

 SPACEPORT 



Spaceport: Courtesan Cat Marsters

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Spaceport: Courtesan Cat Marsters

I am Sayana, high-caste Otha, and I was born to fuck.

Sayana can have any man she wants -- and he'll pay for the privilege. As a Nil Rajan courtesan of great renown, she's in the rare position of choosing which clients she'll allow to share her bed.

Only two men have ever been invited for free. One is her friend and assistant, a quiet, watchful Antillan who's deadly with a weapon and highly skilled in bed. His name is Janus Valdec, and he's the one person Sayana truly trusts. The other is Captain Rider, a pirate with eyes like space trash who touched more than just her body in a chance encounter three years ago.

Rider figured out her most closely-held secret, and she's been on the run from him ever since. When an attack on her ship leaves Sayana vulnerable, she's forced to choose which of these two men she can trust -- not just with her heart, but with her life.

Chapter One

Some people's fantasies are really weird.

For instance, if you'd told me a week ago that a pair of heterosexual males would be paying me to pretend to be an IAC Huntership captain so that they could fuck me in tandem, I'd have... well, actually I wouldn't have laughed, because I've done weirder things.

The man kneeling under the com desk -- who had asked to be called Ensign -- was lapping enthusiastically at my pussy, while I leaned forward over the desk, legs parted to give his friend -- Lieutenant -- a better view. Lieutenant was in the Commander's chair -- a flagrant breach of protocol, but since the three of us were half dressed and fucking like bunnies, I don't suppose it mattered.

Lieutenant had his shirt open and was fondling himself through his pants as I watched him on the little screen on my desk. His cock was hugely swollen, but I hadn't given him leave to unclothe himself yet.

"Prime the thrusters," I purred, gripping the console as Ensign's tongue circled my throbbing clit. "We need to probe inside the Nil Raja nebula."

"Yes, ma'am," Lieutenant said, his voice a little strained.

"What do you suggest we use, Lieutenant?"

He gave a little squeak. There was sweat beading on his upper lip.

"It's a tight nebula," I said. "But we'll need to be thorough."

"Yes, ma'am," he moaned.

I straightened up, tugging down the tunic I still wore, and swayed over to the nav console. Valdec and I had done a decent job of mocking up the bridge of an IAC ship, if I said so myself. I'd hired a suite in one of the more freespirted hotels and

Valdec had paid one of the scrap merchants on Spaceport Adana to find some disused consoles and panels to decorate the place with. None of them worked, aside from the viewscreens I'd rigged to give us all a view of what was going on. In my experience, men are visual creatures. Whatever their species.

At the nav console, I leaned over so that both men could see my pussy. Hairless, and marked with the patterns of my Otha caste, simply the sight of it could cost a pretty penny.

Ensign and Lieutenant were clearly both much better off than their alter-egos.

"Thrusters to full," I said, and glanced back to see both of them gripping themselves through their clothes. IAC uniforms consisted of matching pants and tunic over a tailored shirt, although I'd foregone the shirt. And the pants, after about thirty seconds. I wore my high, glossy black boots and tunic, which I'd slowly untabbed so that my breasts were mostly visible.

Like I said, visual creatures.

Turning, I cupped my breasts and stretched so that my tunic rode up above my pussy. "I think enviro is malfunctioning," I said. "It's so hot in here." I unfastened the last tab on my tunic. "Permission granted to... make yourselves more comfortable."

They were both undressed in seconds. Ensign hit his head on the underside of the com console, but he didn't seem to mind. Truth told, I don't think he even noticed.

"Lieutenant," I said, eyeing his honed muscles and throbbing cock, "I think you need to take over at the nav. I prefer the com right now."

So saying, I sauntered back to the com, with its waiting Ensign, who once again willingly latched onto my pussy. I sighed happily and let my tunic fall to the floor, totally naked and totally happy about it. As Ensign's tongue pleased me, Lieutenant palmed his cock, and I shook my head at him.

"I haven't given you permission to engage the probe yet," I said, and crooked my finger. "Why don't you come here and share your data with me?"

Valdec and I had spent hours coming up with these terrible euphemisms. By the end of it, I'd had tears of laughter running down my face, and Valdec had almost cracked a smile. For him, that's an expression of hilarity.

Lieutenant rushed over, and I gestured to him to pull up the chair I'd pushed away. Sliding back into it, Ensign's face still clamped to my pussy, I reached for Lieutenant's cock and palmed it. He let out a happy sigh.

I've seen many, many cocks, and made something of a study of them. From Lieutenant's, I could tell that he was mostly human, with a touch of Zillion and possibly an Antillan in his ancestry. Not many Nil Raja see Antillan cocks, and certainly very few Otha. The Antillar are far too reserved and proud to pay for sex.

I gave Lieutenant's cock a thoughtful lick. His pre-come had the unexpected flowery taste of a Yaviran. Stocky legs, a strong chest, and large hands -- yes, of course he was Yaviran. Theirs was a garden world, and they liked earthy, outdoorsy sex.

I gripped his buttocks and started tonguing him vigorously. Lieutenant groaned and slipped his hand into my hair, fingers clenching. Ensign stepped up his efforts, sliding his fingers inside me and pumping as he sucked on my clit. I wrapped my thighs about his head and thrust my hips at him, writhing in pleasure. I love being licked, and I don't get it nearly often enough.

A small orgasm was building in me, my first of the session, and I tugged my head away from Lieutenant's cock to let it ripple through my body. Eyes closed, I sighed, and when I looked at my two men, they were watching me hungrily.

"Ensign," I said, my voice even huskier than usual, "you have performed very well."

He looked pleased. Lieutenant looked disappointed.

"I think it's time to engage thrusters," I said, and stood up to lean over the com again. Parting my legs, I invited him in.

Ensign had a strong, sturdy cock and faint Kalha markings on his palms. He wasn't full Nil Raja by any means, but the ancestry was there. I tilted my hips to allow

him to penetrate fully, then squeezed my internal muscles around his cock. He let out a low moan, grabbed my breasts, and started pumping.

I instructed the viewscreens to display what he was doing to my pussy, then invited Lieutenant around in front of me to slide his cock back inside my mouth. We fucked that way for a while, both of them groaning in pleasure, and then I told them to swap places while I got down on my knees. Lieutenant fed his hungry Yaviran cock into me, and I sucked on Ensign's until another orgasm rippled through me. It was quickly followed by an explosion from Lieutenant, which I ordered him to lick out of me as I sat in the Captain's chair.

They fucked me in my chair, on the floor, against the walls, and draped over the nav console. The nameless Lieutenant and his friend fed their cocks into every orifice I had, and I loved it.

I am Sayana, high-caste Otha, and I was born to fuck.

Chapter Two

A little sore by the time my two officers had departed, I enjoyed the luxury of a hot shower with real running water, then padded out to the bedroom of the suite for a nap. Valdec was there, having monitored my clients from entrance to exit, sitting in a chair tabbing through some data.

"There's a crew cleaning up in there," he said, nodding toward the main room where we'd set up the Huntership bridge. "Do you want to keep the consoles? They might come in handy for other role plays."

"Bulky to transport," I said. "I guess we could store them here."

"I'll get on it," he said, not looking up. I slid onto the bed and stretched out, enjoying the pull in my muscles. It had been quite a session, with two strong virile men getting their money's worth from me, and my body was exhausted. But my mind, and my libido, were both still running on full power.

I stretched over to the cabinet by the bed. It was empty. "You could have unpacked my toys," I grumbled, and that made Valdec glance up. His dark eyes took in my naked body, my flushed cheeks, my puckered nipples.

"You're still not done yet?"

"No." I parted my legs, inviting him to look at my wet, puffy labia. "Not quite."

He stood up. "You're like a child who doesn't know she's exhausted," he said, stripping off his jacket. "Next thing, you'll be throwing a tantrum."

"I want my toys," I said with mock petulance, and the faint glint of humor that passed for a smile came into Valdec's eyes.

He stripped out of the rest of his clothes quickly and efficiently. Valdec did everything quickly and efficiently. It was one of the reasons I'd hired him. His body

shimmered golden in the suite's artful lighting, glints of feathers gleaming in his dark hair. The Antillar seemed to share more of their ancestry with birds than with mammals -- but in Valdec's case, his gene pool held powerful, deadly birds of prey.

He sat down next to me on the bed, and pulled me toward him, sliding his hands over my quivering body.

"Those animals humans keep dirtside," he said, "the large ones they ride. Elegant, with slender legs, but very strong."

"Horses?" I said, confused.

"Yes. You're like one of those."

I pouted. "I prefer to be compared to a Kitali."

"I've never seen a Kitali rode hard and put up wet," he said, and if I didn't know Valdec better I'd think he was making a joke. But Janus Valdec didn't joke. He organized with ruthless efficiency, he soothed my jittery, exhausted body with the skill of an Otha, and he fought like a Durgha. But he didn't make jokes.

He ran his hands through my damp hair and kissed the curve of my neck. Ensign and Lieutenant had made an enjoyable show of foreplay when we were all still partly dressed, but as soon as they were allowed to put their cocks inside me they forgot I was anything more than a body to be fucked. Any orgasms they gave me after that were entirely accidental.

Valdec found the nerve in my neck that always drove me wild and made love to it with his lips and tongue. His lightly webbed fingers stroked down my arms, soothing my quivering muscles. Gently, he laid me back on the bed, the soft downy feathers of his chest tickling my breasts. My nipples, hugely sensitive at most times, perked up, hoping for more attention.

Strong, sure hands caressed my sides, my hips, my thighs. He massaged the muscles that had been stretched and abused by my two clients. His fingers trailed up my inner thigh, burrowing into the wet folds of my pussy.

I sighed happily. I was on edge, and Valdec knew how to take me over. We weren't regular lovers, but whenever I needed him, he was there. "The very best of servants," he'd once said to me, straight-faced. "I always know exactly what you need."

His other hand found my breast, stroking flesh that had been bitten and suckled and kneaded. As his fingers explored the needy folds of my pussy, his mouth trailed down my chest, moving across to kiss the sensitive skin of my inner arm. Valdec was nothing if not thorough.

I felt the first orgasm building, a delicious winding up of tension inside my body, until I was almost afraid to move in case I broke it before it had wound up to the top. Valdec's finger was circling my clit with feather light motions, his mouth on the inside of my elbow and his other hand caressing my breast, and I came, release flooding through me.

One small orgasm, but he knew that wasn't enough. Continuing to stroke me as if nothing had happened, he began to lick and gently suck on my nipple. His hand made circles on my stomach, and then he slid it underneath to my back, holding my body against his as he rolled to his side. This way, as he licked and sucked me, he could stroke my back, soothe muscles that were aching from being contorted into sustained positions, flesh that was sore from the bruises of a hard Yaviran fucking.

Don't get me wrong, I love a good, hard fuck. But it takes its toll on your body.

Valdec's hands were working miracles on my back and the flesh of my inner thighs as he continued to give me what I needed. "Do you want me inside you?" he whispered, and I paused, wondering if I could take any more. But then his fingers found that sweet spot inside me, and I shivered and nodded.

"Yes. But will you lick me afterwards? Please?"

If I sounded needy he didn't mention it. He just nodded and slid up my body, draping one of my legs over his hip and rubbing his cock against my labia. I shifted so the hot, bulbous head of it pressed on my clit, and when he tried to move to push inside me, I stopped him. "No, wait. Just... a little more..."

Sometimes my own ability to orgasm surprised me. It could come out of nowhere, with very little stimulation. This was such a time. When Valdec finally sheathed himself inside me, I was still pulsing with the aftereffects.

He rocked deep inside me, never pushing too hard. I had no idea if this was the way he preferred to make love, or he did it all for my benefit. The few times I'd asked, he'd shushed me and gone on to do something that took away my capacity for rational thought.

Once, while fully dressed and not exchanging bodily fluids, I asked Valdec if there was anything I could do for him. He declined. "It would be my pleasure," I said. "For all the things you've done for me --"

"I don't need a favor," he said, a shade coldly, and turned away. I had been firmly put in my place.

The Antillar were too proud to pay for sex, and since they, like most off-worlders, couldn't tell the difference between Nil Raja castes, they tended to avoid us totally in intimate situations. Apparently this pride extended to sex as a favor, even though that hadn't been why I'd offered. I'd offered because I liked and respected Valdec. But I'd offended his pride, and I didn't want to make the same mistake twice.

I wondered, as he moved inside me, how it was that he could offer his own body to appease mine. I'd never been able to work it out. And I didn't want to ask for fear of causing further offence that might dry up my source of sexual comfort.

He was moving a little faster now, his breath uneven, and I knew he was about to come. I squeezed him encouragingly, both with my internal muscles and my hands on his shoulders, but he stilled. "Come inside me," I whispered, then I wondered if he didn't want to lick that out of me. "I can go and clean up --"

Valdec shook his head. "I want to... come somewhere else," he said, avoiding my eyes. The downy feathers at the base of his cock tickled my clit and I shivered deliciously.

"Where? Anywhere you want," I said, and he hesitated for a moment before pulling out of me.

"This is supposed to be for you," he began, and I shook my head.

"No. I want you to enjoy it too. I'd never ask you to do something you didn't like."

He hesitated again, then nodded and rolled me to my back, straddling my chest and laying his golden cock, sticky with my own juices, against my nipple. I smiled, moving my hands to massage him with my breasts, but he shook his head and rubbed himself with his own hands, eyes closed, head back as he gasped silently and squirted his cool come all over my breasts.

When he looked down at me, his eyes had turned to a rich gold. He looked like a statue.

A statue who massaged his own come into my breasts, the cool fluid quickly heating up, before he pulled me into his arms and licked it all off me. His hands stroked my back, easing the muscles there, and I thought I might come again before he left my breasts and began kissing his way down my stomach.

Janus Valdec had a very talented mouth and he put it to good use, thrusting inside me with his fingers as he licked and sucked on my clit. Still stroking my thighs, he made me come again, hard, the big explosive orgasm I really needed, and then continued to lick me until I came once more, a smaller, gentler climax this time.

I slid my fingers into his hair, stroked the golden feathers nestling there, and lifted his head from my pussy. "Thank you," I said.

"No, thank you." He knelt up. His cock was still a little hard, and I reached for it, but he said, "No, my lady. You need to sleep."

I watched him leave the bed and sighed. "What would I do without you, Janus?"

He kissed my forehead, then moved away, and as I drifted into sleep I reflected that for all the glories of his body and all the intimacies we'd shared, he'd never actually kissed me on the mouth.

* * *

When I woke there was a message waiting for me from my brother. Jal and I have a tenuous relationship, due in no small part that we didn't see each other for twenty years. But that's another story.

"Kali and I will be at Haze if you want to meet us," he said, the picture fuzzy and green. Apparently he did it on purpose. I still didn't completely understand Jal.

Washing and dressing, I made myself presentable for being seen in public. Part of the reason I am expensive is because I look expensive. Being seen in public looking like anything less than a princess would be terrible for business.

Valdec was fiddling with one of the IAC consoles as I left the suite. "Would you like to come?" I asked, as I always did.

As always, he refused. "I'll be here if you need me," he added, indicating his com-link, and I nodded and left.

The rooms I'd rented were in one of the more salubrious parts of Spaceport Adana, but that's misleading in itself. There are no truly salubrious areas of 'Port Adana. The whole place is a stew, a writhing mass of sex and greed and filth and desperation. Part of me, the part that had always known I'd become Otha, loved it. And part of me, the part that had been trained by Madam Nasiira, was repulsed.

I swept my silks past the worst of the filth and lies and made my way to Haze, the axis upon which Adana swiveled.

The sound of Kitali caterwauling assailed my ears before I even walked in. I love Kitalii, but no one could love their singing. K'Mere, Haze's resident feline, sat on the bar with one paw in his sake, wailing away happily, and no one had the courage -- or the heart -- to tell him to button it. I kind of liked that about the place.

A dark-haired man and a very pretty girl stood against the bar, leaning into each other and smiling. He was wearing a flightsuit rolled down and a t-shirt with some obscure, faded slogan on it. She was fair, with the yellow hair humans call blonde, wearing a sleeveless dress that displayed the blue Nil Raja marks on her bare arms and legs. He said something to her and she just convulsed, crying with laughter, holding onto him for support. He gazed down at her, grinning widely, love shining in his eyes.

"Hello, brother," I said, trying not to be consumed with a jealousy I had no right to feel. Othas didn't deserve love, didn't need it. Why shackle myself to one man when the cream of the universe was lining up to pay me for something I loved?

Jal turned, grinning. "Sayana. You look..." His eyes traveled over my gown, my jewels, my careful coiffure. "Expensive."

"That's the idea," Kali said, wiping her eyes. "If she looked like me, people would pay... well, what they paid me."

"Nonsense," I said, taking her hand. "You look radiant, Kali. Any man would pay a fortune in jewels for a night with you."

"Your man did," Jal said, and Kali elbowed him. Valdec had indeed slept with both Kali and Jal, and I still hadn't worked out how I felt about that. On the one hand, it was the only time I knew Valdec had paid for sex. I'd once instructed him that if he saw anyone with heritage marks like mine, to do anything he could to find out more. He'd reported back that my brother appeared to be keeping a Nil Rajan whore -- Kali in disguise -- and I'd thrown money at him to spend the night with them.

On the other hand, there was something slightly weird about him having slept with both me and my brother.

On a third, hypothetical hand (well, hypothetical for anyone but a four-armed Kljkrkrik), if he hadn't recognized Jal's heritage marks, I'd never have met my brother.

"You didn't see me back when I was turning tricks on the corner of Jianhuo and Niubi," Kali said to me now. "I was gruesome."

"I can't imagine that you were," I said, although I'd seen the girls parading up and down Blow Job Alley. Gruesome was often the word.

Catching the eye of the bartender, I bestowed upon him a gracious smile and asked my brother and his girlfriend if they would like new drinks.

"One beer, one Nubiran Firefly," Kali said, and I glanced at the bartender in surprise.

"Make that two. They know how to make Nubiran Fireflies?" I said to Kali. I'd never met anyone outside Nubira who could mix the perfect blend of spicy and sweet without adding so much alcohol it would slay a Fedoran.

Well. One person. But I preferred not to think about him.

"They do now," Jal said. "She does that thing you do when you want something."

"It's called smiling," Kali told him. "You might try it some time."

Secretly, I was pleased he was comparing me to Kali. She'd been raised from birth to be a gracious lady -- even if she'd ended up as a bounty hunter's co-pilot, following several months on Blow Job Alley -- which gave her about ten years' head start on me.

We chatted about inconsequential things, and after a while Jal said casually, as if commenting on the décor, "There's a man over there who can't take his eyes off you."

"Well, if there wasn't, I'd have failed in my cause," I said.

"Dark hair, old-fashioned flying jacket, faintly disreputable look?" Kali said, without changing the tone of her voice or the direction of her head. Kali had been Daleri Special Forces during her short but apparently full life. There wasn't much she missed. "He's been watching her since she came in."

"Does he look rich?" I asked.

Kali snorted.

"Does he look like trouble?"

They both considered. "He could be," Jal said, "but Talano wouldn't let him get that far."

I turned and gave one of my most charming smiles to Sabian Talano, the bouncer. He was a very large man, and it's always nice to have very large men on your side.

He ignored me.

"Besides, I can't imagine your faithful hound is very far behind," Kali added.

"Hound?"

"She means Valdec," Jal said. "Earth slang."

I sorted through my vocabulary of human words. "Valdec is not a hound," I said. "He's an extremely efficient personal servant."

"He's a devoted puppy," Kali said. She turned to wipe a smudge off the bar, and added casually, "Your friend's still watching you."

I decided to take a peep. Chances were he was nothing more than a greasy space cowboy, ogling my silks and jewels. Maybe wanting to steal them. Maybe looking at my Otha marks and fancying his chances with a Nil Rajan whore.

Turning as if to place my glass on the bar, I glanced around --

-- and saw a broken nose, a battered jacket made from some kind of dead animal, orange stripes and tiny painted bones, a half-full glass of Firefly, eyes the color of space trash, and half a smile --

-- and turned back, my heart beating like a drum.

Hands smoothing down my back and hot laughter in my ear --

"I told you," Kali laughed. "Disreputable."

"Extremely." I gave a smile that felt wholly unconvincing and clutched my glass.

"Sayana?" Jal said. "Are you all right?"

Salty skin and Firefly breath, warm mouth and the shock of pleasure it brought --

The Firefly burned down my throat in one gulp. "I need to go," I said abruptly. "Away. I need to go away and get... away. To... be... away."

"You taste like strawberries," and the heat of him inside me --

I slammed my glass down on the bar. "Com me," I said to Jal, taking my skirts in a hand that felt suddenly sweaty. "We should have dinner. Anywhere nice on 'port? My ship, then. I have a suite. I'll com you," I babbled. "Oh, and Jal," I added as an afterthought. "Stay away from that man," and I tripped on my way out of the bar, stumbling into a great wall of a man.

No. I made to run, but the hands clamping around me weren't Hadley Rider's, they were Sabian Talano's.

"Are you all right?" he rumbled, and I nodded rapidly, relieved. Trying desperately to regain my composure, I flashed a smile and said, "These silly skirts. One day I'll trip and break my neck."

He frowned at that, but let me go, and I walked as fast as I could out of the bar. Talano caught me again, and I turned, saying, "Really, I'm fine --" but it wasn't him.

It was Rider, eyes narrowed, lips quirked in that half smile, his expression veering between contempt and amusement. As it usually seemed to when he looked at me.

Eyes like space trash, sharp metal and rust, cold and hot at the same time, strong and tarnished, dirty but bright.

"Excuse me," I said, and tried to tug my arm out of his grip. He didn't let go. "Mr. Rider, I really would be very grateful if you'd --"

"Captain Rider," he said. "At least you half remember me."

"Of course I do," I hissed under my breath. "Now would you please let go of my arm and stop this scene, because people are watching."

"People always watch you, darling," he said, eyes never leaving my face.

The space between heartbeats, slick and hot and filled with gasping pleasure, drowning in ecstasy --

"Yes, but not because some idiotic space pirate won't let go of my *chiu* arm!"

That surprised him enough to let go. I suppose I don't swear very often. It's not ladylike.

"Swear you won't run away," he said, "or I'll make an even bigger scene."

"*Posol k cherty*," I said under my breath, looking around for an escape route. Kali stood not far away, watching us. She raised her eyebrows, and I shook my head. I didn't like the bastard, but I didn't want him dead.

Shuddering, wrapped in heat and sodden with lust, "I could never get enough of this --"

Probably.

Rider saw the direction of my expression, and gave Kali a little wave. "Akalis Dalerian," he said admiringly. "You really do have friends in high places."

"I'd have had more if not for you," I said, and started walking.

"What's that supposed to mean? You can't tell me I sullied your reputation." Rider strolled after me as if we were out for an evening promenade.

I gave him a poisonous look. "Because of you, I missed my appointment with Pretorik Ipari," I said. "The Premier. Of the IAC."

"I know who he was, darling." His expression said he wasn't very impressed.

"Well, I thought you might have been living in a hole or something," I said. "You certainly act like it."

"And I thought you might have been a lady," he replied. "You certainly act like it."

I stopped, squeezed my eyes shut, and tried to find the tranquility that had fled the moment I saw Captain Hadley Rider again.

You kissed my lips and called me your darling.

You called me Princess.

"Captain Rider," I said, and gave him one of my politest smiles. "It's been wonderful to see you again. It's certainly been too long." *If I never see you again, it'll be too soon.* "I'm sorry to cut our time so short, but I'm really terribly busy."

He faltered, as men tend to do when I decide to blast them.

"Perhaps you'll contact Valdec and make arrangements," I said. "Be well," and I left, walking as fast as I could without looking like I was trying to run away. Rider, Gods bless him for the first time, didn't follow.

Chapter Three

"How ready are we to leave?" I said as soon as I entered the suite.

Valdec looked up from his datapad, faintly surprised. "When do you want to go?"

"Now. Right now."

He stood up, all surprise gone. "Trouble?"

"No," I said, because Valdec didn't know about Rider and I didn't want him to. The fewer people who knew about my... background... the better. "I've just had enough of filthy Adana. Let's go somewhere nicer. Somewhere I can get decent clients."

Valdec had the good sense to say nothing. He wisely opted to take charge of transporting my things to the ship, organizing clearance for departure, and all the things I was too shaken to remember. I threw things into my cases, precious delicate things that didn't need to be thrown. I just wanted to get away from Hadley Rider.

We'd both been drunk. He couldn't have really figured it out. He had no records. He couldn't be allowed a closer look.

I didn't feel safe until I was in my seat on the bridge of my ship, *Reinette*, and I heard the familiar thunk of the docking clamps releasing. Still unsettled, I retired to my quarters as Valdec piloted us away from Adana, and opened a com-link to Jal.

"Sayana? Where did you go? Are you all right?"

I nodded. If the terrible picture quality was any guide, he appeared to be on board his own ship, although my computer told me he hadn't left the Adana docks. "I'm fine. I just decided I couldn't stand Adana any longer. How Kali lived there so long I'll never understand."

"Desperation," came Kali's voice. Her face appeared over her lover's shoulder and she smiled at me. "Who was that man?"

"Old friend," I said. "Kali... I need to speak with Jal. Privately." She frowned a little, and I added, "Please."

Reluctantly, she nodded and left, and I waited until I'd heard the door cycle shut behind her before I said, "I need total security on this, Jal. Is there anyone else on board the *Nevermore*?"

He shook his head, looking unsettled. "Just the Kats, and you know they won't talk to anyone."

I hesitated. Jal's ship was home to two Kitalii, and while I knew they were immensely fond of him -- they had to be to stay on board his rustbucket -- I also knew that Kats would do nearly anything for treasure. And I didn't expect that damned space pirate Rider had any lack of access to treasure.

The screen flickered a few times, then the picture cleared to show me Jal's face in much better definition. "I've locked out all channels but this one. Sayana, what is this? Why did you leave? And why did you tell me to stay away from that guy?"

"His name is Hadley Rider. He's a pirate."

"I've heard of him," Jal said, because he was almost as disreputable as Rider. "I don't see him as a threat."

"He knows Nil Raja, Jal. He's very adept at reading marks."

Jal went very still. "He's not Rajan."

"No. Not even a bit. But he recognized..." I paused, still not trusting Jal's security. "He recognized my caste marks. Knew Durgha from Otha."

Jal relaxed a little. "Well, there are some off-worlders who are beginning to understand --"

"He knew what the combination meant. Even drunk as a Kitalii he knew what it meant."

"You got Hadley Rider drunk?"

"Don't," I said, because it wasn't something I liked to think about a lot. "He called me Princess."

"It was probably an endearment."

"But what if it wasn't? Do you really want to take the chance?"

Jal sighed. "No."

I chewed my lip, something I almost never do. "Jal, I think he recognized my heritage mark."

Jal swore, colorfully, in many languages.

"That's what I said."

He rolled his eyes. "Like you swear."

"Only when Rider is involved." I sighed. "It'll probably come to nothing. I just thought I'd -- *blyat!*"

The whole ship juddered.

"What was that?" Jal said, as Valdec spoke over the intercom.

"We're okay, just a flux in the power."

I frowned. Jal frowned. "I'll call you back," I said, and ended the transmission. To Valdec I said, "What do you mean a -- *blyat!*" The ship juddered again. I got to my feet, only to be knocked off them by a violent shudder. "Janus! What the hell is happening?"

Silence for a terrible second, then he said, "Something's sucking our power. I'm not registering anything. Either someone's got a cloaking device or -- well, I don't know."

"I'm coming up," I said, and the lights flickered as I reached the door. It jammed half open.

Pretty much everything on the ship used power. There was nothing manual at all. Plus, like many modern ships, it was full of blast doors and bulkheads. I had to pry three doors open to get to the bridge, and when I did I found Valdec looking -- well, looking about ninety percent composed, which for him is terribly frazzled.

"What is going on?" I said as the ship bucked and faltered.

"Something's draining the engines. I can't even identify it."

I lurched into the co-pilot's seat and swung the console toward me. Valdec nearly always flies the ship, but that doesn't mean I don't know how. There are plenty of things I don't often do, but nonetheless know. Play *ropki*. Drink beer. Sing all the verses of "Whoops! Where's The Maid Gone?"

I altered a few settings, changed some codes, and a ship shimmered into view on the screen. "Raven class," I said. "ID is obscured."

"How did you do that?" Valdec said, struggling with the controls as the ship began to spin.

I didn't answer. I was too busy trying to get an ident on the ship draining our power.

"If I could just get enough for thrusters --"

I abandoned my search for ID. It didn't matter who was trying to disable *Reinette*, it just mattered that I didn't want them to do it. "Close all the doors," I said, then realized this would use too much power. "No, just these doors," I indicated the blast doors still standing open behind us.

"Why are they open?"

"They were stuck," I said. "I had to push."

Valdec stared. "A full-grown Fedoran couldn't shift those doors!"

"Is that really important?" I snapped, fingers flying over the console. "Are they shut?"

"Yes, but --"

There wasn't enough energy for a forcefield around the bridge, so the blast doors would have to do. "Shutting down enviro everywhere but here. Diverting power --"

"You can't shut down enviro, it won't let you --"

I gestured irritably to his display. "It's off, ain't it?" *Ain't, ain't.* "*Ladies do not say 'ain't,' Sayana.*" "Is that enough power for the thrusters?"

Valdec managed to flick his eyes back in their sockets long enough to check his screen, and get the thrusters online. "Enough for thrusters," he said, "or weapons. Your choice."

I glanced at the Raven onscreen. "They'd obliterate us," I said. "Move."

We moved. Slowly. The Raven locked on a tractor beam.

"*Elif air ab tizak!*" I spat.

"Some people enjoy that," Valdec murmured. "I think I can target the beam's source. We'll stop moving, but --"

"Do it."

He fired a single blast. The Raven shook. So did *Reinette*.

"Think that did it," Valdec said.

"Any juice left?"

"We'll see." *Reinette* shuddered, but we began to move a little. I shut down the communications system, long-range scanners, anything I could think of to divert more power to the engines.

But the Raven came after us.

"We can't outrun them," Valdec said, and I made a horrible decision.

"If we stay still, can we destroy them?"

He glanced at me, and our eyes held. We both knew we might destroy ourselves in the process. But Valdec was a fighter, Antillan Special Forces before he came to work for me. And I was... Well. I was a fighter too.

He gave a brief nod, and *Reinette* slowed in her tracks.

"Target their engines," I said, and he fired off two quick pulses. Small fires erupted on the Raven, which rapidly returned fire, their lasers filling the viewscreen with purple light. *Reinette* shook, jolted.

"Hull breach: deck three. System failure: short-range scanners," the computer calmly informed me. I frantically searched my memory for any weaknesses in a Raven-class ship, but couldn't think of any.

More violet light. A panel blew out above Valdec's head, showering us with sparks and bits of flying metal.

"System failure: intraship communication."

That was it! "Target their com array," I said, stabbing at the image of the ship on my screen. "There. See?" A Raven's com array ran across the top of the bridge. Taking it out could disable their command center. It could even, with a big enough blast, set off a total systems failure.

Valdec nodded, recalibrated as another purple stream shot toward us. "This might be our last --"

The ship lurched in space, anti-grav momentarily failing, and we both slammed forwards into our consoles.

"System failure: environmental," *Reinette* told me.

"But we've only got one *chiu* room!" I screamed. All my panels flared red. The viewscreen in front of me spluttered then, as the ship rocked again, shattered inward. Showers of plasteel slammed into us, a thousand tiny knives against my skin.

I cursed eighteen generations of my enemy's ancestors, and turned to ask Valdec if we had enough power left for one last shot.

He was slumped sideways in his chair, a large shard of plasteel in his chest. Dark gold blood dripped from his chair. I shoved aside the horror rising inside me and reached over toward the weapons console, swiping away blood as I did. He'd inputted the coordinates for the hit on the Raven's com array, and all I had to do was fire.

The safety straps cut into my shoulders, and I scrabbled frantically to reach the button. Almost, almost --

Violet light filled my vision, pain consumed me, and then I saw nothing.

Chapter Four

Three years ago

I woke in a darkened room, silence enfolding me. I heard no ship's engines, no street noise. As my eyes adjusted to the dark I saw nothing familiar. A ship's cabin, fairly large but impersonal.

A faint red glow coming from the viewport.

I sat up, and realized I was wearing the sort of filmy pajamas I'd seen on recovering patients. My torn and bloody clothes were nowhere to be seen.

I got to my feet, aching all over but ignoring the pain, and padded over to the viewport. Spread out below the ship was a large dock, and beyond it the city of Falaran, capital of Nubira. The last thing I remembered was fighting off a bunch of Mentuan slavers in downtown Falaran. At least if they'd captured me, the ship hadn't left yet.

Something beeped on the wall, and before I'd finished working out what it might be, the door cycled open, the lights brightened to a soft hue, and a man came in. Dark hair, broken nose, eyes like space trash. He wore a battered jacket made from the skin of some dead animal, and he hadn't shaved.

I hurled myself at him, ignoring the protest from my body, hands clawed, ready to scratch out his eyes and knee him in the groin. But he disabled me embarrassingly easily, holding my wrists together behind my back and speaking into my ear. "No one's going to hurt you. You're safe here."

"Define 'here'," I spat, not believing him for a second. His body was large and hard behind me, and he was immovable. Normally I enjoy having a big hard male body behind me, but not when he was a *kusatta kuso* slaver.

"My ship. It's called *Target*."

"Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"Actually, it is." He released me, stood back warily. His pose was casual, but I could tell every muscle in him was tensed. "I'm Captain Hadley Rider. Welcome aboard."

He held out his hand to me in an old-fashioned gesture. I looked at it, then back at him.

"You shake it," he advised.

"I don't shake hands with slavers," I replied, and his eyes widened a little.

"I'm not a slaver. I rescued you from the slavers. Those Mentuans -- they're in my brig. You can come see if you like."

I eyed him warily. "I didn't need rescuing."

"No, you'd managed to dispatch nearly a dozen of them before we found you. But you were unconscious and not all of them were. I couldn't leave a lady so vulnerable."

He smiled at me, and I suppose a less suspicious woman would have smiled back. "Where is Valdec? The Antillan with me. Where is he?"

"Still in sickbay. He had some internal damage. The regen can repair him, but it'll take some time."

"I want to see him."

Rider nodded obligingly, and led me from his cabin. His ship had a patched-over look to it, and we passed a couple of men working at open panels. None of them wore any sort of uniform.

"Always something to repair," Rider said as we stepped over wires. "You get the credits for a new com array, and then the enviro starts malfunctioning. There's never enough to upgrade, is there?"

"Speak for yourself."

"Do you fly?" he asked politely.

I didn't reply. I didn't want to say anything until I had some sort of confirmation he wasn't going to harm me or Valdec. "I want to see Valdec," I repeated.

"Sure, darling. We're on our way."

"I'm not your darling."

Rider just smiled.

He led me to the ship's sickbay, where a med tech presided over a regen bed. In it lay Janus Valdec, his body covered in half-healed wounds. "He'll need to stay here at least until midday tomorrow," the med tech said.

"Unacceptable. I have to leave immediately."

"I don't see you going anywhere tonight, darling."

Pulling aside the neck of my pajama top, I showed him my marks. "Do you know what these are?"

He looked at them. Carefully. "You're Nil Rajan," he said neutrally.

"I am Otha. To an off-worlder, the term is --"

"Courtesan," he suggested, those space trash eyes meeting mine.

After a tiny pause I said, "Yes. And I have an appointment with Premier Pretorik Ipari in the morning. I have to get back to my lodgings and prepare myself."

"Sure, but your friend stays." Rider shrugged.

"That's blackmail," I said. "You know I won't leave without him so --"

"Check his stats," the med tech said wearily, and I did so, with great reluctance.

Valdec was indeed seriously injured. The Antillar had phenomenal skills of recovery, but he was lucky he wasn't dead.

"You can leave him here and come back," Rider suggested. "We'll be here all day tomorrow."

I hesitated. "What happened to the Mentuans?"

"They're in the brig. I'll show you."

We left the room, and Valdec's unmoving body, and I followed Rider down another corridor. "What's that on your jacket?" I asked, pointing to the faded logo.

"Do you like it? It's an old Earth design. From one of their wars. The heavy-air fighters used to wear these jackets and decorate them personally."

There was a stylized image of some sort of Kitali, ferocious and sharp-toothed, with orange and black stripes. Painted alongside it was a sort of tally made of what looked like little bones. "What are the bones for?"

He gave a crooked grin. "Confirmed kills." He laid his palm against a door pad and tapped in a code. "Of course, say the word and I'll add four more to the total."

Inside the room was a cell made of both metallic bars and energy fields. Four Mentuans, separated by more bars, lay inside. They were all bloody and unconscious.

"Space trash," Rider said, regarding them dispassionately. "Ought to throw them out of the airlock when we get into space."

I stared at them, trying to think. "By morning, will Valdec have stabilized enough to move him to a different facility?"

Rider shrugged. "He could have. I don't know much about the Antillans."

"The Antillar," I corrected absently. "I really have to be somewhere by morning. I have to get back to my lodgings first."

"Well," Rider said, leading me out of the brig and locking it again, "we'll see. What were you doing in such a nasty part of town anyway?"

"I was visiting a friend."

Rider looked me up and down in disbelief. "What sort of friends does a lady like you have in a sinkhole like downtown Falaran?"

"We were childhood friends," I snapped, because I really didn't want to go into the details of how Lusika and I had been adopted together by Madam Nasiira, who had abruptly decided that she could do nothing with Lusika, and abandoned her to the dirtside stews of the nearest 'port.

Rider took me back to his cabin -- "Captain's quarters, finest accommodation" -- and mixed two glasses of a spicy-scented drink. "Here. Nubiran Firefly. Ought to make you feel better."

"What's in it?" I asked, watching him sip at his. I'd carefully made note that he poured liquids from the same bottles into each glass, but none of the bottles had been labeled.

"Well, there's Ozio, and --"

"Good," I said, taking the glass and downing it in one gulp. The contents burned down my throat, but it was a welcome burn, and it did indeed make me feel better.

Rider stared. "It's meant to be sipped," he said in a choked voice. "It's very strong!"

"I can handle my liquor," I said, inaccurately as it turned out. "They used to give us Ozio to get us to sleep."

"Who did?" Rider asked, refilling my glass.

"The IAC."

He gave me a curious look. "You were in the military?"

"No," I said, taking my new drink. "An orphanage."

Rider looked appalled. "One of those battery farms? Phong's arse, how did you survive?"

"I was adopted," I said shortly, realizing I'd said too much. Maybe the Firefly was loosening my tongue. To change the subject, I raised my glass. "Thank you for rescuing me."

Rider gave a half bow, which succeeded in making me smile. "Any time, darling. Although I don't suppose you need it often. You fought like a dervish. We counted seven dead before they got you down. Where did you learn to fight like that?"

"I was trained in self-defense," I said, which was true, although it wasn't the answer to his question.

"Well, it was amazing. I ought to be saluting you," he said, raising his glass, and I smiled again. "Can I have your name?"

"Sayana," I said.

He took my hand and brushed his lips over the knuckles, an old-fashioned gesture that nonetheless turned me on just a little bit.

The Firefly was spreading through my body, warming me, relaxing me. I frowned, feeling the effects of a hard, dirty fight. "Did you put me in a regen bed?"

Rider nodded. "Not for long, though. You had a few cuts, and the wound on your thigh might pain you a while, but you should otherwise be fine."

I winced. My leg hadn't been hurting much, but if I was to spend any time with Premier Ipari tomorrow, he probably wouldn't appreciate the scar.

I handed Rider my glass, and stripped off my pajama pants. I heard his shocked intake of breath -- I was naked beneath them, but I didn't care. I couldn't even count the people who'd seen my bare naked pussy by now.

"One of those *pidaras* Mentuans stabbed me," I said, running my hand over the pink, healing flesh. It had thankfully missed the marks on my leg. Plenty of people paid a lot to fuck a Nil Raja with Otha markings. Even if they didn't really know what they were looking at.

"You, uh, are you cold? You should get dressed," Rider said, his words slightly rushed. "You'll be cold."

I looked up, saw the flush on his cheeks, and smiled. Not one of Madam Nasiira's specially taught coy smiles, but one that was all my own. One that said I knew an attractive man had noticed how attractive I was.

And I liked it.

Maybe it was the Firefly. Maybe it was the adrenaline. Maybe it was the thought of what those Mentuans might have done to me if Valdec hadn't fought. If I hadn't fought.

I never fought.

I took in a deep breath and let it out, and Rider watched the movement of my chest. Rolling my shoulders, I winced.

"Are you all right, darling?" His voice came out low and husky.

"Is it usual to ache so much after a fight?" I asked wearily.

He shrugged. "Yes, especially if you're using muscles you don't usually." He put down his glass, came over to me. His big, sure hands covered my shoulders. "Does it hurt here?"

I nodded, then winced slightly as his fingers dug into my muscles. He kneaded my sore flesh, easing the ache there as I sipped my second Firefly. He stood in front of me, his eyes never leaving mine. Heat rose as he assuaged one ache and created another, throbbing low down, setting alight muscles I used all the time. I felt breathless, excited in a way I hadn't felt since I was a novice. Out of control.

I didn't like it.

Raising my drink, I drained it, and held out the glass. "More?" I said softly, and his eyebrows raised a little.

"That's two already. You'll get tipsy."

"Is that all?" My heart was thumping. "I'd like to get drunk."

Rider gave me an indecipherable look as he turned away to mix my drink. As his back was turned I stripped off my top and stood naked, waiting.

He turned back, and froze.

I met his gaze.

Rider picked up what was left of his drink and downed it, then turned back and hastily mixed another drink for himself.

He turned around again, and I was still naked.

"Just checking," he said.

I reached out for my drink, and was appalled to see my fingers shaking. I'd lost my composure. I *never* lost my composure.

My hand dropped, my fingers tightened into a fist. "I -- I'm not --" I began, and Rider put down the two drinks, reaching out to touch my cheek. I dragged in a shuddering breath, and stepped back. It was important that I said something. "I'm not a courtesan tonight," I said. "I'm not prepared, or polished. You're seeing me without silks and perfume and maquillage. You're seeing me without my bracelets," I said, holding up my wrist where the old scars were visible. "I'm bruised, and I'm shaken, and to be honest I'm scared to death." Rider regarded me steadily. "And I want to make it all go away."

He let out a steady breath, then stepped forward, cupped my face in his hands and kissed me. Softly. Gently. Uniquely.

I can count on one hand the number of men who've kissed me. A kiss is a sensual thing, but more than that it's an emotional thing. Emotionless, mechanical manipulation can bring a man to orgasm -- or a woman, for that matter, although it's not as easy. It's why there are so many lovebots and the like out there. It's why the prostis on Level 7 of Spaceport Adana do such a roaring trade. But a kiss? A kiss is nothing without some emotional meaning behind it.

I was uncertain, frightened, vulnerable, and Rider's gentle kiss gave me strength, reassurance, tenderness.

And it really, really turned me on.

He broke the kiss as gently as he'd started it, but didn't move his hands from my face. "I think," he said, "that you and I," he stroked my cheek with his thumb, "ought to spend the night," I shivered, "getting really, really drunk."

Chapter Five

I burst out laughing, and Rider grinned at me. It felt wonderful to laugh, and I was so grateful I kissed him. Another soft, tender kiss, but growing in passion, depth and intensity. My arms went around his neck, my body pressed against his. The material of his jacket rubbed my bare skin, coarse and warm. Under it he wore a shirt that didn't conceal the heat of his skin, and pants that didn't keep down his erection.

"Your mouth is wonderful," I said without thinking, and his eyes gleamed, strong and tarnished, dirty but bright.

"And all I've done is kiss you," he said, marveling.

"I don't get kissed an awful lot," I confessed.

"Surely not." His fingers traced my lips. "Lips like these, ripe and luscious, hot and wet. They're made for kissing." So saying, he bent to prove his point, his warm mouth covering mine, his tongue licking along my lips then darting inside, caressing my own. A moan rose in the back of my throat.

"I could spend all night doing this," I murmured against his lips.

"No argument from me," he replied, and led me to the bed. My nipples puckered, but all he did was sit me down and leave me. Stepping back, he stripped off his painted jacket and picked up our drinks, handing mine to me. Toasting me silently, he stood and watched me for a second or two, before he sat down on the bed, back to the wall, and pulled me into the circle of his arms. "Drink," he said, "kiss me, and talk."

"What do you want to talk about?"

He traced the marks on my shoulders, and I tensed, wondering if he was going to ask me about them. But he said, "What happened to your wrist?"

I looked at the ugly, uneven skin there. I nearly always covered it, either with a long sleeve or a glove, a bracelet. Usually the latter if I knew I was going to be naked. "Childhood accident," I said.

"While you were in the orphanage?"

I nodded.

Rider shook his head. "*Wo di tian ah*, I can't believe you grew up in one of those places. I've seen them. They're like farms for children."

I said nothing.

"How did you end up in an IAC orphanage?"

"I should have thought that was obvious. My parents were killed."

"Killed? They didn't die, they were killed?"

I cursed myself. "An accident in transit, that's all I was told." Still, I hadn't believed it. Not after Jal said to me, "Don't you see? They were the last scions of the family. They wanted to kill us all, Sayana. You and me too." I stared at the scar on my wrist. I could have had cosmetic surgery, could have had my marks tattooed back in place. But part of me rebelled. That scar was part of who I was.

Rider stroked the uneven skin. "Sorry. Bad memories?"

"Not the happiest time of my life."

He kissed my temple. "I'll bet. But you were adopted? Was that better?"

I shrugged. "I suppose so. I was taken by a Madam who trained me as one of her girls."

His eyebrows went up. "How old were you?"

"Eleven."

Shock showed on his face, and I sighed. "A common misconception. I didn't touch a man until I was of age. Before I was allowed to even kiss anyone, I had to learn how to please a man in other ways. To be gracious, elegant, decorative. To move, talk and smile like a lady. To dance and sing, speak various languages and learn local customs."

"And fight with a sword?" Rider said. His hand, which had been resting on my ribcage, edged up.

"Sometimes clients can get rough," I said. "It's why I have Valdec now, but..."

"Some people have no respect," Rider said, his hand cupping my breast. I smelled the Firefly on his breath. Strong, spicy, enticing.

"It's not that," I said, frowning. "It's about power. About asserting it, reclaiming it. Men who feel powerless in their own lives, who have jobs they hate, wives they don't love, who are beaten down and lonely and powerless to stop it, they need to feel better than someone. And who's more pathetic than a street whore?"

"You," Rider said, gently squeezing my breast for emphasis, "are not a street whore."

"But I am a whore." I said it plainly. There was no denying it. The evidence was there to see, part of my body, all over my skin. "The caste of the Otha is a noble and respected one, but we're expected to take a protector. As if we can't take care of ourselves." I took a long sip of my drink. "Sex is a trade of power. The person capable of giving or withholding pleasure --"

"A woman," Rider said with some feeling.

"Usually, but not always. If you're capable of giving pleasure, then you have the power, yes? Because you can withhold it. In a normal relationship, the woman is the one who usually says yes or no. She's the one in control."

"But by paying for sex, a man feels he's in control?" Rider said.

"Yes. Men pay for sex -- whether it's with a street whore or a woman like me, because they want to hold the power. And the more status a whore has, the more power they feel they have."

Rider was silent a while, then he snorted. "Then they're fools," he said. "Anyone who thinks a woman doesn't have ultimate power over a man is an idiot."

I turned, smiled, and kissed him, and he kissed me back, his hand warm and sure on my breast. I slid my fingers inside his shirt, felt the heat of his skin. Rider's

fingers curled around my breast, found my nipple and stroked it, and the heat that had been throbbing inside me ever since Rider touched me flared out from my breast.

I fumbled with the fastenings on his shirt, tugged at it until it was loose, until I could splay my hands on his chest and run my fingers through the dark hair there. He had a well-defined body, strong and broad-shouldered, a man used to doing hard physical work.

I pictured those shoulders above me, strong and naked, and shivered with lust.

Rider's mouth left mine to trace a trail down my neck. He didn't follow my marks, as so many men did, but found the pulse in my neck that drove me wild. His warm mouth brought a shock of pleasure that had me gasping, my fingers grasping at his chest, his arms, his shoulders.

His hands smoothed down my back, his laughter hot in my ear. "You taste like strawberries," he murmured, kissing, licking and sucking on a pleasure point that had me going boneless in his arms. He laid me down on the bed, stripped off his shirt and lay above me, his bare chest against mine, his crisp hairs tickling my nipples, and smiled at me. "You know," he said, "how I said we ought to kiss and get drunk?"

I nodded, stretching and smiling as I noted his reaction.

Rider reached for a glass of Firefly. "How about we combine the two?" he suggested, and poured the cool liquid into my belly button.

I gasped at the shock of it, and he laughed and kissed my mouth before dropping to kiss my stomach, licking the liquid off my body, catching each trickle down my skin. One ran toward my bare pussy, but he stopped tantalizingly close, and reached for the glass again.

He poured the best part of a glass of Nubiran Firefly over my body and licked it off. Not just my belly, but my breasts also received the treatment, and the crook of my elbow, and my inner thigh. But before he got too close, I reached out and grabbed the rest of the drink, dumping it in his lap.

He sucked in a breath, staring down at the wet fabric now tented over his crotch. "Whoops," I said without a trace of contrition. "Guess we'll have to get you out of those pants."

Rider rolled his eyes and laughed, but he stripped and stood naked before me, his thighs powerful, his stomach flat, and his cock thick and strong.

"Yum," I said, and drew him down on the bed beside me. "Now, where did it all go?"

Rider swiped his hand over his stomach, and I obligingly licked up the traces of Firefly lingering there. Moving south, I investigated his hip. His thigh. Felt his breath coming faster. His skin, where it wasn't drenched with the spicy drink, tasted salty. I licked him some more just for the enjoyment of it, and then, to put him out of his misery, I tasted his cock.

No drink poured on it, no jokes or excuses. I ran my tongue up the length of it, and was rewarded with a shuddering sigh. "Oh Sayana," he said, voice filled with longing, "you're going to kill me."

I smiled, and bent back to my task, but I wasn't there long before he lifted my head away, pulled me up to his mouth and kissed me, long and deep. My body slid against his, hot skin and sticky Firefly, and I smiled.

"What?"

"I don't think I've ever been used as a drinking vessel before."

"Shows your versatility." He ran his hand down my back and I shuddered with the simple pleasure of his touch. Kissing my neck again, he slowly moved down my body until his head was between my legs, where I swear he took up residence. His tongue investigated my puffy, wet folds, darting around as if for his own amusement. He licked inside me and I let out a low moan. When he tongued my clit my hips came up off the bed.

He made love to me with his mouth, and I writhed, slick and hot and filled with gasping pleasure, drowning in ecstasy. He didn't hold back from my orgasm, letting it

sweep over and drench us both before he slid back up my body, pressing his hard flesh against my shuddering softness.

I sought his mouth, kissed my taste from it, and his hands roamed my body, sliding over my hip, my thigh, lifting my leg to wrap around his waist as he entered me, never breaking that glorious kiss.

When I came up for air I gasped, "I could never get enough of this," and he laughed softly, kissed my nose and began moving inside me. The heat of him there, filling me, inside me, made me moan. Shuddering, wrapped in heat and sodden with lust, I held on as he thrust, slow at first then faster and harder, driving me with him to another peak, clutching and gasping and desperate for more.

When I came he was looking right at me, and when he came his mouth was on mine. He collapsed on me, burying his face in my neck, both of us breathing hard. I couldn't move. I didn't want to. I'd never felt so complete in all my life.

"I think, princess," he said, lifting his head, "I need another drink."

We drank and talked and made love all night, until the red Nubiran dawn filtered in through the viewport, and I drifted into blissful sleep with Rider in my arms.

When I woke late in the afternoon, it was with both horror and hangover pounding through me. Rider's body was sprawled over mine, and I beat at his shoulder until he grunted and rolled away.

"What did you say?" I demanded.

"Morning," he mumbled.

"Last night," I said, dread mounting. "You called me princess."

"Mm," he said, one eye opening. He traced the marks on my shoulder. "Durgha patterns in the Otha shape. Royalty." He yawned, and winced. "*Blyat*, my head. How much did we drink last night?"

"Too much," I said, because how else could I explain such a lapse? "What do you mean, royalty?"

"Only kings have two kinds of marks," he said. "Don't they? Is this important, darling?"

I stared. "Is it important? Do you have any idea -- *any* idea --"

He blinked at me, his sleepiness beginning to clear. "Your parents who were killed," he said, "they were --"

He didn't get any further. I slammed the side of my hand into his neck, and he slumped back, unconscious. I leapt from the bed, ignored the pajamas I'd discarded last night, and ran.

Chapter Six

I woke for the third time on *Target*, filled with dread just as I had been before. But this time it wasn't Mentuan slavers or the threat of discovery that frightened me. It was that I recognized the sickbay of Rider's ship, and knew there was only one way I could have ended up here.

He'd been the one firing on us.

I peered at the stats on the wall display relating to my regen bed. I'd been hurt, more severely than the last time Rider had brought me here, but I'd also been healing longer. The bed had taken care of my more serious injuries, but there were still sore patches all over my body from where bits of my own ship had exploded all over me.

A pang went through me. Poor *Reinette*.

I pushed the bed's cover away from me and swung to my feet. First thing, to find Valdec. Second thing, to find an escape route.

Third thing, to kill Hadley Rider.

Finding Valdec wasn't hard. He was in another bay of the infirmary, his injuries once again more severe than mine. I remembered that shard of plasteel sticking out of his chest and winced. At least he was alive, although he probably wouldn't be going anywhere soon.

Footsteps sounded behind me and I whirled to see the med tech who'd released Valdec's body to me three years ago when I fled the ship.

"You should be resting," he began, but I punched him against the wall and he slid down it, unconscious. Grabbing his hand, I pressed the palm against the wall lock and punched in the code he'd used back then. Glory be, it still worked. The door cycled open, and on the other side of it stood Captain Rider.

I raised my fist to punch him out too, but he grabbed my arm and held it as if it contained no strength at all.

"Rider," I said through gritted teeth, "let go of my arm."

He seemed to consider this calmly. "You know, I don't think I will."

With my free hand I indicated my marks. "You know what these are. What they mean."

His gaze was steady. "They mean you're Otha," he said.

"And?"

He paused a second before answering. "Durgha."

"And which caste is that? Is it the artisans? The priests?"

His nostrils flared. He had one hand free and so did I. We could still beat each other unconscious.

"You saw those Mentuan slavers," I said.

"I saw that I had to rescue you from them."

"Only after I'd taken out a dozen of them. And I've learned a few things since then, Rider," I said. "My brother's girlfriend is Daleri Special Forces."

"Was Daleri Special Forces," he corrected, "and I'm glad you brought that up. With your brother alive, it doesn't matter so much if an unfortunate accident should befall you."

I swung my free hand up, but he caught that too, his grip hard. Any harder and he'd break both my wrists. "Nil Raja doesn't want a king," I said. "Nil Raja doesn't need a king."

Eyes like space trash bored holes into me, then abruptly, I was released. "Good job I ain't planning on handing you over to them, isn't it then?"

I stared.

"Although I might have to check into how much I'd get if I did," he mused.

"You destroyed my ship," I said. "You nearly killed Valdec. What do you want?"

Rider allowed himself a leisurely scan of my body. I was naked. No pajamas this time. Guess I didn't deserve them. "Come with me," he said, gesturing to the door.

I walked defiantly to it. If he was going to call my bluff on the nudity thing, I was going to call his right back.

The corridors of *Target* looked pretty much like they had the last time I'd been here. There were still crews of men working at various panels, fixing things -- "Your handiwork," Rider said in disgust -- and they all turned to stare at me.

I gave them my most charming smile.

"Hey *popka*," they whistled.

"What a *randi*, Cap'n!"

"*Lund choos*, pretty lady!"

"Maybe later," I said flirtatiously. "I'm busy now with Captain *Haang-jiu* here."

They all laughed. I'd just called Rider a cheap bastard.

He didn't seem so amused. He palmed open a door and led me into an engineering bay. A crew of men in white jumpsuits were working on some partially deconstructed consoles. They all pretended not to look at me.

"Recognize these consoles?" Rider asked.

I shrugged. One console looked a lot like another to me.

"We took them from your cargo bay." He tapped a console top, leaning on its side against the wall. There was an IAC logo on it.

"So? I used them for role play. Some people like the idea of fucking an IAC captain."

The men working on the consoles were all ear-wiggling furiously. "Why were you carrying them around?"

"I don't know, Valdec probably didn't have time to arrange for storage."

"So you intended to keep them?" Rider folded his arms.

"What is this? Yes, I intended to keep them. They're useful, like I said, for role play. Remember how I'm a whore, Rider? Just because you got me for free --"

"This isn't about you and me. This is about data stolen from the IAC about troop movements, ship layouts, evasive maneuvers. Things that have allowed a series of attacks on military ships to succeed very well."

I stared. "Captain, I bought these as scrap. They don't work. Some of them are just shells. You can check -- ask the Dollaveras on Spaceport Adana. Ask Valdec. He bought them --"

I broke off as a slight pitying look came into Rider's eyes. All the techs were watching us now.

"They're not shells, are they?"

He shook his head.

"I mean, we rigged up viewscreens and some lights on the panels, but..."

"They contained information. As much information as when they were ripped out of the IAC Huntership *Macedon* a few cycles ago."

I gazed at the consoles, which were hooked up to a variety of whirring, bleeping machines.

"The information they contain has the ability to do great damage to the IAC, if left in the wrong hands."

"And you think those hands are mine?"

The techs all looked at me.

"I think you knew exactly where to fire on my ship, princess."

I narrowed my eyes. "Don't call me princess."

"You aimed at my com array. How did you know how to do that?"

The techs all looked at him.

"My brother's old ship was a Raven! He told me about it!"

"Your brother? Yes, he's not the IAC's biggest fan, is he? Were you taking this equipment to him?"

I threw up my hands. The techs' eyes swiveled back in my direction. "You know what? I'd really like to know why you're so damn interested."

Rider sighed, and ran his hand through his hair. "Well, darling," he said. "It's probably because I work for the IAC."

* * *

On the large screens in my newly assigned cabin were two sets of news reports. One contained details of attacks on IAC military transports, ships carrying important dignitaries, strategic outposts, all of which had been destroyed at some time in the last few years. The cause in each case was a deliberate attack, systematically targeting weaknesses. Gaps in defense. Structural instabilities.

Insider knowledge.

On the other screen was a news bulletin about twenty years old. It reported the deaths of the last remaining members of the Nil Rajan royal family in a shuttle crash. The king had long been overthrown in the revolution, his family murdered. Only one person escaped the slaughter, and that was the king's younger sister, who had been cast out of the family years ago for marrying an off-worlder.

She, her son and daughter, and the son's family, had all been killed when their ship failed to respond to an IAC border patrol.

All but the princess's grandchildren, although the report hadn't listed that. No one had known. Prince Sere-hadin Jalnar Idwal Vornis Shazhad and Princess Damayanti Kaur Sayana Indrani Reina were listed as dead, and only two people knew any different.

Well, two people plus Rider.

The door cycled open and he stood there, looking rather like I felt. Tired, angry, betrayed. "I com'd your brother," he said, and I looked up in alarm. "The last transmit on your ship had been to his. I assumed he'd want to know you're okay."

I resisted the urge to stick out my tongue. "He probably thinks you kidnapped me and -- oh! He'd be right."

Rider ran his hands over his face. "I convinced him we had a history. He held off on the attack fleet."

I said nothing. This was the downside to my profession.

"Your grandfather was Ezelian," Rider said, leaning there in the wide-open doorway.

"Yes," I said. "And the only reason, apparently, I'm alive in the first place."

Rider raised his eyebrows.

"If *xian-da-mu* hadn't married an off-worlder, she'd have been killed with the rest of them," I said.

He came in, leaned against the wall and folded his arms. "Why did you survive?"

I shrugged, exhausted. "I honestly have no idea. Maybe so that in thirty years' time someone could accuse me of betraying the *luh-suh* system that took me under its filthy, decaying wing."

Rider looked at me a long time, then he slid down the wall to sit on the floor, elbows on his knees, head in his hands. It was a convincing performance.

"I've read the reports," I said. "The pilot of *xian-da-mu*'s ship really did ignore the border patrols. There was contraband in the hold. Jewels that had belonged to the king. They were supposed to be on Nil Raja."

"So they were within their rights to shoot?"

I shrugged. "I suppose so."

"Do you remember it?" He looked at me.

"I was a baby. Of course I don't."

"Your brother?"

"I'd be surprised. He wasn't much older."

A pause, then Rider said, "They killed your family and put you in an orphanage that supplies slavers."

"I'm not a slave," I said.

"You hate the IAC," he said softly.

"Yes, but I don't want to kill people." A pause, then I said, "Those Mentuan *pidaras* don't count."

That half-smile again. "I know. They weren't people."

We were both silent a while longer. "Does anyone else know?" I said. "About..." I gestured to my marks.

"Not unless you've told them. Although, you could have given your ship a more subtle name."

"She's named after Madame de Pompadour, one of Earth's most famous courtesans," I said, wondering even as I did if my decision had been more subconscious than I'd realized. "Reinette was her nickname."

Rider reached over and tapped a few things on my datapad. My grandmother's family tree came up on the big screen.

"Ezelian," he said, pointing to my grandfather. "Dream Invader."

"I don't think he was."

"Are you sure about that? You've made damn certain I never forgot about you."

"Nice line," I said.

"I'm not kidding." Rider didn't look happy about it. "Not a night goes by you're not there. Talking to me, laughing with me. Touching my hand, kissing my mouth, licking Firefly off m --"

"Stop," I said. "Those are just memories. I am a courtesan, after all. If you forgot me instantly I'd be ashamed." I smiled as I said it, one of Madam Nasiira's smiles, but Rider didn't return it.

"You weren't being a courtesan that night," he said.

"Oh no? 'I'm frightened and shaken and I need someone to hold me'," I mimicked. "I wanted sex, and you gave it to me."

His nostrils flared. I'd touched a nerve.

"I'm always a courtesan," I said. "Silks and jewels or not."

"You weren't --"

"I was hoping you'd pass out from all the sex and drinking, and I could go and get Valdec and escape," I said. "Then you had to go and call me princess. I should have fucked you to death, but I couldn't bear the thought any more --"

Rider leapt to his feet, his hand coming up to hit me, and I blocked it, held his wrist the same way he'd held mine.

"You think you're funny," he said, breathing hard, hating me.

"No, I think I'm a whore," I said, hating me as well.

He yanked me to him, pressed his mouth to mine in a hard, fierce kiss. "I remember every detail of that night," he said against my mouth. "Every kiss, every stroke, every lick. Every fuck. Not one moment have I forgotten. Not one tremble, or sigh, or gasp of surprise, or --"

"I'm trained for that," I shot back. "You remember reactions I learned years ago. Every flutter, every moan. The motion of surrender. Faking ecstasy with the most incompetent of lovers. I could practically come by myself most times."

His face was furious. He had me hauled against his body, his hard hot chest heaving. He wanted me, and Gods help me, I wanted him too.

It was all a lie, every word. Every kiss, every stroke, every lick was imprinted on my memory too. I'd faked nothing. In the lonely hours of the night, lying awake next to some snoring client, I'd remembered how it felt to sleep in Rider's arms, to feel his kiss against my hair, to hear my name on his lips.

Not one moment had I forgotten, either.

I kissed him, hard and angry. But I was angry with myself as much as him. Maybe more. Shoving my hands into his hair, I assaulted his mouth, and he responded by raking his fingers down my back, pressing me closer to his body. His erection swelled between us. I was still naked, the fabric of his clothes abrading my skin, and he swung us around so my back was against the wall, pressing me there, the whole length of his body against mine.

My hand slid between us, untabbing his pants, handling his cock as it sprang out to meet me. Rider bit savagely on my lip and I squeezed his cock. He growled, lifting me by the hips and impaling me on his thick, hot erection.

I squeezed him hard, my mouth never leaving his, attacking him with my body. I began to rise and fall, riding him, faster and harder with each thrust. My fingers dug into his shoulders. His left bruises on my hips.

"I hate you," I whispered, "I hate you, I hate you." I whispered it even as I spiraled toward climax, even as I tipped over the edge. Even as he gripped my hips and shot his load into me.

We fell against each other, panting, slick with sweat, hearts racing.

"Now tell me what you're faking," he said, and I loathed him even more.

Chapter Seven

The ship's internal com pinged, and an unfamiliar voice informed me that Valdec was awake and asking for me. Still naked, I was escorted by one of Rider's leering mercenaries -- who probably worked for the IAC just like he did -- to the sickbay, where Valdec lay on a bed, eyes closed, naked to the waist.

The med tech I'd punched gave me a resentful look, but he said nothing. Silently, he indicated a section of the wall display that had static information printed on it. A viewscreen, I realized. We were being watched, and I bet I knew who by.

The med tech left, and I approached Valdec. A dark gold scar on his chest was the only evidence that he'd been injured in the first place. The Antillar are fast healers. I stood and looked at him for a short while. His eyes were closed, his chest rising and falling. His thick dark hair was disheveled, and the gold feathers that usually glinted there looked dull.

In my whole life, there had only been two men I'd chosen to fuck without being paid for it. And both of them had betrayed me.

"Janus," I said, and his eyes fluttered open. They were golden.

"My lady." His voice was rough. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Better than you."

He sat up, rubbing his chest. "What happened? The med tech refused to tell me anything. What ship is this?"

"It's called *Target*," I said, "and it belongs to Captain Hadley Rider."

His face was uncomprehending. Of course, he'd barely been aware of his last visit to *Target*. And he wasn't to know it had been the ship firing on us.

"At least, I think it belongs to him. Given that he works for the Interplanetary Alliance Council, it could very well be theirs."

The gold faded from Valdec's eyes. He was good at appearing impassive, but he couldn't help the color of his eyes.

"Captain Rider has been asking me some very interesting questions about the broken IAC consoles we had in the hold," I said. "Apparently they're not broken at all. Apparently they contain lots of very useful information about the military."

"Oh?" Valdec said.

"Information that's already been accessed and sent to someone else. Unfortunately for whoever did the accessing, the IAC have been informed of the leak. Any planned attacks will be fruitless."

Valdec met my gaze unwaveringly. Damn him, he'd always been a totally infallible *ropki* player.

Hurt curled inside me. Janus, an old Earth god with two faces.

"Who did you send it to, Janus?" I said.

For a long moment he didn't move. Then his gaze dropped. He took in a deep breath then let it out. "Antillar wants to leave the Alliance," he said. "We're one of the richest planets and we're sick of subsidizing poorer worlds. The IAC offers us virtually nothing."

"But they don't want you to leave?" I asked, noting that he'd never mentioned himself and his planet as "we" before.

"No. Lose a world so rich in natural resources? A world that supplies so many world-class soldiers?"

"So you're taking terrorist action? Attacking convoys, murdering senators?"

"It's politics, Sayana," he said sharply. He never called me Sayana.

"It's murder, Janus," I replied.

He stared stonily at me.

"Is that why you were with me?" I asked. "To gain access to so many important clients?" I closed my eyes briefly as another piece clunked into place inside my head.

"You must have been kicking yourself over missing the Ipari appointment. Access to the Premier! And you know why I missed it, don't you? Because I wanted to stay on the ship with you. Because you were hurt."

"You were fucking your lover all night," Valdec said.

"My lover, who turned out to be an agent for the IAC," I said. I rubbed my face with my hands. "All this time, Valdec. I thought..."

"What did you think?"

I looked at him, this golden-skinned, blank-faced liar. I'd thought he was my friend. I'd thought he respected me. I'd thought how special it was that a proud Antillan would work for a whore. "*Wo di tian ah*, I was stupid," I said. "The Antillar don't use whores. And yet you worked for me. Must have been a hell of a sacrifice. You even managed to bring yourself to fuck me."

"I didn't have to bring myself to do anything," he said quietly. "I enjoyed being with you."

I arched one eyebrow. "What's this, a proud Antillan enjoying fucking a cheap whore?"

"We both know you're not cheap," he said dryly.

"But I am a whore," I said.

"Yes." His gaze met mine. "And so am I. The Antillar believe that sex is sacred, intimate, should only take place between committed lovers. It's not something to be thrown away lightly. Or paid for. But I had sex with you. To please you. To keep you happy so you'd keep me employed. I prostituted myself for my job. For my planet."

"How very noble of you," I said, loathing him. Loathing all of them.

"For a planet I can't ever go back to," he said. "For people who'd despise me for what I've done."

"I'm appreciating the irony."

He sat silently for a while, elbows resting on his knees, looking tired. The same pose Rider had adopted in my cabin. I wasn't sure I believed it this time, either.

"So now what?" he asked, looking up. "You hand me over to this Captain Rider and he throws me in an IAC jail?"

"I don't know what he'll do," I said. "There'll be a trial, I suppose."

"Yes, and that'll go well."

My fingers curled and clenched. Between us we could probably escape Rider, but where would we go? He knew Valdec was guilty. He'd be following me everywhere. I'd never be able to work again.

I closed my eyes, and remembered Rider asking me what I was faking.

"You betrayed me, Valdec," I said. "I trusted you, I liked you -- the one man in all these years I actually -- for the Gods' sakes, I was paying you to have sex with me!"

"I'm appreciating the irony," he said softly.

"And all this time you were just thinking about how you could use the information you were stealing from my clients to kill people." I shoved my hand through my hair. "I am so angry with you right now. Forget Rider, I could kill you myself."

"Forget Rider?" Valdec raised his feathered eyebrows. "In three years you never did."

My mouth opened and no sound came out. *Not one moment have I forgotten.*

"You dreamt of him," he said. "I heard his name on your lips as you slept. Sometimes even when I was inside you. You used to call out his name when you came. Did you know that?"

Panic rose inside me. Rider was watching, dammit. He was listening!

"Shut up," I said to Valdec.

"I wasn't the only man you fucked for free," Valdec said. "You thought I didn't know what you were doing all night, did you? The whole crew knew."

My hand went to my mouth. "Shut up," I said again. "Shut up!"

Valdec looked at my left wrist. "You weren't even wearing your bracelets," he said, and I covered my wrist with my hand. "He's seen more of you than I have. If I was

the suspicious kind, I'd think you and he planned this, you and your lover, bringing me in together --"

"Shut up!" I yelped, and struck his jaw. "Shut up, Valdec." I hit him again, frightened and angry. "He's not my lover. I hate him, and I hate you."

"You didn't hate him three years ago," Valdec said, swiping blood from his mouth and looking at the gold stain on his fingers. "I could see it on you. Smell it on you. Did he fuck you well, my lady?"

There were tears in my eyes.

"Did he touch you like I touch you?" His hand was on my waist, smearing his gold blood over my blue marks. "Did he stroke and kiss and lick you?" He caressed my hip, and I didn't know whether I wanted him to stop or continue. Rider was watching. Well, let him see what he really meant to me.

I took Valdec's hand and pressed it between my legs. A knowing look came into his eyes. "Did he do it like this?" he asked, sliding his fingers between my folds. "Did you like it?"

"Shut up," I whispered, my eyes stinging with tears.

"Yes, my lady," Valdec said, his other hand sliding up my back, drawing me to him. He tongued my breast, sucking the nipple into his mouth. His fingers caressed my clit. Slipped inside me.

His touch was sure, gentle but precise. He knew exactly what he was doing. He knew how to get me off.

But he wasn't touching me the way Rider had. He was mocking me with every thrust, every tweak.

I didn't care. I was so angry, and I honestly didn't know who I wanted to hurt more. Valdec or Rider for betraying me -- or myself, for letting them.

I grabbed his feathered head and yanked it up for a kiss, but his fingers tightened and his lip curled just a tiny fraction, and I realized that kissing the whore was a step too far for my proud Antillan.

So I shoved him back on the bed, running my hands over his chest, noting with satisfaction how he winced when I pressed on the healing scar there. I clambered over him, straddling his face and leaning down to his cock.

"Eat me," I said, and he gave a soft laugh and pressed his mouth to my pussy. His tongue lapped at me delicately, his hands stroking my buttocks. I sucked his cock down, hoping Rider was watching, seeing me suck the cock of a man who'd caused hundreds of deaths.

See what I'd rather be doing, Rider?

I fondled Valdec's golden downy balls, licked up and down his cock, and rubbed my bare, blue-marked pussy against his lips. Ground myself into his mouth. Made him open wide and suckle at my flesh, at the patterns that proclaimed me Otha, a whore.

And when his practiced mouth brought me to orgasm, I ripped back my head and moaned, "Yes, Janus!"

I slid down his body and rubbed my sodden, dripping pussy lips against his cock. I was facing the panel through which Rider was watching, and with my eyes fixed on it, I ran my hands down my body. I cupped and caressed my own breasts, slid my fingers into my folds and pressed them back to expose my clit. Then I grasped Valdec's swollen golden cock and rubbed it against my flesh.

Beneath me, he writhed. I smiled triumphantly, and sank down on him. "Do you like it?" I whispered, clenching my muscles around him. "Do you, Janus?"

His fingers gripped my hips. He said nothing.

"You like fucking a whore, don't you? My proud Antillan, getting all hot and hard over a woman who sells her body. Thrusting his big swollen cock into a whore's pussy." I reached down and played with his balls as I rose and fell. He let out a harsh breath.

"Because that's the dirty little secret, isn't it, Janus? You might be too proud to pay for sex, but that doesn't mean you don't want to. All those times you licked my pussy, all those times you stuck your dick in me, you told yourself you were doing your duty, but you liked it, didn't you?"

"Shut up," he ground out.

"You liked poking me with your *hui*," I said. "You liked coming all over my breasts. That made you feel powerful, didn't it? Squirting that cold golden come all over me. I bet you'd have done anything to pump it down my throat. To have me suck you off like the cheap *randis* on Level 7."

"No," he growled, throwing me off. I hit the floor with a thump, my body protesting that it still hadn't recovered from its last injuries. Valdec followed, slamming his fist into my eye. Pain exploded all over my skull. "I was doing my duty," he snarled, standing over me, cock quivering, chest heaving. "I was --"

He got no further. The door cycled open, but before it had even got halfway Rider burst through, fury coming off him in waves. "You do not hit her," he roared, grabbing Valdec and shoving him against the wall. "You piece of *kusatta kuso*, you do not hit her!"

I stared in astonishment. Rider -- who had so nearly struck me himself -- was defending me. "Rider, don't kill him," I said. "I'm all right." I scrambled to my feet with a lack of elegance that would have made Madam Nasiira weep, and touched Rider's arm. "Don't. I provoked him."

Rider looked at me, then at Valdec, smaller and leaner, naked and defenseless. His cock still stood straight up, glistening with my juices. "He still wants you," Rider said in disgust.

"Well, of course he does." I gave him a practiced pout, and he relaxed a little, managing a small smile.

My own smile was wider as I realized how to punish Valdec. "He wants me," I said, "but you get me."

Chapter Eight

Both men stared at me.

"Unless you don't want me," I said, and Rider started laughing.

"Don't want you? Don't want you? Darling, it's all I've wanted for three years." He turned, one strong arm still pressing Valdec back against the wall, and kissed me. He licked into my mouth, his free arm curving around my waist, and I fell into his heat and strength.

We strapped Valdec into a regen bed from which he couldn't escape, and he watched with loathing as I kissed Rider thoroughly, pushing at his decorated flight jacket, pawing at his pants. Bit by bit I stripped his clothes away, stroking and kissing, tasting salt and hot skin. I tongued his nipple. He licked into the curve of my neck.

"Just so you know," I panted as his fingers dipped inside me, "I'm still not sure I like you."

"So long as it doesn't stop you from fucking me," he replied, and I grinned and turned around to lean over Valdec's regen bed. He regarded me with disgust.

I parted my legs and wiggled my hips, and Rider stroked my buttocks lovingly. Leaning over me, he pushed very slowly inside me, and I closed my eyes and moaned. "Oh, that feels good!"

He licked and kissed the back of my neck. I shook my hair to one side, letting it fall over Valdec's chest. Rider filled me completely, then drew back out. Slowly, he fucked me.

"I love having you inside me," I whispered. "I love that thick, hot cock stretching me out."

Valdec closed his eyes, so I leaned up and rubbed my breast against his mouth.

"Bite her and I'll shove a scalpel up your ass," Rider said sharply, and Valdec looked up at him with utter hatred.

"You cannot humiliate me," he said with as much dignity as it's possible to muster when people are fucking almost on top of you. "I am of the Antillar."

"Sure, but you're still going to lick her breasts," Rider said. His voice was easy, but there was an underlying threat in it.

"Can't please her all by yourself?" Valdec sneered, as I pressed my nipple into his mouth.

"She's a passionate woman," Rider said. "Takes a lot of pleasing."

So saying, he moved one hand from my hip to my inner thigh, stroking the sensitive skin in maddening circles. I thrust my hips back against him, taking him in right to the balls.

Rider cupped my pussy, slipped one finger between my folds and ran it back and forth. I moaned, pressing my breast harder against Valdec's face, undulating, rubbing my breast over his lips. His tongue came out and licked my nipple, and I sighed.

"You like it?" Rider said.

"He's licking me," I gasped.

"So I can see. Do you like what I'm doing?"

He circled my clit with his fingertip, and I nodded vigorously.

"The Antillan can't see. Tell him what I'm doing."

"He's stroking my clit," I said, "while he's fucking me."

"How am I fucking you, darling? Do you like it slow, like this?"

"Yes," I moaned.

His big hand stroked my back, my shoulders, kneading the muscles there. I'd been tight with anger and hurt, and Rider was making it all go away. His laughter warm in my ear, he murmured, "Darling, I love being inside you."

"Yes," I gasped, incapable of saying much more. I could feel an orgasm building inside me, spiraling up out of the heat Rider's hands and cock were driving into me. He

was making love to me, to me, not as a whore he'd hired, not as a woman to distract, not as part of his duty.

I stretched my back, arching away from Valdec, leaning back into Rider, and reached an arm behind me to hold his body against mine as I came. Pleasure ripped through me and I clung to him, gasping and moaning, my whole body trembling.

"I told you you call out his name," Valdec murmured, looking up at me. His cock was still hard. It throbbed angrily. I reached out and gave it a little pat, and it leapt under my touch. Valdec might loathe me, but his body didn't.

I slid off Rider, losing the heat and strength of his cock inside me, and swung my leg over the regen bed. Valdec tensed, and so did Rider, especially when I rubbed my dripping wet pussy against Valdec's cock.

Then I crawled up his body, trailing my breasts over his golden feathers as I did, and knelt over his face.

"Eat me," I purred, and Valdec glared up at me mutinously. I arched back, stroked his cock, and his expression flickered. He licked his lips, and then he licked mine. His tongue swept over my wet, swollen labia, darted inside and lapped from my pussy.

I let out a low moan and straightened up. Rider was watching, his fingers wrapped tightly around his cock, and I beckoned him toward me. Sliding one arm around his neck, I kissed him, long and deep, his lips and tongue pleasuring my mouth the same way Valdec was pleasuring my pussy. No; not the same way. Rider's kiss was full of heat and passion. Valdec's mouth could have been a machine for all the intimacy we shared.

Still, I couldn't deny he was getting the job done. Squirming with excitement, I slid my hand down Rider's body to grasp his cock and pumped it slowly as we kissed. His fingers fisted in my hair, his chest rising and falling against mine. I explored him with my hands, re-learning the feel of the hard shaft I so loved to have inside me.

"I want to suck you," I said against his mouth. "I want you in my mouth."

Rider's cock jerked in my hand and he nodded rapidly. "Whatever you want, darling," he said, and I laughed.

Leaning down, I rested my hands on his hips and started licking his cock. The head was throbbing, dark red, and if the sounds he made were any indication, highly sensitive. I licked a pattern around the top, poked my tongue into the slit, then started kissing down the side.

Beneath me, Valdec was making a meal of my pussy. His clever tongue, always skilled at pleasing me, darted in and out of me. His lips caressed my tender flesh. With his hands restrained he couldn't stroke me, but I could hardly complain that he wasn't satisfying me.

I passed on the pleasure to Rider, whose fingers kneaded my skull as I worked my mouth over his cock. He was delicious, tasting partly of my own juices and partly of his own. Wetness seeped from the tip, and I lapped it up, making him groan.

"Darling, that feels so good," he gasped, as I ducked down and tongued his balls. Delicately, I took them into my mouth and sucked, and he moaned. My hands caressing his hips, stroking his firm, tight buttocks, I licked up and down his length then took it fully inside my mouth. Madam Nasiira had taught me to open the back of my throat and take a man deep, and I did it now, as natural as breathing, while above me Rider fought to suck air into his lungs.

"*Chua emu pay*, Sayana, oh Gods yes!" He thrust into my mouth, and I squeezed his buttocks and enjoyed it. I was Otha, and such an act was natural, even easy, to me.

Besides, looking up and seeing the pure pleasure on Rider's face was wonderful. I parted his buttocks with my hands, found the tight ring of his ass, and pressed gently.

Rider let loose the most colorful string of exotic curses I've ever heard, and came copiously down the back of my throat. His hands tightened against my skull. Excited, I writhed frantically on Valdec's face and he licked me faster and faster, driving me toward my own orgasm.

As Rider eased out of my mouth I continued to lick and suck at him, wanting to swallow every last drop of his come, but also to keep him hard. Pleasure twisted and

burned inside me, and I knew that when I came it was going to be glorious, but I didn't want it yet.

"Inside me," I babbled, fingers busy at Rider's ass, tongue and lips fast on his cock. "Inside me, now!"

Rider, looking somewhat dazed, nonetheless lifted me away from Valdec's magic lips and rammed his cock inside me. Still kneeling on the bed, I pressed my body against Rider's, rubbing my nipples against the hair on his chest, fastening my mouth to his and holding on as a tremendous orgasm ripped through me. Gasping, sobbing, slick with sweat and writhing with lust I clung to Rider, my whole body shaking.

For a moment neither of us said anything, then his voice sounded in my ear, "That got me so hard again, darling."

I lifted my head from where it was buried in his shoulder, and laughed shakily. "Well, then. Fuck me some more."

He kissed my nose and withdrew from me, turning me around so I was kneeling over Valdec and facing down the length of his golden body. "Suck her pussy," Rider said softly, and Valdec did. His cock, I could see, was throbbing madly. He desperately wanted to come. His whole body quivered with it.

He sucked my labia into his mouth, then moved up to my clit, and as he did Rider tilted my hips and slid his cock back into me.

The bliss was indescribable. Filled up inside, Rider's wonderful cock stretching out muscles that were still quivering with the aftershocks of my orgasm, and licked thoroughly by Valdec's clever tongue. I could barely breathe. My own hands cupped my breasts, pulling and pinching my nipples. I rocked back and forth, tiny movements that never took me out of contact with Valdec's mouth.

Slowly I became aware that he was licking Rider too, and that pushed me over the edge into a series of rolling orgasms, each one like a set of fireworks inside my body, making me shake and scream until I fell back against Rider, writhing and sobbing uncontrollably.

Rider turned my head and kissed my mouth, his hands tight on my hips for a second before he came too. Valdec never stopped licking, and my orgasmic shudders continued as I realized he was lapping up Rider's come.

I leaned forward, rubbed my cheek against Valdec's swollen cock, and then stretched to squeeze it between my breasts.

With a groan, he erupted, cool liquid squirting over my breasts and dripping from my nipples. The three of us leaned together, panting, exhausted, and at least in my own case, so thoroughly satisfied I couldn't even move.

Chapter Nine

Rider had chosen a bleak, remote planet to hand over Valdec to the IAC. I didn't leave the ship, but watched through the viewport as he was handed from one group of heavily armed men to another. Wind whipped around, whirling into hair and cloaks, even managing to shake the ship a little.

I didn't say goodbye. I didn't ask Rider what would happen to Valdec. I just rested my head against the cool glass and watched the IAC ship take off. Rider's group watched it too, then turned and came back to *Target*.

The door to my cabin cycled open, and I didn't have to turn my head to know who stood there.

"We're leaving," Rider said. "You ought to strap in. That wind's making for some turbulence."

I nodded silently, still not turning from the viewport.

"Sayana," he began, and I shook my head.

"Don't."

"It had to be done."

"I know."

"You didn't even say goodbye," Rider said, sounding bewildered, and at that I turned.

"What was I supposed to say? 'Goodbye, Valdec, I trusted you and you used me to find information that got people killed'?"

His jaw was set. "Look, I didn't like the bastard, but I understood his loyalty. To his people. His planet." Eyes like space trash gleamed at me in the semi-darkness.

"Well, that's very nice for you," I said. "I don't have a people or a planet. So I guess that's something I'll never understand."

He ran a hand through hair that the wind had disheveled. "Of course you have a planet, and a people! You more than anybody. You're a princess --"

"I'm a whore," I said bluntly, and Rider looked absolutely furious.

"You," he began, then exhaled sharply and glared at me. "We'll take you back to Adana," he said. "There's enough left of your ship to salvage, and you can get it fixed there."

I nodded, and turned back to the window. Lonely trees blew in the wind.

"You know," he said, and hesitated, then went on. "Attacking an Otha would lead to a jail sentence. Attacking a princess would be treason."

"No one knows I'm a princess," I said tiredly, "and if you --"

"I'll tell no one," Rider said. "I just thought you might like to think about that."

The door cycled open, and on sudden impulse I turned and said, "Rider."

He paused. I let my eyes take their fill of him, memorizing him. "I never faked anything with you," I said, because he deserved that much.

He stood very still for a moment, and then he nodded, and left.

The door cycled shut, and I was alone.

* * *

"Her name is Bilka," Kali said, as we watched the skinny, pale girl attack her plate of spicy Altaran ribs as if she hadn't eaten in days. Looking at her, I could believe she hadn't. "We used to share a storage locker together."

"What did she have to store?" I asked. Bilka could barely even afford clothes, by the look of the tawdry rags she wore.

"Herself. We lived there," Kali explained. She touched her hair, now strong and glossy and well-cut, and I remembered the ragged blue mop she'd had when I first saw her. How she, like Bilka, had been another beaten-down prosti, sucking cocks on Level 7 for a hundred credits a pop.

"She was a slave before she escaped here," Kali explained, "but she's always been too unwell to find decent work. And without work, she can't scrape the credits for a decent med check to find out what's wrong with her, so..."

"So she lies back and lets men stuff their dicks into her," I said. It was a common enough story.

"If you can pay her med bills and give her somewhere warm to sleep, she'll love you forever," Kali said. "Get her into the union and all her dreams will have come true."

The prostis on Adana had a union, with health benefits, for those they deemed worthy. Bilka, by the look of her, wasn't such a one.

I nodded. "Sure. I'll get her healthy and if she suits me, she can stay. Else I'll get her into the union and she can do what she wants."

Kali smiled. "Thanks. I'll tell her." She paused. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," I responded automatically.

When I blinked I saw eyes like space trash.

"Are you sure? Listen, Sayana, I know what it's like to trust someone who turns out to be a piece of *kuso*. It hurts. But it's not your fault."

"I know that," I said. When I slept I dreamed of Firefly breath and laughter. "I'm probably not the only one he had fooled."

"For sure. Although, I did think he'd probably been Special Forces at some point. The way he moved, like a big Kitali."

"Graceful," I agreed, despite myself. *When I took a client I wanted it to be someone else.*

"Never missed a thing. Very thorough. Well," she gave a little smile, "you know how thorough he was."

"Yes," I said, then paused, confused. "Wait. When did you meet him? Did he -- was he one of your clients?" Suddenly I couldn't bear the thought of Rider being with my sister-in-law.

Kali laughed, although behind it there was concern. "Yes, darling," she said, "you sent him to me, remember? Me and Jal? That's how you found your brother. Because Valdec got to see his marks?"

I stared. I took a long sip of my Firefly. I put down my glass. "Of course," I said. "Valdec. I'd forgotten for a moment."

Kali smiled sympathetically. "I know how you feel. Sometimes it's just nice not to think about it." She patted my hand. "I'll go and talk to Bilka."

I watched her go, saw Bilka's faded eyes light up, and tried to put Rider from my mind. Again.

I wasn't having much luck. He'd escorted me to Spaceport Adana, unloaded the remains of my ship and even recommended a team to work on it. For the time being, I was going nowhere. *Reinette* wasn't totally wrecked, but it'd be a while before she flew again. But she was all I had from my old, safe life. *Reinette* would never use me to get information she could sell.

I took a suite, set about restoring Bilka to health, checked on the progress of my ship, and entertained clients. And I refused to think about a man with eyes like space trash, who moved with the grace of a Kitali and gave me nights full of passion and laughter.

I refused, but it didn't do me much good.

Bilka gained strength, and under my tutelage improved her broken Common to a more acceptable level. We cruised Level 7, she picked out punters, and I showed her some of the techniques Madam Nasiira had taught me. We worked on her application to the union.

I managed not to think about Rider for whole hours at a time.

Then, one day that didn't start out particularly special, I saw him again.

In the morning I inspected *Reinette* and found her nearly ready to fly. Then I returned to my suite to get ready for an appointment Bilka had booked for me. Her administrative skills needed work, I thought as I perused the scant information she'd

taken down. He was a new client, but he'd paid up front and was, in Bilka's own words, "Very nice, very handsome."

I bathed, massaged in lotions that smelled divine but left no trace of taste on the skin, took my time applying subtle cosmetics and styling my hair. I dressed carefully in silks and jewelry, and made sure the bedroom of the suite was clean, tidy, lit properly, and contained all the basic toys I kept on hand for the first session with a new client.

Then I stood in front of the mirror, checking my appearance for flaws, staring at a woman men hired for sex and companionship, wondering when I'd lost my taste for it.

The door gave a soft chime, and I shook myself, moving to pose elegantly on a chair by the viewport, hearing Bilka greet my new client, then take her leave. The door cycled open, and Rider stood there.

The welcoming smile I'd arranged on my face froze there. Rider stood looking at me, his expression unreadable. He wore a suit, his hair was neat and clean and his jaw clean-shaven. There were slight shadows under his eyes.

Silence filled the room.

"You look beautiful," he said finally, and I recovered a little.

"Of course I do. That's what you're paying me for."

The fingers of Rider's right hand flexed, but his expression didn't change.

"Or have you come to arrest me, Captain?" I asked. "Has the IAC changed its mind about my innocence in the Antillan affair?"

"What?" He frowned. "No. Of course not. I'm paying for the night with you because -- well, because..."

I waited. His fingers flexed again. He sighed. "Look," he said, "will you do something for me?"

I gave him a knowing look. "It might cost extra."

"No, I -- will you take your bracelets off?"

My smile slipped. My gaze skittered to the collection of bracelets wound around my left wrist. I never took them off, unless I was in private. And even then, not often. I didn't like to see the scars they concealed. "Why?" I said.

"What really happened? To your arm? You said it was an accident but I figure, when you were a child the only marks you'd have had were your heritage marks. Your caste marks wouldn't have shown until you were older, right?"

"You know a lot about Nil Raja," I said.

"I know a lot about everybody. It's my job." He ran his hand over his face, looking weary. "It seems like a hell of a coincidence that those marks were the part of you that got -- what? Cut?"

I debated silently with myself, then realized it was all pointless, since he'd probably been to the orphanage to find out for himself already. I took off the bracelets. The skin there was lumpy and ugly in the suite's careful lighting. "I was trying to cut the marks away," I said. "I didn't want to be... it was dangerous. My parents, my grandmother, they'd been killed because of these marks. Jal and I spent our lives hiding them. I wanted to make them go away."

"You cut yourself?"

I nodded, keeping my expression blank. "It didn't work. Jal stopped me in time. Madam Nasiira made me wear bracelets to cover it. She said the scars were ugly."

Rider nodded. He loosened the neck of his shirt. He said, "Does anyone else know what happened?"

"Me. Jal. Maybe it was recorded in the orphanage records, but neither of us ever told them why."

"Just you and Jal?"

I nodded.

"And now me."

I nodded again. Rider sighed and came over to me. He held out his hand and I took it, standing. My silks rustled as I did.

"Look, Sayana. I know you're Otha, and you're proud of that. And I know that among the Nil Raja, your caste chooses you only if you're willing to be chosen. And I know you love this life. But I can't stop thinking about you."

His face was inches from mine. He looked tired, and desperate, and honest.

"And I know it's your job to make men fall in love with you. You probably do it without thinking. I bet half your regular clients are just like me, and they know that the most they can ever have with you is a few hours of private time, before they have to hand you over to another lover. And if that's the case then you're just going to have to add me to their ranks. Consider me a regular lover."

"I move around a lot," I whispered.

"I don't care."

My hand moved up, my fingertips tracing his lips, his jaw. His eyes fluttered shut for a second or two. "I never tried to make you love me," I said, and he gave me that half smile.

"But you did anyway."

I kissed that smile. I couldn't stand not kissing him any more. He tasted just as I remembered, hot and sweet and spicy. "Firefly?" I asked, and his eyes danced.

"Someone taught the bartender at Haze to make one."

His body was hot beneath his suit. I pushed the jacket away, smoothed my hands over his shirt. "My sister-in-law," I said. "But I'm the one who keeps him in practice."

"Developed a taste for it?"

"Yes," I said, as his lips caressed the skin of my neck. "It's all I want to drink."

His hands were warm and strong as they spread heat down my back, cupped my buttocks and held me against him. Pressed my stomach against his growing arousal.

His tongue made love to the pulse in my neck. My knees went weak. "*Wo di tian* ah, you're good at that!" I gasped, and he laughed softly. I'd missed that so much, his laughter. He made sex fun.

Rider's hands were fumbling with the neckline of my dress. "Why are your clothes so complicated?" he asked, and it was my turn to laugh. I reached up, unfastened the clasp that held everything in place, and the dress fell to the floor.

"It's tough to get the hang of," I consoled, but Rider didn't seem to be listening. He was staring at me in much the same way as Bilka had stared at that plate of Altaran ribs.

"Oh, darling," he said longingly. "I've missed you." His hands framed my shoulders, skimmed down my arms, featherlight touches that left behind trails of sparkling pleasure. He took my hands and kissed the palms, and then he pulled me against him and kissed me with such intensity and passion I was left clinging to him, too dizzy to stand.

When he finally released me I was trembling.

"Are you cold?" Rider asked, cuddling me in closer.

I looked up at him, wide-eyed. "No." My hand found his. "Come to bed." I led him to the huge mattress, slowly stripped off his clothes and kissed him some more. His hands roamed my body, stroking, kneading. His touch made me crazy, and when I pulled him down to the bed with me, his naked body sliding against mine, we were both breathless.

I couldn't bear it any more. Wrapping my legs around his waist, I pulled his hips to mine and rubbed my slippery wet pussy against his burning hot cock. Rider got the message, and slid inside me, filling me up in a way no other lover had quite seemed to match.

My hands clutched at his back. He felt so sublime inside me, his body pressed the length of mine, hard and strong where mine was soft and yielding. His hand slid to my breast and stroked me there, thumb caressing my nipple as he started to move inside me. I thought I might go mad from the friction.

I licked the salt from his skin, loving the way he shuddered in my arms, this big strong man quaking from the actions of my tongue on his neck. His space trash eyes met mine, warm with laughter, and he kissed me with that miracle mouth of his.

His hands slid down my back and I arched against him, feeling the shock of him inside me, the heat and the slide and the glorious pressure of his body covering mine. Mindless, I moved against him, gasping, drowning in pleasure, and when I came --

-- in the space between heartbeats I knew what I had to do --

-- I cried out his name and shuddered in his arms.

"I could never get enough of this," Rider whispered, his breath coming hard, and I knew I couldn't, either.

But in the morning I still sent him away and told him to make another appointment through Bilka. I was Sayana of the Nil Raja, and I couldn't lie in bed with one lover all day when there were other things to do.

Even if I wanted to.

Chapter Ten

It was on our fourth appointment I told Rider I wanted him to take a trip with me. *Reinette* was fully operational, perhaps even a little improved, and I led him through the airlock, down toward my cabin. "I haven't brought a lover here yet," I said, "not since she's been refitted."

"I suppose I'm honored," Rider said, although there was a bitterness around his mouth at the mention of my other lovers. Truth was, there had been fewer than I was used to, but I rather liked seeing him jealous.

"Don't pout," I said. "Once we've set off, I'll put her on auto-pilot and let you do whatever you want to me in here." I patted the bed invitingly.

"Can I do whatever I want to you before we set off?" Rider asked, and in answer I took off my dress.

Half an hour later, rather more disheveled than I would have ever appeared with any other lover, I sat in the pilot's chair and flew *Reinette* away from Spaceport Adana. I still hadn't told Rider our destination yet, but as he sat beside me I could see him trying to figure it out.

"Stop poking at my instruments," I said, and he grinned.

"I'd rather poke at your -- okay, sorry, too obvious," he amended as I rolled my eyes. "Where are we going? And why?"

"Well," I said, keying in a temporary course and turning to face him, "you ought to know by now. After all, it's you who told me to do it."

"Do what?"

I searched his face. We'd spent a lot of time together recently, and it had been wonderful, but I could see and feel his sadness. He wanted more from me than he was getting. He didn't want to share any more.

"Sooner or later, someone else is going to see my marks and figure out who I am," I said. "And they might not be happy with just letting me decide what to do. They might decide that my existence is too much of a threat to the peace on Nil Raja and try to kill me."

"If those Mentuans are anything to go by, 'try' will be the operative word," Rider said, but his eyes were tense.

"You were the one who said, if they kill an Otha it would go over very hard, but if they kill a princess, it would be treason." I shrugged. "Let's say I'm upping the stakes a little."

Rider's relaxed pose didn't change, but every muscle in his body tightened. "We're going to Nil Raja."

"We are."

"You're going to tell them who you are."

"I am. And," I added before he could say any more, "I'm going to tell them I have no interest in reclaiming the throne. It's not mine anyway."

Rider was silent a moment. "And your brother?"

"We talked about it. He's going to stay in the shadows for now."

Rider nodded. I could see him examining it from all angles, making sure he understood it as fully as possible, and my heart swelled. "Have you contacted the government? Do they know you're coming?"

"I have," I said. "I've explained it. This visit is to announce it officially." Plus, I wanted to see my homeworld. I'd never been there before.

Rider nodded, still thinking.

"And there's something else," I said. "You."

His space trash eyes flickered. "Me?"

"You're part of the visit. Of the announcement. At least," I took a deep breath, "if you want to be."

Rider searched my face. His mouth opened and closed a few times. Then he shook his head, and said, "What?"

"Not all Otha are independent," I said. "Not everyone takes lovers. Well, I mean, they do, but they don't choose them like I do. Well, I mean they do choose, but..."

Rider took my hand. The very faintest glimmer of a smile was on his lips. Flustered, I tried to take my hand back, but he held on.

"A lot of Otha," I began, as he started stroking the back of my hand, "a lot of them are slaves, but, that is..." His touch was driving me crazy. "They have owners, or rather, protectors, and they can choose who they want to be with, it's not involuntary. They can choose..."

"You already said that part," Rider said. His smile was a little wider now. His thumb made circles on my palm.

"What I'm saying is that a lot of Otha take one protector," I stammered. "And they're faithful."

"I've heard that," Rider said. He lifted my hand to his lips and made love to my fingers.

"And -- oh, come on, you know what I'm going to say," I pleaded, and he broke into a full-on grin.

"Yes, but I want to hear you say it." He started kissing up my arm.

I took a breath. "When we get to Nil Raja I'm announcing you as my lover. I'm giving up my other lovers. Clients. There won't be any more." I let out the rest of my breath. "Ever."

Rider kissed that place on my neck that made me go insane, and then he kissed my mouth. "I love you too," he said, and well, it was good that the ship was on auto-pilot, because neither of us paid any attention to the controls for quite some time.

Cat Marsters

Cat lives in a village in southeast England, which, while not quite a fairytale setting, is nonetheless very pretty and was mentioned in the Domesday Book of AD 1087. She shares a house with only slightly batty parents who hardly ever tell her to get a real job, and a musician brother who knows there's no chance she'll ever get one if he doesn't. Cat doesn't have children but she does have cats, who are her babies in every sense except the biological one.

Cat has been writing all her life, but in order to keep herself rich in shoes and chocolate, she's also worked as an airline check-in agent, video rental clerk, stationery shop assistant, and laboratory technician. She's aiming for a fairytale cottage, and asks all potential Prince Charmings to apply in writing with pictures of themselves and their Aston Martins.

Visit Cat's web site at <http://www.catmarsters.com>.