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The Perfect Creation

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

THE PERFECT CREATION

Marie Harte

Dedication

To Claire. Thanks for the opportunity.

Chapter One

Planet Mardu, the Vrail System

A cautious glance around her showed Erin she'd picked the right establishment. Raucous music and drunken carousing made it nearly impossible to hear anything anyone said. The illegal haze of *popper* smoke sat over the din like a blanket of obscurity, and the intentional darkness in the gaming bar more than told her the law was just as welcome, as say, someone like her. *Not at all.*

Furtively keeping to the deepest shadows in the place, she kept her eyes open for the one person she'd been guaranteed could help her. The prisoners on Eyra had assured her that for the right price, Cheltam would do anything. And if it meant crossing System law, so much the better.

Studying the slop of a watering hole, she had less and less confidence in the infamous Cheltam. Unwashed, hard looking men and women dotted the area. Shockingly, couples engaged in sex wherever and whenever they pleased, while others placed bets on anything from vid-displayed *threll* races to which woman over the bar would orgasm first. Not the best place to find herself a saviour. But with no other option, Erin would do what she had to in order to survive. A large body bumped her, and as she turned to apologise, the sight that met her stunned her into silence.

A large male shoved his trousers to his knees. He stood between the naked thighs of a heavily made-up female, one currently moaning and groaning as the male latched onto one of her bared breasts with a slick, open mouth. Slurping and sucking noises grew, grunts and straining flesh pressed at each other in odd places, and to her surprise, Erin felt heat rush to her face. *What? I'm surprised? Embarrassed?* Another thought occurred to her. *I'm sexually aroused?*

Curious, as she'd never before felt the sensation, she watched the couple slam up against the wall, oblivious to their audience. The male pressed into the female, and without further pause gave in to her demands. He lifted her against the wall, wrapped her legs around his waist, then... Erin and several others shifted to get a better look. The male

gripped something between his legs, probably his penis, and shoved inside the female with a long, drawn out groan.

They moved against one another, and the male began pumping his hips. The joining ended rather quickly, with the male's sudden stillness, a groan, and the female's cries for more. Much like an animal coupling, Erin thought, no longer intrigued by the act itself. The pleasure the male appeared to have received, however, made her curious. In all her studies, she'd never quite exhausted human reproduction. Oh, she had the basics from books and such, and her sister was a font of information, but a live demonstration had been deliberately avoided. Even her schooling on the subject had been brief. Why had Canunn left off that part of her education? And why had Synster been so adamant to instruct her in the act? Was this male's pleasure the reason her Handler constantly looked at her so oddly?

And why am I wasting time on this crap when I have more important things to do? Like keep my damned neck out of a peacemaker's collar? Disgusted with her rampant curiosity, which, if she weren't careful, would be the death of her, Erin bypassed the ragged couple and sought the tall, scarred man she'd been told would lead her to Cheltam.

Trying to make herself appear much smaller, she hunched her shoulders, tucked into her stolen black netter's jacket, and carefully stepped through the bar, trying hard not to invite undue attention. In addition to the darkness and smoke, the long collar and drape of her jacket sufficiently covered the parts of her not encased by long trousers and a thin sleeveless shirt. Boots and gloves hid her extremities. And the dark glasses on her face hid the unusual, mismatched hues of her eyes. One glimpse at her unique colouring and System law would be all over this place. The sinful denizens around her would have to be insane to pass up the exorbitant reward Blue Rim Labs offered for information on one of their 'scientists gone rogue'. An out and out obvious lie, but they knew she'd never tell anyone the truth... not if she wanted to live.

She grimaced at thoughts of the prison she'd recently escaped. Four hellish years, almost her entire life, spent surrounded by drab green walls and Eyran scientists. Everything had a reason. Everything, down to the last detail, was planned. Tests, tests, and more tests. Pain and numbness, followed by experiments that even now made her shudder in remembrance. And Canunn thought she would come crawling back 'home' if given enough time in the *real* world?

Erin huffed and moved faster through the bar. With her brother and sister now taken

care of, she had no other thought than vengeance on her mind. Too bad the law couldn't be trusted worth a damn. She glanced back over her shoulder and narrowed her gaze, calling on her second sight. In seconds the haze in the room cleared, and she plainly saw a pair of peacemakers – the ones she thought might have been following her earlier – talking to one of the huge thugs working as bar security. The guard, a Ragga, one of the System's strongest inhabitants, would be invaluable in a place like this. Very few could defeat a Ragga, and though Erin's own manufactured strength had been tested, she wasn't sure she wanted to find out if the practical application of what she'd been taught would hold.

Quickening her pace, she all but ran into the man she'd been looking for.

"Sorry." She coughed and deliberately lowered the pitch of her voice, fixated on the distinctive scar marring his left cheek. "You Drekk?"

"Maybe." The man wasn't thick enough about the torso and arms to be Ragga, but he had height and strength of presence. Something told her he could hold his own in a fight, and as she instinctively sized up a potential enemy, her body automatically readied to protect itself. It was with some effort that she maintained calm and held back her pheromones in the face of this dangerous male. Drekk's eyes were gunmetal grey and flat, the scar on his cheek pinching the corner of his mouth into an unhappy grimace. "Your contact?"

"Wheller."

Drekk stared at her a moment. Then he nodded, and she released the breath she hadn't been aware she'd been holding. He motioned for her to follow him, and they left out of a side door she hadn't seen when she'd previously scouted the bar. Drekk opened the door of a nondescript rover, and she hesitated before getting in. Her instincts were screaming at her not to enter the vehicle, where her defensive manoeuvres would be limited by the constrained space.

"You come with me, or you don't see him." He waited.

If she'd had anyone else she could turn to she would have. But she'd only been on the outside for four measly months, and two of them had been spent healing and evading the law. It had taken her a month to track down Cheltam, and as long to find a ship to stow away in to Mardu. She'd made it this far. A little courage would get her where she wanted to be soon enough.

Taking a leap of faith, she entered the vehicle. Drekk closed the door behind her and

entered. He started the vehicle with the sound of his voice and set a course to their destination, then leaned back to let the conveyance lead the way.

"We'll be there in twenty minutes, standard time." Drekk turned to face her. "Not Eyran time, which I've been told is much more accurate than the common timestamp the rest of us use."

Her pulse sped and her heart raced at his mention of her homeworld. Eyra, a place she never wanted to see again, unless she stood at the controls of a Melan Warship with enough firepower to burn Blue Rim to the ground.

Erin tried to shrug it off but kept her attention on his face and hands.

"I can't make out much more than your hair colour. It's what, red-black? But natural, I'll bet, not dyed like the whores on Nebe6." He narrowed his gaze. "And it's funny, but your skin doesn't seem to glitter the way it does in the description Blue Rim gave to the mercs."

Shit. How the hell he knew she didn't have time to figure out. Because before she could move, he had a hold of her throat in one large, callused hand. "No sudden moves, pretty lady. I know all about what you're capable of. If we'd wanted to send you back to Eyra, we could have shipped you off with those peacemakers in the bar." Drekk closed his hand tighter, and Erin fought the urge to struggle. Instead, she adjusted her body to need less air and deliberately calmed.

"What do you want?" she rasped quietly.

Drekk studied her, his gaze impassive. "Not what *I* want. My boss wants to see you, and to see how high Blue Rim is willing to go. A hundred thousand beks is nothing to laugh at. And if you're worth that much, he figures he can make you worth more."

The bastard. She wanted to rage at the unfairness of it all. That even a low-down criminal mastermind would take Blue Rim's side before hearing her out. Drekk gave a warning squeeze and let her go, nodding when she did nothing.

"Good. Remain steady and silent and this will be relatively painless." He smiled then, and the darkness in his gaze stirred her to an uncomfortable anxiety. Again, forcing herself to relax, she breathed evenly, gradually allowing herself a full intake of air. Erin hadn't escaped a lifetime of imprisonment to walk placidly into the arms of a lying, cheating scoundrel. All the while scheming, she kept her eyes downcast and away from Drekk. She also cued her body to occasionally shiver, and to curl in on itself, as if in fear.

Unfortunately, that fear wasn't all feigned. The instinct to please Drekk, to do what he

said, whispered at the back of her mind, and she fought the urge with satisfying success. Erin had been bred and trained to follow orders. First her Creator's and then her Handler's. Going against her need to please had been harder than anything she'd ever had to face in the labs, especially since she'd done it in secret, with no help from anyone but her brother Ryen. Hell, the scientists had no need to lock her in, not with that submissive imperative buried deep in her psyche. It had taken two years of constant trial and error before she'd been able to resist even the simplest of tasks, but nothing that would alert Blue Rim to her plans.

Most of those outside Blue Rim that she'd come in contact with had been easy to ignore and evade. Drekk, however, bothered her on a fundamental level, so she did her best to give him no reason to exert undue authority.

The rest of the ride passed in silence. When they finally came to a stop, she remained frozen, pleased when Drekk gave her no more than a glance before leaving the vehicle. He opened the door and pulled her out gently, to her surprise. They walked together towards an unremarkable house on the edge of what looked like a once-respectable neighbourhood. Now it was rundown and festered with trash and street vermin – both animal and human.

Drekk punched in a code, the sounds of which she committed to memory. They entered into a dingy receptacle, where a scanner made note of her weapons. Drekk raised a dark brow and waited, a hand out.

Erin quickly handed over her pistol and the Easfran dagger she'd pocketed from the first Mardu thief dumb enough to misjudge her. Playing along with Drekk set him at ease even more. Though the large man didn't unbend enough to slouch, she read the ease in his body and contained an inner sneer, her confidence returning in force. She couldn't wait to lay into him. Him and that scum Cheltam.

Drekk dumped the weapons in a storage bin that pinged a moment after disposal. A large door slid open, and they walked through it. Once past the entrance, the hallways showcased an altogether different house than the one she thought she'd walked into. The air smelled clean. The floor boards underfoot sparkled, and the walls had not a smudge or nick to mar the refreshingly bright yellow colour.

"In here," Drekk growled and nudged her towards a set of large *furen* wood doors. He pushed them open and followed her inside.

"There you are. I've been waiting." The man who stood from behind an oversized, ornate desk was nothing like what she'd been expecting. Yes, he had measuring, unforgiving

eyes and a full-lipped smirk. He wore danger like a second skin, the menace inherent in his character there to see. Yet the sheer beauty in this Mardu male took her by surprise. Cheltam had shoulder-length dark-brown hair pulled back in a neat tail. His face was narrow, masculine planes and lines that hinted at a rough life. His nose was strong, his chin square and hinting at stubbornness. The stark cheekbones and exotically slanted eyes made her think of a jungle cat's – golden and mesmerising if one stared too long.

"Cheltam." She waited, wanting to hear him acknowledge his name.

"In the flesh." His gaze wandered over her. "All covered up I see. Smart." He nodded. "You're worth a pretty bek to the folks at Blue Rim. Not sure if it's really because you're stirring up trouble with science or not. Obviously interference in the scientific process is a criminal offence. But you must have seriously interfered with something big to be worth a hundred grand."

"Wheller had said you were a man who could help." She wanted to smack the satisfaction off his handsome face. Instead she trembled and shrunk smaller. "Why won't you help *me*?" Calling on the helplessness she'd felt all too often during her short life, she willed tears to her eyes. By the blessed suns, she managed to squeeze one over her left lid.

Drekk homed in on the tear trailing down her cheek and frowned in what looked like concern. Cheltam, however, didn't budge.

"Nice try, but –"

Drekk coughed at the same moment and offered her a cloth to wipe her eyes. Cheltam, dammit, was too far away to take down with Drekk. But she feared if she waited much longer, they'd bring in reinforcements. When Drekk shoved the cloth at her again, she slowly reached out a hand.

In seconds, she'd taken the cloth, and Drekk, to his knees. A wrist lock kept him down while she pinched the nerves on his neck, at a spot at the base of his skull, to knock him out. As he tumbled to the floor, she crouched before shooting into the air, meeting the blow Cheltam aimed her way. She saw his eyes widen as his fist met her open hand.

Good, she'd surprised him. But that wasn't all she meant to do. Whipping her glasses off, she shocked him anew with her eyes and used that short moment of inattention to cuff his chin. The blow knocked him back enough that she could use what she knew of the Mardu to her advantage. Clamping one hand on his wrist and another to his thigh, she tugged on the inner bands of his feralis nerves and took him to blessed unconsciousness.

The damage she'd done to both men would keep them out of it for at least half an hour if not more, enough time for her to scout the place, find some restraints, and then convince Cheltam that he'd be helping her, one way or the other.

* * * *

Rafe of Mardu swore as he checked his timepiece again. Gar had a bad habit of ignoring him to suit his convenience. It wasn't as if Rafe wanted to be here, checking on his older brother. But Sernal, damn his hide, had ordered him to.

"Either check on Gar and ascertain his readiness, or be prepared to take on the roll of Cheltam again," Sernal, the oldest of the Mardu brothers, ordered. "Though I have to say, Gar makes a hell of a crook, almost better than you were."

"As if," Rafe muttered and kicked at a fallen shoe. By Flor's dagger, his brother was a slob. Gar's bedroom looked as if a solar storm had lit it. Clothing scattered everywhere. Shoes, socks, and... hell, was that a woman's undergarment hanging from the overhead fan?

Rafe perked up, pleased at the thought that his brother might finally be putting the past behind him. Not that Rafe expected Gar to ever get over the loss of his wife and son. But hell, it had been nearly three years now. Three years of consuming grief, defeat and rage swimming in Gar's gaze, one once so like his own. Whereas once he and Gar had been identical, the years of pain had ravaged Gar's features, turning the once warm Mardu into a steely-eyed devil, one who liked nothing better than to annoy those he considered bothersome. Still, people who didn't know them well took them as twins. As if Rafe's head was anywhere near as hard as that of his stubborn idiot of a brother.

"Fuck this." Rafe pushed past the sloppy bedroom he'd been relegated to and stomped down the hallway, which, thankfully, remained tidy. It hadn't been easy to give up his plum undercover assignment as Cheltam—an independent crime lord—but Rafe had been getting restless. At the time, he'd thought more involvement with the peacemakers would cure him of his malaise. Unfortunately, Sernal was more annoying than boredom. Though his brother, now the head of Peacemaker Central—a term which annoyed Sernal to no end—had an efficiency rate bordering on incredible, he also had a major stick up his ass. Sernal always adhered to the rules and had an irritating tendency to see the world in black and white, or so it seemed to Rafe.

I ought to kick Gar out and resume my duties as Cheltam. Let Gar deal with Sernal on a daily basis. Rafe snorted with amusement, imagining his older brothers facing off. Catam, their youngest sibling, had avoided joining the peacemakers by taking up with a bounty hunting crew. Smartest one in the litter. Not only did the little jerk not have to follow the rules, but he'd become a successful bounty hunter, husband and proud father to two mischievous little girls. And how Rafe's mother loved the justice of that.

Rafe smirked, thinking about the last time he'd seen his nieces as he sought Gar. Those little beauties had nearly started an all-out war by stealing a royal kitten from Prince—

The sight that met his eyes stopped Rafe in his tracks. The study, where he'd thought to find his brother schmoozing with Drekk, looked empty, save for the two unmoving bodies slumped on the ground. Hurriedly checking both Gar and Drekk, he found, to his relief, both of them breathing but unconscious.

Knowing he needed to get a bead on the perpetrator before more damage was done—Flor forbid anyone discover Cheltam was actually a peacemaker—Rafe called on his Xema abilities and drew out his pistol. Quickly and quietly moving through the room and into the hallway again, he listened for any sign of an intruder. To his frustration, he caught nothing. So it was with great surprise when he turned into the kitchen to find the flat of a marbled pan aimed at his head.

Inherently fast reflexes saved him from being smashed in the face, and he ducked and rolled to safety, only to have a strong foot kick his gun from his hand.

"I'll hand it to you, Cheltam. I underestimated you. I won't do it again," a husky, feminine voice warned.

Rafe managed a look at his attacker and made the mother of all mistakes. A glance at inhuman eyes had him pausing in wonder. Her face had been cast in Flor's bountiful Beyond. She had the lips of a god's pleasurer, the eyes of his goddess. The whites of her eyes were overshadowed by a bounty of colour. Bright purple surrounded blue irises around pupils of yellow flame. Her eyes, the slim sternness of her nose, the high, delineated cheekbones which carried both fragility and strength...the woman's face mesmerised with unique, unreal beauty. And in that moment, his study gave his attacker the time she needed to bring him to his knees.

The shot to his groin stunned him speechless, and the pain was worse than anything he could equate it to. So the blow to the back of his head was almost welcome when it took him

into the blissful blackness of sleep.

Chapter Two

This was so not what she needed right now. Cursing under her breath, Erin left the criminal on the floor and reclaimed the bag of food she'd put together before she'd heard him approach. Returning to Cheltam, she hurriedly hefted his deadweight over her shoulder, grateful for the genetics that gave her such enhanced strength, and raced towards the front door. Easily recalling the passcode Drekk had used, she entered it to escape. A quick assessment of the area around her showed nothing but Drekk's vehicle on the street. Not a hint, sigh or speck of any other presence nearby.

Not knowing how much time she had until Drekk regained consciousness, she dropped both her 'saviour' and the provisions bag to the ground, reached into her pocket for the restraints she'd palmed off of Drekk while he lay passed out, and secured Cheltam's hands behind him. With ease, she tossed him into the vehicle that Drekk had conveniently left unsecured and sat with her hands poised over the controls.

The genetic enhancements she'd been given made it difficult to hold Erin under lock and key. She could manipulate her vocal cords to sound like anyone or anything, to include automated intelligence. Her strength made drugs or an actual Ragga necessary to keep her in line when she didn't want to be managed. And her beauty had been amazingly constructed to appeal to anything male in the Vrail System. Better than any Nebite pleasurer, Erin could also regulate her pheromone secretions, to better attract, and thus control, her enemies.

She wasn't without flaws, however. Namely, that she'd been bred to obey. *Only by taking charge of my own life, by putting myself in charge, did I overcome the psychological control of Blue Rim's scientists. I won. I'm stronger than they are,* she continually reminded herself. Yet being in charge had its own problems.

Because for all that she'd taken command of the situation, she didn't know exactly what to do now. She had Cheltam, but she needed his cooperation to take down Blue Rim. Without his connections, it was only a matter of time before Erin found herself a captive of Eyran science once more. And frankly, she'd rather be dead than return to the labs an experiment gone wrong.

Shivering at the thought, she took another glance at Cheltam. He slumped uncomfortably in the seat, and would no doubt awaken with a crick in his neck. But it was no less than he deserved for not even bothering to hear her out.

Fuming at the mess *he'd* made of things, she started the rover using Drekk's voice, overriding his fingerprint command – no wonder he hadn't bothered to lock it – and ordered it to traverse along the lesser used roads towards the Eron Forest. Her jaunt to this planet was logically sound. Though Mardu professed the largest number of bounty hunters per capita of any planet in the System, it also had as many criminals with true skill. Not like the rebels on Melan or the corrupt miners on Mornio, Mardu held a cache of the best thieves in the System, and she meant to use that to her advantage.

But first she needed to get her bearings and a safe enough distance from Cheltam's thugs. Leaving the planet was always an option, but Mardu had both distance and one hell of an asteroid belt between itself and Eyra, making it the ideal hiding place to regroup. Familiar enough with Mardu's topography, specifically the viable regions, she knew that her safest course of action would be to lose herself in the south, in the Anate Jungle while she "convinced" Cheltam to help her. The west held a bevy of lawmen and politicians she definitely needed to avoid. In the east too many bounty hunters and mercenaries polluted every whorehouse and drinking establishment along the coast. The north had too many rich people, and where there was money, there was law. So she decided the south would suit her best.

Once through the Eron Forest, she'd then have to pass through the Fields of Flor. And then on to Anate, where the tribal inhabitants, natural predators and poisonous creatures made even the most dangerous criminals turn away in favour of a prison sentence. But not Erin.

She smiled and settled back in the bench seat, confident in the rover's ability to guide itself. What would Ryen and Anin think of this mad ride through Mardu?

Thinking about her brother and sister took her focus from Cheltam, for which she was grateful. Ryen and Anin had been created within days of one another, a few short months after Erin. Like Erin, all three bore the same genetic construct, with emphasis placed on developing different characteristics within each of them. Ryen looked almost Ragga, and he had been trained as a warrior, the ultimate fighting machine. Unfortunately, Canunn must have missed something important in her brother's creation because Ryen had a hard time

turning off his aggression once wound up. Anin, on the other hand, was the ultimate in subservience. Her attitude pleased everyone she came into contact with, and even Synster considered her a triumph in the field of genetic research. Of course, Synster valued docility, not to mention her sister's skill in all things sexual.

Erin sighed, feeling for her family. Though they'd been created independently of one another, Canunn had impressed upon each of them that they were in fact related genetically, and as such should consider themselves family. One of his sociology experiments Erin had never quite understood yet appreciated all the same. The many lessons and courses of instruction throughout their accelerated growth only exacerbated their need and dependence on one another. In time, Erin experienced what Canunn insisted was love. And from that emotional foundation, Canunn had taught them all about respect, gratitude and loyalty. Then he'd given them over to Synster for handling—tests and experiments that would drive the sanest individual crazy.

Canunn hadn't counted on his teachings being so well-received, however. Because it wasn't long before Erin and her siblings realised they were not being given the same *respect*, *gratitude* and *loyalty* that they doled out to others. They were, in fact, treated as no better than lab specimens.

For days at a time they experienced sensory deprivation, then overstimulation, pain and pleasure, a mix of the two and then extremes of both. Erin had slowly learned what it meant to dislike, disdain, and even hate. Unlike Anin, Erin didn't like giving her complete obedience, and she struggled daily, wishing to bestow her service to someone who'd truly earned it. Though deemed imperfect, Erin still held real value. According to Canunn, she was the first viable, intelligent, decisive-yet-trainable humanoid ever created by Blue Rim. Not a clone or an android, but a carbon-based being who'd undergone artificial maturation and survived without completely losing her mind, unlike the Creations before her.

Synster, however, dwelled on her defects, and not to be outdone by his colleagues, her Handler endeavoured to perfect her 'flaws'.

Synster didn't like to call them punishments, but the beatings, abuse and tests he'd inflicted, to see 'how she responded', had been beyond cruel. Or so Erin had heard several female lab techs whisper, though they never did anything to help her. And because others questioned, Erin found herself able to acknowledge the wrongness she'd always felt in the labs. She began to pay attention to the others around Canunn and Synster. Other scientists

subtly disagreed with Canunn, and many of them vocally disliked Synster. They disapproved of his sexual liaisons with Anin especially, as well as his brutal pleasure in disciplining Ryen. Ryen hated Synster and said so openly, whereas Anin appreciated Synster for allowing her to fulfil his needs. She'd been created to serve, and she did so with pleasure. When Erin questioned her about it privately, however, Anin admitted to liking *the idea* of servitude, but she didn't much care for Synster or the sexual act itself.

As the years passed and their handling grew more intense, Erin, Ryen and Anin became closer and more affectionate with one another. Erin felt real love for her brother and sister. And she knew they wouldn't be able to tolerate much more of Blue Rim's abuse, what certainly wasn't right or fair according to the "System Inhabitant's Rights" vids she'd secretly confiscated and watched.

So Erin devised a plan to escape. With the help of the captured prisoners also used as experimental test subjects, she'd learned of Cheltam and the System beyond Eyra. That there was a life outside of Blue Rim where people had the freedom to do and say what they wanted when they wanted. That it was in fact illegal to kidnap and genetically interfere with life's inception. Erin and her siblings shouldn't have been allowed to exist, and if found out by the wrong people, would be terminated on sight. And if word got out about Blue Rim's method of acquiring test subjects, i.e. by stealing prison contingents, Blue Rim would effectively end.

Unfortunately, Blue Rim had contacts in high places, most especially with System Law, which Erin had found out the hard way. She rubbed her side and stared at Cheltam, wondering how he would have handled a half dozen peacemakers with stunners in hand. Probably would have paid them off, or charmed them with a crook of his lips.

She frowned, wondering why she experienced so much curiosity about the male lying soundlessly next to her. Perhaps it was because Cheltam, to her dismay, didn't fit the picture she'd initially formed of him. His appeal struck her as odd. She'd always assumed that those without conscience would look the part. Both her Creator and her Handler had shifty, untrustworthy eyes and slim, weak frames, as did most of the other scientists at the labs. Evil men, they wanted nothing more than to propel themselves forward in the spotlight, no matter the cost to those they sacrificed in their bid for fame and fortune.

Cheltam, on the other hand, appealed to her sense of what a male should look and act like. Though he hadn't smiled, his lips were both firm and full, and she knew they would

curl invitingly should he grin. His eyes held power. Strength and control, two traits Erin prized. And that body. Erin narrowed her gaze on her prisoner as she noticed his clothing. Though he wore the same dark pants he'd worn in his study, his shirt looked different, as did his boots, which puzzled her.

She leaned closer and inhaled. He had the same sultry scent as before, but it was richer, maybe because they shared a smaller space. And that dark brown hair, those sculpted cheekbones and predatory eyes now closed, those looked the same. But his black shirt bothered her. Erin toyed with the collar of it and accidentally brushed the warm flesh of his throat. The touch of his skin against the sensitive pads of her fingers froze her still.

A burst of pleasure filled her, a warmth unlike anything she'd ever experienced with another, centred in her belly. Curious, she watched for any sign he might be awake, and seeing his steady, even breathing, she touched him again.

His smooth skin felt warmer than her own, and the spark of energy flickering between them told her he was more than he seemed. Many in the System possessed psychic or enhanced abilities that made them special. Erin herself had been constructed to sense the energy around her in all things. But staring at Cheltam, she wondered where his talents lay. Perhaps he was a telepath. Or a Ragga's descendant, considering how quickly and easily he'd met her attacks in his dwelling. Yet he didn't have the domineering build of a Ragga. He was tall and lean, muscled much like an assassin, she thought as she studied him. The feel of him under her fingers, however, made her wonder if he might have some Nebite in him. Because the more she touched him, the more she *wanted* to touch him. And that odd desire told her to be wary of the seemingly vulnerable male.

Reluctantly leaning back, she knew she'd have to be on her guard with him. She'd used the sight of her dazzling eyes to take him off balance before, but the odds of her taking him unaware again didn't figure. Cheltam wouldn't make that mistake with her a second time. Recalling how strong and agile he'd been, she knew she'd best be alert for anything from the canny thief.

As the rover left the crust of civilisation behind and drew nearer to the outlying Eron Forest, Erin began to relax. The provisions she'd brought wouldn't last them though, so she planned on another stop, but only once they'd reached the forest perimeter and the last of the northeastern markets.

Cheltam groaned as they neared their final destination. The rover indicated the Flots

trading tower on the edge of the forest as a last chance at necessities. And considering she'd planned their trek through the forest to last several days, and that was just to get them to Flor's Fields, she knew they'd need to pack heavy.

Conscious of her exposed hair and face, she rummaged in the sack for cover when his voice broke the silence.

"You pack a helluva punch, don't you?"

To her consternation, his raspy voice stroked along nerve endings she hadn't realised she possessed, and she put herself on guard as she turned to stare at him fully awake. Those golden eyes blazed with a strange combination of curiosity and anger.

"You're still hurting?"

He snorted. "My head's ringing, but at least my cock's all there." He frowned at her. "It is all there, isn't it?"

She blinked. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because you nearly smashed it to nothing with your fucking knee." He groaned and felt himself, and bemused, Erin stared at him, fascinated with the shape his fingers outlined. She knew the differences between male and female anatomy, between several species other than human, even. But she'd never been so fascinated with their differences as she was now.

"Are you well?"

"A little sore, but okay." He sighed with relief and focused on her again. His sharp gaze seemed to take in everything from her long hair bound in a tail behind her head to her purple eyes and glittery skin—skin that she quickly toned down to a smooth tan. "You really are beautiful. I've never seen your like before."

And you won't again, if Blue Rim has anything to do about it. "Yes, well, I've never seen your kind before either. None of the other Mardu on the planet have that colour eyes."

"You should talk," he murmured and frowned when he pulled at his shoulders. "Cuffs?"

"For your own protection."

He grinned, and a buzz of warmth stole through her again. "For whose protection?"

"Yours," she answered bluntly. "Because if you try anything, I'll be forced to kill you."

That took the smile from his face, but not the interest from his gaze. "I see." He pursed his lips, and she wished she'd been gifted with telepathy, because she dearly wanted to know what he was thinking. "You're wanted, aren't you?"

"Don't play with me. I was told you'd give me a fair shake, but instead you caved to Blue Rim's demands without hearing me out. Why is that?" She closed the distance between them, angered all over again. "How do you know I don't have as much to offer as they do?"

Cheltam focused on her mouth, and she felt a subtle hum between them, confusing her. "You're right. I should always examine every angle before making a final decision." He licked his lips and met her gaze again. "Must have been the huge amount Blue Rim's throwing out there."

"A hundred thousand is nothing to scoff at, but surely a man as steeped in vice as you would give a fellow criminal the benefit of the doubt." Erin poked him in the chest, irritated anew that she wanted to keep the contact between them. "Hell, Cheltam. I thought you hated System law."

"I do." Though nothing in his expression changed, Erin could feel a guardedness come over him.

"Well, walking hand in hand with Blue Rim is like signing on with the peacemakers. The lab has everyone they need deep in their pockets," she said bitterly, unable to stop her frustration.

"So tell me, what would you have me do for you, honey?"

"Erin, the name is Erin." She wanted to hear him say it. To know who had kicked his ass once and would do so again until she had what she needed — his cooperation.

"Erin." He nodded. "Tell me again what you need. I find I'm in a much more...willing frame of mind to hear you out than I was earlier."

She snorted. "No kidding. I want a techie to help me destroy some data, and I want a cruiser armed with enough demolitions to wipe Blue Rim off the map. Because I want that place destroyed, but only after the prisoners within it are set free."

He frowned. "Prisoners?"

"Yeah. Regular people like you and me." *That sounds good. Make him think we're the same.* "Prisoners heading for the penal colonies on the outer perimeter of the System. Any of the freighters unfortunate enough to come near Eyra end up 'delayed'. That's how Blue Rim acquires their research subjects. By kidnapping and eventually killing them. No fuss, no mess. And the freighter captains are lining their pockets and keeping the jails free from overcrowding."

"Everyone wins," he murmured, his gaze fixed on hers. "Is that what happened to you?"

Did they capture you and, ah, experiment?"

Startled, Erin hadn't realised what a good cover the prisoners would make. "Yes, exactly what happened to me." Her heart raced. If she could delete any and all reference to hers and her family's creation in Blue Rim, they might actually find a way to live without looking over their shoulders all the time. Canunn and Synster had been adamant that life outside the labs was impossible. Creations, according to them, were only deemed acceptable in the environs of Blue Rim and were subject to termination outside of scientific progress. Yet, if she wasn't a Creation, but a poor victim of Blue Rim's objectionable practices...

"So you want revenge." He nodded. "I get it. But honey—Erin," he amended at her glare. "You have to know you can't possibly compete with anything a monster like Blue Rim will offer. Hell, they practically own all of Eyra. A hundred thousand beks is like a drop in the bucket to them."

She frowned. "I was told you were more about screwing with the law than about currency."

He shrugged, not easy to do with his hands behind his back and his body crushed against the seat. For all that he had a leaner frame than a Ragga's, Erin saw she'd misjudged him. Cheltam was thick about the chest and possessed longer legs than she'd thought. "Man's gotta eat. I'll admit, the new head of Peacemaker Central pisses me the hell off. He's a nightmare on two legs." Cheltam grimaced. "All right. I'll bite. What did you plan on offering for my help, because I don't recall anything mentioned?"

His tone softened as he stared at her, and Erin suddenly knew how to get his cooperation. Between Anin's descriptions of what Synster liked and what she'd seen in her time away from the labs, Erin thought she knew enough about the male mindset to proffer something to interest Cheltam.

Herself.

"I have something you can't get anywhere else in the entire System." True. She was the only female humanoid ever created that functioned on her own, with the exception of her sister. And Erin was a lot more independent than poor Anin would ever be.

"Oh?" His eyes turned smoky, and the raspiness of his reply signalled definite interest.

Erin reached out and laid her fingers along his throat, and again that warmth filled her. Helpless to stop herself, she began releasing wafts of pheromones guaranteed to snare the male. "If you help me, Cheltam, I'll offer you something so rare and precious you'll be

begging to give me anything I need."

"Begging, hmm? What's your offer?"

"Me." She ran her fingers down his chest and held her palm over his racing heart. He was affected, no doubt, but he didn't jump on the offer that so many others she'd encountered since leaving Eyra would have taken and run with. She'd received so many propositions in her brief sojourn to Mardu she could have made a nice living for the next few years off her 'delectable' and 'delightfully carnal' body.

"But how do I know you're any good?"

She frowned, not having anticipated anything but a "yes". He thought to refuse her? Erin? Hell, she'd been genetically enhanced to appeal to *all* males. Why was this one so different? She could see he was anything but unaroused. His raspy breathing, dilated pupils and stiffening shaft under those trousers clearly displayed desire. The scent of need filled the air, the subtle aroma a blending of her pheromones and his.

"I don't understand." Not his question, or her sudden instinct to submit to this male, to offer him her subservience. *Oh shit. This is not good. Stay strong. Don't give in.* The knowledge that Cheltam held some innate power over her steeled her will, and Erin resolved that should he accept her offer, no matter how physically close their association might bring them, she'd keep him mentally compartmentalised.

Already the male intrigued her, and they had yet to share intimacies. Erin needed to keep her focus on Blue Rim and her family. She had to in order to survive. Ryen and Anin depended on her. Erin had no time to spare on a criminal mastermind, no matter how attractive she found him.

He smiled, and her heartbeat stuttered, shocking her. She'd experienced a similar feeling when in that bar where the couples fornicated. *Sexual desire.* She didn't have time to worry about it, however, because Cheltam leaned forward and jiggled his restraints.

"I require proof, Erin. A savvy businessman never agrees to an unknown, untested product. Show me what you can do, and I'll think about it. Now how about you start with my cuffs, and we'll go from there?"

She immediately shook her head. "No. But you have a point." Logically, the male needed to know if she could stimulate him past arousal to climax. Anin had often described Synster's quick journey to repletion and his satisfaction afterward. Perhaps if Erin brought Cheltam the same pleasure, he'd be more inclined not only to believe in her worth, but to

help her as well. And if she worked him just right, she could gratify her urge to please him without him learning the truth behind her need.

She shoved him back against the seat and spread his thighs wide. Leaning closer to inspect the closure of his trousers, when she found it, she peeled the top of his pants apart.

"What are you doing?" Cheltam's voice sounded strangled, and she glanced at him in surprise.

"I'm proving myself, as requested." She quickly lifted him with ease as she lowered the cloth, pushing it down past his hips to his thighs.

"How strong *are* you?"

"As strong as I need to be." *But not strong enough to take down Blue Rim, not without your help. And, dammit all, not strong enough to resist you.* Determined to prove she would be worth his help, she drew on what she'd learned from Anin's experience and got to work.

Chapter Three

Rafe was so out of his element here it wasn't funny. Needing to gather as much information from his kidnapper as possible, he'd done his best to ferret answers. Her name was Erin. She had an unnatural ability to enthrall males with a latent sexuality he found fascinating, as well as a beauty that captivated. She had strength and quickness in dangerous quantities, and a logical mindset to meet her objectives, no matter the obstacle.

Unfortunately for her, Rafe considered himself to be a huge obstacle. Erin needed his help to take down Blue Rim, and he knew for a fact Sernal had been investigating that very company, because he'd assigned the task to Gar. The reason behind this kidnapping was beginning to take shape, or at least, it had before she'd lifted him off his ass, as if he weighed no more than a feather, and stripped him to his knees.

Damn. The woman seemed to really want his help, but could he let her—"Oh, shit." He stared incredulously at her small yet strong hand wrapped around his cock. The feel of her soft palm around him aroused him unbearably, and his Xema senses warned him she possessed a dangerous quantity of pheromones adding to her allure. Not that her looks needed much help.

She distracted him by pulling on his shaft, pumping him up and down, slower then faster, and he concentrated all of his attention on holding back, when he wanted so very badly to come all over her. *Control, Rafe, where's your precious control?* Gritting his teeth, he tried to dampen his arousal, and the effort made him sweat.

She wasn't a typical beauty, in any way. Though she possessed a slender build and all the right curves in all the right places, her colouring was too foreign to be anything but stunning. That tan skin that now glittered with gold flecks. Those ripe lips and alien eyes, the colours swirling, as if expressing her emotions. Such a dark purple around the lighter blue, magnifying the pinpoint of heat in that golden pupil. Erin had an uncanny strength, but her touch right now... Rafe wondered if she might have been manipulated by Eyran scientists to bestow sexual pleasure at its finest. He could readily believe it as he watched her handling him.

"You like this." She nodded and continued to jerk him off. "Very much."

"Yeah." Rafe tried to stem the arousal pooling in his blood, to maintain some command over his body. But being tied up and helpless under her touch aroused him even more. And that scent of hers wrapped around his brain as tightly as her fist around his cock. "So you're going to prove yourself invaluable with your body, hmm?" he said thickly, willing himself to hold back.

She stilled and cocked her head. "You aren't responding as I'd thought."

What the hell more did she want? He was ready to blow as it was.

Erin shook her head. "You're still too aware."

"Aware of wh—*blessed Flor*," he moaned, as she enveloped him with her mouth.

She caressed him with her tongue and took him all the way to the back of her throat.

"Oh, yeah. That's it. Suck it, baby, swallow me." Rafe could do nothing more than listen to his body as he fucked her incredible mouth. Jolts of electricity shot through him, and he could feel his energy seeking that elusive plain that every Xema sought: *wainu*—a state of utter peace on a spiritual plateau that only a perfect union might create. And it looked, amazingly, as if the union of his shaft and just her mouth would take him there.

She moaned around him, taking him deeper, her movements so attuned to his needs it was as if they'd known each other forever as opposed to having just met. Rafe lost himself to the splendour of her scent and touch, his orgasm thundering all too near.

He shouted his bliss as he came in her mouth, his climax explosive. The heat of her mouth sucked him deeper, pushing him to give her everything inside of him. The climax took him by surprise, as much as he'd expected it. Because with the physical release, he also experienced a spiritual catharsis, a remedy to the constant restlessness plaguing him. *Wainu*. She'd taken him to *wainu*.

Erin, Flor grant her, swallowed all of his seed before she released him and put his clothes once again to rights. Rafe could only sit there, staring at her in a daze as his spirit dwelled in the perfection of the moment. Erin seemed content to wait.

Moments later, Rafe took a deep breath. "That was...how did you..."

"You liked it." She smiled, pleased, and Rafe noted the flush staining her cheeks, her heavy breathing just now settling down.

"Yeah, you could say that." He took another deep breath, wondering what the hell to do now. He'd violated Sernal's strict policy against fraternization between peacekeepers and

the criminal class. He still needed to know more about Blue Rim and Erin's part in the labs. And hell, if what she said were true, then prison ships were illegally selling their human cargo as slaves to science. An unlawful, not to mention immoral, dealing. Sernal would definitely want that stopped.

Yet it was Erin herself that gave him pause. Rafe wanted her, *badly*. Aside from this mission, aside from her problems, he wanted to sink deep into the intriguing female and cement the connection he could all but feel as he wavered on *wainu's* edge. He'd had plenty of sex before, but not every orgasm could take him to utter bliss, and especially not from contact with a virtual stranger. One touch of Erin's mouth, in this damned uncomfortable vehicle, while *tied up*, and he'd shot his load like a pubescent youth. Yet for all that, he'd seen ecstasy made real.

The responsible side of Rafe told him to take the case and use Erin's information, and *only* Erin's information. But the male, the Xema within, demanded he heed his instincts to challenge the female and gauge her innate worth. That he see what lay beneath the surface of her beauty to find the heat within in a test as old as the Xema line. *Shit*. Though he knew he had to help her, he only hoped he could get to the point where he could focus on the case and not her delectable body.

"Okay, I'll help you."

Her grin widened. "My body for a techie, your ammunitions and a ship to take us there?"

Hell, yes, his body shouted. But his damned conscience just had to intervene. *No, Rafe. She's desperate. Your job is to help people, not to take advantage of them.* Then again, he wasn't Rafe right now. He was Cheltam. "There are conditions." Her grin faltered. "I don't ever go into a situation without knowing the facts. I want details, Erin. I want to know everything you know about Blue Rim. And I want to know what rotten peacemakers are laying in bed with the lab. Those guys will be the first to go," he said roughly, his aversion to corrupt lawmen both in keeping with Cheltam's image and adhering to his own principles.

"Agreed. And in return, I shall pleasure you whenever you like."

He narrowed his gaze, curious at the innocence in her gaze that contradicted the skill she'd just shown with both her hand and mouth. His interest in the woman was growing in leaps and bounds.

"So long as you're willing. I'm not a rapist."

She studied him curiously. "How very odd for a criminal of your calibre. Morals, Cheltam?" Her lips quirked.

"You have a problem with that?" He hoped he wasn't giving anything away, but even when he played Cheltam, Rafe treated females with respect. They adored him; they didn't fear him. He couldn't help that notion of chivalry when it came to the fairer sex. Protectiveness had been bred into his bones.

Erin shook her head. "I don't think rape would ever be necessary with you. The rumours are that you've never begged for female companionship, but rather your women beg for you."

Rafe grinned. "You going to beg, baby?"

"I'm not one of your women. And my name is not 'baby'."

He lost his grin, needing to remind her, and himself, who was in charge, no matter his current state. "You want my help, you're whatever I say you are. Now get rid of the cuffs."

Her hands moved and she grimaced, shoving them behind her back. "I'll take them off, just as soon as we seal the deal."

A typical Mardu custom, one even thieves and smugglers observed, and one he couldn't argue. The woman had done her homework.

Glancing at him, she sighed. "I supposed a handshake won't work."

"A kiss." Rafe steeled himself against a return of the lust he'd previously felt, but he refused to let this opportunity pass. For one thing, he needed to show her he was in charge. And for another, it bothered him on a fundamental level that he'd received pleasure when she had not.

"Fine." She leaned close, but he shook his head.

"No. Straddle me with your thighs, then kiss me. And do exactly as I say."

"Just to seal the deal?"

"Do you want my help or not?" he asked coolly, and her resistance disappeared. Erin quickly straddled him, waiting. "Good girl. I like submissive." The glare she flashed him made him chuckle. "Now slip one hand down your trousers."

"*What?*"

"You heard me. Do it." His stare brooked no refusal. And though she looked confused, she almost eagerly put her hand down her pants. "Now kiss me, and as your lips touch mine, I want you to take one finger and stroke those lower lips, the ones hiding that wet core of

yours."

A rosy flush caused the sparkle in her cheeks to glow brighter. The rover surprised them both by coming to a complete stop, but Rafe continued, needing to make his point.

"But, we're here and I—"

"I'm not going to tell you again. You want my help, you do it my way. Yes or no?"

Erin swallowed, but lust soon consumed the confusion in her gaze. He felt her hand moving between them, saw the excitement she tried to hide, and nodded.

"Now kiss me, and when you do, I want you to rub that tight little nub between your legs."

She audibly swallowed, licked her lips, and made him wish he had the strength to fuck her again right now. But the *wainu* had taken a chunk out of his already low energy reserves, and he needed time to refuel. Watching her take her pleasure would surely help.

Erin's kiss, when it came, had a hesitancy he wouldn't have expected. Her soft lips melted under his, allowing him all the control he thought he'd have to fight for. She gave no protest when his tongue slowly pierced her mouth. If anything, her fingers moved faster over her clit, and her tongue shyly met his as she offered a small moan.

Rafe explored her mouth thoroughly, addicted to her honeyed taste that was like nothing he'd ever sensed before. The scent, flavour and feel of her taunted him as he fought the restraints at his back. He had half a mind to call upon his inner strength, but knew exposing his Xema abilities wasn't necessary, not now. Though he felt like he'd die if he couldn't touch her, he made do with her mouth.

After kissing her until he could no longer breathe, he pulled away to trail his mouth down her neck. Kissing her delicious skin up and down, he returned to the shell of her ear and whispered his commands while alternately teasing her sensitive lobe.

"So sexy," he murmured and pressed his teeth against her soft flesh. Pleased at her shiver, he continued. "How does it feel, touching yourself against me?"

"Good," she breathed, shuddering when he shoved his tongue in her ear, deliberately simulating what he wanted to do with his cock.

"Imagine me touching you, preparing you for a good fucking." Rafe blew in her ear and she moaned again. "Now thrust your finger deep, all the way inside you." He felt her shift. "Ride your hand, baby. Fuck yourself and pretend it's me. Because it will be, very soon."

Arousal built as she rocked against him, and Rafe felt the pitch of her desire nearing its end. "Now rub that clit hard, Erin. Get yourself all wet. And come...right now." He bit her ear lobe, pleased when her body tensed and she cried out against him.

Breathing hard, she fitted her head next to his, their cheeks touching.

Rafe's hard-on returned with a vengeance, surprising him with the suddenness of his arousal. But it was the improbable affection crowding his lust that worried him. Not only was the sensation unwelcome, it was also puzzling. Erin didn't appear to be from Mardu, so the natural chemistry couldn't be explained by planetary impulse. And though he'd before been the recipient of sexual pheromones, namely at the hands of several professionally skilled pleasers, he'd never felt such tenderness for a partner.

"I had no idea," she murmured and pulled back to stare at him with an incredulous look in her eyes. She blushed and withdrew her hand from between them, refastening her trousers.

"Give me your finger," Rafe growled, needing more.

She immediately complied and sucked in a breath when he took her finger deep into his mouth. Like a drug, her taste packed a wallop, and Rafe had to force himself to let go.

"The deal's sealed," he rasped, content when she nodded shakily and removed his cuffs without another word. She slid off his lap and sat quietly next to him in the driver's seat, her gaze focused on her hands, and more specifically on her fingers.

He turned to face her, massaging his wrists. To his satisfaction, she didn't tense or look wary when he touched her shoulder, but met his gaze straight on. "Now let's talk about you and who told you to come looking for me."

She blinked up into his smile, but instead of smiling back, she frowned. Rafe wanted to groan. No doubt about it, this case was going to suck, and unfortunately, not in a good way.

Erin didn't know what to think, say or feel. She'd come so far from the obedient drone Canunn had initially created. Yet a few sexually charged minutes with Cheltam and she'd turned into a quivering mass of "Yes, Sir." She clenched her jaw, unnerved and angry that a criminal of Cheltam's class had gotten to her. And after giving her mindless pleasure.

Who would have thought she could gain such incredible bliss from her own fingers? Sure, she'd touched herself before, curious, but the pleasant hum of release had been nothing like what she'd just experienced. Unlike Anin's descriptions of Synster's frenzied copulation,

Cheltam's movements had been smooth, his commands purely carnal and surprisingly centred on *her* gratification.

Staring at the face that puzzled her, she wondered at the man so infamous for taking on System law and winning. What motivated a man like him? Obviously sex, but what else? And why was his intense scrutiny making her womb tighten with need yet again?

"So what's the plan?" he asked, his voice deep with satisfaction. "This close to the Eron Forest, I'm assuming you want to hide out in the wild?"

"Actually, I had planned to trek past the forest and the Fields of Flor to the Anate Jungle."

He said nothing, just stared at her. "What then?"

"I thought I'd give you enough time to, ah, think the matter over. And once you agreed to help me, we'd find a fifth class cruiser outfitted with munitions, have your techie steal the files I need, then blast Blue Rim into nothingness. End of story."

"Not quite." He smiled, but his grin didn't hold any humour. "You're a pretty popular woman right now with the law, I take it?" She frowned, and he hurriedly continued. "You'd have to be to think up a plan this insane. Look, Erin, totally leaving Tekar puts me at a disadvantage. Most of my contacts are up north and in the east. Granted, I know a lot of people not limited to just this planet, but venturing into the jungle makes no sense."

"It makes perfect sense if you want to remain free," she mumbled, not happy with this turn of events. Already he was trying to take over. "Look, I need you to get me equipment. And I'm *paying* you to do so." She stared at his groin in reminder, but he didn't so much as flinch. "Now follow my lead."

"I don't think so, precious."

"Precious?" She flushed, remembering what she'd said to persuade him to help her. *I'll offer you something so rare and precious you'll be begging to give me anything I need.* Now she felt not only irritated, but foolish as well.

"I can hide us until we need to leave. I have contacts with several peacekeepers I trust, not to mention a few luxury suites to stay in until we have everything you want." He grimaced at the forest around them. "I'm not one for roughing it."

"Why am I not surprised?" She clearly recalled his house in Tekar. "The thing is, I don't entirely trust you."

"Smart girl."

"Exactly. Out here, it's a lot easier to spot an incoming threat, as opposed to relaxing in a luxury suite where you'll set me up to get my ass carted right back to Eyra. I don't think so."

Cheltam frowned. "But Erin—"

"No." Without missing a beat, she pulled a flat disc from a hidden trouser pocket and aimed at him. "With this I can slice you open from top to bottom. The laser is Eyran in design. Deadly." *Just like me.* "Now get out of the rover and do what I tell you."

"Erin, you're making a mistake."

"Well, it won't be the first. Now we're going to get some supplies, and then we're disappearing into the forest for a while. We move when I say move, then stop when I say stop. And Cheltam? I've had it with your attempts to tell me what to do. We made a deal, and you *will* stick to it."

His nostrils flared and his eyes seemed to glow, a preternatural shine of golden fire blazing in the depths of his gaze. For the life of her, Erin didn't understand why his anger excited her.

"You threatening me, Erin?" He leaned closer, his stare unswerving. Faster than she could blink, he disarmed her.

Astonished at his speed but not wanting to show it, she pulled him close and glared at him, deliberately pulling the collar of his shirt tight around his neck, making it hard for him to breathe. "No, I'm not threatening you, Cheltam. I'm *promising* you. Keep screwing with me and I won't put a hole in you with a laser, but with my bare hand."

He didn't blink, almost daring her to choke him. But Erin needed him willing and walking on his own. She especially didn't want to call undue attention to them from the provincial inhabitants this far away from the cities, where anyone unusual stood out. So as much as she didn't want to, she let him go.

Cheltam, however, scooted even closer, clouded rage darkening his gaze. "Killing me won't get you what you want." He yanked her hard into him, and to her surprise, the rock solid feel of his chest under her palms made her want to forego their escape and return to the sexual play she couldn't forget. "We sealed the deal and on that my word is good," he emphasised, glaring at her.

"I know your word is good." Cheltam's reputation was legendary when it came to finishing the job. The hard part lay in convincing the criminal *to take* the job. "But *I'm* in

charge, so get it through that thick skull to follow my lead. I'll tell you everything you want to know once we're away from this vehicle. Trust me, we need to move. It never takes them long to find me, and I wouldn't be surprised if they're on their way here right now." She pulled back, and to her surprise, he let her go. Yet his predatory gaze followed every movement she made.

"You can have this back later." He showed her the slim laser and pocketed it. "But Erin, we need to talk about this plan of yours, *after* we get out of here. No doubt someone's been watching us since we pulled up, and the Mardu out here love to tell tales."

"They'll have nothing to tell about me." She quickly donned the jacket she'd brought with her, but couldn't find her hat so kept her head bared.

"You said it never takes long for 'them' to find you. Who's 'them'?" he grumbled as they both exited the vehicle. A glance around showed them to be the only visitors to the out-of-the-way market tower, but Erin kept her voice low so as not to be overheard when she answered.

She reached back in to grab the small bag she'd thrown together before escaping his house and joined him in front of the rover, facing what looked like a huge tree, but was in fact a trading tower, the last one before they entered the Eron Forest.

"I'm talking about the scientists at Blue Rim. They've got connections the System over. Technology you can't begin to imagine." Like that implanted tracking device that had been an absolute bitch to find and destroy. Erin rubbed her side, aggravated at how careless she'd been not to have realised they would have tracked her in the first place. Talk about stupidly naive.

"I look forward to hearing more, after we hike into the Flor-forgotten forest." He glared at her, and then at the surrounding woods. With a loud sigh, he grabbed the bag from her hands, hefted it over his shoulder, and walked towards the trading tower. "Might want to put those glasses back on."

She hurriedly did so and followed him, irritated that for all her threats, he still managed to do what he wanted. And dammit, she couldn't very well knock him on his ass and maintain a low profile. Her senses were on alert, anticipating Blue Rim security or peacemakers at any moment.

Unfortunately, she wasn't disappointed. The minute they entered the small market, danger surrounded them.

Chapter Four

The giant tree they stood within had been hollowed out and floored with stone. Long counters lined the outer perimeter of the place, upon which several items lay. Animal hides, food stuffs, and ammunitions took up much of the rest of the racks and shelves lining the walls and displays in the middle of the room. Large windows allowed the natural light outside to filter through the store, and the added *char* stones gave the place the illumination it needed.

Several ladders showed passage to the upper, darker reaches of the tree, probably where the merchant stored his warehouse of goods. But it wasn't the small, rotund, greedy-eyed shopkeeper that caught her attention. The three overly large peacemakers bullying the merchant as they piled more on the counter fixed and held her interest. To her dismay, she'd captured theirs as well.

"Easy, love," Cheltam murmured just loudly enough to be heard by all. "I told you this place would be safe enough. See? There are a few of our friendly lawmen keeping the outskirts of society protected as we speak."

Two of the peacemakers chuckled and continued to pocket whatever caught their fancy. The other kept a wary eye between the merchant and them, and she instinctively knew he'd be the one to watch out for.

Cheltam squeezed her hand.

"Thanks, *love*." She squeezed him back. "I'm fine. I'll just see if they have anything over here that we can use on our trip."

He stared at her for a moment, then nodded and left her for the merchant behind his counter. The two peacemakers fighting over some nonsense the merchant objected to ignored Cheltam, clearly not seasoned lawmen. Hell, the first time she'd seen Cheltam she'd been wary of his obvious threat. However, the older, more suspicious peacemaker watched Cheltam begin an itemised list of needs. But after a few moments, seeing nothing out of the ordinary, the lawman left him alone and walked towards Erin.

She slowly turned towards a bin of poorly crafted scarves and looked within, as if she

intended to purchase one of the nasty little garments. The chill of the forest's cooling temperature might warrant such an item, but Erin only wanted to delay the confrontation looming steadily nearer. She did her best to still any hint of her pheromones designed to entice the enemy. While taking out this potential threat might make her feel better, it would only alert his companions of trouble. And she didn't want anyone remembering her visit as anything other than unremarkable.

The red-black hair and long jacket she wore she could easily explain as a fashion trend. With her eyes behind dark glasses and her senses tamped, she stood as close to normal as she could possibly be. Though her skin normally glittered with vitality, when she focused, she could suppress her natural ability to sense energy in the air around her, thus making her skin look normal, if a touch more golden than most.

"You're not going to *buy* those?"

She glanced to her left and smiled at the lawman, inwardly swearing when his gaze homed in on her lips. "No. I was curious about what they're made from. I'm not a native Mardu, and I find the different cultures on the planet fascinating."

The male stood an inch or two shorter than Cheltam, putting him at her height. He had brawn and a smattering of intelligence in his dark eyes, yet his stare held a hint of malice as well. He fisted his hands on his hips, drawing attention to his dark brown uniform and the impressive laser pistol at his side. "My name's Ollen. I'd be happy to show you around, if you like."

He smiled, and the cruel twist to his lips warned her that this one wouldn't shake free easily. A glance over his shoulder showed Cheltam still engaged with the merchant, gathering supplies *she* hadn't ordered. The merchant gathered coils of rope, *char* shards for lighting, a few packets of compressed food and a large globe of some type of liquid on the counter. Then he and Cheltam began haggling about price.

"I'm with someone." She tried for a pleasantly remorseful tone. Unfortunately, Ollen continued to think with the wrong head—a comment she'd heard her sister make many, many times concerning the male of the species. Erin still found the comparison fascinating, that a male's genitals and brains might have something in common.

"But you're not with him now. Your friend looks busy." The peacemaker took another step closer and put a hand on her arm.

Alarms fired in Erin's body, and at a loss to control her anxiety, she felt herself naturally

accommodate to incapacitate the threat. Ollen inhaled and froze, his entire body shifting to align itself with hers.

"Let's go fuck. Now." The brutality barely dormant within him came out in force as he jerked her closer, his strength bruising.

Cheltam, *finally*, glanced over his shoulder at her and frowned. But then the other two guards said something to engage him and nodded at the door. He clenched his jaw and caught her eye. "I'll be back, love. Sit tight and try not to break anything." Or *anyone*, his glance at Ollen seemed to say. Cheltam shot her another look and turned away.

Nice to know he thought she could handle herself. But as Erin watched him leave, she worried about how best to deal with the situation when the peacemaker tried to steal a kiss. Dodging his lips, she moved back a pace and smiled, taking him off balance. "Now that he's gone, let's find a quiet corner and entertain ourselves. What do you say?"

Ollen grinned and dragged her with him towards the merchant. "Take a break, Herm. We need to do some official peacemaker business, you get my meaning?"

Herm glared but said nothing. Instead, he turned on his heel and slammed out of the shop.

"Strip and bend over the counter," Ollen ordered and unbuckled his belt. His fingers shook as he inhaled again, and she noted the dilation of his pupils as she filled the small space around them with her perfume. "*Fuck me*. You smell damned good. Now hurry the hell up. I'm not going to last long."

You got that right. He tore at his trousers, and Erin laid him out flat in no time. She didn't even try to be gentle, gratified by the sound of his thick skull bouncing off the unforgiving stone floor.

Shaking her head at the inherent weakness in all males—most males, she reminded herself, recalling Cheltam's surprising control—she dragged the peacemaker behind one of the counters and tied him up with some nearby rope. After gagging him, she moved to the exit, seeing nothing through the windows of the shop. Had Cheltam escaped, somehow? Or worse, joined with the rogue peacemakers to turn her in? Though he had a reputation as loyal once he'd contracted his services, Cheltam might decide to make an exception in Erin's case. Blue Rim and their lucrative reward for her capture made it impossible for her to trust anyone.

Stealing herself for the worst, Erin pushed out the door and walked cautiously around

the trading tower. As she moved away from the entrance, she noticed Cheltam dragging one unconscious male into the invading woodline. Stunned with relief, she could only watch him work.

Seeing her, the tension in his frame eased. "I take it you put that other asshole out of commission." She nodded, and he motioned to another body on the ground. "Grab that one."

Erin automatically grabbed the male and hid him next to the other guard. Cheltam used a bit of rope to quickly secure both men before holding up a nasty looking cloth.

Aiming a menacing grin at the peacemakers, he then turned to Erin. "Don't ask where I found this, because you don't want to know." He ripped it in half and stuffed the rags into their mouths. When finished, he stood and stared at Erin, his good mood souring rapidly. "Go wait for me inside the store. And for Flor's sake, tone down that scent unless you want to spread those legs for a hard fuck regardless of who's watching." He had the gall to push her back towards the entrance of the tower and away from him, but when she saw the 'who' he mentioned she understood. Several tree lengths away near their rover the merchant, Herm, paced back and forth, oblivious to everything but his own disgruntled rambling.

"Fine." She wished Cheltam's demanding tone weren't so arousing. Unfortunately, being with Cheltam in the rover had only increased her sexual awareness of the exasperating male. "But what do we do about Herm? He'll have questions."

"I'll take care of him. Go inside and grab the stuff on the counter that I was collecting. Put this in its place," he said gruffly and handed her a currency voucher. "Then meet me on the far side by the path near that big black stone."

She'd seen it when they arrived. "Don't take long." She still didn't trust him. But at this point, he surely wasn't in league with these peacemakers. "And don't make me regret trusting you this much," she warned in a low voice.

To her annoyance, he rolled his eyes. "I'm shaking in my boots. Just get away from me before I show you what it really means to bend over a counter."

She blinked. "You heard that?"

"I heard everything that *drun* said. He's lucky I was busy with these two or I'd have ripped off his head and shoved it up his ass."

Not knowing what to say and a bit puzzled over Cheltam's anger, which couldn't possibly exist on her behalf, she started to walk away. "Must have ears like a *threll*," she muttered, not surprised when he answered her.

“Yeah, I do. So hurry that sweet little ass. We need to move.”

More than interested in what exactly Cheltam was capable of, Erin nevertheless shelved her curiosity and entered the market. She grabbed the items he’d mentioned, dumping her bag of supplies and what he’d bartered for into a larger pack, and left for the black rock by a cleared space in the tree line, the beginning of an apparent path through the Eron Forest.

Ducking into the shaded cover of several leafy ferns, she waited for Cheltam to arrive. Three times now he’d surprised her. Cheltam had met her blow for blow in his house. He’d resisted her first attempt to seduce him, and he’d stolen that laser disc out of her hands with a speed exceeding that of mere Mardu. So what exactly was he? She’d been taught that each planet’s natives had distinct characteristics, and that mating between planetary races normally resulted in one genetic strain dominating the other. In unique instances, progeny of mixed breeding resulted in a child with both donors’ characteristics. But according to Blue Rim’s classified files—which she’d risked a week in the desensitisation chamber to read—those instances were exceedingly rare.

So far as her Creator Canunn knew, never had people existed like Erin, Anin and Ryen—beings capable of carrying the dominant markers for *several* planetary races. Erin wasn’t quite sure, but she thought she might possess a hint of Mardu coding as well as the Ragga, Nebite and Zephyr streams running through her blood. Erin had an agility beyond that of most of the System’s inhabitants. Still, she hadn’t the speed that Cheltam seemed to possess, if his theft of that laser disc was any indication. She could only be glad she’d had surprise on her side when she’d downed him in his house.

Cheltam looked like a native of this planet, with a few noticeable exceptions. He had Mardu colouring, a swarthy tan set against that soft, dark brown hair. But those eyes. The light gold colour and exotic slant definitely reminded her of the felines she’d studied back on Eyra. Predators with the instincts to not simply kill, but to survive. Cheltam seemed much the same. Deadly, potent and nearly mesmerising with that sexual, raw stare that seemed to look right through her. She huffed. And he complained about *her* scent. At least that she could mask. His stare, on the other hand, was something difficult to avoid, and it continued to make her want to melt despite her attempts at controlling her libido.

That latent sexuality burning in her ‘partner’ had an odd effect on her ability to concentrate. And that wouldn’t do. Not only did Erin have to protect herself, but the lives of Anin, Ryen, and those helpless prisoners depended on her. Granted, most of the prison

contingent were criminals, but no one deserved the treatment Blue Rim doled on their test subjects. At the memories, Erin tightened her grip on the strap of the pack. She'd do everything in her power to destroy the labs. No matter what she had to sacrifice.

Images of a cold, flat laboratory table, thick straps cutting into her wrists and ankles, prodding fingers, metallic tools and tubes invading her body all stabbed at her with surgical sharpness. Yes, she and her family had escaped Blue Rim, but for how long? And what were the prisoners undergoing as she waited here for Cheltam, a criminal with no thought of anything but lining his pockets and striking out at System law

Erin tightened her jaw and amended her decision. She'd do everything in her power to destroy Blue Rim. No matter what, *or who*, she had to sacrifice.

Rafe glared at Herm, who took the hint and rushed back into his trading tower. Gripping his communicator tightly, Rafe spoke to his brother, not at all happy about Gar's answers. "What do you mean Sernal is unavailable?"

Gar growled back, "What the hell do you think I mean? I can't contact him. He's out of touch. No one has seen him since you last talked to him, if you want to know the truth."

"Great." Rafe rubbed the back of his neck. "First you get cold-cocked by a female, then our great and fearless leader disappears. Two messes I have to clean up."

"Fuck you." Gar sounded less than pleased, and Rafe allowed himself a chuckle. "Think it's funny? She's dangerous, brother mine, and you're stuck with her. She has information on Blue Rim that they're desperate to get back. They offered a hundred thousand beks for her safe return to the planet. Hell, it's obvious she's one of their experiments."

"I know."

"She told you?"

"She told me she and the other prisoner ships getting lost in 'deep space' are ending up on Eyra as part of Blue Rim's illegal test subjects. Apparently, the lab is responsible for the half dozen ships gone missing, which is probably what Sernal expected, and why he assigned you to investigate Blue Rim.

"They use the prisoners as lab rats. For a small fee, those prisoners just 'disappear'. The prisons don't worry about overcrowding, and Blue Rim doesn't have to answer to System law about illegal scientific experimentation."

Gar remained silent.

"What?" Rafe kept an eye on his surroundings, fully expecting another group of peacemakers to show when the three idiots he'd encountered didn't report in. He felt both furious and embarrassed to see lawmen he should have been proud to call his peers acting like corrupt barbarians.

"I'm not buying it, Rafe. She's one of Blue Rim's experiments? She took out Drekk in two seconds, not to mention she knocked me flat on my ass. And what about you? You're saying a female 'experiment' took out two Xema warriors in their prime?" Gar had a point. But still...

"If not an experiment, then what?"

"I've been hearing rumours about a resurgence in the System's push to regulate Eyran practices much more closely." Gar paused, and Rafe had a bad feeling sinking into his bones. "I think she might be a Creation."

Rafe let the cursed word sink in. A Creation, an entity not born, but developed and formed by mortal men and women, not the planetary gods and goddesses as nature intended. An abomination by law and morality, and clearly justified as lethal anomalies during the Eyran War of 2845.

A long time ago, the scientists on Eyra had free reign to do whatever they wanted in the name of science. In doing so, they'd inadvertently manufactured a race of crazy, deviant psychotics with incredible strength and cunning, who had banded together and killed thousands before the peacemakers had stopped them.

As a result, the Vrail Council outlawed Creation as a rule, allowing the occasional android or clone only for specific scientific purposes and only under Council's unanimously voted decision.

Hell, Rafe could name all the clones on Mardu, as well as the androids on Nebe6. There were maybe twenty of them in all, and the peacemakers watched them with careful eyes at all times.

"She's not a Creation." He couldn't—wouldn't—believe it, even as something inside him whispered to listen to what his brother told him. "She could have killed me twice now, yet she didn't. She wants my help."

"To kill everyone at Blue Rim," Gar added caustically.

"Hell, yeah. But can you blame her? If what she says is true, then the labs are doing things to people they shouldn't be. And brother, you saw her eyes. How much do you think

it hurt to turn them purple? Her pupils are *yellow*." Gold actually, a colour that flared with heat whenever she stared at him.

"... Rafe? Are you hearing me?"

Dammit. "Say that again. I think we're losing the connection." Rafe could only be glad this comm unit didn't have a vidphone. He'd catch hell if Gar caught him flushing with embarrassment. *Letting my dick do my thinking when I should be planning a way out of this mess.*

"I said you need to play this out. I'll take care of the peacemakers you knocked out down there. But with the amount of currency Blue Rim is offering as a reward, we can't trust a lot of our guys with this mission. Sad but true. And Sernal can kiss my ass if he doesn't like me mistrusting his people.

"You take care of her. Get her to confide in you what's really going on at Blue Rim. Details. And Drekk's coming with you. I don't trust her, Rafe. And you aren't thinking straight because you're letting your —"

"I'll contact you in two days. Out." Rafe disconnected and pocketed the communicator. Gar wouldn't like it, but Rafe didn't need Drekk covering his ass. *Rafe* would take care of Erin, and he sure as hell didn't want Drekk around when he did so.

Recalling the feel of Erin's mouth over him as if she'd just taken him to *wainu*, Rafe swore at his overactive glands and took a moment to regain control before he headed towards Herm. How a woman could be so soft and willing one minute and so damned dangerous the next baffled him. Yet she'd taken both him and Gar down, and had handled him in the rover easily, when Rafe clearly outweighed her twice over.

But leaving her with Ollen... It had taken considerable control to let Erin take care of him, that disgusting excuse for a lawman. But take care of him she had. Rafe had tuned in to their conversation with his keen hearing, pleased she hadn't let the jerk lay one more finger on her than necessary. Rafe, however, still didn't like the fact that she'd had to defend herself, and had taken his frustration out on Ollen's companions.

Personally, Rafe couldn't wait to see what Sernal would do to the corrupt peacemakers, if Sernal was even around. Gar should have been able to get through to Sernal by now. Especially through their personal channels, a Mardu hotline all of the brothers shared on a special communicator never far from reach. Rafe could only hope Sernal fared well, and that perhaps his brother had to remain incommunicado for a mission's sake.

Sighing, Rafe tucked away his unease and focused on Erin. For the right price, Herm

would forget he'd ever seen them, especially once Rafe promised to send better peacemaker protection his way. Of course, Herm wouldn't know who had sent them, just that a reliable 'friend' of Cheltam's would make good on the promise.

Now to dump Herm and move before Gar sicced Drekk on them. Because Gar wouldn't be denied, and he wanted Drekk to watch over his 'little' brother. Rafe fumed. He didn't need the help, but overprotective Gar couldn't hear "no" past his stubborn brain. He didn't like Erin and would no doubt destroy her the first chance he had if she turned out to be a Creation. The old Gar would have given her a chance, but this tougher, harsher Gar would kill her without a qualm if she threatened his brother's life. And Rafe refused to let that happen.

* * * *

"That little whelp hung up on me." Gar glared at his communicator, ignoring the chuckle from Drekk.

"I told you as much. Hell, Gar. He's you but with a sunnier attitude. Of course he won't take your help, not when there's a pretty female needing him. He's too tenderhearted for the job. I told him so before." Drekk sighed and leaned back on a plush divan, clutching the back of his neck with a grimace. "Damn, that girl put me down hard. I think I like her."

"Took you out like a boy fresh from the fields. Tears, for Flor's sake. She suckered you with damned tears." Gar glared at Drekk, not seeing the humour in any of it. That female was no more an experiment than he was. He'd stake his life on it. She fought too well, and that form, those eyes... She wasn't normal, and if Blue Rim wanted as much for her as they were asking, Erin would bring Rafe nothing but trouble and pain. With Sernal also gone missing, Gar didn't know what to do. Rafe, at least, he had a tentative handle on. But Sernal never took time away from his new job as both commander of *Lady Justice*, his ship, and of the new Peacemaker Central satellite station, *Libetter*. Worry filled him, an instinctive call to protect his own that he would heed this time. He refused to lose anyone else he cared about ever again.

"Gar, don't worry." Drekk rose wearily to his feet. "I'll take care of Rafe. You deal with Sernal. Because of the two of them, Sernal's going to be more trouble than I can handle."

Gar couldn't help the small smile that escaped. "Admit it, he's a pain the in the ass."

"Of course he is. All you peacemakers are. But Rafe, him I can tolerate. More than you," Drekk muttered, offered Gar an obscene hand gesture, then simply vanished.

Gar stared, wide-eyed, at how Drekk had gotten his hands on a personal micro-teleporter and shook his head. "Show off." He sighed. *Now to save big brother, most likely from himself.* Sucking in a breath, Gar did what he'd been dreading. He dialled another number, this time off his vidcom, and stared into Sernal's likeness – Catam. "Well now, if it isn't the baby of the family." He tried for normalcy, hoping it bled through his pores like a fine sweat on a hot day.

"Gar?" The hopeful anticipation in his youngest brother's hesitant smile cut Gar to the quick. "How are you? I've missed you –"

"Yeah, well, I've been busy." The thought of the last time he'd called, of the sound of children giggling in the background, pierced the dull armour around his heart, and he ignored the ache in his chest, wishing more than anything he could undo the past. "Sernal's missing. I don't have time for chatter. Now shut up and listen."

Chapter Five

After three silent hours of nonstop movement through the forest, Erin wanted a break. Not that she needed it, but she sought a handle on the man at her back, at the male staring holes through her every time she glanced behind her and caught his piercing gaze. More worrisome than Cheltam's changing attitude, however, was the fact that the more time she spent in his presence, the more she wanted to bow to his favour. She found herself desiring to ask him what he wanted, if the pace suited him, if the direction was to his liking.

Stop it, Erin. He's not your Handler. You are no man's servant, not ever again. Yet her constant reprimands made her that much more aware of his natural dominance, of the light breaths he took while they marched at a warrior's pace, keeping even with her. So strong, so masterful. And so damned tightlipped about what he thought.

"Okay, I'm taking a break." Erin stopped at a nearby stream and sat down on waist-high rock, just daring him to argue.

"Fine." He shrugged off the pack he'd insisted he carry. To her consternation, he didn't look a bit winded. Her body shivered, wanting another taste and touch of such firm muscle, to feel his warm heartbeat pulsing under her hand again. "Thirsty?" He held up a cup taken from the pack and nodded at the water.

"No, you go ahead."

He shrugged and crouched low, gathering the water for a long, slow drink.

Small beads dripped down his mouth to his throat, and Erin watched, riveted, as his throat moved in time with his swallows. His full lips hugged the metallic container holding the precious liquid, and his long-fingered hand cupped the small container, cradling it with a firm gentleness that would be devastating on her body. She could all too easily imagine Cheltam's callused hands on her naked flesh, easing the material off her shoulders, her arms, baring her breasts that even now swelled in anticipation of his touch...

Erin cursed under her breath, suddenly overly warm. She kept her eyes averted from Cheltam and threw off her jacket, taking in great gulps of air. Her hair felt like a blanket over her head and she threaded her hand through the strands, allowing air to pass over her heated

skull. Something was very wrong, because her entire body began shaking, overheating. And without thinking about it, she took two steps to the right and threw herself into the ice-cold water of the river, sighing with relief when she slowly regained a measure of normal body temperature.

Stranger than strange. I feel better, yet still tingly, not quite myself. She shook her head, smoothed her hair back, and sighed at how good that felt.

"What the hell are you doing?" Cheltam asked in a croak, staring at her.

"I was hot," she answered lamely, not sure what to say. The air around them had cooled considerably, and their trek hadn't been that arduous. She had no idea why she'd grown so hot, and now that she'd resumed a normal body temperature, she began to shiver as the wet cold penetrated her clothes to her skin.

He simply stared at her, but as his gaze travelled over her with deliberate slowness, she saw that the heat in his gaze wasn't so much from anger as from arousal. Following his stare, she saw the clinging fabric of her thin blouse clinging to her breasts and stomach. The light colour of the shirt, unfortunately, turned transparent when wet, showcasing her stiffening nipples just visible under the ends of her hair.

"Come out of there." His flat voice gave nothing away, so it surprised her when he leaned forwards and yanked her the rest of the way out of the river. He plastered her to him and kissed the breath out of her before she could blink.

As before, the moment their lips touched, all thought left her. Sensation swamped the corridors of her body, washing her with a need so great she wanted to do whatever he asked to realise satisfaction.

"Baby, you are so fucking sexy," he moaned, sucking on her lower lip. His hands drew up her ribs to rest under her full breasts. "These I have to see. Now." His voice brooked no refusal, and the sheer command in his voice forced her to obey.

With trembling fingers she parted her blouse, taken with his thickening breaths.

"That's it. Take off that wet shirt. You can't stay in your clothes. Don't want to catch an illness, do you?" he asked smoothly, running hot hands over her chest. "Mother of Night, your nipples are loving my hands, aren't they, Erin?"

Erin didn't want to talk, she wanted him to touch her. She wanted his mouth over her breasts, the way he'd done before. She wanted him to fill that aching void between her legs, to put himself inside her the way the couple had in that bar...

"Answer me," he ordered, staring into her face as he helped her remove her blouse.

She blinked hazily up at him, completely his. "Yes, they love your touch," she whispered, not understanding when he frowned.

"You're pulling me in with that godly scent, aren't you?"

"No," she answered, lowering her gaze as she'd been taught. She surprised herself with the truth. Though her instinctive response to threat was to lure in her prey, this time with Cheltam felt different. "But you are."

"I am?" he sounded uneasy, but his touch grew warmer as he fondled her. He stepped closer and pulled her trousers down her legs. "Tell me what I smell like." He left her body to tug off her boots and leggings and then her trousers, leaving her completely bare.

"Like warmth, like pure *areesia* in bloom," she moaned, craving his touch. "Please, Cheltam. Tell me how to please you."

"Not Cheltam," he rasped. "Rafe. Call me Rafe."

She nodded. "Rafe."

"It's another name I go by, and we don't want to let anyone know who I really am," he continued, as if she needed an explanation. She would call him whatever he wanted so long as he put out this damnable fire within her. He stood and walked her backward until she leaned against a large rock. "Sit back."

She rested her buttocks against the boulder but was unprepared when he nudged her legs apart with his knee.

"You are so blessedly beautiful," he breathed, staring at her from top to bottom.

Erin didn't feel the cold of the air or the rock at her back. She only had eyes for Cheltam—Rafe—until he met her gaze, then she instinctively looked away. Submissive...

Fingers under her chin tilted her gaze back up. "I want you to look at me."

"Yes, Rafe." *Yes, Sir.*

He exhaled heavily. And when he inhaled, he frowned again. "You really aren't overpowering me with that scent."

"So what?" She arched closer to him, wanting his hands back on her. But it wasn't her place to be aggressive. Rafe had to tell her what *he* wanted. *No, Erin, no. Fight it. You're in charge. You're the Handler, not Rafe, Cheltam, whatever he wants to be called.*

"So...your body is like a furnace, and every other time we've been together you've been throwing out pheromones left and right. Yet now, nothing? When I can clearly smell your

cream?"

"My cream?" Puzzled, she stared at him, watching in bemusement as he fell to his knees in front of her.

"Your cream." He put his hands on her sensitive thighs and spread her to his gaze, his stare centred on her swollen folds. "That sweet honey I'm going to eat until I'm full."

Alarmed now, she wanted to protest. The Mardu wanted to *eat* her? The self-preservation that should have kicked in didn't. She waited for him to do whatever he wanted, her body thoroughly ensnared by his heady scent that thickened as he watched her. An ache thrummed within her, and she moaned as his face neared her mound, helplessly caught in a war with her body she couldn't win.

The speed with which his mouth found her sex startled her, as did the pleasure that shot through her.

"*Rafe*. What are you doing to me?"

He grunted his satisfaction and tightened his grip on her thighs as he sucked on her clit, pulling more and more cream towards his mouth. He licked with a tongue that stroked in all the right places, and like before, she burst into an incredible orgasmic bliss. Energy spiralled out from her core, his mouth electric as it wrung more and more pleasure from her.

But when he inserted a long finger into her, she tensed at the intrusion, her body making way for something larger than her own digit. And still it was not enough. The orgasm continued to wrack her as he pushed deeper, while he licked and sucked her clit.

"More," he growled and pulled on her flesh with his teeth as he added *another* finger into her sheath. "So damned tight." Working into her, he thrust repeatedly in and out of her channel with his fingers until the small pressure holding back further penetration broke. A huge burst of ecstasy ruptured the small spurt of pain until a plane of unimaginable rapture filled Erin's world.

She distantly heard Rafe's curse, felt his fingers slipping from her body as she blinked into a world layered atop her own. Colours became brighter, noises louder yet softer at the same time, soothing her into a state of utter peace. And then warmth covered her body, the rasp of Rafe's shirt against her breasts pulling a moan from her. Unbidden, her body released a torrent of perfume, tying Rafe to her in an unimaginable hold.

Blinking up at him, Erin watched his eyes glow like twin suns as he pushed inside her with something more than his finger. He practically purred his pleasure as he pushed deeper

and harder into her, until he fully seated himself inside her. Instead of the discomfort she would have thought to feel, however, excitement and a feeling of utter right lit her from the inside out.

"Erin, dear Flor, you're in heat," he moaned, pulling out only to slam back in. Rafe claimed what no male ever had, drawing from her sensations she'd never before felt. "Fuck. I have to have you. All of it, again."

Still floating in that state of pleasure, she felt the eddying climax swell, pushing her sated body towards the crest of fulfilment yet again. As Rafe filled her with himself, a part of their energy overlapped. His pulling hers back to the forest, and hers pulling him onto a plain of conscious pleasure she never wanted to leave again.

"Yes, yes," he moaned as his pace increased.

She felt his body overtaking hers, experienced the awareness of enveloping another, of feeling his body press hers in intimate places that sparked greater and greater pleasure. Rafe locked his mouth over hers, devouring her lips and breath as he took her harder and faster.

Erin shook, on the edge again as he pulled her with him out of that ecstatic place, only to teeter at the edge of it together. Rafe abruptly ended the kiss and caught the sides of her head in a firm grip.

Staring down into her gaze, he mastered her body and mind, controlling her every physical sensation. "I'm going to shoot so hard inside you," he said thickly, and she moaned as he readjusted his angle of penetration. "Fuck, Erin, you're so *right*." Perfume covered them both, a mixture of his *areesia* and her spice, and he groaned as he pushed deeper inside her, the fullness so tight it almost hurt.

"But I'm not going to come until you do. So come for me, baby. Come now," he urged as he bit hard at the tendon of her throat.

Erin couldn't help but do as he commanded, and she screamed as she came, her climax obliterating all else. Once again that joyful plane awaited, but this time Rafe was there with her, jetting inside her while his energy entwined with hers.

Erin couldn't have said when she lost consciousness, or when she eventually left that floaty perception of perfection. She shifted and suddenly felt Rafe holding her tight. He kissed the top of her head and hugged her closer. And for the first time in her life, the caution she lived with on a daily basis left her. With a soft sigh, she felt him withdraw, and she snuggled closer to bask in the warmth of the only male besides Ryen she'd started to trust.

After laying them both down on the ground over their scattered clothes, Rafe stared down at Erin, baffled at how a woman not Mardu could experience a Mardu female's heat and *wainu*, both while still a virgin. By Flor's dagger, but the woman made him crazed with just a taste. Rafe of Mardu—a Xema warrior—undone by sex. It was unheard of. His kind revered sensuality. Xema both basked in pleasure and *controlled* it, through years of steady practice. Through sex, Rafe could better manage his energy and eventually reach *wainu*—a spiritual centre that would increase his strength the more he reached it.

Yet with Erin, he'd lost any semblance of reason, a prisoner to desire. All he'd thought when eating her had been, *Mine*. And Gar hinted she might be a Creation? What Creation could mimic Mardu characteristics? Could take a Xema warrior to *wainu*?

Incredibly, the spitfire who'd not only kept pace with him but tried to take charge of everything they did had ceded him everything. Her virginity and her submission, and he *still* couldn't believe it. Twice now he'd shared intimacies with Erin, and each time just got better. Hell, he'd shot so hard and so deep into her he still felt connected to the woman.

Her innocence didn't mesh at all with the incredible blow job she'd given him. And he couldn't decide whether to be pleased that he'd claimed what no one ever had before, or annoyed that she'd misled him by agreeing to 'perform' for him whenever he wanted. A damned virgin claiming expertise. *A virgin no longer*, his conscious winced while the predator within him snarled its approval.

They fit together perfectly. And that made him nervous. He didn't know her well... hell, hardly at all. What if she was in fact a Creation? What then? Because as much as Rafe wanted to disagree with Gar, things about Erin just didn't fit. Her face didn't possess one blemish or flaw that he could see. And her body had been built to fuck. Rafe had lived among males of every shape and species, and he knew every male that saw her would want her. And when she let loose those pheromones... Which made him frown.

Erin could control her scent, usually. From what he'd seen of her, she appeared to use it when threatened, or when she wanted to take charge of a situation. And he had to admit, her pheromones had seriously screwed with his head before. Yet tonight she hadn't used her scent to ensnare him. He'd been just as hard, if not harder, to have her once he saw her clothes clinging to her body. Which led him to his second big question of the night. Why the

hell had she jumped into the stream?

So many questions and no answers.

Frustrated at what promised to be a dangerous, potentially addicting situation, Rafe almost wished he hadn't been so tired of waiting on his brother. After all, Erin had been there to talk to Cheltam, and she'd planned on kidnapping his brother before he'd shown up. Yet the thought of her and Gar together suddenly made him see red, and Rafe stared at her in bewilderment.

Rafe didn't suffer jealousy. He didn't lose control with women. And he sure as hell had never been knocked out cold by one. But in the span of one short, day, Erin had him spinning in so many circles he felt dizzy. And that was to say nothing of this majorly messy situation with Blue Rim that would only get worse.

Erin sighed and murmured at his throat, her lips brushing his pulse, and Rafe pulled her closer, needing more contact. *Hell. A Creation or criminal, take your pick, brought you to wainu not once, but twice. You barely know her. You should arrest her. And all you can think about is burying yourself in her again. You've got it bad, Rafe. Really, really bad.*

"Shit." Rafe shook his head and tightened his arms, not willing to let her go. Not yet. But with Sernal missing in action and Gar giving orders—Flor help him—Rafe knew he had to find answers, and fast. A few hours of sleep wouldn't hurt, though. And after what they'd been through, Erin had earned her share.

She murmured his name and moaned softly, and Rafe felt a curious sensation in the vicinity of his heart. Erin clearly didn't trust much, yet she lay here in his arms, asleep. The joy that afforded him should have bothered him more. But he couldn't help the stupid grin lighting his face as he held her close.

Erin's cocoon shifted, allowing a slight waft of cool air to hit her bare bottom. Frowning, she took a deep breath and immediately scented Cheltam—Rafe.

Slowly blinking into the darkness, she adjusted her vision so she could see clearly. Erin lay on her side in Rafe's arms, her shirt draped half over her back. Rafe's heartbeat felt slow and steady under her palm, but when she leaned back to look at his face, she saw his golden gaze fixed to hers.

"You didn't sleep long."

She licked her lips, flushing when he followed the movement with a lazy grin. "I, ah,

normally don't need much sleep." Correction, she didn't take more than catnaps all day because she didn't trust Blue Rim not to show up on her door at any moment.

He stroked her back with long, sensual caresses that made her want him all over again. "I have questions, honey, that even the greatest sex in the System can't put off."

Erin stared. Greatest sex in the System? She tried but failed to contain the grin threatening to take over her entire face.

"You like that," he grumbled, a smile curling his lips. "You like making me burn."

"Me?" She pushed him back and touched him, relishing the idea that she truly desired Rafe. So far, despite his background, she couldn't help liking him. And she definitely had no complaints about his body or the way he used it.

"Yes, you." Rafe sighed. "I'd much rather sink inside you again, but I need to know —"

Erin grabbed his cock, marvelling at the hard shape of him in contrast to the smooth, soft skin covering his shaft. "Why can't we do both?"

He sucked in a breath. "You're really making it hard to concentrate."

She laughed, in a wonderful, playful mood that deserved exploration. When was the last time she'd had fun? Honest, non-recorded fun that had nothing to do with tests or Blue Rim? "Hard is good."

Erin kissed him slowly, building the need between them. The heat constantly present whenever she caught his particular scent flared, and she straddled him without conscious thought, instinctively knowing what to do. Just like when she'd taken him in her mouth and brought him to bliss. Erin knew what he'd like, and what she wanted.

Grabbing his cock, she held him steady while she lowered herself over him. As before, he filled her completely, but the impaled sensation pushed him even deeper towards her womb.

"Flor's mercy, you feel so good," he groaned and grasped her waist.

She agreed, especially when he pushed her up, then let her slide down him again.

"Oh, yes. That's it." She rocked over him, playing with her pace and roughness, finding a rhythm she liked. But Rafe stopped her too soon. "What?"

"Keep it up and I'll come." His raw voice sent another surge of heat through her, and without thought, her arousal pulsed through her pores to draw him closer. "Fuck." Rafe clenched her hips like a lifeline, dragging in a breath of her perfume. "I'm going to punish you for that, you little tease. But I need to know a few things first."

His restraint only increased her ardour. No other male had ever been able to resist her. Not even her Creator or Handler, though they'd tried. They had years of training on their side, but when she'd finally made up her mind to leave, enticing them to show their vulnerabilities had been frighteningly easy.

Rafe, however, matched her will. And she wanted more than anything to give him what he needed.

"Ask me your questions." She would tell him what he wanted to hear. Whatever he needed, she'd give him.

Rafe closed his eyes and forced her to remain still, and she could *feel* his hard cock pulsing with his heartbeat, her sensitivity incredibly tuned to his. "I'm sorry, baby, but if I don't ask now, I have a feeling we'll be knee-deep in peacemakers and scientists before you know it." Rafe shifted his hips, rubbing her clit against his pelvic bone, and she moaned. "That's right. *I'm* filling you, baby. Just me. I own you now."

"Yes." Ecstasy consumed her, and she understood what Anin always sought but had never found during her sexual trysts. The ability to surrender fully, mind and body, to another.

"Blue Rim. Are they really as bad as you say they are?"

"Yes."

"They're using prisoners in their experiments?" His grip gentled and he thrust deeper inside her, arching into her sex.

The movement jolted her body to claw at fulfilment. "I'm telling the truth, yes." She clenched her inner walls, and he cursed, moving inside her again.

"Then tell me one more truth, baby. You're not and never were a prisoner, right?"

Her mind shrieked at her to deny it, but her will was no longer her own. The urge to submit overwhelmed her need to maintain her secret. "No," she whispered, lost when he touched her clit, rubbing the nub as he pushed her to ride him harder.

"They created you, didn't they?"

She didn't want to tell him, didn't want to say it. But seeing him stare up at her as if she were his salvation, she slowly nodded.

Rafe only rubbed her faster, and then the hand still gripping her hip moved up to cup her breast, pinching the bud with delicious roughness. "*Fuck*. Come around me, Erin. Suck me deep, baby, while I come inside you." His harsh command elated her, pushing her into an

all-encompassing climax.

She could barely breathe as the state of perfection blanketed her, and as Rafe shouted his own release, both his seed and his spirit found her, bathing her with comfort and warmth, and what felt oddly enough like true affection.

Moments later she lay slumped over him, his callused palm centred over her lower back, their bodies still joined as they recovered from such an extraordinary coupling.

"It'll be okay, Erin." Rafe murmured her name as he stroked her. "This will all work out."

Moments passed, and her peace gradually faded. *This will all work out*, he'd said. But for whom? Recalling what she'd confessed in the heat of passion, Erin knew the enormity of what she'd done. The calm she'd experienced now felt like a vat of Agoba acid. Staring down at a male she knew only as a manipulator, a thief and an opportunist, Erin gaped in horror and did the only thing she could think to do.

She grabbed hold of his neck and squeezed.

Chapter Six

"I want to know how she and the others got away." Canunn shook his head as he and Synster conferred in the landing bay of Sector Eight on Nebe6, the System's infamous pleasure planet. Canunn had insisted they stand a good distance from disembarking ships, not wanting to be too close to the riffraff normally associated with the sinful destination. "And I'm still not sure why we're here, of all places. I don't think this was a good idea."

Synster scoffed. "I'm surprised you can think at all without the comfort of the labs. This is a golden opportunity to visit the most stellar pleasers in the System. Think what we can do with a pleaser's programming in someone like Anin." His broad grin faded. "When I find that little bitch, she is in for a bout of discipline like nothing she's ever had. And just wait until I get my hands on Erin."

"Really, Synster." Canunn flushed, not at all comfortable with discussions of this sort. "We're not here to...*indulge*. The only reason Blue Rim allowed us to leave was to recapture our subjects before anyone finds out what they are." He kept his voice low, not wanting anyone to overhear. Canunn wasn't worried that Erin or the others would broadcast their identity. The System had ordered Creations terminated on site years ago. And though Erin had adapted to societal strictures better than Anin or Ryen, physically, she didn't completely blend in with most humanoids.

He frowned. She had been away for several months. Could she have adapted better than he'd thought? She'd never been tested outside of a controlled environment. What if she began displaying skills they'd never thought to investigate? Sweat beaded on his forehead at thoughts of never recapturing his Creation. Still, Erin couldn't be at full strength. She had, unfortunately, suffered a fair amount of bruising after that first set of peacemakers had thought to bring her in using any means possible. Then there was the removal of her embedded tracking chip and the reports of vigorous pursuit by a trio of brutal bounty hunters.

"You need to get laid," Synster spoke bluntly, distracting him. "If you'd ever shove that dick through anything but your fingers, you'd know what it's like to desire. Think about it, Canunn. We could definitely use desire to our advantage with our buyers. Imagine how

much we could make on *this* planet with the three of them, Erin, Anin and Ryen, creatures designed to appeal to any and all sexes?"

"But they're commissioned to go the highest bidder next year. We have to finish their programming. We can't afford to deviate from our set course, Synster. The sale from Erin alone will be enough to fund Blue Rim well past the next century. And think of our guaranteed promotion and the ability to run our own research teams. Don't screw this up with sex. I beg you."

Canunn shuddered as a garishly costumed pleasurer, a whore actually, considering the poor quality of her clothing and face paints, strolled by them. He didn't like sex. He occasionally masturbated to ease his physical hungers, thankfully few that there were. But he couldn't imagine Erin walking around like that...whore, his precious project defiled by base lust.

Erin, unlike Anin and Ryen, could hold a decent conversation without prostrating herself or going for his throat. Thankfully, Anin's and Ryen's failings made hiding them easy. Canunn had lied to his colleagues, so they believed that Anin and Ryen were right now stabilised and unconscious in Canunn's private labs away from the main facility.

But Mathin, Canunn and Synster's boss, kept abreast of Erin's progress, singularly so. And Canunn couldn't blame him. Erin, despite a small flaw or two, was perfection. She had intelligence, the ability to learn, and an open-mindedness he prided himself for instilling. Her physical form, naturally, had been designed to attract all manner of sentient beings, for the express purpose of maintaining the upper hand at all times. With her powerful pheromones, she would always be able to confuse her enemies, giving her enough time to disarm and/or kill them with her superior strength.

But to use those pheromones to induce a bout of sex? Canunn squirmed, unable and unwilling to imagine her under Synster, as he had, unfortunately, once seen Anin. The bored Creation had waited patiently for Synster to spend, and the sight of Synster's impure seed dripping down her legs disgusted him. Thankfully, Canunn's sterile Creations would never conceive. A child with Synster's mindset and Anin's abilities would be a nightmare.

"Why did we have to meet here?" he asked Synster again. "I thought bounty hunters were for hire. That means *we* tell *them* what to do." At least, that's the way the other two groups had behaved. Then again, both of them had failed.

Synster shrugged. "This crew is supposed to be the best, and they wanted to meet here.

From what I gather, they have two Raggas on board. And you know how they can get if you don't satisfy them."

Canunn nodded. Though Erin and Anin both possessed Ragga genetics, Ryen had manifested more Ragga characteristics than the others. Both broad and tall, he possessed more muscle than even the strongest Ragga, as well as a keen intellect that wasn't nearly as forgiving as Anin's...*at all*. The only thing that had sated him over the years were a multitude of women to ease his fury and constant battles testing his war skills. Though most Raggas weren't nearly so sexually hungry, Ryen seemed to need the constant release.

"Look, here they are." Synster interrupted his musings. "*Mara's Light*."

They waited while the ship docked. A ramp lowered and several people departed. The two larger figures were clearly the Raggas Synster had mentioned. Another large male escorted a striking woman, his arm wrapped around her shoulder possessively. The four glanced at Canunn and Synster. Then another male left the ship, said something to the group in a low voice, and walked past them towards Canunn. The other four hung back, as if waiting for trouble to break out.

"We're the ones who requested your services," Synster said in a condescending tone once the male reached them.

The male, a Mardu, to Canunn's practiced eye, simply lifted his left brow and stared at Synster, saying nothing for a moment. When Synster shifted uncomfortably, the male rolled his eyes. "You want to discuss this here, in the open, or would you rather take this somewhere private?"

Synster flushed. "I, ah..."

"Somewhere private, please." Canunn nodded meekly, trying to appeal to the man's obvious sense of command.

"Follow me."

Canunn left the bay and glanced over his shoulder, not surprised to see the Raggas heading in their direction. The male and female, however, moved back into the ship. A short time later, Canunn, Synster and the bounty hunter entered a pleasure club, just one of many on the planet that catered to delights of the flesh.

Passing several pleasers that called out to "Catam," their large host, they eventually sat at a table in the corner.

"You're Synster," Catam said, pointing at Synster. "I recognise your voice. Who's this?"

"This is my associate, Canunn. He has a vested interest in recouping our loss. And I don't have to remind you how important this is to us."

"I know. Trust me. With all the money Blue Rim's put out there to recapture this criminal, I'd be stupid not to realise you want her back, safe and sound. A hundred thousand is nothing to scoff at."

That amount was *supposed* to have been kept secret between Canunn, Synster and the bounty hunters they'd previously hired to return their Creations. The many wanted vids circulating through the System listed a much smaller reward for information on their whereabouts. *A hundred thousand beks?* Now Canunn couldn't try to bargain the *Mara's Light* crew for a smaller fee.

He closed his eyes, hoping he and Synster wouldn't totally bankrupt themselves in pursuit of their livelihood. If all went according to plan, he'd have Erin and her siblings by the week's end, the money back in his accounts and this team dead, no longer able to bear witness to any of it.

Opening his eyes, he saw Catam studying him and spoke to cover his silence. "If you find her within the week and return her unmolested and unharmed, there's an extra fifty thousand in it for you. But she must be returned to Synster and myself, and no one else." *Because no one else yet knew she was missing.*

Catam stared slyly. "You gonna have a little fun with her before you give her up to Eryan law?"

"Absolutely *not*." Canunn felt sick at the thought. He noticed, however, Synster's warped grin. No doubt the scientist would relish taking Erin's virginity. Despite Synster's assurances that his dalliances with Anin had done nothing to harm her, Canunn couldn't be so sure. Sex seemed to foul up the mindset of most humanoids no matter their race or species. And in spite of the fact that their Creations had no nested imperative to produce offspring, due to their manufactured sterility, the emotional bonds sex often created could be a disaster. Erin had a touch of rebellion and a genuine affection for her 'siblings'. Those reactions Canunn could deal with. True love and its accompanying emotional pitfalls were not on his programming agenda.

"So, you want the woman back for another reason?"

"What the hell concern is it of yours why we want her back?" Synster answered hotly. "Your job is to track her and bring her to us, no questions asked."

"Actually, no, it's not. *Mara's Light* is selective. We're not like the other scum out there eager to make currency. We take a case only if it's something we think we can handle. And I'll tell you right now my captain will never agree to accept a job that includes bringing you some female you'll only rape and torture later."

"No one intends to rape or torture the girl." Canunn gave Synster a stern look, and thankfully, the imbecile glanced away. "Naturally, she'll be subjected to Eyran law. But unlike the rest of the System, scientific mandates are very clear about death and capital punishment.

"The reason we want her so badly," he paused and leaned closer over the table towards Catam, "is that she took some important documents we want back. She will, of course, be imprisoned for crimes against Blue Rim, and those crimes can be easily substantiated if you require proof before committing to us."

"There's something about you that rings true, so I'll go out on a limb. As soon as I verify that your story's legit, we'll be on the case." Catam studied Canunn, then Synster. "We get fifty up front, the rest when we bring her to you. I've already put out some feelers, so I know where she is. The problem will be taking her down. From what I've heard, she's evaded peacemakers and bounty hunters alike, harming several in the process."

"But you already know where she is? How do we know you won't just take the fifty thousand and leave? How do we know you've even seen the girl? And why are we talking to you and not your captain?" Synster asked in succession, startling Canunn. Sensing this bounty hunter's obvious bend towards command, he'd thought he *was* dealing with their captain.

"You called us, so you must know our reputation. We don't cheat the clients. You start doing that, no one wants to hire you. As for your other concern, Mara put me in charge. If that won't suit, we don't take the case."

He looked to stand, and Canunn hurriedly stopped him. "That's fine. But I think Synster has a point. How do we know you've seen our sub—our girl?"

"You hired two other groups to find her, and she tore through all of them. The only details you gave each of them were that she had some funky coloured eyes and an aversion to touch. You failed to mention that she's as strong as a Ragga. That she left Blue Rim with the help of a criminal named Wheller, or that her skin has an odd tendency to glitter in certain light."

Canunn and Synster shared a glance. *Wheller, that little bastard. Too bad he'd expired a month ago.* Scowling, Canunn turned back to Catam. "I'll warn you that we have friends in high places."

"Peacemakers on the lookout for an Eyran criminal fitting your girl's description. I know. And *you* should know we never lose a bounty. Ever. So if you want your fugitive, we're the people you want working for you. I'll bring her straight to you two, unharmed, in a week's time if not sooner. Deal?"

Canunn studied people for strengths and weaknesses as part of his livelihood, and what he saw in Catam's gaze had him nodding. The large male was a definite predator, and the strength of his stare told Canunn he didn't need to lie. This bounty hunter would succeed where the others had failed...he hoped.

With a sigh, Canunn nudged Synster, who grumbled as he handed Catam a small cred chip. "Check it, the currency's there."

"Trust me, if it doesn't clear, we won't bring her in." Catam stood and handed Canunn a small com unit. "We'll keep in touch via this. You need something, call me. I'm Catam." And with that, he left them at the table, his frame soon swallowed up by a crowd of lascivious perverts and sexually crazed idiots.

Canunn rubbed the back of his neck. "Wonderful. I just hope Blue Rim won't miss that currency until we can replace it." He'd had to 'borrow' from the company to fund their search, though he fully intended to replace the missing funds by the week's end. And once he had Erin, Ryen and Anin back in his control, he'd use them to wipe out the bounty hunters and recollect their currency.

"Blue Rim's biggest concern is science. They barely know what goes on outside the company in the real world, let alone outside the planet." Synster motioned to a nearby woman gyrating with such force it was a wonder the planet didn't tilt more on its axis. "Look, we have another day before anyone misses us. I'm going to enjoy our planetary 'vacation' and you should too. Because it's only a matter of time before Mathin realises his prized experiments are gone. And then we're as good as dead."

Canunn frowned. "Actually, we have until next month. I convinced Mathin that we needed an extension on Ryen's new growth hormone, and that Erin and Anin were coming along quite well. So he won't miss them until he checks back next month."

Hope lit Synster's gaze, and faded as fast. "You mean, until he does another of his

intrusive spot checks. I think you bought us another week, maybe two. But hey, if Catam is as good as he says he is, we might not have to worry."

The gyrating woman came to their table and sat on Synster's lap. Completely ignoring Canunn, Synster began kissing the woman, his fingers creeping over her breasts. Disgusted, Canunn quickly stood. "I'll be in our temporary quarters. Be sure to enjoy yourself," he spat, wishing he could be as casual about the whole mess. But the equations, the potential of the future wouldn't quit his brain, and as he walked back to his rented quarters, he planned out Erin's next series of tests. Though they hadn't quite worked out her ability to heal herself, she did manage to bounce back rather quickly after broken bones. Perhaps his newest research would speed up her ability to heal. And if not, her deliberate injuries would be a just disciplinary measure to convince her not to leave again. Some blood and pain normally curbed their Creations' tendencies to waver when it came to following orders.

Canunn smiled, simply ignoring the possibility that they wouldn't find Erin and the others in time. Ryen and Anin would come when Erin called. And really, their progress wasn't as important as Erin's anyway. Now to find their golden girl and bring her back where she belonged—in the arms of her Creator. And if Canunn were really lucky, Synster might find himself blamed for Erin's disappearance once word reached Mathin of what had happened. In fact, Canunn would *make sure* Mathin heard all about it, and all about Canunn's tireless efforts to bring her back. If all went according to plan, Synster might not live past the next few weeks, dying alongside the crew of *Mara's Light*. Because like Canunn, Mathim was not known for tolerating mistakes.

"Enjoy yourself, Synster, because before long, you'll be handling Erin no more."

* * * *

Catam rejoined the Raggas waiting outside the club for him.

"They take the bait?" Nu Fas asked.

"We in?" his brother, Set, added.

"Yeah. They want her back, badly. And we're only supposed to bring her back to those two idiots, so either Blue Rim isn't in on what these scientists are doing, or they are and want it kept quiet." He strode with them back to the ship, where his captain waited with her husband.

Once inside the ship, the crew took off in no time. Catam shook his head. "Thanks for doing this, Mara. But don't worry, Sernal's going to pay us big time for our help."

His captain snorted. "He'd better. I turned down thirty thousand beks for this."

Catam grinned and handed her the cred chip. "Then you should be thanking me for getting us a fifty thousand advance."

The others shared their thanks, and he filled them in on the details.

"So what exactly did Sernal say this woman did? Why are two scientists involved instead of Eyran local government?" Mara asked. "We're doing this as a favour to the peacemakers, you know."

"Yeah," her husband Lurin agreed, a grin on his face. "So they'll forget about that last job we pulled."

Catam snorted. "Well, it wasn't my idea to bring the entire clan down. Thank the rock heads." He angled his thumb at Nu and Set. "I was all for taking our bounty in alive. Those two destroyed him and everyone around him."

Nu shrugged. "Not my fault, Set —"

"Catam," Mara interjected loudly, "please answer the question. We'll play the blame game later. Now what exactly did Sernal tell you about this besides that he needs our help?"

"Well, it wasn't Sernal I talked to. It was Gar."

Everyone groaned.

"What?"

"Catam, your brother is five times worse than Sernal. Sernal's a pain in the ass, but he's an *official* pain in the ass. Most of what Gar does is illegal, no matter how he spins it. And he doesn't care who he pisses off to get what he wants. Hell, if Sernal knew even half of what Gar was doing, he'd probably lock him up, peacemaker or not." Mara shook her head.

"Yeah, but this is on the level, I swear. Gar's actually helping Rafe out of a tight situation on an official case."

"Another Mardu involved?" Lurin sighed. "There are only four of you, right?"

"Don't forget Isa and the girls on Mardu," Su offered. "But if she's not talking to him, does that count?"

"Thanks," Catam answered dryly, not needing any reminders about his pissed off mate right now. "Look, somehow the operation Gar was involved in, to track down some shady happenings around Eyra, snagged Rafe in the middle. Sernal's not answering his com unit,

and Rafe's got his hands full tracking this fugitive that Blue Rim wants so badly. Gar seems to think she might know something about the prison ships that keep disappearing near the outer rim."

"So why don't the peacemakers handle it?" Nu wanted to know. "Seems like they're always dragging us into their messes. And I don't know that I want *Mara's Light* associated so closely with the law. Right, Cap?" He looked to Mara.

She nodded. "Right. But though it pains me to say it, the Mardu brothers are an exception. And frankly, the more I think about it, the more I like the idea of Gar, and especially Sernal, owing us. What I want to know is what you aren't telling us, Catam."

Damn. The woman could spot a lie a mile off. "Not telling you?"

"Stop stalling," Lurin said. "Gar wouldn't involve us in this if there wasn't more to the story."

When Catam said nothing, Mara glared and the Fas brothers stood with threatening expressions.

"By Flor's dagger. All right. But we have to keep this quiet." They waited. "Gar has reason to believe the fugitive might be a..." He cleared his throat, knowing this information wouldn't exactly endear him to the crew. "A Creation."

Everyone stared at him in amazement.

"Are you serious?" Set asked. "The last Creation the System tracked down had three hundred heads stashed in his ship, with arms and legs decorating his galley."

"It wasn't three hundred," Catam protested. "An exaggeration, surely."

"Yeah, it was more like two-fifty," Nu muttered.

"Don't tell me a Ragga's scared of an artificial humanoid?" Catam teased, but no one smiled.

"You're damned straight," Nu answered. "We're strong, but Creations aren't natural. They live for one purpose. To kill. Remember that war a thousand years ago? Death and carnage ring a bell?"

"Yeah, well, in any event, Gar's not sure. Rafe's apparently spent time with the female, and he thinks she's normal, mostly."

"This just gets better and better," Mara said sourly.

"Come on Mara. I already know where she was last seen just two days ago. It won't take long to find her."

"But that'll delay picking up Isa and the girls."

Catam contained a grimace. Isa would kill him for this, but he had no choice. A little more time with Mother shouldn't stress his mate too much... He forced a smile. "Just more time for my family to grow closer." *Dear Flor, don't let Isa kill Mother.*

"I can't wait to hear this vid call." Lurin said with a grin.

"For that alone the job's worth it." Mara shared her mate's amusement and joked with the Fas brothers while Catam set course for Mardu.

Hell, Isa and the others could be as annoyed as they wanted. He'd make sure to keep them out of danger, if he had to take down this 'Creation' by himself. Because he couldn't refuse Gar anything. Not when his brother had barely talked to him in two long years. That Gar had called him meant the world to Catam, and hope that Gar might finally be open to bridging the gap between them made helping a promise Catam intended to keep.

Hell, maybe the female *wasn't* a Creation. Maybe Sernal was just on an undercover mission and not in serious trouble somewhere out of reach. And maybe this extended visit between Isa and his mother wouldn't result in yet another argument about Catam leaving the bounty hunting business.

"Catam, first watch. And it's a long one," Mara ordered as the rest of them settled in. Nu and Set chuckled, Lurin shot him a look of sympathy, and Catam sighed. It really wasn't his day.

Chapter Seven

Rafe swore to himself as he caught the faint impression of a boot print in the soft dirt. The sparse moonlight gave his quarry that much more cover, and damn her, but Erin knew how to avoid capture like nobody's business. For two days he'd been tracking her through the Eron Forest and into the Fields of Flor. At this rate she'd enter the jungle by dawn, considering she hadn't yet stopped for a break, an impossible feat for anyone not Xema, or apparently, not a Creation.

The little witch had thoughtfully left him half their provisions, and once he'd woken from her incredibly powerful chokehold and broken free from the rope holding him tight, he'd furiously chased after her.

Perhaps if Erin had known about Rafe's heritage, and thus his capabilities, she wouldn't have knocked him out...*again*. The Xema never quit. Rafe would pursue her tirelessly for as long as it took. Mardu hunters had a reputation as tough, but the Xema were legendary for their tenacity, daring and ruthlessness. The rare clan of warriors accounted for a mere two percent of the entire Mardu population, but that two percent could do what normal System inhabitants couldn't. With enhanced physical senses, they could forego sleep and rest periods when keyed up, their bodies on autopilot while they hunted.

That Erin had run for as long as she had both surprised and thrilled the predator within him. Rafe loved a challenge, and Erin proved to be the best he'd yet to come across. She constantly intrigued him, and he used the time tracking her to ponder the many problems she presented.

First and foremost, Erin shouldn't exist. Every now and again the scientists on Eyra toyed with nature, and they lost. Their first group of Creations had almost destroyed the System. And the few subsequent attempts to manufacture unauthorised humans met with death for both Creator and Creation. But those instances had involved true monsters. Erin was anything but. She had the strength and skill to destroy. Three times now she could have killed 'Cheltam', yet she hadn't. Instead she'd run.

By rights, as a lawman, Rafe had a duty to terminate a Creation. But he tempered that

obligation with the fact that Erin was the key witness in an ongoing investigation. Her escape from Blue Rim made her the one person who could bring down that monstrous conglomerate, if the truth of her story could be believed, that Blue Rim kidnapped and exploited prisoners for the sake of science. And exposing the lab for what it was would be a battle, because Blue Rim had connections System-wide as well as the currency to fight the law for a very, very long time.

Rationally, the excuse that Erin was a witness made more sense to keep her alive than that he felt something for a woman he'd just met. Because beyond all explanation, Rafe felt affection for Erin, *a Creation*, for Flor's sake, who'd taken him to *wainu*. She was in so many ways a stranger, yet as familiar to him as his own soul. And it made no sense any way he looked at it.

Rafe nimbly dodged a huge tree root and skirted a gaggle of poisonous nettles, anxiety for Erin angering him even more. The little fool might be quick and strong, but she didn't know the vegetation like he did. And the wildlife grew bolder with the coming dark. Thankfully, he hadn't heard any *kethra* or raptor cries, or he surely would have encountered one by now. Another glance at the diminishing distance between Erin's footprints showed her lagging pace. Finally, fatigue slowed his quarry. Pleased, Rafe lengthened his stride, nearly panting with excitement, the scent of victory within reach.

He had every intention of claiming his prize. Through several brief conversations with Gar using his com unit, Rafe had learned many interesting details about Creations he hadn't previously known. Apparently, Gar seemed stuck on the notion that Erin was a Creation. And though Rafe should have confirmed the fact with his brother, he found himself unable to do so. Until he talked with Erin again, he remained silent about any details, to include the fact that he'd lost her.

Gar, never much a talker, had filled Rafe's head with minutia about Eyran science and their mistakes. The early attempts at Creation hadn't worked. Their initial subjects displayed too many submissive tendencies. They'd been intended to serve as sexual surrogates, military tools, and basic helpers in varied fields from construction to law enforcement. But their inability to function independently on any level marked them as failures. Unfortunately, Eyran science struck pay dirt on their next batch, or so they thought. Their second wave of Creations had the intelligence, backbone, and power to accomplish the tasks assigned them. They also possessed such a strong will to control everything that they

devolved into genius psychotic killers with a need to destroy everyone around them. In months they had effectively enslaved nearly half their planet before anyone else in the System caught wind of what had been happening.

With the Eyran scientists forced to duplicate more and more of the humanoids using advanced maturation, chemical and mechanical construction and stimulus, the Creations built a formidable army in no time at all, and nearly wiped out a good portion of the System's population before the peacemakers stepped in and stopped them.

Rafe ducked under an overhanging branch and swore he caught the scent of Erin just ahead. As he ran, he wondered just where Erin fell into the Creations' evolution. In their short time together she'd wanted to be in control at all times...until she experienced a woman's pleasure. He nearly stumbled as the notion dawned. Erin had been incredibly firm with him on every front, up until he'd given her ecstasy. In his arms, she melted, becoming a softer, malleable woman who catered to his needs. Rafe hadn't thought much of it at the time, too involved in feeding their desires. The excitement in finding such a strong yet pliable woman overwhelmed the intriguing contrasts in her behaviour.

But as he neared her, he thought he may have found his answer. In Erin, it seemed the Eyran scientists had created a masterpiece. She functioned on her own and had the presence of mind to call her own shots. Yet with the right stimulus, she'd been his for the taking. Rafe grinned and sped up, the jungle around him a blur of heat flashes and darkness as he sought his prey.

Finding her now was only half the fun. Because when he caught her, he intended to get the rest of his answers, and teach Erin a thing or two about obedience in the process.

Erin couldn't move another step. She'd pushed herself to the limit, sure Rafe would be hot on her trail the moment he regained consciousness. And since the last time she'd put him down he'd revived in half the time she'd thought, she'd made extra sure to give herself the advantage by tying him up. Surely those knots had given him fits.

She frowned as she bent over at the waist to catch her breath. Hopefully, Rafe wouldn't be too upset about her escape. Erin still couldn't believe she'd confessed the truth of her identity. Why the hell had she admitted to being a Creation? The prison ploy was perfect. *Experimented on with those other hapless souls.* When pressed, she'd mask most of her abilities to lend credence to such fiction.

The smart thing after leaving Rafe would have been to kill him. No one else but Blue Rim and her siblings knew how she'd come to be. Erin's 'childhood' had rushed by her in a blur of animated lessons and chemically stimulated cell development. After a year, she'd advanced to the physical level she currently maintained, that of a healthy, mature female. The next three years had been spent in constant training. Perhaps that was why Canunn had insisted that she, Anin and Ryen forge close ties. Despite some common genetic factors, none of them were truly siblings. Yet that closeness—the love—between them all had made their constant tests bearable.

Love.

Erin sighed and sank to the ground, feeling astonishingly close to tears, not because of what she'd lost in her youth, but because of what she feared she might lose now. Rafe knew she was an unnatural thing. A Creation. He probably hated her now, and she wouldn't be surprised to learn he'd summoned an Ari to take care of her. A Mardu assassination squad, the Ari could conceivably terminate her, with no one the wiser of her disappearance. Blue Rim might not be happy about her loss, but they'd deny all knowledge of her if Rafe made known the fact that he'd ordered a Creation killed.

Depressed, Erin wondered if she and Rafe might have continued their association if she hadn't confessed her ugly truth. She knew she'd given him pleasure. That dreamy state of repletion they shared had been as close to descriptions of a heavenly afterlife as she could imagine. To feel such closeness to another physically, and to have that magnified emotionally...she didn't know how to feel. In sharing her body, Erin suspected she'd also shared her heart, something she'd never thought to experience outside of her own family.

For all that Anin had relayed details about sexual intercourse to Erin, she'd never explained the hunger, that fiery sensation of what Erin now knew to be lust, or the emotional upheaval that came from succumbing so fully to another. With Rafe, Erin didn't want to submit, she *needed* to submit. And that giving made her feel a part of him. She'd thrilled to the quick when he'd demanded her obedience and given her pleasure. Odd that Anin had never mentioned the same feelings with Synster, when Erin knew how very many times the two had copulated.

As Erin thought about Rafe, her loins tingled, and amazed she could feel lust in such a tired state, she smiled. Perhaps she wasn't as different from natural women as she'd once thought. Obviously, her ability to attract others and call upon certain preternatural skills

made her different. But if Erin could feel sexual hunger and, to an extent, what she thought might be true affection for another not her family, then maybe she could fit in with society as a whole once she put this mess behind her.

Sadness hit her hard, and she felt a pain in her chest. Rubbing the ache, she realised that 'this mess' included Rafe. In order to have a real life, she could never see him again. Since killing him wasn't an option—she wanted to cry just thinking about it—she would have to move herself and her siblings to a remote planet, maybe even an asteroid, and live out the rest of her life there.

She could still enjoy freedom, and the knowledge that Anin and Ryen now had the ability to live freely as well brought her joy. But for some reason, thoughts of a life without Rafe bothered her more than she could bear.

And maybe this is why Canunn forbade sexual intercourse. Perhaps, the logical part of her mind argued, this attraction you feel for another male is what most females feel for someone they're compatible with. Anin doesn't feel anything for Synster, but maybe if she found someone like Rafe, she'd have similar feelings of despair and anxiety when finished mating.

Erin dearly wished she had another female to confide in, but she'd promised Anin and Ryen no communications until she'd destroyed Blue Rim. They remained in a safe place for the moment, with Ryen guarding Anin every second of the day. Taking her from Synster had been difficult, and without a Handler, Anin didn't know how to behave. But slowly, Ryen was teaching her to be more independent. Personally, Erin didn't see her sister ever being able to live on her own, but with Ryen and Erin with her, she wouldn't have to.

Sudden thirst overwhelmed Erin's thoughts, and as her body adjusted to this new rest period, it made its needs known. After tending to her bodily functions, Erin used the nearby stream to clean herself as best she could. She ate sparingly of the small stash she'd taken with her, and used only minimal drinking water. The microbes in the river would cause havoc with her digestive tract, a flaw Canunn had never been able to fix, though he thought he had. Erin and her siblings had kept silent about their sensitive stomachs, not wanting to handle more of the disgusting tests that might have plagued them had Canunn known of their persistent intolerance for the microbes. And thank the universe for that.

Erin returned to her spot at the tree and found herself blinking to stay awake, uncomfortably aware she needed rest. But certainly the miles she'd put between herself and Rafe gave her the time she'd need to recuperate. Regardless, her body wouldn't move

without a break. She needed to rebuild her lost energy stores.

Stubbornly resisting sleep until she couldn't function a moment more, Erin sighed and finally succumbed to slumber, thoughts of Rafe's touch bringing a smile to her face. In her dreams, he stroked her forehead, her chest, her wrists. With loving hands, he tied her up and had his way with her. And the fantasies she never knew she had just kept coming...

Rafe stared down at her Erin with concern until he registered the pattern of sleep in her breathing. Apparently, the pace she'd pushed herself to had put her in a deep, even sleep. He gently removed her long jacket and set it down on a smooth portion of ground next to her. Taking a small piece of cloth from his bag, he wet it in the stream and ran it over her perspiring face and neck, combing his fingers through her silky red-black hair as he laid her down on her jacket and away from her uncomfortable looking position against the tree.

This close, and since he was looking for it, he could see the absence of imperfections in her features that one might classify as 'unnatural'. No one had skin so smooth, creamy and *sparkly*. A body so incredibly perfect, both athletic yet shapely. Flor, but just looking at her made him hard, his wired-body not understanding it needed rest and not sex with Erin.

In sleep she radiated peace, and as he touched her, she surprised him by sighing his name. He narrowed his gaze, wondering just where he stood with her. She'd been eager enough to leave him before, yet he featured in her dreams?

Her lips parted on another breath, and her breasts drew his gaze like a magnet. Without the encumbrance of her jacket, he could see the firm mounds he hadn't given his full attention to, a situation he meant to rectify.

Rafe dug in his pack for some food for himself, as well as the rope and oil he'd purchased at the trade tower. As he ate and drank, he studied Erin, wondering why this woman, of the multitudes he'd met in his lifetime, affected him so deeply. He didn't really know much more about her than her body and that she was in a world of trouble. But he understood his need to help her. For all that she possessed an uncanny strength, when Erin looked at him, he saw the vulnerability in her multihued gaze she tried to hide.

It couldn't have been easy being raised in a laboratory...unless she had parental figures? Frustrated at how little he actually knew, Rafe resolved to get answers. He wanted to know more about her. And once she woke, he wouldn't stand for anything but the truth. He finished his small meal and undressed Erin completely. He then tied her wrists in an

assortment of knots and twists even the strongest Ragga would have a hard time undoing, and staked her hands to the ground over her head. Though she still had use of her feet, once he had her where he wanted her, she would do whatever he commanded. Just the thought conjured another hard-on, one he welcomed with open arms.

After placing his coat and some clothing over her to keep her warm, Rafe nodded with satisfaction. He left her to wash the dirt from his body. He wanted nothing between them but skin when she woke, and nothing but obedience when she opened her mouth.

Hours later, as the sun began to rise, Erin mumbled softly, waking Rafe from the light sleep he'd put himself under. He crossed to her and crouched on the balls of his feet, staring down at her. She tossed her head and blinked awake, treating him to the magnificent sight of her purple and blue-rimmed eyes.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Rafe?" Her thick voice stirred his body, already hungry just from being near her. As if he'd entered a full-out rut, Rafe suddenly wanted nothing more than to sink his dick deep inside her slick heat. An inhalation showed him she wanted him as well, for she'd let loose her pheromones and stared at him hungrily, like her last chance at a good meal.

"Why did you run, Erin?"

She swallowed loudly, her gaze widening as it trailed down his body and rested on his long, thick cock. "I, I, ah..."

In the blink of an eye Rafe shifted to straddle her belly, and he sat back on his heels. He stifled a groan when his heavy sack rested against her firm stomach, and he watched her struggle with her bound hands with pleasure. "Easy, I don't want you to hurt yourself. I know you're uncomfortable, but we need to settle a few things between us. And I'm not going to let you catch me off guard again."

"I'm sorry," she said softly, her eyes filling with tears. Shocked at the remorse overtaking his need for justice, Rafe forced himself to remain silent. "I didn't want to hurt you. But after I told you I was – what I was, I had to escape."

"Why?"

"*Why?*" Her voice rose. "Because even in Blue Rim we learned about the Eyran War of 2845, of the laws governing Creations. It's kill on sight, isn't it?"

"It is if you were in fact a Creation."

"But I told you I –"

"I don't think a Creation could make me want so much. A Creation wouldn't hesitate to kill, wouldn't demand justice for prisoners as much as she would simply slaughter any threat she perceived to her safety. I would certainly be a threat to a Creation, wouldn't you agree?"

"Well, ah, yes, I suppose so." She shifted again, arching her breasts upward.

Rafe didn't need further invitation. He scooted back and leaned down to capture one hard tip between his teeth, and the taste of her pushed him for more. "You haven't done more than give me a headache, not once, but several times now. Not something a 'murderous' Creation would do."

"I guess not," she panted, pushing into his mouth.

Rafe kissed her nipple and began sucking on the bud, pulling moans from Erin that flooded the area around them with a sweet, ripe scent. "So I think we need to concentrate on the real problem at hand, don't you?" he rasped before taking her other nipple into his mouth.

Long slow sucks brought her keening moans to outright pleas and had Rafe as hard as stone. He wanted to fuck her badly, but he wanted her to trust him first. And, he admitted, he wanted to punish her for running, to show her who exactly was in charge.

"Do you like my ropes, Erin?" he asked once he'd released her sweet breast. "Make you helpless, don't they?"

She didn't answer, but the heat in her gaze said what he wanted to hear.

Rafe scooted down her body, resting his face between her thighs that he spread further apart. He inhaled and sighed. "Tell me exactly why Blue Rim wants you, Erin. The truth." He kissed her clit and she cried out. With slow licks, he began eating her, until her taste burst on his tongue, nearly making him forget his need for answers. With a restraint he barely managed, Rafe tore his face from her sex and raised his head to stare at her. "You're mine now, and you'll do what I tell you to," he reiterated in a hard voice. "Tell me exactly why Blue Rim wants you, and don't leave anything out."

She blinked slowly as she watched him shove a finger inside her. "Bl—Blue Rim wants their Creation back. And they want..." Her breath hitched as he began fucking her with his finger before adding another.

"What else?"

"They want to silence...what I know...about the missing prison ships." Her gasps showed him her rise towards climax.

"And?" He couldn't explain it, but he could sense her holding something back. "Tell me all of it, Erin. Now." He withdrew his touch, and she shivered. He covered her with his body, resting his weight on his elbows. The tip of his hungry cock brushed her mound, and he played with her as he awaited her answer, stroking between her swollen folds with his shaft while not allowing penetration.

"They want all their Creations back—my brother and sister as well."

He paused for a second, and seeing the worry mingling with passion in her gaze, kissed her softly on the mouth. "Didn't I tell you not to worry about Creations, honey? I'll take care of you and your family—your *criminal* class family," he reminded her. Sincerity rang in his words and mind, and he understood that this undertaking could very well disbar him from his position as a peacemaker, and at the very worst kill him. "You, Erin, only need to worry about taking care of me."

Joy blossomed on her face, the cautious hope stirring feelings in Rafe he couldn't place.

"Now you need to be disciplined for running away from me, don't you?"

"Oh yes, I do," she breathed.

Rafe groaned as he fought the urge not ram deep into her pussy. "You were bad, weren't you, Erin? And you're sorry, now, aren't you?"

She nodded. "Very sorry. Let me make it up to you, Rafe—Sir—please."

Sir. A primitive need to push, to see just how much she could take, rode him. "Open your mouth."

Chapter Eight

Erin didn't question him, and the arousal in her eyes excited Rafe unbearably. He rose on his knees and straddled her neck, then leaned forward to better angle his cock. "I'm going to fuck your mouth, and you're going to swallow it all, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"Say, 'Yes, Sir.'"

"Yes, Sir." She quivered, moaning, and he pushed past her lips.

With a harsh groan, Rafe seated himself balls deep, not surprised when Erin took him fully. With a savage cry, he began fucking her, relishing the feel of her tongue over him, of the sight of himself taking what he wanted. He didn't treat her gently, and the fact that she could take what he doled out and more set him on fire.

The petal soft lips holding him gave delicious friction in addition with the slight rake of her teeth. And when he pulled out, she sucked hard, stimulating nerve endings that threw his entire balance off kilter. What had started out as discipline quickly eroded into carnal need, and it was everything Rafe could do to remember what he wanted and why.

"Open your mouth," he growled, pulling out. "I'll be damned if you control this, too."

She panted, staring up at him with a siren's gaze. The pink flush over her skin sparkled as she forgot to mask her differences. And she made no effort to stifle her scent either. It embraced his lust, swallowing his passion as easily as her mouth surrounded his cock.

Rafe caught himself in hand and took over, stroking to a fevered pitch. "You want to make me come, but you're not in charge, here, Erin. I am." She groaned, disappointment shining in the glassy tears threatening to spill from her eyes. "Now apologise for running."

"I'm sorry." He waited. "Sir."

Flor, that sounded so right. "And?" he prodded, rubbing the tip of his cock over her lips.

She licked the pearl of cream from his slit, and he stilled the shudder coursing through his body.

"And I won't run again, Sir. I'm yours," she added softly, her genuine remorse both beautiful and arousing.

"Mine to what?" He pushed himself through her lips, fucking her mouth again. "Mine to fuck, to own, to keep." He couldn't hold back any more. "Yes, yes. Swallow it all," he groaned as he spewed, coming hard down her throat. He stroked her hair as he shot, watching her take him. Focusing on her, he was able to stave off the approaching *wainu*. Normally he would have welcomed the bliss, but he had a point to prove, and he wasn't nearly done making it.

"You were 'created' just for me," he rasped, trying to catch his breath. By refusing to welcome *wainu*, he'd created a ball of energy that had nowhere to go. So he released it back into that part of him wanting Erin all over again.

Pulling out of her mouth, he straddled her torso and slid his cock between her breasts. Just a whisper of her flesh under his added to the steel of his arousal, and he revelled in this part of himself that he didn't share with anyone else. He allowed his Xema hungers full reign, challenged by the female he sensed needing all of him.

"You're still hard," she marvelled, then cast her eyes down, not maintaining eye contact.

The submissive gesture delighted him, but he wanted her to watch what he did to her. "Look at me." She raised her gaze to his. "That's a good girl. Now stare down at your breasts, at my cock sliding through your valley. I want you to watch me, to see everything I do to you."

She breathed, "Yes, Sir." The flush creeping up her breasts and the richness of her scent showed her frustration. His little Creation needed satisfaction. And if her passion matched his, he could only imagine the wait to be excruciating.

"Good. Now spread your thighs wide." He waited for her to do so. "Have you ever had sex with anyone before me, Erin?" He knew the answer even as she shook her head no. "Ever indulged in sexual play with anyone else?" Again, no. "Then how did you know what to do with me?"

"My sister served our Handler's needs. She told me things, and I've studied procreation through books and vids. Even saw it in the bar where I met Drekk."

The sound of another man's name on her lips aggravated him. "Did you like watching?"

"A little." She arched up, forcing his balls to move along her chest, and she groaned. "But only because it was so different from what I'd imagined."

He slid his cock between her breasts again, and her pupils dilated. "Explain."

She licked her lips. "From what Anin told me, I expected the act to be rather dry, unfulfilling. But a woman in the bar having sex seemed to like it until her partner ended too soon." The look she gave him told him she could have as easily been referring to him.

"Like I did, you mean?" Rafe smiled, unaccountably pleased that despite her submissiveness just now, a hint of steel still rung true in Erin.

"Ah, well..." She flushed.

"Truth." He tweaked her nipple, pinching hard, and reached behind him. His fingers flicked between her folds. There, her cream spilled freely. Apparently, his submissive lover liked a hint of pain.

"Oh yes," she breathed. "Like you. Rafe, you're killing me. I'm so very...hungry for your touch. Please, Sir, give me more," she begged, offering those pretty nipples as she thrust her chest towards his hands.

Rafe pinched her nipples and ground his shaft through the valley between her breasts. The urge to mark her, to spatter his cum over her skin and rub it in struck him, and he began moving with quicker, firmer strokes.

Erin, however, pleaded with him, needing more with each press of his fingers over her, of his cock gliding over her flesh.

Her beauty in passion caught him to the quick, and as Rafe stared down at her, he wanted nothing more than to take them both to *wainu*. Now. He'd punished her enough. Now, they both needed to find that gratification that drew them close.

Cursing, he released her breasts and mounted her. Without pause, he shoved himself hard and deep into her sex, groaning at the perfect fit.

"Please, more," she groaned, lifting her hips to deepen his penetration.

But Rafe wouldn't allow it. He slammed into her again and again, using his own strength to hold her in place. "You'll take what *I* decide to give you," he growled, taking her compliance as he ground into her clit with his pelvis.

They moved together, his forceful thrusts delighting the obedient lover he sensed within Erin. Though she moaned and begged for surcease, he could feel her delight with his mastery, and her desire only sparked his own.

He fused his mouth with hers, stealing her breath as she stole his will to do anything but satisfy her. She returned his kisses with equal fervour, whispering her apologies and her

need to please him until he could do nothing but ride out the hungers plaguing him.

"*Fuck, Erin,*" he groaned, his balls hard and hot and aching with the need to release. "Now, love, come *now*."

Erin cried out and tightened around him, her body arched in a bow, completely his to control. The sight of her capitulation undid him, and Rafe came with a low groan. *Wainu* filled him with bliss, and he caught Erin waiting for him in that peaceful plane.

With a kiss and a hug, he released her from the ground restraint. He caught her to him and rolled over, keeping her on top and still joined with him.

When Rafe could again catch his breath, he sighed and kissed the base of her neck. "You still need to be punished."

Erin hummed her agreement. "Yes, I really do, Sir."

Rafe took a minute before looking up at her, pleasantly surprised to see such warmth and open caring in her alien eyes. "You like calling me that, don't you?"

Erin's smile faded and she flushed, glancing away.

"No, honey, tell me. I want to know everything about you," Rafe insisted. He stroked her back, willing her to believe his sincerity.

"Yes, I like calling you 'Sir.' In the labs, I answered to a Handler."

"Handler?"

"Synster. He watched over my education and helped Canunn, my Creator, run tests. My Handler told me what to do all the time. We're—Creations are built to serve. It's an ingrained trait."

"But one you overcame."

She smiled at the obvious pride in his voice. "It took a very long time, and it was difficult. But yes, I overcame it. Mostly." She leaned close to kiss him. "I can't explain it, but when we're sexually...ah, together, I want to give you everything I have. I want to please you." She glanced away, as if embarrassed.

Rafe caught her face and turned her to see him. "You do please me, Erin. Don't look away. I love being inside you, feeling you submit. It arouses me like nothing else." He deliberately paused, wanting to stir her aggression. Between her submission when underneath him and her dominance when battling, Erin appealed to Rafe's every fantasy. By Flor's breast, he couldn't have imagined another being created more perfectly to fit him. "But I don't want you to obey my every whim."

Erin froze, and the frown she gave him pleased him to no end. "Well, that's good, because don't think for a minute I'll submit to you unless we're... like this." She flushed. "I'm not your servant."

"Good."

"I won't let you handle me. I'm done with that life."

"About time, if you asked me."

"I didn't work my entire life to find freedom only to give it up to a...what did you say?"

Rafe laughed. "Baby, I like you feisty. I like strong women with intelligence, drive and beauty. Not to mention a body that has me hard from just a look. I want you to trust me, Erin. To really trust me. And quit thinking about yourself as a Creation. You were *a prisoner*, same as your brother and sister, that Blue Rim experimented on. And that's Flor's honest truth. Just keep reminding yourself of that. Because no matter where you came from, you were mistreated and abused, and you didn't deserve any of it. So forget about Creations and Handlers, because I'm sure as hell not going to tell anyone about your origins, and that you can count on."

He scowled, not feeling good about lying to his family about her but knowing he needed to, for Erin's sake. Rafe refused to let her die because of some ancient law. Yes, those Creations had been lawless monsters. Erin, however, was anything but.

"Your sister and brother, are they like you?" He needed to know. He'd hate to have to put down her family, but he couldn't risk the danger they presented if they weren't like Erin.

"No. Anin's much softer, very pliable, dangerously so. Ryen...he's pretty fierce. I don't know how else to describe him."

Rafe rubbed her arms, from her shoulders to her unbound wrists, surprising himself by wanting to instil more discipline in the wilful woman. She was his fantasy made flesh. "Tell me what Blue Rim did to you, Erin. I want to understand. And once you tell me, you'll never have to tell anyone about it again." He needed to know about her on a basic level that surprised him for its intensity.

"Four years ago, Canunn produced a viable zygote — me — and two others. Anin and Ryen."

"Hold on." Rafe stared in shock. "You're only four years old?"

"Technically, yes. But my education, physical and emotional maturation actually peg me as a female a few years from her third decade."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank Flor."

"I was conceived in the laboratory, born, and with artificial stimulation, matured to adult stasis after one year. The past three years have been filled with tests and more tests to determine my abilities. As far as I know, I'm what they consider the only stable Creation ever developed. With the exception of my involuntary submissiveness to obey my Handler, I function independently, learn at an above-average rate, and possess the inherent skills of many of the System's strongest races."

"Which ones are we talking about?"

"You know most species in the System don't mix. Genetic recombinants normally result in hybrids possessing only the characteristics of the dominant gene-type. But somehow Canunn manufactured a process by which I, and my siblings, possess the best characteristics of *all* of my contributors. I have the strength of a Ragga, the warring ability of a Zephyran and the physical appeal of a Nebite. And there are a few other factors in my genetic coding as well that my data discs could tell you."

"Data discs." Rafe studied her, trying to process it all. "We need to destroy those discs and rescue those prisoners before we take down Blue Rim. That's why you wanted a techie."

She nodded.

"Where are Anin and Ryen?"

Caution darkened her gaze. "Safe."

"Good. Don't worry, baby, I won't press you for details." His words eased her tension, and Rafe hugged her tight. "I'm not going to hurt you. I know it's not easy to believe, considering we just met and all you've gone through. But Erin, there's something between us... You're new to sex, so you don't realise how precious our joinings are. My kind don't experience *wainu* – that peaceful, rich sensation after sex – with just anyone.

"Erin, you're special." *My potential mate*, he wanted to say, but didn't want to overload her with something even he wasn't sure he wanted to hear. "And there's something else you should know." He'd reasoned out that confiding in her might make her more liable to trust him. After all, she had nowhere else to go, and she needed to believe she had help. "I'm not Cheltam."

She stared, her gaze turning from soft to hard in seconds. "Then you look just like him."

"I do. He's my brother, the one you put down with Drekk in his study."

Erin's eyes widened. "I thought your clothes looked different the second time I took

you down." He winced at the remembrance. "You two look completely alike."

"Mostly. But you need to know that he's concerned about us. And I wouldn't be surprised if Drekk is close to finding us. Before your escape through the forest, Gar warned me he was sending him after us. And Drekk's a damned fine tracker, so if he isn't already here, he soon will be. But don't worry, he's a loyal guy. A friend of mine, actually."

Erin nodded, staring at him with consideration. "So Rafe is your real name, then?"

"Rafe of Mardu, at your service." He paused. "I'm a peacemaker."

She tensed, and he gentled her.

"I won't hurt you, Erin. Look, if I'd wanted to take you in before now, I would have. I only want to help, but to do that, you have to trust me completely." She considered him, and at her hesitant nod, he continued. "I have contacts I can trust. When I tell you we'll take down Blue Rim, believe me when I say we will. But first we need to wipe out any and all references of your family from their database." He thought about it. "And I think there's someone I know to do the job."

Erin sighed and leaned in to the hand now cupping her cheek. She closed her eyes, and after a moment opened them, her sombre gaze fixed to his stare. "In the labs, I learned to endure," she said quietly. "No one looked at me or my family as if we were anything more than experiments. They broke bones, injected me with awful chemicals that burned my blood and blistered my skin. I was forced to kill animals with my bare hands, to tolerate poisons and radiation, all to see what I could withstand.

"They forced me to bond to my siblings, who aren't genetically my siblings, in the truest sense. Another attempt to monitor, to test, to see if a simple Creation could feel affection for another. An experiment that, to their surprise, worked. I love my brother and sister as much as I learned to hate my Creator and Handler. But you, Rafe, are the first person I've ever met who wants to *help* me. You're the first decent person I've met outside of a laboratory, the first one I want to love."

Rafe felt moisture on his palm from her tears. Dammit, Erin was *crying*.

"Please don't destroy my trust. I can handle a lot, and I have. I'm strong, I'm quick, and I can be dangerous. But I'm also a woman with needs; I have deeply seated emotions. So please, don't kill this wonderful feeling growing for you. I don't think I could survive that, despite what I've already gone through. Even losing my freedom again wouldn't hurt as much as your betrayal."

Her honesty cut him to the quick, and he had to clear his throat to speak. Stroking her soft hair he answered. "I won't betray you, Erin. And I won't let you down. There's so much more to life than what you've seen. And I'd consider it an honour if you'd let me show it to you once we take care of this mess."

She relaxed enough to smile, and she chuckled as she blinked through tears at him. "I guess Anin was right. Good sex does have a positive effect on the male mindset."

Rafe laughed with her. "Baby, I hate to break it to you, but it's not just the sex. I can get a piece of—ah, a woman—wherever and whenever I want it." The frown of jealousy on her face delighted him. "But the sex has never been as good as it is with you. And no, that's not the reason I want to help you." *I love you*, he wanted to say, but he didn't feel the timing was right. "What Blue Rim is doing is wrong. They hurt you, and that's not right. I can't help wanting to fix what's wrong in the System. That's who I am, why I became a peacemaker in the first place."

She said nothing for a moment, then asked, "But you don't think *I'm* a wrong you need to correct?"

"No, baby. You're the one thing in my life that's Flor-damned perfect, and I intend to keep it that way." No matter how many peacemakers, scientists, or brothers he had to overrun to do it.

* * * *

Gar glared at the com unit he'd just disconnected. If he hadn't known better, he'd have sworn Drekk was deliberately slowing his progress, which made no sense. Gar knew Drekk better than most. An inheritance that came with Cheltam's cover, Drekk provided both muscle and invaluable contacts throughout the System. He couldn't be bought, and he never stopped on a mission. In a way, he reminded Gar of the Xema, and were it not for his large frame and unsettling grey eyes, Drekk might have passed for one.

So why would Drekk intentionally sabotage Gar's efforts to find Rafe and keep him safe?

"He wouldn't." Gar rubbed the back of his neck, tired from his worry and the successive nights of no sleep. The nightmares had returned. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Taika and his son crying out for help. Unfortunately, the dream ended just like his

reality had, with his wife and son being blown to bits.

Closing his eyes tightly, Gar willed away the images that refused to fade completely and focused on the family he had that were still alive. He had to trust that Drekk would do his job. As Drekk had said, the man preferred Rafe to Gar anyway. Rafe, the brother who most looked like Gar, but possessed an arsenal of charm that stayed him well in life. Hell, were it not for Rafe, Gar doubted he'd be here today. Only his brother's dogged persistence, that ever-annoying penchant he had to get his own way, had woken Gar from a grief filled daze long enough to return to the peacemakers.

Sernal's attitude, on the other hand, Gar could do without. But not permanently, he hastened to add, should fickle Flor be listening close. That fucking Mardu god had an odd sense of humour on Gar's best day. No sense to exacerbate Sernal's problems by wishing for something he didn't really feel. Truth be told, Gar counted on Sernal's steadfastness. Sernal was like a rock. Good and bad had definite sides, and to his law-loving brother, a grey area between the two didn't exist.

That attitude had propelled Sernal through the peacekeeper ranks to the head of the organisation. That and his propensity towards an honest living. Little by little, Sernal emptied his forces of the corrupt peacekeepers giving justice a bad name. But the process was slow-going, and Gar thought that maybe this time Sernal had stepped on the wrong toes.

From what Gar had thus far gathered, Sernal had simply disappeared from sight four nights ago. No one had seen or heard from him since, and ugly rumours began spreading that Sernal wasn't as honest as everyone had thought. Typical peacemaker politics. Without Sernal there to stem the accusations, his career would surely come to a screeching halt. And Gar knew how much Sernal lived for the law. To Sernal, being a peacemaker held the same importance as being Xema.

"Dammit." Gar shoved the communicator in his belt and grabbed a pistol from his weapons stash. In minutes he found his rover and plotted a course to his nearby landing pad. As he travelled, he decided he'd put it off long enough. Taking a deep breath, he set the rover on autopilot and checked in with his youngest brother.

Mara's Light picked up after two short pings.

"What?" The growl belonged to one of the behemoth Raggas, Nu or Set, Catam's crewmates. Commotion sounded in the background, and then the Ragga cleared his throat.

"Mara's Light. What can I do for you?"

"Who's this?" Gar asked, aware he came off as rude. But hell, who had the patience for social niceties?

"Nu Fas. Who the hell is this?"

Gar snorted. So much for Nu's attempted diplomacy. "Gar. Put Catam on."

Nu cursed loudly enough to be heard three planets away, and then Catam joined the conversation. "Gar, any word on Sernal?"

"Not yet, but I'm working on it. What do you have on Blue Rim?"

As Catam relayed his dealings with two of Blue Rim's underlings, Canunn and Synster, Gar understood that his little brother had come a long way from the aggravating imp he'd once been. No longer was Catam the smaller boy trailing after his brothers. He had a successful career as a bounty hunter, a beautiful wife and two breathtakingly wonderful children. At short moments like these, when envy and pain cleared from his mind, Gar could appreciate his little brother and grasp how much he loved and was proud of him. But the memories always intruded, and eventual heartache wiped away any good feelings resurfacing. Before they could overwhelm him, Gar thanked Catam, promised to keep him up-to-date, and broke the connection.

Breathing hard, Gar wished he could overcome his need to distance himself from the happiness of others. Drekk, fortunately, proved easy enough to work with. The large man rarely spoke, and when he did, it was with rancour or dismissal. Though Drekk worked hard, he didn't project that loving, familial tone Gar's brothers did. That need to protect Gar simply didn't exist for Drekk, and for that Gar was grateful. Oh, he knew he could count on Drekk to watch his back, but Drekk and he operated less on affection than on mission-oriented success. A mutual respect for an end state both men wanted. Nothing more. Nothing like the seeming affection Drekk held for Rafe, which Gar definitely appreciated considering the circumstances.

Mulling the notion that he didn't quite fill Rafe's shoes in this job, Gar decided to make the change he'd been debating for several months. Playing Cheltam had helped free him from a course set on self-destruction, but this job didn't fit. Rafe needed to come back, just as soon as Drekk pulled his ass from that troublesome Eyran refugee. Flor's dagger, trust Rafe to land himself next to a fucking Creation.

Gar sighed. Just as soon as he cleared Sernal and settled Rafe once again behind Cheltam's desk, he planned to pack up and head out, to where he didn't yet know. But his

instincts told him it was time to leave. Already he skirted the law more than Rafe, and definitely Sernal, would be comfortable with. The fact that his lawlessness didn't bother Gar at all made his existence as a peacemaker a real problem in the organisation Sernal idealized. No, Gar's time as a lawman had ended.

Arriving at his landing strip, Gar left the rover and soon piloted his small craft into space, towards Sernal's last known location—Mornio, a mining planet filled with more criminals than those populating Jintak's jails. There Gar hoped to find a lead on Sernal, and maybe an idea about what to do with the rest of his pathetic life. But in the meantime, he planned to continue monitoring Drekk's progress, or lack thereof, because if his shady assistant thought to screw with Gar's orders, there'd be hell to pay. After all, Gar lived in the grey between right and wrong. And Flor help Drekk if he thought to sabotage any of the Mardu brothers.

* * * *

Teleporting into the forest had been easy. And from his vantage in the crook of the tree above, Drekk watched Rafe stroke Erin's full breasts, his motions tender and not at all rough as the marks on Erin's wrists might have indicated. Listening to their conversation illuminated much about Rafe that Drekk had suspected but never actually witnessed. Drekk respected the hell out of the peacemaker even more, and the fact that Rafe knew about Erin and still planned to help her cemented Drekk's decision to give them more time alone together; screw Gar's orders. With Rafe, Erin would be protected. The Mardu would help her and her siblings, no matter what. As would Drekk. And part of that help meant backing off to give Rafe time to claim his new mate.

Because in all the time Drekk and Rafe had worked together, Drekk had never seen the Mardu look at another woman the way he stared at Erin. He had a special look in his eye and an aura pulsating around his body that directly aligned with Erin's energy—a tell-tale sign the two would soon bond. Drekk had seen it before, a fascinating ritual, but never with a male of Rafe's particular intensity.

Still, Drekk didn't want to intrude on what was probably Erin's first measure of peace in her unfortunate life. Just seeing her in that Flor-forsaken bar had told him who and what she was. And though he'd sensed what she meant to do to him in Cheltam's office, he

couldn't blithely hand her over to Gar to use as bait, no matter how much she might have helped them take down Blue Rim.

Drekk had been waiting for years to destroy that particular laboratory on Eyra. And with Erin's help, he planned to do just that. But not for the peacemakers, or because it was the law. He'd take Blue Rim apart for all the ones that had come before, and would no doubt come again if someone didn't put an end to the evil Creators and Handlers tinkering with god-skills.

Erin moaned, distracting him, and Drekk watching with interest as Rafe moved her off his torso and propped her up on her hands and knees in front of him. The Mardu spanked her hard, several times, and Erin bowed her head and groaned with pleasure, her pheromones reaching Drekk even up in the tree. No, now was definitely not the time to be worrying about Blue Rim, not with two beautiful forms engaging in the carnality of pain and pleasure.

Drekk rubbed his rock-hard cock, amused and aroused at Rafe's prowess with the female sex. Though the decent thing would have been to give the couple their privacy, Drekk had never claimed to be anything approaching respectable. He wanted to watch, to see if the Mardu lived up to his reputation, and to see if Erin would live up to the promise of her incredible beauty. By the way Erin continued to shiver under her lover's touch, Drekk figured he was in for quite a show.

Chapter Nine

Erin kept her head down as she knelt, undone by Rafe's selfless promise. He couldn't really want to help her, could he? Because hope was all that had carried her this far in life, a desire for freedom and justice, and the ability to find her own happiness. Though she hadn't had much in the way of relationships with others, she knew she'd found something special with Rafe. Her energy pulsed in time with his, and if what he said were true, then the *wainu* they both experienced had as much to do with one another as it did with the sexual act itself.

"You ready to finish your punishment, baby?"

She shivered, thrilled when he called her those pet names in a husky voice. And the slaps he'd given to her ass did crazy things to her insides. She'd never imagined that a rough hand could arouse her so much, as if he strummed her clit instead of smacking her flesh.

"Yes, Sir." He palmed her butt and stroked her, sliding his thumb into the crease between her cheeks, stretching the opening of her anus. The feel of him there stirred a dark hunger, a thrilling, forbidden pleasure she'd wondered about, especially after seeing the act in one of the many bars she'd visited since her escape. "Rafe—Sir—can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

She turned her head to see him kneeling to the side of her, his shaft ruddy with desire. "How are you ready again so soon? Your recovery seems incredibly quick, and not typical with what I've read about Mardu males."

"Studious, aren't you?" Rafe grinned. "But you're right. *Most* men wouldn't equal your stamina." He sounded pleased with that announcement, and Erin liked the possessiveness in his tone when he spoke to her. "With you the rules don't seem to apply. And speaking of rules..." He smacked her hard, three times successively, the strikes overly loud in the quiet around them. "It's high time you answered for hitting me, baby. That's twice now that you've knocked me out cold. There won't be a third time," he reinforced in a deep, gravelly voice. Rafe smoothed his hand over the fiery burn of her skin, the contrasting softness of his touch with the hardness of his slaps arousing in the extreme.

She gasped at the surprisingly erotic sensation, her mind pulling her back into a

quagmire of submission as he exerted his dominance. "Wh-what are you doing to me, Sir?"

His fingers trailed over her ass and between her thighs, delving into the moisture dripping down her legs, and she stared at the ground, focused on the feelings he stoked within her. Before she could answer him, he pinched her clit, and she swore she saw stars from the extreme bliss. "You like that, hmm? The pain and the pleasure."

Erin blushed, unable to control her response as she flooded his fingers with cream. She waited for more—*wanting* more—her skin sensitised, anticipation making her lightheaded. When Rafe did nothing for several moments, she glanced up only to see him staring into the treeline, a look of fierce concentration on his face. Awareness penetrated and Erin used her enhanced senses, seeing the outline of a man through the leaves, his heat signature obvious now that she knew to look.

"Rafe, there's someone up there," she whispered as she rose slowly to her knees off her hands.

"No, get back down. Hands and knees, Erin. Now."

His authority put her at immediate ease, and she resumed her position, puzzled but not threatened. Embarrassment, however, covered her body in one large blush as she stared hard at the tree in front of her, all too conscious of their audience above.

"I know there's someone up there," Rafe admitted. "He's been there for a while, but he's no threat." She swore she heard humour in his voice.

"Who is it?"

"Don't you mean, 'Who is it, Sir?'"

She groaned.

"What's that?"

"Who is it, *Sir*?"

"Does it matter? Why? Do you want him to join us?" The menace in Rafe's tone set her on fire, and when he shoved a sudden finger deep into her pussy she clenched him tight. "Because that's a problem for me, Erin."

"I...don't...want...that."

"I don't share what's mine." He removed his finger and inched it up, pushing into her anus. "No, don't move a muscle." The dark command in his voice forced her to remain still, the burn of his intrusive digit soon giving way to pleasure. "It hurts so good, doesn't it, baby?"

"No, Sir."

He chuckled. "Liar." He pushed harder, and she groaned, wanting him out even as she wanted him deeper. "That's it. Now take another."

Rafe did as before, using the juices from her arousal to grease his second finger. Then he added it, stretching her virgin passage. "Your body adapts so beautifully, baby. Flor, that's sexy."

Erin wanted to cry out in both pain and desire. The burning sensation in her rectum hurt, yet odd tingles raced towards her sex, his probing fingers forcing an electric jolt that rushed straight through to her womb.

"I haven't claimed you here, yet." Rafe fairly purred the words, his breath raspy and his body giving off massive amounts of heat in the cooler air. The light of day rose over them both, streams of sunlight adding a heady joy to their lovemaking—as Erin thought to call it. "It's driving me crazy." His thrusting fingers increased their speed, and Erin felt his erection brush against her ass time and time again.

Then suddenly Rafe removed his fingers and thrust his cock deeply into her pussy. He groaned her name as he slid into her heat. But all too soon he withdrew, only to replace the presence of his fingers in her ass with the tip of his cock.

"It's too much," she gasped as he pressed steadily deeper, her moisture easing his intrusion.

Groaning, he prodded her ass cheeks further apart and sank inch by inch inside her. The fullness cemented their joining, turning an intimate physical encounter into so much more for Erin. She didn't understand why, but she accepted it nonetheless, growing closer to Rafe in that moment than she'd ever been with anyone else in her life.

"Fuck, *yes*. This is so right. So good." Rafe panted as he thrust the last inch home, his entire length seated inside her. "I can't be still, Erin, I'm sorry." Rafe pulled out slowly, the friction aggravating her tender flesh.

Yet again, the prickly sensation of desire flushed her womb, and when he shoved his length back into her she welcomed the alien fullness with pleasure.

"More," she moaned, gripping the grass beneath her fingers.

"Yes. All of it." Rafe surged in and out, his tempo fast, his thrusts rough. Honest lust rode them both as she took him the way an animal takes its mate. Pure possession seared her soul, and as Rafe took that last part of her yet untouched, Erin fell headlong in love.

"I'm going to come," she whispered, shocked at how sudden her orgasm was upon her. The energy enveloping them both sizzled along her nerves, and every time he pushed inside her, his balls slapped her clit. Filled and still teased, the dual sensations on her sexual receptors caused her passion to rise to a fevered pitch.

"Not yet. Not until I let you," Rafe grunted as he pounded her.

"Please, Sir," she begged, conscious she'd never in her life begged for anything with so much fervour. Not even her Creator, in the early days of her existence, had bidden such utter devotion. But Erin felt it all for Rafe. Love and tenderness, utter need and basic lust. *Everything*.

Rafe slammed once more and stilled, his quiet moan incredibly erotic. Erin literally felt his hot seed as it washed her and began trickling down her thighs. She quivered with the need to come, her body one huge mass of nerves.

Breathing heavily and leaning over her, Rafe tongued the shell of her ear and reached a hand around her waist. In seconds his fingers found her clit and pinched, hard. "Come now."

Unable to hold back, Erin exploded. She cried out and seized, her walls convulsing around emptiness even while another part of her gripped Rafe, holding him tightly within her.

"Erin," he groaned as he emptied *yet again* inside her. Joined, they knelt together, *wainu* hovering overhead if only they had the strength to reach for it. "Take it, baby. Take it in." Rafe brought it to her, and she sighed with contentment.

He gently withdrew and left her for a brief moment, but she didn't care. She soon felt him tending to her, but the brightness of perfection all around her bound her to that restful dreaminess she'd previously experienced. Even the smooth glide of a cloth over and between her butt cheeks didn't bother her, when by rights she knew she should have felt some discomfort.

"Rafe?" she murmured drowsily and reached for him. When he remained out of reach, she panicked. "Rafe, where are you?"

And then she felt his arms around her, saw his face in front of her, floating in clouds of bliss.

"Sleep, baby. Sleep. You've had a long couple of days and you deserve it."

Erin nodded and huddled close to his warmth, free for the first time in forever as she held onto the blanket of love covering them both.

Rafe groaned when Drekk interrupted his paradise. Damn, he knew he shouldn't have joined Erin in *wainu*, but the temptation to sooth and be with her, so close, was impossible to deny. With a frustrated sigh, he pulled back from euphoria, disgruntled, and glared at Drekk.

"You sure know how to pick 'em." Drekk ran his gaze over Erin with a thoroughness that set Rafe's instincts on alert. Not bothering with himself, he quickly threw Erin's jacket over her, effectively covering her from Drekk's gaze. "She really is perfection."

"She really is *mine*. And don't forget it," Rafe growled.

"Sure thing, Mardu." Drekk had the temerity to chuckle. *Drekk, laughing?* "Course, you'd be much more effective if you weren't standing there with yet another impressive hard-on. You going to fuck me with that thing or shoot it off again? You know you didn't finish claiming her."

Rafe blinked at Drekk in surprise. How the hell did Drekk know how the Xema mated?

"I know a lot more about you than you think."

Answering Rafe's unspoken question put Rafe on full alert, and whereas before he would have trusted Drekk implicitly, now Rafe wondered, because it wasn't just his safety, but Erin's on the line as well.

Again, Drekk responded without Rafe uttering a word. "Oh, relax, Rafe. I'm no telepath. I've worked with you for years, and I'm a great character study. Besides, I know quite a few Xema, though there aren't all that many of you. And I know the way one Xema claims another. You still have to mark her. What the hell are you waiting for?"

Rafe flushed, not wanting to share that particular facet of himself with his friend, though Flor knew he wanted to finish what he'd started with Erin. Only he hadn't planned on going as far as he had with an audience. From the onset, he'd known Drekk watched them. The minute the man had teleported into the treeline, Rafe had sensed him. But Erin, caught up in their loveplay, had been deliciously oblivious.

His cock throbbed again, and despite his tired body, Rafe's entire being quivered with need. *I know the way one Xema claims another.* Rafe blinked in astonishment. No wonder he was so taken with Erin. She had Xema traits. That strength, speed and agility wasn't all Ragga, nor was it Zephyran. He should have known. So why the hell hadn't he? And of all people, why had it taken Drekk to point out what should only have been obvious to another

Xema warrior?

"Come on, Rafe. You owe me. I let you have her when Gar ordered me to bring you in days ago."

"Please." Rafe snorted. "You don't do anything you don't want to, orders or not. Hell, you barely did what *I* asked you to."

"And that's the difference between you and Gar. You asked. He orders." Drekk shook his head. "Now admit you owe me one."

Rafe couldn't help recalling all the times he and Drekk had watched over one another. Truth be told, on their last mission together, Drekk had pulled his ass out of the fire. Still...Erin was *his*.

"If it makes you feel any better, it's not Erin I want to watch."

Rafe started, staring hard at Drekk, who grinned slyly.

"If you could see your expression. What's wrong, Rafe? Afraid you might want what only I can give you?"

Rafe chuckled. "Unless you've got a pussy between those legs and Erin's brain, body and soul, you're out of luck."

"Thought I'd ask." Drekk sighed, yet his eyes sparkled with something Rafe hadn't seen in a while. Real joy. And to Rafe's surprise, he realised most of what he'd missed about his job as Cheltam had been his friendship with Drekk. "Come on, man. Get to it." Drekk cupped himself through his trousers, displaying an impressive erection. "It's been a while for me, too. Your brother's a stern taskmaster."

"Don't I know it," Rafe muttered. He glanced from Drekk, his friend, to Erin, the woman he couldn't help feeling so deeply for. "This is a sacred part of the claiming. We don't usually have witnesses. It's an intimate thing, and one you shouldn't understand, though you obviously do." When Drekk raised one brow and waited, Rafe sighed. "Okay, but don't let Erin know about this. She wasn't all that happy about you watching the last time." Not that Rafe minded overly. Claiming her with an audience only reinforced his possession.

"Why are you *really* going to do it while she's out of it?"

Rafe opened his mouth and immediately closed it. "Fuck. Because you're a pain in the ass, that's why. Because you're my friend and I feel like a dick because I left you to Gar." Drekk chuckled. "And because I don't want to give her the chance to say no."

"Honest at last." Drekk slowly pulled his trouser fastening apart to expose a thick cock.

Stunned, Rafe watched as Drekk began stroking himself, and to his bewilderment, a subtle, seductive scent enveloped him. It wasn't Erin's, yet its pull was almost as strong. As Rafe's body hardened even more, he stared at Drekk in absolute shock. "*No. No way. Not you, too? How the hell did I miss that one?*"

Talk about the stunner of a lifetime. Most System inhabitants that had ever run across a Creation hadn't lived to see their next breath, lost in a Creation's violent madness. Yet not only had Rafe decided to mate and thus commit himself to one, he'd apparently been working with another for *years*.

"The first batch of us clearly didn't take." Drekk shrugged, the action accentuating the hard organ between his thighs. "But the scientists didn't stop after the war." His voice turned raspy as he watched Rafe begin to jerk off. "Fuck, Rafe. Do her and I'll tell you anything you want to know." The scent around them intensified, and Rafe saw a deep yearning in Drekk's hard grey eyes that softened with need. "*Please.*"

Rafe grunted, incapable of speech, and alternated his gaze between Erin's beauty and Drekk's glittering gaze, his pearling cock. The call of like to like overwhelmed him, and Rafe lost the ability to differentiate between Xema and Creation as he watched the woman he loved, knowing a man he both respected and trusted shared this moment. Rafe pulled the jacket covering Erin away. Kneeling over his woman, Rafe took himself in hand and focused on her, unable to block out Drekk's presence entirely. Still, it was Erin's scent that called to him. Erin's body, the image of her deep indigo eyes with their glowing pupils that pulled him deeper under her spell.

Caught by need, Rafe raced to completion, panting as lust overtook him. Frantic with the need to come, to finally mark Erin with his seed and rub it all over her breasts, Rafe shook from the force of his primitive desire.

"By the universe, yes," Drekk groaned, keeping pace with Rafe. "Watching you two fuck made me so damned hard. Feel her, Rafe. Love her as she was meant to be loved."

"*Erin.*" Rafe could barely breathe, the intensity of his pleasure growing as Drekk suddenly spurted. Ropy bursts of come jetted from the man's cock, and Drekk alternately cursed and prayed as he shot all over his hand and belly.

"Do it," Drekk panted, stroking himself until he seemed utterly spent. "Mark her, Rafe."

Rafe felt his balls tighten as a fist of pleasure centred at the base of his spine and blew

through his body. Yelling Erin's name, he came hard, covering her chest with his seed. A force greater than *wainu* wrapped around them, and he watched with pleasure as his seed seeped through her skin and disappeared, his essence now tied to hers for all eternity.

When he finally caught his breath, he felt Drekk's intense stare. His friend's eyes were no longer grey, but a complete black, no iris or white to differentiate. "Thank you," Drekk said quietly, and Rafe sensed the peace of the moment as it affected his friend as well.

"So far so good," Rafe breathed. "Now I just have to figure out a way to let her know we've mated."

Drekk chuckled, a raspy sound that soothed Rafe even more. "I have a feeling she's not going to mind your claiming much. Our kind don't often experience the kind of acceptance you've already given her."

Rafe stirred enough to cover Erin and clean himself, making good use of the small stream nearby. He alternated his gaze between Erin and Drekk while he donned his trousers, socks and boots, and he said the first thing that came to mind. "Tell me you're a lot older than four." He and Drekk had worked together five years ago, so Drekk had to be at least a year older than Erin.

Drekk looked surprised, and with that emotion his eyes returned to normal again. "Is that all she is? They must have really advanced the maturation process. Hell, I was Created over a thousand years ago. And even then it was touch and go. I think I'm the ugliest one they ever made." He grinned, bringing attention to his scar. "But I blended in so much better than their earlier versions, the pretty ones, that they had a hard time letting go."

A thousand years ago? Yet the male didn't look a day past thirty. Incredible. "Did they? Let you go, I mean? Because from the way Erin talks and the rewards Blue Rim is offering, I get the impression they're very fond of their...assets."

Drekk smiled, but Rafe saw no humour in it. "I died. I simply refused to regenerate after one of the 'tests' they gave me. That's how I got the scar. A near decapitation that went from one ear to the other. Just as they were about to torch my body, I found enough energy to evade my cremation and disappeared. One of my many talents, in case you haven't noticed."

Rafe stared, wide-eyed. "I thought you were using a micro-teleporter."

"Nope. It's just me. Though the teleportation was an accident. I scared the shit out of myself the first time it happened, when I suddenly caught a stray worm thread blowing by

me. They're all around us, you know. You just have to know how to tap into them."

Rafe glanced uneasily around him through the burning daylight. "I'll take your word for it."

"Unlike the Creations from the war and those made now, Blue Rim tinkered with real alien DNA when they made my batch. They found a rock from outside the System and cultivated samples from the life on it. I think my forbearers were spores," Drekk joked.

"I'd believe that."

"*Drun.*"

"Asshole."

"See, now *that* I like. Assholes."

Rafe laughed at Drekk, completely relaxed with the man as Drekk continued to open up about his past. At ease with his own sexuality, Rafe didn't have a problem with those who lived alternate lifestyles. He worried more about protecting those he cared about. And he felt a connection with Drekk now that he hadn't before.

"Weren't you scared someone might find out?" he had to know.

"At first. Remember, I was Created right after the war, and tension was high everywhere. But because there was so much life lost, I was able to blend in with the growing population. Men and women were desperately wanted in certain sectors of the System, and I didn't mind any job so long as it paid and kept me warm.

"It took me a while, but I eventually learned to live among those in the System. I made friends and lost them, shared women, men and loved a few of each in between. But until you, Rafe, I never felt much at home. I like this job. I like Cheltam, dammit."

Rafe chuckled. "Me, too. Never thought I'd say it, but I miss the bastard."

"So come back. You got Gar on his feet. And I know Sernal is driving you crazy. As soon as Gar finds him, why don't you mention how much you'd like to resume your duties? Hell, Tekar is the perfect place to hide Erin. With you and me on guard, no one will hurt her ever again."

Rafe stared at him. "What do you mean 'with you and me on guard?'" Much as he didn't like this side of himself, he couldn't help the jealousy surging through his blood. The warrior within him began to rise.

"Easy, Mardu." Drekk grinned, and again Rafe was taken aback at the lively features on his otherwise stoic face. "That mating instinct hits hard, doesn't it?"

"How the hell would you know?"

Drekk looked uncomfortable and sighed. "Because like you and Erin and your entire damned family, I've got a bit of Xema in me as well. That and some Ragga, Zephyran, a hint of Nebite and a world of unknown coding that allows me to come and go as I please and heal those who need it."

"You can heal, too?"

Drekk rolled his eyes. "How many times have we come back from a job with little to no wounds? I hate to break it to you, pal, but I'm not as sloppy as I seem. Most of the bloody cuts I suffer on jobs are to help *you*. My fluids act as a healing agent."

"You can teleport wherever you want to, and you don't die. A thousand years old? You are one scary fucker, you know that?"

Drekk shrugged, but Rafe thought he caught the man reddening.

"Are you blushing?" Rafe laughed long and hard, aware he'd never had a day quite like this one. "Talk about amazing. I mated with an incredible woman and scared a blush out of the infamous Disappearing Drekk. What are the odds?"

Drekk scowled. "Pretty damned good I'm going to kick your ass if you keep it up. You're not that cute, Mardu."

"The hell I'm not. I got you off, didn't I?" Rafe asked with real amusement. "Man, I can only imagine you having this same conversation with Gar. He'd be totally nuts by now."

"I know." Drekk sighed. "He's really against Creations, Rafe. You can't ever tell him about Erin." *Or me*, went unsaid.

"I figured as much. But don't worry. I'm not going to say one word to him about any of it." Rafe explained the idea to use the prison ships as a cover for Erin and her family, and Drekk readily agreed.

"I know a few guys who make great identification tags."

"Good. And while you're at it, find us a techie to doctor Blue Rim's files."

"My pleasure." The look in Drekk's eyes made Rafe glad he and the large male were on the same side.

They talked more about Erin's family, Rafe's tentative plans and his missing brothers.

Then Erin shifted on the ground, distracting them. Rafe crouched down to stroke her back, wanting nothing more than to take care of her until she forgot all about her hellish upbringing. But that would have to wait.

"That's my cue." Drekk stood and stretched, pinning Rafe with his stare. "I'll get you that laundry list of supplies for the mission and put out a quiet search for her family. But I don't have to tell you we need to wait before accepting them into the fold. The sister sounds fine, but it's Ryen that disturbs me. He sounds a lot like the trouble that started the Eryan War. But like I said, I'll take care of the logistics on this. You have your hands full."

Rafe stared down at Erin. "Yeah, I do." He'd never been so damned lucky in his life.

Drekk snickered, actually *snickered*, and Rafe wondered where this man had been hiding all these years. "Love brings another one down. First Catam, now you. A hundred beks says Sernal's next."

"You're on." Rafe shook his hand. "No way Sernal bites it before you do."

"Me?" Drekk scoffed. "You'd have better luck turning back the moons from their orbits. I'll be waiting at the tower where you last bagged those rogue peacemakers. Be there in four day's time or I'll take on Blue Rim without you."

Rafe frowned. "Now wait a minute."

"Four days. That's plenty of time to fuck on the move." Drekk shook his head. "Horny bastard. Then again, who could blame you...or her?" He grinned. "Best damned orgasm I've had in years, Rafe. Thanks."

"Dick."

"Whenever you want it, let me know." Drekk laughed at the gesture Rafe shot him, then disappeared in an instant.

"Rafe?" Erin's soft voice grabbed his attention. Shaking his head at Drekk's antics, he smiled into his mate's eyes, aware things were quickly coming to a head. But at least he had her now, and bonded for the foreseeable future.

"I'm here, baby. I'm right here."

Chapter Ten

On their third day journeying back towards the edges of the Eron Forest, Erin stared quizzically at the back of Rafe's head. She couldn't put her finger on it, but things had definitely changed. A closeness existed between them that hadn't been there before. And the tender glances of affection Rafe shot her when he didn't think she was looking shook her very foundation.

She loved him. She knew it and accepted it. But she hadn't expected Rafe to love her back. He knew she was a Creation. And as much as he talked about helping her out, she thought his desire to assist her stemmed more from his propensity to right wrongs than that he'd fallen in love with her. So why did each touch of his hand resonate through her very being? As if connected by electricity, whenever Rafe looked at her, she felt his gaze. When his fingers brushed her skin, her entire body lit like a lightning storm.

Had to be that last sexual marathon. He fucked me so good, so hard...so long ago. Erin blushed as she rubbed her ass, wondering how she could mistake pain for pleasure. After all that Synster and Canunn had done to make her life miserable, she'd never once orgasmed, had never experienced even a tenth of the depth of emotion for her Creator or Handler that she had for Rafe.

Confused, she nearly ploughed into Rafe when he stopped.

"Whoa. Why the rush?" he asked with a smirk. As if he didn't know.

"Cut the crap. Let's get back to 'civilisation' so we can blow Blue Rim sky high." *And forget this mission so you can fuck me again.* The blasted man had addicted her to sex, damn his hide.

He raised a brow in that infuriating manner of his and crossed his arms, bringing attention to his powerful frame. Erin loved his strength, that she couldn't push him around whenever she wanted to. And it was more than his physical power, but his mental acuity as well. Rafe used all of his assets to dominate the world around him, herself included. If only he'd relax enough to indulge in the carnal pursuits she couldn't stop thinking about.

For three hellish days she'd gone without. He'd kept their pace deliberately slow,

attentive to her needs, all except for the one to have him inside her again. Yet she saw the heated glances, the erections he tried to hide. And she didn't understand why he avoided his need. He claimed he wanted her focused on the mission, and he said he refused to use her baser instincts to overwhelm her.

Since when had Rafe of Mardu found principles? Oh, she knew his peacemaker status required that he help others in need—a category she definitely fit into. But she didn't want to be his project. She wanted her lover to push her around. This nice act was driving her insane. Such solicitousness when they crossed a stream or encountered a ferocious animal.

Erin snorted. As if she couldn't handle herself. Hell, she still thought she could take him in a fight, one on one. He'd explained he was Xema, an extremely rare, powerful race of Mardu warriors, and that he thought she might be as well. Yet Erin also possessed some Ragga and Zephyran genetics. With so many aggressive genes, surely she could best him hand to hand? She had once, no, twice before.

The problem, as she saw it, was that as soon as they touched she wanted to submit, to give him whatever he wanted. And she hadn't felt that way before, even after sharing sex with him. She'd been fighting the need to give in to him whenever they brushed hands or bodies, and she found, to her relief, she was building resistance. But that didn't mean they had to forego sex totally, did it? Because her body constantly craved Rafe, as much as her heart did.

Glaring at Rafe, Erin deliberately loosed her pheromones, baiting him.

Rafe stilled and stared down at her with a narrowed gaze. "Problem?"

"I want to stop. And you're crowding me." *But not nearly enough.*

"Feeling feisty, eh?" The sparkle in his golden eyes had her loins pooling with want.

"Maybe I'm tired of you taking charge. We're nearly at the trading post, a day early." *And you have yet to make love to me again.* "It was my idea to take out Blue Rim in the first place. Peacemaker or not, this is my mission. Not yours."

Rafe grinned, irritating her to no end. "Well, I can see you're feeling much better, aren't you?"

"I've been fine."

"No, you've been depleted. You used too much energy to evade me in the jungle. And after, well, after our sensual encounter, I think I pushed you too hard. You needed time to recuperate."

Angered at his concern that simultaneously warmed her heart yet aggravated her, Erin invaded Rafe's personal space, a breath between them, and poked him in the chest. "I don't need you to take care of me. I've been doing just fine without you."

"Right. For the whole four months you've been on your own."

Truly furious, Erin let loose even more of her pheromone and grabbed Rafe by the arms, her fingers curling around his hard biceps. A big mistake, she belatedly realised. Because lust flooded her body and mind, drowning out the anger building there.

"That's it, baby. Let it go." Rafe pushed her to her knees and unbuttoned his trousers.

Finally, she wanted to shout, but Erin could only groan as she reached for the thick shaft jutting towards her.

"It's been so hard waiting for you to be okay," he rasped as she took him in her mouth.

"*Fuck, yes.* Oh, Erin, I love you so much, baby. You have no idea."

Joy caused tears to spring to her eyes, and as Erin worked him with her lips and tongue, she knew he spoke the truth.

"You're so stubborn. Hell yes, you're strong. But you're also a woman who needs to be protected." He groaned when she increased the pressure on his balls. "Do it again." He cursed and thrust deeper into her mouth, touching the back of her throat. "I'm Xema, deal with it. You're mine, and I'll care for you the way I see fit."

Rafe lost his voice as Erin serviced his every unspoken desire. She shoved a finger in his anus, roughly taking his arousal higher. She tasted his seed as he began to lose control. And then she teased him with her tongue where she knew he liked it, and he cried out as he shot, shuddering with bliss.

Erin swallowed his cum greedily, lost to *wainu* though she hadn't climaxed herself. Rafe, however, took care of that by dragging her to her feet and kissing the breath out of her. His hand shot into her trousers and worked her tight little bud, and within minutes she exploded, drenching him with cream.

"Oh, baby." Rafe kissed her again and rested his forehead against hers. "I love it when you get all pissed off. It makes the need to dominate you that much stronger."

"Rafe," she protested, lost under his soft laughter and the short burst of *wainu* he pulled back from them both. She still didn't understand how he could control the blissful comings and goings of that state, and she hadn't yet asked, too lost in the *wainu* she experienced to care.

"No, no. You cheated. That perfume of yours is lethal. And I'm not as immune as I'd like to be."

"You don't want to want me?"

Rafe pulled away and looked at her as if she were crazy. "I love how you make me feel. But when you overwhelm me, it takes away my control. And a Xema is always in control."

"Always?" She glanced down at his flagging erection.

He flushed and tucked himself back into his trousers, righting hers as well. "Depends on which Xema you're talking about," he muttered and added something else under his breath, something that sounded suspiciously like *stubborn mate*.

She froze. "What did you just say?"

"Nothing." He scowled. "How good is your hearing, anyway?"

"You said 'mate.' Are we mates? Is that why you love me? Why you've been so damned caring and careful the past few days?" Her heart racing in anticipation, Erin felt more nervous about his answer than she'd been when escaping from Blue Rim.

"Why? You have a problem with that?" he asked, his answer guarded.

Erin stared, not sure what to think. "But you said Xema can only mate Xema." She'd asked a lot of questions about him during their trek back towards the trading tower. And to her surprise, he'd been more than willing to answer her.

"That's what I said."

"So?"

"So what?" Rafe sighed. "Erin, I love you. Does it matter why?"

"It does if it's only because we're both Xema." Being Created was enough of a burden. Erin refused to be someone's commitment solely due to genetics as well.

"Please. You're less Xema than you are a host of other possibilities. You're sexy, smart, and give the best damned blowjob this side of the System," he joked, but when she didn't laugh, he rolled his eyes. "Erin, can't you just accept that I love you for you? Honey, I know who and what you are. And I don't care about anything but that you're mine. Can't you feel it, the connection between us?"

She nodded.

"That's very, very rare. I won't lie. I've experienced *wainu* before, and even felt affection for a few women. But I've never wanted one enough to claim her for my own."

"You claimed me?" Erin didn't know what that meant, exactly, but she thrilled at all he

said. It sounded more and more as if Rafe truly loved her.

"I did. And I won't apologise for it," he growled, looking extremely annoyed. "I love you, you love me, and that's all there is to it. We're going to destroy Blue Rim, and then you and I are going to get on with the process of living."

Erin didn't know what to say. Rafe had been planning all this out for them and hadn't mentioned any of it to her. Much as she delighted in the fact that he wanted her, she didn't like having her future planned out for her. She'd gone that route once before in her life. But he'd been so careful not to garner her submission unless they were making love. From that perspective, it seemed as if he wanted her to make her own decisions.

Before she could comment, however, she heard something moving in the woods in front of her.

Rafe froze as well, and they crouched low, taking cover in nearby bushes.

"Cheltam, come on out, man. We have a problem."

Rafe and Erin glanced at one another in surprise, then stepped out to meet the new arrival.

"Drekk?"

Drekk quickly shook his head. "Don't say another word. Just go along," he murmured, staring at Rafe. "*Trust me.*"

"Oh, good," a voice from Erin's nightmares, from her Handler, whispered in the sudden silence. He appeared along with a dozen blue-suited men, teleporting into the small clearing of forest with phasers drawn. Eyran security uniforms, the recognisable sight symbolising Erin's years of imprisonment, sent her into a panic.

Sweet perfume flooded the air as she readied to fight, to protect not only herself, but Rafe as well.

"Don't do it," Drekk growled, something in his gaze making her take a second look.

And that was all it took to render her off balance. In minutes several pulses stunned her into oblivion, and she fell into waiting arms, not sure of anything anymore.

Rafe stared in shock at Drekk, not knowing what to think. On the one hand, the instinct to protect his mate made him want to tear off the heads of everyone around them. But on the other, the rational measure of the lawmaker within told him to wait it out. Drekk had called him Cheltam, after all. If need be, Rafe could kill the lot of them after he'd found his answers.

"Cheltam," Drekk said with what sounded like relief. "I was hoping to see you yesterday." A lie. Drekk had told them he'd meet them at the trading tower tomorrow. "You have the girl, unharmed, as agreed? See Synster? I told you all was well." He glanced at Synster, and Rafe recognised the name as the one Erin had put to her Handler.

In their days together travelling back, Rafe had explained to Erin more of his life as a Xema and peacemaker. And his mate had tentatively described life on Eyra. A series of tests and torture at the hands of Synster, this measly male Rafe could break in two with one hand. Looking around, he failed to spot her Creator, Canunn. *Too bad. Would have been nice to kill them both and present them to Erin with bows around their necks.*

"She *was* unharmed," Rafe growled. "Until one of these dicks shot her with a stunner."

"The female is fine." Synster shook his head, disregarding Rafe, to his inherent danger. "At least the phaser will leave no lasting damage. So long as you haven't done anything to mar her perfection."

"I saved her ass from peacemakers bent on rape and several raptors and *kethra* wanting to make her into dinner. She's a handy woman, I'll grant you. But she's not familiar with the Fields of Flor or the Anate Jungle."

Synster started, his beady eyes narrow. "I hadn't thought she'd get that far. Good, then." Synster cleared his throat. "Your man Drekk tells me you want more than the hundred thousand we're offering for her capture."

Rafe glanced at Drekk and nodded, thinking fast. "If she's worth that much, then knowledge about more like her should be worth a pretty penny."

Synster grinned, and unease tingled at the base of Rafe's neck. "Oh, we know about the others. She's the last one we need to find, I'm happy to say." Synster glanced at the men around him and considered his words. "I'm not exactly sure why I should pay you anything, considering I've found her myself."

Drekk, Rafe noted, narrowed his gaze, anger pouring off the large male in waves.

Rafe, however, hadn't been away from Cheltam so long that he'd forgotten how to play the game. "Well, now. Seems to me you don't know me as well as you should, Synster. My reputation is as good as it is because I'm a safe man."

"How so?"

"I keep very clear, detailed records about every job I take. And though you didn't deal with me personally on this matter, I have enough on you to put you to death several times

over, should our girl's beginnings be made public." Rafe smiled through his teeth, pleased at Synster's sudden pallor.

"You wouldn't."

"Why not? I'm a known criminal, but one with standards. You Eyran scientists, however, have a bad reputation with creating things that destroy." Rafe stared from Erin to Synster. "You kill me and all details surrounding Erin, you and Canunn will be all over the Vrail news vids within twenty standard hours."

Drekki nodded. "I told you we play hardball, Synster."

Synster grimaced. "That's not necessary."

"Oh, but it is." Rafe held Erin in his arms, wanting nothing more than to put her down and pound Synster into a bloody pulp. "Now I want a credit chip with two hundred thousand on it, as well as passage back to Tekor for me and my friend." He nodded to Drekki. "And I want to know if anyone else is currently looking for Erin. Anyone else I'll have to beat back when they come pounding at my door demanding to know why I stole their bounty out from under them?"

Synster flushed. "A harmless group. *Mara's Light* agreed to track her. But Drekki contacted me before Catam returned my calls. I expect they'll be easy enough to manage for someone with your *reputation*." Synster threw back at him. "Now give me the girl." Synster nodded at two large security men to step forward.

"No. You give Drekki the chip, and we'll wait while he verifies it."

Synster glared. "I don't think you understand who's in charge here."

A sudden disturbance in the air had Drekki and Rafe on one side of the small clearing and Synster and his team on the other. In seconds, two large Ragga, a Mardu, a large, stunning male and a tall, sexy female appeared with pistols at the ready.

"Synster, how good to see you," Catam said with rancour. "Not going to give away my currency, were you?" Catam's gaze flashed to Rafe's, but he said nothing more and looked back at Synster.

"Speak of the devil," Drekki murmured with amusement. "What were you saying about getting rid of *Mara's Light*, Synster?"

Synster's eyes widened with alarm as he stammered for his security to protect him. Guns aimed at one another and shouting ensued while Rafe cradled Erin to his chest protectively.

"I had to bring Synster and crew," Drekk said under his breath by way of apology. "They found Ryen and Anin earlier today. But on the bright side, at least I have you two a minute to finish up."

Rafe glared, not amused at any of this.

"Cheltam, what a pleasure," Catam spoke loudly, breaking through the noise. "Should have known you'd be in on this."

"Yes, you should have." Rafe was so going to kick Catam's ass for involving himself in this mess. And where the hell were Isa and the girls?

"Catam, perhaps it would be wise of you to remind Cheltam that *I* command *Mara's Light*," Mara said with steel underlying her words.

Rafe fumed. "Lady, right now I don't give a shit who works for who. The girl is mine to deal with. So Synster, you want her back? Gimme that chip."

Catam and the others exchanged glances, and Rafe noted that Lurin, Mara's mate, looked none too pleased with his attitude. Well, fuck it. This was his operation, his woman, and his responsibility. *Not* his little brother's.

"Fine. Dagga, give him the currency," Synster snapped.

One of the men set the amount and handed Drekk a chip. Drekk vanished, and while they waited for him to return, Rafe kept Erin close. Catam, he noted, studied him with interest.

"Just tell me this is all the crowd we're going to have today. Because if I so much as see a hint of a peacemaker, I'm leaving with the woman. And you'll never see her again," Rafe snapped, annoyed.

"You're not going anywhere, not with our currency," Mara had the nerve to interject.

Rafe glowered. "Mara, you push too hard and you're going to get hurt."

Synster and the others backed up as the crew of *Mara's Light* advanced on Rafe. But seriously ticked off at his interfering brother, Rafe let loose his Xema abilities, calling on the distortion techniques as he replicated. In seconds, three dozen images of Rafe holding Erin dotted the area, and in the confusion, Rafe moved back into the woodline out of sight of everyone.

Catam, a fellow Xema, most likely saw him move, but was smart enough to keep his eyes on the fake Rafe's all around him. Rafe spoke through all of them, making it impossible to find his exact location.

"Soon as the currency is verified, the girl's yours." He spoke to Synster. "So you have no need of the others we discussed." Stalling them, he planned how to handle this mess. Much as he didn't want to, Rafe knew he would have to give Erin back, if only to follow her to her siblings. She'd never allow them to come to harm, and as his mate, bound Rafe to doing the same. Rafe could only pray Drekk had managed to find them the techie and supplies they needed.

"I hate when they do that," Lurin muttered, scowling at the copies of Rafe and Erin. "Damn Xema."

"You can say that again," Catam said with menace. "When this is over, Cheltam, you and I are going to settle a few things."

Rafe scoffed, "You and what crew?" Which had the crew of *Mara's Light* shouting and threatening, putting Synster and his men on the defensive all over again as Mara accused Synster of lying to them.

Thankfully, Drekk found Rafe in the woods and kept his voice and presence hidden from everyone else. "The credits are good. I already transferred them. My techie just finished scrubbing all the records of Erin and her family from Blue Rim. And it wasn't cheap. Cost a hundred thou just for that."

"Drekk, get on with it."

"Sorry. Look, the way I figure it, we give her back to Synster, then track them with this." Drekk held a small device to Erin's waist and pressed a button. "You have to keep Cheltam's cover. And she can lead us to her family, because you know she won't stop until they're freed again. Once we have them and the other prisoners still being held at Blue Rim, we blow the place up."

"What?"

"You know Sernal wants everything bagged, tagged and documented. But that will just give rise to new Creations, new subjects to torture and experiment on." The rage in Drekk's voice gave Rafe pause. "What's right is right, Rafe. And against the law or not, Blue Rim needs to be stopped."

"But there are innocent people—"

"No. No one at Blue Rim is innocent. They all know what goes on there. Trust me. There aren't as many people working the labs as you'd think, and every one of them is cleared to Create. That's what Blue Rim does. They play -god for profit."

"But—"

"I'm sorry, Rafe. I'm taking them out, with or without you."

Drekki handed Rafe a micro-teleporter, a small device Rafe accepted and tucked into the pocket of his trousers, and waited.

After a minute, Rafe sighed. "Okay. We blow up the lab, but not the people. I'm not a killer, Drekki. And neither are you." Though Drekki clearly wanted to argue, he nodded instead, and Rafe let out a breath of relief. He'd never been totally comfortable working in the grey. But then again... He stared down at Erin. He would do whatever it took to protect her and others like her, others like Drekki and her siblings. "I'll handle the arrests and you can blow up the lab, okay?" The delight on Drekki's face made him wince. "But you make sure to leave Synster and Canunn to me."

"Done." Drekki smiled, menace radiating off him like that damned perfume he exuded. "Now how about you quit fucking with their minds out there and hand Erin over?"

Rafe shook his head, not wanting to let Erin go. "You do it. I can't."

Drekki nodded with sympathy and gently took Erin into his arms. He walked out into the clearing, and Rafe drew in on himself, making his images disappear. He heard the exclamations of surprise, Drekki's rumbling, and then Drekki reappeared.

"Synster and his men are gone. But we need to leave, right now."

"Why?" Within his next breath, solid arms wrapped around his waist and arms, taking him off his feet even as someone lifted a pistol to Drekki's forehead. *Dammit.* More illegal teleporters. Too bad he hadn't used the one Drekki had just given him before they were captured.

"Why? Because Mara and her crew were not amused with your antics," Lurin Vez explained in a deep, angry voice.

"Shit."

"I tried to tell you." Drekki glared at Catam holding a gun to his head. "Fucking Mardu."

Catam glared back, and Rafe wondered how much damage the two Raggas holding him might inflict before he could reach the teleporter in his pocket. Drekki only stayed to help him, though he wished his friend would leave to track Erin.

"We don't have time for this," Rafe began when Mara cut him off.

"Make time." She scowled, giving him that sharp, lavender gaze that normally had her

crew squirming with trepidation. "Dammit, Gar, I'm tired of your bullshit. Enough is enough."

"I'm not Gar."

Catam and the other stared at him, and Catam blinked in disbelief. "You're not... Rafe? What the hell did you do to yourself? You even smell like Gar, like you've been claimed..." he trailed off in horror.

"Yes, little brother. *My mate* is right now in the hands of some crazy scientists and I want her back." In his anger, Rafe let out a burst of energy, effectively shoving the Raggas holding him into the trees at their backs.

"Crap." Catam scowled. "Okay, okay. Uh, Mara? He's not lying. This really is Rafe. And I think it's best if you guys leave this to us," he ended, motioning to Rafe and himself. "It's a family thing now."

"You want me to leave you and your idiot brother, and Drekk," she said scornfully, earning a raised brow from the man, "up against Blue Rim and a Creation?"

Rafe glared at her, ignoring Lurin's frown. "Erin is *not* a Creation. She and her brother and sister did some time for petty theft and were captured by System law. Unfortunately, like many of the others Blue Rim took, she and her family became unwilling experiments trapped in a scientific horror for years."

Mara paled. "Hell. I'm sorry, Rafe. I assumed, since Gar was so adamant, that she wasn't natural."

Rafe fumed at the word "natural" but didn't argue. Best to let her and the crew believe him. "Yeah, well, if we don't get her back, she might just become the monster you're all accusing her of being. You have no idea what she's suffered for the past four years."

Lurin shook his head. "Four years? I don't want to think about it. Come on, honey," he said to Mara. "Let's get back to the ship. Nu, Set, Catam, let's go. Rafe, I trust you'll signal us when you need our help?" Catam looked like he wanted to argue, but Rafe nodded for him to leave.

Rafe was about to refuse their help, however, when Drekk stepped in. "That's a good idea. We can use you as a distraction when we pull the others out."

"The others?" Mara asked.

"The other prisoners still trapped inside," Rafe growled.

Nu and Set flexed their hands, as if anticipating a fight. "Let's go," they said as one.

"Yeah," Drekk added. "Come on, *Cheltam*. Follow me. You won't believe the stuff our contacts found for us." Drekk disappeared.

Rafe turned to Catam. "Erin's mine. I claimed her, *fully*."

Catam's eyes widened. "She's Xema? A female Xema?"

Rafe nodded.

"Hot damn. Okay, brother. You find her, we'll help. And hey, just think, when this is all over, she and Mom can bond, leaving poor Isa and the girls alone."

Rafe couldn't help a small smile at the thought of Catam's fiery mate and their mother at odds again, putting Catam in the hot seat. "Sounds good. Be careful out there." And that said, Rafe teleported to Drekk's signature inside a private weapons class ship.

"We're going to blow them off the planet," Drekk said with malice.

"*After* we rescue Erin and the others." Rafe absently rubbed his chest, feeling half the man he'd been just this morning without Erin at his side.

Chapter Eleven

Erin woke to a throbbing headache. Damned stunners. She winced as she blinked into white light but couldn't block the brightness from her eyes. Her wrists lay strapped to the table under her, her ankles bound as well. And the coldness of the metal under her skin showed her she wore nothing at all. Completely vulnerable to the powers that be. Her nightmares made real, all over again.

"Ah, there you are." Canunn smiled, his watery blue eyes as welcome as death would have been...before Rafe.

"Let me go." Why she bothered fighting, she didn't know. Canunn would never release her, and she could only imagine how Synster would react to her escape. She could only hope Anin and Ryen remained safely away.

"No, dear. You were a very bad girl, Erin. And to say you caused me some inconvenience is putting it mildly." Canunn raised a small tool and Erin flinched. He touched one end of the tool to a large transparent energy block and depressed a button. A small probe shot from the tool and landed on her bare belly.

Mind-numbing energy jolted through her, tearing a scream from her with savage intensity.

"As I recall, you never could tolerate the *volmagni* block, could you?"

"Bastard," she said once she caught her breath. She continued to shiver, the blast of energy stealing her heat, adding to her discomfort at being nude before her Creator.

"That won't do at all." Canunn frowned, and Erin realised she didn't care at all about his disappointment. That urge she'd once had to please Canunn at all costs no longer existed. Hell, once she got herself free of these bonds, she could snap his neck and be done with him. The understanding that she maintained control over herself was liberating. Though she'd worked to overcome Canunn's basic teachings, she'd always feared returning to Blue Rim, that she might fall back into the roll of experimental slave. Funny, but she didn't mind her forays into submission with Rafe at all. With him she felt safe to enjoy herself. She liked pleasing him, but only because she knew how much he liked pleasing her.

Canunn and Synster, on the other hand, had never cared about her at all. Their focus did and would remain on what she could do for them. Another wave of agony swept through her as Canunn turned up the *volmagni's* settings. When she could think again, Erin knew that as much as she longed to rip Canunn's head off his body, she needed to play along until she could escape.

Summoning a few tears and a remorseful expression, she closed her eyes and apologised. "I'm sorry, Sir. I've been so confused lately." *Sorry I'm not free so I can beat you into a bloody mess with my bare hands.*

"That's more like it." The relief in Canunn's voice told her he hadn't been as sure about her as he'd have liked. And Erin decided to use that to her advantage.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Erin. You can open your eyes and look at me, you know."

She blinked to find him frowning. "Sir, where is my family?" He normally liked when she asked about them, as if reassured she wasn't a monster because she loved her siblings.

"They're safe enough for now." Canunn glanced at her breasts before stepping away. He returned with a sheet and covered her nakedness. "Erin, I'd like you to answer me honestly." He paused, and she watched in astonishment when her Creator blushed. "Are you still pure?"

Understanding what he wanted to know, she decided to needle him a bit. "I haven't ingested or imbibed of any toxic substances. I suppose then that makes me pure." She smiled, trying to reassure him.

The little jerk swallowed loudly and glanced away, and she wanted to laugh with perverse enjoyment. Now that she thought about it, Synster had always been the one interested in sexuality. Canunn avoided it like the Mornian plague.

"What I mean is, have you, ah, have you engaged in sexual intercourse?"

Even stated in such clinical terms, Canunn made sex sound dirty. With Rafe, their loving had been anything but. Yet knowing what her Creator probably knew and wanted to hear, she summoned more tears.

"I'm so sorry, Sir. I couldn't avoid it."

Canunn immediately wiped her eyes with a cloth, and Erin was surprised to see compassion, something he'd never before shown her. "I told you not to leave us, didn't I? Poor Erin. Did you find yourself abused at the hands of many? From what I could tell of your

scans, you were sodomized overly. My poor Erin."

Sodomized and loving it. Damn, she missed Rafe. Already her body softened for him at the thought of their joining. "I am sorry, too, Sir. I'll never leave you again. Never. Whatever you demand as punishment shall be just, as you are just."

Canunn smiled, a wobbly expression bordering on honest emotion. Tears filled his eyes. "I am so happy to hear you say that." He released the bar over her left wrist and paused, as if comprehending how stupid he was to give her the chance to escape. But Erin bided her time. Canunn wasn't a complete idiot, and when she glanced around, she saw several armed guards in her periphery. She lay still, not moving at all. Canunn released her right wrist, then her ankles, tense while he waited to see what she might do.

Erin remained still.

"Erin?"

"Sir?"

"Would you like to leave the table?"

"If it would please you, Sir."

Canunn exhaled loudly. "It would please me very much. Please remove yourself to lab room one. Clean yourself, then dress. Synster should be back any minute with Anin."

Erin nodded and left, her thoughts abuzz. Synster had Anin, but what about Ryen? What had happened to her siblings in her absence? As she left Canunn, she noticed the many security guards now posted along the exits of the large room, as well as along the hallway and outside of lab room one.

She entered the lab and sealed the door behind her. Quickly cleaning and dressing, once again in the sterile white pants and sleeveless vest worn by all test subjects, Erin stopped and waited. For several moments she merely stared at the floor, at the cool tiles and their utter sameness that used to drive her crazy. But as she stared, she saw the memories she'd made with Rafe. She felt the heat of the overhead sun as she walked through Mardu's glorious fields. Rafe's unique scent called to her, reminding her that somewhere outside the walls of this prison stood a man who loved her — Erin, a Creation.

Stupidly, she smiled, a huge grin she was unable to contain as she made her way back to Canunn's side. Joining him, she saw his cautious hope and wanted to laugh out loud. That sense of freedom allowed her to resist the urge to choke him. Instead, to her surprise, she felt sorry for the male. The joy she'd experienced in her short life meant everything to her, and

she knew instinctively that Canunn had never felt its like.

“Erin?”

“I’m just so glad to be back,” she said quietly, smiling still.

Canunn nodded, pleased with her response. Before he could speak, however, Synster arrived with Anin in tow. Erin could see nothing overly wrong with her sister, with the exception of Synster’s small hand gripping her arm tightly. Anin met her gaze and looked away, but not before she gave Erin a small wink.

Apparently, the time away from Blue Rim had benefited Anin as well, because that wink was the first show of open humour her sister had managed by herself, without being prodded by another.

Synster sneered as he joined her and Canunn. Shoving Anin away from him, he yelled at her. “Sit your ass down and don’t move.”

“Yes, Sir.” Anin sat and stared at the floor, and if Erin hadn’t known better, she’d swear Anin was grinning inside.

“Synster? What’s wrong?” Canunn looked worried.

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong. That bitch refused to have sex with me.”

Erin and Canunn stared at Synster, then at Anin, in perfect tandem.

“What?” Canunn asked before turning to Anin. “Anin, is this true?”

Anin looked up at Synster. “I should answer, Sir?”

“Yes, yes. Answer him, you stupid slut.”

Anin might not mind, but Erin’s annoyance grew the more he insulted her sister. She’d never liked Synster or his obnoxious comments. But now that she’d had a taste of freedom, she didn’t intend to suffer any more at Blue Rim’s hands.

“Yes, Sir,” Anin said to Canunn. “It is true. I did not want to have sex with my Handler, and when he asked what I wanted, I responded in kind.”

Canunn didn’t say anything. Synster, however, began cursing and pacing, completely put out.

“A few months out of the lab and they’re ruined. Ruined! This little *drun* refused me. My Creation to do with as I please, and she said no.”

“But did she disobey you, or did she answer you honestly?” Canunn asked, a distinction Erin sensed held a great deal of importance. Yet she could only marvel that her sister, once a spineless female, had not only winked at Erin, she’d been honest about her

wants. Would wonders never cease?

“Actually, now that I think about it, she simply answered me. I hadn’t actually ordered her to obey.” Synster stared at her sister with a grim smile.

Anin, unfortunately, lost her pleased glow. And Erin knew that as far as Anin had come during her time away, disobeying Synster apparently wouldn’t be one of her triumphs.

“Sir?” Erin asked to take the focus from Anin. Canunn and Synster looked at her. “Where is Ryen?”

Synster shook his head. “Your brother is another problem, I’m afraid. I had to sedate him rather heavily. He’s in another of his rages and practically tore me apart when I came to get Anin. It took seven stuns to get him to ground, and another four to put him under.”

Canunn stared, open mouthed. “But Synster, that much at once could kill him.”

“I don’t think he will ever work out, Canunn. His death will most likely be for the best.”

Best my ass. Erin counted to ten, but thoughts of Ryen possibly dying without her or Anin, all alone, broke her ability to remain silent.

“Where is he?”

Synster narrowed his gaze. “I hear someone had a time with you. But you don’t look any different to me. She still subservient?” he asked Canunn as he walked around her, eyeing her like a piece of meat.

“Yes. But I don’t think —” Canunn tried before Synster cut him off.

“Erin, Anin, with me.” Synster stormed out of the room and Erin followed with pleasure, wanting more than anything to get Synster alone. Unfortunately, he had more brains than she gave him credit for.

They returned to lab four alpha, Synster’s favourite place to fuck her sister. Anin often complained to Erin about the cold temperature, but apparently Synster liked how it made her nipples stiff, since he obviously couldn’t arouse her.

Inside the room, he posted two guards on either side of the door. The men watched Anin and Erin with interest. Synster meant to put on a show.

“We’re appropriately guarded, Erin, so don’t even think about resisting.”

“No, Sir.”

“Good girl. Now watch how Anin makes me come. I want you to do what she does. Or do you have a frame of reference to go by already?” He sneered.

The prick. “Sir?”

"You were raped repeatedly on the outside, weren't you?"

She could feel the prurient interest in the guards watching them. To her disgust, she saw erections growing through their uniforms.

"No, Sir."

Anin glanced at her, but sympathy turned to confusion in her eyes as she stared.

"No? Then you're saying you invited such attention?" Synster hurriedly stepped out of his lab coat and clothing and faced them. The other males ignored him and focused on hers and Anin's responses. Anin glanced at Synster and looked away, as if bored. Erin, however, stared at Synster, amazed he'd been able to do anything at all to Anin with such a small penis.

She turned to Anin. "Is that as big as it ever gets?"

Anin sighed. "Yes."

Synster sputtered but Erin couldn't help it. She began laughing. "No wonder you complained. That's awful."

The guards grinned until Synster turned to threaten them with termination.

Not caring about repercussions, Erin grabbed him by the throat the minute he turned his back. "One move and I'll break his neck." She released her pheromones and Synster stopped moving. Anin joined her and before long, all three males writhed on the floor groaning as they cupped their painful arousals.

"Ryen needs us," Anin said softly.

"Yes, he does." Grabbing the phasers from the guards' holsters, she shot each male with enough force to knock him out for a long time. Handing one weapon to Anin, who only looked at it with puzzlement, Erin sighed and held onto both weapons. "Let's get Ryen and get the hell out of here." She paused. "Unless you want to stay?"

The confusion Erin thought to see in her sister's gaze flashed for a moment. Anin had trouble making her own decisions and always had. But to Erin's surprise, Anin slowly shook her head. "I do not want to remain."

Grinning, Erin nodded to the door. "Then let's go."

* * * *

"We've got a problem." Drekk grimaced at the readout in his hand. Before them,

behind bars, dirty prisoners lay haphazardly around an overcrowded cell. The stench of unwashed bodies, human waste and spoiled food permeated the hopelessness of the place. "The tracker still won't work this close to the building." He paused. "This is just like the other cells we found. It's as if Blue Rim wanted to wash away any evidence of wrongdoing. None of these prisoners are alive either, and all have been...experimented on. That guy has an extra leg, that one three eyes. That one, what the hell? Is that fur?"

Rafe shook his head, thoroughly disgusted, not to mention worried out of his mind for Erin. Where was she?

"Rafe, you there?" Catam spoke into his earpiece, and Rafe answered back.

"What news?"

"We have a problem."

"Fuck. Doesn't anyone have any good news?"

"Major situation, here. We were talking to our buddy Canunn on the vid feed when we lost video. Audio, however, tells us they have a massive battle going on in the lab. Something is loose in there, and it doesn't sound human."

Drekk and Rafe looked at each other before hauling ass back to the main building and away from the holding cells some distance away.

"Rafe, we're landing to back you up," Catam informed. Though Rafe didn't want the help, he needed it. The peacemakers wouldn't arrive for a few hours more. They were on standby orbiting the largest asteroid around Eyra. Rafe didn't want to chance Erin getting found out or hurt when they took down the labs. But if he didn't hurry, he feared he'd lose her to whatever had cut out transmission inside the main building.

Knocking out the security guards and overriding the system protecting the lab's west entrance, Rafe and Drekk entered into a long corridor. Following the sounds of a loud firefight, they cautiously entered another set of double doors into what looked like Blue Rim's main lobby. What they saw, however, stopped them short. Security guards and a few scientists spattered the pristine floor. Broken bones and blood sprayed everywhere.

"Not good," Drekk muttered. "Fuck."

Rafe centred himself and sought Erin's scent. Though he hadn't detected her outside with any of the other prisoners, he immediately knew she'd been in here, and recently at that. He followed her trail to a lift and entered. He and Drekk stopped on each floor, and on the fourth floor, he picked up her scent again.

They exited the lift and heard shouts and gunfire to their left. Hurrying after the sounds, Rafe paused when they entered an overlarge room, what looked like the laboratory's control grid. The ceilings were at least two stories high, and the large space was divided into several smaller ones around a huge centre, separated by clear partitions and equipment. In the middle of the main floor lay two metallic tables surrounded by monitors and machines. Large data storage vaults smoked and burned while a giant ripped into them with what looked like an arm-cannon. Easily seven feet tall, the dark haired male – who looked Ragga – turned the cannon on several guards entering onto the platform above the northern bank of wall-mounted monitors.

The guards returned fire while half a dozen men and women in white coats rushed for cover.

"Ryen, stop this nonsense at once." A mousy looking man with short brown hair and wan features twitched with fear. "You're causing Anin great distress."

Rafe zeroed in on the female, Anin, being shoved towards an exit under protest, dragged by several guards.

An altercation to his right showed Erin fighting for freedom. She pushed past several men bent on restraining her and ran after Anin. Heedless of the danger, Rafe chased after her. With preternatural speed, he dodged several laser blasts and knocked two guards together, putting them out of commission before they could reach Erin. He gave the giant with the cannon a wide berth and tackled another guard aiming at Erin's head.

"What the fuck?" He heard Catam shout through his headset, guns roaring in the background. Catam and the others now stood somewhere in this chaos.

More guards poured into the lab, the sight of so much firepower against the giant, Erin and Anin almost comical. The giant had to be Erin's brother. And as Ryen continued to mow down his opponents, seemingly oblivious to his many wounds, Rafe thought Blue Rim's precautions justified.

"Erin, look out," he shouted as a guard tried to shove a knife between her ribs. *What the hell happened to protecting their valuable commodity?*

"Not her, you fool!" Canunn screeched, and everyone seemed to turn to watch Erin deflect her attacker. She twisted his wrist and shoved the blade back through the guard's throat in a movement filled with surprising grace.

The dead guard slumped to the ground just as Erin reached Anin. She yanked her sister

back, tumbling them both to the floor. While they wrestled with more guards, the Fas brothers raced down a set of stairs from the landing above and joined Erin and Anin just as Rafe reached them.

"*Rafe.*" Erin smiled, and despite the bruises and blood on her face, her hair all askew, Rafe thought she'd never looked more beautiful. "I missed you."

"You're trouble, you know that?" He dragged her from the tangle of arms and legs on the ground while the Fas brothers helped Anin. Unable to stop himself, Rafe hugged her tight, needing to feel her safe and healthy in his arms. *Flor, but she felt good.*

"Rafe, love her later. We need to go," Drekk shouted as he shot at several guards coming at them.

"About time you showed up." Erin kissed Rafe on the cheek, grinned at Drekk, and looked for her sister, only to see her gone. "Anin!"

"Don't worry, Erin. The Fas brothers took her. Look." Drekk pointed to the Raggas racing for the eastern exit. Nu had Anin over his shoulder while Set cleared a path. "Let's follow them—" A blast took the three of them off their feet.

A moment later, Drekk groaned. "Shit. Stun grenade."

Erin shook her head and wobbled on her feet with Drekk while Rafe regained his feet and his focus. He turned to see Ryen rip the arm off a guard readying to throw another grenade. Like lightning, Erin's brother took on a half dozen guards and shook them off of him as easily as a *threll* shaking off water. He ignored any hits he suffered, and as he took another step towards Erin, Rafe wondered if they'd have to put him down after they escaped this hell hole. Because as Flor was his witness, Rafe had never seen a man so ready and so capable of destroying the life around him. Ryen's dark grin didn't help matters. He seemed to be enjoying the carnage.

"Ryen, come on," Erin yelled. "We have to go. Anin's gone."

The giant's satisfied grin faded, and Rafe felt a press of menace push through him, if that were possible.

Drekk yelled. "She's safe, Ryen. If you want to see her, follow me."

Ryen glared at Drekk, but as he stared, an odd look passed between the two. Drekk turned to Erin. "Which way is out?"

"Follow me." Erin shoved the crumpled guards out of her way and turned to a barred door covered with steel rods. She looked hurriedly for the control on the wall panel by the

door. Ryen, however, simply walked over to the metal bars and pulled. His muscles bunched and flexed, like steel cords covered with blood, as he ripped the bars apart and kicked the door open.

"Nice," Erin said with a grin.

Ryen grunted and they moved out, but not before the giant took a hit to his back that nearly knocked Rafe and Drekk down with him.

"Go," he muttered. "Get Erin to safety. Find Anin."

"Keep moving," Drekk ordered Rafe over the pressing gunfire. "I'll take him out with me."

"You can't—"

"I'll be right behind you."

Rafe cursed but followed Erin, firing to his left and right as they tore down another corridor. "You do know where you're going, right?" If only the lab wasn't guarded against teleporters. They could have been out of here by now. He glanced behind him and saw no hint of Drekk or Ryen. *Shit.*

"That door," Erin called over her shoulder, pointing straight ahead. Before they reached it, a scrawny, naked male stepped out from a hidden passageway adjacent to them, pointing a handheld laser directly at Erin's chest.

"Hold. You're not going anywhere, you bitch."

"Synster—"

Rafe saw red. Without pausing to consider his actions, he shoved the laser away a second before Synster fired, hitting the wall instead of Erin. The blast mark would have put a hole through her heart, and Rafe reacted predictably.

Breaking Synster's neck wasn't nearly as satisfying as it should have been, but they were pressed for time. Tossing the piece of filth away, Rafe hurried Erin towards the exit just within reach. He felt a sharp sting in his side as he shoved Erin out of the oppressive labs into the bright, crisp sunny day.

"Where to now?" she asked.

"That way." He pointed at two ships sitting side by side. *Mara's Light* and Drekk's weapons ship, *The Found*.

"*The Found*?" Erin asked as they ran unnaturally fast through the open clearing at the ships and the Fas brothers, though he didn't see Anin.

"Don't ask." Pain burned as Rafe ran, and he found it more and more difficult to breathe. They reached the ships just as Drekk and the giant suddenly appeared before *Mara's Light*. Apparently, Blue Rim's anti-teleporation protection only extended to artificial means of transport. Well, at least Erin had her brother back. Rafe glanced around. And her sister as well. Anin huddled on the ground between the Fas brothers. Rafe could hear them talking softly, telling her not to be afraid.

Ryen groaned and regained his feet with Drekk's help, but when he spotted Anin looking terrified, he let out a roar of rage and charged Nu and Set.

Nu turned as Set stepped in front of Anin to protect her from the oncoming threat. Erin, of course, had to join the fray, and she left Rafe's side to try to intercept her brother.

"Ryen, they're protecting her," she shouted. "Look."

Ryen reached Nu and tossed him aside. Stunned, Rafe stared, having never seen anyone defeat the Fas brothers so easily. They were Ragga and stood heads above most men. Yet Ryen topped them both, and despite his injuries, he looked mad enough, and mean enough, to kill.

"Don't Ryen," Anin said softly, surprising everyone. She stood shakily and wouldn't let anyone touch her, but she lifted a hand, her palm out. "These men saved my life. We owe them our thanks."

Ryen stopped, glaring at Set. Erin grabbed his arm as well, as if to hold him back. The anger seemed to leave him, however. Rafe wondered if he'd ceased his threats because he finally noticed how protectively Set stood in front of Anin, or because Erin really was as strong as she looked. The thought made him grin. And then he laughed, feeling a bit dopey about the entire situation. He'd raced to her rescue only to watch her decimate her opponents. Pride warred with anger that she'd had to defend herself, but humour won out. He chuckled, and when he saw Catam, Lurin and Mara racing out of the building to join them, he thought their expressions of irritation amusing as well.

"Listen up, everyone." Drekk said in a loud, calming voice. "We need to get out of here so I can blow Blue Rim to hell. Not to mention the peacekeepers are on their way. Blue Rim called them the minute *Mara's Light* began hassling them."

"So we have what, a few minutes at most?" That was enough to kill Rafe's mirth. Dammit. They were supposed to have more time. Rafe rubbed the back of his neck, lightheadedness taking him by surprise.

"Shit. I think we've been spotted." Nu pointed to a large protrusion extending from Blue Rim's roof that aimed at the ships. "Let's go."

Set scooped up Anin and raced with the crew of *Mara's Light* aboard the ship. Before Erin could protest her separation from her sister, Rafe hustled her aboard *The Found*, and Drekk followed dragging a confused and wavering Ryen.

"Erin, keep your brother in line," Rafe ordered as he and Drekk set the controls and quickly piloted into the air, and none too soon. Where *The Found* had been sitting, a blast suddenly took out a large chunk of ground. "I'm really beginning to hate Blue Rim."

Drekk turned the ship around, and Rafe watched Erin lower her brother to the floor. He was bleeding like a sieve, and he acquiesced to her care without protest. In moments, he lay still.

"Dammit! *Ryen*?" Erin prodded him, a worried expression darkening her face.

"I'm...okay," he slurred.

"Hold on," Drekk warned. "Here we go." He pooled the ship's massive firepower and held his finger over a button. "Good riddance."

A large boom left the ship, and then, through the clear bridge, Rafe and Drekk watched as Blue Rim simply exploded.

"It's gone now, Erin. No more Blue Rim to worry about ever again." Rafe was moved by her tears of gratitude. "Smile, baby. It'll all be okay." He slurred that last word and saw Erin frown. "Ryen will be fine, right, Drekk? Just need to bleed on him..." The room tilted and Rafe fell to his knees. "Fuck, my back hurts."

"You idiot," Drekk scowled and left the controls. "Erin, tell the ship to set course for the rendezvous point. It's preprogrammed, but you need to hit the blue, red and green buttons together to sequence our launch." Drekk laid Rafe on his belly. "I'll get to Ryen as soon as I save your mate's sorry ass."

Drekk touched his back, and Rafe hissed in pain, the world turning hazy.

"Dammit, Rafe, you've been burned and blasted, and you've lost a lot of blood. Stupid *drun*." Grumbling under his breath, Drekk pulled a knife from a side sheath. Erin cried out. But Rafe lost the rest of what was said as blackness overtook him.

Chapter Twelve

"Erin, I'm not going to hurt him. Watch." Drekk cut Rafe's burnt shirt away and cleared the area around his wounds. Then, slicing his own forearm and grimacing at the pain, Drekk squeezed blood over Rafe's back. The ship jolted and shifted direction, and then he felt Erin looming over him and his 'patient'.

"Can I help" she asked.

"Yeah." Drekk clenched his fist to bleed heavier. "Next time tell your mate to duck when someone's shooting at him." He glanced up to see her frown of worry. "It's okay. A minor wound that bled a lot. He'll be fine in a minute. It's your brother that concerns me. Looks like he's suffered some massive trauma."

Erin glanced at Ryen and her eyes welled with tears. She looked as if she wanted to go back to him but refused to leave Rafe's side.

Stifling a smile, Drekk held his arm up and clenched a hand around the wound, forcing himself not to heal. "If you would, keep watch over Rafe while I look on your brother."

"Thank you." She knelt and put Rafe's head in her lap. Stroking his hair, she leaned down to kiss him. "I love you, Rafe. Get well, soon, honey."

The lumbering Mardu sighed in her lap and nuzzled her thigh. Lucky man. Drekk turned to his next patient, not so sure how this healing would turn out. Watching Ryen kill had taken Drekk back to an earlier time, when he'd watched many of his brethren turn on their Creators. They'd fought with the same fervour the original Creation warriors had displayed during the war, or so he'd been told. And if that turned out to be the case with Ryen, Drekk would have no recourse but to put the man down.

Sighing at such a waste, Drekk dribbled a bit of his blood over Ryen's wounds and studied the male, who now lay quiet and unmoving on the floor. "Is it true you and Ryen and Anin are siblings?" he asked Erin.

"I think we share some of the same genetic coding, but we were all Created. I'm not sure the definition of siblings applies to us."

"But you're family."

"A social experiment that pleased Canunn. He wanted us to develop affectionate ties to

one another, and we exceeded his expectations." Erin smiled, still petting Rafe. "I love Anin and Ryen, and they love me."

If Ryen can feel love, perhaps I can work with him. "Your brother...is he always so violent?"

Erin shook her head. "He wasn't always this way. But Synster trained him to be a fighter, to never lose. And they did things to stir his appetites. Ryen fights and has sex often, and that keeps him somewhat calm, or so Synster said. Honestly, I think if Ryen was left alone and not prodded so damned much, he wouldn't need so many women and battles to help him relax."

She had a point. But Drekk had spent the last several hundred years hunting down his kind and terminating them when needed, so as not to repeat their mistakes from the past. It was hard enough to hear what people thought about his kind. But to have their expectations justified by crazed Creations... Drekk wouldn't tolerate that. Working with Cheltam allowed him to do good through other means as well, and he found he liked having a purpose other than to eradicate Creations from the System.

Meeting Erin and her kin gave him hope. Seeing her with Rafe showed him that he wasn't the only Creation out there capable of living a somewhat normal life. Now he had to show Ryen he could do the same. He hoped.

"Erin, I'll be right back. Keep an eye on them both, would you?"

She nodded, and after grabbing a bowl and some water and bandages, Drekk returned. To his surprise, Ryen was awake and trying to stand. *What incredible stamina.*

"Lay down."

Ryen glared up at Drekk and worked his way to one knee. "I don't need —"

"Ryen," Erin tried, but Drekk interrupted.

"You don't know what you need. Now lay the fuck down." He put a hint of power in his voice, and like before, something strange passed between him and the giant male. It was almost like recognition.

"No, I—"

Drekk kicked him onto his back and moved too quickly for Ryen to argue. He straddled Ryen's waist and pinned him to the ground, his hands fastened to Ryen's bloodied wrists.

The attack startled Ryen, and though he tried to fight back, weakened as he was and under Drekk's imposing strength, he couldn't move.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I'm trying to heal you. But I can't if you won't let me."

Ryen lay quiet, staring into Drekk's eyes. Like Erin's, Ryen's eyes were far from normal. Dark blue centred around an iris of paler blue, surrounding a golden pupil. The effect was mesmerising, and the scent Ryen released in subtle waves nearly made Drekk salivate with lust.

Narrowing his gaze, he released his own scent and watched Ryen's surprise.

"Yeah, I can do it too. Now are you going to relax and let me help you or what?"

"I thought we were the only ones," Ryen rasped with a nod to Erin.

"You thought wrong." Drekk stared, oddly tense as he waited for Ryen's acceptance.

Ryen looked from Drekk to Erin and focused on her hand petting Rafe's hair.

"He's a friend, Ryen. You can trust him. He saved our lives." Erin smiled and leaned down to kiss Rafe's cheek again. "And you'd better learn to love Rafe as well, or I'm going to kick your ass as soon as you're well enough to stand on your own two feet."

Ryen looked back up at Drekk, closed his eyes, then opened them again with a sigh. "Go ahead and heal me, medic."

"It's not medic. And it sure the hell isn't 'Sir'. It's Drekk."

Ryen blinked, his scrutiny as much assessing as curious. "Drekk."

Satisfaction blazed through him, and Drekk fought the urge to smile. "Okay, Erin. Now that you can see I'm not going to eat your brother for breakfast, why don't you take Rafe into the back room and get him comfortable? We have a few hours before we'll hit our destination. In the meantime, we need rest. I'll tend the giant here, then I'll take him into my quarters down the hall from yours."

Erin smiled. She let Rafe go, gently putting his head back down. Crossing to Drekk, she leaned down to kiss his cheek when he turned his head and met her mouth, surprising her.

He winked. "And Erin, there's something else you should know." He whispered what he thought might interest her. From the way her cheeks pinkened, Drekk knew he'd been right to tell her. He and Ryen watched her haul Rafe to his feet and over her shoulder, then carry him out of the room down the corridor and out of sight.

"What did you say to her?" Ryen asked, his deep voice in keeping with such a large frame. Hell, Drekk was a mere head shorter than Ryen, but he didn't come close to matching the man in sheer bulk. And Drekk was no lightweight.

"I told her we're not all sterile. And that if she wanted to produce young, I could help her with that."

Ryen's eyes widened, and Drekk laughed.

"Shit, that didn't sound good, did it? Good thing Rafe didn't hear me. I meant that I could jump start her reproductive organs, if she wanted. She's committed to that Mardu, no one else. And if you know what's good for you, you won't try fucking with her relationship," he warned.

Ryen looked unsure of himself, and the expression astonished Drekk. He'd bet his last bek Ryen rarely felt hesitant about anything. He'd been bred not to. "I just want her and Anin to be happy. That's all."

"Good." Drekk took the cloth he'd been holding tight, dipped it into the warm water, and began bathing the blood from Ryen's bared chest under so much ragged material – what had once been his shirt. "What about you?"

"Me?"

"What do you want?"

Ryen stared up in confusion, then closed his eyes. "I don't know."

He remained silent as Drekk worked on him, and Drekk felt an instant empathy, seeing himself in the wounded Creation. *Get better and I'll help you find out*, he promised, interested in his sudden need to make Ryen's world right. Then Ryen shifted under him, and wonder of wonders, he felt something hard pressing against his ass. That scent enveloped him again as Ryen fell under a hazy, healing sleep, and Drekk smiled.

"I'll see to it that you're happy, Ryen. Just see if I don't."

* * * *

Rafe pretended to sleep while Erin cuddled him. She carried him into his bed, and he fought a flush, that *his woman* carried *him*. But she put him down gently and began removing his clothes, and his embarrassment faded under the pleasure of her soft touch. He peeked out of the corner of his eye and saw her stripping as well.

In a heartbeat he hardened, unable to maintain an air of indifference any longer. He loved looking at her deliciously sensitive nipples, at her flat belly and long, long legs.

"Always ready, aren't you?" she whispered and he hurriedly feigned sleep again. "Me too." She sighed and lifted him over her shoulder again, giving him a perfect view of her delectable ass.

She carried him into the lav and in moments they were clean. To his relief, she wore only a bruise on her belly and one on her face. The others had either faded or she'd healed that quickly. Erin carried him back to bed and laid him down. Then she fitted herself next to him and put her head on his shoulder, and the rightness of their togetherness had stupid tears filling his eyes.

He closed them tight and hugged her to him, uncaring if she knew he'd wakened. To his surprise, she breathed deeper, and he realised she'd fallen asleep.

"I love you," he murmured and drew her closer, wincing at the slight pull on his back. But the day's worries took its toll on him as well, and with a sigh he joined her for a short nap.

What felt like hours later, Rafe woke to an erotic tease. Erin's hand wrapped around his cock and she was squeezing him and tugging, turning his semi-hardness into a blazing erection. Moisture pooled at his slit, and he gently rolled her onto her back. "Let go, baby. Let me take care of this."

She protested but smiled, and Rafe kissed a trail down her neck to her breasts as he rubbed his shaft over her belly. Taking her nipple between his teeth, he toyed with her until the bud flushed red and hard. He gave her other breast as much attention, not aware of anything but Erin as she chanted his name and gripped his hair.

His cock demanded relief, but Rafe couldn't take her without tasting all of her. Letting go of her breast, he licked his way down her belly, teasing her navel.

"Oh, Rafe." Erin urged his head lower. "*More.*"

"More," he agreed, and settled between her thighs. With slow, deliberate licks, he found the centre of her heat and feasted. Her spice lit his body from the inside out, and he couldn't help thrusting against the bed as he imagined fucking her, his mate, until he got her with young. He sucked her clit, feeling it ripe and ready, and she moaned as he played with her.

"Flor, you're so good. So mine." Rafe thrust a finger deep into her pussy as he ate her, and when she came, he knew it wasn't enough. He continued to fuck her with his fingers. This time he added a smaller finger to her ass, and the scent of loving she let go nearly made him orgasm.

"In me, please, Sir," she begged, and Rafe groaned.

He mounted her and thrust hard, sighing at the exquisite agony, hovering just outside of orgasm. "Take it, baby. All of me." He fucked her hard, his pummeling strokes continually

rubbing her clit until she came again, squeezing him with her tight inner walls. Erin cried out and pushed him into his own climax, and together they reached *wainu* and stayed there.

"I love you so much," Erin gasped and began crying.

"Me too," he could barely get out. "Stop the waterworks, baby. I didn't tell you you could cry." Even happy, her tears bothered him.

Erin, however, seemed to have lost her submissive tendencies rather quickly. She punched him in the arm.

"Ow."

"I'll cry if I want to." She sniffed, and they lay together in peace for a while. "Rafe?"

"What's that, love?" Flor, he loved how she felt in his arms.

"Would it bother you to know I can't have children?"

He froze, not having anticipated that. But though he wanted to raise their children eventually, the potential future was nowhere near as important as Erin. "Only if it bothers you. I can live without children, Erin. But not without you." An image of Gar's tearstained face after losing Taika hit him hard, and he hugged her tighter to him. "I need you with me, always."

Erin squirmed until she lay on top of him, and he could see her face. "But what if I weren't sterile? Would you still love me?"

"What are you talking about?" She punched him again and he frowned. "Cut it out, that hurts, you monster." He smiled at her pique. "Erin, I love you with or without babies. Yes, I'd like to have them eventually. But if we can't, that's okay too."

She toyed with a strand of his hair, excitement brightening her eyes to pools of starry indigo. "Drekk can heal me, if we want."

"He can?"

"He's a Creation, remember?" she said in a low voice. "He knows how we're made. And he can heal."

Rafe thought about it. "Would that make you happy?"

"The ability to choose makes me happy. I never thought I'd want children until I learned I couldn't have any. But with you..."

Rafe felt warm all over. "So when we're ready, we'll try. If you want to."

"There's just one thing."

"What?" He stroked her back, already imagining how she'd look with his babe in her

belly.

"Well, Drekk heals by sharing fluids."

"So?"

"So my internal organs...it's not like he's going to cut me open or anything. It'd be a painless procedure." She flushed, and Rafe suddenly understood what she wasn't saying.

"So he'd fuck you, and heal you with magical cum? Dammit. Drekk," he shouted.

"Rafe, relax. We don't have to have children..."

"The hell we don't. But there's got to be another way."

Drekk teleported inside the room in an instant, causing Rafe to glare as he tucked Erin under a blanket. "Dammit, you ever hear of knocking?"

"You just yelled my name." Drekk looked decidedly put out.

The doorway slid open and Ryen stood there looking both pale and angry. The sight of Erin wrapped in a blanket in Rafe's arms seemed to stymie him.

"Great. Why not invite the crew of *Mara's Light* while you're at it?" Erin huffed with a blush.

Rafe glared at Drekk's smirk. "You told Erin you could cure her sterility?"

Ryen turned wide eyes to Drekk as well.

"Yes."

Drekk's calm, sober response had Rafe check his own answer. Drekk didn't look like a man bent on seduction, or even conquest. And Rafe had to stifle his innate jealousy. He swallowed hard. "So you'd, ah, release inside her, and she'd be fertile?"

Drekk exhaled loudly and ran a hand through his hair, as if in agitation. "That's how it works. Orally might or might not fix the problem, but it would cure any other ailments."

Ryen goggled between them, and Rafe wondered if the large male understood what they were talking about.

"So if we agree to this, it's a one shot deal, right?"

At that, Drekk grinned. "I'm good for more than one shot, Rafe."

"Dammit, Drekk—" But the sly glance Drekk shot Ryen held Rafe's tongue. Drekk had mentioned he was partial to males, and the way Ryen stared back at his friend, in puzzlement, but without his earlier animosity, spoke volumes to Rafe. "We're considering your offer. And..." the words stuck in his throat. The knowledge that because of Drekk's giving nature, he and Erin might actually be parents one day stirred his emotions. "We

appreciate your offer. More than words can say."

Drekk smiled, a grin of true joy that had Ryen blinking as he stared. "Good. But if you really want to thank me, take Cheltam's job."

"That's up to Erin."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Rafe sighed. "I hadn't meant to go into this now, but we haven't discussed the future."

To his surprise, Erin glanced away.

"What's wrong?"

"Yeah, what's wrong?" Ryen repeated, frowning. The big guy really did seem to care for his sister.

"I just don't know what the future holds."

"Honey, none of us do." Rafe shifted her into his lap and hugged her tight. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. I've never been anything but someone's experiment. The most I've ever been on my own was the four months I was on the run from Blue Rim. And all that time was spent evading those jerks. I'm scared I won't fit it."

"You'll be fine," Drekk said, his words soothing. "You and Ryen will fit in, but it'll take some work. I suggested Rafe return to playing Cheltam, because he's good at it and Gar is driving me nuts."

"Gar?" Ryen glanced from Drekk to Rafe.

"My brother." Rafe shrugged. "Honestly, I'd like to return to playing Cheltam. I get to bend the law, a little. Sernal, my brother, also my boss, isn't around as much, so we can do as we please. And we help a lot of people too scared of the law to ask for help."

Erin stared at him and slowly nodded. "I like that. I needed Cheltam's help." Her eyes narrowed. "And I wouldn't mind having a discussion with Gar about how to deal with helpless and desperate women."

"Helpless, you're not," Drekk snorted. "Actually, he was going to use you as bait to trap Blue Rim. One way or the other, they were going down."

"Bait?" Ryen and Erin said at the same time.

Rafe quickly continued. "Bottom line is that we need a new start, baby. Why don't we work together? I'll resume my role as Cheltam, Drekk of course, will maintain his role as my right hand man, with his new apprentice, Ryen. Hell, we can always use more muscle, as

long as it's contained," he directed towards Ryen, who looked stunned. "But you'll be my new lady friend. My mate. My wife."

Erin blinked. "Really?"

"Really. And this is *permanent*, so don't even think about going anywhere without me." He rubbed her bottom and her eyes flashed with heat.

"Yes, Sir," she whispered, but Ryen must have heard her because his eyes widened, the glint of yellow in his pupils shining with brilliance.

"*Erin*. He's touching your..."

She kissed Rafe's neck. "It's not something you haven't done to a woman before, Ryen. Now please, go away. I'm about to get really busy really soon."

Ryen grumbled, glaring at Drekk when Drekk shoved him out the door. It slid shut behind them, but not before he heard his sister's new mate rumbling how much he loved her.

Satisfied that Erin, at least, appeared to be in good hands, Ryen turned to Drekk. "I want to see Anin." His reason for being. To protect and serve. Always to serve... Because without his purpose, he was nothing.

"She's fine, Ryen. We'll see them in a few short hours." Drekk paused, and Ryen stopped, looking down into the male's curious grey eyes. Something about Drekk drew him, but he couldn't have said what. Perhaps it was the fact that like Ryen, Drekk was the only other male Creation in existence...that he knew about. And he seemed sane, a hell of a lot clearer than Ryen.

"Anin needs this time away to become her own person." Drekk crossed large arms over an equally broad chest. "She can't do that if you're always there telling her what to think and what to do. *Mara's Light* is a good place for her to grow, and no one will guard her better than those Raggas on board. You'll see when we meet up with them. Hell, you're the only man I know who's ever taken Nu off his feet," Drekk added with a grin. He sobered as he stared at Ryen's unsmiling face. "No more 'Yes, Sir's' for Anin unless that's what she wants. Like Erin," Drekk said quietly, knowingly.

"Were you like that?" *Like me?* he wanted to ask.

"I was, and it took me a long time to fit in with the inhabitants of the System. But my peer group was different than yours. We were a lot wilder, a lot rougher." Drekk cleared his throat and broke eye contact. And Ryen suddenly felt lost. He stared unseeingly for a

moment, perplexed at the changes taking place all around him.

Drekk looped an arm around his shoulder, and Ryen started. He wasn't used to touching unless he was fighting or fucking. Much as he loved his sisters, he didn't feel comfortable touching them. Too big, he feared accidentally hurting them.

"Don't worry, Ryen." Drekk winked. "I'll help you. Before you know it, you'll be laughing and loving with the best of them."

The warm light in Drekk's gaze convinced him to take a chance. After all, if it had worked for Erin, maybe life outside Blue Rim would work for him as well. And if it didn't, well, he'd died once before. How hard could it be to die again?

About the Author

Marie Harte is an avid reader who loves all things paranormal and futuristic. Reading romances since she was twelve, she fell in love with the warmth of first passion and knew writing was her calling.

Twenty-four years later, the Marine Corps, a foray through Information Technology, a husband and four kids, and her dream has finally come true. Marie lives in Georgia with her family and loves hearing from readers.

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