

ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



Mistress Rules

Christine d'Abo

When Faris steps into his friend and mentor's inner sanctum, he doesn't expect to find Stella—a leather-clad Dominatrix. He can only watch as Ulric, the most powerful man in the sector, drops to his knees and throws himself at Stella's mercy. Faris must decide whether to walk out the door, leaving his friend behind, or to put himself into the hands of a woman who demands nothing less than his absolute surrender.

Ulric knows Faris holds himself responsible for the devastating attack on the colony outpost. If Faris doesn't learn how to forgive himself, the young man will be on the road to emotional disaster. His only hope is to convince Stella to bring Faris into their lives as another submissive. Ulric must now put his feelings for Stella on the line while holding tight to the man he desperately wants beneath him.

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Mistress Rules

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MISTRESS RULES

Christine d'Abo

Chapter One

The click of her stiletto-heeled boots on the space cruiser's marble floor echoed in the hall as Stella made her way toward the room. A soft breath of air pouring down from the ventilation shaft rolled across her bare shoulders as she sauntered past, chasing away the chill from the cold vacuum outside. The ship had been on the far side of the planet for months now, floating in space. Heat from the neighboring sun couldn't reach them in their perpetual dark. Of course a few lucky souls were able to take leave on the planet to warm up. But from what she'd heard, the experience was far from pleasant.

Another diplomatic mission of peace between groups determined to obliterate each other. Tensions were high all around, but then, they usually were in these situations. The crew of the command cruiser was more on edge than normal, less forthcoming with casual information than they had been in the past. Stella didn't require the bits from those conversations to fulfill her duties, but the casual chats made her feel a part of the crew.

In reality, the mission details weren't her concern. Her tasks were always the same—specific, pleasurable and focused on the one man most likely to save the situation.

She wasn't in a rush to reach her destination, the lavish room around the corner. It wasn't like she hadn't been here a hundred times before, knew precisely what to expect when the door peeled back to let her pass. Stella relished her role and what she did to help Ulric.

His Mistress.

It was a position of power she had held for over a year now. Both men and women would kill to be in her place if they knew of her role. Who wouldn't to have the type

control she held over the most powerful man in the sector? Not that anyone else deserved to be here but her. She didn't trust others would understand what Ulric required. Despite how their relationship started, he now meant too much to her to risk anything happening. He'd saved her life, but there was more to it than simple gratitude.

She wouldn't trust his care to another.

Stella smoothed a hand down the front of her black leather skirt, ensuring none of the cream from her preparations remained on her fingers. The material was cool beneath her caress, catching slightly on her long nails as she relaxed her shoulders. She needed to be perfect—for both their sakes.

This was the fourth time he'd called for her this month. Normally during diplomatic or military crises, Stella didn't see Ulric until it was over. The rare times when he'd needed her help during a negotiation, Stella had only been called upon once or twice. Their sessions had been intense, but helped to give Ulric the focus he needed to continue on.

But this? Stella hated knowing something was happening on the planet she wasn't a party to. Something so dreadful Ulric felt the need to retreat into himself to deal with his emotions. No, this time she had to do better to help him.

Her dread-tinged anticipation battled with her desire, the thrill of giving Ulric exactly what he needed outweighing her necessity for her physical release. He had to be so strong in the outside world all the time, but not with her. She gave him shelter as much he did for her. He was the first person outside her family to treat her with kindness in her life, Stella owed him more than she could ever express.

Her stomach swirled and fluttered as unnamed feelings tightened in her chest. More and more she was like this before she came to him—a tangle of emotions she forced down, deep inside. Stella's role had been clear from the beginning. They'd signed a contract stating as much. She couldn't go against the rules and let her heart confuse their relationship, no matter how tempting the prize. This wasn't supposed to be about her heart.

The guards who flanked the ship's corridors at regular intervals dropped their gazes as she sauntered past them. She knew Ulric had made it clear she was not to be touched. When she'd first arrived she would try to tempt one into faltering, increasing the sway of her hips as she walked, but no one ever took the bait. She supposed the penalty for touching her wasn't worth acting on the temptation. But it was a game she continued to play regardless of the disappointing outcome – she'd always loved games.

Sometimes, though, she wished one of them would slip. It had been forever since she'd had any fun simply for the sake of it. Ulric's needs were great and he was too important to the continuing peace in this sector. He needed to focus on peace talks when in the outside world. It meant her entire focus lay on him and him alone.

Turning the corner into the final corridor and her destination, Stella paused. The guards in this section had already been dismissed. *Interesting*. It meant Ulric wanted extra privacy – an unusual turn for him. Something must have happened at the council meeting. Goddess, she needed to tap into communications more frequently if major events were happening without her knowledge. While she could do nothing about the negotiations, she needed to anticipate Ulric's moods, his needs. He knew she had more skills than what she displayed in the bedroom. Perhaps she it was time she asked to be more involved.

Straightening, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes. The soft sounds of the ship lulled her into the quiet place in her head, her center of focus. Expectation gnawed at her insides as her mind turned over where she could take them this evening. How high they would soar before crashing down into a sea of pleasure.

No, she needed to fight past that. This wasn't about her. Ulric needed this thing only she could give him.

Stella understood. She knew about power and strength, dominance and submission. She knew the need, the craving to let go, the unblinking trust one person placed into the hands of another. Ulric trusted her – and she him. There was more too, those dangerous emotions flitting around the outskirts of her psyche, things she would leave unnamed.

It wasn't in their contract. Opening her eyes once more, she walked directly to the door—the Mistress was ready to play.

As the door slid open ahead of her, she immediately noticed two things were out of the ordinary. The lights had been turned off with only candles to illuminate the room, and they were *not* alone.

Crossing her arms beneath the bust of her corset, she cocked an eyebrow and stared at the interloper standing in her domain. Goddess, the room looked nearly romantic with the candlelight and vastness of space spread before them on the other side of the window. Not at all the way Stella needed things to be—this wasn't a seduction. Not on her part at least.

Neither had it been on Ulric's part before.

"Ulric, you dare bring another man into my home without my permission?"

Silence filled the room.

Stella turned her head until her gaze landed on a man standing off to the side of the room. His blond hair was cropped close to his head. She couldn't tell his eye color, given the distance, or the quality of light, but she couldn't miss his intensity. She was strangely curious about him—a trait she rarely indulged. Questions led to answers she typically didn't like.

"He asked me to bring him here." The man wasn't intimidated by her, if his tone was anything to go by. Good, she couldn't stand weakness. "He said you would be able to help him."

Stella ignored the sudden increase of her heartbeat and the twisting of her stomach. "What happened?"

The man ran a hand down the front of his head, smoothing his hair flat. "You might not be aware, but there was an attack. One of the planet's outposts in the disputed region was destroyed. Ulric tried to stop them from retaliating, but...so many people died." He slumped as he stood, looking defeated.

Oh Goddess, no. "He blames himself." She kept her tone cool, as indifferent as she could manage. It was hard knowing the torture Ulric was putting himself through.

The man shrugged. "I tried to convince him...it wasn't his fault."

"He won't listen to you." Stella thrust her hip to the side, bracing one hand on it while the other dropped down. "What's your name?"

"Faris."

"Do you know who I am?"

"You're his lover?" Faris frowned. "He didn't tell me exactly. Honestly, I'm not sure what we are doing here. We need to talk to Ambassador Gravlin and try to get things resolved."

Stella did her best to ignore her annoyance at the unintentional disrespect, and focused on the problem at hand. "I'm much more than his lover. Who exactly are you to him?"

Faris cocked his head to the side, his frown dropping away to leave a blank expression. "I am from Tensa and Ambassador Gravlin's prime, his main advisor. I've been assigned to act as liaison under Ulric's command. We've been working very closely together, as the negotiations have been going on for a while now."

An aide, one who Ulric had taken a liking to as well. It explained a lot about his actions recently. The increase in the frequency of their time together and the resulting long conversations afterward as they lay entwined, covered in sweat and semen. Ulric had spoken about things he hadn't before, about how she'd come to this place in her life. How she figured out who she was and her preference for dominance in the bedchamber. Maybe Ulric had feelings for Faris in a way he wasn't prepared for.

Stella let her gaze fall heavily on the man in question. Faris was younger than Ulric by many years, but appeared older than her. He was muscled without bulk. His uniform clung to him in a flattering manner and knowing Ulric the way she did, knew that was part of Faris' appeal. He wanted something from this man and she needed to find out what.

She allowed him to take in her appearance as well, standing still under his scrutiny. The thigh-high black boots comfortably hugged her legs—the leather cords that bound them together supple but firm. The tops of her breasts spilled over the tight blue corset she wore, enticing any who might dare to look. Faris dared, it seemed.

“I am the Mistress.” The words poured from her mouth in clipped bites. “I’m the one he comes to for comfort.”

Faris snorted. “Pardon me, but from where I stand you don’t look that comforting.”

Stella growled, flexing her fingers at her side. “Be careful, or else I’ll show you exactly how painful I can make things.”

She didn’t like this at all. Ulric understood the details of their arrangement as well as she. They’d entered into a comprehensive contract before she ever set foot on his ship. He may guide the fates of three separate species in this sector of space, but here, in this room, she was the ruler of all. That included deciding who could enter her domain. He should have said something.

A soft moan caught her attention. In the corner of the room, hidden in the shadows by half light, Ulric knelt on the floor. His head was bowed and his eyes were lowered. Normally, he’d be naked, only wearing his collar around his throat and a cage around his cock. She knew it was Faris’ presence holding him back from following their rules.

Things had to change.

“Ulric,” she spoke softly, but knew he heard the steel behind her words when he flinched. “I am very unhappy with you.”

His breathing stuttered and he rose higher on his knees, but said nothing. Stella took some satisfaction in the reaction, pleased he remembered himself enough to hold his tongue. Perhaps all was not lost. Moving forward, Stella made a wide circle around Faris as she approached her charge.

Ulric’s shirt was splayed open at the neck, the white a contrast against his dark skin. The rapid rise and fall of his chest told her all she needed to know about the

tenuous hold he had on his control. He was close to the edge and needed her to jerk him back. She owed him that much.

“Ulric, why are you not properly attired? Answer me.”

He swallowed. “I did not want to offend Faris, Mistress.”

“And who is Faris that I should care about his feelings? You brought this...man into my home and blatantly disobeyed my rules. I’ve never before witnessed such disrespect. Get up!”

Ulric was on his feet as Faris reached her side. Faris grabbed her forearm, tugging her toward him. Without thinking, Stella grabbed his wrist and spun him around until she wrenched his arm behind his back, angled high enough to snap with just a little more pressure. Faris grunted, but did not struggle.

“What do you think you are doing?” Stella hissed. She was careful not to press her body to his. The last thing she wanted to do was give him the wrong impression of what was happening here.

“I thought you were going to hurt him. This isn’t his fault.” He pulled his arm against her grip. “Let me go.”

No, this wouldn’t do at all. “Why are you here?”

“I told you, Ulric asked me —”

“No. It is clear you don’t understand what is happening, or what Ulric needs. You have no role in the goings-on between us. So I’m asking you again. Why are you *still* here?”

Faris swallowed, but didn’t struggle further. “He needs me. He asked me to come, so I did. I’m not going to abandon him now. I couldn’t.”

Stella let her gaze slide to where Ulric stood. His eyes weren’t on the floor, nor was he in his normal submissive pose. This was Ulric, the commander of armies, strong and self-assured, not the submissive she’d trained for a year. His eyes were wide and completely focused on Faris. She could tell by Ulric’s unrelenting gaze he was sizing the

other man up, trying to anticipate what Faris would do and say. He was thinking and scheming—everything he wasn't to do inside these walls. It broke her heart to see this side of him here, in the one place he was supposed to feel safe enough to let go.

She frowned. She couldn't give Ulric what he needed if she didn't understand the rules. The game had changed without her knowledge—and being the game's mistress, the dangers were great that she might lose control. Neither one of them could afford for that to happen.

Flexing her fingers against Faris' wrist, Stella leaned forward until her mouth hovered near his ear. "Ulric's needs are of my utmost concern. They have been for the past year and I intend them to be for many years to come. You are unexpected, but not unmanageable. I will allow you to stay if you agree to my terms."

Faris tensed. Heat from his body rolled across her exposed skin, teasing and exciting her senses. "Negotiations?"

"None."

He nodded. "What are your terms?"

With a quick glance over her shoulder at Ulric, Stella smiled. "In this room, I am the Mistress. I am in charge. Ulric has agreed to this, as well as many other terms, which are of no concern to you. Everything I do in here, I do for him with his blessing. Not for me. You may not understand everything. You may not agree with what you are witnessing, but it is all done with a reason. You may stay. You may observe. But never will you interfere. Never will you stop what is happening, no matter what Ulric says. I know how far to push him, what he can take and what is too much. Not you. Do you understand?"

Faris turned his head at an awkward angle, the cords of muscles pulling taut in his neck. She caught his gaze and held it, waiting for the question she knew would come.

"How will I know if he is okay? I...you won't hurt him, will you?"

Stella knew she shouldn't smile, but couldn't stop the slight turn of her lips. "We have our ways. But you are an observer, nothing more. Do you agree?"

Throughout the exchange, she was intensely aware of Ulric standing behind her. She knew he was waiting for her, for the punishment she was sure to dole out. She also knew he was waiting to see if Faris would agree to participate in this very private part of Ulric's life. Stella had to admit, she hoped he would consent. It had been a long time since she'd had more than one person under her guidance. Despite her annoyance, she couldn't deny his appeal.

Faris swayed back slightly before straightening as much as he could under her grip. "I agree. I won't interfere."

She ran her thumb across the inside of his wrist before releasing his hand to step back. Stella waited for him to turn and face her. Faris was a very attractive man. Brown eyes, high cheekbones, long arms—sleek where Ulric was bulky. She understood the attraction. Nodding toward the large chair in the corner, she ensured the smile was stripped from her face as she spoke.

"You may sit there. Remember, you are not to interfere even if you disagree with what you see. I will not say it again."

He opened his mouth as if to protest, but snapped it shut and nodded his head. "Understood."

Faris walked slowly to the chair, his eyes shifting to Ulric as he passed, but only for a moment. Stella didn't wait to see him claim his seat, instead turning her attention to her charge.

"Ulric," she said making sure her discontent was clear in her voice. "I am very unhappy with you."

"I'm sorry, Mistress."

"You have disobeyed me. Disappointed me."

"Please, Mistress."

Ignoring his plea, she strode to her chest of tools and opened the lid with a sharp tug.

There were so many options available to her, but it was important to select the correct one. Tonight wasn't just about discipline or punishment. No, Ulric needed to be cared for, to learn his lessons once again. Whatever had happened out there, he wasn't ready yet to hand over his control to her yet. It was her responsibility to do what was necessary to get Ulric to that place in his head where he could be free and find peace. What Faris' role would be, she would determine as the evening progressed.

After a few moments of deliberation, Stella selected what she thought she'd need to start. If things took a different turn one way or the other, she could revisit her strategy.

The paddle was heavy in her hand—a comforting weight. Yes, this was a good beginning.

Turning, she was pleased when she saw Ulric had quietly stripped naked and resumed his position on his knees, hands locked behind his head and his gaze fixed on the floor. Stella slapped the paddle on her thigh, enjoying the echoing sound of the whack of wood on her leather skirt.

"You brought another into my home without my permission." *Slap.* "You didn't come to me dressed according to my wishes." *Slap.* "You have forgotten everything I taught you over the past year." *Slap.* "What should I do with you? Answer me!"

A shudder passed through Ulric. "Whatever you wish, Mistress."

Good. He still needed this. "That's right. You are my concern. I know what you need even if you don't. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"Stand."

Ulric rose to his feet. His naked skin shone in the candlelight, casting an ethereal glow on him. Heat and want swirled in Stella's stomach, her clit swelling as her cunt grew damp. No, this wasn't about her—her needs were secondary to Ulric's. Forcing her attention back on him, she smacked the paddle once more against her thigh.

"Get the bindings and the nipple clamps."

Ulric didn't hesitate, moving to the drawer that held the restraints and opening it with a single, sure move. The thick bands of leather dangled from his grasp as he shifted the contents in search of the clamps.

Stella was about to speak again, when she saw him hesitate. He was still fighting this in a way he hadn't for months. Finally, he let out a huff and pulled out the clamps and moved to the location of the spacing bar hanging in the room. Ulric stood tall, even with his eyes cast downward. Still the commander.

She kept still until she was sure he felt the heaviness of her silence and displeasure. Goddess, what had happened out there? She knew there'd been a battle, the ship's status had only been lowered to high alert over the past few hours. She could only imagine the fight had been brutal—in her experience there was rarely another kind. She wasn't sure who had all been involved, but at least this ship had remained undamaged. Ulric kept the details of such fights from her, not because she was unable to handle the information, but rather because she'd had enough of them to deal with. They brought back crisp memories she'd prefer to leave buried in the past.

Whatever had happened, people had died. Death was the one thing she knew ate away at Ulric's normal reserve. She'd seen firsthand his anguish at losing someone under his command. In his eyes, the lives he'd saved were outweighed by the deaths he couldn't prevent.

"Enough," she whispered, knowing her voice would carry.

Seconds ticked by, but slowly Ulric's shoulders relaxed and his breathing evened out. Only then did she approach, careful not to touch his skin and offer him comfort before he was ready, no matter how fleeting.

Taking the bindings and chains from his hands, she waited until he held his wrists out to her, palms up. Her moves were practiced and quick as she fastened the links, her fingers moving almost of their own accord.

Ulric didn't struggle. As she lifted his hands up to thread the chain through the hook suspended from the ceiling, his body relaxed. Good, he was responding as he should to this.

Once his hands were in place, the spacing bar preventing him from escaping her touch, she moved to the computer control and pressed the button that slowly lifted the chain. Ulric moaned softly as he was stretched out before her, his body weight resting on the balls of his toes. His cock twitched and thickened, but did not grow fully erect. It was still early.

She didn't speak. Instead she focused her attention on his right nipple, grabbing it between her thumb and forefinger to roll and squeeze the tip. Once it stood erect, she placed the clamp on his sensitive skin, relishing the sharp intake of breath as he adjusted to the tightness of the sensation.

Movement at the corner of Stella's eye caught her attention. She purposely didn't look in Faris' direction, not wanting to break the spell that had fallen over them. When she spoke she ensured her voice filled the room.

"Oh, I think you like that," she cooed, scraping her nails down the front of his chest. "But we're not done yet. Not even started."

"Yes, Mistress," Ulric whispered. "Thank you."

Stella quickly teased his other nipple and then placed the clamp on it.

Ulric squirmed in his bonds, but didn't pull away. He'd always been sensitive, his control over his body's reaction one of their greatest challenges.

"Don't move." She shifted around to his back and slapped his ass with the paddle. "Are you trying to anger me?"

"No, Mistress."

Another slap to his ass, harder than the last. "I don't think I can trust you tonight."

She'd suspected much of his training would be tested this evening. It wasn't fair to push him too hard until she had all the information. She needed to start over, remind him exactly what she could do for him if she was going to set things right.

Walking back over to the chest, it only took her a moment to find the cage and cock ring. The leather and metal felt cool in her hand, perfect for what she needed.

When she stood in front of Ulric once more, she held the items within his field of vision and waited. When his attention finally landed on the cage, his startled hiss and the bucking of his hips gave him away. It had been one of his less favorite training tools, but absolutely necessary for so long.

"You know I would never do anything to harm you," she said, softly. Stella ran a fingertip along the length of his rapidly hardening shaft. "You need this, Ulric."

"Mistress?"

"Do you trust me?" She squeezed and stroked his cock. "Do you?"

"Yes." He sighed and thrust his hips forward.

Stella squeezed his now-hard cock. "Pardon me?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"Better." She continued to stroke him until Ulric's cock twitched against her palm. "You do need this. Let me look after you. I will make things better for you."

Ulric closed his eyes. "I don't deserve it, Mistress."

Stella immediately released his shaft and stepped back out of reach. Ulric moaned, but she ignored him. "Are you arguing with me? Do you think you know your needs better than I?"

Ulric forgot himself, his gaze snapping to her face. "No, Mistress. Please, I want your help. Need it."

She stood there and waited. Ulric didn't speak further, but did eventually lower his gaze. Good, she knew he was on edge, but he maintained enough of his training to remember the rules and how to respond.

Not wanting to react too soon, to reward him inadvertently, she stood and stared.

Long ago Stella had learned the power of silence. Men and women alike would crumple under the weight of it. Her father had teased her about becoming an interrogator for the Loyalists when she was a child. If he'd known about her sexual tastes back then, he'd never suggest such a thing. He loved her too much to see her shuttled off to one of the sex colonies. Her silence had kept her freedom.

Regardless, she knew how to manipulate others using her words or lack thereof. Other who understood how to do use silence could control planets. Ulric, in his world beyond these four walls, understood how silence could be used as a weapon. She'd watched him unobserved many times when she was trying to learn how best to help him. Now it was time to put those lessons to the test.

Without any further delay, Stella stepped up and secured the cock ring around the base of his shaft. Confident in the binding's ability to prevent him from coming before she was ready, she carefully fitted his shaft with the cage.

"If I thought I could trust you to remember your lessons, I wouldn't have to use this. But you haven't proven yourself to me tonight. I'm forced to treat you like a neophyte."

"Yes, Mistress." Ulric's voice was soft, but confident.

Stepping back, Stella observed her handiwork. Body stretched before her, cock hard and nipples bound, Ulric was a beautiful picture. She walked a slow circle around him, reaching out to touch the vast expanse of flesh before her.

She stopped suddenly – eyes locked on Faris.

He was still seated in the chair, hands clasped to the armrests in a white-knuckled grasp. She was close enough to him she could see the sheen of sweat covering his forehead and the rapid rise and fall of his chest. What he saw clearly aroused him. The bulge in his loose pants prominently pushing up the front announced his approval of the spectacle.

"Ulric, I think I see why you invited Faris with you tonight." Walking toward her visitor, Stella increased the natural sway of her hips. "He certainly seems to be enjoying the show." Faris shifted in his seat, but didn't look away. Stella approved of his confidence.

"Do you?" She leaned forward, bracing her hands on either side of him to expose him to her cleavage. "Have you learned something about the man you've admired for weeks now? Was there something about seeing his power stripped away so easily that made that cock of yours twitch?"

He didn't answer. His loyalty in the face of what many would perceive as a weakness impressed her. Ulric deserved so much better than the close-minded men and women she constantly met as part of the natural parade of people on board the ship. Perhaps he had finally found a kindred spirit in this man.

Leaning closer, Stella brushed her lips along Faris' jawline. The muscles of his throat worked hard as he swallowed, but he didn't sway closer to her. His skin grew damp with the moisture from her mouth. Pulling back, she looked directly into his eyes and ensured she had his attention. Faris didn't look away.

"I consider myself a good judge of character. Ulric too. He wanted you here for a reason. He wanted you to see something because he had no other way of describing it to you."

"Why?" Faris spoke as softly as she.

It was a question she'd been asking herself. "Are you brave enough to find out?"

Only a slight hesitation before he nodded. "Yes."

Stella couldn't hold back the smile this time. "That was the answer I was hoping for." The game was on.

Chapter Two

Ulric's cock ached as the blood and adrenaline rushed madly through this body. He couldn't fully see Stella, only catching a glimpse of her and Faris out of the corner of his eye. He heard her easily enough, the musical lilt to her steady voice. It was one of the things he'd always loved about her – the teasing nature hidden beneath her strength.

Despite the abnormality of the evening's events, she'd accepted Faris' presence without question. It had been risky to go against the terms of their contract – Stella was leery of outsiders. She could have easily turned on her boot and marched out of the room, never to be seen again. He wouldn't have stopped her from getting on a shuttle to take off for who knows where. Hell, he would have made sure she had enough credits to ensure she would never have to worry about her future well-being again.

But she hadn't left him. Stella was nothing if not perceptive.

He couldn't vocalize to her why it was so important for Faris to be here with them. While Stella would understand, she certainly wouldn't accept such insolence from a submissive, even if his intentions were for the best. Not that his current situation allowed for him to press matters, unless he wanted to feel her gag stretch his mouth wide.

Ulric knew if he hadn't acted, Faris would become lost. He'd grown to care for the man too much to allow anything to happen to him. Shit, he hadn't realized how much he'd wanted Faris until the past week. The nights he lay exhausted in Stella's arms, his thoughts would drift to Faris. He wanted to know what it would feel like to be pressed between the two of them, their heat cocooned around his skin.

It was a dream he didn't think would ever come to pass. Faris wasn't sexually experienced enough to know the importance of letting go in this way. He held his emotions too tight and rarely shared what he was feeling with others. He needed to

realize if he continued on in that manner, it would be only himself who suffered. The art of release was the lesson he hoped to teach his friend, especially given recent events. And maybe, if they were all very lucky, those lessons would lead to something more.

It had been harder than he had thought to walk into this room and not immediately give in to his conditioning, letting Stella take control. He needed the release or else he'd go mad. Stella had long shown him the way to do that, how to step beyond the role of commander and back to being a man. The tightening of his chest and the pounding of his heart showed how much he'd come to rely on her.

He never told her how much their time together meant to him. Of course, she must know. The look in her eyes when he did something exactly right, or how she would lightly scratch the smooth surface of his head with her nails after sex, it told him what he needed to know. She cared.

The snap and click of Stella's boots on the floor preceded her return. Ulric closed his eyes and willed his body not to react. He could do this.

"You are lucky, Ulric. Had you chosen another, less controlled man, you would be looking for a new mistress."

His stomach flipped and he struggled to turn in his restraints. "No, Mistress. I am very sorry. Please."

The scrape of nails along his buttock burned against his skin. He sucked in a breath through his nose and forced his body to remain still.

"You still struggle." She wasn't pleased.

Goddess, why do I always fail? "Mistress, I don't mean to."

"It's been a year, Ulric. You've taken longer than most to learn your place."

He ignored the flash of rage, knowing there'd been others before him. "I'm sorry."

"Those are only words. You know they are meaningless." She shifted behind him, doing something he couldn't see. Not that he dared turn his head. "You know the only things I care about are your actions."

He wasn't expected the sting of the wooden paddle as it landed full on his ass. The cry of shock exploded from him before he could stop it. Stella didn't say anything, instead landing three more smacks against his stinging flesh in rapid succession. This time Ulric bit the inside of his cheek to keep quiet. The burning sensation spidered out across the fleshy part of his ass and drew tears from his eyes.

"Why did you bring Faris to me?" Curiosity tinted her question—an unusual occurrence. When he didn't answer her right away, she paddled him twice again. "Ulric, you are testing my patience today."

His heart ached, but he couldn't tell her. Not yet. He shook his head and pressed his chin down as far as his suspended position would allow.

Stella moved to stand in front of him. He couldn't risk looking into her eyes, despite the desire to see her reaction. She could read him too easily when he was like this. It wasn't until the smooth edge of the paddle pressed into his chin, lifting his face that he was forced to meet her gaze. For a fleeting moment he saw her frown, the concern in her countenance, before it melted away into her impatient mask.

"I see." Stella frowned. "This is unexpected."

Ulric immediately dropped his gaze. He wasn't worthy of her attentions. Goddess, he wasn't worthy of the mantle of responsibility others had placed on him. Good men, people like Faris who had the ability to take the sector into a realm of peace, they were the future. But Ulric couldn't risk Faris becoming broken and damaged like himself. After the day's events, he knew his protégé would be at risk for just that. Stella could help Faris, show him how to separate and step away from the insanity of it all.

Faris could let go.

He just needed to be shown how.

Stella slapped the cage around his cock, sending a jolt through Ulric. Pain and pleasure mixed in his body, firing his senses and pushing at the darkness in his head.

"You realize, Ulric, you leave me no choice in this. Everything that is about to happen is your fault. I have no choice but to punish you for your insolence."

"Yes...Mistress."

She walked away, leaving him hanging. The stretch of his arms made it hard to pull air into his lungs and the ache in his shoulders was beginning to give way into pain. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe through it. It took his considerable concentration to hold still and relax as much as possible.

He would do it, take whatever she threw his way. Ulric knew he was greedy, wanting them both in his life. He'd saved Stella from hell and gave her whatever he could to make her happy. Faris, well, he wasn't lost yet. Ulric had time to make things right, to save him too.

"Isn't he beautiful like that?"

For a fleeting moment, Ulric thought she was speaking to the room. He couldn't stop the shudder from ripping through him when he realized it was Faris to whom Stella spoke. His cock twitched but he held the rest of his body still.

"Lost your voice?" Stella teased.

Ulric heard a body shifting against leather. Faris adjusting himself? The Goddess only knew what she would do to him. Faris wasn't familiar with this world, and had signed no contract outlining what was acceptable behavior for either of them. Stella would never push Faris into things, not without understanding more about him.

"You want to get closer, don't you, Faris?" A pause followed by a sigh. "Yes, I can tell that you do. You've never seen a powerful man trussed up like this before, have you?"

Another pause. "No," Faris said with a soft moan.

"He really is powerful. I've seen him, you know. In the council chambers during negotiations, as he commands his armies from the bridge of his ship. So many people fear him, the things he can make people do, or not do, with a few choice words and a wave of his hand. But what people don't seem to realize is that the more power a person wields, the heavier the responsibility, the greater the need that person has to let go."

"Ulric shouldn't need this. He has others to help take some of the burden from him," Faris said. "I can help if he'd let me."

The passion with which the words were spoken jabbed into Ulric's heart. This was why he'd brought his friend here. The connection and mutual respect that bordered dangerously on something else—something he wasn't ready to face, but wanted desperately.

Still, Ulric needed Faris to understand what that was. If along the way he was able to help Faris learn something about himself, then risking Stella's wrath was worth it.

"Come see, Faris." The click of Stella's boots again, moving closer. "I know you want to."

"No."

"It's okay, you know. Ulric would never have brought you here if he was ashamed or didn't want you to witness how he lets go. Despite what you may think, he needs you to do this. You don't want to make him suffer? Do you?"

Ulric couldn't draw breath to fill his lungs, the anticipation gnawed at his calm reserves. It wasn't until he heard the shift of leather again, the soft thuds of a man's footsteps approaching him, Ulric was able to relax.

The wave of body heat was the first indication that Faris was close. He knew it wasn't Stella. Unfamiliar hesitation drew out a new torrent of sensations from him. Faris' familiar scent filled his nose and made his cock twitch. Ulric had memorized the smell after long nights spent together discussing their negotiation strategy.

"Touch him," Stella encouraged. "He won't move or struggle. You can do what you want to him."

A gentle brush of fingertips across his shoulders had Ulric sighing.

"What if I hurt him?" The uncertainty was endearing to Ulric.

Stella merely chuckled. "If you think I would let you do anything to him without my approval, you really don't know anything. Now touch him."

This time the brief pause was followed by a firm caress, the open palm hot on his cooling skin. Ulric was forced to keep his vocal appreciations bottled up, not having been granted permission to voice them. Instead he squeezed his eyes shut and did his best not to move. It proved harder than he thought it would be as Faris moved his hand across the back of his shoulders, then the press of fingertips along the bumps of his spine. His journey stopped just above the valley of his ass, leaving Ulric's skin burning.

Stella moved to stand in front of him while Faris remained behind, exploring. He wanted to weep when she reached out and caressed his cheek before reaching down to slap his cock again.

"Where are your manners, Ulric? You're not showing Faris how much you appreciate his attentions. Not that you deserve them."

"No, Mistress."

"Show him. I want him to hear how much you enjoy this."

"Thank you...oh Goddess...Mistress." Faris squeezed the globes of Ulric's ass, the tender skin sending jolts of pleasure through him.

"See, Faris, he likes what you do to him."

Warmth pressed against his side and hot breath tickled the side of Ulric's neck. "Do you like that, Ulric? Really?"

Ulric turned his face, his cheek pressing against Faris' lips. "Yes."

"Do you...want more?"

"Yes. Please, Faris."

"Why?"

The words caught in his throat. He couldn't explain the need, how the pain and pleasure freed him to go to a place where he could simply exist as himself. No commander of armies, or savior of worlds. The expectations were gone and he was left with nothing but himself.

Blissful heaven.

"Enough." Stella moved closer. "I've let things go on too long. Ulric won't learn anything like this."

Faris hesitated, his mouth opening enough to allow the tip of his tongue to taste Ulric's skin. Then he was gone. The sudden absence of heat pulled a groan from Ulric – his physical regret vocalized.

Stella's firm grasp on his chin again. "Enough. I see tonight you require a firm hand. We'll be using the bench."

For the first time since their arrival, Faris moved directly into Ulric's field of vision. "What is that?"

"A tool. Something he needs to help him remember. And forget."

The press of a button and the chains were lowered until Ulric was flat on his feet. While he hadn't been stretched out as long as some sessions, the exhaustion of the past several weeks had pushed him to the limits of his control. With his body weak, he lost his balance and stumbled forward.

Faris caught him, strong arms wrapped around his waist and back, holding him tight.

"I have you," Faris whispered.

Ulric barely managed to resist the temptation to turn his face into Faris' neck and breathe in the other man's scent. Instead, he struggled to his feet, the weight from the chain and the spacing bar pulling at his shoulders.

"Come here, Ulric," Stella commanded. "Faris may help you if you require it."

"No, Mistress. I can manage on my own."

Stella let out a soft snort, but still smiled. "I should hope so."

Eyes down, Ulric shuffled toward Stella and the bench. He knew the immediate relief of being able to sit and rest would be short lived. Soon his mind would slip back into the dark places, the home of his guilt.

“Stop. Look how clumsy you are. It’s really pathetic to see. Hold out your hands.” Stella’s nimble fingers made quick work of the spacing bar.

The clang and echo of the metal on the floor shocked him from his silent berating. The relief in his shoulders was immediate as she slowly lowered his arms to his sides. He was about to shift into position, when she stopped him with a hand. His heart leapt as she reached over to grab the scented oil. Pouring a generous amount into the palm of her hand, Stella rubbed firm circles into his weary shoulders and biceps. As the tension seeped out of him, Ulric knew he would be able to continue.

Stopping only after every knot and kink had been worked out, Stella lifted his chin with her thumb and forefinger. “You know what I need you to do.”

There was an odd change in her voice—one Ulric didn’t want to dwell on too long. It sounded too close to caring—the one thing she’d insisted would never happen between them. Instead, he walked to the bench and climbed on top. It was awkward with the cage around his cock, but still manageable.

Ulric pressed his chest to the cool leather of the bench, the pressure increased because of the clamps on his nipples. The divots for his knees were well formed, a comfortable cushion for his joints. Lifting his ass high in the air, knees spread wide, Ulric reached beneath the bench and locked his hands together.

He was totally exposed, on display for both Stella and Faris to see. For once, the silence in the room unnerved him. Stella had seen him like this many times before, had done more than simply tie, flog and abandon him. But Faris—he’d never been a witness to anything like this before. Ulric knew of the younger man’s upbringing on Tensa, the limited exposure he had to the world of sensuality or sexuality. They’d developed a close friendship over the course of their time together. Faris had been an influencing factor in the decisions he’d made during the occupation negotiations and the subsequent attack. Faris didn’t need to vocalize his guilt for Ulric to recognize it. They were too much alike.

But he couldn’t guarantee Faris would understand this.

Turning his face away, Ulric felt a flush heat his skin. Goddess, he'd long ago stopped being ashamed of what he needed, despite the negative view the Loyalist government had of this particular need. Stella had helped him accept who he truly was without regret.

"Ulric!" Stella marched to his side and landed a hard slap to the back of his thigh. "You're turning away from me?" Another slap. "Look at me now."

Confused by the swirl of emotions raging through him, Ulric lifted his head and turned his face toward them. Tears returned to his eyes, but stubbornly refused to spill over. Thankfully, instead of Faris, all he could see were the tight leather laces along the front of Stella's boots. The bindings held everything together—the glue that kept his world from flying apart.

But he could feel himself slipping.

Long fingernails gently scratched across his scalp, as Stella moved closer. "What did they do to you?" Her words were barely a whisper.

"Please..." He no longer knew what he was begging for. All he could do was trust Stella did and put his faith in her. She had always understood him better than he did himself.

"I'll take care of you." A fingertip caressed the shell of his ear. "I always do."

"Thank you, Mistress."

Ulric closed his eyes and waited.

Chapter Three

Faris swallowed hard as his mind tried to work out what the fuck was going on. He'd been relegated to the role of observer—one he'd always had great difficulty mastering. Action was what he needed, craved. It was also the one thing he was unlikely to get here.

He'd worked hard to capture the role of the ambassador's prime. He was Ambassador Gravlin's second-in-command and key advisor on the political workings in this sector. Gravlin had always commented on Faris' ability to size up a situation quickly and accurately, and wanted to use his skills, choosing him for the role over older men.

It was exciting, and took him to places he'd never been able to go to otherwise—it had led him to Ulric. *God, his ass looks so red like that.* This continued forward momentum had been the focus of the last few years of his life. To sit and do nothing felt wrong.

"I'll take care of you. I always do."

And then there was this.

How had he not known about this woman and her role in Ulric's life? Ulric had become a mentor of sorts since his arrival on the ship—offering advice and his unique perspective when dealing with the various government officials involved. He'd also become a friend. Maybe even something a little more if Faris was being honest with himself. But *this*?

It explained the rare nights when Ulric would disappear and Faris couldn't find him. Ulric always looked settled, more centered when he reappeared the next day. It couldn't be because of this though. Could it?

Like most of his people, Faris had experienced a limited exposure to sex. He knew he was naïve. He'd been raised to believe the act was strictly for procreation—taught

the fertility rituals and encouraged to find a mate once he'd reached the age of maturity. He'd tried to find a wife, but there had always been something holding him back from making that commitment. Nothing more than a general sense of unease, but one he'd been unable to lose. He was attracted to women, but there had always been something missing, some quality none of his potential mates possessed.

He'd become disconnected, drifting through life until he'd found a renewed sense of purpose as the ambassador's prime. God, his family had been so proud. The abrupt change in their social status was nearly unheard of. For Faris it was a way out, a chance at a bigger life.

In his time here, his understanding of this sector of the galaxy had exploded, much of it under Ulric's guidance. Until the actions of the past few days and the attack, he thought everything had been worth it.

How the hell had he ended up in this room? He should be in the brig. Or dead.

"Faris, come here." Stella didn't bother to look at him or check to see if he would obey.

Annoyance at his inability to resist the woman burned—but his curiosity flared brighter. Ignoring the uncomfortable pain his cock caused him as he moved, Faris approached her side. The sight before him had his mouth run dry.

The bench Ulric was kneeling on really did put his naked ass high at the right angle for anyone to see it perfectly. The skin had lost its pale sheen and was now tinged with pink and red. There were no welts, but he had no doubt they would rise if more abuse was administered to his flesh. Faris flexed his hand, his fingers suddenly tingling from the idea of adding his own smacks to Ulric's ass.

"Yes, you like what you see." There was a smile in Stella's voice as she spoke. "I told you he was beautiful. But he is so much more than what you've come to see."

Looking up to catch her gaze, Faris cocked his head to the side and did his best to ignore the strange feelings pulling at him. "What will you do now?"

"Me?" Stella cocked an eyebrow. "Oh, I plan to do nothing to him personally. You'll be taking my place."

Ulric moaned and squirmed on the bench. Faris felt his cock swell and his balls tighten. "What?"

"Ulric brought you here for a reason. He refuses to tell me what it is, so I am left with no choice but to discover it on my own. You will be my instrument. You will learn what he needs and what it means to be a part of his life." Turning to face him, Stella ran a nail down his clothed chest. "If you feel you are able to handle it, that is."

Can I? This was beyond his experience and understanding. He still wasn't sure why Ulric had chosen him to be here, especially after how badly he'd fucked up. While they had grown close, he didn't hold the same power the ambassador did, nor was he able to sway anyone in the negotiations. He may be the prime, but his influence was limited.

Or was it?

Before he let reason win out, Faris nodded. "Let me."

No smile crossed her lips, but he could tell she was pleased. "There are straps on the floor. I want you to bind his legs to the bench. Tight."

A nervous flutter infected his stomach as he moved close. He made a point not to look at Stella or to make eye contact with Ulric. If he could detach his reason and logic from the things around him, then he'd be able to do this.

The straps were neatly piled beneath the foot of the bench. Large metal loops were secured to the bottom of each. A quick look to the underside of the seat revealed two latches he could use to secure the straps to. The bench itself possessed a unique design. There was a split down the center, providing each leg with its own place. It would be easy to secure Ulric, preventing his escape.

Faris held a breath, letting it out slowly before dropping to his knees and picking up the first strip of leather. He hesitated for a moment, unsure how to start. In the end it was the position of the buckle that dictated his actions. From the bend of his knee,

down across the swell of Ulric's calf, Faris carefully looped the restraint around the limb. Ulric never moved, though he could have easily pulled away at any point.

"Check his foot and make sure the skin doesn't grow cold. Too tight and you will cut off circulation and damage the limb."

Faris started at the sudden appearance of Stella behind him. He felt like a student again – and in a very real way, he was. Doing as she directed, he ran his hand over the exposed parts of the skin, checking the temperature and the color of the flesh. Ulric shivered, but for the first time since their arrival in the room, Faris recognized it as a reaction to pleasure.

"Very good." Stella's terse approval was reassuring. "Now the other."

It took less time now that he knew what to do. The click of the loop into the latch was strangely satisfying.

"Now his hands. You'll find more cord at the front."

Hesitation held him in place. Binding Ulric's hands meant coming face-to-face with his mentor. He wouldn't be able to hide his feelings, his arousal at seeing Ulric tied up and defenseless.

Unsure of what he would see, or what his own expression would reveal, Faris rose slowly to his feet.

"You don't have to," Stella said, sounding bored. "You can choose to walk out the door at any time. Neither Ulric nor myself will do anything to stop you."

Faris knew if he did, it would be the end of everything. While he'd continue to work with Ulric, their relationship would change, become something less than what it was. He didn't know how, but Faris realized this was the worst thing that could happen to Ulric. Without words, the older man had expressed his need, something he wanted Faris to give him. He couldn't let Ulric down. Not now.

Casting a glance to Stella, he moved to Ulric's head. His mentor's face was turned toward him, but his eyes were fixed on a point behind where Faris stood. He didn't

recognize the expression Ulric wore and couldn't recall seeing that look of blank acquiescence before. If he'd been forced to put a label on it, he would have called it bliss.

Dropping to a squat, he located the bindings without looking. He couldn't tear his gaze from Ulric's face.

"Do you like this?" Faris asked without really needing the answer. "Do you enjoy having me tie you up?"

There was no response. Ulric's body jerked when Stella paddled his ass with two hard spansks. "Answer him."

Ulric's gaze slid slowly to Faris' face and his lips parted and a sigh escaped. "Yes."

It was Faris' turn to shiver. "Good. I'm...that's good."

Forced to turn his attention to his task, he shifted his gaze from Ulric to Stella. There was something about the woman, how she could command with nothing more than a lift of an eyebrow. She was an observer of humanity—someone who took the time to see what others did not, and applied her intelligence to the problems of her charge.

She was someone he could learn from. Like Ulric.

Leaning forward, Faris pressed his lips to the top of Ulric's ear as he applied a final jerk to the restraint. "All done."

Ulric's hands were close enough to Faris' thigh so his fingers could touch. The press of Ulric's digits into the material of his pants shocked Faris. Standing abruptly, he moved far enough away to ensure Ulric couldn't repeat the motion.

"What did he do?" Stella asked, her arms crossed beneath her considerable bosom.

"He...touched me."

Stella shook her head as she sauntered a short distance away. "My boy likes to test his limits. He looks for ways to push past the rules. You didn't tell him he couldn't touch. You must be explicit with your words and unapologetic with your actions."

With his heart pounding madly, Faris locked his hands behind his back. "Don't touch me unless I tell you to." His voice belayed none of his nervousness. "Do you understand?"

Ulric's eyes widened and his tongue darted out to lick his bottom lip. "Yes."

Stella held the paddle, handle out for Faris. "Take it. He needs to understand you are in control. Take it and show him."

What the fuck? "I...you want me to...?"

"Yes. Take it."

He did, but could not look at Ulric. The wood was heavy in his hand, the handle of the paddle filling his palm completely. Thick leather covered the grip, making his palm sweat as he adjusted his hold.

Stella pressed her body to his back, her hands scratching furrows into his shirt. "Look at him, lying there waiting for you."

A light sheen of sweat covered Ulric's body, a full flush coloring his face and neck. Ulric's eyes were wide and bright, focused intently on where he stood with Stella. He could only imagine the picture they painted.

"His cock is hard," she whispered as she pressed her cheek to his back. "His ass is waiting for you. You have the power here. You have the control to do whatever you want to him. How does that make you feel?"

Faris chuckled. "Terrified."

"Good. That means you care about what happens to him. You know he needs something and you want to make sure you give that to him."

"What if I hurt him?"

"I won't let you."

He spun in her embrace. "But what if I do? I've never done anything like this before. I...I don't know how hard to strike, or where. I could cut him or make him bleed."

Stella frowned, and for the first time since the evening had begun, Faris saw doubt in her expression. It was short lived.

"I will show you. Is that what it will take to reassure you nothing will happen to him?" She pressed her hips to his groin, his erection trapped painfully between them. "Or maybe I should demonstrate on you first?"

Faris pressed closer to her as his eyes fell closed. "I don't know what I'm doing." Nothing in his life could have prepared him for this – but he wanted it. He wanted her.

Stella nodded. "Take your shirt off. It's hot work when done correctly."

He went to work on his buttons, keeping focused on her and doing his best to ignore Ulric, watching them in silent regard. With each inch of skin exposed, Stella placed a kiss to his chest.

"I'm starting to understand why he brought you to me. You have much you could learn from both of us. How to control...and how to be controlled."

She stopped him from pulling his shirt off, instead taking over the task and sliding the fabric down his arms in a painfully slow path. The cool air of the room was in stark contrast to the heat from his body. He'd only had a handful of lovers over the years, and none of them looked at him the way Stella did now.

Her fingers caressed and evaluated his biceps, chest, across his shoulders and down his back.

"So strong," she muttered. "So innocent."

"I want to learn," he pleaded. "Show me what I need to do to help him."

Without speaking, Stella slipped the paddle from his grasp and tugged on the waistband of his pants. He followed her until once again he found himself standing before Ulric.

"Truly, the best way to learn is to experience firsthand. Bend over and place your hands on either side of Ulric's head."

He knew it wasn't an order he had to follow. Stella would easily accept his refusal and take over the task of paddling Ulric herself. But Faris couldn't walk away, not now. Filled with trepidation, he moved as she'd directed, bracing his hands on either side of Ulric's head. Moist heat from Ulric's breath tickled his arm. Faris still wore his pants, but instinctively he knew they wouldn't dull much of the sting.

Even so, he wasn't prepared for the sharp bite of the paddle against his virgin ass. He cried out, half in pain and half in surprise, as Ulric moaned.

"See," Stella said as she ran a hand down his back, "you give pleasure to him without even trying."

Another slap, followed by a pause and three more quick hits. One to his ass and two to the backs of his thighs. The burn was unlike anything he'd experienced before. Acute to start, it deepened into something that penetrated deep into his body, heating through to his cock. It was intense and almost too much for him to handle.

"You're doing so well, Faris. A natural. I can tell you're enjoying it as well. The way you're holding still for me, waiting for the next blow. Do you want another?"

He shivered, but whether it was from anticipation or the constant heat of Ulric's breathing against his skin, Faris couldn't be sure.

"Yes." He hardly recognized his own voice.

"Of course you do. I told you, you did." One, two, three more—each one a different intensity, a different location so he couldn't anticipate where and when the next slap would land. His mind became focused on the sensations, all other thought fleeing his brain.

Only once Stella moved away, her fingers raking a trail down Ulric's back as she went, did Faris come back to himself. His gaze sought hers, needing to see if there had been any impact on her, or if he was alone in his desire.

Her calm serenity was betrayed by nothing.

“Do you understand now, Faris?” She lifted the paddle, resting the flat head against her bare shoulder.

Straightening, he nodded. He wished he was naked, could turn and see the hue of his ass change from white to something richer. He couldn’t—but he did have the next best thing before him.

Ulric.

“I understand.” He swallowed. “I think...I’m ready to try.”

She said nothing, simply waited for him to move to her and the instrument of his desire. Faris took the paddle from where she held it and turned to face his mentor. The signs of Ulric’s earlier paddling were fading. There was little body fat to cushion the blows—Ulric would feel them keenly.

Moving closer, Faris adjusted his grip on the instrument and widened his stance. Simple to start with. Pulling his hand back, the jolt of the paddle connecting with Ulric’s ass reverberated through his body when he connected the wood to flesh. He knew it wasn’t as hard as what Stella had done to him, but Ulric tensed before letting out a low moan. The sound encouraged him to land another, this one harder than the first. Ulric’s skin immediately took on a pink glow.

He waited, enjoying the way Ulric writhed in anticipation. Had he looked the same? Did Stella feel this thrill of control tempered by the bone-deep need to give pleasure to another? She must.

His gaze roamed over Ulric’s red skin, tempted him to reach out and caress its surface. Faris felt his cock twitch at the thought of sliding his finger between the cleft of Ulric’s ass to tease the opening he knew was hidden there. He’d wanted to earlier when Ulric was stretched out, hanging from the ceiling. He couldn’t remember why it had been so important to stop then.

No, this wasn’t supposed to be about him. Pulling his arm back, he landed another hard crack to the ass tempting him to take more.

Faris lost track of how many blows he'd landed. He shifted where he would connect with Ulric—moving from his ass to the thighs. When the paddle grew too heavy, he threw it to the floor and continued with his hand.

There was something so much more satisfying when his hand connected with the bare flesh. He could feel the welts on Ulric's skin begin to rise, and gave in to the temptation to massage his hands into them. Ulric groaned and gasped, squirming beneath the touch.

Finally, when he couldn't take anymore, Faris stood back, panting. His cock was painfully hard, ready to explode.

"So good," Stella cooed, her hands cupping her own breasts. "A natural. I can tell how much you enjoyed it. You would do well as a master in your own right with a little training."

Had he enjoyed it? God, he was beating and slapping the man who could attack his home planet from space, leaving them no time to react or retaliate. His mind reeling, Faris pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. "This is too much."

"No, no, no, just look at what you have done." Stella pulled his hands down, dipping her head in Ulric's direction. "See, he was so good for you. He took his discipline so well. He held still, knowing you would look after him. Wasn't he good?"

Faris met Ulric's gaze and couldn't believe the change in what he saw. The older man was panting, his eyes wide and fixed on Faris—like he was waiting for something.

Nodding, Faris balled his hands and tried to calm his breathing.

"Yes, he did very well." Faris nodded. "So good for me."

"I think he's earned a reward." Stella moved away from Faris and bent to release Ulric's hands. "Would you like that?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"Of course you would. I'm please you finally remembered your training. I was concerned, but I needn't have been. You did everything perfectly for us." Stella moved

around and freed first one leg, then the other. "Faris did well too. I think he has earned a treat too."

Ulric's gaze moved to where Faris' erection tented his pants. "Yes, Mistress."

"Kneel before him."

Ulric didn't hesitate, though he stumbled to his hands and knees, his legs unable to hold his weight. Faris watched, fixated, as Ulric, commander of armies, crawled toward him across the marble floor. Ulric sat up and winced as his ass connected with his feet, but he made no move to shift position.

Silence again, as Faris tried to make sense of it all. He knew it was up to him to make the next move, to maneuver them both to the next stage. Neither of them had a choice, not after they'd grown so close. With his mind cleared of thought, Faris reached down and undid the opening of his pants.

"You did do well." His cock pushed free from its confines, bobbing inches away from his stomach. "Pleased me very much."

Ulric's mouth fell open, his tongue pressed against the inside of his teeth. "Please, Sir."

Air locked in Faris' lungs and shock penetrated through to his core. "What did you call me?" This was Ulric lying before him, begging. Lust clouded his mind, preventing his brain from working properly. This was his mentor at his feet.

Ulric looked up and licked his bottom lip. "Sir."

Stella walked behind Ulric, leaned forward to cup his cheeks with her hands. "Give him his reward, Faris. He's earned it."

He didn't move as Stella guided Ulric's open mouth to his straining cock. Wet heat enveloped the swollen crown and Faris reached out and covered Stella's hands with his own to stop the forward progress.

"Fucking, God." He moaned as his orgasm nearly overtook him.

Stella realized and slapped his hand away and pinched the base of his cock, staving off his release. "Not yet. I keep forgetting you are not experienced. Perhaps this will help."

She quickly retrieved a cock ring and snapped it into place. The leather pulled tight and Faris knew it would slow him down from coming. Given how tight it was, he most likely wouldn't be unable to come until it was removed. It was uncomfortable, yet thrilling. The sensations intensified—everything became brighter, sharper, and considerably more present.

"Now you're ready." Stella raked her hand across Ulric's scalp.

Faris ignored her, keeping his gaze locked onto Ulric's open mouth. The red flesh pushed beyond the swollen lips, painting the most obscene and erotic picture he'd ever seen. He couldn't stop his forward momentum, pushing until Ulric's mouth encased the cock ring and his nose was buried against Faris' pubic hair.

"Yes," Stella moaned, encouraging them. "You're so big and thick, but he can take all of you. So beautiful together. Ulric, you're doing so well."

"This feels incredible." Faris swallowed hard and fought the urge to close his eyes. He didn't want to miss anything. "Hot and wet."

Ulric pulled back, scraping his teeth along the underside of the shaft as he did. When he reached the tip, Ulric ran his tongue around the tip, flicking and teasing the slit before hollowing out his cheeks and pushing forward once more.

They quickly settled into a steady rhythm—scraping and sucking, Ulric's hands squeezing Faris' thighs to steady his body. It wasn't enough for Faris. Stella hadn't moved from her position, her gaze steady on each of them—watching.

"More?" Faris croaked, squeezing the sides of Ulric's face.

"Yes, more." Stella nodded. "You've fucked a person before?"

"Yes."

"Ulric, stop." The older man froze, his lips still wrapped around the shaft. "Relax."

There was no acknowledgement beyond a slackening of his jaw. Faris watched the tension steadily drain from Ulric until he wasn't sure he'd be able to continue to hold his body upright.

Stella smiled and patted Ulric's cheek. "Good boy. Faris, I want you to fuck his face."

He almost came despite the ring. "I...how?"

"Hold his face like you are now and fuck. Simple."

"But...I might choke him."

Stella chuckled. "You won't. He's well trained to suck cock."

Ulric groaned and Faris watched the cage around his cock and balls bob with a pulse of arousal. It was permission enough. Rubbing his thumbs over Ulric's cheekbones, Faris gave an experimental thrust forward.

Perfect.

He'd been with a few women, but this was unlike anything else he'd experienced. Breath and heat, wet moisture surrounding him and blocking out the rest of the universe until only he and Ulric remained.

Deeper and deeper he pushed, until he could go no further. Ulric didn't resist, taking every inch into his throat. Periodically, Ulric would swallow, the muscles of his throat constricting around his cock. Each time he did, Faris found it harder to stand, the muscles of his legs quivering with the effort to keep his body vertical. He shuddered and shook as orgasm after orgasm was denied, unable to breach the firm grasp of the ring.

"I need...to come," he managed to get out between gasps. Locking his gaze with the woman calmly standing before him, Faris moaned. "Stella, please let me."

She didn't speak, simply reached over and flicked the release of the ring, letting it fall to the floor. One, two more thrusts were all it took for his orgasm to explode. The pleasure seemed to start low in his toes and deep in his chest, only to race toward his

cock and burst out as ropes of thick cum down Ulric's throat. The screams ripped from Faris, but he could do nothing to prevent it. He'd lost control of his body, his mind was shutting down from the overload. Thank God he was being supported by Stella and Ulric.

Somehow he managed to keep to his feet long enough for his orgasm to subside before dropping like a stone to his knees. He wasn't sure who kissed who, but when he came back to his senses, his lips were locked with Ulric's. The taste of his cum still filled his mentor's mouth as Faris licked and tasted himself. Bitter and strong, he wondered how it was for Ulric.

"Thank you," Faris whispered, sucking on Ulric's bottom lip. "Thank you, thank you."

"Don't spoil him." Stella admonished.

Annoyance flashed in him, and Faris pulled Ulric a little closer to his chest. "He deserves more than you give him."

He would have protested more, but Stella lifted her foot and thrust him away from Ulric with the sole of her boot. "How dare you presume to know what he needs. You barely know how to use your cock and you think to tell me what I should be giving him?"

With his head screaming that this was all wrong, Faris scrambled back to his knees and captured Ulric's hands in his own.

"We need to leave. I can...I can take care of you somewhere else. We can talk."

"See what happens when you act impulsively, Ulric." Stella sauntered away from where they sat, but Faris heard her anger. "He doesn't understand, despite you showing him."

Bitch. "We can leave. Now." Faris squeezed him. "Please."

"You can leave. I won't stop you. But if you go, I won't be here upon your return."

Faris realized it wasn't a threat, merely a simple statement of fact, one that gave Ulric the power of choice.

"Please," Faris begged once more. "We can go to my ship and discuss this. You can tell me what you need and I'll do it. She said herself I could be a master if I needed to."

Ulric closed his eyes, turning his face away from him. The older man swallowed, hesitated, but eventually pushed himself to his feet. Faris could only watch as Ulric stood tall above him.

"I'm sorry." There was no weakness in Ulric's voice, no doubt in his movements as he moved to stand beside Stella. "But I made my choice long ago."

"Ulric, I don't understand—" Faris snapped his mouth shut at the look on Ulric's face.

He wasn't going anywhere with Faris.

Chapter Four

Ulric's heart sank and his chest tightened as he watched Faris move toward the door.

The younger man didn't understand what he'd been trying to show him. Like usual, Faris was over-thinking things and not willing to trust Ulric enough to follow him to a place where few of Faris' people had ever gone before. Ulric could only imagine what the younger man thought about him now, seeing him begging for Stella to punish him. Most likely thinking Ulric was weak because of his need to submit to Stella.

What his friend didn't understand was how much he would require the ability to disconnect from the weight the universe would place on him in the years to come.

It was a lesson Ulric hadn't learned quickly enough. He had nearly been crushed beneath the pressures of command. He'd needed escape, to be pulled out of his head and the worries of the millions of people who counted on him to dissipate the rising tensions in the sector. Ulric had needed to be taught that despite his failures, there was at least one person who cared enough to punish and forgive him.

Faris had screwed up on this mission.

Had Faris not been so blinded by his loyalty to Ambassador Gravlin, the bloodshed on the planet could have been avoided. One simple communication at the wrong time and everything Ulric had worked so hard to prevent came true. The Tensans attacked the colony and hundreds of people had died.

Ulric had compounded Faris' mistake by not anticipating Gravlin's move. The ambassador was power hungry, looking to advance up the Tensan military chain however he could. Ulric knew Gravlin wasn't to be trusted, yet Ulric didn't move fast enough to stop the fighting. Ulric had been too wrapped up with the colonists,

convincing them to trust him enough to deal with the Tensans on their behalf, to actually do any good.

Telling the ambassador what he did wasn't Faris' fault—he was simply performing his duties as he was ordered to by his superior. Somehow Ulric had hoped Faris saw Gravlin for the monster he really was.

Ultimately, Ulric was responsible for the people beneath his command, and all aspects of any diplomatic negotiation he was a part of. He could have done more, giving Faris all the information he needed to make an informed decision, rather than try to shelter him from the worst of Gravlin's actions. In the end, Ulric still felt he was the reason people had died.

Faris didn't see it that way. The young man had grown withdrawn in the hours after the colony massacre. Ulric had watched as Faris spent hours on the communicator trying to get an acceptable answer from someone on the ambassador's ship about what happened. The younger man stopped eating, started drinking, which went against his Tensan beliefs. It was only a matter of time before something in him broke beyond repair.

Faris needed an outlet. He needed to accept his mistakes and forgive himself or else he would never make it through. Ulric cared enough about the younger man to want to do something to help.

"Mistress, please," Ulric spoke softly. "He needs this, Stella."

The words came out with far more authority than Stella would normally allow. Neither of them was listening to him, to what he knew Faris needed. His frustration grew.

Her fingers brushed against his skin above the leather around his wrist. "You know I can't. It has to be his choice to be here with me. He won't learn the lessons otherwise. I'm sorry."

It had to be Faris' decision. This wasn't a lifestyle a person could have thrust upon them. Acceptance of one's own limitations and a willingness to trust another person to help you push past them...no, it wasn't for the weak of spirit.

Ulric watched as Faris moved to the door, stopping before it, his hand hovering over the release button. The pause, the slight hesitation was enough to tell Ulric that Faris was unsure, that he still needed to learn his place in the world. That Faris still needed him.

There had to be a way.

"Mistress," Ulric said in a voice loud enough to fill the room. "I have gone against your wishes and need to be punished."

Faris froze, but made no move to turn around. Ulric swallowed and braved Stella's wrath by meeting her gaze full on. "I disobeyed your orders and brought myself to orgasm without your permission." It wasn't true, but he needed to pull Faris back. If it took sacrificing himself to do it, then he would. Happily.

Stella stiffened, her grip tightening on his arm as her nails drove into his skin. "You wouldn't dare?"

He dropped to his knees, locking his fingers behind the back of his neck and fixed his gaze on the toes of her boots. Heart pounding in his chest, he swallowed past the sudden, painful lump in his throat. "I did. I'm sorry, Mistress."

Stella held still, but he could sense her working out the new rules to the game. He trusted her with his soul, he had to believe she wouldn't crush it. But when she yanked his head backward, digging her nails deep into his bald scalp, forcing him to look her in the eye, he wasn't so sure. Not that he could stop his body from reacting to her mastery and control. His cock, already painful from the lack of attention, throbbed as she glared at him.

"You wouldn't," she said, running her thumb across his forehead. "But I cannot believe you would purposely mislead me either. Your training has not been enough to

hold you when you leave me and are out there. If that is so, then there is nothing I can do for you."

Ulric didn't know if she was calling his bluff or if he'd risked too much and was about to lose it all. His body swayed toward Stella. "I'm so sorry. Please. I can do better if you give me time. Help me."

She pushed him away and strode to the window. With her back to him, her expression was hidden, her voice void of emotion. "No, I am sorry. You need more than I can give you. I free you from—"

"No!" Ulric was on his feet, heat racing and his body shaking. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her body to his chest. He ignored the pain from the clamps as his nipples were crushed to her back. "Stella, Mistress, don't leave me. I need you more than anything. Anyone. I can't do this alone."

Without realizing when it had happened, Ulric knew he would be lost without her in his life. Her scent was maddening, taunting him when he knew she was slipping away. He'd finally found the balance in his life he needed to stay strong. He couldn't let her go. Goddess, didn't she realize he was starting to fall in love with her?

She shook her head, but did not face him. "It's been over a year. You still struggle with your control. You are challenged by my commands and cannot follow my lead. If I am unable to give you this, then I have failed you. You're too important, Ulric. The best thing for both of us is if I set you free."

No, no, no, no. "Stella—"

"He's lying."

They both stilled at the sound of Faris' voice. Ulric tightened his grip on Stella, refusing to give her any opportunity to escape. All he could do was wait for Faris, wait to see what the young man would say.

"I have been with him for weeks now. Until tonight, Ulric has barely had any time to himself, not even to sleep. I forced him to eat his meals and he's hardly had time to

shower. I very much doubt he had the time or inclination to masturbate. The few times I didn't know where he was, I assume he was here with you."

Stella turned and Ulric stepped back, immediately mourning the loss of contact but unwilling to push things any further than they had gone. When she reached up and cupped his face, Ulric couldn't contain his surprise. "Mistress?"

"Is this true?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but no words emerged. The look on her face broke his heart. Instead, he nodded.

"Why?" Stella pressed a kiss to his lips. "Why would you tell me such a terrible lie? Risk everything that we worked so hard to build?"

He knew he had no choice but to speak the truth. "I...couldn't lose him. He...needs this. Especially after what happened today. It was the only thing I could think of."

He couldn't tell her how much Faris meant to him. Ulric's stomach soured at the mere thought of losing Faris. To him the only thing worse was the idea of Stella leaving his life forever. Maybe he was being greedy, giving in to impulses he shouldn't. But the Goddess be damned, he'd earned the right to be selfish. He'd given everything to the defense of the people in this sector. Ulric fought to protect these planets from the domineering reign of the Loyalist government. Fuck them, he deserved the little he asked for in return.

He wanted Stella *and* Faris.

"I told you I was fine." Faris' voice had lost all trace of his boyish naivety, being replaced with an edge of steel. "Everything will be fine."

"Ulric." Stella ignored the young man. "You summoned me today, sent the guards away and brought Faris here. I want to help, but you can't hold anything back."

If anyone but Stella had asked him...

"The attack on the outpost. There was a dispute about ownership. I tried to explain to the Tensans that they needed to wait before going in and taking over from the Yetai.

They wouldn't listen because they believed the others weren't going to leave. Gravlin sent in a squad to take over. The Yetai people fought back, but they weren't ready. The Tensans killed them all. Hundreds."

Stella listened, watching him intently. When he ran out of words, he knew she understood. Her gaze shifted to Faris. "What is your part in this?"

"I told you, Ulric wasn't at fault."

"That wasn't the question I asked you."

"I..." Faris' voice cracked.

As much as Ulric wanted to speak for Faris, he knew he would do the young man no favors if he did.

Stella, beautiful and perceptive as ever, pressed a kiss to Ulric's forehead.

"I don't agree with your methods, but I understand now." Another kiss, followed by a sharp slap to his bare ass. "If you ever lie to me like that again, I don't care if the reasons are justified or not, I will leave. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"Tonight has been very trying for you, has it not?"

Ulric nodded, fighting through the press of his emotions. She wasn't leaving him, there was still hope. "Yes, Mistress."

"I will defer your punishment for now. But I won't forget. I never forget."

"No, Mistress."

Stella stepped around and raced to catch Faris before he could turn and leave again. Ulric's stomach flipped when she reached out, caught his arm and slapped Faris' cheek.

"You bastard! You claim to be his friend, you begged him to leave with you and you don't have the balls to stay and face this with him? I should string you up, gag you and leave you to suffer alone."

"Stella, he doesn't understand." Ulric shuffled closer, but couldn't look Faris in the eyes. "It is my fault for bringing him here. If you must punish anyone it should be me."

"Enough of this, Ulric. I've had enough. Go to my room, kneel by my bed and wait for me."

Frustration tore at his insides, but he knew he could push no further. "Yes, Mistress."

Without another look, he left them alone.

Stella watched as Ulric retreated, leaving her with a man she didn't know how to control.

She couldn't offer Faris a release when he refused to acknowledge his own desires. The Tensan people were known for their repressed sexuality, but she'd always been able to work through it with the few she'd come into contact. Show them there was more to their lives than worship and duty.

Still, there was something about Faris. Like her earlier dealings with Ulric, she knew if the open wounds of his soul weren't dealt with properly, it would destroy him completely. He needed to learn how to move beyond the pain. If he'd only let her help.

"I don't understand what he sees in you," she said, soft enough she was sure her voice wouldn't carry into the other room. "I don't think you appreciate how much that man just risked for you."

Faris turned his head in the direction of where Ulric retreated, but did not break eye contact with her. "I'm sure if you disposed of him there are others who could take your place."

Stella snorted and barely resisted the urge to slap him again. "You think so? And how does a man like Ulric going about announcing an opening for this type of position? Do you think he could let just anyone bind him to a piece of furniture or hang him from the ceiling? Do you know how many would take advantage of his vulnerability, his need to relinquish control and have the burden of command lifted from his shoulders, if only for a short time? Do you know how often my life is threatened by those who hope to use me against him? And that is without my role being known to others."

The rage she'd repressed since the start of the evening finally reared up and tore through her carefully built defenses. She shoved at his shoulders hard, sending Faris stumbling back. "Do you know how privileged you are to be invited here today? To be given such an opportunity not only to see, but to participate in his rituals? In the year that I have been with him, there has been no one else. For well over a year before me, there was no one."

It made her heart ache to know how alone Ulric had been before he'd saved her and brought her into his life. He'd recognized who she was almost immediately. But unlike the others she'd come into contact over the years, Ulric treated her with respect and affection. He'd taken time to woo her, not just as his Domme, but as a woman. She'd always loved him for seeing her as a complete person, not just a role.

Faris shook his head and sank to the floor. "I didn't realize."

"You don't understand. How could you?"

"But I do." He looked back toward the room. "I asked him...after...I couldn't understand how he was able to stay so strong in the face of everything. He brought me here."

"What did you do?" It was apparent to her now that the young man had been the cause of the day's tragedy. It was the only explanation that made sense—the only reason Ulric would have jeopardized what they had between them. Ulric had fallen in love with Faris the same way he had with her—quickly and wholeheartedly.

Faris shook his head, dropping his chin to his chest.

Stella didn't want this. The young man wasn't her responsibility. He hadn't come to her seeking guidance and support and he wasn't in the proper emotional place to accept the only type of help she had to offer.

Still, Ulric *had* come to her and he was her responsibility. He'd saved her, given her a life of protection and comfort when others would have sent her away. She owed it to him to try. He trusted her to do what was best. Right now it meant forcing Faris to make a choice.

Straightening, Stella locked her gaze on Faris. "I have needs I must attend to. As before, the choice to leave is yours alone. But I warn you, if you stay this time you will be relinquishing all control. Ulric is not yours to possess or tempt. You have much to learn and are in far worse shape than I'd realized."

Moving toward the room where Ulric waited, Stella prepared to cross the threshold when Faris' voice stopped her.

"And if I choose to agree to your terms and stay?"

"Then I'll help you."

"In the way you helped him?"

"Yes." She crossed through without another look at Faris.

Waiting quietly on his knees by the bed, Ulric sat with his hands laced behind his head. His cock had softened in the cage, but not by much. She knew he was worried about Faris and it was clearly taking its toll on him.

"You have been dancing to the tune of two masters tonight." She reached down and lifted his chin, forcing him to meet her gaze. "It stops now."

"Yes, Mistress."

"Stand up."

She did not help him rise, instead waiting until he struggled yet again to concede to her will. With everything going on, she knew a softer touch would be needed to make things right.

Her fingers played with the nipple clamps, still distending the tortured flesh. She carefully removed one and bent her head to gently swipe her tongue over the angry red skin. His soft gasp made her cunt clench, as a pang of want she forced herself to ignore ripped through her. There would be time enough for pleasure later.

"You bore this so well." She swirled the tip to her tongue around the nipple, the taste of his skin exploding in her mouth. "I know how uncomfortable you must have been."

Stella waited only a moment before removing the second and administering the same treatment and care to his nipple. Ulric sighed but held still. She felt the weight of the cock cage slap against her thigh, reminding her of its presence once again.

"I think we can do without this, though the cock ring stays. You haven't proven yourself in control enough tonight to be trusted without it."

Ulric sighed and Stella knew she'd once again pushed him further than she'd intended. It was rewarding to know he had still trusted her, not stopping her actions with his safe word. "Get on the bed, ass in the air."

This time there was no hesitation as Ulric moved. She watched his body relax into the final position—facedown, ass up. The marks on his buttocks were fading already, a sign that Faris hadn't quite done the job properly. While the young man had talent, tonight Ulric needed a sure hand. Hers.

"I don't approve of your methods, Ulric." She kept her gaze locked on his body, watching for Ulric's tells, knowing he was still focused on Faris and not his own needs. "You agreed that while you are here the outside world does not exist. I am the commander. You relinquished your control willingly. You allow me to help you strip away the world until there is nothing left."

Ulric shivered, but held otherwise still.

"I know you did what you believed was the right thing. So for now, I've decided to start this evening over and attend to you properly. But I want you to know that this can be the only time."

He turned his face to look at her. Stella couldn't help but smile at what she saw. Gone was the earlier panic and worry reflected in his eyes. In those few minutes of reassurance, he'd begun his journey to the special place in his mind where nothing could touch him. He was close—she would take him the rest of the way.

This room was hers to use whenever she wanted. It was lavish compared to the rest of the ship's quarters, possessing a bed large enough to accommodate three or four people if they so desired. It was different from the small room she used when she

needed to find herself. He'd given her the option to have another larger one, but she'd declined. Decadence didn't help remind her of the person she was outside this place, or the hell she'd come from. Living between those standard-issue walls, she was simply Stella from a backwater world where she'd been punished for being who she was. It wasn't a place she could dwell on now.

Walking over to the drawers along the side of the room, Stella pulled open the one that held her most-prized tools. A collection of butt plugs in various sizes and shapes available to her. It had been many weeks since she'd played with these particular toys. They would be just the thing to intensify the connection between them.

"I have just the thing for you, Ulric." She smiled, pulling out one of her favorites. "I think you have earned the pleasure of this tonight."

"I—"

Stella snapped her head around to see Faris standing in the doorway. His eyes were on the plug. She held her tongue, heart pounding in her chest as she waited to see what he would say.

Faris stepped further into the room. "I would...like to stay. If you'll have me."

Stella knew if she did this, took Faris on with Ulric, she would have her work cut out for her. Not that she had ever backed down from a challenge in her life.

She smirked. "Strip and get on the bed."

Chapter Five

Faris didn't think his heart could beat any faster.

Ulric was already naked and in what he now recognized as a submissive pose—facedown, arms flat at his sides, ass in the air. It was thrilling and terrifying, the idea of handing over his control in the same way. He wasn't sure he could lie there and wait for Stella to do whatever she wanted to him.

Still, he wouldn't back down now.

Proud of the fact that his hands didn't shake, he pushed his pants down, letting them fall in a silent heap to the floor. His cock was already showing renewed signs of life. God, how could Ulric have gone as long as he had without coming? Or Stella for that matter?

She clearly cared for Ulric. In Faris' world, people had a higher regard for propriety, image and status than actions. Not Stella. The way she ran her hand along Ulric's flank, and the look in her eyes when she stared at Ulric stretched out before her, showed the depth of her emotions for him. Faris wasn't sure she was even aware how much the look in her eyes gave away. There was a connection between them, one Faris had never experienced in his life.

He wanted it too.

The bed dipped under his weight as he moved to get close to Ulric. Unsure if he should take a similar pose, he was about to lie down when he saw Stella moved beside them. Her scent made his head spin and his cock twitch. No other woman had affected him like this—quickly and all encompassing.

Her fingers traced a path over the swell of Ulric's ass as she climbed up beside him. They flanked Ulric, their gazes locked. Faris swallowed as he realized he needed to take the next step.

"What would you have me do...Mistress?"

"Nothing. Yet." She turned to look at Ulric, a small smile softening her features. "First there is something I forgot to do."

It was then Faris noticed what she held in her hand—a black leather collar with a *carringmite* tag dangling from the front.

Without breaking contact with his body, Stella moved until her knees were by Ulric's head. As if she'd issued a silent command, Ulric lifted his head and moved just enough to rest his cheek against her thighs.

"You should have said something," she whispered. "I know how much it pains you to go without this."

Faris shivered at the gentle possession, how Ulric relaxed even more once the leather collar was secured around his neck. The *carringmite* tag sparkled in the low light of the room, catching his attention.

"What does it say?"

Stella ran her thumb over the flat surface. "It tells the universe he belongs to me."

"And he agrees to wear it?"

"Of course. He had to earn the right first. It took time and training, but he learned his lessons well, despite his relapse tonight. Very few have done that to my satisfaction."

"What do...?" He swallowed, unable to look away from the collar.

Stella leaned forward and ran her fingers through Ulric's hair. "I think your protégé is asking if he can join us. What do you think, pet? Is that something you'd like?"

"Yes, Mistress." Ulric buried his nose against her leg. "Please."

"We'll need to start at the very beginning. You'll need to show him what to do, what I expect. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes, Mistress."

As she bent over Ulric, Stella lifted her gaze back to Faris. "You know my terms. I will agree to show you the first of my lessons. If you do well and if I choose to take you on permanently, there will be a contract. Conditions you must agree to. It won't be easy. Not every man I meet is strong enough."

The impulse to throw himself at her knees and beg her to do whatever she wanted with him was crushing. It surprised him how passionately he was willing to acquiesce, but he knew she wouldn't appreciate the display. And rightly so, she would discount anything he said. Instead, Faris nodded and waited.

"Ulric, get a cock ring and the cage."

As Ulric rose up, Faris was struck by the raw power in the older man's body. He was everything Faris had aspired to become. Physically, Ulric would have easily overpowered both him and Stella. He'd watched Ulric in training, showing the men under his command how to most efficiently capture or kill an opponent. There was no weakness, either mental or physical, that Faris had ever detected in the other man.

Even now, watching Ulric jump to satisfy the commands of Stella, Faris could not think less of his mentor. He understood that Ulric had made a choice—this was simply a different test of his strength and abilities.

Ulric stood behind where Faris knelt, a solid presence at his back. "I have them, Mistress."

Stella stretched out on the bed, propping her back against the rails of the headboard as she shifted and ran her hands down the front of her corset and leather skirt. "Very well. Put them on him, Ulric. Make sure they are secure because I don't trust his ability to behave."

"Turn around."

Faris shivered at the sound of Ulric's voice. It was the same tone he'd used on the bridge of his ship when he'd given the command to fire on the outpost, killing the terrorists.

My fault.

Shuffling as best he could on the bed, Faris turned to Ulric, but was unable to meet his gaze. His cock was fully hard once again, and he couldn't help but compare it to Ulric's. The older man was bit longer, but nowhere near as thick. Faris imagined what it would be like to take him into his mouth. Have Ulric fuck his face the way he'd done to him.

The pressure from the cock ring was as tight as before, its presence somewhat reassuring. When Ulric held the cock cage up in his line of sight, Faris swallowed.

"It will prevent you from touching. Deny you the sensations and keep you from relieving the pressure of arousal. You must earn that right."

"How?"

"By learning your lessons. By letting go."

The cage was heavy, pulling on his cock. It felt odd, the brush of air against his skin, even as he was deprived of the most normal of incidental contact. He could easily free himself if he needed to, but knew it would be a kind of failure.

Panting, he finally looked up at Ulric and nodded.

"Good, you've taken a small step, Faris." Stella leaned her elbow on the pillows and braced her head against it. "But there is so much for you to learn."

She lifted the butt plug and held it out for him to inspect. "This will help. Not that you are ready for such a thing. This is not a child's toy, but designed for a man."

With nothing more than a look from Stella, Ulric climbed back on the bed and lay down, stretched out beside her. She ran the tip of her forefinger across his shoulders.

"Faris, you will watch. You will not speak unless spoken to or touch anything without my permission. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Her gaze snapped up and she cocked an eyebrow.

He swallowed. "Yes, Mistress."

“Ulric, on your knees.” She pushed up as he shifted, moving until she knelt between his legs. Stella cupped his ass cheeks with both hands and pushed against the still-pink skin. “Gorgeous.”

She kneaded and massaged his skin, spreading Ulric’s ass cheeks. Faris forgot to breathe when she held Ulric open, exposing the tight ring of muscles, then bent over and pressed her tongue into his hole. Ulric moaned but did not move.

Faris watched, fascinated as Stella continued her oral attack on Ulric, alternating from long swipes from the base of his balls to the top of his crack, to sharpening the point of her tongue and stabbing it into his hole.

Ulric vocalized his intense pleasure, but Faris was stunned by how still he held his body. Three times Faris had reached down to squeeze his cock, only to be thwarted by the cage. Each time he let his hand fall back to his side, his frustration rising.

After what felt like an eternity, Stella pulled away. Saliva covered her mouth and chin, a look of satisfaction on her face. Reaching for the plug, she pulled it close but did not lift it to Ulric’s body.

“It’s been a while for you, pet,” she cooed. “Just this one time will I open you up first. But not too much.”

“No, Mistress, not too much,” Ulric said, sounding blissed out.

“Faris!” Stella’s voice held as much command as Ulric’s ever had. “Go to the drawer and fetch me the lubricant. Quickly!”

“Mistress,” he muttered, scrambling as best he could with the cage pulling at him.

The lube was easy to find, the only bottle in the top drawer. When he presented it to Stella, she took it quickly and indicated he should stand.

“I tend not to allow my pets to watch me prepare others, but given the circumstances of your arrival to me, I’ll make an exception.”

She heavily coated her forefinger with lube before she pressed the digit against Ulric’s ass. The muscles resisted for a moment, before giving way and pulling her into

his body. Ulric sighed, but held still. Stella pumped her finger in and out several times before withdrawing, recoating her fingers and pressing two into Ulric.

Faris felt his body responding. His ass began to tingle from the imaginary touch. He squirmed as his cock pulsed, blood rushing painfully to his shaft.

"See how easily he takes my fingers," Stella said with pride. "Even three are no problem for him." She withdrew her hand, added more lube and pressed forward. "How much more do you think he could handle, Faris? Four? My fist?"

Ulric groaned loud and pressed back against her hand. Stella laughed and smacked his ass with her free hand. "You slut. You haven't earned that privilege yet."

"Please, Mistress."

"No. I said not yet."

Ulric whimpered but otherwise fell silent. Faris didn't understand Ulric's need, but he hoped to soon. Apparently having enough of the teasing, Stella withdrew her fingers and lifted the plug to Ulric's now-stretched opening.

"This is bigger than you've had in a long time, but not the largest you've ever taken." Pressing her thumb into his hole, she stretched him open and moved the tip of the plug forward. She did not push it fully in, instead teasing Ulric with shallow thrusts. "I know how you love to feel full."

"Yes, Mistress." Ulric rocked his body backward, earning himself another slap to the ass.

"Hold still or I'll send you away to think about your actions."

Ulric froze. "No, Mistress. I'll be good."

"Of course you will. You have to trust me to know what's best. There's not enough lube yet. You'll hurt yourself." Looking at Faris, Stella nodded toward the bottle and held the plug out to him. "Cover it."

Knowing Ulric would suffer if he didn't do a good job, Faris took extra care to ensure every part of the smooth surface of the plug was covered. When he handed it back to her, warmth spread through his chest when he saw her smile in satisfaction.

Returning to her task, she mirrored her earlier actions, stretching Ulric open with her thumbs before pressing the tip of the plug to his ass. However, this time she did not stop. Faris watched in fascination as Ulric's muscles stretched impossibly wide to take the fat end of the plug, before it popped in, swallowed whole by his body. Ulric sighed as Stella twisted the handle, pressing it flush against his ass.

"So very good. You see, Faris, he trusted I would look after him and I did. I would never hurt Ulric."

Yes, he could see that. Things were slowly becoming clear to him—the nature of their relationship and what they gave each other. Faris had never had a connection with another person that even came close to what they shared. The craving for such closeness curled in his belly and refused to budge.

He wanted.

"I think Ulric deserves another treat, don't you, Faris?"

"Yes, Mistress." He swallowed. He could only imagine what treat he would receive.

Stella pressed a kiss to the small of Ulric's back and raked her nails down the backs of his thighs. "I agree."

She twisted the plug once more, this time pulling it back all the way. When she pressed it forward, Ulric's body accepted it far easier than before. "You have had issues with your control tonight, Ulric."

"Mistress, I am ready. I won't let you down."

Seemingly satisfied with his answer, Stella reached around Ulric's body and pulled the cock ring free. "You know my expectations. You can't come until I give you permission."

Ulric nodded. "I understand."

Faris shuddered at the intense moan that spilled from Ulric as Stella pressed the plug all the way forward, forcing it flush against his opening. "Good. Don't disappoint me. Sit up."

When she turned her attention to him, Faris found it difficult to tear his gaze away from Ulric and focus on her. There was something in her posture, a silent warning Faris couldn't decipher. Lips pursed, she braced her hands on either side of her hips.

"Ulric, as you've earned yourself a reward, I will give you the choice. Do you wish to have Faris fuck you, or do you wish to fuck him?"

Faris gasped, but didn't move. "Don't I get a say in this...Mistress?"

The glare Stella leveled him with sent a shiver through to his core. "I wasn't speaking to you. Hold your tongue."

He went to respond, but fell silent at the last second and nodded his head in understanding.

"Ulric, this is your treat. Which you do prefer?"

The large man sat up, his eyes dipping closed when he pressed his ass against his feet as he moved. When he opened them again, Faris knew the answer before Ulric spoke.

"I want to fuck him, Mistress."

Stella's pleased smile slipped into place. "Very well. Ulric, I will leave the matter to you. Faris is in your control." She sauntered away, leaving him to face Ulric alone.

"Get on the bed. Hands and knees, head toward the pillows." The words slipped from Ulric's mouth, his tone at once seductive and commanding.

A bolt of electricity shot through him, propelling Faris forward into the position Ulric dictated. The cage around his cock pulled with the new angle, making his body feel odd and foreign.

"Have you ever been fucked by a man before, Faris?" A large hand slid across the small of his back. "Be honest."

He swallowed. "Once, a few years ago. It was only one night."

"Did you like it?" Ulric slapped Faris' ass once per cheek.

God, there was no sense in lying. "Yes, I did."

"I'm going to fuck you like you've never experienced before."

Faris shuddered. "Please."

There'd always been an element of attraction between them—on his part at least. Those feelings had grown deeper the longer Faris spent with Ulric, worked with him and saw the man beneath the leader's mask. Those desires were what drove him to be here tonight, on his hands and knees, waiting for Ulric to fuck him.

Faris gasped as a lube-covered finger breached his ass. His cock bobbed as his body relaxed to accept Ulric. A brief pause before the finger retreated, only to be replaced by two. He recognized the pattern from watching Stella, the image of Ulric's ass spread open jumped to mind, dragging another moan from him.

"Goddess, you are so tight," Ulric muttered as he curled his fingers up.

"More. Please, Ulric."

The hand was gone again, before the sound of more lube and the returning pressure of three fingers. "I don't want to loosen you too much. I want you to feel me afterward. I want you to remember tonight for a long time."

Faris squeezed his eyes shut. What if he wanted more than tonight? No, he couldn't think about that quite yet.

Ulric removed his fingers and slid his hand along Faris' back to his hips. "Relax."

The blunt tip of Ulric's cock pushed past the ring of muscles and Faris had to fight his body's natural reaction to tighten up to keep the intrusion out. Ulric thrust shallowly a few times, giving Faris time to adjust to the girth of his cock. The burning stretch slowly started to fade as tendrils of pleasure began to shoot along his spine. Finally, when Faris didn't think he could take the teasing any longer, Ulric squeezed his hips and pressed steadily forward until he bottomed out.

With Ulric fully seated inside his body, Faris sighed. This was what he'd been missing—a bond with another person that went beyond simple banter and suggestive chatter. This was something beyond the casual encounters he'd had with women over the years, more intense and personal.

As smoothly as he'd pushed in, Ulric pulled back until the tip of his cock barely remained inside. Faris did his best not to move or speak, but it was harder than he thought it would be. Ulric didn't seem to mind, and before he realized what was happening his mentor was fucking him with successively harder thrusts.

Faris bit down on the side of his hand, but wasn't able to stop his low moan of pleasure. Ulric dug his fingers in, squeezing his hips as he pounded into Faris. Not thinking it could get any better, Faris cried out when Ulric shifted the angle of his thrusts and hit his prostate. Close, God, he was so close now it would take only the slightest touch to push him over the edge.

"Stop!" Stella's voice bounced around the room.

Ulric's hips stuttered before stopping completely. He panted, pressing his thumbs into the small of Faris' back. "Mistress?"

"Don't move." Stella climbed onto the bed, moving to kneel in front of Faris' head. Her hands shook as she carded them through his hair, before lying back on the bed and spreading her legs so her pussy was positioned below Faris' face. "You look amazing together," she whispered. "I want to...I can't help but admire how well you fit."

Ulric's grip tightened on Faris. "Thank you, Mistress."

Her eyes shone as she looked at Faris, and in a flash of longing he knew he'd caught a brief glimpse of the woman rather than the role. Swallowing down the saliva pooling in his mouth, Faris let his gaze fall to her pussy. He wanted her. Needed to know what she tasted like and what it would feel like to have her legs squeeze against his head when she came.

It appeared she wanted the same.

“Faris, you’re not allowed to come until Ulric is satisfied. He isn’t allowed to come until I do. Make sure you do a good job and you’ll get your reward.” She spread her legs wider, which pulled the leather skirt up to her waist. The smell of her arousal nearly undid his precarious grasp on his control. She wore nothing beneath the skirt, presenting him with an eyeful of wet, hairless skin.

Dropping his head to hover above her clit, Faris breathed in deeply, enjoying the scent of Stella. “Yes, Mistress.”

He shifted, trying to slide his hands beneath her body when she slapped the top of his head. “No hands. Your mouth only.”

Shit. “Yes, Mistress.”

Moving again, careful not to touch her with anything over than his face, Faris licked a long swipe along the length of her pussy. Stella moaned and bucked her hips. The sound encouraged him to repeat the action, but this time he stopped to brush his tongue across her clit. The taste of her made him drunk with want. He needed to give her anything, everything he could to make her happy.

Stella pulled her breasts free of her corset and tugged at her nipples. “Yes, you’ve been with women before, I can tell. You still have a lot to learn, though.”

Faris accepted the challenge presented to him. Latching on to her clit with his mouth, he sucked hard while his tongue flicked madly over the swollen nub. He could barely see her face as Stella’s mouth opened in a soundless *O*, her hands falling to the bed to bunch the sheets in her fists.

“Ulric,” she said before swallowing. “You may continue. You can come once I have finished.”

A hard snap of Ulric’s hips had his cock driving deep into Faris’ ass. “Yes, Mistress.”

“Better hurry, Faris,” Stella cooed as she reached up and ran a hand through his hair. “Ulric won’t like his punishment if he comes before me, and I don’t think his stamina is what it should be.”

Both men moaned and Faris doubled his efforts on Stella's cunt. He knew if Ulric wasn't going to like his punishment, Faris certainly wouldn't enjoy his. Spearing his tongue, he pushed inside her and fucked her pussy as best he could without the use of his hands. It helped when he relaxed his body and allowed the momentum of Ulric's thrusts to drive him harder into Stella. She tasted like heaven.

Alternating between driving his tongue into her, and licking around her clit, Faris found his mind emptying. His world consisted of nothing beyond Stella's pleasure and the press of Ulric into him. It would have been enough to lose himself if he hadn't been on edge for so long now.

The constant pounding of his ass, the steady press of Ulric's cock against his prostate, had Faris moaning uncontrollably. It was too much for him to last much longer. He needed to finish this for all their sakes.

When he felt Stella's thighs begin to quiver around his face, he returned his attentions to her clit. Latching on, he started a steady rhythm—slow at first, he increased the tempo until he felt Stella's hips buck up to meet his every beat. Next time he would beg her for permission to use his hands. Then he could fuck her pussy and ass with his fingers.

"Yes, that's it." She moaned a low sound that resonated from deep within her. "Almost. Yes."

Ulric adjusted his grip on Faris' hips, tightening his hold and driving his thumbs deep into the skin. Faris knew the other man was close—God, how had he been able to hold out this long?

Sucking hard, he swirled his tongue around Stella's clit and prayed it would be enough.

It was.

Stella, clutching his head painfully hard, forced his face to her cunt and screamed. He could barely breathe, but did nothing to resist as he lapped up the wet release of her orgasm. Ulric's rhythm lost some of its evenness, but he didn't slow his pace. It was

almost too much for Faris to take, and despite the cock ring and the cage, he nearly came.

"Now, Ulric." Stella smiled, her eyes still closed. "Come for me now."

Ulric pressed his body forward so he covered most of Faris' back. The sudden weight had Faris pinned to Stella's pussy, so all he could smell was her. It only took two more thrusts and Ulric let out a deafening shout. Wet heat flooded Faris' insides as Ulric pumped his cum deep inside. After an eternity, Ulric finally stopped.

The three of them lay there panting. Faris wanted to scream from the frustration of it all, but by some act of God, he held his tongue.

"Faris did very well," Stella cooed as she pulled her body into a sitting position. "Ulric, lay him on his back and remove the cage."

Tears escaped his eyes as Faris looked up to meet Stella's gaze. "Thank you, Mistress."

It only took a moment for them to comply with her wishes. With the added weight on his cock now gone, Faris felt as if he could float out into space. Ulric wasn't done with him though. Faris didn't resist when the other man pushed his legs up so his knees were pressed to his chest.

"This is the proper position whenever you are on your back. This," Ulric grabbed Faris' cock and balls, "no longer belongs to you."

"Yes...Sir."

Ulric shivered. "Mistress, may I remove his cock ring?"

Stella chuckled. "Of course. He is your toy to play with."

Faris sighed with relief as the leather ring fell free. His cock pulsed with blood and he swore he felt the rush of cum moving slowly up his shaft. "Please, Ulric. *Sir*. I need to come."

Ulric moved his hand so it hovered above the tip of Faris' cock. "Do you deserve this? Have you earned it?"

He knew he hadn't. Everything about today was so fucked up. He'd betrayed Ulric by passing on information he knew he shouldn't and the result had been the death of hundreds. He'd compounded his error by refusing to listen to Ulric when he'd first brought him here tonight. He couldn't do anything right. "No."

"I think you do. I see so much potential in you, Faris. You simply need to learn to trust your instincts. Trust me."

"I—"

Ulric wrapped his hand around Faris and pumped up and down the shaft roughly. "Come for me."

It only took a few strokes before Faris came hard, shooting cum across his stomach and chest. His throat was raw from his earlier screams, but he couldn't stop himself from vocalizing his pleasure. It wasn't until he felt Ulric move that he realized his eyes had slipped closed. Letting gravity pull his head to the side, he watched as Ulric curled up against Stella's side.

Time slowed around them. The gentle peace felt fragile to Faris and he was unwilling to do anything to jeopardize it. Somehow, he knew this silent touching wasn't something the two of them normally did. Stella hesitantly raked her nails along the smooth surface of Ulric's head, smiling softly when he moaned his pleasure. Ulric placed a kiss to her breast, startling a brighter smile from her.

"Thank you," Ulric said softly.

Before Stella had a chance to respond, the ship shook violently. Faris sat bolt upright, but wasn't as quick as Ulric.

The other man raced across the room, nearly losing his footing when another powerful shake hit them. Ulric slammed his hand against the com panel.

"Bridge, report!"

A loud crackle from the com filled the room, followed by the voice of a panicked crew member.

“Commander! It’s the Tensans. They are attacking the ship.”

Chapter Six

Ulric finished belting his pants as he strode through the door to the bridge. "Report."

He knew Faris wasn't far behind him, but wasn't sure how the young man would react given the situation. There'd been so many factors leading up to the attack, Faris' communication to the ambassador was merely the tipping point. It was clear to Ulric after his last communication with Ambassador Gravlin, it was only a matter of time before the other man would try to remove him from the situation. He was the main thing preventing the ambassador from getting what he wanted—control of the planet. While Ulric knew Faris considered him a friend and would do almost anything for him, duty was also paramount to the younger man.

"Commander." Ulric's aide ran to his side and saluted crisply. "The Tensan ships broke position from the other side of the planet and charged us. There was no communication before they opened fire. Our shields are holding and it doesn't appear they have the firepower to break through. If they receive reinforcements before we do, we're in trouble."

Goddess. "The Yetai?"

"No other ships have arrived. They seem to be heeding our warnings and are keeping away."

Ulric squeezed his hands into fists. "Good. That will limit the damage."

Faris stepped beside Ulric and held out his hand. "Can I see the reports?"

"Do you really want to be here?" Ulric turned his head, hoping to catch Faris' gaze. "If Gravlin suspects you've crossed sides, he'll kill you upon your return."

"I haven't crossed sides. I'm here as a representative of my people." Faris cocked an eyebrow and scowled. It struck Ulric as odd that less than an hour ago he'd been buried

balls-deep inside the other man's ass. Ulric pushed those thoughts from his mind as Faris continued. "What I can offer you is a conduit for communication. I'm the ambassador's prime after all. Just because he has betrayed our government with this unauthorized attack, doesn't mean I have to stand by and let it happen."

Communication—the thing that had gotten them into this mess in the first place. "No."

"Ulric, if he does anything close to the maneuver he pulled last time, I'll personally give the command to fire on his ship."

"I said no. We are in the position of power and he's angered me." Plus he wanted to protect Faris in the dubious event Gravlin won.

Ulric knew Faris could in all likelihood handle the situation. However, this was his ship and crew and he wasn't about to leave their fates to a man who'd lost all faith in his own abilities.

"Contact the ambassador," Ulric told his aide. "Bring him up on the screen as soon as you connect."

The moment the man left, Faris grabbed Ulric's arm and pulled him close. "I know I failed you before, but give me a chance to redeem myself."

Ulric wanted to. "You blame yourself for the attack on the outpost."

Faris closed his eyes. "If I hadn't contacted the ambassador and told him of your stalled negotiations with the Yetai, none of this would have happened. You would have convinced the outpost settlers to leave and my people would never have snuck in, armed beyond necessity."

"Possibly. Or it may have happened anyway and there still wouldn't have been anything you could do about it."

Faris stared at him for a moment, before a small frown tugged at his lips. "Is that the only reason you don't want me involved?"

"Commander! They are firing on us again," Ulric's second-in-command shouted.

Ulric looked up in time to see a barrage of missiles pummel into their forward shields. The entire ship rocked hard as it did its best to compensate for the attack.

Faris was knocked into Ulric's side, while several others fell to the floor. Ulric righted his friend and looked up in time to see Stella standing in the doorway. Her too pale face and wide eyes gave her the appearance of a frightened child. She'd pulled one of his shirts over her corset, though she still wore her boots. Her hair had pulled free from her elaborate design to now hang loose over her shoulders. If she didn't look so terrified, she would have been stunning.

"Shit," he muttered, releasing Faris to march to her side. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I..." She shook her head, seeming genuinely confused by the insanity unfolding around them. She leaned into his embrace. "I wanted to see what was going on."

"This is dangerous, Stella. Go back to your quarters and I'll check on you when I've put these bastards in their place."

Stella was the strongest person Ulric had ever met. She'd survived more shit than most people could even think of. He knew this situation was dangerously close to the one he'd found her in over a year and a half ago—under attack and uncertain of the outcome. Long before they'd come to their arrangement. Her fingers dug into his forearm and she let out a strangled gasp.

"Please, Ulric."

Stella never begged. "I promise, things will be fine. Trust me to look after them and go back to your room."

"Please, let me be here. I'll stay in the hall out of the way." Her gaze darted around the command room. "I need to know."

Ulric rubbed his thumb along her cheek. "Know what?"

"That you're in charge out here."

He knew she wasn't a weak woman. Stella was intelligent and understood the importance of aligning herself with the right man. But she was also scared from a life of pain and torture. She gave him so much, it was the least he could do.

"Then stay."

Her gaze shifted to a spot beyond him. When he turned to look, he saw she was staring at Faris. "Can he help us?"

"Possibly." Ulric kissed her temple. "I'm not sure I want him to."

Stella squeezed his arm again, shifting her body to mask the motion or draw the attention of those who were trying not to openly stare. "You need to let him if he can. It's the only way he'll ever come to trust his abilities again. He needs to be useful so he can learn to forgive himself."

Of course, she was the expert at reading other people. This was his beautiful, perceptive Stella. Ulric leaned in and kissed her briefly on the lips. "Thank you. No farther than here, okay? I can't have you getting in the way."

Stella saluted gently, a small smile on her lips. "Yes, Commander."

By the Goddess, he loved this woman. The realization hit him as he looked deep into her eyes. How could he not have noticed before, the depth of his feelings? Dammit, there was no time to talk about this now.

Giving her another quick kiss, he looked over his shoulder to Faris. He stood there, fists clenched at his side and his back stiff as iron. Ulric could practically feel the uncertainty and conflicting emotions rolling off his friend, stinking up the room. His heart clenched nearly as tight. He wanted to make things right for Faris. Save him from a world that didn't know the type of man he could become. Save him like he'd done with Stella.

Ulric knew Stella was right. If he was going to set things right, Faris needed to play an active part. Faris knew the risks before he joined this mission and Ulric respected him enough to not stand in his way. "Faris! Get your fucking ambassador on the screen. I want this dealt with before he sings my hull."

Faris hesitated for only a moment, before nodding and striding to the communication post. Ulric watched as Faris paused, fingers hovering over the com panel and his back tense. Sirens screamed at them, announcing another weapons lock. A quick look at the sensors told Ulric a well-placed shot to their aft hull could take out their shielding, putting them at risk of being blown out of the sky. Biting hard on his tongue, Ulric strode across the command floor to stand at Faris' side. He did his best to ignore the twin feelings of concern and impatience, focusing instead on what they needed to do to get out of this mess in one piece.

"Faris?"

The younger man swallowed hard, but didn't look away from the com. "I don't want to screw up again."

"You won't."

"How can you be so sure?"

Ulric reached out and curled his fingers around Faris' forearm. Heat from his skin permeated through the fabric of the shirtsleeve and into Ulric's grip. Ignoring the chaos around him, Ulric licked his lips and leaned in close to Faris.

"I know this is hard for you. I know you've been feeling out of control ever since this mess started. Feeling as if everyone else has been running your life. But it's like Stella says, you have a choice. You can let that asshole of an ambassador of yours ruin everything we've worked so hard to build, or you can take control and do something to prevent it. Either way, it's your decision. Not mine and certainly not his. But know that regardless of what you choose to do, I will support you."

Faris turned, his gaze finally meeting Ulric's. Pain and confusion melted away to understanding in a flash. Faris' face relaxed, the lines around his eyes and mouth softening.

"Commander Ulric, they've got a lock. Missiles have been launched."

Snapping forward, Faris punched in the com channel for the other ship. "Ambassador Gravlin, respond. This is First Prime Faris, please respond."

Ulric squeezed Faris' arm once more before spinning around to march to the center of the command deck. "I've had enough of this crap. Countermeasures, plan *Radin*. Fire everything we have at them. I don't want a single missile to get within twenty parthons of us."

Half listening to Faris' demands to be connected to the ambassador, Ulric watched in satisfaction as his lasers blasted the missiles out of space, and his ship banked hard starboard.

Despite the size of his vessel, it was far more maneuverable than the Tensan cruiser. It was the reason they were able to complete the rolling spin, landing them to the side of the attacking ship and beneath the locking range of the missiles.

"Set a laser fix on their underbelly." Ulric smirked and crossed his arms. "We can easily punch through their shields from this range."

Silence descended across the command deck. The hiss and snap of the static from the open com channel was the only disturbance. The Tensan ship made no move to either retreat or attack. Feeling the weight of Faris' gaze, Ulric turned. The other man cocked an eyebrow.

Ulric nodded. "I think he'll take your call now."

Straightening his shoulders, Faris smoothed down his tunic as he turned to face the com screen. Ulric was surprised when instead of attempting ship-to-ship communications again, Faris opened a sector-wide channel alert.

"This message is for Ambassador Gravlin on the Tensan ship, *Drax*. This is First Prime Faris of the Tensan people. I'm here to bring to light your crimes against not only the Tensan people, but all residents in this sector."

Ulric smiled, looking over his shoulder to where he knew Stella continued to hover. A beautiful, soft smile adorned her face. She winked at him and nodded in Faris' direction before wrapping her arms around her body and turning to move back toward her room. Obviously, her faith in the pair of them was bountiful.

Ulric refocused on Faris, letting his gaze roam over the younger man as he spoke. The change in his posture, the sureness of his voice all spoke to his growing confidence.

Faris kept his gaze straight ahead and he relaxed even more as the words began to flow. "I feel it is my duty to inform you that blood has been spilled and lives have been lost by the careless actions of one man. A man who I trusted with my life until now. Ambassador Gravlin needlessly attacked the Yetai colony. They had never been given a chance to leave, as they were still participating in exit negotiations when the ambassador attacked after I shared with him information in good faith. He betrayed that trust."

Ulric knew the consequences of Faris' confession would hold. Unwilling to leave him to suffer for the rash actions of another, Ulric moved to stand beside him. Placing a hand on Faris' shoulder, Ulric lifted his chin.

"This man has worked with me to set things right. Ambassador Gravlin has refused our attempts at communication. He has attacked my ship and threatened the lives of many in this region. I will not allow this to continue." Ulric dropped his hand and stepped forward. "Ambassador, you have until I reach the count of five to drop your shields and surrender, or I blast through your defenses. There will be no further negotiation. One."

Ulric could practically hear the entire sector holding their breath. There hadn't been a major military offensive in this region for decades – no one was anxious for the unrest to rise once more. Neither he nor Faris moved when Ulric was forced to say, "Two."

"Three," Faris added quickly after. The lines had been drawn and there was no question which side his young lover was now on.

Another count was unnecessary. Without verbal confirmation, the ambassador's ship lowered its defense shields and powered down weapons. Relief flooded Ulric, though he refused to let any show on his face.

“Wise move, Ambassador. A delegation from my crew will be over to take command of your ship and place you under my authority. This sector of space can rest assured they won’t suffer from your dangerous arrogance again.”

Ulric snapped his fingers and cut the open com. A flurry of activity exploded behind them as his crew leaped into action. Faris didn’t move, but Ulric saw the young man’s body relax.

Placing a hand on Faris’ shoulder, Ulric gave him a gentle squeeze. “You all right?”

Faris nodded. “I can’t believe he actually listened.”

“You gave him no choice. It was his fault for creating the situation to begin with.”

“It was...” Faris chuckled, shaking his head slightly. “It was quite the feeling of power.”

“You get used to it.”

“Do you?” He turned to face Ulric, deep lines covering his forehead. “Is this why you...visit Stella? To help alleviate the stress.”

Ulric looked over to the place where she’d been standing not that long ago. There were so many reasons why he went to her, why he needed her in his life. Things he wouldn’t express to anyone—not to Faris, hell, not even to Stella herself. Still, he needed Faris to understand how important she was.

“My friend, a person can’t carry the weight of the universe on his shoulders. It’s too much for anyone. The temptation to use the control, that power over others, is too much. Your ambassador proved what can happen to people when they let it consume them. Stella...she’s a reminder to me that no matter how strong I am out here, there is someone who I remain accountable to. I don’t have to be in control with her. She looks after my wants and needs there, so I can help everyone else here.”

Turning to Faris, Ulric smiled. The young man’s eyes were wide with understanding, his mouth parted as his tongue dipped out to wet his bottom lip.

"It makes sense." Faris dropped his eyes to the middle of Ulric's chest. "Do you think...I mean...the ambassador will be placed under the government's authority and put on trial. I appear to be in need of a new position."

Ulric's cock twitched in his pants as his heartbeat sped up. "I think I could do with a new advisor. Someone who is particularly familiar with the planets of this sector."

"And would you also be willing to let me share the rest of your world?"

Ulric's head screamed yes, but he knew it was more complicated than his approval. "That would be a conversation between you and Stella. I have no say."

"But would you object?" Faris leaned closer until Ulric could smell his arousal. "I will never go into that room again if it's not something you want. I can find someone else, belong to another person, if that's what you want. But...my preference would be to stay with you and her."

Swallowing, Ulric let his hand fall to his side. Without breaking his gaze with Faris, he nodded and smiled.

"We best go find Stella."

Faris returned his smile. "Yes, sir."

Chapter Seven

With her arms wrapped around her body and her back pressed to the wall, Stella silently slid to the floor. Despite Ulric's reassurances everything would be fine, her body still shook and her heart continued to pound, memories of the last attack she lived through still fresh in her mind. Since there'd been no ship-rattling explosions, she knew things had worked out in their favor. Not that Ulric would accept anything less than success, given the situation.

Goddess, she'd spent so much time being strong for him, she'd forgotten how terrifying it could be when control was ripped away from her. The chaos on the bridge, the noise of the claxon shouting at them all—it was too much. A year and a half ago the same noise on a different ship had nearly meant her death. If Ulric hadn't stopped the Loyalists from attacking, there was no telling where she would have ended up.

Dead, most likely.

Shit, she really wished her body would stop shaking.

She jumped at the soft chime of the computer notifying her of a visitor. While most people were aware of where her private quarters were, few ever visited her here. Even Ulric's visits to her sanctuary were rare. This was her place to be herself, step away from the Mistress and simply be Stella. She needed the space in the past to help her find her center. Now she was happy for the company.

Another chime, followed by a third and she knew whomever it was wouldn't wait forever. Pulling in a deep breath, she did her best to relax.

"Yes?"

The door whooshed open to reveal Faris standing in the entrance. He'd lost the sheen of confusion and doubt, but she could tell he hadn't quite regained his confidence. Not that she could condemn him from her current position on the floor.

Faris frowned, came inside her room far enough to allow the door to close behind him, but didn't approach her. Palms flat against the tops of his thighs, he leaned against the wall opposite her, smiling hesitantly.

"Ulric didn't say anything, but I get the impression I should thank you for convincing him to let me help out there."

She snorted, pressing her head harder against the wall. "Believe it or not, I have very little sway with him outside our room."

"I doubt that."

"It was part of our contract." She shrugged, letting her arms relax and her hands fall into her lap. "When he needs me, I'm there for him. I keep to my rooms and occasionally will go down to one of the planets if things are safe. Beyond that, I'm a passenger on his ship. I stay far away from any of the diplomatic meetings. It's not like I'm listed as crew. Goddess, if someone knew about me, it could put both Ulric and his assignments at risk."

Faris snorted softly. "I think you underestimate your importance to him, Stella."

She laughed at the look of shock and his stuttered apology at the use of her name. "It's okay. I'm not *her* every second of every day. Wears me down after a while."

"Sorry. This is all still new to me."

Stella nodded, before letting her gaze drop. She hadn't realized she'd put on one of Ulric's shirts until she'd reached the corridor leading to her room. Inside her sanctuary, she didn't need clothing to feel safe. She'd never been ashamed of her desires and took pride in what she gave to men like Ulric.

Until recently, her role had been enough to keep her content in her life. Until the last few weeks, she would never have thought about how comforting wearing another's clothing was. Or how much she'd enjoyed Ulric curling up beside her in their bed.

He'd been doing that more and more after their encounters. Like he was reluctant to part from her and return to his real life.

"You know he loves you."

She snapped her head up to meet Faris' gaze, surprise racing through Stella.
"What?"

Faris pushed away from where he held his post to move beside her on the floor. Heat from his body warmed her chilled skin where they touched. It felt as good being with him, as it did wearing Ulric's shirt. Reaching down, he shifted his hand so it cupped hers in her lap.

"I know I'm not in a position to comment on your relationship. I've only just met you and can't even begin to know your thoughts. But I've come to know him quite well." Faris ran his thumb across the back of her hand in a gentle, repetitive motion. "The look on his face when he's staring at you...it's love if I've ever seen it. He looks at peace."

"It has to do with our —"

"No, it's more than that." Faris sighed. "When you were standing in the corridor of the bridge, I was watching. He had that same look. God, I thought he was going to kill someone and I know it came from his fear something would happen to *you*. Not his ship, not me. You."

"It's not..." She didn't want to deny what Faris said. Goddess, it felt good to think Ulric wanted her beyond being his dominant in the bedroom. Because if she were honest with herself, Stella knew she wanted him too.

Faris squeezed her hand. "Ulric intended to be here himself, but things have gone a bit insane on the bridge. He asked me to check and make sure you were okay."

"I assumed." This time when she met his gaze, Stella knew exactly what Ulric saw in the younger man. She reached up and cupped his cheek with her free hand. "You know he looks at you the same way?"

His eyes widened. "No."

"He does. It was how I knew you were so important to him. The look in his eyes when he thought you were going to leave. It was if his heart was being torn to shreds."

"I—" Faris chuckled, looking up at the ceiling. "He never said."

"He doesn't. Stubborn bastard."

"What are you going to do about him?"

Cocking her head to the side, Stella shifted her body to look directly at Faris. "Don't you mean *we*?"

"I just assumed —"

"That we'd kick you out the door after your first orgasm? You really weren't paying attention in there."

Faris groaned. "It's not that. We were talking about your relationship with Ulric. I'm not a part of that."

"Why wouldn't you be?" Stella got to her knees, straddling Faris' lap and capturing his face between her hands. "I just got finished telling you I think Ulric has fallen in love with you, and you're trying to find a way to run to the nearest airlock. Are you insane, or simply an asshole?"

"Stella, you can't have...I mean, it wouldn't work like..." He groaned again in frustration.

"Spit. It. Out."

"There would be three of us! Okay? You can't very well have a relationship with three people and things work out. The sex is one thing, but not this."

Stella pulled back slightly. "Why not?"

"What do you mean, why not? It just wouldn't. You and Ulric have feelings for each other. I'm new. You don't know me."

"Yes, I've only just met you, but I've known and trusted Ulric for over a year now. We aren't so very different, he and I. From what I've seen today, I think you're what we need."

Desire flashed in Faris' eyes. She recognized the same need to belong, to be with those who could understand the dark desires burning beneath the surface of his calm exterior. Stella knew there was nothing she could say to make him understand—not truly.

An overwhelming compulsion to take this man and care for him burned inside. Unable to stop herself, Stella leaned forward and caught him in a gentle kiss. She could practically taste his insecurities as she explored his mouth with her tongue. Faris dug his fingers into her hips as he bucked against her and groaned.

She broke the kiss, but didn't pull away from his lips. "See, you feel it too. The connection. There is so much we could show you."

"But Ulric—"

"Will understand. Wants it. I'm sure if you asked him he'd tell you as much."

"He did, I just didn't quite believe him." Faris sucked on her bottom lip, panting harder. "And you? You don't love me."

Something in Stella's stomach flipped with excitement. "No. Not yet. But..."

It took a moment for her words to penetrate through the haze of lust covering his brain. She knew the moment he realized exactly what she'd said, when he let out a soft growl and kissed her hard.

"I see you two have started without me."

Stella didn't want to stop, wanting to lose herself in the new man who had stumbled into her life. But Faris pulled back to look over her shoulder. "Ulric?"

Turning to watch Ulric enter the room, a thrill raced through Stella, knowing both these men were now hers. Without saying anything, Ulric pulled his tunic off, throwing it to the bed and fell to his knees behind Stella. The heat from his chest bracketed the burning coming from Faris. Stella was surrounded—safe.

"You okay?" Ulric murmured against her neck. He placed a soft kiss against her pulse point. "I was worried about you."

"I'm fine. Better now you're both here."

"Good. You two can't be comfortable down here."

Faris chuckled, bucking his hard cock against her cunt. "I'm perfectly contented to stay here. Unless Stella wants to move."

Ulric hummed against her, pressing another kiss, this time to her temple. "We're not in my special room, love. Faris and I have invaded your home. Do you want us to go?"

Stella shuddered. Love—he'd called her love. For a man renowned for choosing his words perfectly, she knew the endearment wasn't a casual mistake. She turned her head enough so his nose pressed against her cheek. The icy fear and panic finally melted as she leaned back against him.

"Stay. Please stay."

Ulric kissed her. His lips were soft but persistent, licking and nibbling before this tongue pushed into her mouth. His hand moved until Ulric spread his fingers around her throat a light, possessive touch.

Faris groaned and bucked against her again. "Gods, you two look amazing together."

Without looking, Stella reached down and ran her fingers across Faris' chest. Her touch met cloth, certainly not the sensation she'd wanted. Breaking the kiss, but not contact with Ulric, she turned back to the man beneath her.

"I want you both. Now. Take off your shirt."

She didn't wait for him to comply, setting out to open the front of his pants. They both fumbled, bumping into each other as they worked to strip Faris without Stella moving from her spot. Ulric followed suit and stripped his pants, keeping a hand in contact with her the entire time. When he moved to remove the shirt she wore, Stella stopped him.

"No, I want to keep it on. I want a reminder. I want it to smell like us."

Both men made appreciative noises, causing her cunt to clench. Once his clothing was out of the way, Stella resettled on Faris. She kept her leather skirt on, pushing it up to allow him to push easily inside her wet passage. While he felt incredible, giving her the deep contact she'd wanted earlier when he'd pressed his tongue into her pussy, it wasn't enough. Stella knew she was greedy, but didn't care.

"Ulric," she said before moaning. "You too. In my ass."

She felt his breath hitch as his hands skimmed over the cheeks of her ass. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. There's lube by my bed." Looking down at Faris, she grinned. "No coming, either. I won't be happy."

"I don't remember signing a contract yet." He licked along the tops of her breasts.

"Do want to stop?" She pulled back, cocking an eyebrow. "I can draw up a datapad if you'd like."

He let out a startled laugh. "No, I'll manage without for now. No coming, I understand."

Stella smiled, only for her to suck in a startled breath as Ulric pressed a lubed finger into her ass. "Goddess."

"No, just me." He bit down on her shoulder and slowly started to pump his hand. "I'm not going to last long. Just doing this little to you has me hard as stone."

"I don't think any of us will." She ground back against him. "Add another."

The heat from his hand disappeared for a moment, only to return with two fingers pressing into her, spreading her wide. Goddess, she felt so full. Her skin tingled as her blood pulsed through her body. Ulric didn't let up with his constant press and pull, scissoring his fingers to stretch her open.

"Enough," she said, squeezing around his digits. "I want you."

"Yes, Mistress."

"No!" It came out of her far stronger than she'd intended. Craning her neck to try to catch his eye, she prayed Ulric would understand. "Just Stella in here."

She watched as understanding softened his strong features. Nodding, Ulric braced her hips with his hands, holding her still. When he slowly began to press forward, Faris held still, sucking in a breath. She couldn't concentrate on him, forcing her body to relax against the double penetration.

If she thought she'd been full before, now, she was positively bursting.

Stella couldn't keep her eyes open as Ulric's cock fully breached her body. A light sheen of sweat covered her skin and her muscles began to shake. Only once he was fully seated did she let herself fall forward onto Faris.

At first their movements were uncoordinated and sloppy. But slowly, they learned each other's rhythm, falling into a comfortable pattern of thrust and retreat. Stella let her mind empty out until all she was aware of was the growing pressure against her clit and the smell of arousal filling her small room.

This was beyond the controlled lust she'd always presided over. This was straight want, passion driven by the need to connect to another person. This was about her heart's desire.

"Gods, Stella," Faris muttered, biting down on her earlobe. "I can feel his cock rubbing against me. All three of us."

Ulric licked the other side of her neck. "I need you to come so badly. I want to feel you squeeze us tight with your ass and cunt. Please, Stella."

She bucked forward, grinding her clit hard against Faris. "Faster. *Hurry.*"

Ulric groaned, snapping his hips forward. The increased force driving her against Faris was exactly what Stella needed. Her orgasm hit her hard and fast. Her muscles tightened as her entire body froze. Neither man held still for long, though they slowed their rhythm.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck.*" Faris let out a low groan through his clenched teeth as he came.

Ulric tensed behind her, thrusting forward once more and coming as well. Stella felt wet heat flood her from both their releases. As if with a single thought, they all stopped moving at once, collapsing together. Stella waited for Ulric to slip from her body, before sliding off to the side of Faris. Random limbs entwined, until she wasn't sure where one of them started and the other ended.

Time slipped from her until she wasn't sure how long they lay there. When Faris moaned, pulling her closer, the uncomfortable reality of their position on the floor became apparent.

"We should move," she whispered.

"Only if we are all together." Ulric kissed her cheek and entwined his hand with Faris'. "I'm not letting either of you out of my sight for a while."

"The bed in the other room was ample enough to accommodate us all." Faris brushed a strand of her hair from her face. "And it's far more comfortable than the slate."

Stella bit her lower lip, an unfamiliar burst of uncertainty hitting her. "So, you will stay with us? Here on the ship?"

Faris smiled, nodding once. "You won't be able to get rid of me."

"I knew this was what we needed. All of us." Ulric traced a pattern over Stella's arm. "I was...concerned things wouldn't work out."

Rolling in his arms, Stella pressed a kiss to his bare chest. "I love you," she whispered.

Ulric held her a bit tighter. "Love you too."

Faris pushed himself away from them with a sigh and a groan as he straightened his back. "Do I need to haul the pair of you to the other room? Comfortable bed, sex toys, remember?"

Ulric chuckled. "Bossy. He might give you a bit of a challenge."

"Not if he knows what's good for him."

"I thought you were good for me?" Faris pressed his hand to his chest. "I'm so confused."

Letting Faris help her to her feet, Stella smiled. "I know what's *best* for you. Just remember to listen to me."

Both men smiled. "Yes, Mistress."

About the Author

It took Christine a lot longer than the average bear to figure out what she wanted to be when she grew up. When she was home on maternity leave, she decided to take a stab at saving her sanity and sat down to write a romance novel. After dabbling with various sub-genres, she realized she really enjoyed creating strange new worlds and writing about sex. Whether due to the pregnancy hormones or sleep deprivation, she thought this was a great combination.

Many years later her kids are in school and she's back at her day job, but the writing bug is here to stay. When not torturing her characters, she's busy playing with her children or conducting "research" with her husband.

Christine welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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