus again. It felt like her body had been drenched in boiling oil. She knew for certain her skin must be blistered off her body.

“We love you, too, Ki’ato. The pain is the effect of the venom in your blood. You are not burned.”

“*It hurts!*”

She heard Sammuel sob. When she tried to look at him again, Ker kept her face firmly in his palms. “No, look at me, love. Look into my eyes and breathe. Deep breaths.”

Despite her pain she suspected Sammuel was overwrought, crying, and Ker didn’t want her to see him like that for fear it would frighten her.

When a wave of pain stronger than the previous ones swept through her, she let the dark places in her mind coax her into oblivion.

* * * *

She dreamed of Aggie. Looking up into his face from a child's height, she saw his smile, heard his voice with a clarity her dreams hadn't possessed in years.

Playing in the small, dusty backyard of their parents' home, feeling loved. Feeling safe, even as he threw her up into the air.

"I'll catch you, Annnnnnyyyaa."

He always did.

Usually only his voice came to her, not their parents. But in this dream, she saw her mother and father watching from the back door with smiles on their faces. "You're such a good brother, Aggie," her mom said.

Her father nodded. "You'll make a good father."

Aine hugged her brother tightly, her arms slung around his neck. "No! I won't share you with anyone!" she said.

He laughed and kissed her cheek. "You are number one in my life, Little One. Don't worry. Always."

That dream faded with another wave of pain.

She hid in the dark alcove. Noises echoed around her, frightening her, but she didn't cry.

Boys do not cry.

The sound of a hatch opening, then men's voices.

She struggled to push herself deeper into the recess and prayed it was Aggie coming for her, but she suspected Aggie was badly hurt. Or maybe dead, like their parents.

When the man's face came into view, she bit down on her lips not to cry out, afraid he would hurt her. Afraid he might be a bad man.

But then he sat and talked to her and his soothing voice calmed her. He didn't sound anything like the bad man. He reminded her of Aggie, in a way. When he called her "Little One" she thought maybe she could trust him. It was what Aggie always called her. Her

father...

That faded.

She lay in her bunk at school and struggled against the tears wanting to drown her from the inside out.

Boys do not cry.

Service Before Self.

Father and Da wanted her to have a chance to accomplish all she could. They had taken the last, extra mission to make sure they had more than enough money for her Academy tuition fees.

They would have been home sooner had they not taken that last run. They never told her that, but she put it together after reading her father's correspondence with the freighter assignment division.

She said she wanted to be a captain and they died to make that happen, to make sure they could put her through school.

Service Before Self...

A new dream. Waking up on that damn planet with Sammuell bent over her. How he called her "Little One."

She loved them, both of them. How could she ever give them up when they felt like part of her?

Yet...

What about what she set out to do with her life? To make her fathers proud? To wipe out as many raiders as she could for killing her birth parents and causing Aggie's death? Was that disrespecting them, dishonoring their sacrifice to turn her back on her duties?

Service Before Self...

Blackness absorbed her.

* * * *

Restraints still kept her arms immobilized, but the breathing tube had been removed. She shivered. When she tried to lift her head to look around she felt too weak to do even that.

She still lay on a bunk in the med bay, the lights dimmed.

Sensing Ker and Sammuel close by, she closed her eyes and called out to them with her mind. The men immediately appeared on either side of her.

“We are here, love,” Ker said. He smoothed her brow. “We are always here for you. Always by your side.”

Her tongue felt dry and thick in her mouth, and it took her a while to make it work right. “How long?” she croaked.

“Shh, don’t tire yourself.”

“How long?”

He sighed. “Nearly two weeks. The worst is past, and you are healing. The doctors say you may feel residual effects for a while. They had to not only adjust the dosage of the antivenom, they had to carefully calibrate it to human anatomy.”

“I fucking hate planets.”

Sammuel laughed. “Love, I shall give you a pass for that. I also promise I will try to never take you onto a planet again if I can help it.”

“Good.”

Ker must have pulled a chair next to her bed, on her right side, because he sat with his chin resting on the mattress. “Sammuel, go get some sleep. I shall sit up with her tonight.”

“But Master—”

“Go. It is all right. Tomorrow morning you return, and you may sit with her while I sleep.”

He nodded, resigned. She saw how tired he looked.

Exhausted by talking, she mentally spoke to Sammuel. “*Please go rest. I love you.*”

He mustered a weary smile. “I love you, too, Little One.” He brushed a kiss across her lips. “In the morning, then.”

Once they were alone, she focused on Ker. She knew there was more to his command than simply sending Sammuel to bed.

“*What’s going on?*”

He smiled. “You have very strong instincts, do you realize that?”

“Do not bullshit the worn out woman in the hospital bed.”

“I shall let that pass as well.” He kissed her. “Do you wish to talk? Mentally. I do not wish you to tire yourself.”

Her mind flashed to her dreams. *“Talk? Why?”*

“Exactly, your dreams.”

She tried to recall them. Some of them she could, some she couldn’t, and she told him just that.

“Sammuel did not see them. I do not think he could because he felt too distraught and filled with guilt over you getting bit. He blames himself.”

“It wasn’t his fault.”

“I know that and you know that, but I also blame myself for allowing the mission. See? Just because it is not rational does not mean it invalidates how we feel. And so back to your dreams.”

She didn’t know what to say.

“Are you upset that I observed?”

She managed to shake her head no.

His voice softened, choked with emotion. “At first, I was not sure if you would live. I wanted to absorb as much as I could about you and your life, to hold on to in my heart if we were parted from you.”

She felt a tear roll down her cheek. He reached out and gently brushed it away with his thumb before he continued. “Then I admit I wanted to know if I could understand your pain, what you have suffered, that perhaps in some way I could one day help you fully heal from it.” He released her right hand from the restraint and laced his fingers through hers. “If you wish to be angry with me for the intrusion, I understand. You would have every right to feel that way.”

She shook her head again. No, she wasn’t angry at him. She just hoped...

He smiled. “It is all right. You are still learning. In many ways this is very new to you. It is to be expected there will be times you think about what was, what might have been, instead of what is to come. Do not feel badly about that. Please talk with me, with both of

us about it. I swore to you to make you happy, and that is what I wish to do.”

“You aren’t upset?”

“With you? Love, how could I ever be upset with you? I cherish you. I treasure you. I can be exasperated and frustrated and befuddled and outright mind boggled, but upset? Never! I love you, you are my heart and soul.”

Did she really want to dredge up those feelings? About her dreams?

“I would rather focus on the now and the future, not the past.”

She squeezed his hand a little, then spoke out loud. “For the three of us.”

She felt her heart speed up at the force of his smile and the wave of joy washing from him to her. “For the three of us, love,” he agreed.

Chapter Twelve

It took nearly a month for Aine to feel even remotely human again. The men made no amorous advances, although she still wanted to lay in bed with them and suck on one or the other for the comforting, peaceful feeling it brought her. One of the men always stayed with her. She felt their undercurrent of fear, that they came so close to her dying they didn't want to let her out of their sight.

The men relaxed as she gradually resumed her duties. She finally convinced them they wouldn't break her if they returned to their previously vigorous level of sexual activity.

Truthfully, she'd missed it, missed feeling joined to them not just in mind, heart, and soul, but in body as well.

One evening, when sensing how horny they were and yet holding back because of their lingering fear, she stripped her clothes and stood in the middle of their bed while Sammuel and Ker sat talking at the table.

"One of you better come fuck me right now, or I'll take care of it myself."

The men immediately turned to stare at her, their eyes widening as they spotted her standing in the middle of the bed.

As one, both men stood and advanced on her, shedding their clothes and quickly joining her in bed. They grabbed her hands and pulled her down to them.

"You are very demanding," Ker said as he nipped her throat. "I think perhaps I should teach you a little patience."

Sammuel knelt between her legs and pushed her thighs apart. "I would agree with that, Master." He lowered his mouth to her mound

and licked her.

She moaned.

“Do not come, Little One,” Ker warned. “Not until I say so.” As always, the command only served to enflame her need to climax to a fever pitch.

Sammuel slipped two fingers inside her, fucking her with them. “She is already wet, Master.”

“Of course she is. She is a very good girl.”

Aine stared up into his eyes. How could she have ever doubted she wanted to be anywhere but right here with these two men? She had it all, their love and a career of sorts. No, not what she’d planned, but she enjoyed it well enough even if it wasn’t a command position of her own.

“You should go ahead and fuck her,” Ker said. “Because then I shall, and I plan on knotting inside her for several hours at least, to enjoy the feel of her body around me.”

Aine moaned. That was, by far, one of her favorite things.

Sammuel smiled as he sat up. Already hard, he paused before he plunged inside her. “And how do you feel, my love?”

“More than ready for a good, hard fucking.”

Before she finished the last word he did just that, a good, hard fucking that lifted and carried her body to the brink of climax. With Ker’s order, she couldn’t make it over.

Ker sat up and fisted Sammuel’s braid. “Sammuel, come hard!” he ordered.

She felt Sammuel’s explosion, his cock throbbing and pulsating, her body greedily welcoming every drop he pumped out. His eyes fell closed as his body trembled before he collapsed on her.

“That was far too soon,” he grumbled against her breast.

Ker released his braid and laughed. “You would say that if I let you fuck her for a week.”

“And your point is?”

“Move your ass, that is my point.” He rolled her over to her

stomach and pulled her onto her knees. Kneeling behind her, he stroked her clit. "Is my sweet love ready?"

She wiggled her ass at him. "Oh, yeah."

As always, besides the feel of his member stretching her, she felt a deeper connection with him, even more than their usual close mental tether.

"How do you wish it, love?" he asked. "Hard and fast, or long and slow?"

She threw her head back. "Hard and fast."

He grabbed her hips and plowed his cock into her, deeply, almost viciously, her body responding and desperate for release. "Hold it," he ordered.

Sammuel grabbed her braid and kissed her, his tongue dueling with hers.

"Come now!" Ker ordered.

With her cries muffled by Sammuel's mouth, her body gave in to the pleasure assaulting her from the inside out as his cock swelled, tightened, the knot forming and stroking her G-spot with every thrust. Her body weak and trembling, exhausted, he wrapped his arm around her waist and rolled to his side with her, his thighs pressed against hers, her body carefully cradled in his arms.

As always, she felt safe and loved. As she shifted position slightly, still impaled on him, she felt well-fucked and still more than a little horny.

"Oh, is that so?" Ker mumbled against the nape of her neck. "Ki'ran, why don't you help her out?"

Sammuel evilly grinned as he pushed between her legs and tongued her. Her muscles clenched around Ker's rigid member, sending another tremor of pleasure through her core.

"Come then, love," Ker said.

She did. Three more times until she begged them to stop.

Ker chuckled. "She has had enough, I believe."

She snuggled in his arms and felt drowsy. "I think I'm ready to go

to sleep.”

“Excellent. So am I.”

When she awoke the next morning, she was still tethered to Ker. Sammuel wasn’t in bed.

“He had a meeting this morning,” Ker said in answer to her unspoken question. “Are you ready to get up?”

She sighed. “Yeah. I guess.” There were really great advantages to this arrangement. She wouldn’t deny that.

He feathered his lips along her neck. “Or, we could spend the morning in bed, if you prefer.”

“Being an admiral does have perks of the rank, huh?”

He chuckled. “Most assuredly it does.” He kissed the back of her neck. “It also has its drawbacks.”

Uh-oh. “Like what?”

“I have been summoned to a political summit. Well, it is not because I’m an admiral, but because I am t’amar-te.”

She knew the t’amar-te, by tradition, sat at the top of the Act’huran political hierarchy. “We have to go to Act’huras?”

He chuckled again. “No, love. Do not fear. No planet for you. We are assembling at a space station in Act’huran territory. We are far too scattered to all make it back to the planet in a reasonable amount of time. Those of us in this sector will render our decision to the High Council. As will several other smaller meetings.”

“What’s the meeting about?” She didn’t honestly care if it was a discussion of boxers over briefs as long as Ker’s cock stayed firmly embedded inside her.

He laughed. “You are a treasure, love. No, nothing as mundane as undergarments. There is a chance Act’huras might finally forge an official treaty with the Confederation. We must have a formal vote to welcome the opportunity.”

Up until this point, one stupid planet had refused to agree to allow Act’huras into the Confederation because of an altercation over three hundred years earlier when raiders stole a battle cruiser under

Reypasian registration and fired upon an Act'huran emissary vessel. The Act'hurans destroyed it. Even though it was in self-defense, the pig-headed Reypasians demanded exorbitant and extreme retribution in both money and several replacement ships.

The Reypasians, at the time a fledgling member of the Confederation, had stymied all Act'huran attempts to join the Confederation since.

Hence the secretive relationship between the Act'hurans and the Confederation military machine.

When Aine found out that both she and Sammuel would accompany Ker to the meeting, she didn't think anything of it at first. Until the morning they docked at the station and Jarl brought her ceremonial robes to wear.

When the yeoman left them alone she looked at her men, who both seemed decidedly on edge over something. "What's going on?"

"There is a reason t'wren go to the meeting, love," Ker explained. "You've learned much about our history already."

She had. The aggressive, warlike t'amar-te nearly destroyed themselves in ancient times, until their t'wren forced an end to the hostilities by placing themselves directly in the line of fire. Not wanting to harm their beloved mates, and by honor code unwilling to harm an innocent t'wren even if their enemy's mate, the t'wren forced their Masters into peace talks.

And kept them there through some evilly inventive means.

"Yeah?" Aine wasn't sure she liked where this conversation headed.

Sammuel smirked. "Some old traditions still hold, even if we have been peaceful for over a thousand years. This time, it shall be you in Master's lap instead of me."

It finally hit her. The ancient t'wren ingeniously kept their Masters calm and channeled their aggressive tendencies through one sure-fire method.

"Oh, *hell* no! I am *not* having sex in public with you!"

Ker caught her chin in his fingers and tipped her face to his. “It is not sex, love. Why do you think the robes are so long and full? All you have to do is sit there and enjoy yourself and even fall asleep, if you wish.” He leaned in and kissed her, draining her objections.

An hour later, dressed in her robes, she tried to not think about her nervous stomach as she walked beside Sammuel, also similarly garbed, three steps behind Ker. Sammuel held her hand and tried to mentally calm her.

Ker was also dressed in ceremonial robes, which she couldn’t help but notice had an easy-access flap in the front.

Then her traitorous body weighed in with a mental image of herself impaled on him. Her clit throbbed in anticipation.

Fuck.

Twenty-seven t’amar-te and their t’wren had assembled in a large, private secure meeting suite deep inside the station. This seemed standard procedure for their culture. Aine had an idea only she felt freaked out.

Sammuel smiled. “*I felt terrified my first time, love,*” he mentally told her. “*Do not worry. The worst part is your anticipation.*”

She shot him a dark look but didn’t reply.

Large, soft, comfortable-looking lounges had been set up in a circle facing inward. All but five of the t’amar-te were accompanied by two t’wren, the rest a single t’wren. Aine realized five of the lounges did not have a corresponding chair positioned behind it.

One lone yeoman discretely hovered in the far corner of the room, the only person other than t’amar-te and t’wren in the room.

A majority of the t’amar-te were, she noticed, blond. Maybe not the same shade as Ker, but a number of them were fair-haired. Some had brown hair, one triad had reddish locks. The t’amar-te were also all very tall, broad men, some trim and fit, some softer and obviously out of shape. Most of the t’wren looked to be t’amen-ra, just from their height and build and facial features. Only three others appeared to be human or maybe even another humanoid race, perhaps Caltazi

or Axpaltean.

Ker walked over to one t'amar-te and hugged him. "Brother! How are you?" A man stood behind him, his t'wren she assumed from his matching eye and hair color.

The other t'amar-te looked a lot like Ker, his eyes and hair the same shade, just a slightly different shape to his face.

"We are...still adjusting. Healing slowly."

"My regrets and sorrows go with you."

"Their t'wren died a few years ago. Killed in an accident," Sammuel silently told her. *"That is Ker's older brother, D'arsolan Jor-Pythan. You can call him Jor. His t'arn is Dalmetri."*

She felt her soul ache for the men. The mere thought of losing either of her men nearly broke her heart.

"Thank you, brother," Jor said. "Yet I hear we have reason to celebrate?" A handsome smile lit his face as he looked at Aine. "My baby brother finally takes a t'wren to complete his triad."

If Ker was his "baby" brother, she wondered about Jor's age.

"Yes," Ker said, introducing her. "We are very blessed."

Aine blushed at the compliment.

One of the other t'amar-te called the meeting to order and everyone migrated toward the circle. Aine noticed those there with a single t'wren took their places at the lounges without a chair behind them.

Ker captured her hand and led her and Sammuel to one of the lounges.

"Do not be nervous, Ki'ato," Sammuel mentally reassured her.

"Easy for you to say. You trade places with me if you think this is so swell."

Ker stretched out on one of the lounges. Sammuel immediately took his place in the chair behind him. Ker gently pulled Aine into his lap, facing him, straddling him. She realized the way the lounge was configured created a place to comfortably place her legs.

He adjusted her robes without fanfare and pulled her to his chest.

"Just relax."

While she could expertly converse with her men and with other crew in Act'huran, she couldn't follow the extremely formal, archaic and fast-paced Act'huran dialect used in the meeting. She closed her eyes and listened to Ker's heartbeat under her ear, the comforting sound of his voice rumbling through his chest and into her body as he gently stroked her back while he participated in the discussion.

She had, in fact, almost dozed off when she felt him discretely reach under her robes.

"Get wet for me, love," he mentally commanded.

She already was, and it was the only warning he gave. He quickly entered her, his cock immediately knotting inside her.

She kept her eyes closed as she felt her face burn with embarrassment even as her body welcomed the intrusion.

Sammuel laid a hand on her shoulder. She opened her eyes and saw his concerned expression. *"Are you all right?"* he silently asked so as not to disturb the meeting.

"This would be a lot more all right in the privacy of our cabin." Even when he molested her on the ship's bridge she hadn't minded, partially because he'd had her so horny she couldn't stand it, and on those occasions it wasn't so blatantly obvious what was going on.

He smiled and stroked her cheek. *"Take a look around and imagine being a man at your first meeting such as this. Mere weeks after being joined to your Master."*

"You're getting way too much pleasure out of this."

"And so shall you, love. Believe me."

Okay, so he had her there. It definitely felt good, although the way Ker positioned his hands on her back, over her hips, prevented her from shifting her body the way she wanted to make it feel even better.

"If you need anything, tell me," Sammuel assured her.

So that explained the lone yeoman.

"Yes," Sammuel answered. *"If someone only has a t'arn or single t'wren and not a second t'wren to serve them both, the yeoman can*

fetch them food or drink as they need so they do not have to adjourn the meeting early.”

“How long, exactly, are we going to be here?”

He smiled. *“A while.”*

Fuck.

He returned to his seat. After a few minutes she braved a glance around them. The other t’wren were similarly situated, some already asleep. The t’amar-te went about their business as if they didn’t have their dicks buried into someone sprawled in their lap, even though the robes everyone wore completely concealed their activities. If someone didn’t know what was going on, they would assume they simply sat there. Most of the t’wren were female, a few male, both Masters with single t’wren and those in triads where all three were male.

Some of the attending t’wren occasionally leaned in, having silent conversations with their t’wren as Sammuel had with her.

Aine tried to doze off, but with the erotically pleasant sensation of Ker deeply knotted and throbbing inside her, that wasn’t possible. Sammuel checked in with her regularly, his obvious amusement at her change in attitude annoying her.

At one point she realized she had dozed when she felt Sammuel’s gentle touch on her shoulder. He held up a bottle of water for her to drink. She realized she was pretty thirsty and drank before handing it back. Ker held another and continued his spirited-sounding conversation.

She didn’t know if it made her feel better or worse that he could carry on as if she wasn’t impaled on his cock.

Sammuel’s amused laughter sounded in her head. *“Why do you think he is not mentally conversing with you, love? It is taking every ounce of his focus and self-control to attend to this gathering. That is the point.”*

“The t’amar-te love even harder than they used to fight. By dividing their attention in such a way, not to mention wanting to protect their precious t’wren, it guarantees no violence and full

attention to getting the meeting adjourned as quickly as possible so they can return to their ships and fuck all night. While technically this process is no longer needed because they have long since curbed their warlike tendencies, they still enjoy the tradition. Who would not?"

Okay, so that made her feel better even if it made her hornier in the process.

Several hours later, the t'amar-te took a break. Ker focused his green gaze on her. "Believe me, love," he whispered, "I do know you are there. How could I not?" He grabbed her hips and thrust once, coming, her insides warming as he filled her and his knot receded. "Come," he commanded.

She closed her eyes and clamped her lips tightly shut as he pulled her to his chest and cradled her against him. Around the room she heard a few muffled sounds she imagined were others engaged in similar activities.

He skimmed his hands down her back. "When you catch your breath, Sammuel will help you freshen up and then we shall eat lunch."

"How much longer are we going to be here?"

He nuzzled her nose with his. "Probably until long into the night."

* * * *

The t'wren tended to stay close to their respective Masters, although they did socialize a little. After lunch, Sammuel led Aine over to Jor's t'wren, Dalmetri, to introduce her.

She felt a wave of sadness from the t'amen-ra. He stood a few inches taller than Sammuel, even though Jor dwarfed him.

"It is a pleasure to meet you," he said in thickly accented but understandable English.

Her eyes widened in surprise. She'd learned that with the exception of Ker's men and others who had frequent contact with the Confederation, most Act'hurans didn't know English. "It's a pleasure

to meet you, too,” she replied in English.

He smiled at Sammuel. “Did we not tell you it would be so?”

Sammuel rolled his eyes. “Yes, Master already had his ‘see, I told you so’ conversation with me.”

Dalmetri returned his gaze to Aine. “Young Sammuel told Peyzin and myself many times throughout the years how he would never share his Master with another. We always told him to wait and see, that he was young and would learn.”

“*His t’wren who died*,” Sammuel mentally clarified for her. Then, out loud, he said, “Yes, you were right, brother. Is that what you wished to hear?”

“Brother?” Aine asked, confused.

Despite his invisible cloak of sadness, Aine felt Dalmetri welcomed her. “We are all of us t’wren family, in a way. Even if not related by blood ties such as ours. It is a title of respect and love, that of brother or sister, for our fellow t’wren.”

Sammuel nodded. “Even if a t’wren were away from their Master, or unbonded by death, they could turn to fellow t’wren or another’s Master if they needed assistance.”

“Not meaning in the bedroom,” Dalmetri clarified with what she guessed was a playful tone. “As a t’wren you are never alone if there is another t’wren or Master when you are in need or dire straits. We always help each other.”

Aine tried to process that. She’d gone from being orphaned—twice—to being a welcomed member of a huge-ass extended family that spanned a goodly chunk of the known galaxy. It nearly overwhelmed her.

Ker returned and took her hand. “We begin again.”

She didn’t feel as nervous this time. Her body, already anticipating the pleasure of spending the afternoon impaled on Ker’s cock, didn’t need a command to prepare, either. Without formality he quickly entered her after she settled herself onto his lap and arranged her robes.

As his knot swelled her body relaxed, comforted. *Okay, maybe this wasn't so bad after all.*

She heard Sammuel's mental laughter.

By the time they adjourned for dinner she felt exhausted, even more than if she'd had a vigorous all-night romp with both men.

Sammuel helped her to the facility. "That is because he draws energy and strength from you, love. Believe me, he is on the edge of his control as it is. At least you do not have to worry about staying awake while he fucks you all night." He smirked. "I'll be lucky if he's not bending me over in the lift and taking me before we even get back to the ship.

She gasped. "All night?"

Sammuel smiled, arching an eyebrow at her in the same expression Ker used. "Oh, yes. And this time I will not sleep through it."

"How could you possibly sleep through that?"

"You would be surprised what you can sleep through when tired enough."

She finally thought to ask him something. "When we talked to Dalmetri earlier, it was like I could feel his sadness. Is that normal?"

"For us, yes, among other t'wren. Unbonded t'wren especially develop very strong empathic skills for others. It is as if the energy they used to devote to their triad, or in Dalmetri's case, to their t'wren, is seeking a use."

"I feel bad for him. Will they ever find another t'wren?"

Sammuel shrugged. "Who is to say? That is Fate's decision. They lost her ten years ago. They have not yet healed to the point their hearts might recognize another t'wren. It is not unheard of for a t'wren to eventually replace a lost t'wren, but it does not happen very often."

Following dinner, Aine settled in Ker's lap. He entered her and she promptly fell asleep until Sammuel's hand on her shoulder gently shook her. "Love, we can go. We are finished."

She forced her eyes open. "I'm so tired."

Ker's gaze burned with passion. "I know, Ki'ato. You have made me so proud today. You did very well." He squeezed her shoulder. The gesture roused a little of her exhaustion from her system.

"Thank you, Master," she mumbled.

Usually she called him Ker, rarely able to bring herself to call him Master outside of their bed, and even then only when he mercilessly teased her to the point of begging for release.

Sammuel helped arrange her robes and lifted her from Ker's lap, scooping her into his arms. "Come on, love. Let us get you home and into our bed so Master can use me."

The lift ride from the secure meeting facility in the bowels of the station up to their berth would take several minutes. They had the lift to themselves.

When the door closed behind them, Ker stepped forward, backing Sammuel against the wall. "Now."

Chuckling, Sammuel gently set Aine on her feet. "I must put you down for a moment, love."

He waited until she was steady and gripped the handrail for support before he turned around, his back to Ker.

Ker planted a hand between Sammuel's shoulders. "Over."

Sammuel grabbed the handrail and leaned forward, sticking his ass out. Ker flipped Sammuel's robes up, took just enough time to slick himself, and immediately plunged hard and fast into Sammuel's ass.

Aine watched, exhausted and yet turned on by the sight as Ker's thighs slapped against Sammuel's.

"Do not come," Ker growled.

That prompted a whiny moan from Sammuel, which earned him a hard smack on the ass. "Do not worry. You will beg me to stop making you come by the time dawn breaks, Ki'ran." With that he climaxed, but he didn't withdraw, waiting only a moment before he started thrusting again, his cock still as hard as ever.

Okay, so the fact that Act'hurans were almost constantly fuck-ready was a huge plus in Aine's mind.

Ker used Sammuel twice more before he pulled out and tucked himself in. When Sammuel straightened and turned, she didn't miss the way his eyes had glazed over from unreleased passion.

Ker grabbed his braid and kissed him. "I shall use you hard all night, love. Then you can spend all day tomorrow sucking my cock."

Finally more awake, Aine cleared her throat. "Um, what if I want a little of that action?"

Ker waggled his eyebrows at her. "I will let you suck his cock, but you are too exhausted for me to take tonight. I doubt you will stay awake once we get you to bed."

She was about to argue that point when she yawned.

Ker scooped her up to carry her back to their cabin when the lift doors opened. Fifteen minutes later, they were all naked in bed, Sammuel on his hands and knees as Ker prepared to fuck him once again.

Aine rolled onto her side, reached out, and laced her fingers through Sammuel's.

She promptly fell asleep.

* * * *

When she awoke the next morning, Sammuel lay asleep beside her with Ker spooned along his back.

Ker's eyes twinkled. "*Good morning, love.*"

She stifled a laugh so she didn't wake Sammuel. "*Are you still knotted inside him?*"

Ker grinned. "*What do you think?*"

"*Lucky man.*"

"*Who? Myself or him?*"

"*Him.*"

He reached over and laced his fingers through hers. "*We are the*

lucky ones, love.”

She lifted the sheet a little and noticed the sticky mess around Sammuell’s thighs and belly. She suppressed another amused snort.

“How many times did you make him come?”

Ker shrugged a little. *“I lost count after the tenth time or so. I am sure he considers himself well-fucked.”*

Chapter Thirteen

When an offer came through from the Confederation to take another shadow assignment, Sammuel didn't want to accept it.

Aine, now six months post spider bite and completely healthy, wanted to do it. Raiders had captured three freighters filled with diryllium, and the Confederation wanted them back.

They knew from surveillance where the raiders hid the freighters, on a remote and desolate desert planet. The raider plan, intelligence told them, was to wait for outrage to die down so they could move the diryllium and scuttle the freighters.

Getting those freighters back, or destroying them before the raiders could offload the precious cargo and sell it, was a Confederation priority, a move that would cripple the raiders' financial inflow in that sector and destroy raider morale and confidence in their already precarious leadership.

Aine made her case. "I've flown a freighter and I can run one of them. I used to take watch all the time on the Bagy. I know how to hack the mainframes to take them over without codes. You *need* me! We can do this. We'd have a well-armed escort contingent."

Sammuel vigorously rallied against it, based on his emotions and fear.

Aine argued back, making the case for her skills and experience.

Ker listened in silence until Aine and Sammuel screamed at each other across the table. He lifted his hand. "Enough," he said.

Both fell silent.

Ker looked at Aine. "You feel confident taking this role?"

"Absolutely! You don't have anyone better qualified on your

crews to fly a freighter than me! And if they have to be scuttled, I'm the one who knows those ships better than anyone."

Ker studied her for a long time, then looked at Sammuel. "Are your objections based upon anything other than your fears?"

His face reddened. "We nearly lost her, Master."

"How many close calls have you endured throughout the years? Have I ever held you back because of it?"

Sammuel's face reddened even more. "No, Master," he mumbled.

"Why should I hold her back? Do you think you are any less precious to me than she is?"

He didn't respond.

"The raiders hurt us personally by this theft because they hurt our allies, the Confederation. The Act'huran High Council has our votes and begins negotiations in six months on the official treaty now that the Reypasians have dropped all their objections to our joining. To turn down an offer to help the greater good, could that not negatively impact those negotiations?"

Sammuel sighed but didn't answer.

Aine remained silent.

Ker pondered for a while, not letting either into his thoughts. Eventually, he leaned back in his seat. "All three of us shall go. Sammuel, you will accompany her to retrieve the freighters and will be in charge of the operation. Pick men you feel can learn the skills she shall have to teach them to successfully bring you both back to me, and she will be second in command of the mission."

"Yes, Master," he mumbled.

Aine felt relief over being allowed to go and simultaneous regret that Sammuel felt badly about it. She stood, then crawled into his lap and put her arms around his neck. "Hey, if that dang spider couldn't take me down, do you think some stupid raiders will have a better chance?"

He finally smiled. "You are very stubborn and willful, and I love you so much. You shall be the death of me from worry."

“You both shall be the death of me,” Ker teased.

* * * *

The assignment accepted, preparations were hastily put into motion. Aine helped Sammuell handpick the men and train them. With a well-armed contingent of ships, they raced to the desolate sector where the three freighters had been hidden.

As the lander took them down to the planet, Aine tried not to think about the spider.

I hate planets.

Sammuel smiled. “You asked to do this, Little One.”

“Sure, rub it in.”

“*When we safely return, I shall rub something inside you,*” he mentally replied.

Her body responded to the taunt as he damn well knew it would, making her instantly wet.

They disembarked from the lander. One man would stay behind to pilot it home or pick any of them up if scuttling the ships was required. The rest of them, nine in all, silently headed for the ridge overlooking the valley where the freighters were hidden from scanner view because of high iron ore concentrations in the rock.

It was night time on the planet, but the worst fear she had was tripping and breaking her neck or getting shot by a raider. This planet had no indigenous animal or insect life larger than bacteria to worry about. They silently made their way up the final incline and found observation positions so they could evaluate the threat firsthand.

Aine stared over the ridge at the four freighters moored in the raiders’ base. That was the first surprise. Well, they’d have to thin the crews. Instead of three men on each, they’d use two men on some of them. Or they could simply scuttle it. She stared at the freighters.

Wait a minute.

One of them...

She grabbed the binoculars from around Sammuel's neck, nearly jerking him off his feet.

"Oh, no!" she gasped.

"What?"

She dropped the binoculars and shouldered her pack, moving quickly across the rocky hill. "They've got the Bagy! It's one of the ships down there!"

He reached out and grabbed her arm and pulled her down, mindful of the men behind them. "What are you talking about?"

She fought her tears. "We have to get the Bagy! I have to get her out of there!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The Bagtopy Yau! My fathers' freighter!" She pointed to the third in the line. It hadn't been listed as one of the missing freighters. The raiders must have recently taken it. "I can fly it alone. Your guys can take the others. I'll fly the Bagy out of here."

"Our orders—"

"*Fuck* your orders, Sammuel! No one is scuttling that freighter unless I'm on it or dead when they do!" She ripped her arm free and scrabbled away from him, down the hill.

She heard him swear under his breath and mobilize the men to follow her. She unshouldered her plasma rifle as she ran. When they hit the raider camp, Aine realized she was screaming as she mowed down three raiders who stepped out of the modular shelter building at the edge of the valley.

According to their thermal scan from the top of the ridge, there were only ten men, none on board the ships. They hadn't yet unloaded the diryllium, which was likely why the freighters hadn't been scrapped.

She fought her tears as she heard Sammuel yelling her name behind her. Mindless rage washed through her.

No. Not this ship. Not this time.

Fuck commands, this had been her home, her fathers' ship, and

she wouldn't let anyone scuttle it like worthless scrap.

She raced across the tarmac and sensed Sammuel fast on her heels while his men took over the mop-up. Flashbacks of her long-ago escape with Aggie rolled through her mind as she pounded across the dusty tarmac, heat radiating up from it even this late at night. She quickly pushed her memories away when grief threatened to take her legs out from under her.

She bolted up the gangway and paused only a moment at the hatch.

Locked.

Sammuel had almost reached her when she decided to try her old code instead of the electro-jimmy she rigged to gain access to the freighters.

The door slid open.

Yes!

Once safely inside she sealed the hatch behind them. Despite the pain in her soul, she kept her hopes high that because of her fathers' deaths so soon after leaving the Bagy that maybe no one had the heart to wipe their codes.

Which would hopefully include her codes—and all of Father's overrides. If so, she wouldn't have to hack the mainframe and fly her manually.

Sammuel raced behind Aine as she ran through corridors she knew even better than the back of her hand. When she burst through to the bridge, she stopped, stunned.

Before her lay the bridge, exactly as she remembered it. And the command chair, empty save for a ghost from her memory.

Edmund Lorcan turning to smile at her and patting his lap. "Come here, my Little One. I'll show you how to fly." Then spending hours explaining the systems to her.

She choked back a sob as she dropped her pack and rifle and sank into his chair. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve as she punched in force-start codes to prime the engines.

When she entered Edmund Lorcan's override codes to authorize, the screens lit up with systems data as the engines burst to life.

Then the message that destroyed what little composure she had left.

Overrides confirmed, Captain Lorcan. All systems available.

With one hand over her mouth to muffle her sobs, Aine continued punching in commands one-handed, system overrides and locks, and brought the ship fully online.

"I'm back, girl," she whispered through her tears.

By the time the planet shrank in their vid screen, she finally became aware of Sammuell standing behind her, watching her, not interfering.

"I couldn't leave her," Aine defiantly said, turning to look at him. "You can beat my ass if you want to later, you and Ker both can take turns, but no *fucking* way am I letting those bastards get her!"

He nodded. "I understand, Ki'ato," he said. "It is all right."

She turned away and stared at the front vid screen. They were in orbit already, could break and jump in minutes and return to the Ab'yoika Maru. She punched in nav beacon settings and activated the auto-pilot. After confirming the other three freighters had also safely lifted from the surface, albeit several minutes behind her because they had to hack the mainframes to take control without command codes, she activated the auto-jump.

Then she left the bridge.

Her feet slowed as she walked down the passageway. She could have closed her eyes and walked from the bridge to the hatch and made the turn automatically into the cabin without ever reaching out to the wall to find the doorway.

Even this many years later.

It lay before her, familiar and yet...not. None of the personal effects that had made it her home remained, all of them in storage with the rest of her fathers' things. Sammuell had arranged through contacts to make sure her storage locker on Mars was paid several

years in advance, guaranteeing her things remained secure.

She sensed Sammuel standing behind her. He didn't speak.

She entered the cabin and looked around, then walked to Mal's old cabin, which had been hers.

Aine closed her eyes and lifted her face to the ceiling. "Why did they have to die?" she screamed. "It's not fucking fair! They were coming home to me! It was their last run, to make sure they could afford to send me to the Academy!"

Grief took her. When her knees unhinged and she collapsed to the deck she never hit. Sammuel's strong arms caught her and held her, cradled her as he murmured soothing sounds, trying to calm her.

* * * *

Two hours later, they lay in what had once been her fathers' bunk. Sammuel kept his arms tightly wrapped around her as she cried out the anguish and pain incinerating her soul.

"They died for me."

"They died in a freak accident that killed others. Did those others die for you, too?"

She angrily pushed him away and sat up. "That's not funny!"

"Do I look like I am laughing, Ki'ato? They knew the risks. They were experienced and good at their jobs. I am sure they loved you very much and never expected an accident to take their lives. But that makes it in no way your fault. I am also sure if they knew you blamed yourself it would upset them."

"They sacrificed so I could become a captain, and look what I've become!" She climbed out of the bed and circled the cabin. "I've thrown it all away!"

He jumped out of bed and grabbed her by the arms. "How is saving lives and defeating the raiders throwing anything away! What is more important, a simple title or your actions?"

Tears filled her eyes again. "I don't know anymore."

He pulled her into his arms. “Oh, Ki’ato. I wish you would let us love that pain and doubt from your soul.”

* * * *

The journey back to the Ab’yoika Maru would take three days. Aine spent hours wandering the freighter’s empty corridors, remembering faces, names, voices. Eventually she could show Sammuell around without breaking down and crying at every turn of the passageway when yet another memory, long suppressed, came to mind.

“What’ll they do with her?” she asked as they came within range of the Ab’yoika Maru on their final approach. Her hand stroked the arm of the command chair. Not once during their journey had he tried to sit there or take over from her. He had deferred to her command the entire time.

“They will *not* scuttle her. Even if Master needs to buy her himself, I promise you, she will not be scuttled.”

More tears flowed. She nodded and returned her focus to the front vid screens. She knew over the past couple of days she’d been the total antithesis of her former Ice Queen persona. Seeing the Bagyn in that valley shocked her, scared her, opened a floodgate of memories and emotions she’d struggled for years not deal to with and had finally been forced to.

Sammuel laid a gentle hand on her shoulder and squeezed. It was something Ker did with both of them. She’d found out it was a loving gesture, implying more than romantic love—pride, Masterly approval. It expressed many feelings not easily put into words. A gesture she quickly came to enjoy receiving, knowing she’d pleased one or both men in a way beyond just the romantic.

As an equal, as a peer, even though they were her Masters, professionally they were proud of her, of her accomplishments and skill.

When they finally stepped out of the hatch into the landing bay of the Ab'yoika Maru, Ker stood waiting at the bottom of the gangway. Aine found that unusual, because normally he would wait for them to come to him in their cabin.

He opened his arms to her. Unable to resist, she flew to him and sobbed as he pulled her tightly to his chest.

"Are you all right, Ki'ato?" he murmured into her hair. "You have been painfully sad the past few days. I could feel it this far away."

Sammuel caught up to them and kissed Ker. "I will explain," he said as he caressed her shoulder. "Let us return to our cabin first."

Sammuel must have explained it to him mentally during the walk to their cabin because by the time they arrived Ker seemed to grasp the crux of her distress. "What can I do to make you feel better, love?" he asked.

She sniffled. "I don't know if anything can make me feel better," she admitted. "I just need to work through it."

Over the course of their time together, she finally shared her history with Ker, including letting him see the things in her knapsack. He had listened just as intently as Sammuel had, as if she formed the center of his universe.

Which, of course, she knew she did.

"Are you unhappy with us, Ki'ato?" Ker asked.

"No!" She buried her head against his chest. "I just...miss some things. I second guess myself all the time. Wonder if they would be disappointed in me."

He stroked her hair as he rested his chin on the top of her head. Her braid now hung halfway down her back, still more than half her original color but steadily turning. "They most assuredly would not be disappointed in you. You have saved many lives by your actions over the years. How could any parent be ashamed or disappointed by that?"

She didn't respond.

He didn't press her further.

Later that afternoon, Ker received a priority communication from the Confederation requiring both men's presence. Aine felt a little miffed at being left out, but she technically didn't have clearance to be there despite being second officer.

Which triggered a return of her unrest.

What was wrong with her that she couldn't simply be happy with what she had? An arrangement that many would kill for, two men who loved her with their entire being. Had she been too damaged by her early losses to appreciate and accept their unconditional love?

Maybe she didn't really know how to love. Sometimes she felt like maybe they loved her a lot more than she loved them.

Would they be better off without her? Maybe they could find someone better for them. She never did believe their bond was for life, no matter what they said. There had to be an out clause somewhere, right? Besides, wasn't it just a matter of time before they left her, or worse, died because of her?

Just like everyone else in my life died for me.

Her parents died working to support them. Aggie died to protect her. Her fathers died to give her an education.

Somehow, by the time the men returned several hours later, she managed to compose herself and shield her thoughts from them. They both frowned, sensing something bothered her, but neither pressed.

They were good about that, sensing when to back off and leave her alone, when it was okay to crowd close and comfort her. And when to stay close when she said she wanted to be left alone, even though that was the last thing she wanted.

Ker called her over to the table to sit with them.

"You need to hear this, Ki'ato," he said, his face grim.

"What's going on?"

"The raiders have started retaliating. They feel they have nothing left to lose in this sector, and they're on the offensive. The Confederation has asked us to participate in the operations."

"As a shadow vessel?"

He shook his head. “No, as a fully participating member of the defense force. Because we are in diplomatic negotiations, they are willing to openly embrace us in this.”

“Because we brought the freighters back.”

“There is that.”

“Okay. What do we do?” Finally, something to take her mind off her self-pity.

He glanced at Sammuel. He looked far from happy about this and apparently Ker ordered him to remain silent. He studied his hands, which he held clasped together on the table in front of him.

Ker explained. “We will take the Ab’yoika Maru and a contingent of available battle-ready vessels into the conflict and fight alongside the Confederation.”

There had to be more to it. Sammuel looked ready to explode. “Aaaaand?”

“You will be in command of one of the ships, if you wish to accept. You do not have to. You can decline a command and stay here with me.”

She thought she misheard him at first, until she finally put together Sammuel’s agitation with the revelation. “Me?”

Ker nodded. “You have the battle experience, command skills, strategic expertise, and the knowledge of our ship systems and language to take an Act’huran ship into combat as its captain.”

She took a long, slow breath to settle her mind and mouth before she said the wrong thing and crushed Sammuel’s heart in the process. “Why is he so upset?” she carefully asked.

“Because Master refuses to let me go with you!” he shouted, unable to contain himself. He stood, shoving his chair back so hard it tipped over. Then he stormed out of their cabin.

Ker took a deep breath of his own and returned his attention to Aine. “Love, please understand, he has every confidence in you. I, however, have the advantage of age and experience biting my tongue every time he has left for what I knew could quite possibly be the last

time I ever saw him alive. I do not enjoy this feeling of letting you go. I know I cannot hold you back, either. Especially when the greater good is at stake.”

“My own ship?”

“For the purpose of this mission, yes. They are anticipating anywhere from three to six months. Possibly longer. I need Sammuell in command of a vessel. His distress, beyond the obvious concern for your safety, is that he will be apart from you for so long. You both will leave tomorrow. If you wish to go, you shall take command of the Haltoran-dey.”

At war within her—the heartache of being away from them for that long and the joy of having her own command again.

What she was meant to do?

“I’ll do it. Can I go talk to him?”

He nodded. “Please do not quarrel with him. His anger is at me, knowing I am right about this and still not liking it.”

She finally found Sammuell in the sparring room three decks down, taking out his anger on a heavy punching bag. He’d shed his shirt and uniform coat and viciously attacked the bag bare-handed. His knuckles were already raw and bleeding.

She knew she couldn’t let him gig her into a fight over this, and it’s exactly what he would do if he could in his present state of mind. She felt badly he was so scared for her. The last thing she wanted to do was compound the situation.

He didn’t look at her when she crossed the room. She stood there for several minutes, mentally trying to get him to stop, to look at her, acknowledge her, anything. His mental anguish washed from him, waves of pain and fear and grief.

“Why are you so upset,” she softly asked.

He stopped his rapid-fire punches and looked at her. “All this time together and you must ask me that?”

“I’ll come back to you.”

He grabbed her by the shoulders. “Do you not understand?” he

screamed, shaking her. “I love you! To lose you after you nearly died in my arms not once, but twice, would be more than my heart could take!” His green eyes, the same shade as hers, flashed with something akin to madness. “I *cannot* lose you, Ki’ato! It would destroy me! I would kill any man that dared to lay his hand on you besides Master. Do you think that losing you to the raiders would be any easier on my sanity, no matter how noble the cause?” A ragged sob escape him as he released her and turned away. He stalked across the room and stopped, his back to her.

She followed and wrapped her arms around him from behind.

That’s when she felt his body tremble and she realized he was crying.

Aine kissed his back, between his shoulder blades. “Those bastards didn’t get me the last time. They won’t get me this time, either.”

“The raiders increased the bounty on your life to five billion dollars,” he hoarsely said. “And now the raiders know you and I both are coming. The bounty on my head was raised to five hundred million. As part of the treaty process, Master had to officially report our whereabouts and crew status to the Confederation, even though they already unofficially knew we were alive and with the Act’hurans. That official information was in Confederation hands no more than thirty minutes before the information was intercepted. They have already found the source of the leak and apprehended them, but they will all be after you, Ki’ato. That is another reason he will not let me stay with you, because he does not want them focusing on one ship in an attempt to get to us both.”

“They won’t get me. I’m a pretty tough bitch.” She forced a laugh in an attempt to lighten the mood. “I know they won’t get you, either. You’re a pretty tough son of a bitch.”

He spun around, breaking her grip on him. “This is not a joke!”

“Do I look like I’m laughing, Sammuel? I’m a Confederation captain, dammit! You know how I was raised. My career started the

fucking second that son of a bitch shot Aggie by the cargo pallet!”

Aine felt her rage wash through her despite her promise to Ker. She advanced on him, got into his face as much as she could despite their difference in height. “You had a sucky childhood? Fine. At least you *had* a childhood! You had parents! What were you doing at age five? I was learning how to re-route a faulty plasma inductor relay on the fly without a manual or wiring schematic. By age ten, I could rewire a com panel with my eyes shut and override life support from a remote location. My brother was murdered when he was sixteen. He died trying to protect me. You left home at age sixteen? It was your choice. At least you *had* a home to leave! I was fucking orphaned. Again!”

She turned from him, prepared to stomp out and find her own secluded cool-down room when he grabbed her arm and dragged her back to him.

She tried to fight him off. He crushed her body against his and kissed her, hungrily, as if he feared it was their last time together. “Promise me,” he hoarsely said. “Please, Ki’ato, promise me you will return safely to me. I cannot bear to almost lose you again, much less suffer the real thing.”

Her anger faded as she felt his keening pain, agonizing to him that he couldn’t, in this case, protect her no matter how much he wanted to. That he knew his presence would only increase the threat, not keep her safe. She draped her arms around his neck.

“I will always come home to you. I will not leave you or Master. I promise.”

He lowered her to the floor mats, quickly stripping her shirt and trousers from her as he fumbled with his own pants. She sat up and pushed him down and helped him. Once he was naked, he grabbed her hips and lifted her on top of him, thrusting his cock hard and deep inside her.

He pulled her down to his chest, his arms tightly around her again. “Ki’ato,” he murmured into her hair. “My Little One. You truly are a

fierce radiance. I feel I am seared in your presence until you wrap yourself around me, and I do not care if the flames consume me.”

She slowly worked her hips with him, gently, lovingly, wanting it to last. Knowing he needed this with her. He had never before experienced a fear so crippling, rendering him helpless and unable to act.

“I can never leave Master again after this,” he whispered. “Not if what he feels at my departure is a fraction of this ache. I had no idea he suffered so. I only wanted to fly. I never gave thought to his distress before. He never let me know it.”

She pushed up onto her arms and kissed him. “Shh. We’ll get through this. I want to take these bastards down and hopefully save some lives in the process.”

He framed her face with his palms. “If you die, I swear to the gods I will kill myself and follow you and haunt you for eternity.”

“You wouldn’t do that to Master.” She hoped her teasing smile would draw him out a little. It worried her he felt so upset.

“No, I would not because you would not do that to me. Would you?”

“Never. You’re stuck with me for life.”

He rolled them over and lowered his mouth to one breast, then the other, teasing her, sucking on her nipples until they tautly peaked, making her gasp with need. “Please, Sammuell, do it.”

He wiggled his hips. “Maybe I wish to savor this.”

“Take me now, please! Then you and Master can both take me in our bed and show me how much you love me.”

His eyes darkened as his passion displaced his anguish. “That is a very fair offer.” He sat up, hooked his arms under her legs, and threw them over his shoulders as he started fucking her hard and fast.

She felt his climax growing close. Just before, he said, “Come for me, love.”

Aine’s back arched into him, her muscles deliciously clamping down on his shaft as his seed flooded her. White hot need rolled

through her body as passion pulled her into that wonderfully familiar place where she wanted to do nothing more than exist as an extension of her men's bodies as they took their pleasure.

No longer alone. Her soul joined to them.

He rolled them to their sides as he regained his breath. He wouldn't release her, kept her tucked against his skin, wanting the contact with her. They were both sweaty and it finally occurred to her the sparring room door wasn't locked.

She felt his agitation still there, bubbling below the surface, but a little more in check now that he had a chance to let some of it out and give it voice.

"When you finish this," he whispered, as if afraid to speak it too loudly for fear of it not coming true, "would you please stay with us so we can be together? At least for a while, without any missions? I will gladly give up my ranking to stay with you and Master, to follow where you go if it means we are never separated again. If my pain at letting you go is this bad, then I can only imagine how badly Master must ache knowing both of us will leave him for this battle. Please? I beg of you, and I have begged only one other time in my life."

She snuggled more tightly in his arms. "Okay."

He exhaled his relief and showered her face with kisses. "Thank you, my love," he said. "Thank you."

* * * *

Ker sat in his chair, eyes closed, feeling them in his soul. They were not fighting.

Good.

Sending them away hurt more than he could ever tell them. His soul, his life.

His loves.

Not just twice as badly by sending her out, but a thousand times worse now that she completed them.

He felt them loving each other, Aine trying to ease Sammuel's heartache. His soul twined with theirs as they coupled. He took a deep breath, relaxing. They desperately needed this.

Despite how he'd once teased Sammuel about finding their t'wren, he had himself wondered how he would love another as fiercely as he loved Sammuel. Once Aine lay in his arms, joined to his soul, he understood. Just as Sammuel understood how he could love someone else.

Ker, not a particularly spiritual man, offered up his prayers to the Universe. *Please, keep them both safe. Bring them both home to me.*

When Sammuel first bonded with her, Ker had felt it even through the cold distance of space. The sudden lightness and joy that gave everything a brighter shade of brilliance, sounds, colors, tastes, even scents. Energy flowing through him the likes of which he'd never felt before.

Their love.

In the back of his mind, he tried not to contemplate the dark shadow yet to leave her thoughts, the regret she had about walking away from what she felt her duty.

Added to his prayers, a hope that she would not let the shadow seduce her away from their arms.

* * * *

Sammuel pulled on his trousers, but he wouldn't let Aine get dressed. Instead, he swaddled her in his uniform coat and carried her back to their cabin while she held her clothes and his shirt.

"We need to take care of your hands," she insisted when he finally set her down. She dropped their clothes and tried to take his hands so she could examine them.

He smiled and caught her hands in his, brought them to his lips and kissed them. "No. They are fine." He fell backward onto the bed, pulling her with him so she landed on top.

Ker emerged from the head. "I take it all is well?"

Sammuel pushed his coat off her shoulders. "Ki'ato made me an offer, Master."

Ker walked over to their bed. "Oh, really? And what is that?"

She shrugged the coat off and let it join her clothes on the floor. She reached for Sammuel's trousers and started to unfasten them. "I want both of you together." She tugged his waistband, pulling them down. He kicked them off onto the floor.

Ker unbelted his robe. "Is that so? Then I would not wish to deny you, love."

The mattress dipped under him as he knelt behind her on the bed, both of them straddling Sammuel. He wrapped his arms around her and cupped her breasts, which had filled out a little more in their time together. He stroked her nipples, sending tiny sparks to her clit and making her wet the way he always could.

He brushed his lips across the nape of her neck and along her shoulders, his breath making her shiver pleasantly. "What exactly would you like us to do to you, love?"

Her breath caught as she threw her head back onto his shoulder. "I want you to fuck my ass, Master. I want to feel you knotted inside me while Sammuel fucks me. I want to come hard with both your cocks inside me."

"Mmm. I like the sound of that."

Sammuel slipped his fingers between her legs, two pressing inside her, fucking her, gliding across her clit with every stroke. "I know I would like it very much."

Ker wrapped her braid tightly around his hand, keeping her head pulled back. "Mount him, love. Take his cock deep inside you."

She lowered herself onto Sammuel's rigid length with a happy sigh. She'd discovered she loved letting them take control of her like this in bed, taking the decisions out of her hands. They wanted to do nothing but make her feel good even as they sometimes tormented her by denying her until the last possible moment.

They loved her.

Sammuel's fingers gripped her hips, digging in as he thrust, controlling how fast she rode him.

"How does he feel, love?" Ker rumbled in her ear.

"Wonderful, Master!"

He pushed her down onto Sammuel's chest, still not releasing her braid. "Hold her open for me, Ki'ran."

Sammuel moved his hands to her ass and spread her cheeks for him. With his free hand, Ker stroked his cock, milking it and slicking his shaft before he nudged into position, his large head pressing against her tight rim. "Do not come yet, love," he ordered. "Not until I say so."

She whimpered and whined, pleading for release even as she squirmed harder against Sammuel's body.

"Hold it, or I will not let you come at all," Ker said. He pressed forward.

Aine gasped, enjoying the sensation of being erotically stretched, his hot shaft already giving her what her body now craved from him whether she was on her knees sucking his cock or laying happily spooned against him with it tightly knotted inside her. All doubts faded from her mind as she enjoyed feeling physically connected to both men, not just mentally—a true triad. They loved her, and yes, she absolutely loved them.

Every stroke Sammuel took hit her G-spot and her clit with Ker's knot pushing him tightly against her inner muscles. She squirmed, wiggled, begged.

Ker loosened his grip on her braid only a little, just enough to capture Sammuel's braid and tightly twine it with hers around his hand. With both of them firmly in his grip, he took a hard, deep stroke. "Both of you, come now!"

Aine moaned her release against Sammuel's chest even as his arms clutched her to him and his cock throbbed inside her. They barely had time to catch their breath when Ker took a few more hard

strokes. “Both of you, come again. Now!”

Aine closed her eyes, helpless to do anything but obey as her body clamped down on both cocks. Explosions rocked her as she felt through both mind and body Samuel’s release beneath her.

Ker stroked her back with his free hand. “That sounded beautiful, loves. It is a memory I shall cherish until you are both safely back with me and we can once again do this. Come hard!”

Samuel’s fingers dug into her shoulders as his body arched beneath her. She felt too weak to do anything but cry out and close her eyes as her own orgasm rendered her body a limp mass of passion.

Ker chuckled and unwound their braids from his hand. “I think I have already worn you out.” He fucked her, quickly reaching his own climax with his knot deeply buried inside her.

She took a deep, satisfied breath.

Ker carefully rolled them onto their sides. Samuel followed, clinging to her. Their legs entwined with hers as Samuel draped an arm across her waist, his hand resting on Ker’s hip behind her.

Exhausted, she drifted to sleep, safe in the cocoon of their arms.

* * * *

Aine didn’t want to get up early the next morning even though she knew she had a lot of work to do in a very short amount of time. She needed to get over to the Haltoran-dey and prepare the crew and check the systems and supplies. There was so much to do—

“A few more minutes,” Ker muttered. “Give me that indulgence, love. Please?”

Samuel also lay awake, but still nestled on her other side where he’d been when they all fell asleep. “Just a few minutes more,” he echoed.

She relaxed. It would be a long three to six months away from them. Away from this. “All right.”

They moved to the shower a little while later, lovingly washing each other. Before they got out, she couldn't help but drop to her knees to spend a few minutes sucking Ker. Sammuel joined her, and they took turns as Ker leaned against the shower wall with his eyes closed, his hands resting on their heads. She felt guilty feeling his pain over their departure, but she wouldn't deny the familiar excitement humming through her. The adrenaline.

A mission.

After their shower they shared one long group hug before they dressed. She started gathering things she needed to take with her when she spotted her knapsack in its usual place on the shelf.

Ker noticed.

"Do not forget that, love. I know it is important to you."

Sammuel's head snapped up from where he packed his own bag when he realized what Ker referred to.

She took a deep breath and draped her arms around Ker's neck. "No," she said. "This is my home. It'll be safe here with you looking after it for me."

He stared into her eyes for a long moment before crushing her to him. He buried his face in her hair, which still loosely flowed behind her, not yet bound in a braid. "Are you certain, love?"

"I'll come home to you. I promise."

Sammuel joined them again, and she didn't miss the tears threatening in his eyes. He also kissed her. "That is a promise I shall hold you to, Ki'ato," he hoarsely whispered.

Chapter Fourteen

They said their final good-byes at the gangway. Ker would escort Sammuel to his ship, the Haltoran-pau, sister ship of the Haltoran-dey. Aine struggled not to cry as she turned and walked through the hatch. This was the first time she'd been on a mission and left people behind to miss, even if she would be able to easily communicate with Sammuel ship-to-ship.

It wasn't the same as being able to curl up in his arms at the end of every day, but at least she had sweet memories of Sammuel claiming her in the cabin she now occupied.

Service Before Self.

Ker sent Jarl with her to be her yeoman. At least she would have one close confidant amongst the crew of strangers. Most of her crew had seen battle action, but few of them had flown against the raiders or with the shadow ship missions. Even fewer of them knew English.

When she walked onto the bridge, everyone came to attention. Marcoln, her first officer hand-picked by Ker, saluted her. "T'ele cau P'acdaeux." *Welcome aboard, ma'am.*

Aine didn't bother correcting him. Making the crew address her with the male commanding officer honorific *P'eycandaeux* would only confuse them. The complex Act'huran language didn't translate English idioms and phrases well in some cases. Besides, she wasn't the Ice Queen anymore. She could effectively command this ship without resurrecting her cold, über-bitch alter-ego to do it. These men respected her for her skills, for her reputation, and they were all well aware of not only the bounty on her head, but that she was one of Admiral D'arsolan Ker-Pythan's t'wren.

In their eyes, that automatically meant she had their respect. Unlike a human crew where, in this situation, they would snigger behind her back that she got the job by sleeping her way to the top with an Act'huran admiral regardless of her skills and experience, she truly was seen as an extension of her t'amar-te. These men accepted, without question or doubt, that her skills and qualifications equaled or rivaled those of the Admiral or Sammuel. She didn't have to earn their respect—her position made it a given.

She looked over her crew. "At ease," she quietly said as she slid into the command chair. Okay, so she did feel more comfortable slipping into that old habit, even if she now spoke the more complex Act'huran language. "Prepare to launch."

"Yes, ma'am," Marcoln replied.

* * * *

With the exception of the language there was very little difference in running an Act'huran battle cruiser than running the Kee-Raw. Protocols were nearly the same. Military around the universe tended to find solace in order and rituals very similar to each other despite vastly differing cultures.

They would take the Ab'yoika Maru and her five battle cruisers, along with three other battle destroyers and their cruisers at five apiece, into the fray. The destroyers would sit positioned on the sidelines and help with logistics, communications, scanner assistance, and support, as well as guard the perimeter of the battle to prevent escape by the raider forces into neutral territory and prevent the cruisers from being ambushed.

They would join a Confederation force of seventy-five vessels and sweep through ten different solar systems, driving the raiders toward Confederation territory where a joint coalition force of over a hundred ships awaited.

Unfortunately, the raiders wanted to utilize old "scorched earth"

tactics, destroying as much as they could in their paths, including innocent civilians. Not only did they have to be fought in space, but sometimes on planets as well.

Aine's job was to help prepare strategy to keep the raiders running so fast, or to engage them in battle off-planet, so they didn't have time to destroy on-planet resources and kill people.

During their daily briefing via vid com, Aine's heart throbbed while she watched Sammuell give his updates and hand out assignments. Always professional, she would expect nothing less from him even though it twisted her heart that he couldn't address her by her pet name.

At first they tried to talk every evening. As the battle heated up they usually didn't have time. Aine barely slept as it was, worried to leave her crew untended for too long against hostile forces despite Marcoln's experience and skill as her first officer.

On the flip side, part of her felt more alive than she had in a long time. It wasn't that she thirsted for blood, but with every raider ship they destroyed it meant less innocents would die.

And that *was* something that thrilled her.

Maybe because of what she did now, the sacrifice she made by leaving her men, perhaps another child wouldn't find herself an orphan, staring down at her brother's body as she lifted into the cargo hold of a freighter on some fucking hot, dirty planet.

Maybe a child could grow up without losing her parents to raider acts of violence.

As the weeks wore on, Aine found her body adapting to the tension, craving the adrenaline spike every time the sensor alarm went off that they were about to engage another enemy ship. She had forgotten the rush that gave her. Several times Sammuell's ship fought alongside hers, then there were days they might not be in the same solar system.

One day, Aine realized nearly a week had gone by since she'd personally talked to him other than daily briefings.

Because of the Ab'yoika Maru's position, she couldn't have live talks with Ker. They sent messages back and forth frequently, which wasn't the same as being able to talk with him. Yet sometimes at night, when she forced herself to lie down and attempt to sleep, she would close her eyes and quiet her mind and feel her men with her in spirit.

Perhaps she lay alone in her bunk, but she was not alone in the universe.

Even if her heart ached to be with them, the knowledge of their souls joined to hers made her smile and brought her comfort.

The raiders grew more desperate as they pushed them closer to Confederation lines. While the Ab'yoika Maru hadn't lost any of her battle cruisers, Aine had to help rescue another Confederation crew when their ship was mortally wounded by a suicide attack. Casualties mounted on both sides of the dangerous and bloody battle, although the raiders bore the lion's share of the loss.

One morning Aine awoke from a two-hour nap to a communiqué from Confederation command diverting her to protect a civilian base, putting her out of range of the other Act'huran ships and their morning briefing. This had been one of the pre-discussed contingencies. Now she and her ship were under Confederation command for the duration of their stay in that region. Her reputation pre-disappearance, as well as during the current conflict, afforded her every bit of respect and deference she had with the Act'huran forces.

Vice-Admiral Iago hailed her that afternoon on a vid com connection from a nearby Confederation battleship. "Captain Lorcan! Welcome back."

"Thank you, sir. Although I wouldn't exactly say I'm back." Speaking English again with another native speaker felt ridiculously easy compared to the complex Act'huran dialect.

He waved her comment off. "We can discuss that when you finish kicking raider ass. There are a lot of brass here damn eager to get you back in Confederation colors once this is over. I'm just glad to see

your skills are still as good as they ever were.”

“I’m here to do my job, sir.”

“And we’re all happy you’re doing it, believe me. You are now officially in charge of the Confederation and coalition ships in this region. We’ve already notified them.”

Shit. That meant she couldn’t cut and run back to her fellow Act’huran forces as soon as she wrapped up this latest scuffle. She was responsible for other ships.

He finally signed off a moment later, but his earlier comment disconcerted her.

Back in Confederation colors?

The thought of going back and having her own ship again conflicted her. She couldn’t leave her men. She loved them. They loved her.

So, it seemed, did the Confederation. She gave morning briefings via vid com, handing out assignments to the twenty ships under her command and coordinating intel data, in addition to running on-site battle ops.

She got so busy she realized she’d received three messages from Ker she hadn’t yet returned.

As more Confederation captains heard about her “return,” some of whom had survived her classes at the Academy, she started receiving congratulatory messages from all over the sector. Enough so it distracted her com officer as he struggled to read and interpret them fast enough that she told him to hold them unless it was related to their mission.

Meanwhile, the part of her mind she thought she’d convinced to stay with Ker and Sammuul grew unsettled as she rubbed her father’s ring and thought about the final vid message they sent her before their deaths.

* * * *

As the ongoing battle raged, Jarl took over communicating to Ker that Aine was fine and in good health. She was lucky to get more than three hours sleep in a daily cycle. As she sat in her command chair one morning and went over stat reports from the other ships under her control, she looked at the universal date code and realized it had been over two months since she'd had any contact with Sammuell.

Guilt filled her, followed by an immediate wave of anger. Why should she feel guilty? He was military, he knew she had a job to do, just as he had a job to do.

She shoved back irritation that he hadn't tried to contact her the way Ker did. After all, she hadn't tried to contact him, either.

All morning her feelings vacillated between guilt and anger until she had to take a brief break to decompress. She went to the ship's small gym and took out her aggression on a punching bag. She still felt her men in her soul, but no matter how hard she tried, the unsettled feeling grew stronger, ripping at her loyalties and conscience until she wondered if she was losing her mind.

Then another, more horrifying thought occurred to her.

She located Jarl. "Have you heard from Ker or Sammuell lately? Are they all right?"

"Just this morning another message arrived. The commander was recalled to the Ab'yoika Maru two weeks ago. They have eliminated the raiders in the sector he patrolled. Both he and the Admiral are safe and well."

Two weeks. They were so far from the Ab'yoika Maru that messages were delayed a week or longer. She did a quick mental calculation, but Jarl seemed to interpret her look of concentration. "He should be back with the Admiral by this time, ma'am."

Dammit. And I'm stuck here.

Quickly turning before he spotted the hot tears stinging her eyes, she returned to the gym for another few minutes and pounded on the heavy bag until her raw knuckles bled. Studying them, she finally let her tears flow as she remembered her last night with Sammuell and

Ker.

She hadn't been with her men in over five months. The Confederation anticipated they would need her and the Haltoran-dey another three months, possibly longer, to ferret out the last of the raider resistance in that sector. The bounty on her head was no longer an issue in that sector as the remaining raiders struggled to survive against the increasingly insurmountable Confederation forces pushing them out.

Later that evening, Vice-Admiral Iago hailed her on a secure vid com line to privately talk with her. He was stationed nearby on one of the Confederation destroyers acting as a base and support ship. Close enough their conversations could be conducted in real time.

He wore a shit-eating grin. "President-Elect Olan wants me to personally congratulate you on the job you're doing."

Aine hoped the fake smile she summoned hid her weary heart and even more exhausted body. "Thank you, Vice-Admiral."

"He also told me to extend you an offer for your consideration. We don't need an answer now, obviously, because you're still on active deployment for this mission."

Aine's heart tightened.

"Once this mission is declared complete, I have been authorized permission to assure you your pick of assignments and Confederation vessels. At double your salary.

Salary was the least of her concerns. "My pick of assignments?"

He grinned again. "I have also been authorized to tell you we are in the process of building several new Candora-class Dreadnoughts. Huge and fast, well-armed, maneuverable. They'll make any raider shit their pants."

She had a feeling she knew where this conversation was heading.

"There will be five of them going online in the next year. Those are already promised. However, we have three more coming online the year after that. One of them can be yours, if you want it."

A Dreadnought. Every battle captain's dream assignment.

“Like I said, I don’t need an answer now. I just wanted to dangle that little tidbit to see if we could entice you to stay with the Confederation. The Act’hurans have informed us of your official status with them, so we can’t force you to stay once you’re finished. But dammit, we sure would love it if you would.”

His slightly snarky tone caught her curiosity. “And what exactly did they say my status was, Vice-Admiral?”

“Admiral D’arsolan told us you’re officially just the second officer on his battle destroyer and that they’ve extended full citizenship and commission to you for your service to their fleet.” He softened his tone. “Don’t you miss being in command? Especially after all this? I can understand Captain...eh, Commander Jorvis, I guess he is now, wanting to stay, considering he’s paired up with the Admiral and he’s got a ship. Or make me a counteroffer, give me something to tempt you back with, Captain Lorcan. We’ll treat you better than that, you know we will.”

After she signed off she sat back and struggled against her tears, tried to let her mind stay in control, let reason keep her calm. Why would Ker tell them Samuel was his mate and list her as “just” a second officer?

There had to be more to it. Except as her brain continued to worry at it, she couldn’t fight the cold wall slowly rebuilding itself inside her heart.

* * * *

Two weeks later, Jarl approached her one evening with a message from Ker. She didn’t want to read it, having just laid down in her bunk in what would most likely be a futile attempt to grab an hour of sleep between skirmishes.

“I really think you need to read this one and answer personally, ma’am.” He held out the com tablet.

She stared at it for a moment before reluctantly taking it from him.

Without waiting he turned and left her alone.

With trembling fingers she tapped the screen and opened the message.

Dearest Ki'ato, is something wrong? I have not said anything to Sammuell yet because I do not think he senses it. What has happened? I felt it very strongly today, almost a pain. Jarl continues to assure us you are well, but what has changed? We miss you so much and cannot wait until you are back home with us. We love you. Ker.

Had it bothered her that much?

Fuck, yes, it had. She felt her cheeks burn every time she heard Iago's voice in her head. "*Just*" a second officer. Was that all she was to them after all? She wasn't sure she ever bought into the whole bonded forever bullshit. Maybe she'd been too stupid to see them for who they really were, men needing a kinky piece of ass.

Then her heart, the part of her that remembered what it felt like being with them, hearing their thoughts, feeling their emotions, tried to beat some sense into her brain.

They loved her. She loved them. They'd called her their wife.

So why hadn't they said that to the Confederation? Were they ashamed of her?

She quickly tapped her reply before she lost her nerve. The last thing she wanted to do was have a long-distance email lovers' spat with him, but as she typed, she couldn't help herself.

I'm fine, just extremely busy with my duties. That was probably my meeting with Vice-Admiral Iago. He made me an interesting offer, and said that since I'm listed as "just" a second officer and Sammuell is listed as your mate, maybe they could tempt me back to the Confederation. Ha ha. I guess I thought I would rank a little higher in the food chain with you guys than that. Sort of upset me, that's all. I don't know how much longer they'll need us here, possibly a couple more months. We'll stay as long as we're needed.

After a moment's hesitation, she added one more line.

Love to you both. Hope you're well. — A.

Send.

She tossed the com tablet onto the table and headed to the gym to abuse the punching bag and her knuckles. There was no way in hell she'd be able to sleep.

* * * *

At two weeks, she felt her stomach tighten, wondered if it was her own stress or if Ker had received her message.

When she didn't receive a reply in the next couple of weeks, she channeled her anger more productively. She volunteered them for a sweeper mission to lead a group of Confederation forces through another solar system, looking for stray raiders. It would keep them there an extra month.

She felt the Ice Queen returning, found it easy to settle into her previous ways, although she didn't make the crew start addressing her as "sir." After all their months together, it would have confused them.

Her emotions ranged from anger to hurt, then to resolve. If Ker couldn't be bothered to respond, that meant she'd hit the nail on the head, right?

She didn't want to think that because it caused a horrible pain in the middle of her gut, like she'd swallowed a red-hot coal and it tried to escape by burning through her from the inside out. Especially when surrounded by memories of her and Sammuel together in that very cabin, memories that ripped at her heart.

Part of her didn't want to believe her supposition, wanted to think there had to be a logical explanation for why he had listed her that way.

And for his failure to respond to her message.

* * * *

Nine months and ten days from when she'd stepped onto the

gangway of the Haltoran-dey and took command, the Confederation issued her recall order. Her vessel was to proceed to an official debriefing at a nearby space station two days away, where Vice-Admiral Iago would await her...and wanted to have a private word with her before she returned with the Act'hurans.

In the three months since her note to Ker, she received nothing from either man, although Jarl had been keeping in touch with them both. She knew from checking the communications log.

Okay, fine. They want to be like that? Fuck. Them.

She felt another pain in her heart. They couldn't have faked their love for her, could they?

As they approached the space station Aine noticed several other ships already docked there. Normally not anything noteworthy, except that one of them was the Ab'yoika Maru.

The dockmaster directed her to berth next to the battle destroyer.

Part of her wanted to immediately disembark and run into her men's waiting arms.

Part of her wanted to walk away and never see them again if she meant so little that they couldn't be bothered to contact her.

"Captain Lorcan, Admiral Iago is awaiting your arrival and wishes to speak with you immediately. He will meet you at your gangplank as soon as your ship is secure."

"Dockmaster, wouldn't this be easier if you allowed us to dock inside the Ab'yoika Maru? That's our normal procedure." It also meant she could avoid Iago.

"Negative, Captain. Admiral's orders."

Wait. Admiral Iago?

Maybe someone got a promotion.

But then he'd referred again to an admiral. *Was that Iago, or Ker?*

Fuck it. "Dockmaster, please clarify. Did Admiral Iago order us to dock at the station, or Admiral D'arsolan?"

"Admiral Iago, ma'am."

She hated that she felt relieved. Ker wouldn't try to override

Confederation orders in their territory. Not with the treaty talks on the line.

Iago waited for her just outside their gangway hatch. Alone.

“Captain Lorcan.”

“Vice-Admiral, or were you promoted to full Admiral?”

He smiled. “Very perceptive, Captain. I have you to thank for that. Came through yesterday. I lobbied to have you put in charge of forces in this sector. I insisted a couple of years out of the command chair didn’t dull your senses or your ability to take those raider bastards out at the knees. Your success earned me more bars.”

“Let’s cut the bullshit. I’ve got a lot to do.”

He laughed. “Yes, let’s cut the bullshit. I wanted to talk with you before Admiral D’arsolan had a chance to steal you away again.” He turned and pointed to a Confederation ship berthed on the other side of the Ab’yoika Maru. “That is the Calpisi Morgan.”

“So?”

“It’s leaving here in exactly one hour. You have two choices, Captain. One, you are on the Calpisi Morgan when it leaves, and you are the golden child of the Confederation who will call her shots, have her pick of ships, and be in line for a Dreadnought as soon as one comes online that hasn’t been promised already.”

“And choice number two?”

“You return with the Act’hurans, and the Confederation will consider your commission voluntarily abandoned.” He frowned. “I just finished my talk with Captain, eh, Commander Jorvis a little while ago. He made it perfectly clear that he has no desire to return to the Confederation.” Iago played dirty. “He also acted more than certain that you’d be leaving with them. Insisted you were happy with your status there.”

“Oh, he did, did he?”

Iago arched an eyebrow at her. “Seems like a rather cocky asshole, if you don’t mind me saying. You enjoy serving under a guy like him?”

Her face burned. “What did Admiral D’arsolan have to say about it?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t speak with him.” He studied her. “Well?”

“I only get an hour to make up my mind about this?” Her heart pounded. Where before she was ready to tell her men to fuck off, now she couldn’t decide. She loved them. She was pissed at them, but she loved them.

And yet...

He grinned. “It’s hardball, I know. They’re on a tight schedule and I’ve held them back two weeks as it is awaiting your return. Their next stop after leaving here, if you’re on board, is to take you to the Martian shipyard and drop you there to pick up your next vessel.”

“And that would be?”

He shrugged. “Your pick, except for the Dreadnoughts currently under construction and closest to completion. Those are already promised, I told you that. If you want one, we’ll put your name on one for when it’s finished. You can fly whatever else you want while you wait for one. Not to mention your pick of crew. We’ll never force you to take on crew you don’t want. We’ve already got a list a mile long of experienced crew volunteering to serve under your command once they heard you might be back. Transfer requests are flooding in from all over.” He studied her. “Few captains are offered a deal like this, Captain. Think long and hard if you really believe the Act’hurans would be this generous.”

“You took the thinking long option off the table.”

“I know.” He grinned again. “I like to stack the deck in my favor.”

* * * *

She made her way toward the Ab’yoika Maru. Instead of the joyful homecoming she’d hoped for, it felt more like she headed to the gallows. Less than an hour now, and the clock ticking against her.

How was she supposed to make a decision like this in that time? She needed to talk to her men, find out what the hell happened, why they didn't respond.

Why she wasn't reported as Ker's wife. Anger, hurt, and longing duked it out in a steel-cage match inside her heart.

In a daze, she walked up the gangway and entered the ship. Jarl, efficient as ever, would already have her things transferred over.

To their cabin.

She felt their presence on the ship. Her heart pulled her along the passages until she reached their cabin.

Empty.

What to do? She couldn't leave, could she?

Aine felt trapped. This was too much to think about too soon, especially for a homecoming.

She turned when the door opened. Sammuel stood there, frozen, then a wide smile broke through. He rushed across the cabin and scooped her up, spinning her around.

He kissed her, and she wanted to give in right then, say screw the Confederation and stay.

Until she saw her father's ring on her hand and once again their final vid message to her filled her memory.

He started to carry her to the bed. She knew if he got her there no way in hell would she ever leave.

"We need to talk, Sammuel."

"There is nothing to talk about! You came home, just like you promised me, and now I can show you how much I missed you—"

"Sammuel, *stop*. Please."

He froze, then gently set her back on her feet. "Ki'ato, what is it?"

"I just talked with Admiral Iago."

His face darkened in a scowl. "That man is a pompous jackass."

"They want me back."

"Who does?"

She realized he couldn't fathom the possibility of her not being

home to stay. The wave of happiness she felt from him turned to confusion.

She couldn't look at him and say it. She turned to the view port. "The Confederation. They said I have to be on the Calpisi Morgan when it leaves in less than an hour or I give up my Confederation commission."

"Then give up your Confederation commission, that is all! Stay and serve with me! We'll get you your own—"

She turned, stunned. "That's *all*? Do you have any idea how hard I worked to get to where I was? According to the Act'hurans, I'm 'just' a second officer!"

"Ki'ato, believe me, I understand. We can give you anything you want."

"You don't understand me at all." She fought back a wave of dizzying sadness. "I want my Confederation commission. I want to fly. To have my own ship again. To follow in my fathers' footsteps. To honor their memory and what they did for me. That's all I've ever wanted. I told you that."

"You can still have it."

"By giving up my commission? How can you even claim to love and understand me and ask that of me?"

"I have also walked away from the Confederation, need I remind you! It is just one small thing, just a title. Anything else, everything else, us—it is all yours. Please, you promised me you would never leave us!"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I can't give up my commission. It would be dishonoring my fathers and what they did for me."

"A Confederation commission is just a title! Does a title mean more to you than anything else? Why does it matter who gives you the title? You did not need a Confederation commission to accomplish what you just did with the Haltoran-dey! Why are we not enough for you? Have we not proven how much we love you? You can stay and serve with me. Then we can be together."

How could she have thought this man really loved her? What happened to the deep bond she thought nothing could rend? “You sure didn’t act like you guys loved me all this time. I didn’t even get any fucking messages from you the past few months! And it’s not *just* a title,” she said, feeling the chill creep into her voice. The Ice Queen returneth. “It’s who I am, who I should be. I am a captain. Not a...slave.”

He took a step back, stunned. “Is that truly all you think we are?”

“Isn’t it? You want to keep me chained to your side, clip my wings. You said the night before we left that you would give up your rank. Well, I don’t want to give up *my* rank! Stay and serve Ker with you? I give up my commission and my job, there’s nothing left for me to do other than be a fuck toy for the two of you. That’s basically what you’re asking of me, to stay and serve you.”

His gaze hardened. “That is not what I ask! We love you with all our hearts. You know that, you are part of our souls, you cannot tell me you do not feel—”

“How can you claim to love me and want to take away my right to fly?”

“Gods, I cannot talk to you when you get like this! That is *not* what I am asking! Would you please listen to me?”

“It *is* what you’re asking! It’s what you asked me to do that last night we were together! If it’s not, then let me keep my commission. Prove to me I’m wrong, I’ll gladly listen.” When he didn’t respond, she turned away and twisted the end of her braid around her finger as she stared out the port. The Calpisi Morgan lay docked in the next berth. She could be there in five minutes, on her way back to her old life. Away from the men she loved, men she thought loved her.

She watched Sammuell’s reflection in the port as he stared at her back. “We would give up everything for you, Ki’ato,” he said. “Everything. Why can you not understand that you can have everything you want with us? Just let us give it to you.”

“Then you come with me.”

“We cannot. You know that.”

“Why not?”

He fell silent. She felt his frustration as they once again butted heads. Not the homecoming either of them envisioned, she knew.

“I think,” he finally said in a careful tone, “that we both need to calm down and discuss this at a later time when we can be rational. Neither of us are getting anywhere fighting like this. I do not think you are hearing me, and apparently, I am not understanding you.”

“That’s the first thing you’ve said that makes sense since you walked through that door.”

“And see, there you go again!”

Sammuel fell silent as the cabin door slid open. Ker walked in and studied Sammuel and her. In the port she watched their reflections as they silently communicated.

Sammuel sighed. “We shall talk about this later, Ki’ato. When we can both be calm and I can make you see reason.” Then he walked out and the door slid shut behind him.

Pain ripped at her heart and soul. She did love them. Yet the truth stared her in the face, that they didn’t seem to understand anything about her. The brutal honesty of her suddenly-changed future stung her soul.

Boys don’t cry...

“Ki’ato,” Ker said.

“He already told me.” She turned. “My commission. The one thing I cannot give up—and he refuses to budge.”

He looked sad. “Is it really so much? When we can give you everything in return?”

“If you can give me everything, why can’t you claim me as mate to the Confederation? You listed Sammuel as being your spouse, but not me? I’m *just* a lowly second officer.” She didn’t bother concealing the bitterness and sarcasm in her tone.

His eyes widened in surprise. “Ki’ato, is that what you thought? I did that because I am not foolish when it comes to dealing with

humans. I know they do not understand our ways. I listed Sammu^{el} as my spouse to make it easy for them to understand why he would want to stay and why he had not aged in all these years. If I had listed you also as my spouse it would have severely undermined your authority with the Confederation. Do you not think I realized that? I did not want to give the Confederation forces reason to snigger behind your back and doubt your skill. In our world, it is not an issue. In the world you came from, I am well aware you had to fight for every bit of respect you deservedly earned, and a woman with two spouses does not earn respect in Terran culture, she is scorned. We love you, and you *are* our wife. I did what I thought was best for you. I am sorry it caused you distress. That was not my intention.”

“Then why the fuck couldn’t you write me?” She let her anger and hurt boil over. “After that last message I sent, nothing. That just proves I’m right, doesn’t it?”

“You sounded so angry, I did not know the right words to say. I knew you were upset and did not want to say anything to make you more upset. That is why we immediately headed here to await your recall by the Confederation, so we could be here for you. We love you.”

“How can you claim to know and love me? I just had this conversation with Sammu^{el}. You want to give me everything but the one thing I cannot give up. I’m an officer, a captain. It’s who I am, not just what I do. It’s what my fathers died for. I thought I could walk away from it, but I can’t. I need to fly. Here, I’m ‘just’ a second officer.” She used finger quotes around the word.

“You can still do all of that with us.”

“Then I can keep my Confederation commission?”

He fell silent.

She nodded. “I see.”

“Are you really that miserable with us?”

She choked back a sob. “No. I’m not miserable with you. I have a chance to go back to doing what I love, what I was always meant to

do. According to Sammuel, I won't be allowed to do that if I stay."

Ker frowned. "That is what he said?"

"Give up my commission, stay here and serve you with him."

Stalemate.

"That is your final say?" he asked.

"If it is yours."

He closed his eyes, looking more tired than she ever remembered seeing him. This isn't how she wanted things to be, but she knew they wouldn't budge, and neither would she.

"I love you, Ki'ato. I cannot deny it will hurt to lose you. You complete me. If you are unhappy with us however, I cannot and will not force you to stay."

She stepped toward him. "I can stay, but can't you just give me this? Let me keep my commission?"

He stroked her cheek, his eyes studying her face as if trying to memorize it one last time. "I could ask the same thing. There is no official treaty between the Confederation and Act'huras yet to allow it. Yes, it is currently a peaceful time and negotiations are beginning. I have no doubt permanent diplomatic relations will soon be forged, especially after this successful mission.

"For now, you cannot have a foot in both worlds. We can give you everything and more than you would have in the Confederation, everything you ever would want or need except a Confederation commission, a simple title. Is that not enough? Can we not talk about this? Why must this be decided this moment?"

"They said I have to leave with the Calpisi Morgan in less than an hour or they'll consider my commission voluntarily abandoned."

He slowly nodded. "And otherwise, you will be unhappy." His hand trailed down her cheek, to her neck, to her shoulder. "I wish I could make you happy, Little One. I have often suspected you might not truly be happy with us. I always felt the shadow in your thoughts. I love you so much. You will take a part of my soul with you when you go. It will always be yours." He gently squeezed her shoulder

before releasing her.

She somehow managed to choke back her sob. "Fight for me to stay if you love me so much!"

He sadly shook his head. "I will never force you to stay. I have always told you that. You have been quite clear about what you want. Unfortunately, it is beyond my ability to give it to you and keep you by my side. If there were any other way, the ability to give you a Confederation commission, I would do so without hesitation. All I can offer is all I can offer. I can give you every freedom you wish while you are with us, grant your every request, and that is exactly what I would do for your love, as I have done for Sammuell throughout the years. Sammuell and I cannot follow you to the Confederation. Their current rules will not allow it. And if that means more to you than our love, if serving a similar position in our fleet is not good enough for you, if the only way I can make you happy is to release you so you may find what you seek and desire with the Confederation, then I cannot hold you back. I am sorry I failed you." He stepped away from her.

She threw herself into his arms. "I don't want to leave you! I love both of you!"

He enveloped her in a final hug. "We love you too, Ki'ato. More than you can ever imagine. I am so sorry I have caused you pain. Yet I cannot live and make you unhappy. I would rather release you so you can find what it is you seek. My own pain is inconsequential, love." He kissed her, then gently caught her wrists in his large hands and stepped back, holding her body away from his. "I therefore release you so you may find the joy and happiness I am not capable of giving you," he whispered, his voice choking at the end. "My love and heart and soul go with you, always. May you find all you seek, and may your dreams come true."

He let go of her wrists and stepped through the door. She felt a mental barrier go up in his mind.

As the door slid shut on his departing back, she crumpled to the

floor, sobbing, feeling more alone than she ever had in her entire life.

* * * *

Twenty minutes later she stood by the Calpisi Morgan's hatch. She'd quickly packed two bags, carrying as much as she could, and grabbed her old knapsack. She hadn't seen her men...

No, not *her* men anymore.

She closed her eyes and hardened her heart against the swell of tears threatening again.

The men had mentally closed themselves off from her. The echoing loneliness of her single soul rippled through her.

How had she lived like this before?

It was nearly enough to make her turn around and run back to the ship, to beg their forgiveness and say screw her commission.

She felt the chain of Mal's pendant twined with hers around her neck. She looked at her hand and rubbed her finger across Edmund Lorcan's ring. If she gave up, gave in, would they understand? Would they have supported her? Abandon her career for a relationship?

The hatch slid open. Captain Darris stood there with his first officer. "Captain Lorcan, are you ready to depart?"

She stiffened her spine. "Yes, Captain Darris."

Darris motioned to his first, who grabbed her bags. She kept her knapsack. "Welcome back to the Confederation, Captain Lorcan." Darris snapped her a crisp salute. A military salute.

A formal salute.

She returned it. "Thank you," she softly said.

The first stood aside, waiting on her to go. "After you, ma'am."

She didn't look at him as she walked past. "I prefer *sir*."

"Yes, sir."

Service Before Self.

Boys don't cry...

Chapter Fifteen

Aine lay on her bunk. The ceiling above her, as always, held no answers, no comfort, no relief for the pain she'd learned to live with. Countless tears shed—self-doubt, anger, and fear—over the past few months.

When she walked onto the Calpisi Morgan, she'd been shown to her cabin, introduced to her temporary yeoman for her short tenure on board, and then once alone she cried herself to sleep so she wouldn't stand at the view port and watch the Ab'yoika Maru slip away behind them.

Because then she might have been tempted to race to the bridge and demand to return to the station. To her men.

In the months since then, the pain hadn't abated.

If it had truly been the right decision, would it hurt this much?

Or maybe only the right choices were painful, made in spite of pain, not because of it. It would be easy to stay with the men, to walk away from a career.

Yet how could she turn her back on her destiny? So many lives had been saved by defeating the raiders in this sector, and there were plenty more elsewhere to fight. How could she deny she had a purpose, a higher calling than spending her life on her knees in front of a t'amar-te and her t'wren?

Even if she loved them with all her heart and soul.

Heartbroken. This hurt as bad as losing her fathers, losing Aggie and her parents.

And this time, she was the one walking away.

The door chime sounded, pulling her from her memories. Her

latest yeoman. She went through them like water, it seemed. This one, so far, had outlasted the others by two months.

“Come.”

Andrews was an older man, a lifer, perhaps used to dealing with high-strung captains. He might last for a while. “Sir, they’re ready to leave.”

She sat up and swung her legs over the side of her bunk. She took command of the brand new Delvious at the Martian shipyard before construction even completed. It was a fast and well-armed battle-tech class warship. Not as large as a Dreadnought, but the maneuverability would allow them to streak through debris fields in search of hiding raiders in a way not even the Kee-Raw had been able. She personally selected her crew of thirty from a roster of experienced officers and crew requesting transfer to her command.

Her reputation preceded her.

Andrews held her uniform coat for her as she slipped into it. Normally she wouldn’t wear it during the course of a regular day, but this was their maiden voyage. When she saw the Delvious under construction and asked if it was available, the shipyard commander assured her that if she wanted it, it was hers.

She suspected somewhere out there flew a captain who reeeeeeally hated her for taking his ship.

Frankly, she didn’t care. The Ice Queen had a job to do, and she needed the tools to properly do it.

She was pleased to see several of her inventions, including the scatter shields and cloak devices, now implemented as standard equipment on most Confederation ships.

Another reason, she consoled herself, that she made the right decision. Here she could do even more good, experimenting and developing new technology on Confederation ships that would benefit everyone.

Andrews followed her to the bridge where the crew assembled. They snapped to attention as she coolly cast her gaze over them.

They'd quickly learned to pipe down and listen to their captain, that she didn't speak loudly, and she did not repeat herself.

She had their respect and admiration.

She had their full attention.

"Gentlemen, are we prepared to depart?" she asked.

"Yes, sir!" echoed their voices.

She nodded and slipped into her command chair. "Good. Everyone, take your stations. Com, are we cleared to depart?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Helm, Nav, take us out of here."

"Yes, sir," they said.

She sat back and studied her command console. All systems online and green. They were on their way to their first assignment. She was home, where she wanted to be, in command.

Then why did it feel so wrong, leave her feeling so empty?

* * * *

She lay in her bunk and stared at the ceiling. Except for the gym and her command chair, it was where she spent most of her time. "It fucking hurts."

"Why do you think that is, Captain Lorcan?" the calm, male voice asked. She'd modified the holo psych unit so it wouldn't record her sessions, couldn't provide anyone information about what she discussed. It was the only "person" she felt she could talk to.

"Because I miss them. As much as I fucking hate to admit it, I miss them and still wonder if I did the right thing."

"Didn't you say they refused to give in?"

The final conversation with her men had become a confused, painful jumble in her mind. Her butting heads with Sammuell, her anger, his—she couldn't remember who said exactly what. Only that he refused to allow her to hold on to her Confederation commission and they couldn't stay with her. Things happened too fast, and she felt

too much anger and pain to remember the exact words.

“All I wanted to do was my job. So I didn’t let my dads down.”

“Is that the only reason you wished to be a captain?” She’d tried several voice options with the unit. This one sounded least like any of the male voices of her memory. Her birth father. Aggie. Her dads.

Her men.

“No! I enjoy flying, and I love knowing that I make a difference.”

“Then what is the problem, Captain?”

She rolled onto her side. “That’s just it,” she admitted. “I don’t know. Should doing the right thing hurt this much? Especially over a year later?”

“Only you can decide that, Captain.”

“That’s absolutely no fucking help whatsoever.”

“I’m sorry, Captain.”

The holo psych said that a lot in response to her comments.

Gods, how she despised that phrase.

* * * *

Andrews stood by her desk in her cabin. He’d managed to last almost two years with her. He proved good at his job. She relied on him in many ways.

He never saw her cry or laugh. The crying she was a master of hiding, although lately she spent a lot less time doing it as dreams of her men faded. Heavy action against the raiders in a sector on the other side of the galaxy from Act’huras tended to take her mind off things. Smiling only happened when going into battle.

“Sir, may I speak with you?”

She nodded and sat back. “Of course.”

“I wanted to let you know I’m eligible to retire in six months.” And there it was. Her heart sank. She couldn’t call him—or anyone else—friend, but she had hoped he would be around a while longer despite what she knew was his impending retirement. She hadn’t felt

quite so alone with him around. He reminded her a lot of Jarl.

“Yes, I know.”

“I believe I have found you a replacement. I’ve arranged for you to meet with his captain when we reach the Martian shipyard next week.”

“I appreciate that, Andrews. Thank you.”

He smiled. “I wanted enough time to break in my replacement and weed out anyone not good enough for you.”

That almost prompted a smile from her. Her entire crew had proven loyal, especially Andrews. He had a lot of pride in his work and took his service seriously. If she was awake, so was he, sometimes days at a time, even when she told him he could take a break. He always refused, wanting to do his duty. “You will be hard to replace, Andrews.”

“The Candola Ryke will be ready for you to take command in three months. I promise I won’t retire until I know for sure he’s good enough for you. I want someone who can ship out with you and be ready.”

“Duly noted.”

When he left her alone again, she sat back and pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to stem the familiar prickle of tears threatening to break through.

Eventually, everyone always left. One of these days she’d get that through her thick skull and learn to suck it up.

Chapter Sixteen

Aine stood staring at the vid screen, posture stiff, hands clasped behind her back. No doubt her bridge crew thought she was all business.

Inside, she struggled not to cry.

Boys don't cry...

No one could see how her fingernails dug into her palms as she stared at the Emissary Flagship Tav'rokian Might berthed in the space station dock. Just the fact that it was an Act'huran vessel made memories flood back with brutal vengeance.

Feelings.

The loss and aloneness. Her single soul, never as complete as when part of a loving triad.

The com whistled. She reached over with a smooth, fluid movement and punched the button. "Candola Ryke, Captain Lorcan."

"Captain Lorcan, this is the dockmaster. I've been instructed to berth you next to the Tav'rokian Might."

Of course you were. Just my fucking dumb luck. "Roger. We'll plug nav into the docking beacons."

"Permission granted to dock at will. We'll fit your airlock and your crew are free to disembark."

"Thank you." Her finger hovered over the button to disconnect.

"Oh, and Captain?"

Damn. "Yes?"

"I was told to upload your Confederation orders now."

Aine frowned. "Now?" Normally she would receive an upload after her post-docking debriefing.

“Yes, Captain. Orders direct from President Olan’s office.”

She swore under her breath as she slid into her command chair and activated her display. “Begin.”

“Aye.”

The display lit up as the upload commenced. Immediately, her private command message icon blinked. There wasn’t much to the upload because within a few seconds it completed.

“Is that it, dockmaster?”

“Aye.”

She slumped in her chair. This couldn’t be good. “Candola Ryke out.” She punched the com button harder than she intended.

The red message icon blinked at her, a red number three in the center. Three messages.

Shit. Her intuition buzzed. No doubt special orders pertaining to the Tav’rokian Might. She locked the message screen and pulled herself from her chair. “I’ll be in my quarters. Helm, take over. Berth us.”

The Lieutenant jumped from his seat. “Aye, sir.”

She muttered under her breath as she stalked down the corridor, the end of her braid swinging and brushing along her ass as she pushed past her crew. She should cut it but hadn’t mustered enough mental strength to do that yet, even this many years later. It was hard enough to dye it black every few weeks to hide the stubborn blonde streaks that refused to go away.

In her cabin she ordered her yeoman out and sealed the door behind him before activating her private command console.

Let’s see what we’ve got.

It couldn’t be good news. And of course, it wasn’t.

Message One: She would report to the President’s formal dinner in honor of the Act’huran ambassador tonight at 2100 hours. Dress: Full formal uniform.

Fuck.

Message Two: Her previous mission orders were hereby

suspended by executive order of President Olan. The Candola Ryke would escort the Act'huran emissary vessel on its mission to Korellas to the final treaty talks and signing.

Double fuck.

Message Three: The honor of her presence was requested by President Olan at a private reception to be held before the formal dinner at 1900 hours.

Tonight. In two hours, to be precise.

Fuck. Me.

Well, there had to be lots of Act'hurans in the star system. They were one of the most powerful races in this quadrant of the galaxy. It meant nothing, especially with the treaty talks nearing successful completion. Everyone anticipated Act'huras would be the next Confederation addition before the end of the year.

It meant *nothing*. Absolutely nothing.

Nothing but a head full of memories to fuck with her after a few years of relative stability.

She unsealed her door and punched the page button for her yeoman, Paul Castlo. The man appeared within seconds. "Sir?"

She headed for the shower. "Caz, I need a full formal uniform ready immediately."

"*Full* formal, sir?"

She threw a glare over her shoulder. Fuck the president and double fuck the Act'huran ambassador. No one ordered her into poufy breeches. "You know what? Substitute a pair of deck trousers for the formal ones."

The yeoman smiled in relief. "I hoped you'd say that. I doubt anyone will challenge you."

"Am I that bitchy when I dress full formal?"

"Honestly?"

She nodded.

"Yes, sir."

Aine laughed as she walked into the head and shut the door

behind her. He was the only person who could make her laugh or ever heard her do it. Damn, Caz was a pain in the ass sometimes, but Andrews made a good choice for his replacement. Besides Caz's beefy size and considerable weapons and defense skills, which made him invaluable as a bodyguard, he wasn't afraid to stand up to her, had a decent set of balls on him, so to speak.

He reminded her a lot of Mal...

She immediately clamped down on that thought, willing it away.

Caz transferred from the command of a retiring fellow captain, John Arctillio. Arctillio warned her Caz would be spookily good at anticipating her needs, like a silent shadow at times, but that if she trusted him and let him do his job he would never disappoint her.

So far, he had never disappointed her. She relied on him in a way she had been afraid to rely on anyone since...

She willed that thought away too. She tried not to think their names.

It hurt too much, her single soul echoing with pain every time she did.

Caz was, in fact, spookily good at anticipating her needs and taking care of her. Even seeming to sense her moods, knowing when to keep crew away from her, when to take her off the duty roster for a day so she could spend a long uninterrupted night trying to catch up on rest.

Fifteen minutes later she'd showered and wrapped herself in a waiting robe. She sat on a chair in front of the mirror while Caz carefully combed and dried her long hair. She didn't have time to fully dye it before the dinner, but she just dyed it the week before. The blonde roots in the streaks were barely visible.

Not that anyone should get that close to her to begin with, except Caz. Not that Caz would let anyone get that close to her if she asked him for space.

He carefully pulled her long hair back as he worked an anti-frizz lotion into it. By the time he finished braiding it, not a single hair

would dare misbehave all evening. She never questioned where he picked up his skills, not after the first time he offered to braid it for her soon after his arrival and the near-perfect result stunned her. Before him, she'd often loosely plaited it, or even bundled it into a ponytail twisted into a rough bun on the back of her head. Before Caz's arrival she hadn't had a good braid since either one of her men or Jarl, when they'd been deployed, had helped her just as she'd helped her men with theirs.

"Bow, sir?"

She started to tell him no, then surprised herself. "Use a green ribbon." She stared into the mirror. Her eyes would most likely never turn back to brown. Admittedly, she liked their green color. Until today, it'd been months since she consciously thought of Ker or Sammuell when she looked into the mirror and saw her dusty green gaze.

He carefully tied the ribbon at the end of her braid, weaving it through the plaits and ensuring the loops lay even.

"Is that satisfactory, sir?"

She turned her head to look in the mirror. Of course it was. He always did it perfectly. "Yes, thank you."

Caz helped her don her skivvies, followed by her molecular body armor. She undoubtedly surprised command by insisting no women crewed on her ship, not even a female yeoman. She wanted no distractions for her men, and high command overlooked certain regulations to give her what she wanted. After all, they'd begged *her* to come back.

A Dreadnought wasn't a ship to fuck with, and she wasn't a captain to fuck with. Just one of the reasons why she insisted on the traditional high-protocol "sir" honorific instead of "ma'am," like other female captains. The formality comforted her.

Kept people away.

To be honest, after "what she went through"—as she tended to refer to that period in her mind to avoid thinking their names—the

glancing looks her yeoman got of her naked flesh were nothing to blush about. The skin-tight deck trousers accentuated her firm, curvy hips and thighs. Caz polished her knee boots to a gleaming black glow and helped her pull them on. The starched white shirt and roll-up cuffs were an anachronism, but one she didn't mind. Belted around her waist, the shirt hem fell past her ass and could almost double as a short dress if it had to. She'd had the formal black woolen coat specially modified, allowing her to hide extra weapons and not interfere with her sidearm draw. Caz had spent countless hours sparring with her as they worked to perfect the modifications. The tails dropped almost to the backs of her knees, but the front angled up and fell mid-thigh, long enough to give her an illusion of slimness she didn't feel anymore despite the frequent appraising glances she knew she received in passing from her crew.

Caz handed her the short carbon dagger she kept inside her right boot as well as the throwing stars and another knife she stashed within her coat. Then her plasma pistol in its holster, which she clipped to her belt.

She studied herself in the mirror as Caz ran a lint roller over the already spotless jacket. She still had an hour before reporting to the reception.

"You look good, sir," he said.

"Thank you."

"No makeup tonight?"

She shook her head. "No. They can kiss my ass. Nothing in regs says I have to paint my face."

"You don't need it anyway." The large man blushed as he realized he said it out loud. She felt a wave of worried embarrassment from him.

It took her a moment to process his comment. He started to stammer an apology, but she stopped him with a rare smile. "Thank you, Caz," she said. "That's the kindest thing anyone's said to me in a long time."

He nodded. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Of course."

"You know I've served under many Confederation captains besides you. You're the best ever, and the toughest by far of any of them. I wish you'd take some time to see another side of yourself. You never have fun. You never relax. I'm not saying I think you should girly up and confide in me, but frankly, sir? I wish I knew who had made you this way so I could personally kick their ass if I ever meet them. I'm afraid you'll burn yourself out way too young unless you learn to take down time. You're too damn good at what you do lose you like that."

She blinked, trying to absorb what the yeoman said. Caz was normally quiet, respectful, and unopinionated, even though extremely protective, almost like a big brother. To hear this kind of sentiment from him nearly brought her to tears.

"Thank you. May I ask what brought this on?"

He blushed again. "When we stood on the bridge earlier as we approached the station and you saw the Act'huran emissary vessel. I don't know what's going on or what happened, but it was like you went from flat calm to wanting to kill someone when you saw that ship."

Aine replayed the events in her memory, buying her some time. She'd requested her records be sealed and brass had honored that. All people knew was she commanded an Act'huran ship in charge of Confederation forces during the Great Raider Sweep, as it'd been dubbed, nothing else.

"What did I do?" she carefully asked. Here she thought she hid her reaction well. Well enough. Maintaining her calm, icy image was a source of personal pride to her. She never engaged in idle chitchat. People knew when she spoke it meant they'd better pay attention.

Demonstrating yet again why he was the perfect yeoman for her, Caz shook his head. "No one else noticed. I was standing right behind you." He reached out, lifted her right hand, and turned it palm up.

Purple half-moons where her nails dug into her flesh still showed. “It’s my job to watch my captain in a way no one else does. My sole job is taking care of and serving my captain. This means knowing you like no one else on this ship, so I can anticipate your every need and make your job as easy as possible. Otherwise, I’m failing in my duties to serve you.”

Mal’s voice flickered through her memory. *Service Before Self.*

Aine clamped down on that before it could drive her to insanity. There were only so many painful memories she could deal with tonight.

She slowly licked her lips to buy another moment to compose her thoughts. “No one else noticed?”

He shook his head. “No. It’s also my job to make sure no one else does.” He smiled. “I stowed a stress ball at your station for you to abuse next time, sir.”

Aine laughed, long and hearty. At least her tears could be attributed to that. She smiled and snapped him a crisp salute, which he happily returned. “Caz, buddy, you have job security. You realize that, right?” He was the only one she allowed close enough to see her like this. The only one she ever conversed with outside of normal duties. Even that bit of informality dangerously stretched her ability to relax.

He grinned. “Sir, that’s the only thing I ever ask for.”

* * * *

Leaving her first officer to oversee their replenishment and maintenance, Aine left for the reception with Caz on her heels. Dressed in his formal uniform, he closely followed a step behind and to her left. Also in body armor and well-armed, he carried extra weapons in his modified formal coat. Not that Aine anticipated any trouble, but as a Dreadnought captain with a considerable raider bounty on her head, she never left the ship unless well-armed and

prepared for anything. No one would challenge her or her yeoman on this well-protected station, at least. Despite Caz being a good foot taller than her and beefy as hell, she knew people saw her first, felt her presence.

Caz was a master of melting into the background.

They stepped into the dock lift. Caz punched the code to take them to the official level. He flashed her a smile. “Ready to knock ‘em dead, sir?”

She managed not to cry after he left her cabin earlier. She spent a few minutes with a cool, damp cloth pressed to her face to keep her eyes from looking red and puffy. She pulled herself together and firmly anchored her “Don’t fuck with the Ice Queen” mask in place.

She nodded. “Let’s knock ‘em dead, Caz.”

When the lift doors opened at 1901 hours, two presidential guards turned and bowed as she stepped out. Caz handed over the chip with their invitation code. After verifying it, the guards stepped back, waving her through with a new, respectful air upon discovering her identity.

“Thank you, Captain Lorcan. Please enjoy your evening.”

She walked past, never growing tired of that. Of the respect she automatically earned after clawing her way to the top to become a Dreadnought captain, one of the elite. One of the few. Able to face down any situation with steady calm.

Only Caz suspected the truth about her inner nature, and he damn sure wasn’t talking. Her relationship with him, even though only Captain and yeoman, was the closest thing she’d had to a friendship since...

End that thought.

She stopped in the reception hall doorway. Without turning her head, her gaze coolly swept the room. Over one hundred people, including a group of musicians, every captain with something other than a garbage scow docked at the station in attendance—

No, wait, there was a sanitation captain over by the punch bowl.

Son of a bitch.

She marginally relaxed. Caz stepped close, his voice low. “Looks like everyone got an invite.” As if he read her mind. He did that a lot. She’d grown used to it over the years.

Aine barely nodded. Not singled out after all.

Relief.

As President Olan spotted them and swept across the room to greet her, the truth hit her: he wanted to impress the Act’huran ambassador. That meant the more, the merrier.

Or, as a cynic might say, misery loves company. From the looks on the faces of some of the captains crammed into formal uniforms no doubt hanging unworn for years in some cases, there were some pretty miserable fucks in that room.

“Captain Lorcan!”

Before he could breach etiquette and try to hug her, she stiffened her spine and tipped forward in an appropriately cool, formal bow, followed by a salute. “President Olan. It is a pleasure, sir. My yeoman and I are honored to be here.”

He wasn’t used to high protocol. She’d heard that about him, a looser kind of guy more worried about function over form. Fine for him because he got results, which was why he’d just been elected to his second seven-year term. Aine still preferred the old traditions.

Olan grinned as he returned her crisp salute with a sloppy one. “I finally get to meet you in person after all this time. You are a busy woman. Admiral Iago speaks very highly of you.”

“I’m honored, sir.”

He waved a waiter over. “Get Captain Lorcan anything she wishes and make sure she’s well taken care of.”

Fortunately for Aine, one of Olan’s aides stepped over to talk with him, diverting his focus. She turned to Caz and tipped her head. Caz took the cue and stepped forward to speak with the waiter.

“Captain Lorcan will have ice water with lime, if you have it. Lemon if you don’t.”

She took the moment to survey the room again. No one that might be an Act'huran ambassador. Captains, a few higher brass, official delegates, ass-kissing wonks—did the pang she feel signify relief or disappointment?

She made her way to the edge of the room. When the waiter returned with her order, Caz took it and turned, his hand hovering over the glass before handing it to her. He winked.

All clear.

Had his mini ring scanner found anything, he would have “accidentally” tripped or otherwise spilled it instead of handing it to her. Probably a stupid precaution, but he insisted on taking care of her and he hadn’t failed her yet.

She would damn sure keep him close by her side for the remainder of her career, or for as long as he would stay in the service.

She didn’t want to contemplate the pang of loss she felt at the thought of him leaving her command.

“Here you go, sir.”

“Thank you.” She leaned against the wall as she sipped, her gaze briefly settling on each person in attendance. A few more trickled in since their arrival. Military and other Confederation non-com flunkies far outnumbered the few civilians mingling throughout the room.

Caz stood a step away, a buffer between her and the rest of the room, sensing her tension and responding to it by remaining on high alert. Maybe one day she would let him further into her carefully constructed fortress, give him a glimpse of why she was the way she was.

Or, maybe not. He might be able to betray her one day, but at least he wouldn’t take her heart and soul with him.

Not that it felt like she had either left inside the empty shell of her constant pain.

A few people she knew walked over to talk with her. Caz stood close by, carefully observing, keeping her water filled and managing how many people approached her at a time.

She was in the middle of a discussion with a battle cruiser captain about jump drive evasion tactics when a murmur trickled through the room.

Caz tensed, and so did she. A small group of people blocked her view of the main doorway, but Aine sensed someone important just walked in. Several people in a group, from the sound of it. Then she watched as Olan raced across the room with a beaming grin on his face.

This had to be the Ambassador.

Breathe. It's just a person, no big deal.

Another image flashed through her mind, of her body impaled on Ker's huge cock, begging him to let her come, feeling more alive than she ever had.

Feeling connected to another being in a way she never had before.

Her belly clenched. She closed her eyes to slow her breathing.

That was a past life. A life not worth revisiting.

A life of slavery. Nothing good would ever come from that line of thinking.

Aine turned her back to the doorway and drifted to the side so a large potted palm partially obscured her from others in that direction. Caz stepped to the side to shield her.

He was *damn* good.

A nearly paralyzing thought hit her. She stood there, the highest ranking captain in attendance, the only Dreadnought docked at the station. Most likely, from Olan's reaction, she would be seated at his table.

She closed her eyes and swore. The last place she wanted to sit was next to an Act'huran. Any Act'huran.

Caz's soft voice in her right ear startled her. "Captain hasn't been feeling well the past few days. I suspect it's the flu. I can beg your leave and have Maddings take your place at dinner. That wouldn't breach protocol."

Without opening her eyes she reached out to the wall for support

and shook her head. “No, I’m okay. But keep that one ready, it’s good.”

“Yes, sir.”

She opened her eyes. While he wore a serious expression, she didn’t miss the unmistakable twinkle in his intense blue eyes.

They stood relatively alone, the others close by having stepped over to meet the Ambassador. “Job security, Caz.”

“Thank you, sir.” He smiled.

“You’re eligible to retire in ten years?” He looked young for his age. That thought struck her the first time she met him. His short brown hair didn’t even show a single grey hair.

He shrugged. “Depends.”

“On what?”

“On how long you plan on staying in, sir. I told you, I’ve served under a lot of captains, and you outshine them all. I prefer to spend the rest of my career under your command.”

She straightened, reached up, and squeezed his shoulder before she walked past him into the room. That was the one sign of affection she allowed herself to express, and only with him.

He always seemed to enjoy it.

Aine knew the men of the Act’huran race were very similar in appearance—tall, large, especially the t’amar-te. She had no doubts the Ambassador would be a t’amar-te, maybe even one of the High Council. She had mentally prepared for this, but not emotionally. The Ambassador stood with his back turned to her. The sight of his braided plait of blond hair, down to his waist, stopped her in her tracks.

It’s not him. It’s not him. It’s just another man. They all look very similar. Many have blond hair. Some have brown or red, but a good majority of them are blond.

It couldn’t be him.

To his left stood another large, broad-shouldered, although slightly shorter man, back also turned and wearing an Act’huran

military uniform. Admiral, if she remembered correctly. His long blond hair, the same color as the Ambassador's, hung loose to his waist, not bound into the customary braid.

T'wren. The word came to mind unbidden. Most others probably didn't notice, but from how close they stood to each other and from the way the shorter man leaned in, she knew with certainty the Admiral was the Ambassador's t'arn, or at the very least, one of his t'wren.

No matter how ready she thought she was for this, she'd lied to herself. She stood far enough across the room she couldn't discern individual words in the Ambassador's low, deep voice. With him garbed in his formal robes, she couldn't gauge his body. About the same height as Ker, was this man hard and firm all over, like him? Or was he a bureaucrat, soft with a fat belly from years of sitting behind a desk?

Panic swept through her. She couldn't do this and had been fooling herself if she thought she could. When she quickly took a step toward the door, Caz immediately fell in behind her without question, her ever-present shadow.

President Olan proved faster.

"Ah, there she is! Captain Lorcan, come over here, please. I'd like to introduce you to the Ambassador."

She froze, cringing. Caz stood close enough for her to feel his breath on the back of her neck. She knew he itched to reach for a weapon to cover her back and allow her escape. She felt it, his agitation, his extreme protectiveness, his desire to keep her safe.

Dammit, Arcillio didn't lie when he said Caz would tune in to my thoughts.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, and with her eyes focused everywhere but on the Ambassador's party, Aine turned, walked over, and stepped around the group to the president's side. Caz remained less than a full step behind her, smoothly moving with her as if an extension of her body. She felt his tension as thick as a cloud around

him as he reacted to her mood.

President Olan beamed. “Ambassador, Admiral, this is Captain Aine Lorcan of the Dreadnought Candola Ryke. Her ship will accompany your vessel on its journey.”

She pasted a smile she prayed didn’t look sick onto her face as she turned to snap a salute to the Act’huran ambassador and his right-hand man. “Ambassador.”

Ker’s green eyes reflected nothing back to her but polite, professional disinterest. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Captain Lorcan.”

Chapter Seventeen

Abandoning protocol, Caz slipped his hand around Aine's upper arm. Whether to hold her up should she faint or to pull her out of harm's way, she wasn't sure. She only knew that the squeezing pressure of his fingers around her left bicep kept her conscious and sane.

Aine had to struggle to focus and hear the President's words. "I told Ambassador D'arsolan that after dinner you would give us a tour of the Candola Ryke. I've never been aboard. They tell me you run the tightest ship in the fleet."

Slightly harder squeezing from Caz. Bless his heart, he did his job well. "Of course, President Olan. It would be an honor."

Risking her heart ripping from her chest, she let her gaze drift to Ker's left. Sammuel's expression shocked her. A subtle cross between longing and hatred that he'd managed to muscle into bland disdain. She didn't miss that his gaze appeared locked on Caz's hand around her arm.

His voice drifted to her from the past. *I would kill any man that dared to lay his hand on you besides Master.*

She shoved that memory away.

Ker motioned to Sammuel. "This is Admiral Sammuel Jorvis, of the Act'huran fleet. He's accompanying me on this trip."

Swallowing hard, she tipped her head. "Admiral."

He returned it. "Captain."

President Olan clapped his hands together. "Fantastic!"

Aine stayed quiet and let Caz back her away from the gathered throng as others jockeyed for position to be introduced. He summoned

the waiter for another glass of water and made her sit in a chair against the wall. He stood in front of her to block her view and bent down to whisper to her.

“Sir, what can I do for you?”

She shook her head and didn’t bother trying to see around him. She couldn’t label the feelings bouncing through her. Anger and pain that Ker and Sammuel pretended not to know her? Anger and pain that they were there? Anger and pain that they didn’t greet her warmly? Anger and pain that her body ached to drop to her knees, burrow through Ker’s robes to find his cock, and beg them to take her back?

It was definitely anger and pain vying for the top spot, regardless of the origin.

She closed her eyes as she pinched the bridge of her nose. “Give me back the last seven years of my life,” she whispered. “Then we’ll call it even.”

He glanced around and knelt before her, his hands gripping hers, squeezing them, trying to warm them. “Let me escort you to sick bay. I know one of the doctors here. They’ll certify you’re ill and need to return to the ship.”

“Job secured, Caz. You don’t need to go overboard.”

“Please, sir?”

She opened her eyes and realized he truly worried for her. When was the last time anyone looked at her like that? Cared about her?

Unbidden, her mind flashed back to that first night after her crash landing, when Sammuel hovered over her, tending her wounds, fighting to keep her alive. And other memories long suppressed.

Sammuel and Ker keeping watch over her after that goddamned spider bit her on that fucking planet.

Ker worried for her after that first night together when they made her theirs and completed their triad, afraid he’d gone too far and hurt her.

She managed a wan smile she knew didn’t fool Caz in the

slightest. “Keep my secret?”

“Oath upon my soul, sir.”

“You remember what you said in my cabin earlier this evening, about kicking someone’s ass for me if you ever met them?”

He frowned, then slowly nodded as comprehension dawned.

She tipped her head in Ker’s direction. “You just met them.”

* * * *

Caz followed her to the facilities, stood watch outside and waited for her. When she emerged she didn’t miss his anxious expression.

“Sir, are you sure you wish to stay?”

She nodded. “Sucks to be the captain sometimes.”

“Yes, sir.”

He hovered closer than protocol normally called for. Under the circumstances his presence calmed and focused her. She wasn’t about to correct him. She had never felt anything remotely improper from him during his service, and tonight he reminded her even more of a loving big brother. She wouldn’t refuse what little comfort she drew from his concern.

It was the closest thing she’d had to a connection with another human since...

I am the Ice Queen.

She managed to stay occupied talking with others, distracted with conversations rehashing battles and braggadocio, until a servant walked in and announced it was time to move to the dining hall.

Aine hung back, allowing the President and the Ambassador’s party to walk through first. Somehow, she won the struggle and kept her eyes off their backs and focused elsewhere.

Caz leaned in. “Make a run for it now, sir?”

She allowed the faintest of smiles. “You think I’m letting you leave my command any time soon, think again.”

“Thank you, sir. That’s all I ask.”

She trailed behind the main gathering into the banquet hall. Huge, seating over five hundred, she mentally groaned when she realized the seating was assigned.

A waiter approached. Caz intercepted and spoke with him. The man consulted a hand-held tablet. The yeoman's face reddened and he turned to her. "Sorry, sir. President's table for us. They won't allow us to change seats."

Her reputation preceded her in Olan's office. They seated Caz next to her, on her right, not making him stand behind her like many lower class yeomen had to do. The President sat at the head of the table, Ker and Sammuel on his left. She'd been placed on the President's right.

Directly across the table from Ker.

Her stomach dropped.

When she approached the table, all the men stood and waited until Caz helped her with her chair before retaking their seats.

Ker and President Olan continued their conversation from where her arrival interrupted it. She watched Sammuel glare at Caz before his eyes settled on hers.

She stared him down. She would have to do this at some point. His identical green gaze pierced through her, turning her insides out, bad or good she didn't know. When Olan asked him a question he finally turned his attention to the President, allowing Aine the chance to drop her gaze and take a deep breath.

A waiter poured her another glass of water. Before she could fumble for it with trembling fingers, Caz reached over, picked it up and handed it to her, passing his palm over it before he used both hands to firmly press her fingers around the glass and release it to her.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Sammuel watched their interplay, a brief scowl flitting across his face.

When the rolls were passed, Caz waved his hand over the bowl before handing it to her. No one else seemed to notice the gestures, but Sammuel did.

She was careful not to make eye contact with Sammuel again. She kept her eyes on Ker's chin when forced to make pleasant conversation with him.

He acted diplomatically bored, polite and respectful, but as if they hadn't shared what felt like a lifetime of passion and pleasure and pain rolled into one.

At one point in the evening Ker coughed. That was the only time she noticed Sammuel's barely-constrained mask slip. He jumped to his feet and before her eyes could follow, he produced a small inhaler that Ker palmed. With obviously practiced movement, Ker took a quick pull from it. He smiled at Sammuel, a hint of the Master's gratitude in the expression as he returned the inhaler.

Sammuel nodded and retook his seat.

"My apologies for the interruption, President Olan," Ker said.

"Are you all right? We can skip the tour if you aren't well."

Ker waved his hand as if it was nothing. "I am fine, truly. Minor annoyance."

He had Aine's full attention. Her eyes traveled his face, his rugged, tanned skin, the deep lines etched around his green eyes.

Something's wrong.

She wasn't sure why, but now that she allowed herself to pay attention she knew with certainty he was sick despite being locked out of their minds. He looked older, an impossibility for Act'hurans in only a few short years. It should take him many human decades to appear even slightly aged.

I could live practically forever with them.

She closed off that line of thinking. What was forever if spent in servitude?

Not that the servitude they offered was a bad thing...

Sammuel's full attention focused on Ker. Caz noticed too, because she saw him watching the two men.

Somewhere between the second and third courses, Ker excused himself to the facilities. When Sammuel tried to accompany him, Ker

laid a staying hand on the other man's shoulder. "I'll return shortly."

He squeezed before walking off, followed by two of his official guards.

Aine's heart throbbed. There was a time she lived to receive that simple gesture and only now consciously realized why she used the same gesture with Caz.

President Olan's next words shocked her.

"It's a shame he'll retire so soon, Admiral."

Sammuel had been taking a sip of wine. His hand jerked slightly. Aine knew she and Caz were the only ones who noticed.

"Yes. His negotiation skills will be greatly missed. He has accomplished much in a very short amount of time."

Olan was on a fishing trip. He dropped his voice. "I heard rumors he's ill, that it's what prompted his retirement following this mission."

Aine's breath froze in her chest. Under the table, Caz dropped his hand to her thigh and squeezed. Not in a lecherous way, but to distract her and bring back her focus.

Sammuel carefully set his wine glass on the table. "The Ambassador does not listen to rumors. Neither do I."

Caz leaned in. "Permission to excuse myself, sir?" he whispered.

She absently nodded.

He pushed back from the table and bowed to the President and Sammuel. "Please excuse me. I'll be right back."

Aine also didn't miss the way Sammuel's angry gaze followed Caz from the room. For a brief moment, fear took her. Would he order his men to follow Caz and kill him for touching her? Then her reason returned. Surely he wouldn't do that.

Would he?

Sammuel's gaze landed on her for a moment, then continued on to the President. "President Olan, I hear the Confederation has made great inroads with regards to raiders in the Talsaurean sector."

She tuned out the rest. While waiters served the next course, Aine

anxiously awaited Caz's safe return and excused her waiting to eat until everyone else was served. Caz passed his hand over her plate as he sat, gave her an imperceptible nod as he did.

Ker returned, but did he look a little pale?

Sammuel thought so. He pulled his angry glare from Caz to his Master, his expression transforming to concern.

Ker squeezed his shoulder before he retook his seat. "I am fine. No worries. Where were we in our discussion?"

From that point on, it was a conversational tennis match between Olan and Ker, from the inconsequential to aspects of the treaty talks. Toward the end of dinner, Aine saw her out. Dessert had been served, and the men stretched back to settle in for a bullshit chat.

She stood, Caz on immediate alert and rising with her. Sammuel looked at her.

Ker did not.

"President, Ambassador, Admiral, I have greatly enjoyed our evening together, but we must return to our ship and prepare for the tour. If you still feel up to it tonight?" Part of her hoped they wouldn't.

Part of her wanted the chance to show them what she'd accomplished.

Olan spoke first. "Wonderful! We'll be there within an hour. Don't bother garbing the crew in formal uniforms. I want to see a normal day on a Dreadnought."

She tipped her head in a bow. "Very well, President." She saluted, then steeled herself and bid her leave to Ker and Sammuel.

Ker's eyes never turned her way, but he nodded in her direction. Sammuel stood and bowed despite the unpleasant glare on his face and the murderous look he shot Caz.

They were safely out of the banquet room and down a private corridor leading to the berth lift when Caz slipped an arm around her waist and hurried her along even faster.

"I have to get you back to the ship. Right now. I'll have Maddings

conduct the tour.”

She barely felt her feet. “No, that’s okay. I’ll do it.”

He hustled her past the guards and into the lift, where he punched the button and entered their berth code. Then he turned on her, his voice harsh. “No, you can’t. You can’t see what you look like, but sir, you look like you’re about to drop dead on me. I can’t allow you to do that to yourself.”

Her voice trembled. “What did you find out?”

He set his jaw, not bothering to bullshit her. “The Ambassador isn’t sick. He’s dying.”

Chapter Eighteen

Dying?

The word echoed through her brain as she allowed Caz to lead her to their berth. He had her in her cabin less than a minute later, the door sealed for privacy.

He knelt in front of her. “Sir, *please*. Let me have Officer Maddings do this,” he begged.

Even her lips felt numb. *Dying?* “No. If I can’t do this I don’t deserve to be captain of this vessel.”

“Begging your pardon, sir. Right now, you don’t look fit to captain anything.”

She turned and glanced into the mirror. Her face looked pale and drawn, hollows under her eyes. “Make-up. I guess they’ll see me in it after all.”

Knowing better than to argue, Caz grabbed the case and set things out for her. In a few minutes she almost looked normal.

Normal enough.

Bless his heart, he never asked even though he had to be dying to know why she reacted like this.

“Did you mean it, that you would follow me as long as I stayed in?”

He eagerly nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Ten, twenty, thirty years? I’m a lifer. You know that.”

“Absolutely.”

“No one waiting at home for you to return?”

A dark shadow crossed his face. “No, sir,” he said. “No one but you would miss me.”

She took a deep breath and forced herself not to cry. He was as alone in the universe as she was. Why had she never asked him about his family before, never looked through his records beyond his recent service dossier? “Will you swear an oath bond to serve only me? To wear my rune?” She had taken on her father’s rune and had never offered an oath bond to any other crew member before.

He dropped to one knee and bowed his head. “Only you, sir.”

“To the death?”

He nodded. “Yes, sir. To the death. I follow you.”

She laid a hand on his shoulder and squeezed, left it there. “On your soul, you swear to hold my confidence?” Why was she even doing this? It wouldn’t heal the gaping wound in her own psyche.

But she’d been alone for so long, it finally hit her tonight just how alone she felt.

Ker and Sammuel still had each other. Well, for now, at least.

It wouldn’t ease the perpetual ache in her solitary soul, but at least she would have a trusted confidant.

Perhaps someone to mourn her when she died.

“On my soul, my word, my bond, or my death,” he swore.

She squeezed again and released him, turned to her private command console, and started typing. In a moment she called him over. “Here.”

He glanced over the document. Without hesitation or question, he pressed his thumb to the screen reader. A message blinked.

Commission bond recorded.

She deactivated the screen. From her desk she withdrew a box. Inside lay a holographic pendant on an unbreakable chain, identical to the two she wore. She turned to him again, and he bent so she could fasten it around his neck.

“Do you know anything about my history, Caz?” she quietly asked.

“No, sir. Not beyond common knowledge.”

“This was my father’s rune.” She showed him the ring, then the

two matching pendants she wore. “Mine and my Da’s. We were the only two people Captain Edmund Lorcan oath-bound in his career. His lover and his daughter. I don’t do this lightly, Caz.”

He fingered the pendant. For a moment she thought maybe he would cry, but he didn’t. “Thank you, sir,” he quietly said. “This is an honor and a privilege. I promise I will never let you down. To the death. I mean it.”

She took another deep breath to steady herself. “You’d better sit down.” For the first time since she left the Ab’yoika Maru she told the story of her time with Ker and Sammuel to someone else, to a real, living, breathing person. Not everything, not all the details, and not why she left them, but enough. When she finished she watched him.

All through the story he fingered his pendant as he listened to her without interruption. A few times he reached up to scratch the back of his head, running his fingers through his short hair as if maybe he once wore it longer and was used to playing with it. She’d noticed he did that sometimes. He sat on the end of her bunk, stunned shock and something else she couldn’t interpret on his face.

“Does this change how you look at me?” she asked when she finished. “Regretting your oath? Do you wish release from your bond?”

He shook his head. “No, sir,” he said. She felt his stunned shock. “To the death. That’s exactly what I meant.”

“It helped make me who I am. I suppose I should quit feeling sorry for myself.”

“You’re a damn good captain.” He snorted in amusement. “It also explains why Admiral Jorvis kept looking at me during dinner like he wanted to kill me with his bare hands.” He laughed. “He *did* want to kill me for touching his t’wren.”

“You noticed that, huh?”

He grinned. “Wanted to tell the bastard to go fuck himself because you’re *my* captain. I just thought maybe he had the hots for you.” His smile faded. “Under the circumstances, I really wish you’d reconsider

the tour, sir.”

“No.” She stood and walked over to the vid port. He let the silence lay between them. “Did you find out what’s wrong with him?” she eventually asked.

“No. Unfortunately my sources weren’t that well-informed.” She had a feeling maybe he had a suspicion, but if he wouldn’t speak it, she didn’t want to press him and send her imagination spinning even harder than it already was.

“So why are you alone, Caz?” She turned to look at him.

That sad cloud passed through his eyes again. “Begging your pardon, sir, I will tell you that story. Will you trust me when I say I would rather it not be tonight? I prefer to get you through this first. Then you can ask me, when we can both sit down and talk about things. You’re not the only one who’s been a long time without a confidant.”

She smiled. “Fair enough.” She didn’t feel anything romantic for him, and knew damn well he didn’t for her either. He felt like family.

Brother. The term floated through her mind on a wispy thought. It sort of fit, though. The two of them alone and bonded together. She would take care of him as her yeoman while he took care of her as his captain.

Something pecked at her intuition. How had he known the word *t’wren* when she hadn’t used it? Then the official chime sounded at the airlock, distracting her. She stood ready with Caz as President Olan, Ker, Sammuel, and four official Act’huran guards stepped aboard.

Aine bowed, then saluted. “Welcome aboard Dreadnought Candola Ryke, President, Ambassador, Admiral.”

The men nodded. President Olan took the lead. “Captain, we appreciate the tour. Where do we start?”

She led them to the bridge. Her agitation grew the longer she spent with the men. Caz moved with her, more an extension of her body than a separate individual. Maybe now that he had job security

in the most literal sense of the word he felt freer to connect to her in a way he hadn't before. Calming energy flowed from him to her every time she stepped close enough for her arm to brush his.

She didn't miss the ever-darkening frown on Sammuel's face.

They worked their way through the ship toward the hold, docking bays, and engineering. The lift only held six. The four guards stepped in, followed by Olan and Ker.

Caz reached in and punched the lift code. "We'll join you there in a moment, gentlemen."

The door slid shut. Behind her she felt Sammuel's possessive rage radiating off him.

And his passion.

She wanted to close her eyes and lean back into him, feel his arms around her, feel him take her and own her and...

Aine closed her eyes and took a long breath to steady her nerves.

When she opened them, Caz watched her while trying to keep his gaze off Sammuel.

"This is a beautiful ship," Sammuel said, startling her.

She turned, shocked. The look on his face screamed...something. She honestly couldn't tell what anymore, but his voice sounded neutral.

No one else walked the passageway. "Thank you, Admiral."

Caz glared. She shot him a warning look to keep his mouth shut.

Sammuel lifted his chin and she tried not to think about falling asleep nestled against his chest, her head safely tucked against his neck, the sound of his heartbeat in her ear.

His cock inside her.

"Yeoman, you appear extremely devoted to your captain," he observed. "More so than the average man."

Caz set his jaw and straightened. Sammuel had three inches and fifty pounds on the yeoman, but Caz's heart was ten times as big, she suspected. "Aye, sir. I serve no one but Captain Lorcan. I am willingly oath-bound to her as of tonight. I wear my captain's rune

with pride.”

Sammuel slowly arched an eyebrow at her. “Interesting.” His gaze pierced her. “Some would call that *slavery*.”

Caz jumped in. “I volunteered. I’ve never served under any Confederation captain with a fraction of the heart and soul and skill as Captain Lorcan.”

Sammuel’s green gaze floated through her soul, through her heart, ripping new shreds in her sanity.

“My yeoman is very devoted and performs his job well,” she said, hoping her voice didn’t quaver. “I wouldn’t have extended the offer to just any crewman.” She glared at him. “You have to have a deep level of trust to extend an oath bond. Even more to accept it.”

Sammuel slowly nodded. “Yes. You do.” His eyes never left hers. “I suspect he holds as much loyalty and devotion for you as I do for Ambassador D’arsolan.”

Where is that fucking lift! “I would suspect that’s true.”

Caz watched the exchange, ready to pounce if she gave the slightest indication.

Sammuel started to reply, but the lift door opened. Caz stepped in. “Sir? Admiral?”

Sammuel didn’t look away from Aine. “We will be along shortly. Go on ahead.”

Caz stepped back out. “I’ll wait.”

“I wish a word alone with your captain.”

Aine forced back the urge to swallow hard. She wasn’t the scared little girl, the grief-stricken teen, or the mortally wounded castaway. She wasn’t the dying woman trusting her life to this man. She wasn’t the woman screaming with passion under his hands. She wasn’t the woman snuggled safely in his arms, sleeping without nightmares.

She wasn’t *his* anymore. Hadn’t been for a long time.

When she stepped inside the lift, Caz moved with her. “Anything you wish to say to me, Admiral Jorvis, you can say in front of my yeoman.”

Sammuel's jaw clenched as he followed her inside the lift. Caz punched the buttons perhaps a little harder than he meant, but remained silent.

When Sammuel stepped forward, Aine didn't give ground. She looked up into his face and tried to ignore his scent, still the same and achingly wonderful even this many years later.

"He is proud of you."

She expected almost anything but that. She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"He has followed your career with great interest. He is very proud of you, even though he cannot and will not tell you himself."

Recriminations, insults, possibly even coaxing to return. Anything but that.

She reached over and hit the stop button for the lift, punched in her code to lock it.

"What's wrong with him, Sammuel?"

Sammuel glanced at Caz, then back to her. "I suspect you know."

"Dammit, I asked you a question!"

"He is dying. Your yeoman probably already told you that."

She gritted her teeth. "*Why* is he dying?"

Sammuel stepped to the other side of the lift and crossed his arms over his chest. His tone sounded even and steady. "That is *none* of your business, *Captain Lorcan*."

He might as well have slapped her, she felt the sting in his words. No "Ki'ato." No "Little One."

She stared, stunned.

What the hell did you expect, dumb fuck? This is what you wanted, wasn't it?

"It *is* my business, and you damn well know it!"

He studied the floor. "I sense your yeoman will understand this concept even if you do not. I have sworn a loyalty to my Master." Another sting in her heart and soul. "I will not betray his confidence. All I can tell you is that he is dying. He has maybe five years left, if that. Even telling you that much is pushing the bounds of my loyalty

to him.”

“Act’hurans don’t get sick. They don’t age quickly. He looks like he’s aged a lot in the past few years.”

Sammuel slowly nodded. “He has.”

Caz’s voice startled her. “He’s soul sick, isn’t he?”

It startled her even more to realize he’d spoken perfectly accented Act’huran, a language she hadn’t heard anyone else speak since she left her men.

Both Sammuel and Aine’s heads slowly swiveled to stare at the yeoman. Sammuel’s hand went for the butt of his plasma pistol, but then he seemed to remember himself. “What do you know of that?” he growled in Act’huran.

Caz’s gaze dropped to the floor. “Because my Master was Act’huran,” he said, still in that tongue, “before I joined the Confederation. He died in combat, along with my t’wren.”

Aine stood there in shock. Caz joined the service when he was just twenty. There’d been nothing in his records about anything else.

Then it struck her how he used the word *t’wren* earlier.

Ironically, Sammuel’s expression softened, kind and sad. His entire body language changed as he relaxed with this new knowledge. “I am sorry, brother. My regrets and sorrows go with you.”

“Thank you.” He looked at Aine. “The Confederation knew I was much older than twenty. With them both dead, and since we were on a shadow mission for the Confederation, they reworked my credentials to give me a new life, so to speak. They changed my records several times over the years to protect my identity when I didn’t age as normal humans do.”

Dumbstruck, she stared. It explained everything. “What does that mean?” She was aware they should get moving but she had to know. She turned to Sammuel. “Soul sick? What does that mean?”

He still stared at Caz but in pity, no longer in anger. “I suggest he can tell you later at a more appropriate time, Captain Lorcan,” he said, his voice sounding far gentler than before. “Let us not keep the

Ambassador and President Olan waiting.”

She punched in the release code. The lift started moving.

As it slowed again when they neared their destination, Sammuell stepped close behind her. Caz tensed but didn’t interfere.

“Your hair looks beautiful in a braid,” he whispered in Act’huran. “As it should. Too bad you ruin the color with the dye.”

She closed her eyes and resisted the urge to lean back into his arms. To feel his strength course through her.

To feel his body possess hers.

To feel their souls joined.

To drop to her knees and...

She knew she didn’t imagine he leaned in and brushed his lips across the nape of her neck as he stepped past. The gentle tug on her braid could have been her hair accidentally snagging on his uniform.

She didn’t think so.

When the lift opened, Sammuell stepped out immediately. “This is a beautiful ship, President Olan. I apologize for the delay. Captain Lorcan indulged my many questions, and I lost track of time.”

Ker frowned and stared past him into the lift before his expression shifted back to bland neutrality.

Caz stepped behind Aine and gently pressed his palm into her back. “After you, sir,” he whispered.

She forced her feet to move.

* * * *

Somehow, with Caz there to guide and support her, she made it through the rest of the tour without breaking down or throwing herself into Ker’s arms. Every time she tried to meet Ker’s gaze he looked elsewhere. By the time they reached the shuttle bay, he looked tired, drawn, a shell of his former self. Not the man who could tirelessly work for days at a time on the bridge without sleep or fiercely fight in hand-to-hand combat if needed.

Sammuel noticed. “President Olan, this has been wonderful. I assure you, we are very happy with this assignment.”

Aine thought those words might bring her some cold comfort, but he said them professionally, dispassionately.

He continued. “It has been an extremely long voyage, and an even longer day. I do not know if I can speak for the Ambassador, but I am looking forward to a long, uninterrupted night in my bunk to catch up on sleep since we are safely berthed. We have an even longer journey ahead of us.”

“I totally understand, Admiral.”

Ker said nothing.

They repeated the arrangement, the four guards, Olan, and Ker stepping into the lift. When it departed, she turned on Sammuel. “*Five* years? What the *fuck* is going on?”

Caz pulled her back, wouldn’t remove his arm from around her waist. “Sir,” he desperately murmured in her ear in Act’huran, “please. Not here.” Fortunately there were no crew around to witness her outburst.

Sammuel didn’t move. “You should listen to your yeoman, Captain Lorcan,” he said in Act’huran, his tone gentle. “You chose well and wisely in him. Your instincts no doubt served you. A released t’wren latching on to an unbound t’wren. It is probably best for you both.”

She didn’t struggle against Caz’s restraining arm, suspected he wouldn’t let her get close enough to hit Sammuel. “Tell me what’s wrong with him!” she screamed, reverting to Act’huran in her anguish.

The lift opened behind them. Caz stepped out of Sammuel’s path, pulling Aine with him. “You go ahead, Admiral,” he said. “We’ll follow on the next one.”

Sammuel hesitated, then nodded. As he stepped past them he paused and reached out, placed his hand on Caz’s shoulder, and squeezed. “Please, care well for her,” he whispered. “For she is

precious and well-loved.” He turned after he stepped inside the lift. “You do not have to return to see us out,” he said, switching back to English. “I will tell them I insisted it was not necessary.” He met Caz’s gaze one last time and nodded, then reverted to Act’huran. “Live long and well, brother. Please see to her and her happiness. If you ever need anything so you may properly care for her, it is yours.”

Caz nodded. Sammuell reached out and punched the lift button. Aine wasn’t sure, but hoped the lift doors closed before he heard her sob.

* * * *

She didn’t remember the return to her cabin, only that she lay on her bunk with her head in Caz’s lap as he stroked her hair. She sobbed in a way she hadn’t since the early days after leaving the Ab’yoika Maru so many years earlier.

Sometime in the middle of the night Aine awoke with a pounding headache and dressed only in sleeping shorts and a T-shirt. Movement in the corner of the dim cabin startled her.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Caz apologized as he snapped on a lamp. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

He was still dressed in his formals, but his jacket hung from the back of a chair.

“What time is it?”

“Nearly 0600 hours.”

She scrubbed her face with her hands. “What? Holy gods, I’ve got to get on duty.”

He sat on the bunk and gently grabbed her wrists. “It’s all right. The watch has been taken care of. I arranged the duty roster to give you the day off.”

She glared at him. “I didn’t tell you to do that.”

“It’s my job to take care of the captain, whether the captain wants to be taken care of or not. You’ll collapse if you keep this up.”

The night flooded back to her. She sniffled. “Tell me. What does it mean?”

He laced his hands together in his lap. After thinking about his reply for several long moments, he responded in Act’huran. “Soul sickness is what happens when a t’amar-te loses a bound mate. When the mate leaves them.”

She shook her head and automatically replied in Act’huran. Truth be told, it felt more natural to her to speak it than English. She even caught herself thinking in it several times a day. “I don’t understand. Sammuell left him all the time and he never got sick before.”

“He left for missions. That’s different. The Ambassador understood that the Admiral would return to him. They were still mates, separated only by physical distance, not emotional.” He tightly clasped his hands together, as if to rein in his emotions. “T’amar-te mate for life, you know that. When their triad is complete, they are complete. To lose one literally kills them.”

“That’s not true! His brother Jor lost one of his t’wren years ago. She died in an accident. Jor did just fine, Sammuell said so, that they might one day meet someone new. I met him and his t’arn and they were sad, but they had moved on.”

“Death is a different matter. If you’d died they would have mourned, but the connection to your soul would’ve been broken. Just because you were released doesn’t mean the bond is broken. They are still connected to you. They can never find another to take your place while you are alive. It’s not possible.”

She remembered what he confessed in the lift. “I’m sorry about what happened. I didn’t know.”

He shrugged. “It was a long time ago. I don’t generally talk about it.” He switched back to English. “It’s why I didn’t want to get into it last night. You had enough on your plate to deal with, sir.”

“How long ago are we talking, exactly?”

He sadly smiled. “Over sixty years ago. I have no desire to find someone else to replace them in my heart. I’m human by birth, not

Act'huran. Just like you and the Admiral."

"Sixty!" She stared at him. "You only look like you're in your late thirties!"

"I'm over four hundred years old, sir. Pretty good for a human." He smirked. "Looks like you and I will be stuck together a lot longer than we originally planned with this oath bond, huh? I figured I'd be outliving you and looking for a new captain in a few decades."

Gods, he was older than Sammuel! She realized now why his eyes looked so intensely blue. "Your Master had blue eyes?"

Caz nodded. "And brown hair. We were together for over three hundred years. I was his t'arn. We met a woman, a t'amen-ra, and I knew she was our t'wren. I was on a different ship when we all came under attack. I watched their ship be destroyed, I felt their souls leave mine."

He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. "When I rejoined the Confederation I cut my hair. I couldn't bear to wear the braid when I felt so alone." He glanced at her hairline. "I wondered why you dyed your hair so frequently and yet kept it so long. It all makes perfect sense. The first time you let me braid your hair I couldn't help but think about them and how I missed doing that. I was so glad you let me do that for you."

She blushed. It also explained why he could easily tame her hair. Being an unbound t'wren also explained why he could key into her emotions the way he did. "Did Ker know this would happen? When I left, when he released me, he knew he would die?"

Caz didn't want to answer, but eventually nodded. "I'm sure he did."

"What happens?"

"Their body shuts down. They feed and funnel and amplify the energy of their mates. That's why both, or all three once a triad is complete, live for so long. A pair can live a long time, but triads have been known to live thousands of years."

"There's no cure?"

“If a mate was to return I imagine the process would reverse, or at the very least cease. But if a mate leaves there’s usually a damn good reason why and they don’t return. Not that it happens that often to begin with. Very rarely. I only heard of two cases, and both of those involved severe physical abuse.” He frowned as he realized what he said.

“He gave me the choice to leave! He let me walk away! He never said anything like this would happen to him, that he would die.”

“T’amar-te must have willing mates. They cannot take or keep one by force.”

She snorted. “Well, no one told *them* that.”

His frown darkened. “They forced you?”

“I—” She stopped, thinking. They did a lot of things to and with her.

Unbidden, her mind went to the first time Sammuel made love to her. Passionate, practically violent, sure.

Forced?

All the times, every time at first, until she begged for his touch, Sammuel told her to tell him to stop if she didn’t want him.

They never forced her. Never took her. Not until she asked. Even the mating ceremony, the repetition, the ritual.

The permission she had to freely grant.

The only time she ever told him to stop was the day she left, when he wanted to carry her to bed.

And he had immediately put her down when she said it.

“No,” she admitted. “They never forced me.”

“Sir, not as your yeoman, but as one t’wren to another. *Why* did you leave? What did they do to drive you away?” She felt a surge of protective outrage wash from him.

“They didn’t abuse me,” she reassured him. “They wanted something I couldn’t give. They wanted me to stay with them, resign my Confederation commission and give up my career. I couldn’t do that. I worked too hard for that. I wouldn’t have been happy there, I

would have been miserable. I owed it to the memory of my fathers to complete what I'd set out to do and not let their deaths be wasted."

"And are you happy, sir? Has leaving them fulfilled you?"

She fell back onto her bunk. "Fuck!"

He let out a sad sigh. "I take it that's a no?"

Chapter Nineteen

For the three days before they departed, Aine didn't leave the ship. She could see the Tav'rokian Might in her berth and swore she felt the combined pull of the two men's presence. Once again the feeling of being a single soul plagued her, something she managed to ignore over the years.

Caz maintained a careful watch over her, hovering, keeping others away from her as much as possible. By the time she issued the cast off order she was on her last nerve and turned the helm over to Maddings.

Once clear of the station, the Tav'rokian Might would mid-space dock with the Candola Ryke, magno-field attached to the armored underhull for protection and the Dreadnought's superior jump capabilities. It would cut months off their trip that way. Aine monitored the activities from her cabin command terminal as Caz hovered nearby.

Only two months. I can do that.

Only two months of fucking agony knowing how close her men were and yet not being able to join them.

The next morning they got underway, followed by two battle cruisers for extra protection. Aine took her place in her command chair and worked the stress ball back and forth from hand to hand. It had quickly become an ingrained habit.

The dreams had also started again, returning with a vengeance. More than once she awoke to find Caz holding her, soothing her, her face and pillow wet with tears.

She let him. What difference did it make at that point? A good man was dying because of her. But he wouldn't speak up and ask her

to return. She couldn't eat, couldn't sleep.

After four consecutive nights of no sleep, she waved off Caz's concern and told him she planned to stay up reading. When she knew he'd settled for the evening in his adjoining cabin, she left and quickly made her way to the shuttle bay where the docking airlock to the Tav'rokian Might was located.

Punching in her captain's override code, she tried to enter but it wouldn't open. She tried again with the same result.

The com panel next to the airlock door buzzed. "Tav'rokian Might."

"This is Captain Lorcan. I'm trying to board. The airlock seems to be jammed."

"I'm sorry, Captain. Orders from Admiral Jorvis to keep it locked down."

Part of her fumed, ready to turn on her heel and leave.

Then the other part of her wanted to have this out with him right there and then. "Well, get Admiral Jorvis and tell him to unlock it. I want a private word with him, face to face."

"I'm sorry, Captain." She reeeeeeally despised that phrase. "He's retired for the evening and left orders not to be disturbed unless we're under attack."

Goddammit. "Then get me Ambassador D'arsolan."

"I'm sorry, Captain—"

She punched the com button before screaming. Then she screamed again as a hand touched her shoulder, startling her. She whirled to find Caz standing there with a sad look on his face. "Gods, you scared me!" she screamed.

"I'm sorry, sir." He looked at the com panel. "Under attack, huh? I could order a shuttle launched and have them fire at them from below."

Stunned, she stared at him, jaw gaping. As a playful smile crept across his face she started laughing, the sound rolling out of her until she collapsed against the wall and slid down it, laughing until

hysterical tears fell and she sobbed her anger and anguish against his shoulder as he sat next to her, put his arm around her, and pulled her tightly against his chest to soothe her.

It only made her sob harder as she relaxed against him, knowing he truly was the only person who understood her pain and in whom she could trust.

The only person left in her life who she hadn't lost or driven away.

After a few minutes he helped her to her feet. "Come on, sir," he gently said. "Time to put you to bed."

She snorted. "Not that I'll get much sleep."

He kept his arm around her for the walk to the lift. "Maybe not. Promise me you'll try? I have a feeling Admiral Jorvis will kick my ass if I don't take good care of you."

Early the next morning she sat at her command console on the bridge when the com link whistled from the Tav'rokian Might. She answered it, audio only, before the communications officer could. "Candola Ryke. Captain Lorcan."

A brief hesitation. "Captain Lorcan, this is Admiral Jorvis." The cautious sound of his voice ripped at her heart. "I understand you wished to speak with me?"

She forced a chipper tone she knew didn't fool him in the least. "That's quite all right, Admiral Jorvis." Her voice bore more than a hint of sarcasm, but with her sanity and composure on the line, she felt beyond caring at that point. "I got the answer to my question last night. I'm *sooo* sorry I disturbed you, won't happen again. Candola Ryke out." She punched the button, cutting him off before he could respond.

Caz chose that moment to appear with her coffee. "That was mature, sir," he muttered in Act'huran.

She shot him a glare as she accepted the mug of coffee.

An hour later, security notified her someone was trying to cross from the Tav'rokian Might to the Candola Ryke.

Aine figured she only needed one guess who.

Alone in the airlock bay, she left Caz guarding the lift to ensure their privacy and walked down to the hatchway. Punching in her official override code, the airlock door opened.

As much as she figured it shouldn't, her breath still escaped her in a long, harsh whoosh. Sammuell glared at her as she stepped into the airlock and let the hatch slide closed behind her.

After a moment of silence he spoke. "You have left me rather confused, Captain Lorcan."

"How so, *Admiral*?"

Did he step away from her? "What was so important last night that my men said you sounded very upset, then this morning you cop an attitude with me and rudely cut me off?"

This was the one place she knew that in either ship couldn't be monitored because of the magno-hull connection field.

He knew it too.

"Why didn't he fucking tell me?" she demanded.

"Tell you what? And who are we talking about?"

She stepped forward, forcing him back against the airlock wall. "You know *fucking* well who we are talking about. And you damn *fucking* well know what we're talking about!"

His eyes burned as his jaw tightened. "You have quite a vocabulary, Captain Lorcan," he forced through clenched teeth.

She suspected he was dying to bend her over and spank her ass for the swearing.

She pressed her body against his and felt his cock stiffen in his pants. Her body instinctively responded in the old familiar way that nearly took her knees out. "I've been told that before, *Admiral*."

His gaze pierced into hers even as his expression softened. "I have missed you beyond words, Ki'ato," he whispered. "Beyond measure."

When she tried to kiss him he grabbed her wrists and gently pushed her away without letting go. "I am sorry. I cannot. You are not my t'wren anymore. My Master released you, even if our hearts and

souls could not.”

The one thing she didn’t want to do was cry, yet that’s exactly what she did. Large hot tears slid down her cheeks. “Why didn’t he tell me? Why didn’t you tell me? Why did he let me go knowing it would kill him?”

“I suspect your yeoman told you that.”

He followed Aine to the floor as she crumpled to her knees. “All I wanted was a career. I wanted to be a captain. You never told me before you took me that you would make me give all that up! You knew how much my career meant to me. Why would you force me to make that choice?”

He shook his head. “We never said you couldn’t be a captain, Ki’ato. Never.”

“You did!” she screamed. “You fucking liar!”

“We asked you only to give up your Confederation commission, never your captaincy. You could have transferred to our fleet to serve with me there. I told you that! Do you think you would have been given command of the Haltoran-dey otherwise? We loved you. We wanted you close where we could keep you safe, at least keep you with me in our fleet so I could protect you. You could have flown as long as you wanted, as many missions as you desired, even if it hurt us to let you go every time. We only wanted you to serve in our fleet to keep you close.”

A large, hot knot choked her throat. “What?” It came out barely more than a gasp. “You said you’d give up your ranking to stay with Ker.”

He nodded. “I never said I would make *you* give up yours. Only your Confederation commission. You are the one who promised you would never leave us.” His expression darkened, hurt. “You broke that promise.”

“You told me I couldn’t fly!”

Confusion twisted his face. “What? No, I never said that! *You* are the one who insisted you had to hold a Confederation commission,

that our ships and our fleet commissions were not good enough for you!”

“I thought you said...you told me I had to choose to stay, to serve Ker with you, couldn’t go back. Had to give up my commission, that I couldn’t fly anymore!”

He nodded, his confusion turning to horror. “Your *Confederation* commission, not flying, not your career. I never asked you to give up flying. You had to stay with *us*, serve on our ships. To serve *with* me, in *our* fleet.”

He slowly shook his head. “Oh, Ki’ato, I thought you understood. We would never ask you to give up...” He released her hands and slumped against the bulkhead, his eyes closed. “Gods, no. Oh, no. All these years. What have I done?”

She stared at him, her chest hot and heavy as another storm of grief rapidly built inside her. Had she simply misunderstood? Her stubbornness getting in the way, again, butting heads with him that day as they often had during their time together? All these years alone, all this pain, Ker now dying, all over a fucking misunderstanding?

She couldn’t bear it, felt her sanity tipping. Sobbing and overwhelmed with pain, she ran from the airlock, desperately punching the keypad to open the hatch.

“Ki’ato, please, wait!”

She couldn’t. She punched in the code to seal the hatch behind her and raced for the waiting lift and Caz’s comforting arms. He didn’t ask her what happened and she didn’t volunteer. He tucked her into her bunk and cuddled her against him as she cried herself to sleep.

* * * *

Caz stared into her sleeping face. A mere child compared to his years. He couldn’t comprehend what emotions ripped at her soul. To willingly walk away from not one, but two bonded mates who would

die for her love, soul mates she still loved and desired with all her heart...

She was far stronger than he ever dreamed.

The pain in her soul must be nearly unbearable.

The com terminal in her cabin blinked. He carefully untangled himself from her without waking her and answered. "Yes?"

"I have a private com request for Captain Lorcan from the Tav'rokian Might."

"The captain is asleep. She is not available. Let Maddings handle it or she can call them back later."

The com officer nervously cleared his throat. "He asked to speak to her personally. It's Ambassador D'arsolan."

* * * *

As a personal oath-bound officer, Caz was privy to everything his captain wanted him to know. Including her codes. He had security clear the docking bay and secure the lift before he walked to the airlock hatch and punched in her code. Ambassador D'arsolan turned at the sound of the hatch opening, then looked momentarily startled before a careful mask slipped across his expression.

"I expected Captain Lorcan," he said in Act'huran.

The hatch closed behind Caz, sealing them in and concealing their conversation from prying ears. "She's ill," he replied, also in Act'huran.

With that revelation the Ambassador dropped all pretenses. "Is she all right?"

"Not as of right now she's not. How are *you* doing, sir?"

The Ambassador frowned. "I have been better." Stalemate. "Admiral Jorvis spoke very highly of you."

"Thank you."

He studied the yeoman. "Hypothetically speaking, if Captain Lorcan—"

"I follow her where she goes, regardless of where her commission or career takes her." He leveled a pointed gaze at the larger man. "I serve her and only her."

One eyebrow slid up. Caz saw where Jorvis picked up the habit. "Is that so?"

"If that's a concern, then yes, that's so. If she decided to leave and would take me with her, I would gladly go. If she told me to serve someone else with her, I would do that as well, without hesitation. I am oath bound to *her*. According to Confederation regulations, that supersedes all else. I am bound to her as my captain, not to any ship or branch of service." He studied Ker's expression. "If she leaves the Confederation to return to her Master, I would follow her there as well. If she would have me."

Ker's voice softened. "I looked you up. Your Master and t'wren were good, honorable people who served our forces with exceptional distinction. My regrets and sorrows go with you over their loss."

That was almost enough to smash Caz's composure. "Thank you, sir. I loved them very much and feel their loss every day."

The Ambassador stepped back toward his ship's hatch. "Please offer Captain Lorcan my respectful hopes for her quick recovery."

Caz opened the hatch behind him and stepped out of the airlock, where he reverted to English. "I suspect there's only one cure for what ails her, sir."

"And what is that?"

Caz rested his hand over the lock panel. "The same thing that would cure you." He sealed the hatch and took a moment to gather his thoughts.

When he returned to her cabin she was still asleep. He felt her distress, her grief, her anger and rage, close to the surface in her mind. Times like this made his empathic skills more a liability than a blessing. The carefully constructed wall she'd spent years reinforcing had crashed around her without warning or preparation.

Soul raw and bleeding, she suffered. Badly.

* * * *

By late that afternoon, Caz knew Aine was in dire shape. She bordered on dehydration and had lost nearly ten pounds over the past several days. He hesitated to call in the ship's doctor, afraid he would declare her unfit for duty and add insult to injury.

She slept the day away. After evening mess ended, he made a call to the Tav'rokian Might and asked to be put through to Admiral Jorvis. Ten minutes later, he let the Admiral in through the airlock.

Sammuel silently followed Caz through the deserted passages to her cabin. Caz kept her lights dim, the cabin temperature perfect for her. Caz ushered him into her cabin and pointed to the bunk. Then he sealed the door and took up his familiar position in the corner chair.

"You are not leaving?" Sammuel asked.

"Would you really expect me to leave her alone in this condition, sir?"

"Good point." Sammuel carefully climbed into the bunk with her. He closed his eyes and inhaled her scent. It had been so long, so many painful, empty years without her. Then knowing Ker was dying only compounded his grief. That Ker swore him to secrecy added to his personal agony. So many times he wished he could tell her, hoping she would want to come back.

Never dreaming it was his fault she left in the first place. He'd blamed it on her stubborn will, misplaced pride.

Blamed it on her having less than a soul full of love for them both. Doubting his choice in her too many times to count, believing he had acted rashly in picking her. Anger.

Longing.

He pressed his lips to her forehead, chanting in his mind, "*Ki'ato...love. I love you.*"

Unconsciously, her body recognized he was there and snuggled tightly against him. Without talking to Ker first, he couldn't offer her

any more comfort than this. Two hours later her body stiffened in his arms as she quickly burst from sleep into full awareness.

“Lie still, Ki’ato,” he said in Act’huran. “Rest.”

As if reluctant, she eventually settled against him and allowed him to hold her.

He shifted position, his lips pressed to her ear as his arms tightly held her. She did not fight him.

He coiled her braid around one hand, held it snugly, and pushed her mouth against his shoulder. He whispered to her. “Bite down, Ki’ato. Hard.”

Aine shivered in his arms as she tentatively pressed her teeth against his shirt, then clamped down.

His other arm skimmed down her back, his hand splayed across the curve of her ass. In barely more than a whisper he said, “I love you with all my soul. If you still love me, show me. If you still feel for me the way I feel for you...come.”

Her body tensed in his arms as her teeth clamped down to stifle her scream. He positioned one thigh between her legs, pressing hard into her mound as her first climax slammed into her. She sobbed against him, the sound muffled by his shoulder. It hurt, but he would gladly bear the mark.

Caz made no move to step in and interfere.

“Very good,” Sammuel whispered, his grip on her braid tightening. “Again...come, *now*.”

She cried out, her body arching into him, not releasing her hold on his shoulder. Before she had time to recover from that one, he rolled her onto her back, pinning her to the bed. “Again. Come for me now.”

His erection strained through his trousers, wanting to plunge deeply into her, to fuck her, show her he loved her and take her away and keep her safe and secure forever. He nuzzled her ear, not quite kissing her, knowing Ker had never anticipated he would do this with her and thanking Fate for that.

As her body went limp beneath him he nipped her earlobe. “One

more...come *hard* for me, Ki'ato. *Now.*"

A low, long moan rippled through her. She threw her head back and gave herself over to his strength, her hands clenched around his arms. He knew if his cock was sheathed inside her how it would feel, every exquisitely pleasurable sensation, every ripple of her slick muscles.

Sammuel wondered how many men she'd been with since then and tried to stifle that thought. He lowered his forehead to her chest and deeply inhaled. She smelled fresh and pure, untouched, his and Ker's scent still part of her.

Could it be?

* * * *

As her senses returned, Aine held her breath for a long moment, then blew it out. Sammuel wasn't prepared when she sat up and pushed him away. "How did you get into my cabin?"

"My fault, sir," Caz answered from across the room.

"He was right to do it," Sammuel said. "Please, Little One, do not do this to yourself."

Aine battled a wave of rage, followed by agonizing pain of loss. "What do you care? You let me leave! Then the first time I see you in years you both act like you don't know me! *Fuck* you!"

She tried to climb out of the bunk but Sammuel grabbed her and pulled her back, wrapping his arms around her. "You do not leave here until I have my say, Ki'ato!"

Aine struggled against him. "Let me go!"

"No!" He gripped her chin and forced her to look into his eyes. "You stubborn, willful child! What do you see when you look into the mirror every day, hmm? I see your eyes staring back at me, I hear your voice and smell your sweet scent. Every day I am away from you is an agony. Please, I am begging you, and you know I do not beg. Come back to us!"

She froze again. "Come back?"

"Yes! I can give you a ship larger than this one. As many as you want. Master can have you named any rank you desire!"

She sneered. "Fine. I don't earn it, I fuck for it."

He shook her. "I screwed up! Is that what you want to hear? I failed you, I admit it. I totally failed you as your Master. I did not know you misunderstood me. This is my fault and I take full blame, but please do not make our Master suffer any longer for my mistake!"

Finally stunned into silence, she stared at him in disbelief.

He tried again. "We have *never* stopped loving you, Ki'ato. We have never stopped missing you. Every moment of every day you are in our hearts and souls. Always. And every second we cannot actively touch you with our souls is an agony for us."

Aine forced her expression from distraught to totally blank. "Please leave," she whispered. "Now."

"Ki—"

"*Stop*, Admiral. Leave. Now."

He slowly climbed to his feet and stared at her, then formally bowed. "As you wish, *Captain*." He stiffly turned on his heel and left.

Caz shook his head as he raced to her side to comfort her. She sobbed, her temporary façade shattered. An hour later she lay broken in his arms.

"Why did you make him leave?" Caz asked.

"I can't take this anymore. I left because I misunderstood him? I lost all those years with them because I was stupid and didn't listen?"

"They want you back. They love you."

"I'm not the woman I was."

"They aren't the men you left, either."

She shivered and closed her eyes. "I don't know if I know how to love anymore."

"I'm sure that's not true, sir. If you didn't still love them you wouldn't hurt this bad."

"I don't know how to trust."

“You trusted me.”

“That’s different.” She sighed and went silent.

A few minutes later, Caz realized she’d fallen asleep again. *Good*, she desperately needed it.

* * * *

Early the next morning, after Caz dozed off next to her, Aine took the opportunity to shower, dress, and head for the bridge. When he caught up with her there a little after 0600 hours, he glared at her as he handed over her morning cup of coffee.

“You didn’t wake me, sir.”

The Ice Queen had returned. “You looked comfortable.” She finally turned her gaze to his. “Is there anything else, *Yeoman*?”

He straightened, posture stiff. “No, *sir*. Do you wish to take your morning meal here or in your cabin?”

“I’m not hungry.”

He didn’t challenge her. “Very well, sir.” He stepped to the back of the bridge, to his usual post, where he could observe her.

All morning Aine felt aware of his presence, not quite an accusation radiating from him, but close to it.

At least from her command chair she could look out the front vid ports and see space, not the emissary vessel securely snugged to her ship’s belly.

Or Caz’s glare behind her.

Want her back? Love her? How could they *possibly* love her after she left them like that?

Sammuel admitting he screwed up? Didn’t she fail him, not the other way around?

Stubborn, willful child. The words floated to her from her memory, Sammuel’s voice, from one of their many arguments during their time together.

Mid-morning, Caz brought her a protein drink and stood at her

elbow, hovering until she finished every drop. She handed the empty glass to him. "Happy?"

He curtly nodded. "Thank you, sir."

She'd hurt his feelings and that compounded her guilt.

* * * *

Caz forced her to drink another protein shake after coaxing a small bowl of fruit into her for lunch. He felt her trying to rebuild her emotional wall, rapidly jamming brick after brick into place haphazardly, in a way he knew would only lead to a full and irreversible breakdown if she didn't stop.

She needed her men as much as they needed her.

When she refused to leave the helm that afternoon, he knew he had a couple of hours available to him and left the bridge. Locking himself in her cabin, he used her private terminal to request a com link to the Admiral. Ten minutes later they met in the airlock.

Admiral Jorvis wore a blank expression but Caz felt his tension, near desperation.

"What did you wish to talk about?" the Admiral asked in Act'huran.

"I think the Ambassador needs to talk to her personally."

"He tried, if you'll recall. You appeared in her stead."

"Tonight, 2200 hours. I'll let you both in and give you access to her cabin."

Jorvis hesitated, considering. "He will not force her back."

"I don't think that would even remotely be necessary. She will soon die at this rate. I have to force her to eat. She's in misery and too damn stubborn to admit it."

At that revelation Jorvis' lips curled in a faint, wistful smile. "She was always very willful and stubborn. I cannot tell you how much I missed that, even as much as it sometimes frustrated me. I also want you to understand you always have a welcomed and honored place in

our household for the rest of your life, guaranteed. My Master will always honor her oath bond to you if you do not desire release from it.”

Caz bowed his head. “I will gratefully accept your Master as my own, and serve her—and you and your Master—well.”

“Obviously we will not ask anything of you other than loyalty, honor, and service in our home. I understand the loss you’ve suffered.” The Admiral reached over and squeezed the other man’s shoulder. “But you are a brother, and it is our duty to not turn our backs on you regardless of your bond to her. How long have you been with her?”

“I’ve served with her a little over five years. She took me on when she was given the Candola Ryke and her other yeoman retired.”

“How much do you know about us? What happened. Her history.”

“I think she hasn’t told me quite everything. I’ve always suspected, since the first time I met her, that she carried a deep pain in her soul. I just never imagined what or how badly it hurt her. This explains why she so readily accepted me into her life when she pushed everyone else away. As you said, her instincts served her.”

“I failed her. I never should have turned my back on her that day. I should have made sure she completely understood what I asked of her and why. I thought she was just being childish and stubborn. I never thought she would leave like that and I would never get to talk with her again. We were both so angry and hurting...”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I failed her,” he repeated. “And then she left and I could not contact her because of Master’s orders. I could not believe she would love a simple title more than she loved us. I could not believe she would leave. I wanted to calm down and talk to her again but then she was gone.”

Caz shook his head. “I think a lot of things conspired to tip Fate against you. You have a chance to rectify it. She is currently overwhelmed with pain and regret. If the Ambassador talks to her personally, I think she would come around.”

“He will not force her. Knowing how badly she aches, he will not say or do anything to influence her. He wants her return, should she choose it, to be of her free will.”

“I’ll wait here for you tonight.” Caz stepped back and sealed the airlock before the Admiral could disagree.

The hours crawled, but Aine was so exhausted Caz had no problems settling her into her bunk by 2100 hours. Within seconds, she fell asleep.

He paced, waiting, unable to stay still. He finally made his way to the airlock fifteen minutes early and wasn’t surprised to find the men already there.

Without a word Caz led them through the ship to her cabin and sealed the door behind them. He pointed to the door leading directly to his cabin. I will be in there. I will leave it unlocked, and I will come if she calls for me, you understand?”

The men stared down at her sleeping form and silently nodded.

“Good luck, gentlemen.” Caz stepped into his cabin and prayed as he closed the door behind him.

Ker looked down at her, unable to believe after all this time he was back with her. Part of him ached even worse knowing she was not truly his, the sickness blooming deep within him. If she did not come back he doubted he would survive their voyage to Korellas. Not that he would ever admit that to her, and Sammuel was sworn to secrecy.

He carefully stretched out on one side of her and motioned to Sammuel to take her other side. As Ker stared into her sleeping, albeit far from peaceful face, he thought about their many talks.

Talk to me, Little One. Tell me your dreams.

He wished he could weave himself inside her soul and have her love him the way she once had. All he could do is what he did. He opened his mind and soul and removed the barrier he’d placed against her that day long ago.

After a few minutes she relaxed, molded her body to his. He

risked slipping his arm around her, the old, familiar way he held her, snuggling her tightly to his side.

Ker closed his eyes and forced himself not to cry. It hurt so bad, the ache within him. If she wouldn't come back he might kill himself tonight just to end the agony.

* * * *

Aine's dreams turned from unsettled to comforting. She dreamed of sleeping nestled securely between Sammuel and Ker, knowing she had no worries, no fears, no regrets.

When her mind wanted to insist that it couldn't be, she ignored it and relished the dream sensation of Ker's soothing heartbeat against her flesh, the feeling of her soul no longer alone, being a part of their triad. Sometime deep within the night she tried to roll over and realized she couldn't. Her eyes popped open.

Sammuel's sad, green gaze stared at her.

That meant...

She froze.

Ker spoke in her ear. "I only want your happiness, however you feel you need to find it, Ki'ato."

Caz. She knew he arranged it. It was the only possibility.

She didn't want to cry, but that's what she did. Ker gently rolled her to face him, held her against his chest as she sobbed. He stroked her back through her shirt while Sammuel pressed close behind her.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I didn't know this would happen if I left. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Do not worry yourself. Past is past."

She tipped her face back to meet his gaze. "I've never stopped loving you."

He trailed a finger down her jaw, to her chin. "Neither have we."

"What now?"

He shrugged. "What do you want?"

“I want to fly.”

“Fly you shall. I will never hold you back, you know that.”

“But I’d have to give up my Confederation commission.”

Sammuel spoke up. “There is no shame in being the commander of an ambassador’s flagship. I told you, you can have an equivalent commission in our fleet. Any rank you want is yours. Name it.”

Her body shuddered as she took a deep breath. “Can I finish this assignment?”

Ker smiled. “Of course, love. I am honored and proud to know you are the captain of this vessel. More than you will ever know.”

“Then what?”

Sammuel spoke up. “All you have to do is ask.”

Ker silently swore, should have known Sammuel couldn’t keep his mouth shut, but he couldn’t blame him.

Aine sat up and wiped her face. “What about Caz? I won’t leave him behind. He’s alone.”

“We have already assured him that he has a guaranteed place in our home until his death.”

“Really?”

Ker nodded. “Really. We know he is devoted to you.” He played with the end of her braid, gently twisting her hair around his fingers. “I would not dare try to take him away from you, or you from him. Especially not when he has cared so well for you. Besides, he is a brother. It is our duty to make sure he has a home.”

She took a deep breath, then asked, “May I come home?”

As if a dam burst within Ker’s heart, the pain of the past several years left in a flood, bringing him to tears. He knew he was already healing, recovering as he felt their triad once again complete. He gathered her into his arms and kissed her, the way he’d imagined all these years. “You already are, Ki’ato. You already are.”

Sammuel turned her to face him and kissed her, then nearly crushed her against his chest. “Gods, I’ve missed you so much, love. You have no idea.”

At the sound of her renewed sobs, this time happy ones, Caz silently appeared in the doorway, concern on his face. Ker smiled and waved him over, indicated he should sit on the bunk.

“Do you still wish to serve her?” Ker asked.

Caz nodded.

He placed a hand on Caz’s shoulder. “I swear to you, you are of our family.”

Caz bowed his head. “I swear to serve you well, Master.”

Ker squeezed and released his shoulder.

Aine sat up and wiped her face before hugging Caz. “Thank you, brother.”

He sighed, sensing the peace and happiness that now rightfully ruled her soul. “I told you, sister, my job is to take care of my captain. Even if she doesn’t want to be taken care of.”

Chapter Twenty

Caz left them alone and promised he would not allow them to be disturbed until morning. Sammuell grabbed her and pulled her down on top of him. He wrapped her braid around his hand and kissed her, long and hard, until they both gasped for breath.

With his forehead touching hers, he closed his eyes and asked the question he wasn't sure he wanted answered. "Tell me truthfully—"

"No one but the two of you. Nobody since then. Caz is the only man who's ever laid a hand on me, and it wasn't romantic."

Sammuel crushed her body against his. "Thank the gods," he said with a relieved sigh. "I had hoped, but since Master released you I was not sure."

She poked him in the chest, hard. "And you damn well better not hurt Caz. He's never been inappropriate with me. He's the only person that's kept me sane the past few years."

"No, love. I swear it, he is of our family."

She sighed, relieved. "Good." She snuggled closer. "In fact, the last orgasm I had before you showed up in my cabin last night was with the two of you. There wasn't a single drop of desire in my body without you."

Ker cleared his throat. "What does she mean by that, Ki'ran?"

She lifted her head and smiled as Sammuell blushed. "I came to talk to her last night," he admitted.

"And what did you do?"

He couldn't say it. She knew he thought it to Ker.

It felt damn good to have that connection back with them.

First, Ker frowned. Then a wide smile creased his face, which

already looked years younger. He laughed, throwing his head back and falling onto the bunk. "I should have known you would find a loophole, you stubborn, willful man. You always have."

"Feel free to punish me, Master," he said as he stared into her eyes. "I will gladly take it."

"No. Because I will not complain, this worked out for the best." He crooked his finger at her. She rolled onto him and kissed him as he grabbed her braid and held her captive against his body. "I feared I might go the rest of my life without ever seeing you again, without being able to tell you how much I love you."

She stroked his cheek. "Are you going to be okay?"

"That is not the only reason you returned, is it?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm sorry I didn't listen and understand. I'm sorry I wasted all that time. Answer my question."

He kissed her again, slowly, deeply, gently tracing her lips with the tip of his tongue until she gasped at the tickling sensation feeding her desire. "Yes, I will be okay. I already feel better. The effects should fully reverse within a few days or so."

"Even if we're apart while I finish this mission?"

He smiled. "You will not start worrying about every little line on my face now, will you, Ki'ato?"

"Do I need to?"

"As long as I know you are part of us again, as long as our hearts and souls and triad are complete, even if you are physically away from me I will be all right."

That settled, she had something else she desperately needed to take care of. She squirmed free and worked her way down his body until she burrowed under his tunic and found his cock. As his taste filled her mouth, her senses awoke and she realized she'd spent the past seven years not just in an emotional haze, but a physical one as well. She closed her eyes and moaned, laid her cheek against his smooth thigh and felt comforted as she sucked him. Her senses felt sharper than they had, hearing and smell...

And taste.

Her mind swirled as her emotions swelled.

Home. She was home.

No fucking way would she ever give them up again. The Confederation could kiss her ass.

Sammuel chuckled as he sat up. "I told you before, Ki'ato. Only Master and myself may kiss your beautiful ass." He pulled her trousers down and proceeded to do just that, licking and kissing and nipping at her cheeks even as Ker rested his hands on her head.

"Ki'ran, I suggest if you wish to have any opportunity to fuck her tonight, you do it now. Because once I get my cock inside her, it is staying there all night."

Heat curled through her body at his words. She took him even deeper into her mouth.

"Thank you for the warning, Master." She felt Sammuel leave the bed for a moment. When he returned, his naked flesh pressed against hers as he helped her shed her clothes.

His hands stroked her back, but neither man made her relinquish the cock in her mouth. His knees nudged hers farther apart.

She didn't need a command to get wet either. Sammuel noticed. "You have missed us." He plunged a finger deep inside her, drawing another moan from her.

Ker's eyes closed. "Love, this is just the first of many for you tonight." His cock swelled. She moaned again as his thick, sweet juices hit her tongue.

Sammuel's cock pressed against her as his hands grabbed her hips. Then he plunged deep inside her, hard and fast, her body melting around him.

Ker wrapped her braid around his hand. "Come for us, Ki'ato."

Aine's body responded as if she'd never spent a night away from them. Her muscles clenched around his cock as her passionate cries were muffled by Ker's member.

Sammuel didn't bother trying to hold back. He came and held

himself still deep inside her. She felt him flooding her, warming her, renewing their bond.

Relieved but far from sated, she shivered pleasantly when he feathered his lips down her spine. "I cannot believe you are back in our arms," he murmured.

Ker had already hardened again. Gods, how could she have wanted to give this up! His grip on her braid tightened even further as his cock grew hard and hot. When it throbbed, swelled, then exploded again, she let out another happy moan. Her lips and tongue lapped at him, sucking, swallowing it all and wanting more.

"I need to be inside you, Ki'ato," he said.

She wrapped her arms around his hips, refusing to let go.

Sammuel burst out laughing. "Good luck with that, Master."

He tugged on her braid. "You can spend the night with Ki'ran's cock in your mouth." He handed her braid to Sammuel, who helped pull her off him. He climbed out of bed and disrobed. Sammuel had to wrap an arm around her waist to keep her from diving for his cock again as he climbed back in.

Ker took her braid back and placed his hand in the middle of her back. "I suggest you move fast," he teased Sammuel. "She is desperate."

Laughing, Sammuel moved out of the way while Ker knelt behind her in his place. Sammuel stretched out on the bunk on his back. Ker guided her over to him where she wasted no time swallowing his member.

Ker patted her on the ass. "I'm guessing that will keep you busy for a while." He caressed her hips, his fingers parting her folds, playing with her, teasing her. "So beautiful, love." He lined his cock up and quickly sank inside her.

Aine sighed with relief. Not only from the comfort of Sammuel's taste, but feeling full, feeling joined to Ker once again. His knot immediately swelled and tightened inside her as he slowly pumped his cock. "I will enjoy falling asleep inside you, love. It has been far

too long.”

Ker’s joy washed through her mind, body, and soul. Mixed with Sammuels, it felt nearly intoxicating.

When the familiar warm flood filled her, she closed her eyes and took Sammuels shaft even deeper in her mouth.

Ker closed his eyes. “Both of you,” he hoarsely said. “Come now!”

It felt like a shockwave slammed through her body. Sammuels hand tightened on her braid as his body arched beneath her and his sweet seed filled her mouth.

When his climax subsided, Ker rolled them to their sides, careful not to dislodge Aine from Sammuels. Sammuels shifted position too, to his side, so she could still suck him. Ker’s arm draped over her hip and his other hand drifted between her legs where found her clit.

“Again, Little One. Come for me now.”

With his hard, hot body pressed along her back, she gave herself over to the pleasure. As she felt his knot pulse in time with her own release, she wondered how she could have been so stupid to give this up.

He let her catch her breath before calling another one out of her. Then, with her weakly trembling in his arms, Ker kissed the back of her neck. “And now we sleep, love. Together.”

Sammuel remained where he was, but he curled himself close to Ker and laced his fingers through Aine’s. “All night,” he said.

Aine closed her eyes. For the first night in nearly eight years, since the night before she left on her mission on the Haltoran-dey, she went to sleep feeling whole again.

* * * *

Sometime in the early morning, Aine’s eyes popped open. Something felt wrong, but she couldn’t figure out what...

The feel of Ker’s body along hers, his knot still tightly embedded

inside her, that was as it should be.

She took a deep breath and nuzzled Sammuels thigh. Smiling to herself, she realized what woke her. After a few seconds of searching, she found his flaccid cock and greedily engulfed it again.

Next to her, Sammuels chuckled. When his hand settled on her head and stroked her hair, she took a deep, relieved breath and promptly fell asleep again.

* * * *

Hot lips on the back of her neck nuzzling her ear awoke her. "Aaaaine," Ker teased. "Morning."

She pressed her cheek to Sammuels thigh. She didnt want to let go. "No," she mumbled as best she could around his cock.

Ker stroked her cheek with his hand. "Love, you have a ship to run. Responsibilities."

Fuck. She did.

He sensed her thoughts. "Two months until we reach Korellas. If you wish to turn the Candola Ryke over then, you can. Or if you wish to wait until you return to the Confederation to do it, Sammuels can come back with you. We will call it a diplomatic escort or something."

Now that she had them back, she didnt want to let them go.

Sammuel finally coaxed her into releasing him. He held her hands, kissing them. "Love, we can be with you every night during our journey there, but during the day we do not wish to undermine your status with the crew."

She shook her head. "I cant be this close to you now and not be with you." Her heart couldnt bear to let them go.

He kissed her. "Perhaps I can stay here during the day then. We can say I am learning about the ships systems and technological advancements."

Ker agreed. "Excellent idea. You are not really needed on the

other ship at this time. Caz can escort me back and forth at night.” Aine felt his knot recede. She reluctantly let him turn her over to face him. “Do not worry, love. Jarl is with us, he will help Caz.” He smiled. “A little political intrigue. I have never had a secret affair with a Dreadnought’s captain before.”

His playful expression started her laughing. So hard, in fact, she had to lay her head back down on his chest until she caught her breath, still hiccupping on occasion.

It felt *damn* good.

* * * *

Caz brought them breakfast. He’d already coordinated with Jarl and retrieved fresh uniforms for Sammuel and Ker. He left them alone to eat and shower, and before 0500 hours, all three were dressed and Aine felt the pang of good-bye even though Ker was only returning to the other ship.

He pulled her close, kissing her deeply. “You have made me so proud, Ki’ato. I would never wish do to anything to jeopardize what you have done, your reputation with your crew.” He squeezed her shoulder, then stepped back and snapped her a precise salute.

She automatically came to attention and returned it.

Caz escorted him from the cabin. Sammuel pulled her to him, then delivered a hard, stinging slap to her ass.

“What was that for?”

He smiled. “A reminder about your mouth. When this is over and we can take some time for the three of us, I have plans for you, Little One.”

“Like what?”

“Like tying you up in our bed and ravishing you so completely that you will understand how much we missed you.”

Okay, she already needed a new pair of panties because the ones she wore were totally damp.

“You said I can fly.”

“Any ship in our fleet you want, it is yours. And I have the rank to grant it.” He soothed his hands over her rump. “Though I am hoping when you see Master’s ship that you will think it a suitable match for your skills.”

She sensed his amused, teasing thought. “What do you have up your sleeve?”

He smiled as he released her. “Just wait. It is a surprise. One you will love, I am sure.”

* * * *

Caz snuck Sammuel out through his cabin after returning from taking Ker back to the Tav’rokian Might. The VIP cabin, fortunately located on the other side of Caz’s room and linked through another door, would provide adequate cover and not force her to have to explain an Act’huran Admiral and Ambassador sleeping in her quarters every night if anyone spotted them coming and going.

By 0600 hours, Aine sat on the bridge in her command chair and went over morning reports. Caz brought her coffee and hesitated before releasing it to her. When she looked up to see why, he winked.

She felt the grin crease her face and barely managed to contain her laughter.

He grinned back. Then he leaned in and whispered in Act’huran, “You’re smiling, sir. Please don’t scare the crew.”

That finished her off. She managed to disguise her laughter as a coughing fit. Caz hurried to bring her a glass of water, but the playful and barely disguised smirk on his face nearly set her off again.

She knew some of the crew situated at stations closest to her command chair suspected something off about her that morning.

Frankly, she didn’t care.

He finally left her alone, but with her triad restored she easily sensed Caz’s amused presence standing behind her.

A few minutes later, she felt Sammuel's presence even before the bridge doors slid open and he entered.

Oh, boy.

If trying to maintain her Ice Queen persona had been rough with Caz, this would be a sure test of her will.

"Admiral Jorvis, it's a pleasure to have you on board, sir."

When she spotted the evil twinkle in his eyes she knew she was in trouble. "Thank you, Captain Lorcan. I am not disturbing you?"

"Not at all."

"Might I trouble you for a tour of the bridge and ship? There were many things I wished to ask the other night, but we were in a hurry and did not have time."

She hesitated, then stood. "Not at all, it would be my pleasure."

He stepped back to allow her to pass, but his gaze on her body scorched her.

"My English is...rather rusty, Captain. I understand you are fluent in Act'huran?"

Oh...fuck. "Yes, I am."

Ever helpful, Caz chimed in from his position a step behind her. "Only myself and the Captain speak Act'huran, Admiral."

A slow, sexy grin spread across Sammuel's face. "Excellent. Would you mind indulging me? I do not wish to miss any details because I did not properly understand."

Aine took a deep breath and led him over to the life support system panel. "Not at all, Admiral." She switched to Act'huran and pretended to point things out. "What the hell are you up to?"

Sammuel pretended to nod at the appropriate times and randomly pointed to things on the screen. "I simply wanted to make sure we could converse in private. That way I knew if I wanted to tell you about how hard you are going to get fucked by both of us tonight when we retire to your cabin, I could do so without being understood by others." He turned to her, smiling.

Caz disguised his own fit of laughter with a coughing spell.

“What happened to not jeopardizing my status with the crew? You could say it mentally, you know.”

“Ah, but this is so much more fun, openly teasing and torturing you like this. Knowing that at this very moment you are dying to drop to your knees and suck my cock, and we are discussing it out in the open as if we are oh, say, discussing life support systems. Why do you think I wanted to make sure only you and Caz could understand me?”

Aine had to suck in a breath to stop herself from doing just that.

“Does the Admiral have any special requests for tonight?” Caz helpfully chimed in.

“Why, yes I do. I believe with your background if I were to ask you to prepare a very romantic dinner for Master and myself to feed to our t’wren after her long absence, you would know exactly what I ask of you.”

Caz grinned. “Yes, I believe I do. I will make sure everything is ready. Say, 2100 hours?”

“Perfect!”

Aine finally regained her senses—and remembered to speak in Act’huran. “What the hell?”

Sammuel leaned in as if listening to her explanation of another aspect of the life support controls. “You shall find out later, love. Until then, allow your mind to freely wander as far as it would like. I wish for you to be so wet you can barely stand it by the time we get you out of that uniform.”

* * * *

Too late. By the time they finished with their “tour” of the bridge systems nearly an hour later, Aine knew her panties were soaked through and hoped she didn’t have a visible wet spot on her uniform trousers.

She didn’t know how Caz managed to maintain a professional,

although slightly amused expression. Her face felt supernova hot, her body almost trembling from the effort not to throw herself into Sammuels arms and beg him to take her right then and there.

They moved to the lift to continue their "tour."

Once the door closed, Caz hit the stop button and turned to face the wall. "I'll try not to listen," he said, not bothering to conceal his amused tone.

Sammuel pinned her against the wall and kissed her, tongues and lips mashed together, her arms draped around his neck as he fumbled with her trousers. She couldn't kick them all the way off without removing her boots first. He didn't care. He opened his own fly and spun her around, his cock sinking inside her drenched pussy from behind without any resistance.

"Do not come," he growled in her ear as he fucked her hard and fast, finishing quickly, leaving her whining and desperate.

He leaned over her back and rested a hand on the lift wall for support. "No. You will wait until tonight. I want you so out of your mind with need by the time I let you come that I have no worries of ever losing you to the Confederation again."

Caz snorted in amusement. "I have a feeling that won't be a problem, sir."

He withdrew and turned her around to face him. Nearly out of her mind already, she begged.

"Please, Sammuels!"

He arched an eyebrow at her. "Feel free to drop to your knees, if you wish."

She did, eagerly sucking him in, at least able to temporarily sate that craving. After a few minutes, Caz cleared his throat. "We should get the lift moving again, sirs."

Sammuel laughed and grabbed her braid to haul her to her feet again. She clung to him on shaky legs as he helped her adjust her uniform. She didn't want to let go of him ever again.

He tipped her chin to face him. "Love, as much as you want, any

time you want, on whatever ship you desire. Master and I will follow you anywhere it is possible for us to go. Please, only go where we can follow?"

Beyond speech, she nodded. Then he kissed her again, tenderly, sweetly, nearly bringing her to tears from the emotions washing from him, the power of his gratitude that she was again in his arms. He stepped in for one last hug before he adjusted his own uniform and turned to Caz. "All clear."

Caz turned around and frowned. "Not quite." He stepped over, helped her smooth her uniform and rebutton her coat where they missed a hole and got it lopsided. "Better. Hair's a mess but no time to rebraid it. I'll do it at lunch."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "You're going to be impossible to live with now, aren't you?"

"No, sir. My captain's happy, that means I'm happy." He grinned. "You are happy, aren't you?"

She threw her arms around him and hugged him. "Yes, I'm happier than I've been in a long time."

* * * *

Throughout the course of the tour, Sammuel took her three more times, twice in the lift and once in the engine room. Caz escorted them back to the cabins at lunchtime. Sammuel disappeared through the VIP cabin door as Aine went through hers. Seconds later, he ran through the door leading from Caz's cabin and tackled her onto her bed.

"Did you miss me, Ki'ato?" he growled.

"Immensely."

"You are lucky I cannot knot with you like Master can," he rumbled against her throat as his teeth grazed her flesh. "You would not leave this cabin for weeks."

"You gonna talk or fuck?"

He sat up, grinning as he quickly stripped her of her trousers and boots. He didn't bother removing his, just opened the fly before sinking his cock inside her again with a happy moan.

This time he didn't move. "Oh, love, this is the best feeling in the world!"

She wrapped her legs around him. "Are you really going to make me wait all day?"

He started thrusting, his strokes perfectly gliding along every pleasure point as if no time had passed between them. "Oh, absolutely. Do you think you are the only one who has lived without passion all this time?"

She sat up and put a hand on his chest. "Wait. *Stop*, Sammuel."

He looked down at her and fell still but didn't withdraw. He frowned. "What?"

"What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

He actually blushed. "Without you in our lives, neither Master nor I felt much desire. He would let me suck him for comfort for both of us, but neither of us felt...horny."

Okay, now she felt even guiltier. "Sammuel, I'm sorry. I didn't know. I figured the two of you would move on and find someone else."

He shrugged. "Past is past. We are together now." He bumped his hips into her, reminding her of what they'd been doing. "I *am* trying to make up for lost time, love."

She laughed and wrapped her arms around him. "Then by all means, Ki'ran," she said. "Fuck my brains out." Maybe she could hold on until later, until their little surprise.

He dropped his forehead to her chest and started thrusting again, hard and fast, until she felt his release and his body limply collapsed on top of her. "Oh, love," he whispered. "Please never leave us again."

She tried to wiggle her body against him, to rub her clit against his body even though she knew damn well he wouldn't let her come yet.

“I might not be the brightest bulb, but I do learn from my mistakes.”

* * * *

They quickly showered, then ate the wonderful lunch Caz prepared. She felt an appetite like she hadn’t had in years. While she ate, Caz stood behind her and rebound her hair.

“Try not to muss it up again before dinner, sir,” he teased. “You scared the crew enough with your happy mood this morning.”

Sammuel laughed. “Really?”

“Totally freaked them out. They’re wondering what the hell’s going on, what she knows that they don’t. She never laughs. She’s always a solid block of ice. The only time she ever smiles is during battle. The bigger the smile, the more dangerous the conflict.”

Sammuel nodded. “I can see where that would be disconcerting to them, brother.”

Caz finished with her braid and looked at Sammuel. “You’re a little disheveled, too. Want me to rebraid it?”

“If you don’t mind?”

He grabbed the brush and stepped behind him. “I swore to serve our Master. I wouldn’t have asked if I minded.” After a moment he added, “Maybe I’ll grow mine out again.”

It struck Aine then that they all spoke Act’huran, and had been for most of the morning.

She really was home.

* * * *

Ker lay in bed, eyes closed, hands clasped behind his head, a smile on his face. He felt his t’wren nearby, both of them happy.

He felt happy.

This was his first pain-free day since her departure on the Calpisi Morgan years ago. He hadn’t slept at all the night before, too busy

staring at her face, and at Sammuel's happy expression. Nothing could blemish this perfection.

Well, it would be easier if they could all be together without worry, but he didn't want to mar her final days with the Confederation. She worked hard to get where she was, and she deserved that respect.

Jarl entered with his lunch. "I hope you're hungry, sir."

"Very. Just put it there. I will eat shortly."

"Are you all right, sir?"

He opened his eyes. "Absolutely."

Jarl's face brightened. "So it's true? What Caz said?"

"Yes. You now have someone to help keep the *three* of us in line."

Jarl breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm glad to hear she's back, sir."

"You are not the only one."

Ker finally ate, leisurely, savoring the taste of his food. Jarl had provided all his favorites. No doubt the fact that he had an appetite again would please their yeoman. When Jarl came to take his empty dishes, Ker told him to go to the Candola Ryke and stay there with them, to take care of them.

"What about you, sir?"

"I shall be over later tonight. It will be less suspicious if you are also there with the Admiral."

"If you are sure?"

"I am. I plan to nap this afternoon. I have a long sleepless night ahead of me."

Jarl laughed. "Very well, sir."

Alone again, he returned to his bed and lay there, focused on his mates' energy. So happy. Together again. Their energy flowed through him as strong as before their separation.

He napped.

* * * *

Hours later, something awoke Ker. Fearful at first, he relaxed when he strongly felt his t'wren's energy. He sat up and glanced at the time. Almost dinner time, but he wasn't hungry. He'd have Jarl or Caz bring him something later once over at the Candola Ryke.

His lips curled in a smile. Unless Sammuel had already made plans for them to welcome their wayward one back with a kam'cerak dinner.

He closed his eyes and focused on Sammuel. Yes, he felt the anticipation flowing through him.

Sneaky, willful man.

And how he loved him for it.

He threw the covers back, got out of bed, and started to cross the dim cabin and to the head when he heard a noise behind him. Before he could turn, a blow struck him across the back of the head and he collapsed to the floor, unconscious.

Chapter Twenty-One

After lunch they returned to the bridge. Aine was pleasantly surprised to see Jarl, even more pleased that he and Caz seemed to hit it off. She'd worried the two yeomen might butt heads over her. Jarl took good care of her while on the Haltoran-dey. As good as Caz took care of her now, even if they didn't have as close a relationship as she had with Caz.

Sammuel gave her a respite from the teasing, asking in English about their voyage. The Act'huran vessel was little more than a piggyback rider, their engines on only to provide life support, shields, and artificial gravity support to the smaller vessel while the Candola Ryke did the heavy lifting.

"We'll emerge from our jump in two hours," she explained. "The rest of our journey will be under normal trans-light and sub-light propulsion."

"Why is that, Captain?"

She didn't miss the twinkle in his eyes. He knew damn well why, but he enjoyed playing up to her, giving her crew a show, making her look good. She explained the territory to him, the radiation pockets that dotted this region and made jump travel risky. If their sensors were knocked out during a jump by one of those pockets, they would, literally, be flying blind and in danger of collision, and the jump engines couldn't just be shut down like their other engines. Once a jump was engaged, it had to complete the cycle.

After two hours her helm, nav, and engineering officers coordinated their planned emergence from the jump. The two battle cruisers soon emerged from their jumps and rejoined them. Aine

almost forgot Sammuel's distracting presence as he stood behind her, flanked by Caz and Jarl, as she ran through the power-down of the jump engine.

Something niggled at her. She checked the systems on her command panel, frowning as she looked at it. Something wasn't right.

She called out to her engineer as her Ice Queen mode fully slipped back into place. "Engineer, full systems status report."

"Full, sir?"

"Was I not clear?" she snapped.

"Right away, sir." He ran the diagnostics. "Results to your console, sir."

She studied them. Nothing wrong. Not a reading out of place.

"Run them again," she ordered as she stood and walked to his panel. "Now."

"Yes, sir."

Caz moved across the bridge to stand behind her. "Sir?" he asked.

She shook her head and held up a hand to stay his questions.

The feeling grew stronger in her gut. There was a problem, she just couldn't pinpoint it.

Three more checks and nothing wrong.

"Go down to engineering and run a complete ship diagnostic scan from there," she softly ordered, looking at the results on his console. "Something's not right. I want to know what that something is."

He nodded, "Aye, sir. Right now." He quickly left the bridge.

She turned to Caz. "You don't feel it?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, sir."

She returned to her command chair and punched through the systems again. Screen after screen of nothing but green lights and readings at perfect levels.

Her gaze fell on Sammuel. "*Do you feel it?*" she mentally asked him.

One eyebrow arched, but he imperceptibly nodded. "*Master is asleep. I sense that. He is fine.*"

So what the fuck had her skin feeling like every hair on her body wanted to stand on end?

“Com, get me the Markus Bight and the Exceloran on the com.” Maybe it was a problem with one of the battle cruisers.

“Aye.”

After a few minutes of discussions with those captains, nothing appeared out of the ordinary there, either.

She contacted the Tav’rokian Might and asked to speak to their captain. When their com officer hesitated, she barked at him in Act’huran. “Get your captain on the line, now, or Admiral Jorvis will hand your head to you!”

“Right away, ma’am!”

She didn’t correct him. Behind her, Sammuel snickered. “I think he’ll have to change his trousers, love,” he murmured in Act’huran.

Both Jarl and Caz laughed.

Their captain hesitated to give her access to his diagnostics systems until Sammuel stepped behind her and barked at him himself through the com. Within seconds, the Tav’rokian Might’s computer streamed the data to her, flooding her command console display with the info she called up. Tapped into their computer, she ran through familiar systems and readings she hadn’t seen since her time on the Haltoran-dey.

All normal.

Without warning, she stood. “First, take over. Admiral, come with me, please.” Before the men could react she left the bridge without waiting for a reply.

The men hurried after her. Once back in her cabin she paced. “What the hell is wrong? I feel it!”

Sammuel frowned. “I do too, love, but I also do not know why.”

She wheeled around and looked at Caz. “Do you feel it?”

“I feel stress from both of you, but I don’t feel whatever it is that’s stressing you.”

“Shit.” She immediately glared at Sammuel. “Don’t you dare try

to spank me over that, either.”

He smirked. “No, love. Not under these circumstances.”

* * * *

Ker awoke face-down on what he assumed to be his cabin floor. With the lights off he didn’t know if he was alone or not. His hands were cuffed behind him. Energy shackles, if he had to guess.

He held his breath and listened, but didn’t hear anyone else in the room.

What in holy hell is going on?

He sensed his t’wren on the other ship, a little agitated but unaware of what was going on.

The cabin door opened. Two sets of footsteps approached him, then hands grabbed his arms and hauled him to his feet. In the light from the passageway he saw the faces of the first officer and one of his guards. Both unmated t’amen-ra.

“I demand to know what is going on!” Ker snapped.

The first officer, Parekin, smirked as they pushed him out the door and down the hallway toward the bridge. The man was very young, someone he had never worked with before, a last-minute addition to their crew when the original first officer was killed in an accident.

Ah.

“You demand nothing, Ambassador,” the officer said as he shoved him again. “We are in control of this vessel. Where are Admiral Jorvis and your yeoman?”

“If you are in command of this vessel,” Ker said, trying to maintain a placid tone, “then you know very well they are on the Candola Ryke. I sent them there to learn from the crew.”

“Recall them. Now.” They reached the bridge. There were only two men manning the controls when there should be at least four.

Dark fear coiled in his stomach.

“Why would I recall them? They have not yet completed what I

sent them to do.”

“He is your t’arn, Ambassador. I am not stupid. You will not tell him anything is wrong, either. Either recall him, now, or we’ll kill you.” The guard pointed a plasma pistol at him.

“I do believe if I am the one with a weapon held on me that I am owed an explanation.”

“Fine. Your Admiral has quite a raider bounty on his head. And we’ve been offered a handsome bonus to bring you along as part of the deal. Disrupt the treaty talks, send the Confederation and the Act’hurans on a hunt to locate you both, and that will leave a large swath of territory mostly unprotected.”

“The diryllium mines.”

“Exactly. Twenty-five freighters full, to be precise, a large convoy ripe for the taking if the Confederation is otherwise distracted hunting you down. Recall him.”

“You realize we’ll be destroyed by the Confederation battle cruisers? Captain Lorcan will hunt you down. She will never allow you to take me when I have been trusted to her protection.” *Especially since I’m her Master and you are too stupid to know that.*

“My financiers are counting on Captain Lorcan’s dedication to duty, Ambassador. They want to lure her away from the fight to try to take her out as well. Lots of old scores to settle at once.”

“Where are the captain and the others?”

Parekin arched an eyebrow. “I suggest if you don’t wish to join them that you don’t ask questions.” He shoved Ker toward the com console. “Recall them. Now.”

* * * *

It was close to dinner time, but Aine wasn’t hungry. She used her cabin console to go through the systems again and again, the systems on the other two battle cruisers, and the Tav’rokian Might. Just as she was about to start another round on the Candola Ryke, something

caught her eye.

“Sammuel, how many crew on the Tav’rokian Might?”

He sat in one of the chairs, legs crossed, hands clasped behind his head. “Thirty-two total, including myself, Master, and Jarl. Why?”

A chill washed through her. “There’s only five live bodies showing on the sensors. And we know one of them is Master.”

Sammuel bolted from his seat for the cabin door. Before she could stop him, the sound of her com link did.

“Captain? I have a hail from the Tav’rokian Might. Ambassador D’arsolan wishes to speak to Admiral Jorvis immediately.”

“Patch it through.” She slid out of her seat and let Jorvis have it. “*Don’t let on we know*,” she thought to him.

Sammuel schooled his face to a bland expression. “Ambassador?”

Standing to the side, she could see the screen but knew she wasn’t visible on it. “Admiral Jorvis, I need you and Jarl back on the Tav’rokian Might to go over some things.”

Aine shook her head. They couldn’t clearly read Ker’s thoughts from that far away, but she knew if Sammuel and Jarl set foot on that ship all three men were as good as dead.

“Ambassador, I do not believe Captain Lorcan is finished with our tour yet.” He looked at her. “Are you?”

She spoke loudly enough they could hear her on the other end. “We need another two hours, then they’re all yours, Ambassador.”

She watched Ker’s eyes flick to someone standing off-screen, then back. “Very well, that is fine. Two hours then. Thank you, Admiral. And thank you, Captain Lorcan. I sincerely appreciate your indulgence in this. Tav’rokian Might out.”

The screen cut off.

Sammuel swore. He stood and started pacing. “What the hell is going on? We must go get him!”

She held up a hand to silence him. She slipped back into her seat, her fingers flying over the console. After a moment, she turned to Caz. “Get your body armor on and get mine. We’ll wear stealth suits

and we need weapons. I also want a mini console and an electro tap. You know the one I mean?" He nodded and raced to retrieve the items.

Sammuel turned on her. "Do you honestly think I will let you go over there without me?"

Her face turned grim. "You have no choice, *Admiral*. This is *my* ship. If I have to lock you in a fucking brig cell while I go get him, I will. Otherwise, I want your word you and Jarl will not try to interfere."

Explosion wouldn't adequately describe the volume of Sammuel's outburst. By the time he calmed himself a moment later, Aine coolly waiting him out, Caz had returned from his cabin. He'd changed into one of the tight, black stealth suits, worn over his body armor. He carried a large satchel, which he set on her bunk, opened, and started removing the contents.

She unbuttoned her uniform coat. "There are currently two ways onto the Tav'rokian Might, Sammuel. The airlock and the utility umbilical corridor. Both are airtight. They'll be monitoring the airlock, obviously. They've got it locked down, and if I try to override it, even having access to the main computer, it'll alert them. They won't be monitoring the umbilical corridor because the only alert is if it's open or closed. And it has to remain open while it's connected to us. You are too damn big to get through the utility umbilical corridor. You're built like a freaking space station. I'm not even sure Caz can make it. I know I can."

"And then what is your plan, Ki'ato? To get yourself killed storming their bridge?"

She smiled, but there wasn't a drop of mirth in her grim expression. "No. First I plan to do a little eavesdropping."

* * * *

As she changed clothes and Caz helped her don her body armor,

she explained her countless hours exploring the ventilation ducts in the Bagtopy Yau as a kid. "I'm a little bigger, but I pulled up their vent specs and I know I can easily make it." Caz helped her load weapons into her stealth suit's pockets. "Once I'm on board, I can figure out where he is. Then I'm going to kill those other four fuckers."

"How do you know there are four involved?" Sammuel asked.

"Basic strategy. The lander and emergency pods on that ship only hold six at the most."

"But with Jarl there would be seven."

She didn't answer him, didn't want to say it in front of their beloved yeoman.

Sammuel looked at Jarl and he understood her meaning and let out another epithet. "Why did they make him call both of us back then?"

"Appearances. I'd be willing to bet those fucks don't know I'm your t'wren, do they?"

He shook his head. "None of the guards with us were aware of it. Only Master, myself, and Jarl." He thought for a moment. "Well, the captain does. Marcoln. He was your first officer on the Haltoran-dey, but you don't think..." He shook his head. "I refuse to believe he'd betray Master."

Another cold smile crossed her face. Whether he was a conspirator or a victim of whoever planned this, Aine knew she had justice to mete out. "Caz, let's go hunting."

Sammuel grabbed her and kissed her, hard. "Please let me go with you."

"You can't. Stay here. If I have to worry about you, I can't focus." She caressed his face. "I can do this. I have to trust that you aren't going to distract me. You said you'd respect my authority as captain."

He nodded. "That does not mean I have to like doing so." He turned to Caz and squeezed his shoulder. "Please protect her with your life."

Caz nodded. "Absolutely. Without question."

Sammuel nodded and let go.

Caz quickly moved with her. They ran down the corridor to the security chief's cabin, and after a brief consultation he personally went to mobilize five of his best men. They would wait outside the airlock for her to open it and let them in. She didn't want any of their plans communicated over the ship's com links in case the men in control of the Tav'rokian Might had figured out how to monitor them. In the hangar bay, Aine popped the access hatch leading to the utility umbilical corridor and looked into it, then glanced at Caz's large frame. Shorter and lighter than Sammuel, but a lot bigger than her.

"I don't know if you'll fit," she whispered.

His grim expression most likely matched her own. "I'll fit, sir."

She touched his arm and smiled. "Hey, he's our Master. Aine for now."

He grinned. "Always wanted a little sister."

He wanted to go first, but she made the valid point that if he got stuck it would block the way for both of them. She went first, pulling up the ship's schematics on the mini console in her hand. As they passed over the galley area, her heart sank as she peered through the grate. Only the dim exit lights illuminated the room, but she easily made out the shapes of several still bodies sprawled on the floor.

After silently lifting the vent grate out of her way, Caz lowered her through the opening into the room. Walking around the outskirts, she made her way to the door and locked it down.

Then she turned on the lights.

Caz dropped through the opening in time to turn and suck in sharp breath at the gory sight.

Aine wished she hadn't looked. The men's throats had been slit. From what she could count, eight men, including one she suspected was the captain from what she could see of his uniform. She carefully avoided the pools of blood around each body and knelt beside the man. Caz helped her turn him face up.

Marcoln's sightless eyes stared up at the ceiling.

“Oh, no,” she sadly whispered. Which was worse, seeing him lay dead before her, or knowing she might have had to kill him for treachery?

This was worse. Much worse.

“You knew him?” Caz asked.

She nodded and closed his eyelids, unable to stomach his empty brown gaze. “He was my first officer on the Haltoran-dey. He was a damn good officer.”

“What do we do next?”

She stood and surveyed the carnage. Good men, all of them. Loyal to their Ambassador and Admiral and now needlessly dead over raider greed.

Rage threatened to take her. How many more people had to die because of these fucking bastards? How many lives ruined?

Temptation warred within her to send her screaming out the galley door and down the passageway like she had that night when she liberated the Bagtopy Yau, mowing down raiders in her path with her energy rifle.

But if she tried that it could get her Master or Caz killed, neither option one she could live with.

Aine hardened her heart. “Back to the ventilation ducts,” she said. She turned off the galley lights, unlocked the door, and let Caz jump up and pull himself into the duct first. He reached down and caught her outstretched arm and pulled her up with him. She continued down the duct with Caz stealthily on her heels. All their hours of sparring practice had paid off. They could work well in close quarters and had a silent rapport allowing them to read the other’s body language.

They crossed one of the large crew dorm cabins that normally housed eight. The room lay dark below them. She reached into her pocket for her flashlight and played the beam through the grate.

More bodies. Some lay in their bunks, murdered while they slept. Some lay sprawled on the floor in puddles of blood.

Aine barely clamped down on her scream of rage.

She wondered where the rest of the bodies had been left, or if the other dorm cabins would reveal more victims.

They silently crawled through the ducts until they reached what she suspected was Ker's cabin. She closed her eyes, let her mind reach out, and found him close by.

"Are you alone, Master?"

His faint reply. *"Yes. Please, Ki'ato, they are soulless. Be very careful."*

She pulled out her flashlight and shone it around the cabin through the grate. There, in a chair, sat Ker. He looked up into the beam. She allowed herself to breathe a sigh of relief.

Caz patted her thigh to get her attention and silently mouthed, *"What now?"*

She pulled out the mini console again, consulted it, and trained the flashlight beam down the ventilation duct until she focused it on an electrical junction box. Creeping down to it, she used her electro tap to hook the console into the ship's systems and override them. First job, lock down Ker's cabin from the inside to prevent them from getting in.

Second, shut down sensors.

Third, open the airlock.

She ripped the tap free and motioned Caz back to the grate over Ker's cabin. He held on to her legs as she unhooked the grate and then he carefully lowered her into the cabin.

She used the electro tap to short-circuit the energy shackles and free Ker. *"Are you okay, Master?"*

He smiled and pulled her to him. *"Yes. Now how do you plan on getting me out of here?"*

Caz dropped into the cabin as the sound of gunfire echoed through the corridor outside. He'd already drawn a pistol. "I suggest getting down."

Someone fired on the door as voices shouted in the corridor.

Aine drew a blade. "Take him," she whispered to Caz. "Lock

yourselves in the head.”

Ker tried to protest.

“Ambassador, your captain is dead. I am now in command of this vessel. I order you to go!”

Caz hooked an arm around him. “Come on, Master. Don’t orphan me before we even get home.”

Ker smirked but let Caz lead him to the head where they locked themselves in.

Aine felt the Ice Queen return. She wanted Ker safe.

More importantly, she didn’t want him witnessing what she wanted to do.

The pounding on the door grew louder. She flattened her back against the wall and locked down the lights before she unsealed the door. When it slid open, an armed man stumbled through.

Not one of her men.

“Lights!” he screamed in Act’huran. When they didn’t come on, he turned, looking at the empty chair. “Where the hell is that fucker?”

Aine silently stepped behind him, and despite his height, she pressed the blade to his throat. In Act’huran she asked, “Who hired you?”

He replied, in Act’huran, “Who the fuck are you?”

“Wrong answer.”

He slumped to the floor, clutching his throat.

One down.

She wiped her blade on his uniform and stepped over to the door to wait. She heard her men sweeping the corridors, screaming for reinforcements when they discovered the crew’s bodies, and more sounds of a firefight from the bridge.

Another man ran through the door. He tripped on the fallen body of his comrade. “Parekin,” he yelled. “What the fuck?”

Before he could gain his footing, she held the blade to his throat. In Act’huran she asked, “Ready to die, traitor?”

He dropped his gun. “They never told me they were going to kill

the crew! We were just supposed to deliver the Ambassador and the Admiral to the raiders.”

“How many did you kill?”

“Only one guy. They paid me to—”

She slit his throat, then wiped her blade clean on his jacket. “That’s for Marcoln, Aggie, and my parents, you son of a bitch. Not to mention the other men you murdered.” She spit on the bodies.

Another man ran in before she could turn. One of hers.

“Captain Lorcan, the bridge is secure. Two dead.”

She nodded at the body by her feet. “Two more. That’s all of them, then.”

“The Ambassador?”

“Safe. Caz!”

The men emerged from the head. She turned to them.

Ker didn’t look at the bodies on the floor. “Captain Lorcan—”

He couldn’t finish because she raced across the cabin and threw herself into his arms. She cried as he held her, scooped her up, murmuring to her in Act’huran.

“Master,” she whispered. “I love you so much!”

“I love you too, Ki’ato.” He tried to put her down, but she clung harder.

Her security officer nervously shifted his weight and cleared his throat. “Um, sir? Admiral Jorvis is about to kill someone to find out if the Ambassador is all right. He seemed pretty worried about you, too.”

“Tell him, and I quote, I said he should hold his fucking horses.” She kissed Ker, not caring who saw. “We’ll be right there.”

She finally let Ker set her back on her feet but she wouldn’t release his hand. “Let’s go.”

He tried to pull free. She wouldn’t let him. “I don’t care who knows you’re my Master,” she said, in English.

Caz let out a low whistle of surprise.

Her security men flanked them, weapons drawn and ready, as they

made their way to the airlock where Sammuel and Jarl anxiously awaited. Upon seeing them emerge unharmed through the Candola Ryke's airlock hatch, Sammuel ran over to them before pulling up short, as if remembering himself.

"Ambassador, are you all right?" His gaze dropped to where Aine held his hand.

"I'm fine, Ki'ran."

"Captain Lorcan?"

She released Ker's hand and grabbed Sammuel, laying a long, passionate kiss on him. "I'm fine."

He looked stunned, tried to speak, and was silenced again by another kiss. When she let him go, she smiled. "I decided I don't give a shit who knows. This is my last mission. What are they going to do, fire me?"

A wide, beaming smile broke across his face. He picked her up and spun her around. "You beautiful, willful woman. Gods do I love you!"

Chapter Twenty-Two

With heavy hearts, Sammuel and Caz supervised gathering the Act'huran crew's bodies into cases to return to their families after they finished the treaty signing at Korellas. Ker told Aine what the traitors had told him, that their plan had been to forcibly detach the Tav'rokian Might and make a run to join their compatriots once the jump portion of the journey had completed.

Aine didn't care who knew about her relationship with Ker and Sammuel. They spent every night in her cabin with her, although they tended to stay there during the day to minimize their distraction to the crew.

Several times Caz gently corrected Aine when she spoke Act'huran to the crew and they couldn't understand her.

Four months later, after the Korellas talks ended and Ker signed the treaty, Caz's hair hung almost to his collar and Aine itched to be free of her Confederation uniform. On her final journey as captain of the Candola Ryke to meet with Admiral Iago at a space station to hand the ship over, she sat on the bridge and stared out the vid screen.

Had it been worth it? All the pain and anguish?

When she thought back, in some ways, no. Then again, had she been with Sammuel and Ker as part of the official treaty party, she might have been one of the dead on the Tav'rokian Might.

She had severely crippled raider forces all over the galaxy. Yes, that was definitely worth it. And with her return to the Act'huran military, she'd already been asked to take the lead role coordinating joint efforts between Act'huras and the Confederation in maintaining the pressure on raider forces.

That was also definitely worth it.

She smiled as the space station came into view. Admiral Iago had begged and pleaded over the past several months, short of offering to hand over his own commission to her, to keep her in the Confederation. When she told the Admiral she wouldn't be separated from her mates again, he sighed. "You Act'hurans are damn stubborn, you know that?"

She smiled. "So I've been told, Admiral."

He wanted one more chance to talk to her alone upon her arrival. She met him at the hatchway, with Caz, Jarl, Sammuel, and Ker gathered behind her.

"Everyone has a price, Captain Lorcan. Name it!"

"Admiral Iago, while I appreciate your offer, I can honestly say the Confederation can never find anything valuable enough to separate me from my men again."

"What about your rank? Your commission?"

She grinned. "I'm the commander of an Ambassador's flagship. I have an Admiral willing to give up his rank stripes to serve under me as my captain. I can still fight the raiders and save lives in an Act'huran uniform. I'm sorry Admiral Iago, but my decision is final." She offered him one final salute, which he returned.

He looked at Sammuel and shook his head. "Stubborn damn Act'hurans."

Sammuel grinned. "Yes, we can be."

* * * *

Act'huran battle cruisers met them at the station to escort the Tav'rokian Might back to its home base near Confederation lines. Sammuel appointed her the vessel's captain. Some of the battle cruiser crews transferred to take over for the murdered men. Despite the circumstances, Aine was pleased to see some of the men had crewed with her on the Haltoran-dey. Aine settled into the command

chair and looked over the bridge at her crew as Sammuel, Ker, Caz and Jarl stood behind her watching.

“Helm, Nav, are we ready?” she asked in Act’huran.

“Aye, ma’am.”

She smiled and felt Caz’s amusement that she didn’t correct him.

“Take us home.”

The journey took three weeks. As they neared their base station, Sammuel came to the bridge that afternoon and stood behind her chair. He laid a hand on her shoulder. She covered it with hers, wrapping her fingers around his and holding on.

He leaned in and spoke in her ear. “I cannot wait until we have you home.”

“Home? I thought you promised me no planets?”

He chuckled. “So I did. Look.” He pointed at the vid screen with his other hand.

Several dozen ships, large and small, were docked at the space station. As they drew closer, her eyes widened when she recognized one of them.

“Are you *kidding* me?”

He gently tugged her braid. “Master bought it before you left us, while you were on the Haltoran-dey. It was to be a surprise for when you returned, our home. He had it retrofitted so it can be used for our official duties and his, as well as be comfortable.

She felt tears running down her cheeks but didn’t bother wiping them away. The sight of the Bagtopy Yau had her full attention.

“I promised you it would not be scuttled or sold for scrap, Ki’ato.”

She squeezed his hand. “*That’s* my new ship?”

“That, my love, is your new ship. Rightfully so. The Act’huran Ambassador’s flagship Bagtopy Yau.”

She settled back in her command chair, a smile on her face, her hand still firmly clamped around Sammuel’s as she stared at the Bagy.

* * * *

Ker and Sammuel didn't wait for Caz and Jarl. They led Aine up the gangway to the hatch. She carried her knapsack slung over her shoulder.

"All your codes are intact. Go ahead, *Commander*," Sammuel said with a smile. "Claim your ship."

She punched in her code and the hatchway slid open.

The ship felt alive, much as it had when she grew up on it, not dead and desolate like the night she and Sammuel liberated it from the raiders.

Not much had changed in the captain's stateroom either, other than updates to the facilities, a new galley—and a larger bed.

She fell onto the bed and looked up at her men. "You know, I've been meaning to ask you something," she said to Sammuel. "Before all hell broke loose on our way to Korellas, you were teasing me that morning on the bridge and asked Caz if he knew what you meant by preparing a romantic dinner. What was that about?" While they'd made love many times since then, their grief over the loss of the Tav'rokian Might's crew dampened their spirits and they never had the promised dinner. They would attend an official memorial ceremony later that evening for the fallen men now that they had officially returned to Act'huran territory.

Sammuel lay down next to her. "You will find out soon enough, love. Tonight, after our return." He looked at Ker. "Or does Master have other plans?"

Ker smiled. "No, I think that would be quite appropriate."

* * * *

It was a comfort, after the somber memorial service, to return to the familiar corridors of the Bagtopy Yau. The passageway lay empty as she turned to walk into their cabin.

Sammuel grabbed the back of her uniform coat and pulled her to a stop. “Wait,” he said.

Then Ker draped a soft blindfold over her eyes. He spoke in her ear. “This is long overdue. I can think of no better time to officially welcome you home with a kam’cerak than tonight.”

“A what?”

“Shh.” He kissed her, silencing her. With Sammuel guiding her from behind, Ker led her inside the cabin. She smelled food, heard the door slide shut behind them.

“We are alone,” Sammuel assured her as he reached around and started unbuttoning her coat.

In front of her, Ker kissed her. “For the rest of the night, your only focus is us.”

The men quickly stripped her and guided her over to the bed. Then they spread her arms over her head and tied something soft to each wrist.

“Do not move,” Ker said.

Both men left the bed. Her clit throbbed, aching, already desperate for their touch.

She heard the sound of clothes hitting the floor, then both men returned.

Something cool and smooth touched her lips. “Open,” Sammuel ordered.

She did. He popped a small cherry tomato into her mouth. She chewed and swallowed. “Kam’cerak doesn’t have an equivalent expression in English,” Sammuel explained. “You must experience it. It is mind, body, heart, and soul.” Another cherry tomato touched her lips. “Open, love.”

Ker’s lips latched on to one of her breasts, his tongue flicking her nipple until she felt like she’d explode just from the sensation. Then he withdrew his mouth and she felt something cold and smooth circle her nipple, drawing it into an even tighter peak. “Settle back and prepare for a long evening of our undivided attention, Ki’ato,” he

warned. He popped another cherry tomato into her mouth.

One of the men drizzled a small amount of something cold and wet on her stomach. She realized it was ranch salad dressing when Sammuel fed her a piece of lettuce after dredging it along her tummy.

When they finished the salad course, the men took great care to lick and kiss her stomach, apparently making sure not to miss a single drop. By this time she tugged on the restraints, wanting to be free, wanting them to go down on her or at least fuck her.

No such luck. "You will not have relief for a while yet, love," Ker assured her. "We are only on the first course."

By the time the men reached dessert over an hour later, Aine wanted more than a good hard fucking, she wanted both men to fuck her long and hard. Their love and desire for her wrapped around her like a cloak, not just a feeling, but as part of her heart and soul, beyond her ability to describe.

She understood why there were no equivalent English words.

"Spread your legs, love," Ker ordered.

Okay! Maybe she'd finally get some relief!

They drizzled something warm, thick, and sticky over her slick cleft. Ker stretched out beside her while Sammuel knelt between her legs and started to lick whatever it was off.

"Honey," Ker informed her.

Aine's back arched as Sammuel tortured her with his tongue, long, strong sweeps up and down her folds, avoiding her clit.

"Do not come," Ker reminded her.

After Sammuel finished, he drizzled more over her and Ker took a turn. Sammuel lay beside her, his fingers playing with her nipples, his touch scorching her. They kissed or licked every inch of her body except that tiny little parcel of real estate that would send her bouncing over the cliff into climax.

Finally, when she lay gasping and trembling, every nerve on fire and desperate for release, Sammuel reached up and freed her hands and removed her blindfold. She immediately rolled on top of him. He

grabbed her hips and sank his cock home to the root but wouldn't let her thrust against him.

With her hips pinned against him, all she could do was lie there and whimper.

Ker knelt behind her. "Tell us what you want, love."

"I want you to fuck my ass while he's inside my pussy, and I want your knot inside me all night long!"

Ker laughed. "That seems straightforward."

Sammuel spread her cheeks for him as he slicked his cock and prepared her rosette with his juices. Pressing forward, Aine moaned as they stretched and filled her.

"Come as hard and often as you like, love," Ker said as he slowly thrust.

Aine didn't need any other encouragement. With her clit throbbing and rubbing against Sammuel's hard body, she moaned against his shoulder as she came the first time. He cupped her breasts in his hands and ran his thumbs over her nipples, triggering another explosion inside her.

"I am nearly there, Ki'ran," Ker grunted. "I suggest you hurry."

Sammuel bucked his hips into her from below. When she felt him come, quickly followed by Ker's cock throbbing and swelling as he knotted inside her, it triggered another climax. By the time his knot was firmly and deeply embedded inside her, she'd been reduced to a limp mass draped across Sammuel's chest.

"I think we finished her, Master," Sammuel said with a chuckle.

"So we have." He carefully rolled her with him, onto their sides.

Sammuel kissed her and got out of bed, returning a moment later with a warm, wet washcloth to wipe as much of her down as he could. "Do not want you to be sticky, love. And I doubt you want Master to unknot with you so you can take a shower."

She didn't bother responding, too wrung out to speak mentally or out loud.

He lay in front of her and captured a hand, laced his fingers

through hers. “Are you thoroughly fucked, love?”

She nodded.

Ker laughed. He kissed the back of her neck. “If she is not thoroughly fucked, I am not sure what more we could do for her to rectify that.”

Sleep didn’t have to fight for her body. Feeling almost physically cradled by their love, she fell into a sweet darkness with the comforting sensation of Ker’s cock pulsing inside her ass.

* * * *

Two weeks after taking command of the Bagtopy Yau, Aine sat in her command chair and stared at the vid screen. It still felt surreal, and yet totally right.

Home.

They would leave on their first mission after Jor and Dalmetri’s arrival. Ker had appointed Jor as his personal attaché now that he’d rescinded his retirement plans.

Family.

She felt the smile on her face and had to suppress a laugh. This crew wouldn’t be creeped out by it. All they ever saw her do was smile.

When the shuttle arrived, Aine headed down to the hatchway to meet them, Caz shadowing her. Sammuell and Ker were in the middle of an official vid conference they couldn’t leave.

She looked at Caz. His hair now hung below his shoulders, usually worn loose since an extremely short braid didn’t look right on him. In another few months he could start braiding it again.

“You’re smiling, Commander,” he teased. In private he used her name or called her sister. On duty, he respected her authority and usually showed nothing but professionalism. Right now they stood alone, waiting by the hatch.

“So are you, Yeoman,” she taunted back.

He shrugged. "When my Commander's happy, I'm happy."

"You're a pain in the ass and I love you."

He grinned. "Love you too, kiddo."

She'd been happily relieved to find out her men hadn't been spouting lip service about accepting Caz into their family. Behind closed doors, away from the crew, the men were informal with each other, friendly. Brotherly.

The hatch slid open, revealing Jor and Dalmetri. Dock crew would move all their things into the cargo bay. From there, Jarl and Caz would then take them to their new quarters and get them unpacked and settled.

She offered Jor a smile as she invited them inside and they stepped through the hatch. "It's a pleasure to see you again." She held out a hand, but he opened his arms. She laughed as she hugged him.

"It's a pleasure to see you again as well, sister."

She started to greet Dalmetri when she noticed the stunned look on his face. His eyes were fixed on a point behind her.

She turned and noticed confusion on Caz's face.

"What's wrong, Caz?" she asked.

Jor schooled his expression, shook his head, and gently grabbed her arm. He stepped away from them, pulling her with him.

Dalmetri walked forward to stand in front of Caz, his eyes never leaving the other man. Then he closed them and took a long, deep breath before letting it out. He had a few inches and several pounds on Caz, but he looked like he wanted to melt into the other's arms.

Her heart pounded as she watched Caz also close his eyes, a soft moan escaping him as his head bowed.

Jor pulled her back another step as the two men fell into each other's arms. They stood there several minutes, silent, holding each other. Then Dalmetri kissed Caz, long and deep, as if they were long-parted lovers reunited.

By the time they finally ended their kiss, Aine realized she had a tight grip on Jor's arm. The two men didn't open their eyes as they

stood there, Caz with his head resting on Dalmetri's shoulder.

"You're sure, Dalmetri?" Jor hoarsely asked.

Dalmetri nodded as he reached up to stroke Caz's hair. "Absolutely." He nuzzled Caz's forehead.

"And you?" Jor asked. "Do you understand what this signifies?"

Caz nodded. "Yes. Please. Now." Without another word he grabbed Dalmetri's arm and quickly led him down the corridor toward their new cabin.

Aine's heart slowed. "What just happened?"

Jor hugged her, nearly crushing her. She felt joy washing off him. "Dalmetri says he is our new t'wren." He kissed her forehead before releasing her and following the other two men.

Stunned, she stood there a moment watching their departing backs as she tried to make sense of it. She started to laugh, eventually leaning against the corridor wall for support as she laughed so hard tears ran down her face. She was still hiccupping a few minutes later when she reached her own cabin.

Not only had returning to the Confederation saved lives despite the personal agony she went through, she never would have met Caz. And Caz never would have returned with her. Now, three more souls could find the joy she had.

Ker had returned from the vid conference and sat at his desk. "Is Caz getting Jor and Dalmetri settled in?"

Aine couldn't help it. She roared with laughter, helplessly collapsing on the bunk.

Amused, Ker walked over, sat on the bunk, and waited for her to regain her composure. "Dare I ask what that was about?"

She giggled. "Ooooooh yeah, you could say Caz is getting them settled in just fine." She laughed again.

Damn, laughing feels goooooood.

"What, exactly, is so amusing, Ki'ato?"

She snorted. "Let's just say Jor and Dalmetri didn't have to rescue a feisty, stubborn, half-dead human to find a t'wren."

His eyebrows arched in surprise, setting her off on yet another laughing jag that Sammuel caught the tail end of as he entered the cabin.

“Do I even want to know?”

Ker smiled. “It seems we have temporarily lost the services of one of our yeomen to my brother’s bed for at least the next few days.”

Sammuel frowned. “What?”

“No! I want to tell him, let me!” She giggled, snorted, laughed, and finally managed to get the story out.

Laughter rolled out of Sammuel as he joined them on the bed. “Lucky bastards,” he said. “At least they will not have to use energy shackles on him to keep him from attacking them.”

“Hey, you can still use them on me if you want to get a little kinky.”

The men looked at each other and grinned.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tymber Dalton lives in southwest Florida with her husband (aka “The World’s Best Husband™”), son, and too many dogs. When she’s not dodging hurricanes or writing, she can be found doing line edits or reading or thinking up something else to write. She loves to hear from readers! Please feel free to drop by her website and sign up for her newsletter to keep abreast of the latest news, views, snarkage, and releases. (Don’t forget to look up her writing “alter ego,” Lesli Richardson!)

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