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HIGH OCTANE

KATHLEEN SCOTT

Two hearts are never more than one dimension apart.

A routine fuel run through one of the planet's dimensional portals explodes in violence when Major Geneieve Lockhart's Jumper team is hammered with an unprovoked attack. With her ship disabled and contact to mission control limited, Genie faces her worst nightmare—losing her crew on the blood-soaked floor of a foreign desert.

Help comes from an unlicensed freelance mercenary ship, piloted by a man she never thought she'd see again. Her AWOL ex-lover, Lt. Col. Dante Bowen.

Bowen knows answering Genie's distress call puts his undercover mission to expose a governmental conspiracy at risk. But after faking his death six years ago, he owes her something. Ending up chained in her cargo hold for transport to his own court martial wasn't the thanks-for-the-rescue he expected.

The bridges between them may be in ashes, but their desire burns as hot as ever. Even as Genie wonders what happened to Bowen's code of honor, her body betrays her heart at every turn. The hostile race that attacked her ship, though, is coming back to finish them off. The only way to ensure freedom—on both sides of the dimensional divide—is to put her trust in the one man who betrayed it...

Warning: Contains action-packed dimensional travel, hot military wartime sex, betrayed lovers and evil, power-hungry bastards.

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Kathleen Scott

Dedication

To all the sci-fi geeks and those who think physicists are the real rock stars. Enjoy!

Chapter One

Bombs screeched from the sky, falling from above like lethal rain. The terrible concussion of the blasts rocked the ground beneath Geneieve's feet. She held her flak helmet on with one hand and attempted to contact the command center with the other.

"I need cover! My team is taking heavy casualties here. If you can't get someone to rectify this situation, you're going to lose the entire payload on T-six."

The return reply came back so garbled she heard only every third word. She rose up just enough to see over the natural barricade of a rock face to assess the enemy's progress across the burning red desert.

Getting stuck in heavy fighting during an inter-dimensional mission was always a possibility, but never an easy situation to extricate a team from. Geneieve had exchanged fire with hostile forces before. It wasn't a new experience after ten years in the Jumpers. She damn sure didn't want it to be her last. Not to mention dying on this side of the divide. Not a pretty picture by any stretch of the imagination.

Unable to hear the command center, Geneieve closed the com unit and stuffed it onto her utility belt. If the team was to survive, they had better come up with a way to do so themselves.

She turned to Bertram, her second-in-command. He had a perfect mask of dirt and debris around his field goggles. Flaxen hair had turned red from the drift of sand across the open plain. She didn't imagine she looked much better.

"Find out what's taking Isaacs so long to get the freaking port drives fixed. While you're at it, have Thompson try to raise the command center. I can't get a decent signal and my helmet mic's blown out." Geneieve watched him hurry off, keeping his head low to avoid having his brain shot out by the snipers on the ridge.

Christ, they were all over her team like horny teenagers on their first date. She'd be lucky if even ten percent of her team came out of the mission alive. Not good odds at all. But she'd been in worse fights.

A lump formed in her throat and she choked it down. Dwelling on lost loved ones would get her killed.

Focus. She needed to focus.

A loud ping sounded beside her ear. Chipped rock spun upward, striking her cheek. Warm blood trickled down her face. She pulled her gun off her hip. Laser pistols were useless in killing enemies at this range, but if she got off a lucky shot, she might be able to disable some of the mobile defense shields

stationed in the backs of their transport rovers. Besides, those damn shields operated like one-way valves. Enemy fire could get out, but return shots could not penetrate them.

Geneieve rose up again. Bright sunshine glinted off the windshield of the rover, temporarily blinding her. She squinted against the light and aimed.

The first shot went wide, giving her position away.

Bullets whizzed by her, striking the rock in a cacophony of sound and heat.

“Damn.” She hunkered back down and followed the line of rock cover, taking another position closer to the rover.

One of her team members, Toussant, lay on the ground with a crimson river spreading out behind her, soaking the sand. Her breath came in staccato puffs between tightly pursed lips.

Geneieve tried not to show emotion as she bent over the woman and felt along her utility belt. She’d seen so many comrades maimed and killed in the Jumpers, her skin should have grown as thick as cured leather. But it hadn’t. Seeing the injured now only made her think of the ones left behind. Ones she hadn’t been able to save.

She bit back a curse at the memory. “I need your long-range scope.”

Toussant gritted her teeth. Sweat ran down her ebony face. “Where’s yours, Major?”

“Got hit in the first round of ground fire.” She finally located the long-range scope. “Let me take out the damn defense shield and I’ll see about getting you to the transport.”

Toussant held her side and moved her shoulders slightly, getting into a more upright position. “They got...power...up there yet?”

“Not likely. But it’ll be a hell of a lot safer for you there than here.” With that, Geneieve left the injured solider, screwing on the long-range scope as she continued down the line.

At the end of the rock ledge was a little rounded outcrop that made a perfect place to stand. She steadied her pistol in a crack between stones and closed one eye. Lining up the shot through the lens, she squeezed the trigger. A stream of blue light shot out of the barrel, striking the rover in the power grid.

White sparks showered out in all directions. Enemy soldiers ran for cover as the shield sputtered and died.

Those of her team left standing came out from their cover and began charging the field as the enemy fighters fled.

“Not so tough now you can’t hide behind your screen, eh?” She put her pistol back in her belt and hurried to check on Toussant. The woman was the best damn cultural liaison Geneieve had ever worked with, and as close to a friend as she ever let anyone get. She’d be damned before she’d let her die in such a miserable place.

She squatted down beside the injured solider. “You hanging in there?”

“Tryin’.”

“Do more than try, Lieutenant, or I’ll have you court-martialed when we get back.”

Toussant gave a lopsided grin, pained though it appeared. “I wouldn’t...expect...any less. You...hard-ass.”

“That’s Major Hard-ass.” Geneieve leaned Toussant forward to look for an exit wound. The enemy fighters might have a state-of-the-art shield, but they sure as hell used guns and ammo from a bygone era. A laser would have burned clean through and not created such dramatic blood loss. Then again, maybe that was the point. Her team hadn’t expected lead bullets and hadn’t been prepared for the severity of the injuries incurred.

Who were those guys anyway? One minute the sky was clear all the way to the jump port, and the next, the ships occupied by the hulking warriors were coming out of the sky like a plague of locusts. Had civil war come to the Didan Provinces? It was no great secret there had been bitter infighting among the Didan Chancellery and Council over the last seven or eight years.

Medics administered to the wounded. The injured who were movable were triaged and taken back to the transport’s negligible sickbay. The dead were carried to one of the transport’s empty holds.

Geneieve stole glances at the activity while trying to administer to Toussant’s wounds the best she could. The miserable cleanup of the injured and dying brought back memories as wicked sharp as the point of her field dagger. They lodged somewhere under her heart and gave a painful twist.

“Don’t think...about him...Major.” Toussant winced and moved out of the way of Geneieve’s touch.

Surprised her thoughts could be so easily read, she looked up into tawny eyes. “I stopped thinking about him a long time ago.” It was a lie and they both knew it, but neither said anything more on the subject as Geneieve took off her outer uniform shirt and ripped it into shreds to tie as a pressure dressing around Toussant’s injury.

“After I bind your wound, I’m going to fashion a litter and take you back to the transport. We can’t wait for the medics to get to you.”

“That...bad?”

Geneieve only managed a nod before a large Didan ship came hurtling over the engagement site, landing by the disabled transport vessel. Members of Geneieve’s team hurried to secure tow chains and external power cables to the transport ship so it could be safely moved to the jump port.

The Didans were their contacts on this side of the divide. Trade within the Didan Provinces had provided America, and indeed the entire world on the other side of the port, with a new fuel source that made fossil fuels and oil obsolete. However, since the plant and mineral extracts could not be grown or excavated in Earth’s alpha dimension, the Jumpers were required to make runs to collect the elements used to make the fuel.

Before Geneieve could construct a makeshift litter, the medics ran over to collect Toussant.

Geneieve stood back, allowing them to perform their duty. Knowing Toussant was in capable hands, she crossed the distance to the transport to speak with her Didan counterpart. As she neared the ship, details of the hull became clear. The uniforms weren't standard Didan military issue.

"Oh, shit!" She picked up speed and began shouting orders to halt the link-up with the other ship.

One of the more recent additions to her team, a lieutenant fresh out of the academy, met her halfway, his eyes wide with surprise. "Did I do something wrong, Major?"

"Let me speak with the merc ship's commander and I'll let you know after."

"Merc?"

The kid acted like he'd never heard the word before. Geneieve fought hard not to roll her eyes or take a strip of hide from him before she knew if they were a licensed crew or freelance. A crew licensed by the Didan government had to operate under a rigid set of laws and regulations. A freelance crew operated under its own moral code, or lack thereof—a difference that was about as broad as the Grand Canyon.

Without regard for the fact she had stripped down to her synthetic undershirt and didn't have the insignia of her rank on her shoulder, she approached the first member of the merc crew she reached, standing close enough to violate way beyond the borders of his personal space.

"Where is your commander and proof of licensure?"

Though he outweighed her by at least eighty pounds and had a foot on her in height, he stepped back. "He's busy on the bridge."

"Direct me."

"He said not to bother him." The man turned his attention to the open door of the merc ship.

"I'll just bet he did." She turned, shouting to Bertram, who had just exited the transport, "Treat these mercs as hostile forces until otherwise notified. Do not let them on the ship or near the payload."

Bertram saluted and drew his weapon. The mercs standing outside looked around, confused at the suddenly aggressive attitude of the U.S. team.

Geneieve started toward the merc ship's entrance ramp then stopped and turned. "Oh, and Bertram, if any of them look as if they aren't going to cooperate, shoot them."

"Yes, Major."

Geneieve took the ramp at a brisk walk, shoulders squared and chest out. She didn't draw her weapon, but kept her hand on the butt to show she meant business. The merc she'd intimidated outside looked uncertain of his actions. But, seeing more of their ship and the non-existence of uniforms or federal seal of any manner convinced her it was indeed a freelance operation. If so, they were being very accommodating to her and her team.

Suspicion rose like a heat wave in her lower belly. Freelance mercs normally wouldn't hesitate to slaughter an entire transport crew and steal the haul before crossing the jump portal into God-only-knew where to fence the goods. They were little better than pirates.

The very thought turned her stomach. Made her see red. Freelancers had more blood on their hands than any single group on this side of the divide. At least Didan's enemies fought for principles easily understood by an opposing army, like fertile soil, water sources and mineral rights. Freelancers fought for one thing—profit.

They reached the bridge and were stopped by two hulking guards standing in front of the closed door. They raised their laser rifles, crossing them in an X to bar her entrance.

“Cap’n says he doesn’t want to be disturbed, Rolf. That means the sweet piece, too.”

Man, did it ever irritate her when a member of the male persuasion treated her as if she didn’t have a lucid thought in her head. In less time than it took the big merc to blink, she had the field knife from her belt held to his groin. The other hand held a bead on his partner with her pistol.

“If both you boys want to sing like angels, just keep on pissing me off. If you want to be around to enjoy the equipment your Gods gave you, let me on the deck.”

At any moment, one of them could disarm and kill her. It was common knowledge with soldiers and mercs that to take out the leader first meant an easier victory over their followers. It stood to reason they would try to put her down. But they didn’t. They stood looking at her with something close to fear in their eyes. Surely not fear of her. She was tough, but no match for three mercs with rifles loaded for bear. However, some thought a U.S. Jumper uniform reason enough, though she hated like hell to hear shit like that. They weren’t the bad guys here.

The merc with the knife to his crotch flinched and she nicked the inside of his thigh.

He took in a deep breath and turned to his counterpart. “Let her pass.”

“Cap’n will have your balls worse than she does.” The second guard moved out of the way.

The door panel slid open to reveal a spacious bridge section. There were two chairs at the flight controls, intended for pilot and co-pilot, a navigation seat and one for communication. Judging from the arrangement of the setup, it took at least a two-person crew to fly the damn thing. It was also Didan army surplus and not originally a private craft.

The pilot’s seat faced forward and swiveled slightly as the man sitting there moved a bit to flip a switch. “This better be good or you know what’s going to happen to you.”

Breath failed to pass either in or out of Geneieve’s lungs. They’d stopped working. Though she couldn’t see his face, she knew that voice like she knew the beat of her own heart.

No! It wasn’t possible. He’d been captured and presumed dead on that terrible blood-soaked plateau on the Jenesia side of the Didan Provinces.

Words bottlenecked in her throat.

“State your business or get the hell out.” The chair spun and Geneieve felt the world spin and tip. Her first trip through the jump port hadn’t been nearly as disorienting as this.

He leaned back in his chair and gave a slow, easy smile that ripped straight into her core. “Hello, Genie. Long time no see.”

Chapter Two

“Lt. Colonel Dante Bowen, you are under arrest as a defector and traitor.” Genie raised her laser pistol and pointed it at his heart. Her hand was covered in dirt and blood, but she held the gun as steadily as if it were mounted.

The years apart had hardened her, both in muscle and the look in her clear gray eyes. Hate and distrust came at him like a blast of heat. She meant business.

Bowen leaned against the back of the pilot’s seat, resting his arm on the side. “Is that any way to talk to the man who risked his life to come to a battle zone and save your sorry excuse for a team?”

“Don’t you dare speak about my team as if you have the right.” She touched the com unit attached to her belt. “I need security to the merc ship bridge.”

“Yes, Major.”

Bowen raised his brow at Genie, trying to look more casual than he felt at the moment. “Major, huh? I didn’t know you’d been promoted.” He let his gaze rake over her, taking care to make note of the thin synthetic undershirt she wore instead of her uniform embossed with rank insignia.

“A lot of things have changed since you went MIA and were presumed dead.” There was a distinct bite to her words. He expected nothing less from a loyal soldier like Genie. But there were more pressing matters at the moment.

“Instead of wasting your time arresting me, why don’t you make sure the ships are secure so I can get your rigid ass back to the jump port and your team across the divide before the Muloons return with more firepower?”

She shook her head slightly. Strands of shiny, wheat-colored hair fell from its ties under her flak helmet and brushed her shoulders. “They probably work for you and this is just another one of your brilliant double-crosses.”

“It’s not. They *will* be back. Mark my words.”

“From where I’m standing, your word isn’t worth much.”

No, it wouldn’t be. But he’d made his own bed where Genie was concerned.

The synchronized stomp of booted feet vibrated the floor under Bowen’s backside.

He’d told his men not to let anyone on the bridge and here they’d gone and let the one person in the beta dimension he was trying to avoid right into the cockpit. A shit storm was about to rain on his parade.

Someone was going to get hurt. Real bad.

He knew when he'd picked up her voice on the distress call it would be a bad idea to get involved. But he couldn't stand by and not attempt to rescue the disabled vehicle. Even so, he had to tread carefully here or his entire operation would disintegrate like a house of ash. Or they'd all get killed by the Muloons.

"Cap'n!" Cozan yelled at him from the door for instructions.

Since he had no doubt that Genie would shoot him if he didn't let her security team onto the bridge, and as long as he was alive, he could help them fight off the Muloons, he used his only option left. "Bring 'em on."

Genie narrowed her eyes and indicated Bowen with a wave of her gun. "Cuff him and lock him to the bulkhead in the empty storage hold."

Bowen didn't miss the looks exchanged between the officers, but they didn't question her orders.

The largest of the guards started to reach for his arm. Bowen pushed to his feet and turned his back, presenting them with his wrists. The electronic cuffs clicked into place with a finality that raised a lump in his throat.

If he had to die now, so be it. He just didn't like thinking of his impending demise with objectives left unmet.

The guard patted him down, relieving Bowen of his more obvious weapons—two laser pistols, an antique 9mm, and a ceramic-bladed hunting knife. The guard spun him back around to face the Major.

"Who is your second-in-command?" Genie hadn't relaxed her guard, even after his hands were secured behind his back.

"There is no second."

"Then you better name one."

Bowen watched her finger move a fraction, putting more pressure on the trigger. He shrugged with indifference. "What does it matter, you're going to seize the ship, right?"

"That's the greatest irony of all. Blackbeard's vessel seized by the authorities. I can transfer my cargo and have mission control bring us in manually." She shivered as if the very idea made her tingle all over.

Bowen didn't bother to suppress the crack of a smile as it filled the side of his mouth. He used to love it when she'd shiver like that. Most of the time it was while they were going at it like a couple of horny teenagers. The memory alone made his dick hard. It was definitely not the right time or place for a walk down memory lane with her. But he couldn't resist. He hadn't been able to shake her with threats of the Muloons, maybe bringing up their illicit past would get the job done.

As the guards started to move him past her, he leaned over and lowered his voice so only she could hear him. "You used to love it when we played pirate games."

Her eyes flashed with cold fire. "Take him to the hold."

They marched him off the bridge and out of his ship.

They moved by startled soldiers and mercs. All stood with mouths agape. Some of Genie's team recognized him, though he barely resembled the man they had once known and answered to.

He heard his name and military rank follow him until they entered the quietness of Genie's ship's hold.

Going from bright desert sun to the darkness inside, he didn't at first see the bodies in their black bags waiting to be taken home to their families for burial.

Bowen swallowed and lowered his head.

If he'd ever wondered what Genie would think of him if their paths crossed, he now knew. Condemned to death in her eyes, he allowed the guards to recuff his hands in front of him then lock him to the bulkhead. He had to play this out until the end. No matter if the end meant his execution as a traitor.

Damn, he'd been a fool.

He'd thought he could help her ship out of trouble and get the crew and cargo to the jump port without her ever seeing his face. The crew was told to cooperate with Genie's team. The only other instruction had been to not disturb him on the bridge. Hiding out there had been his worst mistake. He should have had his crew drop him off on the far side of the rock ridge before going on to help them. But he just had to be the man in charge and direct everything from the pilot's seat. Instead of working smart like usual, he'd done something stupid and life-threatening.

He knew better. By the time a soldier made L.C., he knew a thing or two about working smart and stealthily, especially if the majority of his military training came from the Jumpers. Crossing dimensional divides for a career wasn't for the faint of heart.

Long hair fell over his eyes as he turned his head away right before the guards closed the hold doors. Darkness, pure and absolute, descended all around him.

How many of the dead in the hold were friends he'd left behind? Would their lives have been spared today had he stayed with the Jumpers six years ago? Could their deaths be placed on his shoulders, their blood on his hands?

Regret for his decision had never entered his mind. Not in all the time he'd been working the Didan Provinces as a freelance merc.

Until now.

A blast outside the ship rocked it sideways.

They were under attack again.

Bowen pulled at his restraints, but they were damn secure.

Sounds of gunfire and screams of agony filtered in through the hull. People were dying on the other side of this tin bucket and, try as he might, he couldn't do anything to help them.

Another blast knocked the ship off her landing struts, rolling it onto her side. Bodies fell like cordwood to pile at what used to be the port side. Bowen hung suspended from his cuffs. His legs dangled in midair. The restraints cut into his wrists. Blood ran down his arms where the cuffs had broken the skin.

He tried to swing a leg up to lie horizontal to the ground and take pressure off his hands, but the wall they'd fastened him to was smooth, with the exception of the small, U-shaped bar that held him. He might be willing to die to protect an ideal, but not at the hands of a hostile force intent on taking the haul from Genie's transport.

Freakin' Muloons were the worst menace on this side of the divide. They would kill to the last man before they gave up trying to take a payload from someone. The fact he'd never seen them this close to the jump port or so far into Didan territory notwithstanding. But something had brought them here—something major.

He'd been shocked when he'd seen them all over Genie's team like maggots on day-old roadkill. That was another reason he'd come to her aid personally instead of letting his crew go in without him. The Muloons had a nasty habit of raping women before they slit their throats. More often than not, repeatedly, and, given her rank, she'd be brutalized both inside and out before they finished with her.

Bile rose to the back of his throat.

He had to get out of the restraints and help before both crews were slaughtered.

He took a deep breath in preparation for his attempt to break free when a noxious odor hit his tongue and burned his lungs.

Aleon gas—the chemical reaction that occurred when Huber root was exposed to heat and pressure. Much as it would be if the side of the ship where the root was stored had been hit by one of the explosive devices.

Violent coughs racked his body. Suspended as he was, he couldn't catch his breath again.

Unlike carbon monoxide, aleon gas did have an odor, but it wasn't any less lethal. Or explosive. Once the gas built up in the bulkhead, all it would take was the tiniest of sparks to blow the entire ship off the surface of the planet and into orbit.

The next explosion spun the ship around in circles. Forever, it seemed. Bowen turned and twirled, suspended by his wrists, unable to find purchase on the hull wall.

The section of ship hit something hard and gave a violent shake. Had they been slung far enough to hit the rocky outcrop?

Bowen shook his head. Dizziness swept over him. At this rate, he'd welcome death, but not before making sure Genie was safe.

The hatch lay at the top of the ship. Thuds, like heavily booted feet walking across the fuselage, moved on the hull over Bowen's head. They stopped near where the door should be. It came open with a loud screeching of metal on metal.

Bowen turned his head and looked up into one of the ugliest faces he'd ever seen.

Chapter Three

“It took you long enough.” Bowen watched as Cozan hooked a repelling cable to the side of the ship.

The large Didan yanked on the line a few times before lowering himself upside down. He secured another line around Bowen’s waist before releasing the locking mechanism on the cuffs.

There was a short jolt then Cozan started to pull him up through the door.

Bowen’s eyes closed against the bright sun after being in the dark. When his vision cleared, the sight that greeted him stole his breath.

The transport ship had been split in several pieces. The section where Bowen had been kept had been knocked across the plain to land against the rock ridge.

One part of the transport had ignited. Plumes of black smoke billowed up into the sky. Charred marks colored the back of his ship, but it didn’t look in danger of going up in flames.

Cozan unhooked a laser pistol from his belt, handing it to Bowen before they jumped down off the side of the transport.

A quick scan of the area didn’t reveal any straggling Muloons, but that didn’t mean they weren’t in the area, or waiting to make a third strike. Muloons always made their strikes in a series of threes if the first attempt wasn’t a clear slaughter. They would return once more before they declared victory or defeat. However, they never used the same timetable for their subsequent strikes. Vacating the area was always the best policy unless there were enough people left standing to defeat them on the last run.

As he took in the carnage, he searched for any sign of Genie. It didn’t appear anyone had been *left standing*. At least not anyone who wore the black and olive of the Jumpers.

His legs moved as if propelled by a force outside himself. It wasn’t a conscious action on his part, but more of a desperate need to protect the woman he loved. Though he knew Genie more than capable of protecting herself, there was no guarantee she could hold her own if more than one Muloon decided to grab her.

They had returned with quite a bit more firepower on the second run. The scene was out of Bowen’s worst nightmares. Or memories. He’d been in situations both in the Jumpers and as a merc where the carnage had rivaled this one.

The air hung heavy with the stink of burnt flesh. Bodies smoldered in the sand, victims of flamethrowers reminiscent of weapons used in Vietnam. The fire that shot from the cannon-sized gun was a bastard child of Greek fire and napalm. It killed without mercy or prejudice.

Bowen brought up his shirt collar to cover his nose and mouth. The acrid stench had already stuck to his palate and gotten in his nose. It would be a long time before the taste left him.

“Genie!” He ran across the thick sand, stumbling over debris left by the destruction of her transport ship. “Genie!”

The craft sat broken into four distinct pieces. Two of them were clearly storage holds with extra-reinforced bulkheads to protect cargo from such a pass. As he neared the hold where her haul had been, the unmistakable stink of Aleon gas hung in the air like a vicious cloud. That, added to the already horrible smell of the Jumpers’ charred remains, was enough to gag a man.

“Genie!”

Bowen rounded the end of the hold segment, gun raised and at the ready. The scene that greeted him stopped his heart for an instant before kicking up his adrenaline into hyperdrive. Three Muloons had Genie pressed against the broken hull, attempting to strip her down. Two held her arms, while the other grabbed at her clothes. They’d managed to rend her shirt in half and relieve her of her utility belt, but not get much further. Each time one lunged in, she kicked out with her legs, connecting with the hard part of her shin to some delicate piece of her attacker’s anatomy.

Without delay, Bowen shot the Muloon who was the most immediate threat. A small, round burn mark opened the warrior’s temple, frying his brain on contact. The man shuddered and fell.

His comrades looked up as a unit, dropping Genie to the ground and facing Bowen.

“I’d love to beat the shit out of you scumbags hand to hand, but I don’t have the time.” He pulled off two quick shots, dropping them both before they could reach him.

He ran forward and sank into the sand. Dropping down on his knees, he took Genie into his arms. She slapped at his shoulders. Her breath came fast and hard at his neck.

“It’s all right. It’s Dante. I won’t hurt you.” He rubbed her hair, cupping her head with his hand. His lips grazed her temple.

“Let me go!” She shoved at him again.

Rather than let her get any more upset or panicked, he did as told and leaned her back against the hull. Red welts marred her breasts where the Muloons had grabbed her in their big, powerful grips.

Before he could check himself, Bowen ran a bent knuckle down the marks. “You’re hurt.”

Genie looked down at his hand on her breast. She arched away from his touch, giving him an annoyed look. She pulled tightly at the stretchy undershirt fabric and tied it together under her breasts. It covered her, but barely.

Without a word, she pushed to her feet then leaned over and picked up her utility belt. She strapped it on with quick, jerky movements.

“Are you all right?”

“Dandy. Next time, stay in custody and let me handle the enemy myself. I could have taken them without your help.”

“You’re welcome.”

She turned to the hatch of what was left of her ship and tried to open the compartment door. It didn’t give. “Damn it. Latch got fried in the explosion.”

“But at least the hold remained mostly intact.”

She sniffed at him. “Mostly? These compartments are made to withstand explosions worse than those.”

Bowen tensed. “Take a deep breath.”

“What?” She hesitated only a moment before she did as he asked. Her eyes widened. “Aleon.”

“We need to get clear of the area.” He started to pull her away and was surprised that she didn’t resist. “Do you know if any of your team besides you survived?”

The question seemed to shock her more than the release of aleon gas from the hold.

She shook her head and moved ahead of him, coming out from behind the hull and into the main view of the battlefield. Her steps faltered.

“Oh, Christ.” Slowly, she started walking again.

Bowen followed in her wake, not knowing quite what to do for her.

Across the field, Cozan bent over bodies, trying to determine the injured from the dead. A couple more of his crew members came off the merc ship with a litter and hurried over to Cozan.

“I’m going to help look for survivors.” He started past her then turned back around so he could see her face. She looked pale, dazed. “You’ll be all right?”

She gave a brisk nod. “I’m going to see if there is any reserve power left on the bridge and if I can raise the command center. We need a rescue ship.”

Bowen placed his hand on her arm, but dropped it when she flinched at his touch. “The offer of a lift still stands, even if you want to see my neck stretched.”

Heat and fire came back into her eyes. “I’d expect you to take off and let us fend for ourselves.”

“If I had any intention of doing that, I wouldn’t have responded to your distress call in the first place.” With that, he left her standing by her ruined ship and went to see if he could help what was left of his crew sort out the dead and dying before the Muloons returned.

Geneieve let out a long, slow breath. She’d been unable to take a good one since she’d looked up from trying to fend off the advances of her captors and saw Bowen looking down at them like a stubble-clad avenging angel.

She kept her hand on her pistol as she slogged through the sand to what used to be the bridge section. Damn. The ship had only been commissioned the month before. At least the majority of the reinforcements on the hull design had held. What she really wondered was whether the sickbay had stood up under the concussive impact of the blasts. She'd been headed there when the goons had grabbed her and dragged her behind the hold.

Try as she might, suppressing the need to shiver at their touch was beyond her capacity at the moment. The memory of their hands on her sent a wave of revulsion through her body. Her hands clenched into fists. At least she'd gotten in a few good kicks. But despite her bravado to Bowen, she doubted she'd have been able to hold them off indefinitely.

If not for Bowen...

She pushed the thought out of her mind.

The lousy traitor had no right to her thoughts of gratitude. He'd turned his back on God, duty and country for the lure of profits. Greed had turned more than one good man's head. She just never thought it possible of Dante Bowen. Honor and loyalty fit him like a well-cut dress uniform. He had been her rock. And he'd fooled her. Betrayed his team during the Battle of Jenesia.

When they hadn't found his body, all sorts of horrible scenarios had filled Geneieve's head. She'd imagined he'd been captured and tortured, held prisoner in a slave camp somewhere, injured and amnesic or clinging to life by the barest wire. But no, he'd cut and run and was sporting long hair, civilian clothes and a pilot's license.

Geneieve shook her head.

Don't think about him. He's dead to you.

Or soon would be. All she had to do was to make sure her call to the command center included a plea for the MPs to transport him back for trial.

Bile rose in her throat at the thought.

They'd been in love once.

The memories she had of Bowen were so incongruous with the man she'd seen on the bridge of his freelance merc ship. And yet, he'd come to her rescue not once, but twice. A suspicious stinging burned her eyes until she blinked them in rapid succession. Probably just the smoke billowing around her that irritated them.

As she walked up the twisted metal of what was once the ramp to the bridge section, something large and dark cast a shadow over the ground, momentarily blocking out the sun. Geneieve put her hand up to shield the sun from her eyes to look. The thing moved, creating an eclipse effect.

Bowen ran by and grabbed her by the arm, pulling her along with him. "Come on. We need to get out of here."

"No. I'm not leaving without my crew."

“Your crew is dead. The only survivors out there so far are my men. Mine!”

Geneieve tore her arm away from him. “I have to check.”

“Don’t be stupid and save yourself while you still can.”

She spun on him, ramming her finger in his chest a few times. “Is that what you did at Jenesia? Save yourself?”

The look he gave her from his golden hawk-like eyes by rights should have turned her into glass in the hot sand. It only made her angrier. As if he had the right to judge her actions?

She turned and continued on into the broken bridge section, no longer caring about the enemy or if they managed to kill her now. How would it look if she was the only survivor of her team? No, she’d rather die knowing she tried to save as many as she could than live to face years of regrets for not even making the attempt.

“Christ,” Bowen muttered. “Let’s hurry then.”

“You don’t have to come.”

“Yes, I do, or you’ll stay here and get yourself killed.”

Instead of asking him why he’d even care, she ground her back teeth together and fought to keep her mouth shut. If she needed to pull any survivors out of the wreckage, she’d need help.

She led the way through the short entranceway to the small sickbay. The door stood open. All power was off and the few life-support machines attached to patients stared back at Geneieve with blank screens. Dead.

Those brave souls who had been severely injured in the first round of fire hadn’t survived the second attack.

“Major?” A low, raspy voice rose from the other side of the sickbay, back behind a cabinet of medical supplies that had slid off its moorings.

She and Bowen moved as a unit toward the voice. The light spilling in from outside didn’t reach far enough to make out who was crushed behind the cabinet or how badly the person was injured.

“Where are you caught?” Geneieve felt Bowen bend down beside her as he asked the question.

“My leg. Knee on down.” From the soft southern accent, Geneieve now recognized the man as Bertram.

Geneieve leaned in over Bowen and ran her hands through the space between the cabinet and wall, on down until she met Bowen’s hand coming upward. She pulled her hand back from the contact. They’d both been thinking the same thing. If Bertram was crushed in half, he might not be able to feel the injury if it caused a tourniquet effect. That didn’t seem to be the problem. The situation was as he had described it.

“How’s Toussant?” Bertram asked. “I came in when the second wave started to see if I could secure the sickbay.”

And knowing him, he would. “Did you manage to raise the command center before that?”

She felt rather than saw him nod. "They said they were going to mount a rescue team when the first explosion happened. We lost the entire instrument panel after that."

Hopefully they'd come heavily armed and blow the brutal killers from the sky.

"I think we can move the cabinet without adding to your injury." Bowen brushed against her as he tried to wedge himself into a better position. "When I lift, you push. Genie, you pull. On the count of three."

He counted down and at three the cabinet came loose and Bertram was able to get himself out from under the heavy shelving.

"Can you walk?" Geneieve put her arm around Bertram's shoulder as he tried to put weight on his foot. His muffled curse and the sound of a scooting-shuffle step told her he was in quite a bit of pain.

They limped into the light. Blood ran down his forehead, one eye had swelled shut. "Toussant!" he yelled.

A cough and sputter came from the other side of the room. "Here."

"I'll get her, Genie. Help Bertram to my ship."

Jesus Christ, the memories of past missions tried to reach up and strangle her. It was like old times, Bertram, Toussant, Bowen and her. They had been together since Geneieve had graduated boot camp. They were in the first outfit she'd been assigned. Bowen had been their commanding officer.

She helped Bertram out into the hot sun and sand. Off in the distance, south in the direction of the jump port, angry black smoke filled the sky.

Bertram stopped. "Mother of God."

It looked as if the fighters that had flown over moments before had intercepted the Jumper rescue team. "Come on. Let's get to Bowen's ship."

"That was him? I didn't imagine it then?"

"No. It's him, in all his blazing glory."

They hurried along a bit faster in the face of the impending threat. Without their rescue team, the only choice was to trust Bowen to get them home safely. Geneieve didn't know if she had that much trust left in her. Not with him showing up like an apparition after being declared dead for six years.

One of the men who had guarded Bowen's bridge approached her. "You'll have to leave the Huber root. It's too unstable to move. But we can get the Calenite from the hold."

Half a haul was better than none at all. She gave a quick nod, not surprised they knew exactly what her transport had on board. It wasn't a secret in this dimension that the U.S. shipped large quantities of the stuff back over the divide. Less so since Bowen was in command of the merc ship.

"Let's move!" Bowen shouted as he came down the ramp carrying Toussant.

Two more fighters came screeching overhead. Shots from the gunner bays peppered the ground around them.

The bedraggled remains of the mercs and Jumpers hurried for the open hatch of the merc ship. They had barely made it inside and brought the ramp up when another violent blast rocked the floor beneath them. The ship tilted up on its side.

Someone screamed.

Chapter Four

“Fire!”

Didan Vice Chancellor Rehelm’s eyes glazed in imagined glory as he stared at the view screen before him. Bright blazes of fire exploded across the sky as the Muloon fighters found and exterminated their American and merc targets.

It wouldn’t be long now before he stood on the reviewing balcony, victorious over those fools on the council.

Cut him out of the profits gleaned from the American coffers? He thought not. They’d soon see they had crossed the wrong man.

Another explosion rocked the ground. The ship recording and sending data back to Rehelm shimmied from the concussion. He held onto the earpiece as a high, tinny whine started—feedback from the explosion affecting the audio sensors.

Their civilization had successfully mastered short-flight, light-speed travel, but they still failed to manufacture audio equipment that functioned properly.

All that would change under his reign.

Another U.S. airship glimmered in the fabric between dimensions. It hung suspended in the murky borders, dancing like a mirage.

“Blow them out of the sky! I don’t want to see another ship cross that portal until I command it.”

And then it would be his forces going aboard to explore and exploit the alpha dimension.

Alpha!

As if those bastards on the other side of the veil were the first. The way he understood the physical attributes of dimensional fabric, there was no beginning and end, only a continuum of existence created simultaneously by the Gods.

When all was said and done, this dimension would be the first. The one to call the shots for both worlds on either side of the veil. As he saw fit.

He watched the action on the ground. People scurried like threatened insects, trying to avoid the rain. A rusty chuckle rumbled up from his throat. The difference was the rain in this case packed hull-piercing shells that could bring a transport ship down with one hit.

“Don’t let them get to the ship. If they become airborne, that bastard merc will get them free.”

He'd seen the merc captain's piloting skills on more than one occasion. He doubted the Muloons were up to the challenge of hitting a moving target manned by one such as him.

Bile rose in his throat. Blood pulsed behind his eyes as his blood pressure rose.

The pleasure at bringing the AWOL commander to heel was the only thing keeping Rehelm from losing control.

Not taking his eyes from the action on the screen, he opened a frequency to his forces at the chancellor's palace who awaited the signal to attack.

The moment had to be perfect. Everything in this coup had been timed down to the millisecond.

He glanced at the scrolling time counter displayed on the screen above him. In just a few minutes, the chancellor would exit his chambers, along with the full Didan Council, and announce the new trade treaty with the Gordanes.

Rehelim closed his hand into a fist. That particular association had come about as a direct result of Dante Bowen's undercover work.

It still burned in his gut. As the vice chancellor, one of his duties had been to cultivate and entice new trade and treaty agreements with countries inside their own dimension. The Gordanes had not wanted to enter into dialogue with him. However, they'd been more than happy to bed down with someone with ties to the alpha dimension.

His failure to secure the necessary contacts had seen him disgraced before the council and cut out of most discussions.

Plots and conspiracies churned in his brain.

"Call up the reviewing balcony." He showed no emotion as the Muloon manning the vid-feed controls typed in the commands to bring the palace camera online.

The screen split, showing both the massacre at the desert portal and the palace balcony.

Throngs of citizens had already gathered below. Their excitement was palpable even through the relays. It was a big day for both Didan and Gordane.

And it would soon be a big day for Vice Chancellor Rehelim.

"Stand ready," he commanded the head of his palace forces.

Just then, action in the desert diverted his attention.

Muloon fighters closed in for the kill as survivors made a mad dash to the merc ship. "Take out the ship! Bring the captain to me!"

Rehelim turned his head as the balcony door on the second screen opened. A lone man stepped out onto the platform to address the assembled masses.

What was this?

Everything inside him went tight.

No. All his glorious plans were about to be thwarted. Anger boiled into the magma range. Had Bowen tipped them off? Did they know they were going to be taken down at the exact moment of their greatest triumph?

He turned the speaker on his headset up so he could catch every word.

“Today is a grievous day for all of Didan as we mourn the deaths of the brave and patriotic souls, our dimensional brethren who this day gave their lives on the desert plains, killed by the advance of the Muloons. This cowardly and unsanctioned act of violence will not go unpunished...”

The words swallowed Rehelm whole. The maw of despair opened below him. His senses sharpened to pinpricks of sensation across his nerves. Hair stood on his arms and his legs felt as if consumed by fire. Red flashes crossed his vision. He’d spiraled down into madness.

Blood. He wanted to see the blood of his enemies soaking the pristine white walls of the palace.

“Now!”

Fighting exploded on the second screen as his Muloon forces sprang into action. They dragged the speaker from his dais. The crowds attempted to flee, but were caught between the rain of bullets from the Muloons and the return fire from the palace guards.

Crimson clouds appeared around those unlucky enough to not get clear of the fighting. Some were even trampled underfoot.

From the ashes of failure came a small victory.

“Patch this file into the main news feed and transmit. Send a message that the chancellery has fallen.”

The confusion that followed would allow Rehelm’s supporters to gain a stronger foothold. Fear would turn the country to chaos and he’d be the man to restore order. He’d be the stability they sought in time of crisis.

On screen one, the merc ship stirred to life. Why hadn’t the Muloon fighters completed their mission? It wasn’t like the Americans and mercs had unlimited fighting power on the ground. Even now, the American Jumper ship lay scattered on the desert floor, her double-lined cargo hold no doubt leaking deadly aleon gas.

“Fire on the Jumper ship hold.”

Rehelm, Vice Chancellor of the Didan Republic, sat back to watch the action and bask in his own brilliance.

Fear for those in his care lodged hard in Bowen’s throat. It would be hard as hell to start the ship and take off from the position they’d slid into. The thrusters farthest from the ground were all but useless for the initial lift they needed to gain altitude.

“Hang on, folks. We’re going to have a bumpy lift off.”

He gave a cursory check around the cockpit to make sure everyone on deck had strapped into their safety harnesses.

Another explosion—this one from directly behind them—propelled the ship up on her bow. Bowen turned the thrusters to full, letting the momentum from the blast carry them forward.

It took all of his strength and concentration to keep from losing control of the aircraft. He cut the computer controls and switched to manual operation. No telling what the craft's response would be if the stern sensors were damaged in the blast. False readings were the last thing they needed.

The ship shuddered around them, threatening to come apart at the rivets. Bowen clenched his teeth to keep from biting his tongue. The muscles in his arms and shoulders burned from the strain of fighting against the pressure in the thruster toggle. He pulled it back, sending them straight up into the sky.

A fireball headed right for them, gleaming like a comet in the lens of the rear camera sensor. The aleon gas in the transport had finally blown.

"Brace yourselves!" Bowen shouted. "Cozan, hit the hyperdrive."

Cozan turned his head to look at Bowen even as he reached for the switch that turned the ship from normal, merchant-style vessel to one that reached near light speed.

Words of a nearly forgotten prayer fell from his lips as a sonic jolt sent a violent shudder through the fuselage.

Booms rocked around them as they broke the sound barrier and headed for the light. Once they were clear from the explosion, Bowen leveled off the craft to cruise along the curve of the planet.

He hated calling this desolate place Earth. It wasn't anything like home. Geographically, it was practically identical. Culturally, it was worlds apart. Scientific and anthropological theory stated the civilizations on the beta dimension grew divergent from those in the alpha. No one knew why, other than the simple fact that some great ancestor long ago turned right instead of left and changed the course of beta history. Bowen had lived in the beta dimension long enough to know the theory was indeed fact. No one had to convince him otherwise.

And he thought the alpha dimension had diversity. He shook his head and put his mind back on the problem of discovering what had happened to the rescue team.

Quickly, he typed in a course and then turned his attention to the monitors. Cameras stationed at different points along the hull recorded and interpreted information from as far away as ten kilometers from the ship, if grounded. The range went even farther if the ship broke atmosphere and roamed in free space.

He called up the fore camera and typed in the time frame and coordinates of when and where the rescue ship entered the port. The scene looked like something from a twentieth-century science-fiction movie. No sooner had the rescue ship—sides emblazoned with Old Glory—come through the port, it was then blown into powder by the Muloons.

"Cee-rist." He rubbed a hand down his face. "Genie, come look at this."

He heard her unbuckle her harness and step forward. He backed up the recording again then hit play.

She made no sound, but Bowen noted her hands fisted at her sides.

“You still want to try for the jump port?” Bowen didn’t want anything to do with taking her there, but he’d promised her a ride back home and it was one he intended to keep.

“Not at this point.”

Bowen watched her study the nav screen for a moment. She rubbed her chin in thought. “They probably have the Triangle Port covered by now. Go to the Dragon Port. We’ll try that one instead.”

Bowen started for the port that came out in the alpha dimension off the coast of Japan.

“This is a liberated Didan military vessel, right?” Genie walked back to the communication center and sat at the controls.

“Liberated? You make it sound as if you think I stole it.” The thought made him smile. He’d played his part to perfection if she still believed the worst of him after all that had happened in the past hour or so.

“Did you?” She shot the words at him like laser fire.

“Nope. It came with the crew. Kind of a bonus.” He looked over his shoulder to catch her expression but she was already busy at the com controls.

“Have you modified the com board in any way?” The woman flipped switches and pushed touch pads like an old-time telephone operator.

“No. I’m proud to say the com system is as installed.” Though it was several generations better than the ones he’d used in the Jumpers.

“Good. Let’s hope I can raise the command center on it and warn them not to send any more ships through until we can secure the port.” She looked up at him. “You have a secondary system up at the helm?”

“What kind of pilot would I be if I didn’t?” He leaned over, ready to punch in the frequency she wanted. “Who do you want me to call?”

“The Didan officials, to let them know what happened.”

Bowen’s heart sank. That was the one thing he couldn’t do for her. “I can call anyone you want, but I can’t call them.”

She spun on him, her gray eyes cold and narrowed. “Jesus, Bowen, don’t tell me. You’re wanted in this dimension, too?”

The last time he’d seen a vid with his picture on it, the price for his head on this side of the divide had gotten pretty high. An unfortunate sidebar to his cover. And a direct result of pissing off the wrong man within the Didan government. Though who that was, he still hadn’t discovered. “What can I say? It’s the price one pays for being damn good at his job.”

She let out a disgusted sound. “Fine, let me go get Bertram up here and he can call the Didan officials.”

Before she headed out the bridge door, she stopped and turned to him. "If you get caught, my crew and I aren't going down with you. You and your band of pirates will be on your own."

The door made a swishing sound as it opened. The cockpit didn't feel as small and confined with her gone. No, it finally felt as if all the air weren't being sucked out into the clouds.

Bowen pretended not to have heard the disdain and disgust in her voice.

Knowledge that things seemed to be coming to a head kept rolling through his mind. If he continued to chant it as a mantra, there was a good possibility he wouldn't spill his guts and tell her things were not as they seemed. At least not for him.

The marks on his wrists where the electronic cuffs had bitten and broken drew his gaze. He'd bled for her, killed three Muloons intent on raping her, helped to save what was left of her team and still she didn't seem capable of cutting him any slack. Granted, it had been six years since he'd fled the field of battle and blended in with the dead of the Jenesia Plateau. Six years without a word sent across the divide to her that he was alive and well.

But he couldn't. That had been the worst part of all. Communication across the divide for him had to be done with extreme care and much subterfuge. His contacts in the Didan government didn't know his true identity. He'd even changed his appearance several times over the years to try to shake the law and keep everyone else off his trail.

Bowen moved in his seat, trying to relieve the sour feeling in his gut.

Oh yeah, he'd sacrificed all for the life he now led. He just hoped that one day soon it proved worth it.

Geneieve came to a stop in the sickbay door. The smells of blood and unwashed bodies hung thick on the recycled air. One of Bowen's crew tended the wounded, assisted by Bertram, who hobbled around on his bad leg with gritted teeth and sweaty forehead.

"What are you doing up? You need to rest that leg while you can."

"Is that an order, Major, or are you just making a suggestion?" He sat on a retractable cot next to Toussant, held a cup to the injured woman's lips, and spoke softly to her. "Come on, sweetheart, you need to drink."

A large plastic tube connected to a water-seal canister came out from under the short paper shirt Toussant wore. The water in the canister bubbled. Geneieve had seen enough of those contraptions to know Toussant's injury had been worse than just blood loss. Her lung had been punctured.

Toussant allowed Bertram to help her with the cup then nodded when she drank as much as she could manage. Her gaze found Geneieve's. "I'm sorry...about the others."

Geneieve pushed off from the door and came fully into the sickbay to look down at the two people she could always count on in a crisis—the only two besides herself who had been spared in this major fuck-up. “So am I. We’ll figure out what these Muloons want and then come up with a plan to return the favor.”

Toussant offered a slight smile. “Make sure...you wait...until I’m feeling up to it. I’d...hate...to miss the...fun.”

Bertram gave Geneieve a dark look over his shoulder. “Haven’t we lost enough friends without you vowing vengeance?”

Geneieve’s back went up at that. “Your fiancée almost died today. I’d think you’d want a chance to get back at the bastards the same as I do.”

“Yeah, well, I want her and I to live long enough to get married.” He turned blue eyes back to Toussant, offering the cup again.

“This is why I advised one of you to take a commission on another team. You can’t be lovers and work together. You spend most of your time worrying about the other person when you need to keep your head focused.”

“Is that why Bowen deserted us at Jenesia? To break up with you?”

As a parting shot, it was the most eviscerating Bertram could have possibly come up with. Even Toussant looked at him as if he’d struck too low.

Geneieve waited for him to apologize and when none was forthcoming she slid into her command stance and glared down at him. “Report to the bridge, immediately. Your duties haven’t ceased because we’re on another vessel.”

She waited to hear a faint, yes, sir. When it finally and most reluctantly came from Bertram’s lips, Geneieve turned on her heel and marched from the sickbay.

Anger and grief threatened to consume her.

Bowen’s desertion wasn’t her fault, was it? Had he meant to get away from her and didn’t have the guts to tell her? If so, why didn’t he request her transfer to another unit? It would have been much simpler than going AWOL.

No. Bowen was a grown man. If he chose to cut and run, it wasn’t her fault. She refused to take responsibility for his actions. Only Bowen was to blame.

She sat back in the communication station seat and called up the frequency that allowed her to penetrate the veil between the dimensions to contact the command center back in New Mexico.

Slight delays were normal, but it took longer than usual to raise mission control. When the reply came, it was hard to hear.

“Go ahead, T-six.”

“Payload lost. Seventeen confirmed killed in action. Rescue vessel hit and lost. No word on survivors. Do not repeat attempt. Situation extremely volatile.”

Bertram came onto the bridge. Geneieve looked up at him, half in the mind to ask command to remove him from her team. Only the knowledge that he grieved as deeply as she did kept the words at bay. When he cooled down and had time to think, he'd offer an apology and they'd be on speaking terms once again. She needed him and Toussant to help her rebuild the team. There were too many friends and comrades lost today to begin backbiting with one another.

Bertram gave her a quick salute then waited for his orders.

Though she appreciated the acknowledgment of her rank, she wasn't in the mood for it used as sarcasm.

"There's another com unit at the helm. Use it and alert the Didan officials of the situation near the jump port. I don't want them going in there unprepared."

"Yes, sir." He turned and limped to the controls.

Bowen spun in his seat. She looked up from the board, prepared to preempt the smart comment she knew was about to come out of his mouth, and stopped. "What is it?"

"Sensors show the Dragon Port is covered in Muloon ships."

"Are you kidding me?" It was a pointless question. His very expression told her the situation was as serious as it got.

She turned back to the board. "Control, can you give me the status of the Dragon Port?"

Again she had to wait for the response. Moments clicked by, measured in the hard thrum of her heart as it knocked against her ribs. Already, Geneieve knew the answer.

"Japan reports heavy casualties on both sides of their port. No traffic is being allowed in or out of either dimension. Stand by for instructions."

"Major Lockhart, standing by." She pulled one of the earpieces out and shook her head at Bowen. "Looks like your buddies have taken up position at the Dragon Port as well. Doesn't give me a real happy feeling about Tibet either."

"Damn it." Bowen's nostrils flared. "I don't have enough fuel to keep us up much longer."

"Only you would rescue someone on an empty tank."

"I didn't say it was empty. But if you want to keep cruising around the globe, we're going to have to set down and refuel."

There was a short beat of silence then, "Fuck!" He banked the ship hard to the right. "Hold on! Muloon fighters coming in fast."

Geneieve held onto the com console. The ship lurched again then dove. "Tell me you still have guns on this bucket."

"Yes, but we won't need them. Just a little evasive maneuvering and..." The sentence trailed off as they wove into another dip.

Geneieve buckled her harness and closed her eyes against the weightless feeling of freefall. She hated *evasive maneuvers*. They always made her feel as if her next heartbeat would be her last. Give her a straight flight path any day.

“Gordane fighters coming in at two o’clock,” Bowen said. “We’ll let them take care of the Muloons. I want to get us set down and the injured to a treatment facility.”

Geneieve relaxed her hands where they’d gripped the seat arms. Thank God Bowen didn’t feel the need to be a hero to compensate for his defection.

An explosion rocked the ship. It teetered midair, but continued on its course.

The Gordanes were the toughest race on this side of the divide. Their warriors were lean, mean and Herculean. Their country corresponded to what would be the Asian continent beyond the divide. Unlike their Asian counterparts, the Gordanes were one country united with thousands of tribes spread throughout the huge landmass. If they decided to take over the ports, they definitely had the firepower to do so, but respect and honor ran deep in their culture and the thought probably never occurred to them. But having the Muloons take control probably chafed at their pride. It would no doubt be a short battle.

Bowen spoke into his com unit in the rough Gordanian dialect used by pilots. Shocked he even knew the language, let alone well enough to communicate smoothly with the control towers, Geneieve listened in, trying to extrapolate the situation from his side of the conversation.

He let out a deep, throaty laugh that hit her square in the stomach. Memories boiled up from the seat of her soul. His quick, easy laugh had been one of the reasons she’d fallen in love with him.

She sat like stone, wanting the mission from hell to finally be at an end.

“Major Lockhart?” the contact from the command center said into her earpiece.

“Go ahead, command center.”

“Didan officials are attempting to clear the area around the port. Gordane has confirmed your ship over their airspace. An escort team is on their way.”

“Negative. Gordane forces engaged in air battle. Merc captain has com link to air tower.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to give command the captain’s identity, but bit the words back. Right now she, Bertram and Toussant owed Bowen their lives. That would be a hell of a way to repay him. Even if he had deserted them at Jenesia. Even if she had wanted to do just that very thing earlier. But so much had happened since he first came to their rescue.

“Major Lockhart?”

“On channel, command center.”

“We have confirmed reports of a coup at the Didan Chancellery. Situation extremely unstable.”

“Roger that, command.”

Geneieve pushed the mute button to confer with Bowen. He still talked to the tower operators in Gordanian.

The laughter in his voice died. He quieted then barked a short guttural word. She didn't know if it was an expletive or question.

He turned a worried gaze her way. She nodded, pointing to her earpiece. While news from the command center explained some of the day's events, it brought no comfort and raised more questions.

Did the rebel forces within the chancellery hire the Muloons as muscle? If so, what did they promise them in return for their cooperation? What did that do to the trade practices between the alpha and beta dimensions?

Genie sat back in her seat, letting a slow breath escape. How was she ever going to avenge her fallen crewmembers now?

They landed shortly thereafter at a Gordane military base in the heart of the country. Medics hurried to the sickbay to transport the injured to the base hospital. Geneieve stood with her flak helmet in hand, watching as Toussant was loaded onto a floating gurney.

"I'll visit you as soon as I finish my debriefing." She held her hand out to Toussant and gripped her strong dark fingers.

"Don't be mad at Bertie," she said as her tawny eyes gazed over at her fiancé, who sat on a gurney while a medic examined his leg.

Geneieve squeezed her hand again. "You know I could never stay mad at him for long. The guy's like a brother to me. And besides, if shit days were golden, we'd have hit the mother lode."

"That's the God's honest truth."

The medics moved Toussant to the ambulance. Geneieve watched her go then turned to look at Bertram. His blue gaze followed Toussant's stretcher. Pain and worry etched lines around his mouth and grooves in his dirt-stained face.

Misery wormed its way into her heart like a parasite. The team's safety landed on her shoulders. The fact they had been ambushed and slaughtered was her responsibility. She should have been more careful. Should have sought out alternate methods of intelligence instead of relying solely on what her superiors wanted her to know—which in this case hadn't been much. How could a force as powerful as the Muloons pose an immediate threat during this jump and not be part of the information provided to teams crossing the portals during the time of heightened threat? It was unconscionable.

Bertram's gaze found hers. His jaw tightened and he looked away again. If it wasn't enough she blamed herself for the events of the day, she had one of her most trusted team leaders blaming her too.

A hand on her back made her turn to stare into a pair of golden hawk eyes. "The Gordanes have a room for you to shower and change." Bowen's gaze skimmed over her half-bare chest, gentle as a caress.

The Gordanes were notorious for admiring strength in their women. Strength tempered by modesty. Geneieve noticed the Gordane soldiers' gazes never quite met hers. The Gordanes' looks came from the corners of their eyes, confining her to their periphery.

She nodded consent and allowed Bowen to escort her to the base guest quarters.

They walked down a long hallway painted a utilitarian gray. There were no frills or decorations other than the Gordanian flag hanging in a pressure-sealed case on the far wall.

As Geneieve and Bowen walked side by side, she wondered why he seemed so comfortable at the Gordane base. Bowen acted as if he owned the place and all the people working there. Though not a new attitude for him, it struck her as odd, since Didan was a closer ally to the U.S. than Gordane. But then, Bowen admitted he wasn't exactly a welcome commodity with the Didan government.

"Here you go." He stopped in front of the last room on the right side of the corridor. The door slid open when he placed his hand over the palm-recognition control.

She raised a brow at him. "Don't think because my door is calibrated to your print that you can come in any time you want."

"You have my word." He ran a bent knuckle down her bare arm.

So many emotions—all of them conflicted—swirled around her heart and head. Granted Bowen's word wasn't worth much on the open market, but he had managed to save what was left of her team. He had gotten them to a place where they could await their next assignment in safety. Though she hated like hell to admit it, she owed him. He'd lost much this day as well. If he hadn't come to her team's rescue, most of his crew would still be alive. And that was the material point.

"I'm sorry, Bowen."

"So am I." Pain etched brackets around his mouth. "I tried to get to you sooner."

Neither of them brought up what she knew they were both thinking. If she had listened to him about the Muloons instead of locking him in the cargo hold, the outcome would have been much different.

"You didn't have to do it. Didn't have to lose your men to try to save mine."

That hawk-sharp gaze zeroed in on her mouth. He leaned forward, trapping her between the wall and his body. Heat speared her to the spot. Her hand crept up his chest, feeling his heartbeat under her palm. The hard drum of his heart sped up to match the quick beat of her own.

"Yes I did." The words were a breath against her lips.

His mouth descended on hers. Six years melted away in the space of an instant.

Geneieve curled her hands into fists in the soft nap of his shirt. No man tasted as good as Bowen. None had even come close.

Gently, he pressed her mouth open and ran his tongue against hers. Emotion exploded in her like a shooting star. He overwhelmed her senses. Stripped her of all reality.

Dignity bade she put him in his place. To keep him at arm's length. To deny him intimate access to her. But her body remembered all too vividly how it felt to make love with Bowen.

His hand came up, cupping her breast. Instantly, her nipple drew up behind the soft confines of her ruined shirt.

He changed the angle of his mouth, delving deeper into her. The iron press of his erection against her caused her breath to catch. Memories of how it felt to have him inside her pulled her under like a rushing river. His fingers traced the torn edge of her shirt, dipping inside to caress her breast and slide gently against her nipple.

A moan fell helplessly from her open mouth, straight into his. Bowen responded in kind.

With a quick pivot, he had her inside the room, braced up against the wall, out of the common hallway. Skilled fingers unknotted her shirttail, letting it fall open. He tore his mouth away and began a passionate descent down her body.

Genie grabbed his hair when he clamped his mouth around the tender peak of her breast. She held him to her, not wanting him to stop the delicate torture of his tongue as it traced a velvety path around her sensitive flesh.

She closed her eyes, blocking out everything but the incredible sensations. There was a brief tug, the sound of a zipper, then the feel of a demanding caress through slick folds.

"Have mercy, Genie." His breath was hot against her body. "You feel so freakin' good."

It did feel good. As a matter of fact, it felt incredible. But no matter how good she knew the sex would be, she couldn't allow it. Not now. Not until he explained to her why he'd turned his back on his country and ran during a battle.

Pushing him away, she broke off the kiss. "This isn't a good idea."

He stood, grazing his lips over her forehead and temple. "I disagree." To prove his point, he flicked her clitoris a few times, making her shudder.

"It's not open for debate." She reached behind her for the wall, trying to support herself.

Slowly, he slid his hand from her, pressing all the right places as he did. It was enough to send her to the edge.

Genie started to go around him—anything to get away. He stopped her by taking her face in his hands, cradling it with a tenderness undermined by the roughness of his palms. "Not a day's gone by that I haven't thought of you."

The heady scent of her on his hands filled her nose. Turned her on even more. But she couldn't let it lull her into letting him make love to her. Not yet.

She had no defenses where Bowen was concerned. Only arrogance.

A harsh, incredulous laugh escaped her. “I doubt that, but if it helps you cope...” She let the words and their meaning hang on the air, not finishing either. Let him wonder what she meant by it. Just like she was left to wonder what had happened to him.

“You should probably leave. I need to shower and make myself presentable before the debriefing.” She glanced down at her uncovered breasts. Her nipples remained hard, inviting.

Bowen tightened a fist as if readying to fight some unseen opponent. “You don’t know how much I regret things weren’t different between us.”

He left her room and closed the door with a decisive click.

Chapter Five

“Well, hell.” Bowen let out a long, near-strangled breath then ran his hand through his hair. He’d blown that apart.

The want to kiss her had ridden him hard since he’d turned in the pilot’s seat and saw her standing with that shocked expression on her beautiful face. The need to see if she’d still taste the same had been a craving he could no longer deny.

Desire hummed through his system like high voltage.

Genie had responded to him. She’d been right there with him. At first.

He understood only too well why she’d have reservations about getting involved with him again. Maybe his parting words would soften her a bit. But, damn, she was already so unbelievably soft.

Without thinking, he rubbed his hand over his face and smelled her unique fragrance on his fingers. He took a deep, sustaining breath, drawing her scent into his body. Memories squeezed his heart. Where would they be now if things had been different? If some unknown cell hadn’t infiltrated the Didan Chancellery?

He pressed a palm to her door then turned and moved to his own. Wondering about the might-have-beens hardly made for a productive afternoon. Even if the answers to those nagging questions didn’t haunt him like a tethered ghost.

Bowen’s room was the same guest quarters he used every time he had business at this Gordane military base. The place had started to feel somewhat familiar and not unlike home. In the last six months, he’d spent more time in Gordane than he did piloting his merc ship. His presence in Didan was treacherous. Any bounty hunter worth their weight in gold-line creds had the itch to bring him in.

Not a good thing. It made him too conspicuous. Thus one of the reasons he sought refuge in the friendly arms of his Gordane comrades. However, these days he couldn’t afford to be too complacent and homey about any location, even if the Gordane High Command was in full support of his mission. And why not? When all was said and done, the GHC would benefit greatly from Bowen’s hard work. But that didn’t mean there weren’t Didan spies on the Gordane base.

He stuck his hand in his pocket and worried the circle of platinum he’d carried there for six lonely years. It had long ago gone from symbolic token of love to good luck charm.

Crossing the room, he pulled the ring out to study it.

The stone ranked as the highest in all the C's. He'd shot a wad of money on it and hadn't blinked an eye. No matter what he'd paid for the ring, Genie was worth twice—three times the amount.

He sat on the bed, resting his elbows on his legs.

The night before he'd planned to ask Genie to marry him, he'd been contacted by mission control to partake in a highly classified operation. By the time his superiors were done briefing him, he'd decided the best course of action was to disappear without ever popping the all-important question. Mission control couldn't guarantee how long he'd be gone and he hadn't wanted to tie Genie to an open-ended promise he might never be able to keep.

They had fought over the ring. Well, not after he purchased it. She'd never known he had. The fight had been more about the size and quality of rings not being equal to the amount of love behind the gesture. Bowen argued that even a cigar band made a proper engagement ring if the sentiment behind it was sincere. Genie had given him a dirty look. She maintained that the man who thought so little of her as to give her a cigar band for an engagement ring would end up one lonely man. He'd jokingly called her materialistic. She'd defended that some things just weren't right.

He'd waited until later that afternoon, after she'd gone on duty, and returned to the store to purchase the ring. It had been in his pocket ever since.

The room's com system gave off a low bong. The red incoming light flashed.

Damn, he didn't want to be disturbed. He just wanted to sit for a while and contemplate the day's events in quiet until the Gordane officials sent for him.

He pushed up from the bed and heard the sound of Genie's shower filter through the wall. The ring bit into his hand as he closed his fist around it. The overwhelming urge to help her bathe all that soft, lovely skin of hers ate at his insides.

He punched the open button on the com system a little harder than he should have and it snapped off the console, spinning up into the air before hitting the floor and rolling under the bed.

"Benoit here." He gave the cover name he'd used since working the beta dimension.

"I heard you were in a nasty dogfight." Commanding General Jaeden Augent smiled out from the visual display. Jaeden preferred to speak Bowen's mother tongue when they were together. He claimed he needed the practice. His deep guttural voice made every one of the English words sound as if it were ripped from deep in his chest.

"Jae." Bowen let a weary smile lift the corner of his mouth. "Those Muloon bastards were waiting for them."

Jaeden nodded. "We have a theory we'll disclose during the debriefing. How is Major Lockhart?"

"Naturally upset about losing all but two of her team members."

"We'll have to check how many were in the ship's sickbay. At this time, not all bodies are accounted for."

“What?” Bowen leaned down, bracing his hands on either side of the desk to steady himself.

“It’s too early to tell and, until we can verify the intelligence, we do not want to raise Major Lockhart’s hopes.”

“But?”

“*But* it appears that, during the confusion of the heaviest fighting, some of the U.S. soldiers were taken hostage.”

If they were hostages, they were still alive—at least for the moment. “We have to get them back.”

“We are doing our best to sift fact from rumor.” Jaeden raised a tawny brow at Bowen. A steely look came into his fierce blue eyes. “Under no circumstance are you to tell Major Lockhart the truth of your mission. We’re too close to bringing this to a close. It would be foolish to jeopardize it now. With the Didan coup underway, the traitors will rise like dirty oil on water.”

Bowen nodded. “I understand.”

However, he didn’t like it.

After this mission, he was resigning his commission. There were those who would argue he’d sold it along with his soul six years ago.

They were damn wrong.

He still held the engagement ring in his hand. Once again, it bit into his palm as he tightened his fist around it. One day, he’d be able to place it on Genie’s finger where it belonged and they’d finally be able to live the life taken from them.

That was if it wasn’t too late.

Didan Capital

Fires ravaged the city.

From his position at the window of the palace citadel, Vice Chancellor Rehelm watched the smoldering embers that had once been the national gardens. On the western horizon, a wall of flames spread upward, touching the very sunset it rivaled.

The city must burn to be born anew.

From ashes grew possibilities. A grand order. The beginning of the Glorious Didan Empire. No more council to kowtow to. No more vice chancellor to take the fall. From now on, the Didan government was a one-man operation. *Him* being that one man.

A Muloon fighter streaked across the sky, leaving a white tail of smoke in its wake. On its ass was a Didan fighter coming in fast.

Rehelm didn't even blink as the Didan fighter's main cannons fired on the Muloon, blowing it from the sky. The Muloon ship spun. The stream of smoke grew to a curly plume that followed the fighter until it crashed into the hills beyond the city walls.

One less soldier he'd have to provide a future for.

He brought the cigar up to his lips and took a long pull. Rich, flavorful tobacco smoke rolled down his throat and bathed his lungs. It sure beat the shit out of the stench of burnt bodies and charred homes. He needed something to cleanse his palate of the taste.

Victory really should have a sweeter flavor. Like that of a wet, willing woman. No matter, there would be plenty of those during his reign. An entire palace full if he wanted. A different woman to fill his bed every night of the week.

A short beep sounded in his ear. "Sir, the hostages have arrived."

He took another long pull on the cigar, in no great hurry to answer the summons. He'd get to the hostages when he was damn good and ready, not a moment before.

The scene around him continued to burn.

It was better to let hostages stew in their own terrified thoughts. Psychological torture was just as effective as the physical method, sometimes even more so.

Rehelm's hands trembled with need.

First came the anticipation. Then the act. Then the release.

Always the release.

He threw his cigar over the balcony to the bloodied street below. Stains from the earlier carnage had baked a dull red in the hot Didan sun. The first good rain would take care of that, washing away all evidence that lives had been lost inside the palace square.

He turned from the chaos of revolution and made his way slowly through the palace to the audience chamber.

In the hours since the first attack, the palace had grown quiet. The sounds of his hard shoes echoed down the deserted corridor. So far, his men had not been able to locate the chancellor or the council. That aspect of the coup worried him. They had gone to ground before the fighting began.

There had to be a leak somewhere in his followers. Once stability was established, he'd discover the one responsible and ensure they met their afterlife.

His hands closed into fists.

There would be retribution. Later. First he had other matters to attend to. He had to have Dante Bowen brought to him—the man had to know his place in things. Bowen had been the instrument of Rehlem's downfall. The ploy to use Bowen's former lover as bait had only worked temporarily until the bastard slipped the net. Now his lover's crewmembers were going to act the part of chum to bring Bowen out of hiding and to their rescue. This time, Bowen would not get away.

He pumped his hands open and closed.

There were secrets to learn. And he intended to get them soon.

Anticipation burned like rocket fuel in his bloodstream. The hostages had waited since being taken hours before, held in the confines of a dark transport caravan, left to wonder where they were headed and what fate awaited them upon their arrival.

Psychological torture was sometimes more fun than its twin—physical torture. Though nothing quite compared to the heady sensation of using hands to inflict pain on another.

Rehelm entered the room, his glance moving over the American GIs with their formal Jumper uniforms and Freedom Eagles with wings outspread embossed on their upper left breast, right over their hearts. They weren't an old society by Didan standards, but damn if they weren't a proud, arrogant lot.

The hostages were held at the end of laser rifles by their Muloon guards. Superiority shone from the Americans' faces. Their countenances as stony and expressionless as the rock faces outside the palace walls. He'd enjoy breaking them.

Angry red flashes filled his vision.

Without warning, he raised his hand, striking the hostage closest to him. The young man's head snapped to the left. A large, vivid handprint shone on tanned skin. The other Jumpers leaned forward as if they were about to rush Rehelm and the guards.

A shot flared. The stink of burnt flesh filled the room.

"Next man who moves will get thrown through the portal in a body bag." Rehelm lifted the injured soldier's head by grabbing a handful of dark hair. "Your government will pay dearly for your release."

The soldier looked forward, not meeting Rehelm's eyes. Not from a sense of fear or respect, but as if to say the vice chancellor wasn't worth the contact. "Levins. Sergeant. 871352." Name, rank, and personal identification number—standard operating procedure for an American POW.

"In every regiment, there are individuals who will break easier than others. Every man has his limits. It is my goal to find yours." He turned to his guards. "Take them to the cliffs."

Gordane Base

Forty-five minutes after leaving her, Bowen, flanked by two of the general's elite guardsmen, escorted Genie to the debriefing. She'd exchanged her dirty and torn uniform for simple cotton pants and a long tunic in a dark tan. The color looked bland on most people, but on Genie it set off her hair and eyes, making her glow.

They entered a small conference room where several high-ranking Gordane commanders sat at a long table situated on a dais.

The hairs on the back of Bowen's neck tingled. The setup looked more like an inquisition than a debriefing. He knew he'd violated about twenty international aviation laws, but he'd been attempting to survive an aerial attack from the Muloons at the time. However, Jaeden sat in the center seat and all the others would take their cues from him. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

Bowen glanced at Genie to see her reaction and wasn't surprised to see none at all. The woman was as tough as Didan steel. Besides, anything the Gordane command had to say to her probably wouldn't weigh as heavily on her heart as the deaths of her team members. He only wished he had been authorized to tell her about the rumors that some of them might have survived.

They were seated facing the inquisition officials. A pitcher of water and two glasses sat on the table in front of them. Microphones were sunk into the tabletop to record the proceedings. A monitor was buried inside the clear Formica top to show a streaming vid feed if necessary, or to translate the words in real-time if High Gordanian was not understood by the parties testifying.

Bowen spoke most Gordanian dialects, but wondered how well Genie knew them, if at all. Jaeden wouldn't have a hard time conducting the debriefing in English, but Bowen doubted the other commanders would be as accommodating.

They were directed to sit. Genie was handed a translator, not unlike the old Bluetooth technology, to place in her ear. They had upgraded since the last time Bowen had been debriefed. But then, he'd stopped needing translation a while back. Nothing like total submersion in a foreign culture to speed the learning process.

The debriefing opened as Jaeden extended his sympathy for those lost on the Didan desert. Genie nodded in thanks, her gaze never wavering from the general's.

"The Muloons have made a grab to control all portals on this side of the divide. We believe this is the first step in their bid to reclaim both country and heritage. If they can control the portals, they can curb trade from the alpha dimension. We do not expect this situation to last. Even now, we are again in possession of what you call the Dragon Port." Jaeden leaned forward as if about to impart great wisdom or tragedy. "This does not mean it will stay so. World governments are initiating legislation that will make aiding and abetting the Muloons an offense punishable by international law. But, the Muloons have proven extremely resourceful in the past, as we're sure they will remain in the future."

It was about time the combined governments got involved in trying to stop the scourge of the Muloons. Though they were a ruthless bunch, Bowen had to give them marks for persistence. The Muloons were once a proud race of warriors before they were conquered in battle by the Didans and their motherland leveled to build the new capital. The Didans meant to absorb the Muloons, but the anger and betrayal ran too deep and the Muloons vowed to take back their homeland.

"Prudence must rule the day. With the power shift in Didan, we no longer know where we stand with their government." Jaeden looked directly at Genie. "We have downloaded the data from Captain Benoit's

ship. Unfortunately, it will only give us data from when his sensors came into range. Major Lockhart, if you will tell the command of the initial engagement.”

Her brow furrowed in confusion over the use of the name Benoit, but she didn’t ask any questions.

Bowen laid his hand on the microphone and leaned over to whisper in Genie’s ear. “Speak normally. The translator will interpret for you.”

She raised a brow at him. “I *have* done this before, flyboy.”

No, he really shouldn’t have gotten so carried away earlier. She was pricklier now than she had been when she threatened to send him back to their dimension for execution. Or maybe she was just mad about his use of an alias.

Genie sat with her spine straight, eyes forward. “We were coming over the last rise before the open plain when a Muloon ship dropped down on top of us and began to fire. At first we believed them to be mercs, but the flag on the side of their ship was unfamiliar.

“They hit our port drives on the first strike. Then our thrusters went. The pilot managed to land safely, but the ground was covered in troops.

“I’m sad to report our intelligence never mentioned the Muloons were in that sector or on the warpath or why. We were unprepared for the attack, especially in what should have been friendly airspace.” Her hands were fisted in her lap. Bowen was sure she did that so the High Command wouldn’t see the emotion they revealed.

“Then let me enlighten you, Major Lockhart.” Jaeden hit a few commands on the console in front of him and a map of the Didan Provinces covered one large wall. The area around the capital was highlighted in red. “We believe the Muloons are being sponsored by someone within the fallen Didan Chancellery. The only way to get a Muloon to work for a government, or an official, is to promise them the chance of a new homeland of their own. That’s all they want.”

“And yet they haven’t received one.” Genie pointed to the map. “Instead they’re left to fire on trade ships coming in and out of the jump ports. Why haven’t we been told of the escalating attacks? I’m assuming they are escalating as of late.”

Jaeden nodded. “They are.”

Genie shook her head. “Then why not offer them an island somewhere and be done with them? If all they want is to live in peace and continue their cultural traditions, someone should step up and give it to them.”

Bowen watched the commanders as the translation was made and they understood Genie’s words. Most of them shook their heads at her lack of comprehension of the situation.

“No, Major Lockhart. The Muloons will stop at nothing to get what they want and to avenge centuries of wrongs. They are nothing if not persistent. They allow no marriages or births outside their own dying culture. To do so is to face punishment of the most brutal kind.”

Genie sat back in her chair. Incredulousness filled her face and eyes. Bowen could almost hear the wheels turning in her mind.

Genie took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "They had at least forty soldiers on the ground. Six to man the shield rover. At least a dozen on the ridge. I ended up taking down the grid, and the Muloons scattered."

The commanders followed her lead as she went on to answer their original question.

A one-talon general sitting to the right of Jaeden leaned forward in his seat. "Why didn't you make for the port? Our intelligence of your American-made ships states they can gain forward momentum without the use of thrusters. You could have rolled forward, but not gained liftoff."

"Your reports are accurate." Genie's tone was clipped. The stirrings of offense and annoyance radiated from her.

A wing colonel with obsidian eyes and an angry scowl pointed at Genie. "If that's true, then why did you not make for the port and let your mission control pull you through?"

What in the hell were they doing? They acted like the attack had been all Genie's fault. Did they think she sold her team out to the Muloons? That the Jumpers were in bed with the Didan rebels?

Genie's back stiffened further. Her shoulders rose. "Jumper protocols strictly forbid any team to guide a hostile force within ten kilometers of a port. We were already within the designated perimeter when we were attacked. I followed direct mandate by *not* going forward."

The High Command covered their mics and conducted a conference in hushed tones.

Bowen placed his hand on Genie's and squeezed. "Take a deep breath and let it out slowly."

"Don't sweat it. I've been in worse trouble. It's just the price one pays for command." She surprised him by turning her hand over and linking her fingers between his. "Remember the first mission to Alterrian? We almost lost the ship when we went from water to land."

How could he forget? The Triangle Port was underwater, off the coast of Bermuda, but came out on a tropical island. One some scholars believed consistent with the location of Atlantis if it hadn't fallen in their own dimension. Others argued that the islands off the coast of what corresponded with Greece in the beta were indeed Atlantis. Whichever side of the argument one believed didn't matter. The fact was no one had known of the island's presence until their advance team went through on a discovery mission. "Levins ran right into that cliff wall."

"I'll never forget the look on his face." She gave a small laugh that suddenly died. Her mouth drew down at the corners. In a whisper, she asked, "What am I going to tell his wife?"

The High Command finished their conversation and returned their attention to Genie and Bowen, cutting off his response. But it didn't stop him from closing his eyes for a moment and feeling her pain. Jesus, Levins must have still been assigned to the team as the pilot. If there was a God in heaven, Levins would be one of the rumored hostages and not one of the corpses left behind.

It made him sick. The whole nasty business made him sick.

“We believe the Muloons intended to steal your payload to sell it on the black market on your side of the divide, procuring funds for their revolution.”

Genie leaned forward. “I disagree. If they knew what we carried, they wouldn’t have run the risk of causing an explosion. As it was, the second strike blew the ship into sections and caused an aleon leak.”

Bowen shook his head. “The first strike.” He turned to Genie. “I smelled it when I was in the hold.”

Color drained from her face. Bowen wasn’t sure if she felt bad for having him locked in there with the dead bodies or with the unknown aleon gas leak.

She gave a little cough. “The first strike then.”

Jaeden frowned and tapped the desk. “It isn’t logical for the Muloons to jeopardize the haul.”

“I can’t speak for their motivations, only on the events as they unfolded.”

“Very well.” He nodded once to the one-talon on his right then to the guards behind Bowen and Genie. “We will analyze the data from Captain Benoit’s ship and interrogate the Muloons captured at the Dragon Port. You are welcome to stay here in Gordane as long as you wish, Major Lockhart.”

“Since the Dragon Port is secure, I want to see about having what’s left of my crew returned home.”

“I’ll have the medical staff see to transport in the morning.”

She mouthed a small thank you.

The meeting was adjourned and Bowen watched with a sinking heart as guards escorted Genie back to her room. Bowen remained in his seat.

His day was about to get a whole lot longer.

Chapter Six

“You can’t be serious!” Geneieve wanted to pull the earpiece off her lobe and send it hurtling across the room.

“I’m afraid I am, Major.” Mission Control Commander Roderick Cash didn’t sound a bit remorseful that he had effectively clipped her wings. Any chance she had of a quick and glorious revenge on the Muloons had been nixed by her C.O. “Prepare to return with the injured tomorrow as scheduled.”

“I need time. There’s something more to the situation on this side. I owe it to my lost crew to find out what it is.”

“You have your orders. You *will* return to base.”

“With all due respect, sir...”

“Don’t try my patience.” Geneieve heard Cash’s heavy breathing through the relay. If she knew him as well as she thought she did, the man’s last nerve was about to snap. “I’ll relieve you of command.”

He’d promised that before, only to later recommend her for promotion. Theirs was a love/hate relationship, which didn’t matter to Geneieve most of the time, but in instances like this, it definitely hurt.

Not one to back down when she knew she was right, Geneieve picked at the point like a scab. “Sir, I think this situation requires further investigation.”

There was a beat or two of silence over the relay. A decided click sounded. “I’ve switched to a more secure channel.” Cash’s voice had changed. Gone was the building anger. He spoke in little more than a whisper. “We’ve discovered a traitor on that side of the divide.”

Geneieve stopped.

Her knees turned watery.

Oh, God! Bowen.

She sat down on the floor, unable to hold up her weight any longer. They knew about Bowen and she hadn’t told them a word. Had Bertram made contact and ratted out their former commander to mission control? It was a possibility she had not considered before. Usually orders to turn someone over to the MPs came directly from the team commander, in this case, herself. But she had given implied consent when she’d had Bowen chained to the bulkhead after the first attack. She’d made her intentions more than clear when she placed him under arrest.

She forced her heartbeat back to within normal limits and swallowed down the panic in her throat. “Any confirmation on the traitor’s identity?”

“Negative.”

“In light of this development, I think it’s prudent that I remain here until we’ve uncovered the traitor.”

“We’re pulling all our teams back until further notice. It’s not safe there now with the collapse of the Didan Chancellery.”

“What about the Huber root and Calenite? Without this shipment—”

Cash cut her off. “We have temporary usage restrictions in place until we can arrange shipments from Gordane”

Anger fissured through her veins, burning like an acid river. They must have known something like this could happen in order to react so quickly in case subsequent shipments were not forthcoming. “Did you know my team would be attacked today and that we’d receive no assistance from the Didans?”

“When you’re hauling components for fuel, it’s always a possibility. Hostile forces can make millions off just one shipment. There was nothing special about today.”

No. Only the death of all but three of her team. God, she wanted to reach through the relay and strangle the unfeeling bastard. “And the Muloons? Mission control knew about their recent activities?”

Silence was the only answer she needed. Mission control was not above risking every last member of her team in order to procure the all-important Huber root and Calenite. Something about the soil in this dimension remained hard for scientists to duplicate on the alpha side of the divide.

“I’ve told you more than I should at this point. Be on the transport tomorrow, Major. That’s an order.”

A click closed the channel. Static filled the void of the broken connection.

Damn!

She glanced around the room. There was no way in hell she could stay and not try to do something proactive. It just wasn’t in her genetic code to do nothing but wait. But what could she do? Well, one thing she hadn’t done yet was visit Bertram and Toussant. Maybe they had seen or heard something that could be of use.

She opened her door and met with the steely gray gaze of her guard. If the Gordane officials weren’t careful, they’d make her feel unwelcome. Did they honestly think she had anything to do with the attacks on the jump ports? If the Muloons hadn’t attacked them, her entire crew would be back at the base bar, enjoying a pint or two together.

Maybe someone thought she had turned traitor. After all, if they discovered Bowen worked this side of the divide as a merc, they could very well believe she had turned and assisted him from the other side. Their affair had been the worst-kept secret in the history of the Jumpers.

She searched the face of her guard, but didn’t detect anything in his expression that gave away his feelings one way or the other. Like any good soldier, he was only doing his job.

“Would you escort me to the infirmary? I’d like to visit what’s left of my crew.”

He nodded and preceded her down the hallway.

The infirmary was located in another building across the complex and was roughly the size of a big metropolitan hospital.

Bertram and Toussant were roomed in a small ward off the main emergency department. A guard stood at the entrance of the unit and another watched the room about fifty feet from Bertram and Toussant's beds. At least they had placed the lovers side by side. Bertram would have been impossible had they been separated, in light of the severity of Toussant's injuries and him too lame to protect her properly.

Bertram sat sideways in the bed. His blue gaze fastened to Toussant, who had fallen asleep in a reclining position.

"How's she doing?" Geneieve pulled up a chair, placing it between the beds.

"Better. The sleep will do her good." He ran a hand through his hair. Even from where she sat, Geneieve could see his hand shake. The shock had started to set in.

"Did they give you anything for pain?" She looked up at the IV running into his arm. Fluids.

Bertram shook his head. "I need to stay clear-headed." He lowered his voice even more. "There's something odd going on here. I mean, I understand heightened security with the Muloons out of control and the Didan government falling, but we just want to go home."

Geneieve gave a quick nod to let him know she agreed, but didn't say anything else on the subject. From the position of the guards, they could hear every word. "We've been ordered back to base in the morning."

"Who'd you speak with?"

"Cash. He was less than helpful." That was an understatement.

Bertram raised a blond brow. His jaw worked back and forth, chewing on his anger. "Tell me when he has been helpful. That man's a menace."

"He's a company man, that's for sure." She didn't want to talk to him about Cash. She wanted to apologize for almost getting him and Toussant killed. "I made some grave tactical errors today. Bowen tried to tell me the Muloons wouldn't relent until they wiped us out, but I thought he was lying to me. And I'll confess something else. I accused him of hiring them. At first."

Bertram flared his nostrils and looked away. "Can't say I blame you there. Having him rise like freaking Lazarus must have been a shock. But faking his death or not, I'd never believe Bowen would ever hire the Muloons to take out our team."

Chagrined she'd contemplated such a thing for even a moment, she bowed her head.

Geneieve touched her lips, remembering Bowen's passionate kiss. Her body tingled in all the intimate places he'd touched her. "I still can't believe he's alive."

"You still planning to tell the command center he didn't buy the big one? Or are you going to have him escorted home?" The way Bertram asked and the earnest expression in his eyes when he turned back to

look at her revealed to Geneieve she didn't need to worry about him. Bertram hadn't told their superiors a thing.

"No. I think they might already know. But I do owe him for at least being able to save the three of us today." For the first time since they'd declared Bowen legally dead, a tear ran down her cheek. She hadn't been aware she'd shed it until it slid like absolution down her face. Brushing it away, she said, "He said he smelled aleon gas in the hold when he was cuffed to the bulkhead."

"Christ..." Bertram leaned over as far as his injured leg would allow and took her hand. "I know you think I hold you responsible for the mission falling apart like it did, but I've known you too long to believe that. You had about as much idea the Muloons were going to attack as any of the rest of us." He squeezed her hand. "If you decide to plot revenge on the bloody bastards, I'll back you. But, like Toussant, you have to wait until I'm back on my feet."

Geneieve smiled and squeezed his hand. "Thanks." She rose to leave and her guard came to attention. She and Bertram exchanged speculative looks then she followed the guard out of the ward.

All the way back to her quarters, she wondered where Bowen had gotten to and if he planned to come back any time soon. He was her only solid source of information at the moment, seeing how the Gordanes didn't want to reveal too much to her.

When they passed by Bowen's quarters, she stopped to knock.

No answer came.

Now, how in the hell was she going to disobey a direct order from the command center without his help?

Chapter Seven

Blood boiled through his veins.

The only thing that kept Bowen in his seat was the knowledge that he'd killed the Muloons responsible for assaulting Genie.

Footage obtained from Bowen's ship showed the second wave of attacks filling the large screen of the debriefing room. Bigger than life, the image of Genie being manhandled by the Muloons intent on raping her came into view.

Bowen felt Jae's gaze turn to him.

"She fights like a tigress," came the soft rumble of the general's voice.

It was hard to talk around the lump in his throat. "You'd better believe it."

The camera lost sight of Genie as the Muloons pulled her behind the broken transport. A young soldier broke from the fighting and followed, trying in vain to save his commander. A large Muloon with a face like a razor blade came up behind the Jumper and plucked him from the ground. A quick gun butt to the back of the head and the soldier slumped against his captor. The Muloon threw the body at a comrade, who bound the soldier and took him to a small awaiting aircraft.

Bowen gripped his hands into fists. Confirmation of at least one hostage.

The kid didn't look like he was much past his twentieth birthday. No telling what the Muloons would do to him, and all for trying to save Genie.

After watching the video, Bowen made his decision. He stood. "Where do the Muloons hide when they aren't terrorizing people?"

Jae held a light pen and traced along the tail of the aircraft. "Highlight and zoom on the ship's call sign."

The technician in the booth typed in the command and the side of the Muloon ship came into sharp focus. "This symbol marks it as originating from the Otoawa sector of the Didan Provinces. Back a hundred years ago, they had a small principality in that region before their king was killed and the government disbanded."

Bowen knew the Otoawa sector well. Cold dread filled his gut. "The topography is pretty hospitable to a hideout. The area is full of cliffs and caves. Someone could search for years and never find a group hiding there."

“And as long as they keep the threats from the west coast in check, they are doing the Didans a great service by being there.”

The western side of the Didan Provinces abutted a land of nomadic people and tribes, the Artevi, who had no qualms about crossing the borders and stealing anything they could get their hands on. Often, they would procure such goods by violent means then disappear back into the landscape.

Bowen sat up a little straighter. “Has anyone ever made a connection between the Artevi and the Muloons?”

Jae shook his head. “Centuries ago perhaps, but not recent enough to call upon a blood loyalty. Besides, the Artevi have a country. Such as it is. The main goal of the Muloons is to reclaim their heritage by whatever means necessary. It would go against their personal code to use the Artevi for help in that venture. However, they aren’t above selling their services.”

Unable to view the scene of carnage any longer, Bowen stood. “I’ve got to get out of here.”

Jae stood as well. “We will advise you if we locate the Muloon base.”

“And if I find it first, I’ll let *you* know.”

Bowen left the room and headed for the base bar. He needed a tall shot of Gordane *wissan*—the local equivalent of Scotch, but a whole lot smoother going down.

Cozan sat at the bar, nursing an *olat*, a lager beverage that was so thick it practically had to be cut with a knife to get it into the glass. When he saw Bowen, he lifted his glass in silent salute.

Bowen ordered his drink then lowered his voice so only his co-pilot could hear. “Prepare the ship to leave before first light.”

Cozan raised his brow. “Are you taking Major Lockhart and the others home?”

“No. The Gordane officials can do that. We’re going to hit the Otoawa sector and see if we can find ourselves some Muloons.”

Cozan’s wide mouth curled up at one corner, a cross between a grimace and a smile. “Good. Those bastards killed some of my best friends today.”

And some of Bowen’s. If he hadn’t come along when he did, they would have succeeded in killing Genie as well. That was just not acceptable.

He studied Cozan’s profile in the dim bar light. The Didan merc looked as if he made it a practice to shave with industrial grade sandpaper. Pock marks pitted his face like a lunar surface. A long, jagged scar pulled his right brow down lower on one side, giving his face a sideways appearance.

He took out a thick Gordane cigar and tapped it on his sleeve. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“You’ve been staring at me for five minutes. If you have something to say, spill it. If not, I’ll see you at the ship in the morning.” He rolled the cigar once more then put it between thin, unexpressive lips.

Cozan had more bad habits than an entire host of addicts in twelve-step programs. There was barely a thing likable about him, and yet, Bowen did. Perhaps it was the fact Bowen had discovered Cozan was ex-Didan military, their equivalent of a Special Forces unit. The Didan never mentioned it, and neither had Bowen.

Bowen had often wondered if Cozan was on a similar mission for his own government. The man was too close-lipped. Not a typical merc. No, they usually set their tongues to wagging at the first opportunity and didn't shut up until they were sure their audience was convinced how lucky they were to be in their company.

Cozan lit the cigar and blew thick clouds over his head. "I mean it, Cap'n. You're beginning to piss me off."

Bowen chuckled then dug into his pocket and pulled out a Gordane *lemnet*. It was a gold coin about the size of a silver dollar, but worth about seventy-five American. "Why don't you walk yourself down to the base brothel and take the edge off? It's on me."

Cozan shook his head. "Keep your money."

The door swung open and a dark-haired Alterrian beauty entered the bar. She was hot enough to melt eyeballs. Her bright red dress was cut down to her jeweled navel. The hem rode up so high, if she moved a fraction in any direction, everyone would see paradise.

Cozan's ugly face melted into a smile.

The beauty scanned the bar patrons. When her sultry gaze landed on Cozan, she started forward. He pulled the cigar out of his mouth just in time to lock lips with the woman.

Bowen watched in fascination as his co-pilot and the mystery woman continued to kiss as if they were connected by magnets. Frankly, Bowen didn't know the old guy had it in him.

Bowen shot back his drink in one long swallow and stood. "Meet me at the ship at oh-five-hundred."

Cozan held up a hand behind the woman's back to indicate he'd heard. Bowen pushed away from the bar and turned to leave.

He started back for his quarters, knowing he needed sleep more than anything, but the events of the day and raw adrenaline still pumped through his veins like a bad drug.

Glancing down at his watch, he wondered if Genie was still awake or if she'd tried to get some sleep. It was late—or early, depending on how you looked at it. If he went to sleep now, he'd still only get about four hours before having to get up. But he doubted very much he'd be able to sleep on command. Plus, he really wanted to check on Genie. See her one more time before he headed into only God knew what.

He turned down the hallway and saw the guard trying frantically to open Genie's door.

Bowen's heart kicked hard against his ribs as he took off at a run. "What's wrong?"

The guard turned grateful eyes to Bowen. "I don't know. All was quiet then she started screaming. My override isn't working."

That was because Bowen had disabled the feature to ensure Genie's privacy. "Here, let me try." Bowen nudged the slider aside and put his hand flat to the plate and the door eased open.

He hurried into the room, followed by the guard, to find Genie twisted up in her sheets, fighting enemies in her sleep.

She'd left the bedside lamp on. A low, ambient glow highlighted her tanned skin, accentuating the sheen of perspiration covering her body. Genie was also completely naked.

Bowen put his hand up to stop the guard from coming any closer. "It's all right. She's only having a bad dream." He sank down on the bed beside Genie and covered her with the sheet before pulling her into his arms.

Though it was clear Genie suffered from nightmares, the guard still took his time and searched the room before returning to his post.

After the door swished shut, Bowen held her tighter and crooned into her ear. "It's all right, baby. You're safe."

Her forehead and back were damp. Her body trembled. She hadn't woken up yet.

He rocked her back and forth, singing what had been their song. Slowly, her body stopped shaking and her breathing evened out. He ran his lips over her cheeks and eyes. Gently, he rubbed his lips against hers.

Genie's lips parted and she kissed him back.

"Bowen," she breathed against his mouth. "You never could carry a tune."

A deep rumble started in the depths of his soul. No, she was right there. His singing voice sounded like the last strains of a bullfrog dying under immense torture. It had been a source of constant amusement between them.

Bowen lifted a hand and ran it down the side of her face, cupping her cheek. "Are you all right now? You were having a bad dream."

She frowned and looked away from him. "Bad is an understatement."

"Do you want to talk about it?" He brushed the hair from her forehead.

She shook her head and ran her hand up his arm to rest on his shoulder. "I talked to Cash this afternoon. He said they know of a traitor on this side of the divide." Worry darkened her eyes, put a wrinkle between her brows.

He let a small smile curve the side of his mouth. Gathering her closer to his chest, he said, "Are you trying to warn me about your boss?"

"This isn't a joke."

"No, it's not. It wasn't a joke when you locked me in the cargo bay either." When she looked as if she might apologize or argue, Bowen stopped her words with a deep kiss. Genie stole her arms around his neck and held tightly to him.

The kiss changed. It became desperate, hard.

If he could crawl inside her soul and never leave her, he would. The drumbeat of a heart pounded against his chest. Bowen wasn't sure if it came from him or Genie. He didn't care much. All he wanted was to sink into her and wash away six years of loneliness.

He rolled them so he was on top of her.

Genie opened her warm thighs and wrapped her legs around his hips. She nudged against his erection, sending pleasure shooting down his shaft and into his balls.

He broke the kiss to pull back and look at her. "Are you sure?"

"I've missed you."

He'd missed her, too. But he didn't say it. Didn't let her know that every day of his assignment had been torture. Not knowing if she'd moved on and married. If she'd quit the Jumpers to raise a family. Or if she'd lost her life on some blood-soaked plain on this side of the divide.

In one quick tug, he had his shirt off.

Genie leaned up and ran her hands over his pecs, spreading her fingers out in his chest hair. Bowen took her hands and brought them up to his mouth, kissing each one in turn.

The sheet had dropped down to her waist. The glow from the lamp bathed her in golden light. She looked like a damned goddess staring up at him. Everything about her was perfection.

His gaze slid down her body, stopping at the red marks that still marred her breasts. "I'm sorry. I tried to get to you sooner."

She glanced down. "They'll fade."

But the memory would follow Bowen for the rest of his life. Even now, in the moments before lovemaking, he couldn't stop the constant loop of that horrible video footage from replaying through his head.

"Do they hurt?" He dropped one of her hands, reaching out to trace a bent knuckle over the injury.

Her slightly puckered nipple grew diamond hard as the side of his finger grazed against it. Her back arched in response. Genie's nipples had always been ultra-sensitive. He moved the pad of his thumb over her, stroking her, watching in fascination as her eyes closed and lips parted.

She hadn't answered his question, but from the look of it, she wasn't in any pain.

"I'll give you at least an hour and a half to stop that." A sweet smile curled her lips up at the corner.

The teasing words brought a lump to his throat. Tears burned behind his eyes. She'd said that the very first time they'd made love.

Her gorgeous eyes opened, the smile faded. "Bowen?"

He could barely squeeze out the words. But she looked so beautiful and trusting, staring up at him like he was her only salvation. God above knew she had no reason to trust him after he'd abandoned her. She still didn't know why he'd left. And Christ, he was under orders not to tell her either.

He leaned down and moved his lips over hers, still cupping her breast. “Shhh. Just let me make love to you.”

Together, they removed the rest of Bowen’s clothes. Her sweet lips pressed kisses to each newly exposed expanse of skin. His belly quivered as she leaned forward and ran her tongue up the length of his hard cock.

Threading his fingers through her hair, he cradled her head in his hands. He closed his eyes and lost himself in the sensation of having Genie’s mouth on him. But no matter how good it felt to have her making love to him so intimately, he wasn’t going to be greedy tonight. He wanted to comfort *her*, make *her* feel alive after a day of so much death.

He pulled away from her, staring down into her face. “If you keep that up, we aren’t going to get much further.”

“We have all night.”

No, they didn’t, but he wasn’t going to mention that and risk pushing her away. His need for her had become visceral. As necessary as air and blood.

He lay beside her, gathering her into his arms.

“My beautiful Genie.” He captured her lips and tasted her slowly, savoring every moment of their kiss. Passion spurred him on to take and ravage and plunder. But he forced those feelings down. Control hung suspended on a razor-fine wire.

Every moment he spent in her arms was a gift he might not get again. It needed to be savored, cherished.

He ran a hand up her side, circling her breast with a light touch. Breaking his mouth away from hers, he moved down her neck, shoulders, and down to the evidence left on her body by the Muloons. With the tip of his tongue, he traced the injuries, letting his love heal her. Even if she acted as though the attack hadn’t bothered her, Bowen knew it did. No woman could be that tough, even one as remarkable and courageous as Genie.

Her hands tightened on his as her back arched upward. Soft hair brushed against his cock. The hard points of her breasts brushed against his cheek as he moved his face over her, continuing to heal her with his lips and tongue.

A long sigh spilled from her mouth, stirring his hair.

Bowen cupped her breast in his hand and lifted it up to his mouth, taking that sweet, hot peak between his lips. Shivers ran the length of her body at the contact. Her thighs spread beneath him, beckoning him downward.

Making love to Genie had always been so good. The best he’d ever had. Separation had only made it better, sweeter, more poignant for him. There wasn’t a part of her he didn’t want to possess again.

He kissed a trail down her body, stopping at the juncture of her thighs to take in a deep breath. Her scent clung to his palate, making his mouth water for her taste. She'd always been so sweet. Anticipation was a fist in his gut. His erection painful in his need to be inside her. That part would have to wait.

Wet female flesh parted under his mouth. Genie opened wider for him, moved against his lips in frantic thrusts. He flicked his tongue over the hard jut of her clitoris.

Sexy moans filled the air. Her hands snuck into his hair again. If she thought to keep him in place, she really didn't need to worry he'd be going anywhere until he'd finished what he'd started.

Bowen wrapped his arms around her legs, holding her in place. Out of his head with her smell and taste, he set out to devour her. She bucked, trying to move with him, but he held her in such a way as to ensure any movement she made would be ineffectual.

"Bowen, please..." Her voice was ragged, on the verge of losing control.

He stopped and looked up into her hot eyes. "Please, what?"

"Let me move."

"Why?" he asked the question, but he already knew the answer. She might be a dynamo in bed, giving all for her partner, but she was also incredibly orgasmic. He'd spent one night in bliss actually counting the number of times he'd made her come. And the more she came, the more she wanted to. Greedy thing that she was.

"Don't do this..."

She tried to move again, but Bowen anticipated it and held her fast.

He looked at her body, a light sheen of sweat glistening on her skin. Her breasts were thrust up, nipples rock hard and pointed skyward. No woman had ever been sexier or made his blood burn hotter than Genie. She was everything to him.

"Don't do what? Make love to you like you deserve? Draw out each stroke, each sensation until you think you'll go mad from it?" He bent his head and licked her over and over again. Slower this time. Making her sob underneath him.

Once again he zeroed in on the tight bud of her sex. He pulled it between his lips and held it there, suckling.

Nonsense words, somewhere between benediction and damnation, pummeled him from above. Just for that he'd make her pay.

He backed away from her.

Light gray eyes flew open. "Why'd you stop? I was so close."

"Is that right?" He let a smile curve the corner of his mouth as he reached out a hand to run through all that lovely wetness. He circled her clitoris with his thumb, sliding first one finger then another into her tight sheath.

Just the thought of how she'd feel on his cock made him moan with her. He didn't remember her being so tight and hot. How long had it been since she'd taken a lover?

Forget it. He didn't want to know. He'd only be enraged with jealousy to think of another man giving her pleasure.

Genie rode his hand. Her breath came in puffs. Her moans grew louder. Bowen knew that sound. Had waited for it. Any moment now...

As her voice rose and broke with the first wave of her orgasm, Bowen took his hand away and pushed his cock deep inside her. Tight, hot walls squeezed his length, blinding him with sensation. He rode her hard until he felt the pulsing of her body slow.

His jaw and teeth ached where he clamped them together, trying for all he was worth to keep from following her into orgasm. No, he had plans. He wanted to take her there again. Slower this time.

Much, much slower.

Chapter Eight

Time stood suspended as Bowen continued to make love to Genie. Who knew if this would be the last time he ever got to hold her, to lose himself in the ecstasy of her incredible body? He only wished that tonight wasn't an illusion. That their reunion had permanence. That he wasn't leaving soon to face certain death.

He bent to rest his forehead on hers as he continued the slow, even thrusts of his hips. The sounds and scents of sex surrounded them, adding to the experience. He kissed her deeply, sending his tongue inside to mirror the movements of his body.

He wouldn't be able to hold out much longer. He'd gone almost beyond his sexual endurance as it was. But some part of him believed he'd never see her again. All the promises he wanted to make to her about a happily-ever-after would be made in vain. So he said nothing. He kept up the maddening pace, pretending this night was about validating life after the heat of battle and not reclaiming the love of his life.

The thought alone squeezed his heart like a vise. He held his eyes shut tightly and thrust as Genie lifted her hips and he fell, unable to hold back any longer.

Wave after wave of unimaginable rapture moved through him. Making love to Genie was all the religion he'd ever needed. She clung to him as he poured his soul into her, praying as he did that she'd kept up with her birth control immunizations. The last thing he wanted was to worry every day if he had a child on the other side of the divide.

As the spasms quieted, he ran his open lips over her face, kissing her forehead, eyes, cheeks and finally the sweet fullness of her mouth.

They continued to kiss for a time, hands busy caressing each other. Genie's eyes were only slivers of gray behind heavy lids. He rolled both of them over, tucking her under his arms. "You're tired. I shouldn't have kept you up so late."

Her voice when she spoke was filled with sleep. "Do you hear me complaining?"

Genie complain about making love? It'd never happen. She was a highly sexual woman. He swallowed the knowledge. That line of thinking would just lead him back to wondering if she'd had lovers in his absence or not.

"You should get some sleep."

She threaded her fingers through his. "You too. I have something I need to talk to you about."

All his senses went on alert. "What's that?"

“It can keep...until morning.” Her breathing deepened and she stopped talking. She’d fallen asleep in his arms.

He gathered her closer and buried his face in her hair. Tears that had wanted release since he’d first laid eyes on her again ran down his face and dripped into her hair.

He slept for a bit, waking only when his body’s internal alarm went off.

The sun had yet to rise. The room lit only from the lamp they’d both forgotten to turn off.

Bowen untangled his limbs from Genie’s and leaned over, pressing a chaste kiss to her lips. “I love you, Geneieve Analise Lockhart.”

She stirred a bit then settled again.

Emotion tore at his guts. He had to get out of the damn room before he woke her and begged her to come with him. Before he put her life in danger.

By the time she woke, he’d be in hostile Didan territory—in the Otoawa sector to be precise—trying to locate her lost crewmen.

He dressed then hurried out to the tarmac where his craft waited.

Cozan was already on board, going through the pre-flight check.

One look at the co-pilot and Bowen cringed. “You look like you had more to drink after I left. Or the bombshell put the hurt on you.”

The look Cozan sent Bowen was filled with laughter. “And you smell like a brothel, Cap’n.”

Bowen shrugged. Perhaps he should have stopped by his room to shower before he’d hauled ass out of the guest quarters, but he was afraid if he stayed any longer, he’d not have been able to leave.

Before they continued the check, Cozan turned to Bowen. “I’m sorry I let her on the bridge yesterday, Cap’n. We might have gotten out of there had she not seen you.”

Bowen let out a long breath. “What could you have done? Knocked her out and locked her in our storage until we got her to the portal? The Muloons would have taken out both ships at the jump site and we’d all be dead now.”

“Still. I did disobey an order.”

“Yeah, and now I’m about to take you into something that will probably get us both killed by the end of the day. Consider it even.” He took the pilot’s seat and started his own pre-flight control check.

Bowen strapped on the com unit’s earpiece and hit the button. “Tower one, this is the merc vessel *Analise* requesting clearance for take off.”

“Stand by, *Analise*.”

He covered the mouthpiece. “We need to find the hostages first. After we get them to safety, we’ll go back and find the infiltrator.”

Cozan started to answer when the sensors on the control panel lit up. A vessel screamed overhead and landed on the opposite end of the tarmac. Bright red, white and blue banners were painted on the side of the craft in stars and stripes.

“Shit!” The last thing he needed was to be surrounded by more Americans, especially those in positions of command.

“Friends of yours?” Cozan flipped the switch for engine ignition.

Bowen wouldn’t go that far, but they probably knew his name. If he had to place a bet, he’d say the owner of that patriotic vessel was Mission Commander Roderick Cash himself.

“*Analise*, you’re cleared for take off.”

“Thank you, tower one.” Not a moment too soon.

Chapter Nine

A steady knock on the door penetrated the heavy veil of sleep. Lethargy threatened to pull Geneieve back down like a dangerous undertow. She wanted nothing more than to stay asleep. Forget.

But forget what?

Images flashed behind her closed lids. Gory pictures of death and battle.

She sat up on the bed, heaving for breath like a swimmer who'd stayed too long underwater.

Something was wrong.

Red marks on her breasts caught her attention, bringing all the horror of the day before into clarity.

The knocking on the door intensified.

Bowen?

Other memories surfaced, smoothing out the rough edges of fear.

She and Bowen had made love last night.

A warm glow replaced the fear.

"Major Lockhart! Are you well?" The voice wasn't familiar and had a decidedly Gordanian accent.

"Fine." She stood and wrapped the sheet around her, trying to conceal her nudity enough to answer the door.

Dragging the majority of the bed linens behind her, she went to the door, hit the open mechanism then turned the handle. A guard stood there, staring down at her. His broad face pulled into a worried frown, which he tried quickly to conceal from her. He nodded his head in a quick jerk of greeting. "Your transport is here and waiting for you to board."

Cash wasn't taking any chances that she'd run.

"I'll be ready in a few minutes. Could you contact Captain Benoit and tell him I want to see him?"

"Captain Benoit left the base earlier this morning."

Geneieve stilled. She hadn't heard the guard correctly. Maybe she'd been wrong and Benoit wasn't Bowen's cover name. She'd only speculated.

"The merc captain who brought me here is Benoit, right?"

The guard nodded.

"And he left the base already?"

One look in the guard's eyes and she knew he spoke the truth. Bowen had cut and run on her. Again.

Pain and humiliation went off like grenades inside her. She schooled her emotions behind her mask of rank. "I see. Please inform the transport I'll be out in a few minutes."

He gave the Gordane equivalent of a salute and left.

She closed the door and folded herself down in a poof of cotton still warm from the bed. Bowen's musky male scent clung to her body. God, she could smell him all over her. Feel his hands on her body. A deep, sensual soreness between her legs turned into an empty pain.

Stupid.

How could she have allowed herself to be used again? Granted, the first time he'd left her, she hadn't known it was coming. This time there was precedent, and she'd still been stupid.

She sunk both hands into her hair and lowered her head.

Somewhere during the marathon lovemaking, she'd actually begun to believe that he still cared—that they might have a second chance. But he'd never said the words. Never uttered one syllable of forever. He'd called her beautiful, but big deal. Lots of men had called her that over the years. It meant less than nothing.

Physical attraction was light-years away from love. They weren't even in the same dimension.

Resigned to return to alpha and New Mexico, she stood and headed for the shower before Cash came looking for her. That would definitely not be good. She'd end up having to explain to him why she wasn't ready for departure.

After a quick shower, Geneieve put on the borrowed clothes from the night before, laced up her boots and stood.

It was done.

Six years of mourning for a man she never thought to see again, gone. At least there was solace in knowing he was alive, even if he didn't want her for more than one night of incredible sex. But the thing that kept looping through her mind was how little she'd really known him.

If someone had told her Bowen would go AWOL, she would have shot them without remorse. But they would have been right. And yet...

Another knock on the door had her snapping her head up. What now? Couldn't they just leave her alone and let her brood in private until she was ready to face her superior?

She hurried to the door and let it slide open.

Chief Commander Roderick Cash stood on the other side, his expression as menacing as a thundercloud. "Where's your uniform, Major?"

"It didn't survive the attack by the Muloons." She picked up her utility belt from the bedside table and strapped it on. "I can either wear this, or I can wear nothing but my belt and boots. You choose, sir."

His blazing blue gaze sharpened and a dark curse cut the air like a knife. "Are you..."

Geneieve put her hand up. “I’m fine, sir. A member of the merc crew killed the Muloons and freed me.”

The lump returned to her throat and she turned, grabbing her com unit so Cash wouldn’t see the sheen of tears in her eyes. Bowen had chosen to save her life then leave her again. All the tears in both dimensions wouldn’t bring him back. They were a pointless exercise in self-flagellation. She hadn’t risen to the rank of Major by being emotional. She was a strong, capable woman of action. It was time she started trying to find a way to give a little payback to the Muloons. Because she was quite certain no one else planned to.

Didan Province

The computer console smashed against the wall, shattering the components into a useless pile of electronics. Rehelm crushed them under his shiny shoe for good measure. The council had wiped the information systems clean. Not even the first line of code remained behind.

The information he needed pertaining to the treaties with the Gordanes was lost to him. The way the Gordanes had come to the rescue at the Dragon Port proved they were in deeper with the fallen Didan Chancellery than a mere trade agreement. This smelled more of conspiracy and tyranny.

Rehelm tensed.

Were they on the trail of Amulet of Skia?

By all the Gods. If the chancellery and the Gordanes got a hold of that artifact, there would be no stopping them from taking over the entire dimension. If the amulet fell into the hands of the Jumpers...

He didn’t even want to think about the consequences of such a pass. More so than ever, it was imperative to capture Dante Bowen and extract the details of the conspiracy from him.

Footsteps behind him drew nearer. Rehelm turned his head to gaze at the Muloon over his shoulder. The flat, ugly face was pulled into a gruesome frown. The news he came to impart must not be pleasant. Although nothing could be worse than learning that the chancellery and council had absconded with the entire governmental record.

“Well, what is it?”

“Sir, we’ve confirmed the *Geneieve* is in Didan airspace.”

A divine gift to be sure. Very subtly, he pulled his jacket hem down, straightening the wrinkles. “Ready my vessel. I want to be on deck this time to watch the bastard fall.”

In less than ten minutes, the small crew of Muloon soldiers had the vice chancellor’s ship in the air, coming in hard on the small fighter identified as Lt. Col. Dante Bowen’s *Geneieve*.

Rehelm’s hands grew damp in anticipation. Soon he’d not need the trade records, he’d have the man who orchestrated the deal. The maestro of mayhem himself in custody.

He tried to control his breathing and heart rate as images of Dante Bowen stretched out and tied to a table, unable to move, fighting against restraints as he bled secrets, came to him in a rush.

He grew painfully hard from the power. Drunk with it.

The *Geneieve* raced across their flight path, heading toward the Otoawa sector. Perfect.

“Pursue!”

The vessel shuttered under Rehelm’s feet as the pilot went thrusters full.

“Shoot out their gunners. I want no return fire.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do not...”

The command held suspended in the air as the guns fired and the *Geneieve* banked hard to starboard. Holes ripped open the side of the merc ship. Big, gaping wounds that sent her hurtling toward Earth.

Plumes of black smoke cloaked her descent.

All his hope to extract information from Dante Bowen slipped through his fingers. He watched in horror as the ship fell from the sky. A wild spin spiraled the black trail upward.

“Wait! There!” Two figures appeared, breaking through the smoke. Strapped to their seats and holding on for dear life, the pilot and co-pilot had safely ejected from the cockpit.

“Move to intercept.”

The ship swooped downward to intercept the enemy. Soon Dante Bowen would be one more hostage in Rehelm’s collection. The most prized of them all.

Cash’s regular crew manned the transport vessel *Freedom*. Lieutenant Wynn St. Jyles, a Jumper First Class, sat in the back with Geneieve as they circled the globe to land in the New Mexican desert. The jump through the Dragon Port had gone without incident as the Gordanes kept the area a Muloon-free zone.

Wynn brushed her hand along her scalp and tucked an errant platinum lock back into the bun at her nape. She turned jade eyes to Geneieve. “Cash thinks the Muloons are ramping up to invade this side of the divide. If they can’t take over a country in the beta, they’ll try for one in the alpha.”

“I’d like to see them try with the Gordanes covering both the Dragon and Tibetan Ports.” Geneieve shook her head. “Why does everyone know about how much of a threat the Muloons are when my team was out there dying and hadn’t a clue?”

Wynn leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Cash has been in secret talks with the Gordanes since the attack. I have a feeling something big is about to go down.”

That validated what she’d noticed on the Gordane base. Sure the heightened security could be explained away by the attack on the portals, but did not account for the thinly veiled hostility or the accusations of the Gordane officials.

“How does all this fit in with the fallen chancellor?” Geneieve whispered back.

“Cash thinks the Muloons are paid muscle. They earn enough creds assisting the revolution, and the new government pays them big time to settle elsewhere.”

“Including the alpha.”

Wynn nodded. “Oh, yeah. And don’t you know, if they settled on this side, they’d open up a bigger black market train than there is now.”

Neither of them said it, but they weren’t thinking of textiles and trinkets. Weapons and people. It was an ugly, disgusting business. Every time one such enterprise got shut down, another would spring up in its place. So far, there had been no reports of such dealings in New Mexico, but the other ports were a different story.

A mile from the base proper, a bright light rocked the sky and a shock wave shook the ship.

Red lights blinked in alert. The crew braced themselves as the vessel dove in a sharp roll to the right. After yesterday’s terrifying flights, Genie hoped today’s would be without incident.

Genie held to her harness and tried to look out the window to determine what had caused the explosion. The ship banked back the way it had come and she could no longer see the port from her window. They landed on a little-used tarmac on the northwest corner of land owned by the government, but not within the restricted zone.

Cash was the first off the transport. His shouted orders were lost in the wind and sound as six fighter ships screamed overhead.

“What do you mean he’s missing?”

Those words filtered back to Geneieve clearly enough.

Cash stopped and turned to glare at her. “Is that right?”

The words, though said to the person on the other end of his com unit, were directed at her. “Well, you better find him before we lose the best soldier this outfit has ever seen.”

His hard gaze never wavered from hers as he cut the connection. “Is there something you need to tell me, *Genie*?”

That name. Only one person in the world had ever used her nickname as an endearment. Using it as he did was Cash’s way of letting her know that Bowen’s resurrection was no longer a secret.

“As pertains to what, sir?”

He stalked toward her. “Don’t you dare play games now, Major. I need to know everything you’re withholding.”

How could she give Bowen up to her superiors and live with herself? He had saved what was left of her team. Even if he felt nothing but physical attraction to her, she still owed him for her life.

“I’m waiting, Major.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“The man who rescued your team yesterday? Where the hell is he?”

“Captain Benoit?”

Cash placed his hand on his pistol and narrowed his eyes. “We don’t have time to fuck around here. I want to know where L.C. Bowen a.k.a. Captain Benoit went after he left your room this morning.”

The world spun. The only way she stayed upright was to dig her toes into the bottoms of her boots and hope it helped her keep her grip on the planet. The jig was up. They already knew he had spent the night with her. Anything she said now would not get him into further trouble. Keeping her mouth shut would only see her court-martialed. There was no way she could avenge her friends if she were locked in the brig, awaiting trial.

“I don’t know, sir.” It was the truth. “I woke and he was gone. The Gordane guarding my door said Bowen had left the base.”

“Dammit.” Cash hit the connect button on his com unit. “His last known whereabouts are as we knew them. Did he file a flight plan?” There was a long pause as he listened. “Then we have to assume he went in search of the hostages.”

Hostages?

The secrets and subterfuges were really starting to tick her off. How was she expected to make command decisions for her team when she didn’t possess all the information? Never, in the history of her military career, had she ever been so close to resigning her commission. She wasn’t naïve by any stretch of the imagination. Military history was full of secret deals and unknown alliances and conspiracies. Most of her assignments were routine and nothing top secret in nature. Given the classification of her command, she had a high security clearance, but that still didn’t admit her to the inner circle.

Another explosion rocked the base. This time, the portal lit up like Times Square on New Year’s Eve. It had to be one hell of a blast to rock straight through the divide and into this dimension.

Were the Muloons attacking again? If so, had the deposed Didans finally decided to get off their collective carcasses and do something about them? Or did the Didans simply fight to reclaim their country?

Wynn placed her hand on Geneieve’s back and nudged her forward. “Come on, Major, we need to get you checked by the infirmary and back to your quarters.”

“Infirmary?”

A look passed between Wynn and Cash. “Go with her, Major. If I have any more questions, I’ll know where to find you.”

Finally, after the base physician inspected her bruised breasts and gave her the medical equivalent of a once-over, Geneieve returned to her quarters. It had been a horribly long twenty-four hours.

She crossed the room to look out the window overlooking the expanse of the New Mexican desert and the port. Flashes of brilliant light continued to strobe behind the dimensional veil. Whatever battle waged

on the other side had not spilled over. News had not been forthcoming either, and the base had gone on lockdown.

She needed to formulate a plan. Nothing from this point forward could be left to chance or for others to handle. She needed direct involvement.

The door buzzer sounded.

Man, she just wanted to be alone and figure out what hostages Bowen had gone after. Being a wanted man on both sides of the divide didn't make for an easy rescue mission. He'd have to watch his back at every turn. And there had only been a few members of his crew left alive as well. Not enough to man the ship properly or cover them during heavy fighting. It was a tactical disaster waiting to happen.

"Major!" A staccato tap of the buzzer punctuated Bertram's frantic shout.

Geneieve hurried to the door and unlocked it. "What's wrong?"

He looked around the hallway and then crossed the threshold and closed the door. He backed her up into the room, his blue eyes frantic. A decided limp listed him to one side. "We aren't the only survivors from yesterday. The Muloons took four members of our crew hostage."

Four.

The word stuck in her throat. Incredulous, Geneieve did nothing but stare at Bertram.

Then she moved.

Chapter Ten

He hurt all over.

Consciousness came back to him in fits and starts.

Small shafts of light punctured the dark cave. There was barely enough light to allow his eyes to capture and see. Mostly he saw silhouettes. And the big one he assumed was Cozan's wasn't moving. Neither were the other four bodies strung up like the catch of the day.

His brilliant plan to free Genie's team had ended in disaster.

As soon as they hit the Didan Provinces, Muloons were all over them like flies on road apples. His ship was currently on the desert floor, an expensive pile of scrap metal. The damn thing had taken it nose down then burst into flames. He and Cozan had barely made it out alive.

Not that he'd be alive much longer. He took in the condition of his surroundings. It was going to be a bitch of a time getting out of this one.

Bowen tried to turn his head to see if Cozan was still conscious. The motion swung the ropes holding his arms up over his head. He felt like a side of beef waiting for the butcher to come do his duty.

"Anyone awake?"

A short grunt came from Cozan's direction.

The others had probably been strung up for over twenty-four hours. The body couldn't take the strain such a position caused for very long. It lifted the diaphragm and made breathing difficult. The victims slowly suffocated.

They didn't answer him when he spoke, so Bowen began to swing his ropes back and forth to circle around and assess the other hostages. Pain shot through his sides and back as he lifted his leg and kicked one of the bodies. A low, dazed moan was the only response.

Still alive. But barely.

Since he seemed in the best shape of any of them, he had to be the one to rescue them before the damn Muloons returned.

The bands—hemp, if he had to venture a guess—bit into his previously injured wrists. The more he struggled, the tighter they became. His wounds reopened, leaking sticky blood down his arms. He swung in a circle again. It was too dark above him to see how the restraints were attached to the ceiling. If he could shear the ropes against the rocks, he'd be able to drop down then try to free the others.

But he had to hurry. No telling when their captors intended to return.

Bowen shoved his arms back and forth, undulating his body like a swimmer cutting through deep water. The bands tightened. What feeling remained in his hands quickly fled.

The rope dropped him a few inches, snatching his arms hard. Pain ripped through his shoulders. With all his strength, he pulled forward. The bands snapped. He crashed to the cave floor and rolled, looking up into the dark forever. His hands remained bound in front of him, the ropes twisted into a figure eight and secured in sailor's knots.

He ran his hands down his pants and boots. The Muloons had relieved him of his weapons. Even the pocketknife he kept stashed in the false heel of his left boot was missing. He put his feet under him and pushed to stand. What he needed was a sharp rock to finish severing the restraints.

A jagged boulder partially carved into some kind of primitive god guarded the entrance to the chamber. Bowen held his arms out and began sawing them back and forth.

Noise from the passageway halted his frantic movements. *Damn!*

He sawed faster.

Time had just run out.

Six Muloons wearing heat-sensing goggles rounded the corner from the cave mouth.

Spotting him, they charged. Bowen spun, hitting the closest one in the jaw with the side of his foot. The man dropped. With his hands still bound, Bowen reached for the man's blaster and raised the weapon, striking two of the remaining five. The odds still weren't in his favor. He didn't give a damn.

A shot hit him low in the side. It was a glancing blow, but enough to take him to his knees. He raised the blaster and fired off two more rounds, killing the shooter.

Without hesitation, he pulled the trigger twice more, dropping the remaining Muloons.

A dull thud sounded from the chamber behind him. Hopefully Cozan had freed himself. More Muloons passed through the cave entrance. A shorter figure walked between them, as if being escorted by an honor guard. The person walked stiffly, suggesting an old injury that impaired movement.

Bowen knew that walk.

His stomach turned.

Damn, he didn't have any way to contact Cash and relay this startling revelation. However, it explained why Genie's team had been allowed to go unprotected by the Didan government. If it was the last thing he did, he'd make sure everyone involved paid and paid dearly for their treachery.

The likelihood that the reports of a coup were false was highly possible. The situation sucked all the way around and back to Sunday.

"They're free!" one of the Muloons shouted. They spread out in a circle, trying to flank him. Bowen didn't know where Cozan stood, but hoped it was at his back.

Blaster fire lit the cave. Sparks showered down on Bowen, scorching his hair and face. He tried to ignore the pain in his wrists and side. It was no good. They hurt like he'd been set on fire. His bound hands continued to impair him.

Ducking, he tried to move out of the rapid succession of rounds. The close quarters of the cave gave no real room to maneuver. Nowhere to hide or find shelter. Not that it made a difference now. It was only a matter of time before they got him. His life was numbered in seconds.

Bowen's return fire slowed. The blaster's charge died.

They'd have to kill him. There was no other choice.

The thoughts barely formed in his brain before a charge hit him like runaway lightning. Fire coursed through his nerve endings. Hair all over his body stood. His skin tingled.

Blackness sucked him down.

Light began, small as the head of a pin. Slowly and with much pain, it expanded. Grit crusted his corneas, making it painful to blink.

He was alive. And alone.

From what he could determine from his limited sight, he was no longer in the cave, but a room somewhere. It wasn't even a comfortable sort of room. It looked more like a medieval torture chamber. Or a room in an S and M club. At least the parts he could see.

Currently, Bowen was strapped to a table of sorts, as if crucified to the hard slab. A band across his forehead kept his head immobile.

Why didn't they kill him when they had the chance? This only gave him another opportunity to free himself and take information back to headquarters. However, gaining that freedom might prove difficult.

But, as long as he was alive, it was still possible.

Sensations, old and familiar, moved up and down his body. Pain. Agony. Itching. Not just any itch, but the worst one he'd ever had. That proved the greatest agony of all. Having hundreds of itchy places all over his body and legs and not being able to free his hands to scratch.

This was how they'd break him. Strap him to a slab, unable to move then cover him in itching powder. It was the very definition of Hell. He'd go out of his mind.

He noticed his breathing had sped up and he held it, trying to slow it down a bit. He'd not be able to help himself if he hyperventilated.

A breeze blew over his skin, ruffling the hair on his chest and legs. For the first time, he realized they'd stripped him down.

He knew with a dreaded certainty his captors meant to torture him. If the bastards wanted information out of him, they were going to be bitterly disappointed. So far, all the intelligence trails he'd followed had

led him straight to—Jesus! Not here. He was supposed to be the hero in this epic fight, not the poor stupid sap who failed, despite all his best efforts.

Hadn't he risked everything for God and country? Hadn't he sacrificed the love of his life to help uncover a traitor who threatened stability on both sides of the divide? Where in the hell was the justice if he died unable to help those he'd sworn all his life to protect?

Without his clothes, his one connection to all that mattered had been lost. Genie's ring had been taken from him. The very symbol of his commitment to all he and Genie stood for. They had both sworn allegiance to defend the Constitution—their bodies had made vows of their own to each other.

But he wasn't dead yet.

He had to keep reminding himself that life meant hope. He might not be able to go down literally swinging, but they'd get nothing out of him. Not one word.

Somewhere behind him, he heard the sound of footsteps crunching rocks and dirt under heavy treads. Maybe he remained in the cave, but had been moved to a different chamber? He listened closely, trying to determine how many sets of feet he heard.

Voices speaking in a low, guttural form of Didan standard conversed as they entered the room. It was a common dialect among the trading circles. He heard the words Calenite and Huber root. One payload lost wasn't the end of the world, but they lost the woman as bait.

Aw, shit! It was all tied to Genie. They had planned to use her as bait to lure him in. And it had worked like a charm.

Their intelligence network had outdone itself this time. He hadn't once mentioned Genie's name in the six years he'd worn the name and clothes of merc Captain Benoit. The only concession he'd made was the tribute of naming his ship after her. It might have been a sappy bit of sentiment, but it had kept the wounds of their separation from feeling fatal. Yesterday had been the exception to his own rule. He hadn't even reacted in the past when he heard transmissions from her ship. Hadn't known she'd been promoted to Major. He never would have risked her like that—until yesterday. But the Muloons had gambled and won.

Another voice cut through the conversation. This one in the clipped aristocratic tones of the ruling class. If it wasn't the traitor himself. He'd probably sold out the entire Didan government to get into the black market. Or maybe he'd been controlling the markets all along. So the coup came from the inside not the outside.

Vice Chancellor Rehelm limped into Bowen's field of vision. "You are awake. Good. Torturing the unconscious is unsporting."

"I can just imagine it is." That answered his earlier question. Torture was definitely on the menu.

"The bounty on your head does say dead or alive. I think dead after bleeding all your secrets is so much more evocative. I daresay your employers will not care one way or the other."

No. They wouldn't. He'd agreed to die for his country when he'd joined the military. He tried to shrug. At least Genie was back in New Mexico by now, safe on the base. She never had to know how badly he'd fucked up the rescue. Never had to know about the hostages he didn't save.

"You are so persistent, *Lieutenant Colonel Bowen*. Like a blood-fly searching for a host. You circle and circle until someone crushes you with a swatter." An evil smile curled up the corner of Rehlem's mouth. He reminded Bowen of the old pictures of Nazi generals during World War II—polished and dapper on the outside, rotten and evil on the inside.

If he had illusions that he'd kept his cover, they had just been completely shattered. "Let me guess. You're the swatter?"

Another smile. This one filled with dark joy. How this man had risen to the second highest seat on the Didan command, Bowen had no idea. It disgusted Bowen.

Rehlem raised his brow as he donned a pair of black leather gloves. "I made sure when I placed the bounty on your head it was high enough to keep you busy trying to evade the hunters and out of my way. You're too resourceful for your own good."

Rehlem moved out of Bowen's line of sight. There were noises he couldn't identify. It sounded like items being moved around on a metal surface of some sort.

"Tell me, what are the Gordanes planning? What have your Americans promised them in exchange for their help? We know they're planning to import the fuel source from the Gordane stores." He made a tsking sound.

"They don't tell me their secrets. If you want to know, haul one of them in here and strap them to this freakin' table."

A whistling of air gave Bowen only an instant of warning before a whip cracked across his bare upper thighs. He ground his teeth together to keep from crying out. It stung like hellfire, but it wasn't the worst pain he'd endured. It was, however, a little too close to his dick for comfort.

"The Americans and the Gordanes are in negotiations to take control of the ports. They've made secret pacts with the Didan Council." Rehlem's voice had taken on an edge that hinted at madness. "What do they plan to do once they have control?"

The man had slipped a cog in his brain wheel somewhere. The Muloons were the ones responsible for blowing up ships trying to cross the divide. Bowen kept that accusation to himself.

The whip sang above him, this time finding its mark along his torso. He barely suppressed the scream. It came out as a grunt in his throat.

"We'll destroy the alliance if we have to do it man by man, ship by ship."

Crack!

“This was your doing! You brought the Didans and Gordanes together. You and your self-righteous Americans! Not enough you have to save your world, now you want to save all the dimensions in your grasp. I’ll not have it! I will not have it! Tell me where the Amulet of Skia is!”

Bowen’s eyes watered and tears ran down into his hair. Silently, he cursed the waterworks he couldn’t call back. It was a pure physiological response, not emotional. Still, he hated to think the men holding his life in their hands would read it as a sign of weakness. But watering eyes were the only response they would get from him. Even if they beat him until his skin peeled from his bones, they wouldn’t get him to spill what he knew of the Jumpers’ plans or how the Gordanes, along with the majority of the Didan ministry, were in full agreement of the direction dimensional history was poised to take. Yes, he knew about the legend of the Amulet of Skia and its power to open more portals, but he’d let Rehelm stake him bleeding in the desert sun and leave him for the vultures before he’d ever give up that secret.

Besides, recovering the relic wasn’t part of his mission. That was set for another team. His only task was getting the Didans and Gordanes into a dialogue and outing the traitor.

Too bad he discovered Rehelm’s identity a little too late.

Chapter Eleven

Bertram climbed into the rover beside Genie and strapped on his safety harness.

"I can't take you with me."

"You need a pilot." He slipped his sunglasses down over his eyes and looked into the west.

"I'll ask Wynn. She's more than qualified to pilot a transport."

Bertram turned to her, raising a brow over the frames of his glasses. "And have Cash on your ass for taking his golden girl into a battle zone? No way."

"You're injured. You'll slow me down."

He dangled a red, white and blue keychain in front of her eyes. "But I already have a transport."

He had her there.

They took off for the tarmac. Stealing a port jumper was definitely against the rules, but Bowen... Damn his soul! Had he gone after her teammates without telling her? Why?

There was no longer any doubt in her mind that Bowen was an inside man and not the traitor Cash spoke of. And he had been for six years.

In the distance, the port shimmered in the fading sun. It remained open from the chemical fallout of the explosions that rained down on the other side.

"Over there." Bertram pointed to the star-spangled transport.

"Have you lost your mind? You want me to hijack Cash's personal transport?" She shook her head but continued to drive on, not even stopping for a pedestrian walking across the pavement. The man made it out of the way just in time to avoid being run down.

A muffled curse faded in the distance as she continued.

"Will you be able to maneuver the ship with your injury?"

"Sure. No problem."

He didn't sound so sure to Genie's ears.

They parked on the far side of the transport, away from the prying eyes of any base traffic. They might be seen on camera, but she doubted anyone would get to them in time to stop them from taking off.

In seconds, they were strapped in and Bertram ran through a brief pre-flight check. He turned on the communication console. "If someone calls us back, ignore them. I have it on solely for the purpose of listening to tower transmissions." He flipped a few more buttons. The engines whirled to life. "You'll have to act as co-pilot. When I tell you to, pull the red lever toward you."

The jump drive.

Sweat broke out on her palms. All her years in the Jumpers and she'd never once had to engage a jump drive to get through a portal. That was handled by the flight crew.

"It'll be fine, Major." He cracked a lopsided smile. "You keep focused on going back into hostile territory and where you think those bastards took our teammates and I'll worry about the flying."

"And if I do something wrong and vaporize us on the jump?"

He shrugged. "Then we don't have to come back and face a court-martial."

They left the tarmac accompanied by shouts from the tower and people running across the runways at them.

"Major! Bring my ship back to base!" Cash's voice came over the com unit in a near growl.

She turned to Bertram. "How did he know it was me? You're right. The man is a menace."

Only seconds passed before they were approaching the port. Genie held the lever, waiting for Bertram's signal.

"We have two transports on our ass. Big ones." Bertram gave the ship more throttle.

"Not fighters?"

"No."

It was a small positive, though the transports did have gunners on board. "Either they'll let us go, or they'll shoot us down. Those are their only choices at this point."

Bertram nodded. "Now!"

Genie pushed the lever and that awful weightless feeling moved from her head to her feet, lodging her heart in her throat and her stomach up where her heart should be. Then they were through and everything bounced back into place, leaving her breathless and dizzy.

The transports were still on their tails.

Followed closely by the Muloons, who came from the east, beyond the port's perimeter.

The gunners behind them showed no mercy and fired. A Muloon fighter fell from the sky like Icarus with melted wings.

"Major," Cash's voice came over the com again. "Head for the Otoawa region. We'll cover you here."

Bertram turned the ship to fly northwest. "Is this an *if you can't beat 'em, join 'em* situation?"

"No. I think it's an *at least one of us will make it through* situation."

Even though the flip comment rolled off her tongue with the sting of acid, she couldn't stop wondering at the direction they'd been given. The Otoawa region. Not a good sign by any stretch of the imagination. What if the *Freedom* didn't have the equipment on board they needed to mount a rescue in such an inhospitable landscape? Cash didn't usually use this craft for such things.

She let loose of her harness and stood. "I'm going to check the cabinets for equipment."

The ship rocked as another Muloon fighter exploded off their port side. She grabbed the navigation center for support.

“Be careful.”

It was a wasted comment. She could only be as careful as Bertram’s flying permitted, or as much as the bombs bursting around them didn’t rock the ship.

The storage area was in a wall cabinet built into the bulkhead near the cockpit door. It was like finding the mother lode. Heat sensor goggles, extra blasters with charger clips, ceramic field knives, liquid-gel explosives, they were all there.

“Oh, yeah. Come to mama.” Genie loaded her utility belt, stuffed vials into her socks and shoved extra knives into her boots. It paid to be a one-woman arsenal.

The *Freedom* flew forward, leaving the battle raging behind them. Only the occasional bobble jostled the craft.

“Major?” A note of uncertainty hung in Bertram’s voice.

She turned back from the storage cabinets. “What?”

“Isn’t that Bowen’s ship?”

She looked at the burnt-out vessel, lying abandoned on the desert floor. Her eyes closed of their own volition. “Could be. I don’t know. It’s sure absent of markings like his ship.”

“Want to go down and take a look? See if there are any survivors?”

Deep down, she knew Bowen was still alive, somewhere. He’d faked his death before, she wasn’t about to let him get away with it a second time.

“Give the coordinates to Cash and head on to Otoawa. If Bowen’s anywhere, he’s with the hostages.”

Bertram gave her a long, silent look and followed her order.

Cold night air blew down the cavern wall.

Jesus, the temperature had to have dropped forty degrees since the sun went down.

Genie zipped up the thermal jacket and turned in a circle. Her heat-sensing goggles picked up nothing but small animals and birds perched in the rocks. Nothing big enough to be a man and nothing that left the residue of human footprints behind.

She’d relegated Bertram to the ship. Cash and the crew of the two transports had followed them into the gorge after dispatching the Muloons to their respective Gods. The two teams spread out, looking for clues as to where Bowen and his co-pilot had been taken—and Cash was certain they’d been taken somewhere and had not left the ship under their own steam. He didn’t disclose how or why he suspected such a thing. It was enough for Genie that he did.

She adjusted the penetration on her goggles. It would be easy to miss a heat signature if they were behind one of the rocks or hiding in a cave. As it stood, they needed to check all the caves in the Otoawa region to be sure the Muloons weren't hiding there.

There had to be a better way to find their lost ones.

"Major, report to the command center immediately."

"Acknowledged." Genie turned and started back to the cavern floor.

Speculation spread through her like a cancer, malignant and hateful. Cash wasn't one to recall a member of a search to base unless there had been a big development. They had to have found something.

Please, don't let it be Bowen's body.

The thought alone made her choke.

She squared her shoulders and took a deep breath before continuing on. It was like six years ago all over again.

The team had searched for Bowen's body for days. They'd checked field morgues and mass graves. There had been too many dead to transport home, so they were given a burial on this side of the divide. For a while—and up until she'd walked on the bridge of his ship and seen him alive—she'd lived with the stark feeling that she'd failed him somehow by not finding him and bringing him home.

Genie gritted her teeth, picking up speed as she made for the safety of the gorge floor. It had all been an illusion back then, one to make everyone believe Bowen dead so he could work this side of the divide with immunity. She knew that now. Knew it as she knew he really loved her. That had never been faked. It had always been there in his eyes and the press of his lips.

The ships sat together in a defensive pattern. Their guns trained at angles to protect in a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree radius. The *Reformation* had her forward guns trained skyward.

She entered the deck of the largest transport, *Mephistopheles*, and followed the MP to the command deck.

Bertram handed a cup to the large Didan who looked like he'd been run over by a backhoe. Hope grew as a tiny bubble. It was Bowen's second. If he were still alive, maybe Bowen was too.

The man glanced up and smiled through a busted lip and broken teeth. His right eye was swollen shut. "The Cap'n..." he said before he narrowed his one good eye in pain, if Genie read his battered expression correctly.

"What about him?"

"Hostages...he tried to free them."

Her toes curled in her boots to keep her grounded. "Is he dead? Are the hostages?"

He shook his shaggy head. He stopped and took a deep sip from the cup before answering. "No. They took Cap'n away. Don't know where. Same cave. Different tunnel."

"Which tunnel?"

“I can show you.” He stood, suppressing a wince as he did. Though pride showed through his busted face, he walked stiffly, his arm bent slightly forward to protect what Genie felt sure were broken ribs.

Bertram stood as well. “There’s something else you should know. Vice Chancellor Rehlem was there with the Muloons.”

Bastard. He’d betrayed his own people and sold out America. But for what?

“Where’s Cash?”

“Conference call. The Didan chancellor and his council along with the Gordanes.” Bertram handed Genie a printout. “Reports of the coup might have been a bit premature.”

“Or the chancellor and his staff allowed it to flush out a traitor.” She scanned the notes then nodded once. “I need to take some of the MPs with me. Fully armed.”

“Already assembled.”

She jerked her head to the side to indicate Bowen’s co-pilot. “Arm him as well. I’m sure the Muloons thought it prudent to relieve him of his hardware.”

A short time later, with Cozan as their guide, Genie and a small band of MPs started for Bowen’s last known location—some God-forsaken cave in the backside of nowhere.

Chapter Twelve

The cave stood a good kilometer above the gorge floor. The trek up the cavern wall was treacherous, but not impossible with the night-vision goggles. The wall of rock wasn't a straight vertical ascent. Hand and footholds were plentiful.

Genie's shoulders and upper thighs screamed in pain. She hadn't done this particular activity in a long time. For Bowen, she would endure it. How could she not? He'd put his life on the line repeatedly to save her and her crew.

Even if he hadn't, she loved him more than her own life. Any sacrifice she made for him was well worth the payment.

Cozan stopped and pointed to a gaping maw at the top of a ledge. Three warm bodies glowed red and yellow under the goggles' heat-sensing filters. There was no way Genie's team could go gung-ho up the rock face without picking off the guards first. But the kills needed to be clean and silent. Any noise might alert others to the coming raid.

She gave the MPs hand signals indicating they double back and come up on the entrance from above.

Though loath to do so, Genie instructed her team to hunker down and wait for the MPs to signal success before storming the cave. It was the longest wait ever. Adrenaline surged through her veins, looking for an outlet. She slowed her breath, telling herself the chance for vengeance would come soon enough.

The signal came as a short series of clicks over the com unit. The team moved up the hill, gaining purpose as they climbed.

As they entered the cave, a loud crack echoed down the rock walls from some inner chamber. "Spread out," Genie commanded into the device she had clipped to her ear. She took the laser rifle from a harness on her back and held it with both hands as she moved toward the unfamiliar sound.

"We've found the hostages, Major."

"Status?"

"Alive. Barely."

"Can you identify?"

The answer took a moment in coming, but when it did, she let out a long breath of thanks for the lives that were spared. "Levins, Cartwright, Isaacs, and Stern."

"Do what you can for them here. We'll have to wait to move them."

Confirmation that the soldier understood came and then radio silence.

Genie continued to move down the tunnel, following the crack of sound. Something being struck with force and violence. Flesh?

The thought turned her stomach.

She stepped around a corner and was jerked forward by the barrel of her gun. Muloons filled the corridor, menacing. She let the momentum pull her forward and struck out with a solid kick to a Muloon's groin, followed by one to his chin. He dropped at her feet, releasing the gun. She spun, firing off shots as she did. Muloons lay at her feet. Scorch marks pitted their chests and abdomens. Noxious smoke rose from the burns. There was nothing like the stench of burnt flesh to turn a stomach. She breathed through her mouth and continued down the passageway, stepping over bodies as she did.

She hadn't taken but a few steps when an arm reached out from a darkened recess, grabbing her from behind. Her rifle clattered to the ground, discharging a round to ricochet off the walls as it hit the dirt.

An arm like a vise held her throat. The other gripped her waist, lifting her off the ground. Black spots swam in front of her eyes. He was cutting off her air. She pulled her legs up. Only a bit more and she could reach the ceramic knife in her boot.

His hand moved up and grabbed her breast. She crunched into a ball, reaching into her boot. She pulled the knife free then sent it into his left thigh. The Muloon yelled and dropped her. Genie gulped in air, trying to gather herself.

He didn't give her much time. He pulled the blade from his leg and lunged for her. She flipped her body like an acrobat, pulling the other knife from her right boot, sending this one sailing into his chest.

A moist gurgle came from his throat. He looked at the knife handle protruding from his chest as if in disbelief. When he lifted his hands to pull it out, something bright glittered in the low lamplights. A ring on his pinky.

Not just any ring either—a diamond engagement ring the likes of which were not found on this side of the divide. With a last bloody gasp, he fell to the floor. Genie hurried and rolled him over to look at his hand.

Memories of a shopping trip and Bowen's adamant stance against expensive rings filtered through her mind. They had fought over a ring like this one. This exact one, she'd wager.

Angry tears filled her eyes. She pulled at the ring, but it wouldn't budge. She spit on her hand, rubbing it over the thick, dirty digit. Finally the ring gave way and slid off into her hand.

Coincidences were possible, she'd always believed that, but not like this. Bowen had gone back and bought the damn ring before he disappeared from her life.

A sob threatened to tear from her throat.

She had no time to mourn things that happened so long ago.

She pushed up from the floor and pulled her knives from the dead Muloon, then cleaned them on his shirt and stuffed them back into their hiding places. She retrieved the gun from the dirt and checked its functionality.

Noise from the cave opening had her moving deeper into the tunnel.

Suddenly, two members of her team, along with Cozan, met her where the passages bifurcated. Cozan looked as if he was in excruciating pain, but he limped on, a determined look on his brutalized face.

They continued. The torturous sounds had stopped, replaced by the rumble of voices.

The passage opened to a large room. A sick feeling spiraled down to Genie's soul. It was nothing more than a torture chamber.

She surveyed the room strategically. Four Muloons and the Didan traitor stood at various points. Rehlem had a whip in his hand and a glazed look in his eyes. The thing that stopped her heart and nearly made her gasp in reaction was the sight of Bowen strapped to a long stone table, blood running down his sides and thighs.

"Who are your contacts on this side?"

Bowen mumbled what sounded like an expletive.

The whip cracked in the air then connected with Bowen's flesh. Geneieve winced. She stuffed her hand into her mouth to keep from crying out.

Her eyes filled. How long had they been at this? There wasn't a place on Bowen's body that would be left without scars.

"Take the guards out first. Save Rehlem for me."

Laser fire exploded in the room. The Muloons dropped like rag dolls. The vice chancellor backed up into a corner with his arms raised like a scared child.

Genie came at him with murder in her eyes. "For every mark you've made on his body, I'm going to put one on yours."

Rehlem shook as if coming out of a trance. "He wouldn't tell me his secrets."

"And he's a hero for it." Genie wedged her pistol under his chin. "But you wouldn't know about that, you spineless bug."

An MP held his own gun on the vice chancellor. "We have orders to take the traitor alive."

That was so not fair. She wanted to see his blood on her blade. To take that fucking whip and bleed his body dry.

Reluctantly, she turned Rehlem over to the MPs and hurried over to Bowen.

Quickly, she cataloged his injuries. The lash marks were many and some looked pretty deep. She unhooked the strap on his forehead. A perfect line of blood ran across his brow where he'd strained against it and broken a few layers of skin.

She bent down over his face, running her fingers through his hair. "Bowen?"

His eyes fluttered. “Genie?” It was the only thing he said.

“It’s over, baby. You can come home now.” She kissed his parched lips.

Chapter Thirteen

Light streamed across Bowen eyelids, waking him from a fog of pain-deepened sleep. There was a sharp astringent smell to the air. He definitely wasn't in the cave anymore.

He lifted a hand, tethered by an IV, and scratched at the bandages across his stomach. His mouth tasted foul, as if someone had replaced his water with piss. He lay there a few more moments before he let his eyes open and take in his surroundings.

Base hospital, by the look of it. One on the American side of the Desert Port.

He was home.

If he hadn't felt another presence in the room, he'd have broken down and cried with relief.

He turned his head. Genie sat by his bed, a lovely smile on her gorgeous mouth. Now that was worth waking up to.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been shot out of a cannon." His voice was so low and gravelly, he almost didn't recognize it.

She stood and came to his side, taking his hand gently in hers. "I don't think you're quite ready for a stint in the circus, but Cash wants to offer you a post on the base as a Jump instructor, if you're interested. He said you could also work as a consultant on missions, if you were tired of being the go-to man."

He let his fingers curl around hers and squeezed. "You know?"

She nodded. Was that a tear sliding down her cheek? Christ, Genie never cried. He felt like the worst kind of jerk.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't tell you..."

She silenced him with a kiss.

When she pulled back, another smile broke through the sadness. "Thanks for trying to save my team. Because of you, they made it back here in time for treatment."

He closed his eyes tightly. "I screwed it up. The Muloons were waiting for us. They knew we'd come looking for the hostages. Once they lost you as bait..."

The bed depressed where she sat beside him. She held his hand cradled in hers. "You should have taken me with you."

He shook his head. "It was too risky. I'd already saved your life once."

"Don't think you'll hold that against me, Bowen. I saved you right back."

He lifted his free hand to brush at the tears gathered on her lashes. "Thank you."

She pressed her face into his palm. "I recovered something from one of your captors I think belongs to you."

She pulled back, dropping something into his palm. He raised his hand, looking at the ring that had kept him sane for so long.

"Genie." The name was ripped from the very foundation of his heart.

She smiled. "I wouldn't have thought much about it had I not recognized it."

He took her hand in his, surprised that his were shaking. Everything in his life centered on this moment. This reward he'd dreamed about for so long.

"I love you, Geneieve. Please say you'll forgive me for the hell I've put you through and marry me."

Her hand trembled as well. He slid the ring on her finger, not bothering to wait for an answer. It was there in her eyes and the smile that spread across her face.

He pulled her forward and gathered her into his arms. Their lips met and passion flared like the flash of high-octane fuel igniting.

About the Author

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Wither

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Recast, Book 1

Wrangling is in Colt Marshall's blood. He was known across the galaxy for his skill at roping horses and cattle, but found that the woman he loved wasn't so easy to tie down. Now a mysterious client has him wrangling a man who may or may not be fully human. Colt doesn't know and doesn't care, as long as he gets paid. Until his pursuit of the escaped captive lands him on his former lover's planet...and her request for help threatens to crack the armor around his heart.

With Colt's unexpected arrival, Brynn Wight's problems could be solved...or multiplied a thousandfold. She doesn't expect him to understand why she left him, but she sure could use his help ridding her planet of the feral creatures terrorizing her town every night. It doesn't help that he looks just as good as she remembers. Or that even after five years, their mutual lust is very much alive.

Their desire rivals the heat of the planet's skin-peeling sun, stripping away layers of secrets to expose the truth. And a secret that could be their death sentence...

Warning: This book contains a space cowboy with an attitude, a female sheriff with a kick-ass past, an AI dressed like a deputy, feral creatures, and a planet scorched by its proximity to the sun—but still not as hot as the cowboy and sheriff are for each other.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Wither:

Damn, it's hot.

The heat slapped Colt as instantly as the realization that Brynn was already waiting for him.

He readjusted the bandanna around his neck. On this planet, it would serve the purpose of a sweatband. Perspiration moistened his jeans-covered legs and made the boots uncomfortable at his feet. Yet, without these articles to protect his skin, he'd fry.

He placed the wide-brim hat on top of his head and walked out into the bright sun. The glowing orb hung just above the barren horizon in the distance, large and orange, ready to scorch the skin right off his body. Colt couldn't understand why anyone would willingly live here.

"You might want to get under cover before your skin burns," a familiar voice called.

He looked up, trying not to smirk. There she was, inside a wagon with a white canopy, holding the back open for him. "And that flimsy transport will protect me?"

Brynn jumped out of the wagon, dressed in an outfit which mirrored his. Except she wore protective glasses over her eyes and her skin glistened with what he could only assume was some sort of sunscreen. The jeans clung to her curvy hips and the white shirt opened up far enough to expose her impressive

cleavage. A leather vest emphasized her small waist. Her hair glistened in the sun, and for a moment, he fought the urge to close the distance between them so he could wrap his arms around her and demand a rough kiss. He'd never gotten any kind of goodbye, kiss or otherwise.

She placed both hands on her hips and lowered the glasses to the tip of her nose, looking him over. "Maybe we should pop into your new shiny ship, instead. What happened to the *Stallion*?"

"*Stallion* had its day. I'd like you to meet *Stallion II*." He spread his arms out to showcase the best ship he'd ever gotten his hands on. Not big enough to comfortably house any more than two or three people, but roomy enough for him and the captives of his trade.

Brynn whistled. "Very fancy. I never figured you for a fancy boy." She crossed her arms over her stomach. "I think I liked the old one better."

"Yeah, well, I'm afraid you don't get a vote anymore." He looked away for a second, checking out the array of cactus in the distance. He might be willing to be civil in order to get what he came here for, but he wasn't going to take any shit from her. "How'd you know I would land here, on this spot?"

Her blue eyes darkened and she pushed her glasses back into place. He'd caught the tiny sun wrinkles around her eyes hardening. "I know my own planet better than anyone else. It's good to see you haven't lost your wit, Marshall."

"Wish I could say the same about you, Wight." Anyone dumb enough to return to their home planet—when she'd obviously been running from something—didn't have the balls he remembered his Brynn having. He crossed his own arms, puffing his chest to show his full stature. A move which wouldn't do anything to impress her, but they were beyond impressing each other. After spending over three years together twenty-four-seven, neither needed to show off. He'd just make things clear from the start. He wanted to find his escape pod and scoop up some gold while he was at it. Nothing more.

"Right, now that we got the attitude out of the way, how'd you get here so soon?"

"Let's just say that I was in the area."

"What were you doing on this side of the galaxy?" Was that suspicion or accusation in her voice? She probably had a bit of both, though he couldn't figure out what she had to be suspicious about. She'd left without a damn word and now expected him to help her, and wanted to interrogate him in the bargain? *Not gonna happen.*

He shook his head. "I'm afraid you don't get to ask me any more questions."

Brynn took a step forward. "Then I suggest you lock up your ship and follow me."

"You want me to leave *Stallion II* out here in the open?" Colt looked over his shoulder. His ship stood in the middle of a barren landscape with the scorching sun practically stripping the paint off its exterior. Anyone or anything could damage it and he'd be back too late to do anything about it. After so much space travel, the original chrome finish had darkened, but this ship was still his pride and joy. His one constant companion. "Don't you have a space port where I can park it or something?"

She removed her dark glasses and dangled them loosely from her fingers. “Did you receive any communication or instructions while approaching the planet?”

“Nope, can’t say that I did.”

“Yeah, well, that would be because we don’t have any of those facilities around here.”

“So anyone could land and you wouldn’t know either way.”

She shrugged. “Well, we’re not totally primitive. I knew where to find you, didn’t I?” She released a breath. “We also know that a ship crash landed last night. And I know that whoever was in it happened to be injured.”

“How do you know that?”

“Let’s call it a hunch.”

Colt stared at her. How much could he trust her now? At one stage in his life, he could honestly say he’d trusted her more than anyone else. But now, he wasn’t sure. His tense body unwound a little when he remembered her the way she used to be. She hadn’t changed that much, though her demeanor seemed different. He couldn’t take his eyes off her cleavage.

Come on, Colt, all you have to do is move a few steps and take her. She might be all tough and standoffish, but she’d melt right back into his arms. He knew she would. He could see it in her eyes, the way she looked him up and down when she thought he didn’t notice.

They were sizing each other up. But what he’d really like to do was size her up in bed—naked. Hell, he didn’t even need a bed. He could easily pick Brynn up and press her against that pathetic wagon of hers, or bend her over the side of his ship.

The wild thoughts made blood surge through him until it all collected in the one spot he’d hoped she wouldn’t affect. Trying to readjust so she wouldn’t notice, he thanked the leather chaps strapped to his legs.

I might be angry, but I’m not stupid. If the opportunity arose for him to score with her, he’d snap it up in a second. Sex was sex. It didn’t need to mean anything. He’d become level-headed enough to separate physical need from emotion.

Colt cleared his throat. “You might want to call it a hunch, but I think you’ve seen the pod. Where is it?”

The invaders thought they had crushed humanity. They messed with the wrong species.

Metal Reign

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An Impulse Power Story

Francine Beaumont is tired. Tired of waiting for an armada of Imber ships to finish off what's left of humanity. Tired of fear and privation. Tired of living like a rat, feeding off what scraps the cat lets her have.

When the chance comes to hit the Imbers where it really hurts—right at their fuel supply—she takes it. One stealth cruiser. One pilot. A cargo hold filled with explosives. A suicide mission for sure, but better that than doing nothing.

As the ship's cook, John O'Shaughnessy knows everything that goes on aboard the warship. And something is definitely up with his Frankie. If she thinks he's going to let her carry out this crazy plan of hers alone, that stubborn woman has another think coming.

Frankie thinks she's gotten away clean...until her instincts tell her she's not alone on her mission. Still, it's a shock to find her peace-loving John standing there with eyes that spell murder. Now is a hell of a time to discover they're more than friends. But there's no turning back...

Warning: Space invaders were seriously harmed in the making of this story.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Metal Reign:

Everything happened fast.

One second, about a dozen alien ships were flying a couple thousand meters ahead and the next second, a hit sent the reefer barreling to portside. The impact rocked both Frankie and him back against their seats. Only the harnesses saved them from being projected across the bridge like the rest of everything not anchored or strapped down with thick cargo netting. Clacks, clangs and rattles drowned what Frankie yelled. Alarms wailed, lights flickered, died for an agonizing second then switched back on.

John's instinct surprised him. Instead of trying to stay the ship, he extended an arm to grip Frankie by the back of her coveralls. Just in case. He'd never known a protective nature hid under his cynical crust. *Great timing...*

As the reefer gathered speed in its gut-flattening spiral, John braced his feet wide apart on the consoles. Gs built up. Space flew sideways in the tacscreens. Stars became white lines. Interspersed with these lines, a green blur—Earth. Fighting against nausea, John forced himself to focus on the altimeter. Too low. Too damn low.

"Take...the nav," he growled. "I'll...take...propulsion."

Both wrestled the effects of gravity, which tried to keep them glued to their backrests, as they struggled to control the ship's spiral. Frankie quickly punched in coordinates while John gripped the engines control and pushed them as forward as they could go. The only way out of a spiral was down hard and fast. With any luck, they'd gain enough momentum to break out of the corkscrew, skim along Earth's atmosphere then bounce off into space. But then again, luck was a bitch these days.

"Hang on," John warned a split second before the attitude jets responded to his commands. By his side, Frankie held on to the console corners.

Turning, turning. Slower. Another turn that stretched out told John their maneuver may just work. Alarms finally clicked off when the reefer pointed downward and entered into a dive just as scary as the spiral. Except that now they were in control. Somewhat.

"Tell me when it's five degrees," John said through his teeth.

Frankie nodded. Sweat coated her face and made limp ribbons of her usually curly hair.

Silence was only broken by their panting as they each fought with their assigned console.

"Five degrees!"

John gunned it.

The reefer shot forward and up, at thirty-five degrees to starboard, higher still, until they'd made a complete U-turn that sucked every iota of power out of his poor ship. When the moon appeared in the tacscreens, John spared a hand to pump his fist. Had to let out the testosterone somehow.

"Jesus *fucking* Christ," she muttered. "They hit us and didn't even come back for a look."

"We just don't matter to them. Would you come back to look at a bug you just squashed?"

"Still, for Pete's sake." She combed a hand in her sweaty hair. "Man, that was close."

"I'll go check for damages. That hit can't have left just a scratch." He unclipped his harness, worked his stiff legs and neck. Without his brain's consent—his brain had pretty much taken an extended vacation...wasn't he on a suicide mission?—John bent over and placed a loud kiss on her forehead. "We make quite the team, Commander Beaumont. Want to recruit me? I promise I won't spoil your other recruits' young, impressionable minds."

Her beaming smile made everything all right. Her betrayal, her lies. Nothing mattered anymore. Affection swelled his heart, and pride his head. This woman, strong and capable and hot as the coals of hell, made him feel as if he could take on the world. Which in a sense he was about to do.

He left her in command of his reefer while he climbed down below into the detachable section of his refrigerated ship. Used to transport produce and other perishables, his reefer had never been meant to withstand the hit it'd just taken. Not without serious damage. They were lucky not to have been sucked out into space.

All along the passageways, metal plating had buckled, rivets popped off and steam whistled out of bent pipes. Not good. Near the airlock, e-suits hung on hooks and resembled a row of hanged men. Those

environment suits may come in handy if the ship had suffered hull damage. At least until they connected to the pipeline. Afterward, well, it wouldn't matter much, would it?

John breathed a sigh of relief as he inspected the seal between the main portion of the ship and the separate cargo area. It seemed intact. But as he stepped through the hatch to survey the damage to their precious cargo, he couldn't abort the long string of curses. He didn't know much about explosives, but the way the charge had shifted on its rails in the hold, with yellow wires pulled out of connectors and plastic coils all crumpled up against the glowing blue core... That just could *not* be good.

"Shit."

The comms panel still worked so he switched it on. "Hey, Frankie. You know how to build that thing, right? Because right now, it looks like something the cat spat out. Except in metal and plastic."

Her voice crackled but he got the last bit. "...goddamnsonovabitch."

"Indeed."

"I'm coming down."

John felt the ship decelerate to automatic pilot. A minute later Frankie barged into the cargo hold like a Valkyrie down the hills. His nape tingled with arousal. He forced his mind to clear.

Not the time, O'Shaughnessy.

"Argh, no, no, no." She rushed to the sad-looking bit of Imber destruction smashed against the side of the cargo hold and muttered for a good minute as she inspected her patient. In the end, she straightened, fists on hips—sending his testosterone fever into the danger zone—and blew air through pursed lips. "I think we'll be good. It's not as bad as it looks."

"Is this like 'it's-not-as-bad-as-it-looks-just-a-sucking-chest-wound-Ma'am'?"

Her snort of laughter unreasonably stroked his ego. "No. I can fix this. We'll reroute some power to the charge, hook it up to the ship directly. It'll work." She nodded, muttered to herself some more. "I can fix this," she repeated.

"Well, get to it then because we can't take another hit like this." It was one thing to die in the name of humanity and all that, it was an entirely different thing to just get blown into bits by a passing Imber ship. Not as, well, *fulfilling*.

Before he left her to work while he checked the rest of the reefer for damage—something told him he'd find much, much more—John stopped inside the hatch leading to the main part of the ship. Frankie was crouched underneath the electrical panel and muttering through her teeth as she yanked on knotted wires. He tamped down the regret. He wasn't doing this only for her. Well, mostly for her. But along the way, he'd begun to believe that maybe, just maybe, it was better than doing nothing at all. He'd never tell her that, of course, in case she started to think of him as a romantic. John O'Shaughnessy had a rep to keep. Catholic Irishmen weren't a flower-in-the-hair, bright-eyed bunch. Or he liked to believe. But then again, to his widowed father's horror, his eldest child and only son of four children had become a *cook*. His little

sisters all teased John about his choice of career, especially since he was a trained machinist like their da. Oh well, to each their own path.

They better dedicate a whole city to her name, complete with wide boulevards, airy gardens and gurgling fountains. Frankieville. Frankburg. Francine-sur-Mer. Ha.

When she let out a long string of curses, John smiled and turned away to hide what he knew was in his eyes.



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