

Wolf Hunt 3: Galactic Wolf



Marie Treanor

Changeling Press

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As the Earth wolves are freed and the truth revealed, the Gardenians panic and bring forward their invasion. They send a fleet of star ships, led by the troublesome young Senator Cereza.

Cereza, mindful of her career as well as her duty, takes her responsibilities seriously. But she lets herself be distracted for long enough to capture the mysterious space pirate captain who's been terrorizing Gardenians on the frontier for months.

Yuri doesn't even know his own name when he first meets her, but from the beginning, she confuses his instinctive mission to eliminate Gardenians. Taking her hostage to ensure the safety of his crew is necessary. Educating her in what he's learned of Earth's situation seems sensible. Seducing her isn't part of his plan, not when his wolf is liable to tear her apart. But their lust is powerful and has consequences that go far beyond their own emotions. The fate of two peoples is balanced in their hands.

Chapter One

Cereza dragged her gaze from the document on her reader. She stared at her flagship commander in disbelief.

"They've got the entire crew of a Gardenian patrol ship in prison? Why, in the name of all the galactic gods?"

"Apparently because a space pirate told them to," Commander Azale said with heavy sarcasm.

Cereza frowned. "I know things are different out here on the frontier, but haven't the planetary authorities gotten mixed up? Aren't our patrols meant to put the *pirates* in prison?"

Azale allowed himself a very minor smile. "That's always been the way it worked in the past. But, apparently these pirates captured the patrol ship and spirited it away while dumping the crew on the planet under a charge of 'planetary misappropriation.'"

"What in space does that mean?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea. Neither have the authorities, but it sounded so serious they thought they should hold the crew until Gardenia was informed."

"We're informed," Cereza said grimly. "Get them out of there, Azale. Assign the others to whichever ship has accommodation or need of them, but I want their commander *here* as soon as you spring him."

Azale's bright orange eyes gleamed. "Yes, Senator."

As he marched off, Cereza reflected that she shouldn't be getting involved in such minor incidents. She had a more important mission a long way off, and she really

didn't need any more hold-ups. Still, she couldn't leave a Gardenian crew languishing in a frontier prison. Aside from the cruelty, it wouldn't reflect well on Gardenian authority or morality.

With an irritable sigh, she resolved to contact Gardenia once she'd spoken to the patrol captain. They could sort it out from home while she continued immediately on her way to Earth.

On the thought, she returned to the document in her hands, a description of recent events from Gardenia's Primary Agents on Earth. At least, they still styled themselves in this manner, although they'd been forced to flee along with all the agents they could collect in their small ship. It was their original plea, while still in place, that had jolted Gardenia's military wheels into unexpected motion. The Earth authorities were on to the existence of alien agents and were fighting back with a fearsome secret weapon that was seeking out and killing them. As yet, the reports were so garbled that Cereza was at a loss as to how this weapon worked, but the important thing was, a peaceful, gradual takeover of Earth was no longer possible. It was going to have to be all-out military invasion to combat Earth's new weaponry.

Flung suddenly into the deep end with her new job as Minister for Expansion, Cereza was still trying to bring herself up to speed. She was far from stupid, but knew only too well that as the youngest and most recently elected senator, she was ill suited to such a senior role. They'd thrust it upon her to carry the blame for possible failure, because she'd annoyed them by bringing up issues they didn't want to address. This invasion thing was all going too fast. If it succeeded, the senior senators would applaud her and take at least half the credit. If she failed, she'd be disgraced. Perversely, Cereza determined to succeed in a project she doubted, and so she read everything she could find of the agents' reports in order to assess the best way forward.

Frequent interruptions didn't make her study easy, and when the door to her quarters opened again, she glared at it. Azale stood there with another rumpled-looking soldier.

"Commander Kryasant of patrol ship three-one-seven," Azale announced.

Cereza blinked. "That was quick."

"I used your name and rank to good effect," Azale said wryly. "Will that be all?"

"Yes, of course. If we've got them all, let's resume course."

As Azale departed, she indicated the seat on the opposite side of her desk. "Please, sit. Are you hurt at all?"

"Only in my professional pride, letting my ship be seized by trickery," snarled Krysant, easing himself into the chair. His eyes and hair had a soft pinkish tinge that contrasted almost alarmingly with his craggy, angry face.

"What happened? Who did it?"

"The captain!"

"Captain who?"

"How the..." Krysant started to fume before forcing himself with obvious difficulty to calm down. He contented himself with a glare. "You don't know what's been going on out here, do you?"

"Not exactly. It's not my area of responsibility."

Krysant frowned. "Then you haven't come to nail the bastard?"

"Sorry. We have a larger mission than one space pirate. But I will report the incident to all the relevant authorities on Gardenia..."

Krysant snorted. "Hope you've better luck than I did. Does nobody on Gardenia know about this guy?"

"I'm sure the appropriate authorities do," she soothed. "But no, it's not general knowledge. You'd better tell me."

Krysant sighed, drumming his fingers on the desk as he reported in words he'd clearly used before. "He sprang to life here from nowhere just a few months ago. Alien ship, not as fast as ours but nimbler, very precise weapons-targeting. He recruited a few frontier scumbags on the shady side of the law to crew it, and began attacking every vessel he passed. Boards them all, personally. Some he lets go -- which contributes to his hero status -- others are seized, plundered --"

"He has hero status?" Cereza interrupted. "How come?"

"Because he steals so sodding much! He pays his crew, repairs his ship and gives the rest to the scaff and raff of the frontier planets. As a result, they hide him and his crew, deny all knowledge of their whereabouts. Meanwhile the captain goes on seizing Gardenian ships --"

"He *only* seizes Gardenian ships?" Cereza interrupted again.

"No, but it's largely the Gardenians he sticks in the local prisons. The ones he doesn't kill, that is."

Cereza closed her mouth. "He's killed Gardenians?"

"Several. Some who've survived say he's a wild animal. I can see why. It all contributes to the legend." He snorted.

The commander's anger began to seem very understandable, because it went well beyond his own humiliating experience. "And you've heard nothing from Gardenia? No support in dealing with this?"

"Not a hoot."

"Madness! Your communications can't be getting through!"

"They're through." Krysant stared at her with barely concealed insolence. "Sitting under some senator's silver cup."

Her frown deepened, because she couldn't dispute his belief with any conviction. Inefficiency was rife in Gardenian government -- officials dealt only with the matters which would bring them wealth or glory. Frontier space pirates were less interesting than the possible assimilation of a new planet.

And Earth was certainly more important in the bigger picture for overcrowded Gardenia. But leaving her compatriots to die was not just callous in Cereza's mind, it was impossible.

She stood abruptly. "I want everything you have on this pirate. Presumably he's not stupid enough to attack a military convoy of this size, so we'll have to lay ourselves out as bait. I want you to liaise with Commander Azale."

Krysant stumbled to his feet, staring at her with mingled hope and suspicion in his tired eyes.

"You're going to get him?"

"Yes," said Cereza with conviction. "I'm going to get him."

* * *

It might not have been the battle for her career she set out on, but it was one she was just as fully determined to win. And for the first time, as she stood on the bridge watching Azale and his officers carry out their duties, she felt she had their approval. She hadn't expected to care about that either.

The flagship had separated from the main fleet. If the pirates knew of its existence, they should believe the fleet hunted for them around the planetary system while the flagship sped away on its own mission.

Few ships traveled this far out. A few vessels of science or exploration, the odd repair crew to make sure the communications booster to Earth was still working. Even the captain, according to Krysant, didn't stray this far as a rule -- it wasn't worth his time. But Krysant suspected he wouldn't be able to resist the glory of a Gardenian flagship, and Cereza was happy to go with his view. So they traveled unshielded with blatant contempt for attack, pausing often to scan uninteresting phenomena and dead planets, just to give the captain time to catch up.

Cereza's gaze fixed on the large central viewscreen which showed only the familiar blackness of space relieved with a million pinpricks of light and, on the left, the outline of a dark, dingy-looking planet with several moons. Ruefully, she acknowledged their ruse would appear in character for a Gardenian crew. Future security out here depended on a vast improvement in discipline and attitude, and so she would tell the Senate if she ever made it home. If they ever listened.

"Sir, vessel approaching fast from starboard!"

"Got him," Krysant breathed. Standing behind him, Cereza gripped the back of his chair. "He was hiding in that moon's shadow..."

"Inform the fleet now," Azale snapped. He was staring at the instrument panel in the arm of his chair. "Ready shields but hold. Switch screen to starboard."

The ship seemed to come out of nowhere, speeding straight at them.

Azale leaned forward. "Hold..." he said softly. "All right, open communications, send an ID query, in a lethargic sort of way..." His arm lifted, poised and scythed the air. "Shiel --"

Before the word left his lips, the whole ship shook violently. Thunder crashed in Cereza's ears, twice, as she was flung hard against Krysant's chair and then back onto the floor in an undignified heap.

"How the hell did he do that?" someone demanded through the yells of surprise and the clattering of people hauling themselves back to their work stations. "There was no sign of powering weapons!"

"There never is," Krysant said grimly. "I told you."

"Main engines offline! Weapons systems are out!" cried another officer. "Five minutes at least until they're back online!"

"Then make sure those shields are up one hundred percent!" Azale snarled.

"Sir, the shields are down too. We only have environmental protection."

Azale swore.

Cereza knew how he felt. This wasn't exactly going to plan. "Any sign of the fleet?" she asked hopefully.

"Moving in at full speed, Senator. ETA ten minutes."

"Well, the speed should surprise him," Krysant muttered.

"Then let's stay alive for those ten minutes," Azale said. "Get shields and weapons back online!"

"Sir, they're communicating..."

The image of space and stars and the insolent, scarred little ship disappeared. In its place, an interior shimmered into life, bare and basic. Three men and a woman, dressed in rough, yet vaguely threatening combat clothing sat at partially concealed stations in the background. Another man in the foreground had his back to them, shadowed head down.

Cereza hauled herself to her feet. From the pirate ship, she heard a blast of static, then into the quiet, a woman's voice said, "Captain." And the man in the foreground straightened and swung round to face the screen.

Cereza reached for her throat, as if to stop her heart from jumping straight out of it. The man was alien, dark, indescribably threatening. There seemed to be no color about him at all, just opaque darkness. Unrelieved black hair fell in unkempt, tangled curls around his forehead and neck. Fainter black stubble covered his chin and jaw. But it was his eyes that truly scared Cereza -- alien, piercing, unafraid, and so dark that they looked black, too. How could they glitter like that when they were *black*?

"Prepare to be boarded," he said shortly, in harsh, very accented Gardenian.

Azale stood. "On what authority?"

The alien's dark lips twisted. He hoisted a large weapon into view, in one thickly muscled bare arm, and the screen went blank.

"Okay, let him on," Azale growled. "It'll pass the time until the fleet blows his ship into the next galaxy. No confrontation, no heroics. Until I give the word. Peoni, you have the bridge. Krysant, you had better come with me. Senator," he added, breaking his stride as she turned to walk with him. She had the impression he'd forgotten her existence. He frowned. "You should wait in your quarters until this is over. I'll assign a security --"

"For ten minutes?" she interrupted. "Don't you think the presence of a Gardenian senator might be the best thing to distract him from shooting the crew?"

"If he doesn't shoot *you*," Azale said grimly.

Ignoring that, Cereza strode in his wake, along the passages toward the docking bay. The floaty white gown that was standard senator uniform for females clung around her legs. Suddenly it seemed the wrong attire for the occasion. Unfortunately, it and several others exactly the same were the only clothing she'd brought for the journey.

"Where is he?" Azale muttered as they swung round the corner to find the docking bay doors still closed. Nor had there been any kind of bump to signal the pirate

ship had docked. Security men swarmed on either side of the doors and at the end of their corridor.

"Hold your fire," Azale warned them. "I want no casualties on our side. There will be one chance when the doors open -- before they can target any of us, we'll be aiming at them. You wait for the order -- understood?"

A muttered affirmative greeted him from all sides but was interrupted as the doors sprung open much faster than their usual leisurely speed. Azale's raised hand was ready to scythe downward, his lips forming the beginning of the order.

But people erupted from the bay, covering every threat with a speed and accuracy that implied they already knew exactly where the enemy was. Although they couldn't possibly. And faster than everyone, was the dark alien with his large, vicious-looking gun pointing straight at Azale.

"Drop them," the pirate snarled. He was big, tall and broad, and no less rough-looking in person than on the grainy viewscreen. He wore crumpled black pants, a nondescript shirt and a long, battered black leather waistcoat. His powerful arms were bare.

There was a pregnant pause while Azale's eyes locked to the pirate's. Then Azale nodded and the men laid down their weapons. Some of the tension seemed to relax and Cereza let her gaze dart over the other pirates. The woman, the fair Galetan whom Cereza had seen on the bridge of the pirate ship, now collected all the weapons, slinging each through the open door into the docking bay. They all wore headsets, with thin mouthpieces.

The "Captain" curled his lip and stepped nearer, reaching to disarm Azale of his side weapon. He did it quickly, yet almost gingerly, as if he couldn't bear to touch him, before shoving him into the wall. Azale bore it in the grim silence of a proud man. The captain's gaze fell next on Cereza, and narrowed.

Cereza's heart thundered. She realized she'd never known physical fear before. She hadn't expected it to have this strange effect on her nipples, or to loose the uncalled-for moisture between her thighs. It felt almost like sexual desire, which was

confusing to say the least. But this man would be frightening even if he wasn't holding you up with a gun. His very darkness was threatening.

His lip curled in apparent distaste. Without warning his hand snaked out, shoved into her armpit and swept down over her hip. Stunned, she didn't even cry out as he did exactly the same to her other side, then rammed the edge of his hand between her breasts and pushed down over her belly to between her thighs.

This time, there was no thought to her action. The invasion was intolerable and her hand lashed out on its own to smack him hard across the face. But fast as she was, he was faster and before she even connected, he'd caught her hand in a grip of steel and was staring into her face.

"He was searching you, Senator!" Kryasant said urgently. In other words, *Don't get us all killed by your pathetically outraged behavior*. He had a point. With difficulty, she contented herself with staring back.

"Senator," the alien repeated. He grinned, revealing a surprisingly white set of teeth. "Bloody hell, children, we have ourselves a Gardenian senator."

While the other pirates laughed -- whether with amusement at his ludicrous choice of swear words or with joy at having so valuable a hostage -- the captain stepped closer, insultingly close, so that her thin skirts swished about his boots and thighs and she could feel the heat of his body through her gown. Worse, she had to hold her head uncomfortably far back to keep her gaze on his insolent face.

He inhaled. His nose twitched like some animal's and the frown between his black brows grew deeper. The uncomfortable butterflies in Cereza's stomach spread until her whole body tingled with awareness. For some reason, she felt afraid to breathe.

"Back against the wall," he said distinctly and, with relief, she stepped back away from his overwhelming heat.

He turned to Kryasant, who already held out his weapon in the flat of his palm. He'd been here before. "Can't keep a good man in prison, eh, Commander? You should

have gone straight home." His gaze shifted, skimming across Cereza until it came to Azale. "Weapons store?" he snapped.

"What are you going to do with my crew?" Azale countered.

"Shoot them, if you don't answer my questions."

"You really think three of you can hold a Gardenian flagship?"

"Certainly, when we hold the commander, to say nothing of the senator here. And this time, I have a very special prison in mind." He wiped his free hand across his forehead, and in some surprise, Cereza saw that he was sweating.

"And you'd better pray we get there before Xorax blots out the sun," one of the other pirates said with an oddly vicious grin.

"We're not afraid of the dark," Azale said dryly, just as the pirates' headpieces all crackled in unison.

The words were crystal clear. "Get out of there, Captain -- we've got to go! Military convoy full ahead."

The captain swore. At least it sounded like swearing to Cereza, but since it was in a wildly bizarre language, she couldn't be sure. Then, "Go!" he barked at his minions, who immediately backed up toward the docking bay doors.

"You're too late," Azale said with unconcealed triumph. "Instead of all that gold and weaponry, you really should have concentrated on getting yourself some decent long-range sensors."

"Tell me about it," the captain muttered.

"Captain!" yelled the Galetan woman.

"Captain, we'll never break out of this intact," the earpiece yelped.

"Intact or alive?" the captain snapped.

"Either."

"Fuck," said the captain. He glared at Azale. "Honors of war, or we'll go down blasting."

Cereza held her breath. She could almost see Azale wondering if it was worth it, how many Gardenians the pirates would be able to take down before they were killed.

With a sigh, Azale inclined his head. "Honors of war," he agreed.

The pirate nodded back, an oddly courteous and almost military gesture for an undisciplined criminal. His shoulders didn't slump. He didn't even seem to be acknowledging defeat, merely a temporary setback.

He touched his mouthpiece. "Stand down."

Chapter Two

Since the pirates' vessel was already docked to the flagship and was small enough not to impede their progress, they left it where it was and continued on their way. The entire crew, amounting to six, was housed in the brig.

It wasn't long before Cereza left her studies once more, and made her way there. Though her feet dragged a little with silly reluctance, she was also conscious of eager anticipation. Behind a cell door, he would no longer be frightening, and now that she thought she knew what he was, his alien-ness wouldn't bother her.

In the cell-suite, she all but ran into the departing security officer.

"Have you found out who they are?" she asked.

He shrugged without a great deal of interest. "They're all known felons in this sector, Senator. Apart from the captain. Him, we have no record of. Anywhere."

"What does he say?"

"Nothing, Senator."

Since the man walked away with no more than a curt nod, Cereza closed her lips on the theory she'd been about to impart and shrugged. The guards at their stations in front of the row of barred cells sprang to attention as she approached.

"Hey, Captain!" the Galetan woman called out. "How you doing?"

"Fantastic," came the sour response.

"Senator lady's here."

There was no response to that. Pretending to ignore their conversation, Cereza said to the guards, "I want to speak to the captain."

"Sure. Just stay well back from the bars."

"Actually, a private conversation would work better."

"There's the interview room," one said doubtfully. "We'll bind him and keep watch, but are you sure --"

"Perfectly sure," Cereza interrupted.

She paced the interview room, a small, bare apartment furnished with three chairs, a table, and a surveillance device. She wasn't quite sure where she was going with this, but she needed to prod it to see where, if anywhere, it led.

When the door opened abruptly, she tossed her reading device on the table and turned to face the pirate captain who, despite his hands being bound behind his back, strolled in as if he'd been invited for dinner. His black gaze found her immediately and held. Again that shiver of fear rippled up her back and down her front. The guard followed, taking another security bracelet from his pocket.

"Stand still," he commanded and when the prisoner did, with a sigh, he crouched down to fit it to his ankles.

Cereza frowned. "Is that necessary?"

"He's not exactly a gentleman," the guard said wryly.

"True." The captain's eyes were still on Cereza. "But I promise not to kick you. Unless you kick me first."

Cereza caught her breath. "Deal."

She signaled with her eyebrows to the guard who rose with a resigned look that said *Your funeral* as clearly as if he'd spoken. Cereza ignored him, concentrating on maintaining difficult eye contact with the captain.

"Please, sit," she offered, waving one hand to the table and chairs as the guard left.

The captain inclined his head, but stayed where he was, merely leaning one shoulder against the wall.

So, no friendly chat. Good. "Very well. You don't like Gardenians, do you, Captain?"

"No."

"Why is that, precisely?"

His lip twitched. "If I said you smelled bad, you'd think me rude."

It was hardly the answer she'd expected. Perhaps that was the cause of the flush which suffused her face but it felt more like humiliation, especially when coupled with a sudden urge to smell her own armpits. Fighting it, she snapped, "That's hardly a reason to seek us out as you do."

He continued to regard her with dumb insolence until she wanted to slap him.

"What's your name, Captain?"

He smiled. "My friends call me... Captain."

"And what did your mother call you?"

"Boy, Brat, You -- who knows?"

Shit. "You weren't brought up by your mother?" she asked, ignoring the pointless pity trying to lure her from the point.

"I don't see that that's your concern."

Her mouth opened to answer back, no doubt childishly. Then she caught the gleam in his black eyes, all but urging her on, and she pursed her lips instead. In any case, he had a point.

"Where were you before you arrived in this sector?" she asked instead.

"Around."

"Around where?"

He smiled at her and shrugged. Butterflies jumped in her stomach, because he had an amazing smile that lightened the darkness of his face. Or perhaps just because his uncooperative manner annoyed her.

"All right, here's an easy one. Where were you born? Where did you grow up?"

"Do you know, you've got the loveliest eyes? Red eyes just shouldn't be beautiful, but they are on you."

"Then I suppose it's a pity your favorable impression is spoiled by my disgusting smell. Where were you born?"

"It isn't and I couldn't care less."

Although it wasn't terribly clear, Cereza thought she followed him. More interestingly, she thought he did care. He spoke too rapidly, too carelessly.

"Earth?" she suggested, pushing the point.

His eyes didn't change. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"Oh come on, Captain! You accused Commander Krysan of 'planetary misappropriation.' Isn't that why you hate Gardenians? You've heard something about my people on Earth and you don't like it."

"I have," he allowed. "But that doesn't make me a native."

She stepped closer to the table and switched on the reading device. "Does this?"

After a moment, during which she thought he wouldn't actually trouble to look, he eased his shoulder off the wall and walked to the table. Even with his hands behind his back, he walked like a large feline, balanced and graceful and probably lethal. She imagined the muscles rippling under his bronze skin, and her body heated uncomfortably.

He chose to halt right beside her, too close for comfort. Moving away would have admitted the weakness she was beginning to suspect in herself, so she ignored it and stayed where she was, keeping all her attention on his face as he gazed down at the reader.

"Who's he?" he asked without noticeable interest.

"His name is Louis. Or Android 4176 slash 89, model C, modified."

The captain blinked and lifted his gaze to hers, waiting for more, waiting for the point.

"Gardenian scientists made him to resemble an Earth male. I found his picture while researching the Earth situation and my attention was immediately caught, because he looks like you."

"No, he doesn't." The captain appeared taken aback, genuinely surprised by her claim, and she smiled with triumph.

"Not to you. Earth faces, human faces are familiar to you. But trust me, in this sector, you're a rarity. You have the same black hair and black eyes, the same skin tone. That's what I see. You're from Earth. Or one of its colonies."

A smile began to tug at his lips. His gaze moved continuously between one of her eyes and the other, as if searching. "So what?"

"So tell me what you're doing way out here beyond where any Earth ship should be capable of reaching. Tell me if there are others out here too."

"I neither know nor care."

"Then what do you care about?" she demanded.

"Right now, the amazing color of your hair. So many shades of red, each more alluring than the last. And do you know they're all reflected in your beautiful eyes?"

"Yes," she said baldly. She couldn't think of anything else because without warning, he leaned even closer, his nose twitching as if he was inhaling her perfume. His nose, his chin, brushed a tendril of her hair.

"So soft," he murmured and his breath stirred her skin. "And fragrant."

"Is fragrant your politer word for smelling bad?"

His gaze met hers, half-rueful, and with surprise, she realized his eyes weren't black at all, they were brown. Warm, dark brown, and not opaque, not expressionless when you actually looked into them, but desperately, excitingly hungry. For an instant, she imagined herself falling into those eyes, being consumed by that hunger, that big, strong body moving on her, in her...

With a tiny gasp, she whisked herself away from the danger.

Her heart drummed in her breast, dampness pooled between her thighs, and she was very afraid that if she held out her hands they would shake. It wasn't fear. It had never been fear. She wanted him, and with a strength that shocked her.

Chemical reaction. Nothing to do with my mind. Think!

It was what she did best. Grasping on to her intellect, her mission, like a drowning woman to a tree branch, she said, "What about your ship?" And spun around to face him again.

He still stood where she'd left him, by the table. "What about it?"

"Did you travel in it all the way from Earth or did you acquire it in this sector?"

"It's mine."

"The technology is alien to us, but your weapons, your targeting devices, are all superior to what we expected from Earth."

The captain's lips twisted. "Ah. Now I get it. If my ship and I are from Earth, then Earth might give you more of a fight than you bargained for."

"Your ship is crude and puny."

"And disabled yours inside five seconds with two shots."

"Only because our shields were down to tempt you out."

"That may be a fair point," he conceded. "Have you torn my ship apart to study it?"

"Our engineers have no need to tear to study."

"How very superior of them. And what are your plans for my crew and myself?"

"You'll be taken to Gardenia and tried for space piracy."

"When?"

"When our mission is complete."

"Your mission," he repeated. He began to walk toward her again, frowning. "You travel with a mighty convoy. I thought you'd come to the frontier to clean up piracy, rattle a few sabers at the lax planetary authorities around here, enforce some discipline. But you haven't, have you?"

"My mission is not your concern." She wanted to be haughty and was very afraid she sounded merely desperate. It was his nearness as he loomed over her, almost touching, turning her from a powerful senator into a glob of immature lust.

Who am I kidding? I was never a powerful senator. I was an annoying one and I was sent out here because they wanted rid of me. Azale will direct the invasion while I watch, little more than a cipher and a convenient scapegoat for failure.

"You're going to invade Earth," he said softly. "You're the acceptable political face, and this is your armory. Fuck."

"Why do you care?" she demanded. "You don't even admit to being human!"

"I don't like Gardenians." His fierce gaze held hers, anger, contempt overlaying the hungry desire that still lurked in his eyes. His body heat soaked through her, as if he'd closed the tiny distance between them. His nearness confused her all over again. Big, overwhelming, threatening, even bound as he was.

And yet she wasn't afraid. It was he who sweated. A bead of it trickled down his forehead, fascinating her. She'd noticed that before, when he'd boarded -- sudden sweats without obvious reason.

Abruptly, he swung away from her. "I want to go back to my cell."

"Are you ill?" she asked.

"No, I'm angry and I want to kill someone. I don't want it to be you."

"Then talk to me!" she exclaimed, ignoring the threat in his words in favor of the desperation she sensed behind them. "If you care at all about your people, talk to me!"

He stared at her over his shoulder. "Talk to you? About what, for God's sake?"

"Earth!"

A moment longer he held her gaze, then he turned away and continued his stride to the door. He banged on it loudly, making her jump, before he looked at her once more. He was still sweating.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Senator. To my knowledge, I have never been to Earth in my life."

* * *

Barking up the wrong tree? What in the name of the galactic gods did that mean? His grasp of Gardenian was good, if heavily accented, but he used some extraordinary phrases.

She followed the guards marching him back to his cell. "I think he needs a doctor."

"I'll tell the medics," one guard responded laconically, shoving the prisoner back into his cell.

"Hoi!" the captain objected, lifting his bound wrists pointedly.

“Live with it,” the guard retorted. “Teach you to defy a senator.” He closed the barred door and keyed in the locking code in the panel beside it. They didn’t like him. He’d killed their comrades.

Cereza went on her way. At the final cell, she paused and looked at the Galetan woman. “How long have you known the captain?”

She appeared to mull over the question. Then, as if she decided there was nothing to lose by answering it, she said, “Two months or so. Why?”

“Where did you meet him?”

“Galeta Prime.”

“And the rest of the crew?”

“Same time.” The woman grinned. “We met up in a bar fight.”

Encouraged by the provision of information she hadn’t asked for, Cereza said, “What’s wrong with him? Is he ill?”

The woman laughed. “Might be catching. Best stay out of his way.”

Chapter Three

It was hard when he couldn't tell where he was, when he couldn't even see the stars. The urge came in waves, powerful and unexpected, giving him little time to combat it. He lay on the hard, uncomfortable mattress, fighting it once more.

He thought of the girl, the beautiful Gardenian senator, concentrating not on the blood lust she inspired, but on the sexual desire. There was something about her -- her amazing, warm ruby eyes that met his so fearlessly, the way she moved, so sleek and sensual inside that virginal dress, her very scent in his nostrils -- that made him think constantly of hot, exotic, intense sex.

Well, he'd been thinking about sex a lot recently. Not surprising when he didn't get any. But he couldn't remember any woman inspiring him with such overwhelming lust. He could have taken her against the interview room wall, in full view of the spying guards, even with his hands tied behind his back. He'd have been able to get at those plump, alluring breasts by tugging her dress with his teeth, and then he could have sucked those enticing, elongated nipples he'd only glimpsed in outline, while she bundled up her own dress and unfastened his pants to let him slide into her hot, hot wetness...

Fuck. There was a fantasy to drive a prisoner wild.

She'd been fighting it, of course, much as he was fighting the change right now, but there had been something in her secretive eyes that told him she wasn't indifferent to his physical charms. She probably liked a bit of rough. What a sodding pity he'd never find out. Because her next meeting would be with the wolf.

Not now, not now, hold on... And yet the fighting was habit. The ship had quieted. This must be their designated "night," so it was as good a time as any.

Sweat rolled down the inside of his shirt. He swallowed. He couldn't hold it off any longer in any case. It was time.

"Hey. You awake?"

There was a muffled many-voiced response, some of it delayed, showing him that Farco at least had been asleep. No matter. He'd counted five voices, and they were all alert now.

"Keep it quiet," the guard growled from outside. There were two of them on duty, but at least no one else was wandering about the cell suite either on duty or social visits.

The captain sat up, drawing himself farther into the shadows and beneath the blanket as he removed his clothing. The constant movement attracted the guard's attention, as he'd known it would.

"Settle down in there or I'll sedate you."

With the same mixture of relief and resignation with which he'd become familiar, the captain released his crumbling self-control. This time, he almost welcomed it, because it was their only possible way out of here.

He held on grimly to the pain, to the outrageous strains pulling and wrenching at his body, biting down on the agonized groans and cries he couldn't entirely suppress. But then, this time, he didn't want to suppress them.

"Hey, what is it?" The guard sounded alarmed now and closer, as if he was at the cell door. All he would see was an agonized, undulating lump under the blanket, falling onto the floor. "Are you sick? Shit, why didn't we get the medic when she said? I'm going in, Laburn. Call the medics now!"

"On it," the other one said grimly from his desk.

The captain heard the faint, hurried sound of fingers tapping on the control panel keys and then the door screeched open.

His pain slid away. The lights went up. The captain leapt at his guard, strangling the man's scream at birth. The scent of enemy, of evil filled his nostrils. He smacked the man across the head with one massive paw, sending him spinning into the door, and bounded out of the cell.

The second guard was bolting from his desk, drawing his weapon in terror. Before he could fire it, the captain was on him, knocking him down and standing on his chest. Eager, desperate for the kill, he opened his jaws.

"Captain! Captain, we need you back, remember?"

Andra. Her voice penetrated the fog of instinctive blood-lust, reminding him he had a higher duty. The crew...

He snapped his jaws closed on air, brought up his paws to either side of the gasping, heaving guard's neck and willed himself to change back.

This was harder, going against the urge when it held him in full thrall. A weird, rattling noise came from the guard's throat -- not a death rattle but a fearful one. It was the captain's hand, not his paw, that punched him to unconsciousness.

Full of adrenaline and the legacy of the beast's enormous energy, the captain sprang naked to his feet and tried to make sense of the guard's computers. Easy. Three keys and all the cell doors slid open and his crew spilled out.

"Nice one, Captain!" Farco said gleefully. "Docking bay?"

"Can you release the docking clamps from here?" Andra demanded, deliberately keeping her gaze above his waist.

"No, it's cell security only. Everything else is locked out. We're going for the girl."

"What girl? The senator? Shit, you like her that much?"

"She's our way out," the captain snapped, unsure why he should be so irritated. "Without her, they'll blow us out of space. If they bother releasing the ship in the first place. Make sure they're both dead or out cold."

The change was easier to accomplish this time, all relief and less pain. He gave himself up to the wolf and bounded out of the cell suite, following his nose. On a ship

full of Gardenians, it was hard to ignore the urge to kill as he went, hard to pick her particular scent out of all the evils, but he found it and followed it single-mindedly.

Hurtling through the maze of passages, always keeping the position of the docking bay in mind, he occasionally encountered terrified crewmen, some of whom tried to shoot them. They scattered when he leapt in among them. His snapping jaws occasionally ripped flesh and the taste of blood, the sound of Gardenian screams drove him on. But he had to control himself -- there was no time to finish the kills. He had to find the girl.

When her scent filled his nostrils, he halted, sniffing under the door that was clearly hers. He let out a whine and Andra quickly pressed the admittance key.

There was a pause. Then "Come in," the senator's melodious voice said, rendered even more delicious by its husky sleepiness.

The words released the locking mechanism, and Andra and Farco entered swiftly and without fuss. The captain lost anything more than her muffled cry of surprise, because he had to scatter a group of terrified, weapon-blasting Gardenians. He ignored the sharp pain in his shoulder. From the muffled sounds inside the room, the girl was putting up too much of a fight. His annoyance was tempered by unexpected pride. She was more than a patrician, more even than a politician. It took three of them to get her out in the end, and by the look of them, she'd managed a couple of flush hits.

She was still struggling, twisting and writhing in their grip, pulling back and slowing them down. Enough was enough.

The captain growled, a deep, echoing snarl as he bounded along beside them. She caught sight of him for the first time and her cries of rage broke off as abruptly as a slamming door. Instead an inarticulate moan broke from her throat as the others yanked her onward. He felt her eyes following him, wide and fearful. Well, who wouldn't be?

Rounding the corner, they met a patrol ready to fire. The captain jumped straight into them. A weapon went off harmlessly, most of them scattered, except the one under his paws. *Now, one quick kill...*

He opened his jaws, ready to tear out the Gardenian's throat. But through the man's screams of terror, it was *her* voice he heard, barely above a horrified, babbling whisper. "No! Oh for the love of peace, no..."

It was enough to remind him he had a primary aim -- to get the hell out of here. With a snarl, he left the man and loped round the corner to the docking bay.

Of course, there was a welcoming party here too, and their weapons were armed and ready. The captain nudged their hostage with his head, knocking her into Andra, who fortunately caught on and grabbed her, holding her right in front of her to disguise the fact that she held no weapon but her bare hands.

"If you fire I'll kill her where she stands," Andra yelled. "Back off, now!"

They backed off. They had no choice. His instinct had been right. No one would take responsibility for killing a senator.

"What the fuck is that?" one of them said fearfully, staring at the captain as Farco wrenched open the docking bay doors.

"We die, she dies," Andra reminded them. The captain stationed himself in front of the doors, snarling while Andra dragged the hostage inside, hissing between her teeth, "Don't you dare bite me, you bitch."

When they were all inside, the captain backed in too and the door closed. Farco smashed the control panel, effectively locking it, while Garrech ran to open the door of their own ship.

It smelled of stale Gardenian. They'd been in here, poking around, as the senator had already implied, but there were none on board now. Except the senator herself.

As one, the crew bolted to the bridge, Andra keeping hold of the girl more from habit than anything else. The captain paused outside the door. The wolf's work was done, for now, so he willed it gone. When the shift was finished, he rose naked to his feet and grabbed the pants hanging conveniently on a peg by the door -- Andra had placed them strategically all over the ship after coming across him naked once too often for her blushes, or so she said. He yanked them up as he strode onto the bridge, flexing his stinging left shoulder.

"Engines on, ready full thrusters, communications."

"On it," came the various responses. From the torn chair where she'd been unceremoniously pushed, the senator watched him with her huge, round red eyes like rubies.

"Galaxies," she whispered. "Where did you come from?"

"Got the Commander," Andra said, saving him the trouble of answering.

He swung around to face the viewer and held out one arm impatiently. Understanding, Andra emptied the senator out of her chair and pushed her at him. She landed against him with a pleasing bump just as Azale's face glared at him from the screen.

The girl gasped but, with a politician's grasp of her public, made no undignified squeals or struggles. The captain gave his most wolfish smile and hugged her to him with one arm. She was soft and warm, and through the even finer gown she wore to sleep in, he could feel the arousing plumpness of her breast against his chest.

"We've got your senator. And we'd like you to release your docking clamps."

"And leave her to your tender mercies?" Azale snapped. "I don't think so!"

"Trust me, our mercies will be considerably less tender if you don't do as I say. You want me to give her to the wolf?"

"What in the galaxy *is* that thing?"

"Bad," the captain mocked. "Very, very bad. Out."

"Docking clamps released!" Garrech reported with glee.

"Then get us the hell out of here. Head for the nearest planet so we can lose the bastards." Still holding the woman to his side because he liked the feel of her tucked against him, he reached forward to his control panel and scanned for their position. As he moved, her nipple brushed against his naked chest, sending his already over-excited blood pounding straight to his cock. He wondered how long it was since he'd actually had a woman? Curiously enough, he knew exactly what he wanted to do with this one...

With an effort, he concentrated on the matter in hand. "In fact, there's an asteroid field at four-one-two mark five. Just the place."

"It's too far away," Farco argued.

"So what? They're not going to shoot us, are they?"

The vessel shuddered to life, slipping smoothly away from the flagship. Pacing himself, enjoying the anticipation, he looked down at the rigid girl in his left arm.

Oh yes, she was just as stunning as he'd remembered in his fantasy. Dark red hair, streaked with brighter highlights like a sunset, tumbled about her delicate, fine-featured face with its slightly turned-up nose and amazingly beautiful ruby eyes, and soft, full lips he wanted to taste under his. Or feel wrapped around his clamoring cock. Either. Both.

She made a quick, fluttering movement to be free, causing her breast to rub against him once more. Her nipple was hard, long, unable to hide from him in its flimsy covering. From instinct, his arm tightened around her, and the swell of her hips under his hand made him long to see her naked.

He didn't know very much, but he was sure he'd never fucked a Gardenian before. His focus had always been on killing them. But this one, this strange, contradictory creature with the colors of passion and the demeanor of an ice cube -- and the luscious breast pressing into his chest -- her he could fuck for a long time. A very long time...

If she'd let him. Which she clearly wouldn't. Straining away from him so that the breast barely touched him anymore, she snapped, "What's the matter? Need something to hold on to, to stop you from falling over? Or are you really planning to feed me to your wolf?"

"Sh-sh, don't wake him," he said, letting her go.

"Where is it?" She looked round warily, not, he noticed, stepping very far away from him. Andra laughed.

"Safe. For now. What's your name, Senator?"

"Cereza. What's yours, *Captain*?"

"Captain," he answered. "Steady as she goes, Garrech, don't flog the poor ship."

"They're following," Farco warned grimly.

"What do you expect? We've got their precious senator." Idly, he reached over the back of his chair and found his spare leather waistcoat. It would do until he found a shirt. "Andra, why don't you take the senator to her quarters?"

For a moment, the red girl looked mutinous, like a child refusing to go to bed. Only this child had been kidnapped, dragged from her comfortable world where she held power and a measure of control, to one full of violent criminals and a man-eating wolf. No wonder she looked vulnerable.

The captain shrugged irritably as Andra got the senator's attention by ungently tugging her arm. His first responsibility was to his crew and he didn't care for the discomfort in his stomach that was telling him otherwise.

He had torn people apart with his teeth, slung others into very unsavory prisons without enquiring very closely into their guilt. He had nothing else to do.

The senator, Cereza -- didn't that mean "Cherry" in some language or other? -- shook Andra's arm off with a disdainful curl of her red, luscious lips.

"Treat our guest with politeness, Andra," he warned. "Remember right now she's all that's keeping you alive."

Andra snorted and bowed elaborately. "If the lady would condescend to follow me."

The lady hesitated. He thought she wanted to test her power by insisting on staying here. And possibly she felt safer here from the wolf. Her tongue darted out, wetting the corner of her mouth and the captain's loins stirred again without permission. It was an interesting reaction considering his usual one to her race, but it was damned hard to be analytical around her.

He needed to sleep. He needed something to take his mind off sex. Instead of looking for such a thing, he watched her barely hidden curves disappear through the bridge door. At the last moment, as if she couldn't help it, she darted a glance over her shoulder -- looking for him? Or for the wolf?

"You're bleeding," she said abruptly.

Automatically, the captain felt at his stinging shoulder. It had been burned by one of their weapons. No matter. He healed quickly. What seemed more important was that when she'd gone, the exotic light seemed to fade from the bridge, leaving it bare, monochromatic, and dull.

Shit, this was complicating matters. He wasn't a randy kid, he was a ruthless pirate with a reputation for brutality. He should not be getting schoolboy fantasies about Gardenian Senators.

"Isn't she too young to be a senator?" he said in annoyance.

Farco shrugged. "Comes from the right family. Some of them go in at puberty and draw their salary faithfully until death, having never done, or even said, a damned thing."

"She's given them a kicking though," Garrech added unexpectedly. "They hushed most of it up, but some got out, and the underground broadcasts are always full of her."

Underground broadcasts... they didn't just come from Gardenia and its allies, though, and Garrech's words reminded him that he'd been in the middle of reading one from a distant world when the flagship had finally flown across their bows.

He checked the readings and the viewscreen, and stood up. "Why?" he asked reluctantly. "What's her grumble?"

"Everything." Garrech grinned. "Corruption, laziness, waste. She wants to reform Gardenia, so Gardenia sent her away to found a new home."

"Well, looks like we've held that up."

Or had they? What if they simply went without her?

And what was it to him if they did? He had plenty to fight about right here. For the moment, the entire Gardenian fleet appeared to be following him. As he set the watch for the next few hours, he grinned to himself, thinking of a few excellent places to lead the fleet to.

But restlessness stayed with him as he entered his own quarters. A sense of homecoming had grown recently, but there was no deep-seated welcome from this place, no recognition in his own soul. If he had one.

He left the door open to signal he was available to the crew, and slapped on the computer on the built-in desk on his way to the chest that contained his meager clothing. Reaching inside, he found a clean shirt – hell, it was a new shirt bought among other things with the gold they’d nicked from the Gardenian freighter last month. It wasn’t exactly the high life for a pirate, he reflected sardonically, spending stolen gold on a new shirt. It wasn’t even silk or whatever the hell fabric counted as silk in this neck of the woods.

Holding the shirt in his hand, he glanced back at the screen and saw the Earth broadcast he’d picked up just before he’d attacked the flagship. He moved closer and saw that he’d been right in that one glimpse. It really was a wolf. Like him.

Chapter Four

Cereza looked inside the tiny cabin. "I have to sleep in here?"

"Be grateful," said Andra. "Last time we took prisoners, five Gardenians slept in here."

"What happened to them?"

"The wolf ate them."

Cereza pushed inside with an irritable little jerk of her shoulder. "Do none of you ever answer a straight question?"

"Maybe if you answered a few of ours we'd feel more inclined."

Cereza's sense of unreality heightened with every passing minute. Perhaps that explained why she wasn't more afraid. Or perhaps she was still in bed on the flagship, dreaming. She sat down on the bare mattress, took the blanket that Andra held out to her and shivered.

"Will the wolf eat me too?"

"Up to the wolf." Andra sounded amused.

"Why are you doing this? What's it all about?"

"Money," said Andra, apparently surprised. "Captain's never led us wrong yet -- except to your ship, of course. But even that's working out all right. We should get a queen's ransom for you."

"Is that all he wants to do? Steal?"

"And kill Gardenians," Andra amended with a hint of malice.

"Why? Why does he hate us?"

Andra blew her a kiss. "What's not to hate?"

As she turned away, an upsurge of panic broke through Cereza's numbness. "Are you going to lock me in?"

Andra glanced over her shoulder in surprise. "Oh, no. You can go where you like."

"Where's the wolf?" Cereza asked uneasily. "In fact, where the hell did it come from? How did it get on our ship? Did you bring it?"

Andra hesitated, then, "Yes, we brought it."

"How?"

"Hell, ask the captain."

"Does he come from Earth?"

"I've no idea where he's from."

"What's his name?"

Andra shrugged. "Don't know. And if you ask me, neither does he. Sleep well."

She didn't sleep at all. After several minutes staring into space, mulling over Andra's answers, and coming up with only bizarre theories -- *Some who've survived say he's a wild animal* -- she stood and drew the blanket around herself to go exploring.

There wasn't much to discover. The ship was tiny, bare and basic apart from some unexpectedly bright cushions in the communal eating area. She found two of the pirates there, eating and playing games of chance. They showed little interest in her, although one of them said negligently, "Hungry?"

Cereza shook her head and went on her way. Next, she discovered the main living quarters, which weren't so much larger than her own. She caught a glimpse of Andra through an open door, sitting cross-legged on her bed, reading. She didn't so much as glance up as Cereza flitted past.

At the end of the cramped passage, another door stood open. Cereza peered in and immediately wished she hadn't.

It was the captain's living quarters, complete with bed, desk and some kind of computer. Worse, the captain himself stood behind the computer, still wearing nothing but pants and the leather vest over his naked chest, although he did have a shirt in one

hand as if he planned to put it on at some stage, when the screen no longer interested him.

Cereza's stomach flipped. There was something very physical about him, creating a powerful reaction in her. Perhaps because he was so different. Even his chest had black hairs, almost like an animal. But the weird thing was, despite having encountered only smooth, hairless male chests before, she knew a powerful urge to rub her hands and her cheeks all over this one...

Don't go there! She whisked herself out again.

"The door's open, senator. That means I'm available."

Even his voice did things to her body, seeming to vibrate through her to every nerve-ending. Despite the harshness of his accented Gardenian, it was a good voice, deep and quiet, not the loud, vulgar one she expected of criminals.

Since she was out of his sight, she let her eyes close, briefly. "Maybe I'm not."

"Then why are you wandering the ship like a wraith?" His voice was too close. "Looking for a way off?"

She opened her eyes to find him standing in the doorway, with his shirt over one shoulder, watching her. "Maybe."

"We only have escape pods. I have to release them."

She gave a twisted smile. "Then there's no hope for me?"

He didn't answer for a moment, then, "Come in. I want to show you something."

"What?" she asked with suspicion.

His lips quirked. "About Earth."

He turned and walked back into the room and after an instant, Cereza followed. Her mission might be over in abysmal failure -- temporarily at least -- but she hadn't forgotten it or her plan to learn as much about the place's politics as she possibly could before losing the invasion. If she could bring about a swift and easy transition to peace, she'd count it a success.

"What?" she said again, approaching the captain and his computer.

"Well, what do you know already -- how many of the Earth broadcasts have you seen?"

She glanced at him uncertainly. "Broadcasts *from* Earth?" she repeated.

He nodded, watching her steadily.

"None," said Cereza. "Earth is not a technically advanced society. They have space colonies, but like the planet itself, they're all very distant from this sector. Their communications don't stretch this far."

"You have a signal booster in the Empty Zone. It works for any race, any language."

She frowned. "But I've never seen anything at all from Earth -- certainly nothing that isn't from our agents there. None of our people have."

"You have to look in the right place. They use different frequencies, different systems that your equipment doesn't always recognize. Mine does."

She stared at him. "You *are* from Earth. So is your ship and your computer."

He shrugged. "None of that matters beside the fact that you appear to be ready to invade a planet and exterminate a people you know nothing about. But then, I suppose it's easier that way."

"We're not planning to exterminate anyone!" Cereza exclaimed. "We bring them the benefits of technology and interaction with other species, in return for a share of their planet. Do you have any idea how overcrowded Gardenia is? We need space."

"Senator. There are thousands of unoccupied planets."

"They're not suitable for Gardenians. Earth is the only one we've found that is."

The captain's smile was lopsided. "The only one that's pretty enough? The only one that combines any kind of technology and industry with forests and flowers and fruit?"

"Essentially, yes."

"Then you know it's pretty crowded itself. Apart from a few sparsely populated areas, some of it inhospitable without any trees at all."

"With the benefits we bring, they will be able to migrate all over space, not just to the puny colonies they have already. They are great explorers by nature."

The captain reached out and dragged over a chair which he placed in front of the computer. "You get all this from your agents' reports? Those agents who have been infiltrating Earth secretly over the last few years, whom you're relying on to cripple any defense systems?"

"Broadly speaking."

"That's a politician's phrase. Almost the first I've heard you speak."

"Is that bad?" Stupid question.

"I haven't made up my mind. Tell me, senator, has it ever entered your mind that the Earth people, explorers or not, might prefer to keep their own planet?"

"A few might. We're happy to share with them."

"And if they're not happy to share?"

"There is no sign of that."

"Isn't there? Look at this. I've been reading the unofficial and underground news from Earth, which has been rife with rumors of alien threats. But this says more than any of them. Watch."

The screen fluttered to life. Cereza saw a cellar of some kind, full of caged animals that looked both miserable and familiar. She sank into the chair without meaning to and watched as the camera panned around the cages. Some of them held not the huge wolf-like animals but colorless men and women like the captain.

No, not like the captain. He was dark, but vigorous, vital, nothing like these listless, unhappy creatures whose eyes held nothing but pain and fear.

"What...?"

"Do you hear the voice? It's speaking in English, Earth's major language, and it belongs to one of your agents, a woman called Rose Winter, who disguised herself on Earth for years as a native journalist."

"She's missing, compromised..."

"Let's say she's reached a new understanding. These caged creatures show you the extent of Earth's fear and abhorrence of invasion. They won't give up their planet. On the contrary they'll do anything to keep it, even reduce their finest soldiers to these creatures you see caged. Hear that? That's the voice of an ex-army officer identifying his former comrades. They turn them by some crude genetic modification into these." He reached over Cereza's shoulder to touch the computer screen, pointing out the caged wolves. "Hybrid human-wolves who can smell out and kill aliens. Gardenians."

Her heart thudded with the sudden understanding, and with it came a new fear, that her ridiculous speculations earlier were not so ridiculous.

"Like your wolf," she whispered, turning slowly to stare at him. He met her gaze steadily, yet oddly, there was a hint of something like defiance in his eyes, as if he was daring her to run from him, screaming. "Was... it you? It *was* you."

"It is me. But I've only just understood why."

She frowned, a hundred questions trying to spill from her lips at once. But before she could ask any of them, he said, "But you get the point? That is how far Earth is from happy at your coming."

He gave one of his unexpectedly charming lopsided smiles. "Of course, the raid has complicated matters. The project was developed in secret by the Earth Government. Your agent together with two Earth people and a Gardenian android -- the one you showed me, in fact -- have blown it all wide open, causing widespread outrage and rebellion against their own government. But even the rebels won't tolerate invasion. They're forming guerrilla groups, organizing mass production of weapons and trying to develop more."

Cereza licked her lips. The situation he described bore so little resemblance to what she'd learned for herself that they might have been talking about completely different places. "Seems to me," she said slowly, "that Earth technology is farther on than we thought. It made this ship, didn't it? Sent you out here, with this computer, those weapons, that targeting system..."

"To be fair, I tinkered with those a little. Added bits I found as I went on."

Cereza let her breath out slowly. "I knew I was being set-up, but... can I look around here some more? Do you have a translation device?"

"Sure. And I'll get one."

Her eyes refocused on him. "Are you trusting me?" *Am I trusting you?*

He didn't answer the question directly. "You're not who or what I expected to be leading the invasion of Earth."

"No," she agreed bleakly. Worse than a scapegoat, a cipher. She was a dupe. In fact, she began to think they were all dupes. Her breath shuddered as she drew it in. "I used to annoy the government, the senate, my elders and betters by accusing them of blind obedience to custom and orders, of not questioning. If you want the truth, that's why I was chosen to go to Earth, to get me out of their hair. And now it looks like I'm as guilty as everyone else -- guiltier, because I *know* to look below the surface."

He stirred beside her, making her very aware of his nearness. "We're all limited by the information available to us."

"You're not," she said at once, and then wished she hadn't. She didn't want to admire him, let alone have him aware of her admiration. She felt the color rise to her face, but before she could look away she caught the odd expression on his. It might have been stark disbelief that twisted his sensual lips and drew in his brow. But what she read in his eyes looked more like -- desolation.

It was he who turned away, rummaging in the desk drawer beside her.

"Are you?" she said with a hint of doubt.

"Limited? More than anyone. Here." He took a small, standard translation box with a bizarre connector and fixed it to the computer.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I have less information."

She stared at him. "But you have all this, awful as it is. You've been through all *that*." She waved one hand toward the computer screen, where the wolves and humans were now leaping out of cages. "And come here..."

"That's the point. I don't remember any of it."

Her lips came apart without permission. He turned abruptly away. "I'll leave you to it."

"No, wait," she said urgently. "What do you mean, you don't remember any of it? You don't remember being there? That's probably a blessing!"

"Any of it. I don't remember what went before. I don't remember coming here."

In the silence, she stood and followed him across the room. When she touched him, he jumped.

"You really don't know your name, do you?" she whispered. "You have no identity, no goal but the instinct to kill my people."

His arm, thick with muscle, was rigid under her hand. He didn't look at her. "I can live with that. I can't live with your pathetic, sentimental pity."

She snatched her hand back as if stung and he let out a groan and seized her elbow, swinging her into his arms, muttering incoherent words in a language she didn't understand. She tried to answer, to ask him to explain, but his parted lips touched the side of her face, slid down her jaw to her mouth and fastened, and she was silenced.

For an instant she hung there, stunned, bombarded by her senses. The blanket she'd clutched around herself slid, ignored, to the floor. Only when she found herself flinging an arm up around his neck to draw him closer and kiss him back, did she make an effort at defiance.

"So kill me," she gasped into his mouth.

"I've gotten over that. It's the desire to fuck you I can't get past."

She moaned aloud, as if the very coarseness of his words fed her lust. Whatever fanned it, the flame burned wildly, out of control, consuming her in its heat. Somehow, every moment since she'd first seen his dark, frighteningly unfamiliar face on the viewscreen had been leading up to this. It didn't seem to matter what he'd done. Pirate, enemy or victim, they were all part of him and her body made no distinction.

His hands roved up and down her body from her waist, down over the curve of her hips and back up to the sides of her breasts where they lingered, cupping. Shivering

with delight, she covered one hand with her own, pressing it closer, rubbing against his skin in desperation.

His knee parted her thighs for his erection to slam between, and galaxies, that felt good too, his hardness grinding into her hot, moist tenderness. She moaned again, thrusting her tongue into his mouth, twisting it around his teeth.

With a muffled growl, he tore his mouth free and released her. His breath was ragged, panting, his brown eyes black with lust

“Get out of here,” he said harshly. “Now!”

She stared at him, fighting the hurt that suddenly chilled her to the bone. On top of which her body, celibate for so long, since she’d first entered the Senate two years ago, still clamored for fulfillment. Wildly, she wondered if she was above begging. Or if she should just laugh carelessly and walk away and hope her knees didn’t buckle from trembling.

But he wanted her. She knew he did. That’s what the strange flirtation in the interview room had been about, and the clinch in front of the viewscreen to show Azale...

“Cereza, go,” he snarled, and at that, his very desperation gave him away. He’d kidnapped her, hurting, maybe even killing, her comrades in the process of escape. Fucking her when she was at his mercy broke his code of honor.

She smiled, a little tremulously, and walked to the door. She let her hips swing, but although she felt his eyes burn into her back, he didn’t follow. She reached out and closed the door.

“Say my name again,” she whispered as she turned to face him.

A baffled frown flitted across his face and was still. But his pants tented, telling her all she needed to know. In one movement, she shrugged the nightgown off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor. “Cereza,” he all but pleaded, “Don --”

“Thank you.” She walked to him, holding his ardent, almost frightened gaze until she stood naked in front of him, his laboring breath on her cheek, the heat of his

body burning before she even touched him. "Again," she whispered. "In your voice it sounds... special."

Slowly, she lifted her arms and placed them around his neck and reached up to brush her mouth across his. As if he couldn't help himself, his lips moved, accepting, kissing back, until she pulled free. "Again," she pleaded.

His hands came up, cupping her face. "Cereza," he whispered, wonderingly. "Cereza." And his mouth sank into hers, invading, claiming until a sound like a sob escaped her. This time it was he who teased, drawing back to say, "Are you seducing me?"

"Yes," she said boldly, and reached down to unfasten his pants. "You may take me to bed, if you wish."

"I'd rather take you right here."

"Like a pirate?"

"Like a wolf." The breath hissed between his teeth as she finally closed her fist around his cock and drew it free. "Doesn't that frighten you?"

"Everything about you frightens me. Being in the same room as you frightens me, because I want this so badly."

His eyes widened. Golden flames seemed to dance in them, mesmerizing her, and then he swooped, seizing her mouth with his. He muttered something that might have been "Me too," against her lips.

His arms enveloped her in warmth. When she came up for air, she kissed and nipped the skin of his shoulders instead, pushing back the leather waistcoat to get at his chest. Smooth and hot to her touch, dusted with those fascinating black hairs. She could taste the salt of fresh sweat on his skin, and something else intense and spicy that drove her on, licking and grazing his nipples.

Almost violently, his fingers tangled in her hair and forced her head up for his open-mouth kiss. He bent her backward with the force of it, until her upper body lay over the desk and his naked cock jutted between her slick thighs. Somehow he'd kicked off his trousers, and with the waistcoat hanging off his powerful shoulders he'd never

looked so piratical, or so indescribably sexy. She almost came just looking at him, just imagining him making love to her.

"I can feel your wetness already," he growled in triumph. "How often will you come for me?"

"How often would you like?"

"I'll tell you when to stop."

"Can I tell you when to start?"

He smiled, rolling one hard, aching nipple between his finger and thumb. "Is that impatience?"

"Oh yes."

His smile widened as he bent his head over her other breast and took the nipple into his mouth. She arched into him, threading her fingers through his soft, thick hair, and when he began to suck, let out a moan of bliss and need. Lifting her legs, she wrapped them around his waist, drawing him as close as she could, encouraging him to enter her body at last.

At last? How long had she known him? This was madness...

And she'd take it any day over sanity.

Still sucking one nipple, his hands slid under her bottom, kneading her cheeks, sliding his fingers round to bathe in her wetness. She gasped as they explored the sensitive folds and valleys, and softly rubbed against the hard, swollen nub at the center. As if he sensed the desperation of her clamoring body, he slid a finger inside her, stroking around the pulsing walls of her pussy until he found the spot that drove her over the point of no return.

Galaxy, she was so close now... She writhed on his finger, trying to push farther on to it while his thumb stroked her clitoris over and over. He pumped her gently but relentlessly, sucking harder on her breast until she fell headlong over the edge into bliss.

Through the convulsions, she was aware of him lifting his head, watching her face avidly while his free hand caressed her breast. It was part of the joy to drown in his eyes at last, to soak up his fierce pleasure in her ecstasy.

But she wanted, she *needed* him to feel it too.

"Please, come inside me," she whispered. "Now, quickly..."

Unexpectedly, he took hold of her arm and yanked her up against him so they stood together, her buttocks pressed into the desk as he kissed her deeply. Then he spun her around until she dropped dizzily over the desk, face down. His cock, huge and rigid, probed between her cheeks and slid inside her in one long, sweet stroke that left her panting.

Pulsing around him, her pussy reignited, so when he began to fuck her in earnest with slow, hard thrusts, she reached, sobbing, for the climax, as if she hadn't come only moments before. His strokes quickened, pounding into her, gathering the pleasure in an ever growing arc around his plundering cock and finally shooting her over the edge into another raging orgasm. Ruthlessly, he held her there while he climbed higher with every frenzied push. Her own wild, animal noises mingled with his increasing groans and pants until she couldn't tell one from the other.

At last, with a sound like a howl, he wrenched her upright closing both hands around her breasts and devouring her mouth. Hot liquid spurted deep inside her, deepening her pleasure beyond any she'd ever imagined. But his groans didn't stop. They seemed to get louder. He thrust again and again, his penis quivering and throbbing inside her as his arms and body shook against her.

Suddenly frightened, she reached up and behind her for his face. "What? What is it? Oh, galaxy, are you -- changing?"

Chapter Five

Lost in orgasm, in the beauty of the exotic creature who took his fucking and his seed with such pulsing, passionate joy, he couldn't be still. Her clinging softness, her hot, velvety wetness hugging his cock kept him pushing it into her. Visions sprang into his head, flooding him, overloading him until she was his only reality, gripping his cock with muscles of warm steel, gazing into his eyes with fear.

Fear. He didn't like fear, not in the woman he was screwing. With a huge effort of will, he concentrated on what she'd just said.

"Changing?" he gasped out. "No... that is, yes, but not to the wolf... Not at all. Cereza... I think... I think I'm remembering."

Twisting, she tried to face him properly, but since he couldn't bear to leave her pussy just yet, he held her where she was, merely stepping back with her and sinking into the chair with her in his lap, still impaled on his cock.

She turned on him, sending pleasure pangs shooting once more and took his face between her hands, searching his eyes.

"Yuri," he blurted. "My name is Yuri Grigorovitch Nikitin. I really am a captain, in Earth's army. I'm a pilot. I tested new ships."

He couldn't keep up with his thoughts, couldn't blab them all and didn't want to. This amazing, lovely red woman sat on his cock and right now that seemed more wonderful than anything else. She curled into his chest, and he held her softness to him, accepting the rush of protectiveness along with the shame. He'd been blindly killing and imprisoning her people from a planted impulse, and he had to face the fact that

they didn't all deserve to die. Stuck in some massive stagnation, they needed education, not another fight, another enemy.

Which didn't mean he'd be happy to educate them from Earth. The bastards who'd done this to him had been right about that. The Gardenians couldn't have Earth.

"What will you do?" Her voice sounded tiny, breaking into his thoughts, and he realized all over again the value of the gift he'd just received. She didn't seem like a woman who gave herself easily, and yet she'd done this with a man who was her enemy and a terrifying werewolf to boot. A man she guessed was about to cast her aside. Was he? Was that what he did? Is it what he *should* do for both their sakes?

Putting off the decision, he kissed her hair. "I don't know yet."

"Are you married?" she blurted and closed her eyes as if ashamed of the question.

He stroked her hair, but wouldn't take the easy lie. "I don't know. It isn't all back yet. But I don't think so. If I was, I wouldn't feel so --" He broke off, urging her chin upward so he could kiss her and lose the words he had no right to think let alone say. After all, he hadn't known her twenty-four hours. "Did you ask me to take you to bed some time ago?" he asked huskily.

She smiled, and her eyes were like the Northern Lights. "I might have."

"My name came to me at the moment of climax. I'm hoping it might be a pattern -- and I suspect I have a lot of remembering to do."

"I'd like to help," she murmured and slid off him at last to kneel between his knees. Since she immediately took his cock into her mouth, he decided not to object, and merely gave himself up to the astounding pleasure of her sucks and licks. Her wicked hand drew back his foreskin, gently, rhythmically pumping him while her sucks grew stronger and harder. She had a light, sensual touch that was beguiling, eagerly accepting his thrusts into her mouth until she swallowed him, drawing him swiftly toward climax. The thrill was so sweet that he waited until he hovered on the brink before seizing her once more, breaking the suction so that his cock popped out of her mouth. He hauled her into his lap and thrust up into her.

Orgasm broke, rushing on him with all the force of a starship crash, but she didn't leave it there. She rode him fiercely, determined to find her own pleasure which extended his beyond anything he could remember experiencing in his checkered past.

To the enchanting sound of her cries and screams of orgasm, Yuri retrieved his life.

* * *

Cereza woke with him still inside her. They'd finally made it to the bed for one more slow, lazy lovemaking, after which they'd fallen asleep like this.

Cereza opened her eyes and gazed into his face. In sleep it seemed to lose all its rough edges. He looked contented and vulnerable, and for some reason she wanted to smile and weep at the same time. There had never been a feeling like this. For her, this closeness went beyond the exciting bliss of good sex, even if this was the best she'd ever known. Waking in his arms with his semi-erect cock twitching inside her, she never wanted to be with anyone else.

It was all wrong, but even if he'd never been anything more than the pirate he was now, she would still have done this. Everything in him called to her, his darkness, his mystery, his hard, muscled body, his lopsided smile, the unexpected glimpses of humor he let slip.

Sex with Yuri made her feel like a queen, powerful and elated. Ridiculously, this felt more important than joining the Senate, more necessary to her even than the acclaim of the people she was beginning to reach on Gardenia.

She smiled, remembering his urgency, his tenderness mixed so beguilingly with fierce, rough passion. He'd certainly been in no hurry to sling her out of his bed, and instinct told her there was more to this coupling than a one-night stand to release a little of his sexual tension.

For her, there had always been more. She'd never been so aroused or so attracted to a man. And no man had ever given her such pleasure. Her whole body ached with it.

She moved her head on the pillow so she could feel his breath on her lips and smiled. She stretched out her lips and kissed his, a soft caress that brought immediate response. His lips parted, smiling, waiting for more.

She didn't even know if he was awake, yet her heart seemed to plunge straight into her stomach, spreading warm emotion to her very core. Without permission, her pussy clenched around his lethargic cock, which immediately began to grow again.

Since his eyes were still closed, she kissed his mouth in earnest, allowing her hips a little sensuous gyration. He growled into her mouth. His arms moved, holding her tighter, rolling her underneath him and his eyes looked into hers at last.

It was a moment of truth. Would he be aghast or pleased to find her still in his bed, the source of his sexy awakening? She didn't doubt he'd be prepared to finish what she'd started -- few men of any race would draw back from this position -- but she'd see in his eyes if there were still feelings for her beyond the animal instinct to fuck.

His dark gaze fixed on hers, widening as she held her breath. The waking smile in them began to die, and she held her breath.

"Cereza," he whispered. It sounded like wonder. His hands came up to touch her cheeks and lips, to cup her face. "Cereza." And his mouth fastened on hers.

Within her, his cock continued to grow, but he kept it still. He seemed content just to hold and kiss her, and Cereza's throat closed with tears of joy. Ignoring them, she kissed him back with enthusiasm, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Something buzzed loudly, dragging her from the moment. Yuri's lips stilled and released hers. "Fuck," he said, and reached above her to press a button on the wall. "What?"

"Entering the asteroid field, Captain," said a disembodied voice.

"I'll be there," he said with resignation, and pressed the button once more. "Sorry," he said. "You'll never know how sorry."

She smiled. "I might."

He grinned and eased out of her at last. "Go back to sleep if you want." With appreciation, she watched his long, muscled legs stretch across the bed to the floor until he stood naked and magnificent before her. "I'll be back."

He turned, pulling on his pants while she admired his taut, rippling buttocks. He reached for the shirt he'd never quite got around to putting on earlier, slipping it on while adjusted the bulge in his pants. "Stop looking at me or I'll frighten the crew."

She laughed and rolled out of bed to walk into his arms. He held her gently, carefully, like valuable porcelain, as if afraid to come too close. Wickedly, she rubbed her breasts against him as she kissed him. "Hurry back," she said huskily and stepped out of his arms.

He swallowed. "Count on it." He shrugged himself into the leather body warmer and sat on the bed to pull on his boots.

Cereza's gaze slid beyond him to the computer. Reality. Things -- great things and smaller ones -- had to be sorted out. "Can I use the computer?" she asked, as if a guest rather than a hostage. What the hell was she now?

"Sure." He stood up and glanced at her. His lips parted as if about to say more, then they closed on silence and twisted into a rueful smile. He walked to the door and went out, closing it behind him.

Cereza put her nightgown back on, flung the forgotten blanket around her shoulders and sat down in front of the computer, to learn more about Earth. She still had a mission and a duty.

* * *

As Yuri expected, the Gardenian fleet didn't follow them into the asteroid field. Their ships were too many and too big for safety. Instead, they lined up at the edge and waited for him to come out.

"It's stalemate," Azale's voice said over the communicator. "We can't come in, but you have nowhere to go. You have to come out eventually." There was a pause, then, with more difficulty, "We want our senator back. We are prepared to negotiate."

Farco grinned. Andra looked over her shoulder at Yuri, her eyebrows raised in question.

Yuri shook his head, drawing his thumb across his throat in a gesture for communications-silence. "We have to work out what we want for her. In the meantime, edge forward into the field, and keep moving in case their sensors can pick us up."

"We going all the way through?" Farco asked. "Come out the other side and arrange to meet them somewhere safe to make the drop?"

"It crossed my mind," Yuri admitted. But then a lot of things were crossing his mind just now. He glanced at the two crew members he knew best. They'd allied in a bar fight on the first place he'd landed his ship. For more than two months these people had been all he had, past, present or, it seemed, future. One thing was certain -- he owed them.

He drew in his breath. "She was right. I do come from Earth. I've started to remember things."

"Wow," Farco said, apparently impressed. "You crossed the Empty Zone alone?"

"I crossed it asleep," Yuri said wryly. It wasn't strictly true. After waking, he'd spent days alone with the stranger who was himself, without coming across any ships or inhabited planets, wondering if he was the only being in the universe or if he was insane and hallucinating. "The point is, I need to decide what to do about it."

"What's to do?" Andra asked. "You left, you're here now."

"We have a hostage. A senator leading the expedition that plans to take Earth."

"You think they'll give up the idea in return for her?" Farco said dubiously.

"I don't know. In the short term, they might chase her for a bit. In the long term, they might just send some other politician to figurehead the expedition. We have to figure out which."

"Or just sell her for gold."

It was one solution. It would pay off the crew and leave him free to do whatever he needed to about the Earth invasion.

And Cereza herself... What would she do? Accept her place in the exchange and carry on? Would what she learned here not influence what she did? She was a rebel, a maverick who thought for herself. And yet what a career boost it would be to finally secure her people another "garden."

"I need to talk to her."

"Talk, is it?" said Farco wryly.

"What does that mean?" Andra demanded, gazing from one to the other.

"It means she wasn't in her cabin when I took her breakfast two hours ago."

Shit. Breakfast. She'd be starving. He realized he was. Breakfast with Cereza...

"She's in my quarters," he said abruptly. "Using the computer. Watch those asteroids, and keep me informed."

He strode out, only too aware of Farco's salacious grin and Andra's stare. Behind her habitual hardness, she looked oddly stricken.

But he couldn't consider that now. Cereza's scent was in his nostrils, growing stronger with every pace. It was new, he realized now, this powerful sense of smell. It had come with the wolf, during those dark days in the project that had taken from him all that he was, except the quick reactions of a soldier. He doubted he'd been meant to get the rest back. He should have carried on a mindless slave to instinct, killing Gardenians for the benefit of Earth.

He paused in the kitchen, grunting at Garrech, who was nodding off over a bowl of stew. It smelled good, so he took two more bowls, stuck them on a tray with a jug of water and two cups, and departed.

Coffee, he thought with sudden longing. *I want coffee.*

Remembering was a mixed blessing.

When he opened the door to his quarters, her scent seemed to consume him. Once, it had urged him to kill her, and he still felt that instinct -- well buried beneath the desire and the tenderness, but still there.

The first time he'd seen her, outside the docking bay on the Gardenian ship, her unique scent had filled him with ferocious lust -- for blood and sex in almost equal

measure. He'd nearly shifted on the spot, so powerful had been his reaction to her. It still was, but he had the wolf well in hand. And even if he did change near her, he knew now he'd never kill her. He wondered if his reaction to all Gardenians had altered for good. Time would tell. But at least now he understood it, he could control it. Control himself.

She sat in front of the computer, staring at the screen. He couldn't tell if she was reading or thinking, but either way she was so lost in concentration she didn't hear him come in. Fuck, but she was beautiful. Just looking at her melted his insides. And turned his cock to stone. He closed the door and walked across the room to lay the tray down on the table. She jumped, looking quickly up at him.

"Yuri." He loved the sound of his name on her lips, the way her eyes relaxed suddenly into a smile of such warmth that he felt burned.

He said, "I need to talk to you, Cereza."

"I need to talk to you. Mmmm, what is that? It smells delicious."

"Stew. Andra made it." He dragged over the other hard chair and sat in it. Cereza had already grabbed the fork and tasted the stew.

"Galaxy, that's good. I didn't realize I was so hungry."

Now, he thought, watching those luscious lips draw vegetables off the fork into her mouth, *would be a good time to talk*. Except the way she ate made him think of oral sex. And when a splash of sauce landed on her chin, he leaned forward without thinking and licked it off.

Her eyes smiled. A hint of heat sprang into them, urging him on. He took a forkful and held it to her mouth. She took it with such deliberately sexual provocation, making great play with her tongue, that his pants strained over his cock. He fed her some more, this time leaning forward to share the forkful with her when it was halfway into her mouth. Kissing her and eating at the same time seemed an excellent use of time.

Perhaps chocolate, or even fruit would be sexier. Yuri didn't care. He'd use what he had, so long as he could still taste her in among the vegetables. She didn't object when he drew the nightgown off her shoulders and drizzled sauce on the swell of her

breast. And when he licked it off, she made a tiny noise like a moan. Lingered, he felt her quickened breath and pulse. He emptied another forkful over her and brought up his hand to catch it before it dripped farther than her nipple.

That took a wonderfully long time to clean up, and by the time he'd finished, she was naked on the floor, pouring stew over her own belly button. Voraciously now, he dug that out with a stab of his tongue, cleaning as he went, while his free hand trailed stew down her stomach and thighs.

She was writhing under his consuming mouth, arching up into him, her hand floundering for the bowl. But he didn't want it now. The scent and taste of her pussy was more than enough and he could wait no longer to feed.

Pushing her thighs farther apart, he settled between and probed delicately with his tongue among her moist folds and valleys, swirling over her entrance and back to her swollen clitoris. When he fastened his mouth to her lower lips, she cried out, jerking up into his mouth and he sucked relentlessly until she hovered on the brink of orgasm. Then he released her and reached over to help himself to a little stew from the bowl.

Her eyes, dazed with lust and frustration, watched him, uncomprehending. He winked, swallowed, and returned to the better meal. God, she tasted good, sweet and strong. He lapped up her cream like a starving man, driving her on toward bliss with his tongue and lips, and yet couldn't resist another tease. Her orgasm would be all the sweeter when he let her have it.

"Bastard," she said distinctly as he finished up the stew from the bowl.

"Want some?" he asked huskily.

"I... I want... oh Galaxy!" she finished as he latched his mouth to her pussy and sucked hard. She drenched him, writhing so hard in her convulsions that he had to hold her hips steady in both hands in order to draw the last ounce of pleasure from her.

Her bliss excited him beyond belief. He could remember other lovers now, passing affairs as well as women with whom he'd had some kind of relationship. With none of them had he felt this overwhelming joy in their pleasure. Despite the raging beast still enclosed in his pants, he felt he could watch her orgasm all day.

Except that she had other ideas. After she quieted, he pulled himself up her body and kissed her mouth.

"My turn," she said throatily and pushed him over on to his back.

Which was when something struck the ship with the force of a bomb, rocking it wildly. He and Cereza were flung across the floor. Crockery crashed around them.

"Fuck!" Yuri didn't know if he was angrier about the damage to his ship or the frustration of his lust. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," she said, dazed. "What just happened?"

"I don't know," he said grimly, springing to his feet, "but get dressed and come to the bridge."

He strode to the door, pausing only long enough to glance at her over his shoulder. "Next time -- if there is a next time -- I must keep my hands off you long enough to talk. No seducing me."

He closed the door before she could deny it. Even through his anxiety, he was smiling, because he'd made her come and made her laugh.

"What the hell just happened?" he demanded, running onto the bridge ahead of Garrech and the others.

"Asteroid," said Farco briefly.

"Damage?"

"Considerable. Hamt and Gore have gone to investigate a possible breach."

"Fuck," Yuri said again. He realized he was saying it in English. It made a more satisfying swear word. Throwing himself into his chair, he called up all the information he could on damage and status. "All right. For the duration, I've passed control of the escape pods to each of your codes too. If it goes bad, just get the fuck out. You guys are too ugly to die."

He leapt to his feet and ran off the bridge, just as Cereza stumbled on. They almost collided. Then, for an instant, they stood staring at each other. She looked wide-eyed and anxious with the ridiculous blanket still clutched round her flimsy nightdress. They should get her some proper clothes, if they lived long enough.

“Asteroid collision,” he said tersely. “With possible hull breach. Listen for the order to abandon ship. I’ll find you.”

He touched her face, once, as if to remember what she felt like, and then ran on.

“Yuri?” she called after him, but he didn’t answer and didn’t stop.

Chapter Six

"These would do," said Andra, some three hours later, holding a pair of soft, silken pants against Cereza's body. They were considerably finer than the ones Andra herself wore, but she was clearly determined to give Cereza the best.

A lot had changed during the hours of the emergency. In many ways, they had been even stranger than the time she'd spent being dragged through her own ship in the company of a giant wolf. Since the attention of those on the bridge was focused on avoiding any more asteroids and on carrying out Yuri's orders as barked over the bridge communications, Cereza quickly left them to it, and tracked Yuri down.

He lay on his back with his head in a maintenance tunnel, swearing at Hamt for not tracking the surrounding asteroids. When she spoke, he bumped his head and levered himself out to swear at her for not staying on the bridge.

Ignoring him, Cereza sat on the floor. "Is the hull breached?"

"We've contained it," Yuri said reluctantly. "But the collision damaged vital sensors."

And so she stayed, while his temper cooled, and Hamt regained his insolence. She passed them both tools and instruments as they asked for them and tried not to look smug when Yuri seemed surprised that she knew what he was talking about.

"I've flown ships since I was twelve years old. My father insisted we knew how they worked."

He glanced at her. "Some day you can explain this one to me."

For Cereza, it was a curiously enjoyable emergency. Besides the tingle of danger in the pit of her stomach -- which seemed to have been around one way or another since

she first encountered the captain -- she got to know Yuri better. She got to impress him by re-routing some wiring all by herself. And she got to watch his deft hands working, remembering how they'd felt on her body, and to hear his caustic humor as he bantered with his crew.

I like you, Yuri Grigorovitch Nikitin...

And when at last they were finished, she entered the bridge arm in arm with Hamt and Yuri as if they were old comrades. That felt good too, and not at all as if they were pirates and she their hostage.

"Panic over," Yuri declared. "Hamt is officially Arse of the Month and the rest of you are promoted over his head. I'm going for a shower -- don't bang into anything else while I'm gone!" He glanced at Andra. "Find Cereza something to wear?"

"Sure," said Andra, rising with alacrity. And moments later, they were here in Andra's cabin -- not much larger than Cereza's -- while the pirate rummaged among her best clothes for something that would fit.

"Seriously, just give me something old. It'll just be good to be dressed!"

"Dressed's overrated," Andra declared, coming up with a creamy tunic. "Surprised the captain wants it."

Heat galloped through Cereza's body. She supposed that on a ship of this size secrets were impossible to keep. "He has a lot of things on his mind," she mumbled. "He's starting to remember his past."

Andra paused in the act of holding the tunic against Cereza's breast. Her gaze flickered upward. "You knew him before?"

"Of course not. He shouldn't even be in this part of the galaxy, according to our admittedly faulty information. But he does come from Earth. In fact he's a soldier who once swore to defend it."

"Try those," Andra said. And while Cereza modestly pulled the pants on under her nightgown, Andra added, "I guess that makes your position a little awkward. Unless you're just screwing him in an effort to get back to your own people."

Cereza didn't dignify that with an answer, although she couldn't prevent a quick glare.

Andra was watching her intently. "You do know that he's the wolf?"

Cereza nodded. "He told me. It was done to him by his own people, in the same process that took his memories."

"Doesn't that scare you?"

"The wolf thing? Not now, to be honest. Does it scare you?"

"I confess it freaked me out the first time I watched it happen. But since it was in the middle of a brawl and he seemed to be on our side, I got over it. He never threatens us. In either form, he protects us."

For a pirate, it was a declaration of loyalty. And a warning.

"And let's face it, he's a damned fine secret weapon." Andra kicked idly at the base of the bed. "Do you care for him at all?"

It wasn't a question she was prepared to answer to a stranger. Not when she couldn't answer it to herself. Logic stated she couldn't really care for someone she hadn't known two days. And yet she'd already made love with him several times. She was a politician. She knew how to evade an uncomfortable question, but before she could do so, something in Andra's too-neutral eyes caught her attention.

"Do you?" she countered.

Andra looked away and shrugged. "Doesn't matter, does it? I'm crew, so I'm off-limits. Apparently hostages are in a different class."

Cereza sank onto Andra's bed, won over by the other woman's pain as she would never have been by her sympathy. "I'm sorry." Worse, something horribly close to jealousy twisted through her with the knowledge that in the long run Andra had more chance with him than she had. She had a duty to invade his planet or betray her own people and deprive them of the only suitable new home they'd ever found.

But there was a higher duty, one she'd always tried to follow -- to do the right thing. And her reading of Earth broadcasts had taught her a lot. She wasn't sure yet what could be done with it, but she had to try. The notion forming before he'd

distracted her with delicious food and even more delicious sex rushed on her now with a vengeance.

She said abruptly, "I need to go back."

"He won't let you." *Even for a fuck.* The words hung unspoken between them, along with Andra's bitterness and her own uncertainty. Why had he relaxed his principles to screw her? Did it make her worth more than Andra to him? Or less? In all her dealings with him, she'd gone on blind instinct and wishful thinking, but now it frightened her how little she really knew him.

Andra said, "We're going straight through the asteroid field to find a planet to exchange you for gold."

Pain sliced through her. She was just a hostage after all... "I can't wait that long. The invasion might go ahead with someone else." She stood up, tearing off the nightgown and throwing the tunic over her head even as she strode across the room. "He has to let me go back."

"Cereza." Andra's voice stayed her before she even reached the door. "He won't let you go."

Cereza turned and stared at her. She was trying to hide her own pain and that cut Cereza even more.

"I've seen the way he looks at you," Andra said, low. "He never once glanced at me that way. He won't let you go because he wants you here."

Warmth flooded her, even as the impossibility of her situation pressed down ever harder. "Even if I can save his Earth by going? He'd rather hand me over for gold?"

"That's a decision he doesn't have to make yet. A lot can happen in a few days."

Cereza closed her mouth, letting the idea whirl through her head. "Perhaps it's a decision we have to make for him," she said slowly. She could make use of Andra's pain to lessen it, to give him a real choice.

"How?" said Andra with suspicion.

Cereza drew in her breath. "You still have control of an escape pod, don't you?"

* * *

He was on the bridge, where he'd smell her easily if she walked past. Andra took her to the pod bay by a more circuitous route through engineering tunnels.

While Andra programmed the pod from the ship's navigation computer, Cereza watched her like a hawk. Though they'd reached an understanding, Andra was a pirate and Cereza was sure simply bumping her off had at least crossed her mind.

"It should emerge from the asteroid field right in front of your own fleet," Andra said briskly. "The pod itself will adjust course to avoid large objects -- like asteroids. This is for communications -- and this to open it."

Cereza nodded. Excitement hummed because she was doing something at last, had taken back control. And because she had a mission truly worth fighting for, beyond her own career and another garden for her people to play in. And yet as Andra nodded and prepared to shut the lid on her, a sudden wave of loss rose up like a tide. It felt almost like terror.

"Andra." Reaching up, she caught the other woman's wrist. "Andra, will you tell him..."

"What?" she asked in a small, hard voice.

Good question. Damned good question. What the hell could she say? *Great sex but I have to dash? Need to sneak away to my own people? I'm not betraying you, honest?*

I love you?

She caught her breath. "Just... tell him, I'll find him." It was what he had said to her when he thought the ship might blow. Would he remember that, connect it to whatever they'd found together and trust her?

If they really had something, if she was right about him, then surely he would.

Andra stared at her. After an instant, her hand twisted, not to escape but to grip hers. Her eyes gave away a confusion of compassion, jealousy, and reluctant friendship, leaving her looking unexpectedly vulnerable. "I'll tell him," she said. "Good luck."

* * *

Yuri watched asteroids on the viewscreen with an attention that amounted to paranoia, while his plan to use Cereza's presence with him to deter the invasion circled in his head. All he needed was her agreement and cooperation.

He shifted in his seat, desperate to see her again, talk to her again. And yet afraid to abandon his station and endanger the ship. As soon as they were out the other side of this damned asteroid field...

In front of his eyes something spun away from the ship at high speed. He blinked, immediately targeting and scanning it. "What the..." He checked the internal readings, and hit the communication button with force. "Andra? Where the hell are you?"

"Kitchen."

Relief flooded him. "Your pod's just launched. Roll call."

One after the other, the crew called in.

"Cereza? Cereza, communicate!"

"She can't, Captain." It was Andra again, her voice both nervous and heavy. He knew what she was going to say.

* * *

By the time Andra dragged her feet onto the bridge, he had himself back in hand. Inside was a raging emptiness that seemed worse even than the dark early days when he'd first wakened on the ship. But he only let the anger show.

She was right up to him before he even looked at her. God knew what was in his eyes because for the first time since he'd known her, she flinched. "What the hell did you think you were doing?" he asked quietly.

"She wanted to go back." She was like a surly child. "You'd never have sent her, so I did."

"She was all I had."

Her brows contracted, the sudden pain in her eyes before she looked away reminded him of that brief stricken look he'd glimpsed once before, when he'd more or less admitted to taking Cereza to his bed.

"To halt the Earth invasion," he finished.

Her gaze fluttered back up. "She made no difference. She told me that. She said the Gardenians would negotiate for her return but in the meantime send someone else to figurehead the invasion. I knew you'd never negotiate for gold, not now. So I saved you the trouble and sent her back."

"What the *fuck* do you know?" He bit back the rest of the tirade boiling on his tongue like acid and dragged his fingers through his hair in an effort to regain control, to think beyond this disaster. Lowering his hand again, he waved her away.

She turned on her heel, sharply.

"Andra."

She stood very still.

He drew in his breath, trying to ask, trying not to care. "Did... did she say anything else?"

Andra turned slowly back. He saw understanding, almost compassion flit across her face before it was replaced by the more usual hard cynicism. "No. Nothing else."

Chapter Seven

"Captain Nikitin."

Yuri hadn't expected this to feel so much like a homecoming. But after the two anxious weeks spent crossing the Empty Zone, it was surprisingly comforting to hear an Earth voice speaking English.

The speaker's harsh, handsome face flashed onto the screen, and Yuri recognized it instantly, not just from several recent Earth broadcasts, but from the dark, still blessedly vague days as part of the project. Major Maynard was a wolf too. "Good to see you."

"You too, sir, though I could wish there wasn't a Gardenian fleet between us."

"What's your status, Captain? Since you introduced yourself with your own name, I presume you remember everything?"

"Most of it."

Maynard nodded. "Most of us do remember, one way or another, though apparently we were never meant to. Do you have everything under control?" He meant the wolf, of course.

"I believe so."

Maynard gave a faint yet genuine smile. "Glad to have you back. What's your position?"

Yuri gave him it precisely, adding, "I'm out of their sensor range. They won't know I'm behind them. They've ignored all the colonies and come straight to Earth, so I've gathered all the colonial ships I could to stand with me. We can harry their rear and

slow them up, but I can't pretend we'll make any real difference to the outcome." His lips twisted. "I'm hoping you have a plan, Major, or a secret weapon."

"Maybe I do," Maynard said unexpectedly. He reached out to something beyond the camera's focus, and an instant later, drew someone else into view. A beautiful Gardenian woman with long thick amber hair and golden eyes. She looked familiar too. "This is our best weapon. My wife."

"Rose Winter," Yuri said slowly. Although her eyes had been different then... "Earth journalist and compromised Gardenian agent."

"He compromised me," Rose said with a jerk of her head at the Major, then almost immediately, she added, "Actually, living on Earth compromised me as it did several other agents. We're still in control down here, despite the fact that all agents should have been activated by now to take over vital installations. Many of them just didn't. We have several agents with us."

Yuri frowned. "Who exactly is 'us'?" he demanded. "Is there still a government?"

"In name," Maynard said. "In practice, it's paralyzed, ceased to function. The rebels -- like us -- are in control."

"So how do we defeat the bastards?"

"We send my weapon to talk to them."

Yuri dragged his fingers through his hair. "Sir, there's nothing talk can do. It doesn't matter how much sympathy you'll find in their leader. This was a decision made long ago. To them, it's already a fait accompli. They believe they need this planet and every other consideration is secondary to that." *Including love.*

Yuri laughed at himself, bitterly, for even letting the glancing thought into his head. Love wasn't a few urgent fucks and an escape without so much as a goodbye. Not to him, and clearly not to Cereza, whatever softness he'd chosen to see in her at the time. He didn't like that her desertion had hurt him so much, with a sharpness that hadn't faded with the long, boring journey across the Empty Zone in the Gardenian wake. He didn't like the vulnerability it implied either.

In truth, he was looking forward to a fight, if only to ease his aggression. The loyalty of his crew who had chosen to come with him on this probably final, suicidal and non-profit-making mission, was the one warmth in a life that had gone as cold as his first awakening as the wolf.

"Nevertheless," Maynard said implacably. "It does no harm to share a few views. Rose has already talked to their senator and found her -- understanding."

"She is," Yuri snapped. "But she'll annihilate you just the same. It's easy to be understanding with a massive fleet at your back." Or when you're the captive of a pirate...

Maynard's brows drew together and up. "You speak as if you know the senator."

"We've met," Yuri said shortly.

The two on the screen exchanged glances and muffled words with someone off-view. Then Maynard said, "It might be a good idea if you were to accompany Rose to their flagship..."

"Hardly," Yuri barked. "Our meeting was in the line of rather less honorable business -- on my part. I attacked her ship and held her hostage."

"Ah. Understood. Very well, Captain. We'll keep you informed. Stand by."

"Yes, sir."

Yuri broke the connection and rose restlessly to his feet. He was sure Rose would fail, and not just because he couldn't stand the thought of another doing the job his own charms hadn't. Cereza really was trapped by her own position. Her one chance to do the right thing would have been to cooperate with him as his prisoner. But she had a lifetime of loyalty to her own people, and so did Rose. It wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility that instead of persuading the Gardenians to back off, Rose would simply return to them. Making it doubly-hard for Maynard to attack them, or to rely on the other Gardenians he'd said were with him.

Yuri kicked his desk with frustration and strode to the door.

There was nothing for him to do but wait and watch. He couldn't fight anyone, let alone kill anyone and his wolf wanted to do both.

At least, he was blaming the wolf, but in truth his rage felt only too human. Perhaps he could persuade Hamt or Farco to a round of boxing.

* * *

Cereza regarded Rose thoughtfully. To orthodox eyes, the woman was a traitor who'd not only failed in her duty but had chosen the enemy over her own people. But her reasoning, her decision-making, came very close to Cereza's own.

Of course, their positions were very different. Rose was from an obscure family, had been little more than a servant of the state, however valued and trusted she had risen to be by her own intelligence and ability. Cereza was a senator, someone with a right to make decisions that affected her people. Rose was infected by the people she'd lived among for nearly six years. Yuri's people. And his odd egalitarianism was reflected in her speech.

Cereza nodded slowly. "Very well. I'll come to Earth."

"Senator," Azale began in clear alarm. He and his senior officers sat around the conference table with her, Rose, and the android Louis whose picture Cereza had once shown to Yuri. To Cereza, it said a lot that an android's logic had chosen to oppose his makers. Even though it shouldn't have been possible, he -- it -- didn't appear to be malfunctioning.

"We'll guarantee the senator's safety," Rose said quickly.

"I don't see how you can," Azale snapped. "By your own admission, there is no government. Such rule as there is, is held by small groups of rebels who cannot possibly control a people hostile to the senator."

"I can guarantee it," said Louis unexpectedly. He had made little contribution to the discussion, except to supply points of information and statistics, and at this intervention, everyone gazed at him in surprise. "My sensors will detect any unauthorized weapons, or anyone charging weapons. And I will protect her with my life as I am programmed to do."

Azale curled his lip. "You've done a lot you're not programmed to do."

"I'm more than my programming, not less," the android said calmly. "And I'm still protecting Gardenians. My logic has merely chosen a different path for the greater good. The senator will be safe on Earth. So will you be, should you choose to accompany her."

"I think you should," Cereza said seriously. She turned back to Rose. "You will broadcast the meeting all over Earth and its colonies?"

"As you will to Gardenia."

Cereza nodded and glanced down at her notes. "One last thing. You have had contact with the Earth pilot Captain Nikitin."

Rose's lips parted. "He didn't think you monitored those frequencies."

"We do now," Azale said grimly.

It was all part of Cereza's new efficiency drive. But it wasn't her chief point of interest right now. "It would be beneficial," she said carefully, "if Captain Nikitin were to attend our conference on Earth."

A quick frown marred Rose's brow before it smoothed once more. "Captain Nikitin believes otherwise."

Cereza's stomach twisted. She had hoped against hope that Rose's companion at this meeting would be Yuri, and now it seemed he planned to stay away altogether. Did he hate her for leaving? Had he not understood her message? Or had their brief affair meant nothing to him after all? Just a release of sexual tension, an unexpected means to retrieve his memories and his identity which he had taken full advantage of?

Louis said, "Do you wish his presence for reasons of punishment? Or understanding?"

"Understanding," she said with difficulty. But she held her gaze steady and, hopefully, neutral under the observation of Azale and the other Gardenians.

Rose nodded. "We'll talk to him. And do our best to get the President there too, as you suggested."

"Good. Tomorrow morning then." Cereza stood, signaling the end of the meeting.

"Tomorrow morning," Rose agreed.

When the delegation had gone, suitably escorted to their shuttle, Azale turned to her abruptly. "It's a risky strategy, senator. Damned risky."

"But if it works, I think we win a lot more. In the long run."

"If it works."

If Yuri's people don't kill me and Azale. If my own people fail me... "It will work," she said fiercely.

* * *

"It's like an arena lined with soldiers," Azale reported as their shuttle approached the meeting point on Earth. "Well guarded, patrol craft all around. Armed to the teeth, but at least not threatening. Yet."

Cereza nodded. Her attention was on the viewscreen, showing the environment in which they were landing. It was a city, not the open country -- chosen, she was sure, to convince the Gardenians that this planet was not so attractive as they'd believed.

"Ease her down," Azale instructed, the unnecessary order betraying his nervousness.

Tall buildings and patrol craft flashed by the screen like moving pictures, until their shuttle landed softly in a more open area and the engine was cut.

Cereza exchanged glances with Azale. This was it, the moment of truth.

She rose and smoothed out her white, flowing skirts. She wore the formal dress of a Gardenian senator, without jewelry as was her own custom. But she'd taken care in the dressing of her hair, in the soft creams and perfumes she'd applied to her face and body. It was a delicate balance she was looking to achieve, somewhere between splendor and friendliness for the people of Earth. And yet the beauty, the allure she'd strived for, was for Yuri.

Let him be there... Please, bring him to me...

She came to a halt in front of the shuttle doors beside Azale. Behind them, several armed soldiers lined up, weapons at their sides.

"Open them," she commanded.

The doors slid open in silence, save for the sound of the descending ramp easing down to the ground. A heady breeze whipped over her, almost dizzying, reminding her of how long she had been in space without fresh air. She could smell distant grass, flowers, a few tantalizing food scents.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward and walked down the ramp. Azale kept to her pace, quick enough to appear eager, yet slow enough to give no impression of threat. The shuttle doors closed on her soldiers, and she and Azale were alone with the people of Earth.

The shuttle was ringed with Earth soldiers. Beyond them, an arena full of Earth people, come to gawk at the aliens. Cereza had never felt so vulnerable in her life. Or so powerful, she realized suddenly. She held the fate of two peoples in the palms of her hand and for the first time it seemed to her that she had been born for this.

From the huddle of dignitaries, uniformed or otherwise formally dressed, three people detached themselves. Her heart lurched. Yuri?

No. None of them walked as he did, and one of them was definitely a woman. At first two of them appeared to be almost propelling a third, although after the initial movement he walked alone, slightly ahead of the other two. As he drew closer, Cereza recognized the Earth President, little more than a figurehead nowadays but a necessary one for her purpose. His escort, she noted, was Major Jon Maynard, Rose's rebel wolf husband, and a petite female soldier who also looked familiar.

The President came to a halt. Someone ran in from the side and placed two microphones on stands. The cameras came closer, and Cereza had time to hope that her own people were picking it up and relaying it to Gardenia as ordered. And then she arrived opposite the President and slowly extended her hand.

The man looked petrified. For a moment, she feared it would all founder on his terror. "Sir!" the woman at his side hissed. The President raised his hand, which trembled slightly, and gingerly touched her fingers. It was Cereza who closed the grip, and a huge sigh went up, swelling until it turned into a cheer that grew into a shout of

pure relief. Whatever the culture, it seemed a joining of hands was symbolic. You didn't kill the man whose hand you took.

Or woman.

Cereza spoke first, both because she had a lot to say and because she was fairly sure the President was floundering in a situation he neither understood nor approved. The galactic gods alone knew how they'd got him here.

People were drawing nearer, not crowding but joining the group. She wouldn't let herself look for Yuri, but one of them was the android Louis, who stood beside her as he'd promised with every intention of giving his life for hers. He nodded, in a serious, reassuring way to the female soldier beside the President.

Cereza said, "This is a historic meeting. Thank you for inviting us to visit your planet. First, let me introduce myself, Senator Cereza of Gardenia, and our Senior Commander Azale."

They all bowed and Jon Maynard took over, introducing the President, himself, and Captain Linnet Lewis.

Cereza lifted her other hand, in which she held the paper documents. "I have here two petitions to the people of Earth," she declared. "One is a request to let us colonize whichever empty area you feel is appropriate. The other is a petition for friendship and alliance and cooperation to terraform the empty planets of the huge space between Earth and Gardenia."

That was when she saw Yuri, standing at the edge of the inner circle, staring at her with hard, sardonic dark eyes. Her stomach plunged, her heart soared because he was here, because she was looking at him. And yet everything cringed because it was massively clear he hadn't come because of her. They'd made him come, as they'd made the President.

But she couldn't take her eyes off him. He slouched between Farco and Andra, more like the pirate she remembered than the soldier she knew he had been. He wore much the same clothing too, a clean white shirt, perhaps, but worn under the

disreputable black leather waistcoat. His hair had been combed and his face was clean-shaven, making him more handsome than ever. Her heart turned over with longing.

But there was no response in his hard eyes, no lightening smile, not the remotest tug of the lips that had taken hers so passionately a few weeks ago.

He turned deliberately and walked away toward a distant building.

Cereza felt as if she'd been punched. He didn't trust her.

* * *

Yuri leaned his shoulder against the wall and watched her in action. She was impressive, damned impressive. She'd looked amazing stepping off the shuttle, exotic, splendid, beautiful and brave. He could almost feel the people falling under her spell. As he once had.

But here, sitting around the table inside the room where the hard negotiations took place, she had really come into her own. And he had to hand it to her, she was good. Her idea was brilliant -- even better, he freely allowed, than his to use her as a hostage for peace -- and she sold it well. The President looked unhappy, of course, but the Earth people were buying.

"Your people have ideas and drive that my people desperately need to inspire them," she said. "And we have existing technology that can make it work faster and better."

"And how would we make it secure?" Maynard asked. "For both our peoples -- and the other peoples of the galaxy who live in your sector."

"I would propose some kind of association, a federation to which we all contribute and which we all employ to keep peace and security and discuss issues as they arise."

Yuri's gaze lingered too long on her beautiful face because as she stopped speaking, her eyes moved and trapped his. He left his stare where it was, let it grow insolent. He wanted to crush her in his arms and make her remember him. He wanted to run away and lick his wounds like a kicked cur.

"Much as we began the Federation of Earth," Maynard observed.

Nice move, Cereza. You really have done your homework now. The weird thing was, while part of him wanted to pull her down, hurt her as she had so carelessly hurt him, the other part was actually proud of her. It could work. It really could. Except for one inconvenient fact.

He stirred, electing to point out the fly in the ointment if no one around the table would. "May I ask the senator a question?"

All eyes turned on him, even Andra standing so uncharacteristically silent at his side as she watched and listened to those around the table.

"Of course," said Cereza at once.

He eased his shoulder off the wall. "How much of this have you actually sold to the government of Gardenia?"

Her eyes didn't waver. She'd been waiting for someone to ask the question, but the faintest twitch of her lip told him she didn't quite like it.

"None of it," she said.

As the stunned silence fell into gasps, Yuri smiled bitterly. Like herself, her proposals had no substance. It tore him apart. Part of him didn't even believe it.

But she hadn't given up. Leaning forward, she said urgently, "My friends, we are at a major crossroads here! The Earth government is struggling with new ideas, with rebellion and new leadership. My own is not so different. I lead a growing party of opposition in Gardenia. Your de facto government today is formed from the rebels of yesterday. Peace, stability and elections will regularize that. But as you know that you speak for the will of the vast majority of your people, so do I speak for mine. My party is even now marching on the senate with demands, including a petition of peaceful coexistence with Earth on the terms we've already discussed. And if that doesn't produce results, my 'rebels' will unite with yours, as Gardenian agents have already united with you to bring about truth and right."

The room listened. Yuri had a feeling the whole galaxy listened. But she spoke to him, directly into his eyes, and he couldn't prevent the soaring of his heart. She spoke to convince him. Or perhaps to convince all skeptics.

"Would you win?" Major Maynard asked quietly.

And she smiled, at last detaching her gaze from Yuri's. "Oh, yes. You see I have one very important advantage. I have the support of the armed forces."

Almost for the first time, Yuri glanced at Azale on her left hand side. The commander inclined his head in acknowledgement. Not just a stooge, Yuri realized. Not just there to humor and protect her. She'd seen his importance at once and convinced him to ally with her. Nice.

She said, "Along with just about all of my people, I was in complete ignorance of Earth at the start of this mission. I was placed in charge of our necessary expansion into a planet that was believed to be backward and inferior, whose people would move quite happily to the sort of place we higher beings disdained. And if they didn't want to, their death was considered an acceptable price to pay for our comfort. We lived in an isolated bubble of our own making.

"Captain Nikitin changed that for me."

Fuck, don't bring me into it! But at least she wasn't looking at him.

"He taught me about Earth, the real Earth and its actual people with all their faults and abuses as well as their bravery and independence, and led me to think of the situation from a new perspective. Yours. And when I brought my knowledge back to the troops, I knew we could make this work."

Now her gaze was back on him, open, vulnerable, almost desperate for his understanding. "That's why I left your ship."

He couldn't doubt her. She'd had a mission, and now she was crediting him with showing her the right thing for both their peoples. But *she'd* found the way, his amazing lover. He smiled at her as his throat constricted. "I know."

He couldn't fight it. He didn't want to. He dragged his eyes free and regarded Maynard. "My recommendation, for what it's worth, is to accept the senator's proposals."

"Seconded," said someone else at the table. Yuri didn't care who. He could see in Maynard's brief, grateful glance that the crisis was passed, at least for now.

"Agreed," came another voice.

"Sign," said one of the watchers farther along the wall and before long the room was in uproar, everyone desperate to shake the hands of their new, alien allies. Yuri felt battered, by pride in her, by relief that they'd found a way to move forward, to save Earth, gladness that his comrades had shown sense and maturity.

It was a happy ending -- or at least a bloody hopeful one -- so why did everything inside him ache as he watched her acclaimed and feted?

Everyone from the table had risen, mingling with the watchers who'd lined the walls -- largely officers and journalists, administrators and politicians. She moved through them, smiling, courteous, gracious. Splendid. No sign now of the passionate, vulnerable creature who'd melted in his arms so sensuously and writhed under him so wildly as he'd brought her to orgasm over and over.

Yuri didn't move. Even Farco went forward to renew acquaintance, although Andra lurked at the door, ready to leave. She was right. But Cereza was making her way through the throng, and sooner or later she'd get to him.

The ache constricted and sharpened into pain. He at least would say goodbye.

Is that what hurt? That she hadn't trusted him enough to tell her what she meant to do? That she'd put a damned good fuck second to her duty? They'd hardly known each other. He was being ridiculous, childish. But as she finally stepped into the gap in front of him and the moment was upon him, he realized what truly pained him. Not that she'd put whatever they had second -- in the circumstances that was only right and proper. It was that she hadn't acknowledged it had even existed. What had meant so much to him, meant little or nothing to her. And he had to get out of here before it tore him apart.

She didn't even offer her hand as she did to everyone else. She held it tightly in the other as if afraid he'd snatch it and show the watching world what they'd done together. Her lip quivered slightly as she smiled at him, straight into his eyes like a blow to the stomach. She had never looked so beautiful, her ruby eyes sparkling with

euphoria, her face full of vitality, hope and determination and just that hint of neediness that had so fooled him.

"Yuri," she said, a shade breathlessly.

"Senator." He inclined his head. "Glad it's all worked out."

Her eyes searched his. "Thank you for showing me."

"Thank you for learning." He'd been playing a pirate for months. It really was easy. He winked. "Go kick your government. So long, senator."

A frown puckered her smooth brow as he turned away. "Yuri? Where are you going?"

Apart from those following her every move so avidly, several more people turned their heads to listen. She wasn't shouting, but her voice had definitely been raised. It sounded almost panicked, a fact that made him childishly, reprehensibly glad. Part of him wanted to hurt her even while shame washed over him.

He glanced back and shrugged with deliberate carelessness. "Don't know. But I've got a ship and a crew. I've got the whole galaxy."

He grinned, and shouldered forward to the door. Farco, he left to follow in his own time, but Andra stood leaning against the door, glaring at him.

"You can't mean to leave now?" she hissed. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Er -- leaving." He reached behind her for the door button.

"Captain, listen," she said with odd desperation.

But Yuri couldn't take any more. He needed to be away from here, away from Cereza to lick his wounds and his hurt pride and lash himself with his own stupidity until he got so bored with it all that he'd pull himself together.

"Out," he said, and pulled her aside by the arm, opened the door and yanked her into the empty outer hall. There were no soldiers here; it was like a no-man's-land between the soldiers inside the conference room and those outside the building.

He meant to release her as soon as the door swished closed behind him, but Andra never gave him the chance, wrenching her own arm free with fury.

"What is the matter with you?" she raged. "Are you blind? You can't just leave her like that!"

Yuri curled his lip. "Watch me."

But again she seized his arm, shaking it like a terrier with a rat. "Will you fucking listen?" Interesting, he thought, distracting himself from what really mattered. She swore in English, like him. Even more interesting, he could almost swear there were tears in her eyes.

Frowning, he hesitated long enough to let her say more.

"Go back in there. Please."

Andra never said please. Yuri stared at her. The lump he despised began to rise up his throat once more. "I can't," he got out.

"Just because she left you once?"

Yuri cast his gaze at the ceiling. "Because she left in silence."

"Oh fuck, is that all it is? Shit and shit and shit. Captain, she didn't leave in silence. I chose not to pass it on because I could see how you felt about her. I encouraged her to go and she asked me to tell you... that she'd find you."

Yuri dragged his gaze back to her face, afraid to misunderstand, afraid to hope. "She said that?"

"She said it, and she did it. And you're behaving like an arse. And it's all my fault."

Yuri dragged his hand through his hair. "Yes. Yes it is." He caught his breath on a laugh, grabbed her and kissed her full on the mouth, hard and brief. "I forgive you." Thrusting her aside, he stabbed the door button, more impatient to get back in than he'd ever been to leave. The door slid open and he stepped straight into Cereza.

She staggered, forcing him to catch her in both arms to keep her from falling. "Yuri? Yuri, you can't go, please don't go. I need to talk to you."

Her eyes were soft and pleading. Somewhere, he couldn't quite believe she was looking at him. "I was coming back to find you," he said. Andra pushed past them,

shoving them toward the empty green room. She brushed Cereza's clinging hand and closed the door, locking out the noise and the people.

They were alone.

Cereza clutched his elbows, slid her hands up to his shoulders. "Were you?"

"I need to talk to *you*," he said ruefully.

She searched his face, a frown between her brows that slowly relaxed and vanished. She smiled, the smile that went straight through his heart to his cock. "I need to kiss you," she said, and did.

With her lips on his, her heady scent invading his whole body, sense disintegrated. In an instant he had her up against the wall, grinding his hardness into her soft, pliant body, plundering her mouth like a drowning man seeking air. She opened wide to him, giving him her tongue, grazing his with her teeth. She seized his hand, guiding it to her breast, but it wasn't enough to feel its plumpness through her dress, even though her pebbled nipple poked through the fabric to meet his caressing thumb. He slid his hand inside the gown, finding warm, soft skin and the puckered hardness of her areola around the pleading nipple. He longed to taste it, to have her naked all to himself. He wanted to push himself into her right now, take her and pleasure her right here...

He groaned. "How long have we got?"

"How long do you need?" she gasped.

He laughed breathlessly and seized her mouth once more. Somehow, his hands were under her bundled skirts, caressing her naked thighs and hips. "Days. Seconds. Anything."

"Take what you like," she said shakily, reaching for the fastening of his pants. "The door's locked and Andra's got the key."

"How do you know?"

She had his cock in her tight, teasing hand and it felt so good he thought he'd explode on the spot. "I gave her it."

His breath of laughter turned into a groan of anguished pleasure as she wriggled and pushed him blatantly inside her. "God, I love you," he whispered.

Her eyes glistened as they gazed into his. "I've dreamed of you saying those words to me."

"While doing this to you?" He began to move inside her, circling, thrusting and she met him halfway.

"Oh yes," she gasped, and then they let their bodies speak. Later, there would be all the time in the world to talk.

* * *

Every news screen on Earth, and every broadcasting channel in Gardenian space, carried colorful pictures of the amazing summit held between representatives of Earth and Gardenia. The President shaking hands with the senator in front of the still, tense crowd lined with armed soldiers; the delegates around the table talking. The senator posed with the one-time Gardenian agents, including Rose Winter and the android Louis. Commander Azale and the Earth rebel soldiers Jon Maynard, Linnet Lewis and Yuri Nikitin standing in a crowd with raised glasses in a toast to peace. Whether serious or relaxed, there was no shortage of pictures.

But only one Earth news screen, Rose Winter's former employer, the iGazette, carried a rather unusual, still picture of three large wolves against the fading red and gold of the sky at sunset. The animals were just about to break into a run, their powerful backs rippling with bunched muscle. But on the neck of each lay a Gardenian hand -- Rose Winter, the android Louis, and Senator Cereza herself.

The iGazette thought it symbolic.

Marie Treanor

Marie Treanor was born and brought up in Scotland, but for some years moved around the UK working and studying. Now she is back home and happily married with three young children. Having grown bored with city life, she lives these days in a picturesque village by the sea where she is lucky enough to enjoy herself avoiding housework and writing stories of romance and fantasy.

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