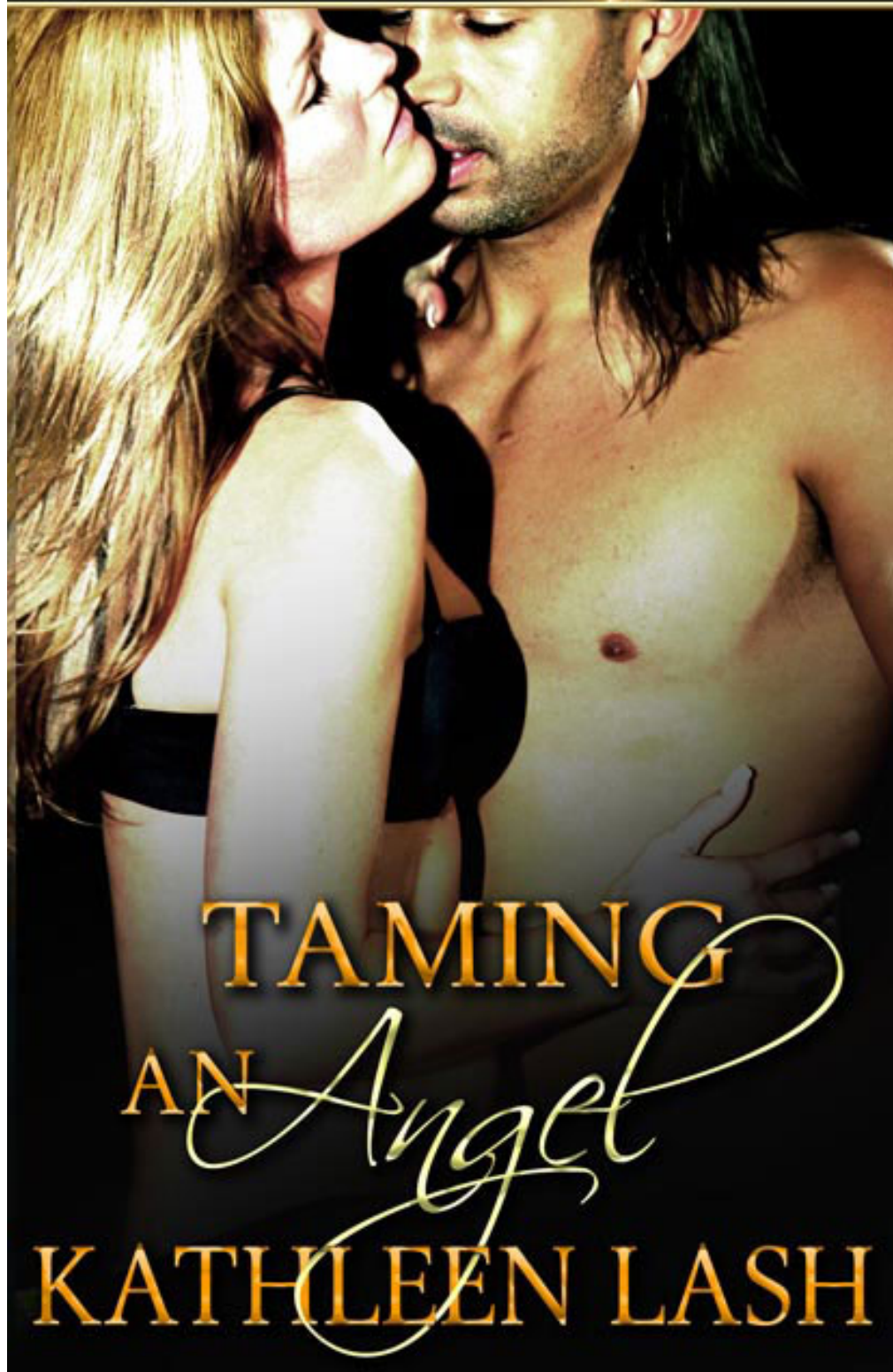


ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



TAMING

AN

Angel

KATHLEEN LASH

Taming an Angel

Kathleen Lash

Taming an Angel is the prequel to Taming a Raven, but can be read as a standalone.

As a final installment in a military career wrought with horrid events, Jess is sent to rescue a Braugh warrior and his men from prison. All she wants is to be safely on her home planet to forget her *throwback* status and find a normal existence. The warrior's intimidating size and raw strength contrast with his tender nature, skillful lips and gentle touch, awakening sexual urges she thought had been stripped away years prior.

Shane knows the piercings adorning Jess' body once created pain and taught her to suppress arousal and desire. And he knows what's needed to take her beyond the torture. But providing a sexual release may prove easier than convincing her something stronger lies between them. All he needs to claim his angel, in *every* way, is her consent.

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Taming an Angel

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TAMING AN ANGEL

Kathleen Lash

Dedication

To my husband, who bravely lives with agonizing pain, pushes himself daily to regain his health, while finding the strength to offer encouragement to me to pursue my passion for writing. Wherever we wind up will be fine by me. *In sickness and in health 'til death do us part.*

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Chapter One

Shane Tiernan hung by his wrists in a cell, beaten, stripped naked and on display. He never figured he'd die in a prison. In truth, he reckoned he and his brethren warriors would escape long before the situation got this far. They'd traded themselves to get back the most precious of their tribe. At least the gals and wee ones were safely home.

Twenty-two warriors would die in the morn unless they swore service to the Doxyn bastards currently holding them. *Obey and kneel before me. You'll receive food, comfortable quarters and no further beatings.* Ach, as if men from Braugh would kneel before anyone!

Two desires came to mind as blood trickled from his wrists. He'd give a limb to smell the sweet fields of home one last time. The stench of the prison wasn't something a man should carry with him into the afterlife. The other—he'd give much to have a taste of the lovely gal that appeared outside his cell. With ghostly, colorless hair, she had golden eyes and delicate pale skin. He appreciated the sight of the angel in the bowels of hell. To have her under his tongue for a time would be a rare treat indeed.

He'd been privileged with a private cell, whilst his men had been crowded into those on either side. Like him, his battered brethren took in the sight and scent of the comely creature as a guard pressed her against the bars. Her long, slim fingers grasped the metal as the man forced her legs apart. The bastard pinched and pulled her breasts, causing her to grimace. When he pushed his hand between her legs, her eyes narrowed and her fingers whitened from squeezing the metal rods. The dumbass could pretend to feel for weapons without hurting her. *Vicious bastard!*

"Tiernan!" the guard called as he groped her.

"Aye, you piece of shat?" Shane forced his voice to be loud and tough. He'd not be weak whilst in view of his men. They deserved to see their leader strong and brave. His brethren laughed, probably relieved to hear menace in his voice.

"You should be put down like the animal you are, but the director insists we hold with custom."

The last thing Shane expected was the Doxyns to abide the Galactic Prisoner Treaty.

"You're to die clean, full and sated. I've brought the woman to do that for you. Do you think you'll make use of her, knowing what'll happen in a few hours?"

"Aye," Shane said, staring at her. "I'll make use of her time. And I'll be sure to enjoy the feast too. I'll make it hard for you to rip me guts out in the morn."

Braughmen cheered as Shane forced his expression to remain passive. The eve held some real promise with the gal to tend him, but thoughts of what would happen in the

morn made his stomach clench. With all the ways a man could die, disemboweling seemed about the worst way to go.

The ruckus died down as the guard tore the gal's dress, exposing a set of perfect breasts before stripping the garment from her. Bared to the chilled air, her budding nipples plumped and stood proud. She'd been pierced. He'd heard of gals placing the jewelry to expand arousal and pleasure—he'd just never seen it in the flesh. He hoped she'd enjoy what he'd likely do. If he had but one last time to rut, he'd take all she could give.

Not a sound came from any of his men as they stared. They'd been held more than forty days without a single gal to ease what a man of his tribe frequently needed and got. Sex. It'd drive them crazy to watch him fuck the waif, but they wouldn't be tortured before execution. His brethren would die quickly and mercifully. The torture, bath, meal and gal were bestowed upon the leader.

"She's too fine a piece for the likes of you, Tiernan."

Aye, you too, bastard Doxyn! The guard leaned into her and rubbed against her back. Her eyes flared and her wee body grew stiff. Her eyelids closed and jaw set when he grabbed her again. In particular, she seemed not to like having her breasts touched.

She turned quickly to face the guard and ran her hands over his chest. His groans and grunts revealed his want to keep her all to himself.

"Please, Aaron," she said in a soft, breathy voice. "Let me take care of you instead."

Shane's command of Gov language needed some work because Braugh had only recently adopted the choppy vocabulary to expand their ability to negotiate with certain worlds. Despite his basic knowledge, he sure as hell knew what she said wasn't really what she meant. The dumbass guard didn't understand the difference. He took her at her word.

"After. Earn your pay with him and then you'll be mine." Aaron stroked her face and she turned into his hand. He spoke quietly next to her ear. "See to him and make it good. You'll be watched through the camera. They'll record this to prove we upheld the Treaty. Now give me your boots so I can check them as well."

"If that's the only way," she whined, as if she'd been disappointed and wiggled against him whilst taking the boots from her feet. Again, what she said wasn't really what she meant. Her outward actions conveyed one thing but the way her shoulders stiffened relayed her true feelings. With her wiggling, the guard didn't bother with her boots. Oh but she played a game and Shane wondered what mischief she planned. He dearly loved games. Too bad he didn't have much time to join in.

The guard opened the cell door and stepped inside with the additional four men who'd stood waiting a distance away. Even battered, starved and nearly finished, Shane fought and forced them to earn their pay. His hands remained numb after being above his head, but he managed to get a few punches in before they all grabbed hold. On a good day, five-to-one odds would've been laughable. It hadn't been the very best day.

They labored to get him settled on the small cot. The width of it barely held him. With a guard holding each arm, they managed to secure his wrists together beneath the bed. It took all five men to spread his legs and place manacles around each ankle to chain him to the metal framework. He'd be going nowhere. Not until they let him.

The smell of food drifted in as they brought a tray close. A basket came too, which they set by the sink. The guard pushed the gal inside after shoving a cloth bag, her boots and dress into her hands. The metal door slammed once the guards left the cell.

Aaron said to her, "Make it worth the Doxyn money you've been paid and they'll bring you back to service others. If you're good enough, you could earn payment for taking care of us instead of the vermin behind bars."

The guards left and his men uttered not a sound. *Bastard Doxyn!* They could've spared a meal for each of the men as well! They should all be fed.

The waif drifted closer and glanced down. At a distance she'd been lovely. Up close, he couldn't believe this amazing creature would be his for a time. The fragrance of a clean, warm gal grew strong and drifted into his head. His mouth watered a bit and it wasn't only for the food a few feet away. He bet her taste would be much to his liking.

"Do you want the food or a bath first?"

Despite her words earlier, she didn't seem the least put off having to tend him. As a matter of fact, she displayed no emotion whatsoever. "The food – it's for me to do with what I want?" he asked.

"That's what they told me."

Such a fine, soft voice she spoke with.

"Then I want you to feed me men. Each of them gets a bite. You follow?"

She gazed at him for a time before she said, "Yes, I understand."

"They'll be dead not long after me so they get what I get."

She scanned the men and looked ill at ease.

"They'll not handle you, gal. You'll only be touched by me." He thought about his bound wrists and laughed. He noticed the subtle flinch she tried to hide. Why would his laughter frighten her? "Well, in truth, maybe not. I seem unable to reach you at the moment."

As she took the tray and turned her back on him, he found himself unconsciously straining against the chains. He could hardly wait but would have to. He shrugged and unclenched his jaw. Maybe if he relaxed a few parts of his body, the rest of him would settle down too.

The cloud of soft-looking hair stretching down her back made him think of the place he'd likely go on the morrow. He'd been a good man, done right by his tribe and his conscience. If the likes of her would see to him in heaven, death couldn't be all bad.

He wondered about her origin. A race to produce such a creature would have to be most grand. How the hell did she come to tend prisoners on Doxyn? Her circumstances must've been desperate to wind up in such a place. He sighed and flexed his arms,

trying to get the blood flowing again. After a few days with his wrists chained above his head, to have them restrained at a different angle brought needles to his arms and hands.

She did well in taking the food and cutting it into portions. She walked first to one side of the cell and fed half his men before wandering over to do the same for the rest. Each of them got a bite of thick, red, steaming meat and a few greens for which they thanked her. Shane closed his eyes, thinking again how such a wee thing as a bit of food impressed them. They deserved high honor for valor in the field, not death in a stinking prison.

The scrape of metal over the flat stone floor drew him from bad musings. She'd pulled a chair beside him and set the tray down in her lap. Her pale complexion looked natural against her light hair and eyebrows but he wondered if perhaps it didn't also come from neglect. She appeared most fragile.

He asked, "Have you eaten, gal?"

She stared and studied him while he did the same to her. With her sitting so close, he knew with all his heart she wasn't an ordinary waif who came to tend a prisoner. She didn't have the look of a gal accustomed to trading sex for currency.

"No, Sir, and I don't intend to take the last bite of your meal. Can you comfortably raise your head so I can feed you?"

"Aye."

He rose up as far as he could and she placed the last large bite into his mouth. He leaned back and chewed slowly, savoring the food as his men had done. It was enough. It would have to be.

"Your bath now?" she asked.

"Aye."

He closed his eyes, contemplating what the future held. With the meal done, only two things remained before execution—to be clean and sexually satisfied. The cleansing had been written into the Treaty to give a man closure. Most babes came into life hungry and needing bathed. They decided a man should meet his maker having those needs met. In his current state of filth, the bath would be just as much for the benefit of the gal.

She surprised him by letting the water in the fetid sink heat prior to soaping the cloth. He expected a sloppy, hurried, half-assed cleaning. The scent pleased him and the warmth felt good against his skin. The sting of soap going into the opened wounds even felt good. She took care in washing every centimeter, even his feet. The rinsing took longer, her working the cloth over him to strip the sanitizer away. She took her sweet time, probably not in a hurry for what would follow.

"Oh shat," he said, really liking the last part of him she rinsed.

The cloth slid away before she took his cock into both of her warm, soft hands. The gentle caressing had him hard in seconds.

"Aye, your hands feel fine against him. But you're in a hurry with this last chore. You don't want him?"

She leaned in and whispered against his lips, "You want this to take a while, don't you?"

"Aye," he said, agreeing with her taking some time to hold and caress his sac.

She'd fed them all slowly, letting each of his men get a good look. With the thorough bath, he figured she simply didn't want to finish her tasks. The slow and steady caressing of his cock and balls relayed even if she didn't particularly want to pleasure him, she'd make it good.

"We need to go slow," she said before kissing him with her thick, soft lips. "And you need to enjoy it."

"I'll try," he agreed, the thought of *going slow* to his liking.

"The camera has sound, so those watching need to hear you. This has to be very real and dramatic. You'll cooperate?"

He knew the meaning of what she said but not why she'd say it. Maybe he wasn't really interested in much beyond the needs of his cock. Damn her hands felt so good! "Aye, as long as you take care of what you play with, sweet."

She kissed him and it wasn't a shy, wee sampling. The gal tongued his lips and pushed inside, moaning as she did. She tasted and smelled of clean, sweet menthe. When she withdrew, the tip of his tongue traced inside her lips. She opened so he could have his want. By God, he desired a slow seduction, bringing her to heat with more than some kissing. When her tongue brushed his, he groaned into her mouth. The taste of her made him ache. The need to know her from the inside out had him straining against chains. Purity surrounded her and he ventured she was special in many ways, not simply because she'd be his last gal.

He'd not finished with her lips, but she'd finished with his. A warm, wet tongue trailed the stubble on his jaw before she licked and nibbled his neck. The chaste kisses relayed a certain degree of innocence, which forced his blood to run fast and hot. His urges raced between kissing her gently and fucking her roughly. He couldn't decide if she knew exactly what she did to him or used the wee kisses and licks because she didn't know a man might need firmer touching.

After a time with her hot breath, warm lips and wet tongue working him over, Shane forgot she'd asked him to be vocal. Sounds came from him automatically. He moaned and groaned for her, couldn't help it. He'd give much to touch her and make her burn as he did.

She avoided the slash marks covering his skin as she kissed a path down his body. The chair slid away and she dropped to her knees, intent on licking even lower than his belly. He'd abide that, having her pretty mouth go down for a taste. He yearned for much from her but didn't want her to kneel on the cold floor. She wouldn't be comfortable or clean when she finished.

Obviously versed in the use of her mouth, she touched him like none before. Many of his questions were answered over her previous experience. He'd been kissed and licked by a gal but never *consumed*. Her first full pass onto his cock forced his hips from the cot as he strained. Once she'd taken him in, she did crazy things with her tongue. It swirled slowly before wiggling quickly back and forth. The tip of it traced the thick vein running his length before flattening out to rub and tease. She applied just enough pressure to keep him hard while withholding the strokes needed to get him off. As he'd initially sensed, she was up to a game and just then, it was playing with his cock.

There was little for him to do but lie there like a dead thing. He took a breath and willed himself to come. He strained and groused but she lightened her touch before licking slowly to spread moisture over his length. If she'd capture him hard for a second or two and stroke him in that wet, hot mouth, he'd come as never before. She didn't let that happen.

"You know just what you're up to, don't you, sweet? Ach, I need to come!" That got him released from the heat of her mouth but he didn't have time to regret it. She moved lower to tongue and kiss his sac. He spread his thighs as far as he could to allow her access.

"Oh shat!" he bellowed as pre-cum dribbled.

Jessica Storm balanced Tiernan on the verge of climax and held him there. His anguish came out in long moans and sentences she sometimes couldn't fully understand. The deep baritone brogue, accompanying the rolling *r* in his enunciations, made it tricky to decipher what he'd said. She managed to gather the gist of his meanings though. Governance language never sounded so melodic.

She knew how to pleasure a man and recognized how badly he wanted to come. She required his patience however because the longer he suffered, the more intent the men watching through the camera would be. Those who'd been told to view Tiernan's pleasure would become emotionally vested in the outcome. She counted on the Doxyn to be no different from other men. The better the performance, the less the guards would notice other things happening in the cells surrounding them.

His men worked to release themselves from manacles with small picks. She hadn't been able to explain what she wanted them to do. As she fed them, she inconspicuously loosened the flesh colored tape on her leg and slipped the small tools into their eager hands. They improvised exceptionally well by making use of what she'd provided. Thank heavens Aaron wasn't interested in parts of her body other than those uniquely feminine. There would've been real trouble if he'd discovered the lock picks.

She occasionally glanced in the direction of the caged warriors to check on their progress. The looks of pity cast at their leader as he moaned hadn't been anticipated. With them well on their way to freedom, why should they care if Tiernan suffered a little and especially in such a way? It's not as if he wasn't also receiving pleasure.

Besides, he'd already gone through a great deal and resembled a piece of raw meat. They should be happy for him.

Her lips slipped over the head of his straining flesh and pre-cum washed into her mouth for a second time. The man had a heady taste very much to her liking. Slapping her fingers lightly against his sac, he jumped slightly and groaned loudly. She rubbed deeply to express regret for surprising him. The small slap hadn't deterred him from climax as she'd intended. It seemed to hasten him toward it. She fisted his cock and gave firm pressure at the base to hold him off. A deep bellow from him sent reverberations rumbling through his body. He'd live. Hopefully they all would.

Her nipples tingled and she held a breath until the feeling passed. Odd, that. She couldn't discern exactly what caused the strange stirrings. Perhaps the plumping of her nipples stemmed from cold or maybe embarrassment because the Braughmen watched. They stared actually. *Animals!*

Tiernan took air as if he'd done battle and a twinge of pity washed over her. After his recent torture, he probably thought this to be his last enjoyment before an agonizing death. Of course he wanted a man's pleasure. He probably wanted it many times over that eve.

"Aye, sweet, don't stop this time. Ach, take him back into your mouth." His big, muscled body tested the metal holding him.

With him drawn up and tense, she felt a little vulnerable and couldn't help hesitating.

"Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you." He laughed in between the quickly drawn breaths. "It's downright impossible. Eh?"

How did he know what she felt? She glanced at him. His muscular neck supported his head so he could observe what she did. Intense, passionate, almost colorless gray eyes studied her, watching as her tongue slid up and down his shaft. Those eyes, accompanied by the slight reassuring smile, were impossibly inconsistent. She couldn't seem to look away. She'd never *felt* a man's need and strange things happened in her belly when she sensed Tiernan's.

As she repositioned herself and took his length into her mouth, her nipples inadvertently brushed his hip. She whimpered as small jolts of sensation shot through her breasts, stunning her for a moment. Why were her nipples so hard and thick? She quickly understood that cold or embarrassment hadn't caused it. Something else made the tissue swell around the piercings.

She rhythmically tugged on his cock and fisted it, keeping him hard while taking inventory of her own state of affairs. She didn't feel right at all. The damn, rotten, stinking prison probably made her ill! Strangely, she didn't feel particularly sick.

She'd given his men plenty of time with the camera's remaining focused on her and Tiernan. If they'd been too stupid or slow to get themselves free, they'd be left. With unusual happenings in her body, she'd bring the diversion to conclusion and face what

would occur next. She took a deep breath to shut everything out for a few seconds and regain her composure. Sick or not, she needed to stay focused.

Tiernan's gaze never left her. He'd witnessed her struggle for self-control. The slight crinkle beside his eyes relayed regret and then – sympathy? She needed neither. All she wanted was one Shane Tiernan, alive and able to fight.

"Do you desire something?" she asked before giving a long lick to the underside of his cock. *Oh he craved something all right.* He wanted her mouth surrounding his flesh. She'd grant his wish while getting what she needed from him in the process. The diversion had to escalate with the oafs in the surrounding cells clanking chains. Maybe they'd be left behind after all.

He did have a nice long, thick cock with satin skin. She also liked the fact he'd gotten full and hard quickly. She imagined because he was so sensitive, she could have him really wailing in no time. The next time her mouth slid onto his shaft, it wasn't to tease. Taking him almost to the base, she struggled until her throat relaxed. After capturing him deep, she held her breath and swallowed. She knew he'd like the pressure of her throat constricting around the head of his cock.

"Sweet gal, ach, damn! Ah, God I've never felt anything so... Oh!"

Girl! He'd called her *girl* again! She was fairly certain he hadn't meant the word in a demeaning manner. When Tiernan said *gal*, it came out with reverence. She withdrew, sucking gently on the way up. She didn't allow a reprieve before going down on him again. He needed to really get wild as his men made ready. Wiggling her tongue over him, she swallowed then squeezed.

"Ach, damn, let me come!"

A little more aggressively, she gave him a few good strokes, making sure to use her tongue and lightly suck on the upward motion. He understood the change in tactics. He knew his reward was close. His balls tightened up. He wanted to climax. *Easy, Tiernan. Give me a little more and I'll give you a whole lot.*

"Keep it going now. Don't stop. Aye, gal, finish me!"

She varied the motions so he never knew what to expect. Confusion from an unsteady rhythm had his hips pumping, trying to set a pace for release.

"Oh sweet gal! I need to fucking come," he bellowed. "Damn me, but I can't take much more."

He did have a nice strong voice, moaning, groaning and rumbling pleasant-sounding phrases as his chest and hips intermittently strained off the cot. Even beaten as he was, he attracted her eye. The long dark, perspiration-damp hair clinging to his face made him look wild and uncivilized. The sparse mat of black hair across the center of his chest gave him a look of virility. She imagined he could please a woman if she were a product of a conventional upbringing.

Focus, Jessica! Such musings helped in the teasing process, giving her something agreeable to think about. Now she needed to concentrate and make the hulking man

come because most of his men were free of manacles. She took him deep, rolled his balls in her hand and held a breath.

“Ach, fock – shat!”

How original. Fuck and shit.

Throughout different cultures, great pleasure in men equated to rutting and bowel movements. At times she was grateful she didn’t have to tolerate her own mind being reduced to such horridness.

“Oh! Back off and take me to hand if you don’t want me cum. Now, gal. Right now!”

Damn, but he came so hard! His liquid tasted complex, unlike what she’d expected. She wasn’t repulsed in the least with her first taste of his cum.

“Oh,” he bellowed, the sound coming from his gut, “*bra’achton delmorrha meishtah!* So fucking good – me cock in your mouth!”

Each time she swallowed, he groaned. His heavily muscled body clenched magnificently as he growled and strained. His size intimidated, but in the throes of passion, it changed and became – exciting?

Whispered murmurings surrounded her. The words came from his men. *Lovely gal. Precious creature. Sweet angel. Oh swallow. Bless ye, sweet, broughen gal, swallow.*

Eventually he made contented man sounds, all happy and pleased, fulfilled and satisfied. She couldn’t decide if finishing Tiernan and swallowing his seed stemmed from rebellion or the simple need to please this one man. It didn’t matter. She’d likely never find herself in a sexual situation again. Tiernan was a final installment in a military career wrought with horrid events. If she managed his rescue, she’d soon return home.

She held his softening flesh in her mouth and stroked him lightly with her tongue, taking the last of his cum, keeping him warm for an additional moment. His features softened. He seemed younger and happy. He appeared to be in a mental place where he hadn’t recently been abused and threatened with death. The warrior she’d come to fetch looked quite handsome as a man with fewer cares.

When at last she released him, she turned her face away from the camera and whispered quietly so only he would hear. “Pretend to sleep.”

The scuffle of men drew her attention for a quick glance. She glared and nonverbally cautioned them to be quiet. Silence ensued. She stood and reached for her dress while pushing her bag closer to the cot. She pulled the garment over her head, closing the tear down the front by creatively tucking cloth together. It wasn’t likely she’d ever don a piece of trash like that again. Fumbling through the bag for a pick, she placed her back to the camera and slipped the piece of metal into the lock of a manacle holding his ankle. It clicked and she saw Tiernan take in a huge breath. Thank heavens he’d made it seem a natural occurrence of sleep. She slipped her foot into a boot and straightened.

She feigned a stumble and pushed the bag to the other side of the cot and retrieved her second boot. As nonchalantly as possible, she unlocked Tiernan's other ankle from the restraint while pulling on the boot.

Aaron opened the cell door and hurriedly walked to her. He jerked her flush with his body so she'd notice the swell in his pants.

Why won't he kiss me? She almost said something but controlled it as his hands grabbed and pinched her nipples through the dress. She'd had about enough.

Four more guards entered and she placed an index finger to her lips. She whispered, "If you wake him, I'll be obliged to finish earning my money here. I'd be happy to but thought maybe I could earn it elsewhere."

They smiled and nodded, assuring her they understood. The passing of her tongue over her upper lip succeeded in stretching the fabric at the front of their pants. *Livestock!* As if she'd take all five of them!

Aaron pulled the hem of the dress to her waist, turned her around and shoved. Her hands landed on the metal rail of the cot.

The frown on Tiernan's face was evident. *Slimwit – idiot!* Thankfully the guards weren't focused on him.

Aaron kicked her feet apart and shoved his hand between her legs. He just couldn't wait and suddenly neither could she.

Bringing her thighs together to trap his hand, she swung her elbow back and landed it square in his face. He hit the floor without a fuss. A broken nose could do that to a man. It'd take him a minute or two to figure out how he'd need to take air. Glancing at the downed man, she realized he might not need to breathe after all. He looked quite dead. The other four oafs stared.

"Oopsie," she said before lunging.

She caught two by surprise and shoved them toward the side of the cell. Tiernan's men grabbed them by reaching through the bars. The captives twisted the guards' heads sharply. Loud cracks from broken necks resonated in the wake of the swift motions. They died in seconds and fell to the floor. Only two remained for her to contend with.

Her fists came up and she adjusted her stance. When it occurred to the smaller man she waited for a fight, he chuckled and lunged and quickly dropped after a few punches and a neck-breaking twist. Tiernan's men laughed when she mimicked their maneuver. It came in handy and she'd remember it in the future.

That was easy. Now for the big one.

What she lacked in brute force she made up for in speed. The knife he drew barely grazed her before she caught his wrist and twisted. With his arm drawn up behind his back and the knife in his beefy hand, she jerked upward. The cracking of his shoulder made his fingers open.

"That's a good boy."

Once she had the knife, he pulled free and grabbed her with his undamaged arm. She didn't move, stayed close in fact so he'd give her a nice, tight hug. Did he think he could crush her like that?

Tiernan yelled above his men's loud directives, "Use the knife, gal!"

She already had. The lumbering fool simply hadn't felt it yet. She waited and waited as his hold loosened before finally – the dawning. A perfect "O" formed on his lips, reflecting disbelief that she'd managed to stick him.

"That's what you get," she said, sliding the blade in further and twisting, "for playing with sharp-pretties!"

He obligingly dropped to his knees and she placed a boot on his chest before shoving. He slid a few feet from her effort. She grabbed her bag, retrieved a large metal tool and slipped under the cot. In ten seconds, the manacles fell to the floor and the cot above her shifted. She'd barely crawled out from beneath when someone grabbed her upper arms and hauled her to her feet. A step back might've been nice with Tiernan dwarfing her but he wouldn't let go. He took the front of her dress and finished ripping the last two buttons before his hands roamed everywhere.

Her eyebrows rose. "Finding everything all right?"

"There's blood all over you. Where are you cut?" He kept checking her over.

"It's not my blood."

A huge hand cupped the back of her head and pulled her forward as he bent. There wasn't a reason for him to smile. He remained naked, hurt and in a prison. The warm expression seemed directed at her. His lips fell upon hers very gently. The confounding caress didn't relay sexual need.

Why would he waste time with this?

As he thoroughly kissed her, she heard, "Eh, Shane, you care to get us out of here?"

He kissed her forehead, the tip of her nose and chin before crouching over Aaron, who remained in a heap at their feet. Tiernan unhooked the keys attached at Aaron's waist and threw them to the man who'd spoken. "Finn, you got me pants over there?"

"Aye. Next time, take better care of your shat."

A pair of pants flew past her, which Tiernan caught before he hurried to put them on. Boots sailed through the air to land close to him.

Jessica pulled weapons from dead guards. After laying two aside for herself, she ripped more from holsters and tossed the other three to Tiernan. She stood, left the cell and walked cautiously down the corridor. When the alarm sounded, she smirked. She'd actually expected it minutes before. They just might make it to safety. The other cell doors clanged, which meant all the Braughmen were free. Fingers bit into her arm as someone roughly jerked her backward.

"You'll stay behind me. You get me?" Tiernan asked.

"Sure." She turned to find him wearing an intense expression. She mimicked his frown. "You know which exit we need to get to?"

The look on his face said it all. He didn't and wasn't very happy about it. She said, "You follow *me*. You understand?"

He looked as if he might throttle her.

She slunk ahead, approaching the intersecting hallways with caution. With guns ready, she crouched low and peered to her right before firing the lasers and killing three guards. The second her head spun in the opposite direction, she sighted six more. She began shooting but wasn't quick enough. To her surprise the guards fell anyway. Tiernan had come over her and took care of those she couldn't. She owed him because she should've been hit.

They led the way until the lights went out. She placed her gun against Tiernan's chest to hold him still. Combat lighting would come up soon. She knew what to expect. Most military followed the same protocol. A red light began flashing, intermittently brightening the corridor. Men stumbled behind her and bunched up into a tight group. They'd accumulated fourteen useless weapons because the men were blinded by the flashes of red after the moments of darkness.

"Hold your eyes open, let them water and focus ahead. Don't turn your head too fast," she said.

The message got passed back through whispered words and she gained speed, knowing they'd follow. She kept walking and when a patrol came near, she and the Braughmen engaged the Doxyn threat. There would be quite a body count after they departed.

Rounding the last corner and ensuring the hall was clear, she started sprinting toward the last barrier. They'd get through the door but it'd take a number of laser blasts directed at the huge locking mechanism to make it happen. From out of nowhere, something hit her shoulder and shoved her against the wall. Her head exploded in pain. While sliding to the floor, she twisted and shot the hidden guard with three blasts. A veil of darkness clouded her vision. She might actually pass out. A baritone rumble relayed something urgent and questioning. Shaking her head to clear the disorientation, stars danced before her eyes.

"Is that the way?" Tiernan asked.

"Yes, the door to the right," she replied, trying to bring the double images into one.

After hoisting her up, he ran behind his men. A moment later her head cleared as Braughmen blasted the lock. When the door swung open, she arched her back and pushed against Tiernan to get onto her feet.

"You're hurt," he said, tightening his arms.

"If they head out, they'll be killed. If my crew doesn't see me, your men are dead."

He kept hold of her. "I'll take you."

"They'll...kill...you." There wasn't time and she bit the words out so even a child could understand. "Let me walk."

He set her down but held her arm until she jerked free. With an unsteady gait, she bumped into men until she forced a path to the front of the group. She reached into her boot and pulled the slim transmitter from the inside concealed pocket.

"Drew?" She waited. Static answered her until she said, "Damn it, Drew!"

"Here, Storm," her crewmember replied.

"Secure the area beyond the door and prepare to get us aboard."

"How many?"

"About twenty-two semi-naked men. You see anyone follow us out with uniforms, kill them."

"Understood."

Jessica staggered into the gated compound as brilliant light encased the area. Knowing Tiernan and his men followed, she waited until Drew could see she wasn't being restrained. Once she counted to ten, she gave into the dizziness and fell to her knees. The transmitter hit the ground and skittered a few feet away. She reached for it.

"Storm!" Drew's voice screeched through the device.

Tiernan picked her up before reaching to grab the transmitter off the pavement. "She's wounded. Me men are clear for transport."

Jessica heard a laser blast and Tiernan turned away from the sound. He held her tightly as men crowded around them. Braughmen formed a barrier between the threat and their leader. "She'll be dead right quick if you don't transport now!"

Jessica felt weightless for a moment before strong arms squeezed her. Her cheek rested against the solid warmth of Shane Tiernan's naked chest. Funny, the delicate scent of floral soap seemed ridiculously dissimilar to the mass of muscle holding her.

Chapter Two

Storm slipped out of Shane's arms and onto her feet the minute they got aboard. Blood dripped from the wound by her scalp and crimson streaked her colorless hair. Shane followed her the short distance to the command center. She didn't waste time and spat orders to her one-gal crew.

One gal!

"Drew," she said, "take us from orbit."

Now that'd be a problem because he felt tractor beams attach to the ship a moment prior. "You're being held. Use your warp drive to break free."

She stood behind the command chair as if she didn't have her wits. She asked, "Weapons scan of the prison?"

Her second replied, "They're bringing up power."

"Prepare to return fire and raise the shields."

"It's one or the other."

One or the other?

"Divert power to weapons, Drew," Storm said, "and make her hum."

"Didn't you hear me? Warp us out of here." Shane spoke calmly, despite his growing unease. What good would freedom be if they died five minutes after rescue?

She walked to the computer and worked with Drew. "Deploy." After a second, she said with more force, "Deploy!"

When the weapons fired the floor shook. Her ship was outdated when his Da was a boy and still pissing himself. From what Shane could see, not much work had gone into the antique vessel over the last half a century to make it flightworthy.

"Status?" Storm asked.

"We have a minute before I'd venture they use their secondary location to blast us to hell."

"Long enough," Storm said, flipping switches as Shane heard power divert to bring the thrusters up.

About damn time.

Finn walked up behind him and spoke quietly. "First-rate transport, eh, Shane?"

As the power for the thrusters rose, she righted herself and waited.

After he counted to ten a second time, he reckoned he could walk faster with a broken leg and a hundred pound sack on his back. He prayed the transportation relic had the heart to hold together and pull free.

"Brace yourselves," she said.

Finn laughed and he nearly did too. Shane expected a small lurch before they fell from the sky in a flaming mass. At least they'd die laughing.

"I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and pretend you didn't hear me," she said. "Hold on."

His brother never learned that sometimes it wasn't wise to make sport of a gal intent on something. Now and again, it was wise to play along. Besides, Shane sure as hell couldn't take command and make things happen any faster. His GranDa might've had a clue what to do. With few options, he did what she'd asked. He held the back of the command chair and prepared. When the hum of power began fading, he let go to get out and push. It'd be faster.

All of a sudden, a high-pitched whine screeched through the ship. He'd be deaf soon if it didn't stop. Storm kicked the console with her wee boot and they lurched to warp speed. Naturally he and Finn fell with the motion and landed against a wall. His head was probably hurt and bloody like the gal's but he couldn't help laughing. They must look like fools, squished and flattened in a heap. At least they made it to space before the Doxyns blasted them.

"They following, Drew?" Storm asked.

"Nothing yet, but they signaled to an off-base location to ready ships."

"They won't catch us. Not enough time."

The floor started vibrating and he got up before offering a hand to Finn. His men grumbled in the next room. They didn't get the warning to hold on. "You need repairs. Where's your mechanic?" Shane asked as he neared the gals.

"You're looking at her," Storm replied.

He'd been staring into her eyes. "Reilly!" Shane called. His man came quickly thereafter. "The gal's fine craft needs a bit of work. Can you repair such a vessel?"

"Aye, to be sure," Reilly said with a smile, as the vibration from the floor chopped his words.

If Reilly laughed, Shane would be obliged to kick his ass. Storm didn't look happy, and more outward amusement at her ship's expense would probably make her hostile.

"Then get you to it, man."

"Aye, Shane. I'll need others though. This is a mite more than I can handle on me own."

"The others are just standing around looking at the scenery anyhow. Put them to work."

His wee Storm stood at the console, leaning on her hands. Her blood dripping onto the controls probably wouldn't help Reilly's repairs, so Shane walked over to see what she focused on.

"How many crew do you have aboard, gal?"

She didn't answer and he touched her shoulder. She turned to face him and he didn't like the look of her. There wasn't a hint of relief, concern or anything else on her face.

"Storm?"

"Three. Zoe's in the engine room." She nodded to her crewman, Drew and said, "This is Angela who's manning the controls. And me."

"Three!" It'd take at least twelve to handle a ship this size. She lacked nine bodies. What the hell could she have been thinking?

"Rendezvous coordinates, Angela. Are they locked in?" She used given names for her crew after they escaped the immediate danger.

He wondered what hers could be.

"Yes," Angela replied.

"How long until we reach them?"

"An hour more or less. It depends on hardware issues."

"Contact them. Let them know we have the cargo."

"They'll shit themselves, Jessica."

Jessica. It sounded too formal for the wee bloody gal. A smaller name with a bit of *punch* would suit her better.

"They never expected you to pull it off," Angela said.

"Thanks to you and Zoe, we managed."

Shane instinctively reached out when Storm swayed. She stepped back and wiped blood out of her eye with the back of her hand. The wound near her scalp looked deep. It appeared to pain her too.

She glanced up at him. "Appropriate clothing for you and your men—in the hold. Angela will show you. You can sterilize in a room off the mess hall. Food too. Eat."

"Jessica?" Angela asked.

Storm waved and walked past them with unsteady steps. He wondered how far she'd get.

"My cabin," she said.

His men watched her with weary concern. She'd aided them and suffered for it. As she walked by, their hands rose to steady her if she needed it. She didn't.

He said to Reilly, "Take care of Angela and send some brethren below to help Zoe with the engines. Do what you can in the time we have."

"Aye, Shane, don't worry. Take care of the captain."

Her cabin wasn't far and she never looked back to see him following. He walked into the tiny room after her and she pushed the torn dress from her shoulders before tugging off the boots. Her sanitizer resembled an upright coffin and she staggered straight to it. Behind the clear door, she reached up and braced herself as a white mist

clouded her image. After the cleaning she didn't come out, just stood there with her head hung.

He opened the door and she finally spared a glance but said naught. She looked too tired to speak. The wound on her scalp dribbled more blood.

"I can fix your head if you'll let me," he said.

"I doubt it." An emotionless expression made her appear cold and bitter.

He figured it had everything to do with the condition of her damaged head, because she'd been right affectionate when she'd gone down on him and hot-blooded in the ensuing battle. He grasped her arm and drew her from the shower. She came forward and he helped her sit on the wee bed.

"We'll get you dressed and I'll take you to medical," he said.

"No medical, I'm fine."

"I can run a med unit for minor stuff, gal."

"Most beings can. There isn't one on the ship."

That surprised him. He'd never been aboard a vessel without a healing unit. Thank the heavens none of them were hurt too badly.

"There's an aid kit somewhere in here. I can't remember where."

He didn't ask permission, just searched the drawers until he found what he sought. He took the kit and sat down beside her. As he unrolled a piece of gauze and folded it many times over, he kept his opinion to himself. A three-gal crew should at least have basic medical equipment aboard. The smattering of items in the box didn't fill the need.

"You'll hold this on your cut for me?" he asked.

Looking annoyed, she winced a bit when she placed the gauze against the split skin. The swelling around it grew and she'd nothing in her kit to settle it down. He gave it a minute and brushed her hand and the pad away to place small sealing strips over the cut to hold it together. At least she wouldn't lose more blood. After replacing the cover and taping it in place, he looked at his work.

"I never claimed to be a medical man," he told her, so she wouldn't be angry if she caught sight of her reflection. The lopsided wad of gauze stuck on her head looked as if his five-year-old brother had done the job. He hadn't wanted to tape the damn thing to her hair so he did what he could. "Do you have something for *ar'ghad*?"

She stared at him. He hated when the simplest terms escaped him. Thinking on it for a moment, the word came to him. "*Pain*. Do you have injections or pills to make the pain go?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine. Thank you."

She stood and walked to a closet and pulled out a uniform like Angela's. As she dressed, he leaned back on his elbows and watched. The gal had first-rate legs. To cover them in pants was a shame. The white uniform did naught for her color either, making her look more like a ghost than before. How could a gal that looked like her have no inkling as to her appeal? He was fairly sure Jess didn't have a clue. Most pretty gals

would swing their hips an extra inch when they walked or would speak in a soft voice laced with double meanings. His wee Jess Storm didn't display such things once she boarded the ship.

He rubbed his chest before lightly fingering a scabbed-over cut. He needed to express gratitude for her help. She'd done a fine job in their rescue. He especially wanted to thank her for what she'd done with her mouth.

"Miss Storm?"

She turned while tucking in her shirt.

He could see the faint bumps of the nipple piercings beneath the fabric. He forced himself to gaze at her eyes and not at what most fascinated him. "I want to thank you for your effort in yon prison. You risked your life and we're grateful. Can I do something for you in return?"

"You'll pay. The Governance will detail it once you board their ship. They sent us."

He froze, hearing whom she'd blamed for their rescue. Anger rose and he couldn't help what he said. "You're telling a tale on who pulls your strings. Gov don't send gals to do a man's work."

"They did this time. Their military tactics would've gotten you all killed in the process of getting you out."

"You'll go to hell for fibbing."

"You have about forty minutes to get cleaned up before you'll board a Governance ship. Make use of the time. I'm sure the bite of meat you got in your cell wasn't adequate."

He wouldn't tolerate her being polite and changing subjects to avoid answering him. He stood and walked to her. She didn't back up.

"The Gov didn't send you and they've no use for Braughmen. They're too big, too strong a force to call on me tribe." He'd called her a liar a second time. His Ma tried her best to teach him manners but his weren't what they should be when his temper came up. When she turned to leave, he grabbed her arm so she'd stay put.

"You're acting a little too familiar, Tiernan. Let me go."

At least she showed some emotion. Her anger didn't disturb him because he thought it better than the dead expression from a moment prior.

"That's what you get after taking me into your mouth, Storm. *Familiar.*"

She looked lovely, her golden eyes sparkling with annoyance. It made her seem more normal, not like some cold, detached being who didn't give two shats about a damn thing. Oh he liked the passion flowing from her. He'd something burning in him as well.

Without thought, he leaned down and placed his lips against hers. She didn't kiss him in return. He didn't mind because she felt fine against him and tasted good too. It took a moment before she tried to punch him. He caught her fist and waited for her next move. He remembered how quick and merciless she'd been while fighting the

prison guards. If she'd a mind to, she could probably do some damage to him because he'd never fight with her. Not in a real way.

She did nothing but stand there looking confused and worn out. There were other things they could do together that didn't require either of them getting hurt. Forty minutes could be spent a number of ways. After what she'd done for him in the prison, he wanted a chance at turnabout to even the score.

The ship suddenly jumped beneath their feet and she jerked free. Before she gained a foot of distance, he caught her shoulders and backed her against a wall. He put her there so they could speak to each other. He felt her tremble and it came from something more than anger, kissing or her wee broke ship. Most gals didn't mind him being close. She did.

He instantly set her free. A minute ago, she'd been ready to do battle. Despite her expression still relaying hostility, her eyes held dread and concern. *What the hell?* He didn't touch her too roughly!

"You have thirty-five minutes left, Tiernan." Her heated words conflicted with her shaking voice.

He stepped back to give her space and closely watched her reaction. She released a breath and wiped her palms down the front of her shirt. She'd need to learn she had nothing to fear. Not from a Braughman and never from him.

"Aye, go to your Angela and check on your ship. I'll see you in ten minutes and you'll tell me why you came to fetch me and me men. Think fast, Storm and regale a better tale when next we speak."

* * * * *

Jessica bumped into men at every turn. The ship barely accommodated twenty bodies, let alone twenty-two the size of Braughmen along with her and her crew. Angela worked diligently alongside Reilly, under the console panel, sifting through wires to straighten out part of the mess. The pride and joy of her home planet lacked a great deal compared to most transportation. The vessel reminded her how poor and ravished her world was.

The ship began rhythmically lurching. In warp, it could be fatal. Wiring wouldn't account for the problem, although it couldn't hurt to leave the two of them under the control panels to straighten out other troubles. The next time they needed thrusters, it'd be wonderful to have them work without a kick or punch.

She walked quickly to the engine room. Four men surrounded Zoe. They worked fervently, not wanting the ship to give up. If it did and they hurled from warp at their current speed, they'd be splattered across the heavens. They affected repairs in the wrong area but she let them work. Again, anything they fixed would be something less for her to do later. The engines stayed together with a lick and a promise. She'd *adjusted* various components throughout the ship to get to Doxyn. She wasn't the very best wrench-puller but even a Class I, Governance-trained, highly skilled flight mechanic

could run around as she did to patch what broke. The sanitizing units and chairs seemed to be the only things functioning without a glitch.

A heavy two-tone wrench lay on the floor and she picked it up. Fatigue made her conjure things not appropriate, such as which engine to vent her frustration on. The bent valve on the side of the small reactor shimmied, threatening to come apart. Anger bled away and she chose to ignore how tired she'd become. If she didn't act quickly, they'd have a leak on board. That certainly couldn't be good. The valve also created an unsteady flow of pressure and caused the rolling motion. She drew the wrench over her shoulder and lined up. Placing full effort into the strike, she grunted from the strain of swinging the heavy tool.

"Ughhhh." *Bang!* "Ughhhh." *Bang!*

She kept swinging to drive the pivot back into the notch. The lurching smoothed out slightly as she slammed it into place. On an upward motion, the tool slid from her hands. She spun and found Tiernan glaring at her, holding her makeshift hammer. He'd changed into one of the black uniforms from the hold. From across the room, Zoe and four men stood staring at them.

"You'll blow us to bits," Tiernan said.

She'd loosened the pivot and unless it got driven into place fast, they'd die. The ship started bucking. She wouldn't waste her breath explaining a thing to Tiernan. "Zoe!"

The strum of a laser made the men turn. Zoe Cross passed through doorways requiring six inches less clearance than most beings, but her small size didn't mean she was slow or incapable. The gun targeted Tiernan. Jessica pulled the wrench from his hand and started to work. As far as she was concerned, he could stand there all eve with his mouth agape. A few more blows had the ship merely lurching again. She kept at the task, refusing to let her arms give out before she righted the problem.

When he swiped the tool a second time, she ordered, "Zoe, kill this slimwit!"

"Nay," Tiernan said, putting up his hand to still his men.

Jessica sometimes said things she didn't mean. Zoe understood and wouldn't have shot a nonaggressive man, but Jessica had forgotten about *his* men. They could've hurt Zoe. She'd need to keep her temper in check for another twenty-one minutes.

"I see what you're doing. I didn't understand but do now. Stand back, Storm, and I'll put it right for you."

When he drew the wrench over his shoulder, she cautioned, "You miss, we die."

"Yeah, yeah, like your piece of shat ship ain't been trying to kill us already." With one mighty blow, the pivot lodged deep and the thrusters whirled normally. Placing the wrench down, he brushed black strands of hair from his face. "Is there a thing on your vessel that doesn't need a kick or punch to function?"

She glanced at the men who'd begun working again in the engine room. "To your credit, Tiernan, it appears your men don't need much prodding to lend a hand. I

appreciate yours too with the sensitive adjustment to our reactor." She took a step, placed a finger against his chest, looked up and said rather quietly, "However, the next time you push, pull, grab or get familiar with me in any way, you'll get me angry. You won't like me when I'm angry."

He leaned down until the tip of his nose almost touched hers. "And what about kissing you? You didn't mention it and I need to be sure what the rules are."

About to spell out exactly what she wouldn't tolerate, Jessica heard the hiss of compressed air before she caught a flash of white through the corner of her eye. Zoe had ruptured the fitting she'd been tightening. She fell backward and men quickly surrounded her. Jessica shot past Tiernan in an attempt to get to her friend. When the men wouldn't move, she tried clearing a path by kicking the backs of their knees and shoving them. Jessica's heart pounded. She couldn't get through the wall of Braughmen and knew Zoe would be terrified.

"Get away from her," Jessica yelled before someone grabbed her around the waist.

"Hold on, Storm. Finn's got your gal," Tiernan said.

Her leg drew up before her boot landed against his shin. He didn't budge. She tried twisting but couldn't get free. Finn *having* Zoe was a huge problem and she didn't want to waste time explaining. She shouldn't *have* to explain! "Damn you, let me go!"

"It's okay, Jessica. My wrist. He's getting it wrapped up," Zoe said.

"Did you hit an artery? How much blood?"

"A lot, but it's okay."

It wasn't *okay*. She'd been surprised to find Zoe working in the small room with so many men in the first place. Zoe had been pierced and *trained* like her and Angela. The aftermath of the torture left Zoe permanently and irrevocably terrified of most beings, especially males.

However brave Zoe's words were, her voice shook. Jessica watched her scoot away from Finn while leaving her arm outstretched so he could finish wrapping the tourniquet he'd made from a discarded cloth.

"Easy, wee one. A few more turns and you'll not bleed so much." He finished wrapping before splitting the cloth and tying it around her wrist. "See? Now we'll get you to medical to fix it proper."

Tiernan said, "Your patch needs to hold until we reach the other ship. Medical's a can of scraps and cloth. Nothing in there would put that gash to rights."

"Storm?" The overhead speaker blared.

"In the engine room, Angela," Jessica replied, watching the big man care for Zoe. One wrong move and she'd kill him.

"We're approaching the Governance vessel *Efface*. They've ordered us to prepare to dock."

Jerking free of her captor, she pushed through the men and said, "The ship *Guardian* should be collecting the Braughmen. We are not docking. They're to transport Tiernan and his men. We're going home."

"I complained about that very thing and they said to comply."

"Jessica?" Zoe cried out.

"Who's commanding the vessel?" Jessica demanded as she knelt near Zoe.

A new commander was slated to take control of *Efface*. She could only hope it'd happened. Zoe laid her head against Jessica's chest as men stepped away. Jessica embraced her while stroking her back. They'd been promised release if they managed to get Tiernan. Maybe the new commander didn't understand the conditions of their mission.

"Commander Bragg." The distress in Angela's reply couldn't be more obvious.

Zoe whimpered and Jessica's mind spun in twenty directions at once. She didn't think Bragg would outright lie to them.

"Tell him we can't dock. Tell him we can't come out of warp." The warp drive disengaged and rumbled as everything in the engine room fell silent. "Never mind, they're listening."

"Storm," Commander Bragg's voice boomed from the speaker.

"Bragg," Jessica said, stroking Zoe's colorless hair. She couldn't help his name coming out like a curse. *Bastard, liar!* She and Angela would probably survive more time with him. Zoe wouldn't. Before the deal to get Tiernan could be sealed, Zoe had tried taking her own life. If they spent much time aboard *Efface* with Bragg, Zoe would find a way to finish what she'd attempted.

"From the life readings on board, I see you've collected Tiernan?"

"Aye," Tiernan replied. "She got me men too."

"Wonderful, Mister Tiernan. We'll make you comfortable and sit down to bargain."

"What good would a bargain be? You seem to have broken your word with Storm."

"Storm and her crew belong to me, Sir. I own them."

"If you own them, you've been remiss in their care. Since when do you send a gal into a Doxyn prison alone?" The deep rumble of Tiernan's heated voice didn't seem appropriate.

Bragg hadn't lied to him and probably wouldn't.

The ship lurched. They'd been snagged and would soon be pulled into the belly of the Serenity Governance's mammoth vessel.

"We'll speak face-to-face, Sir and all will be assured. Prepare yourselves."

Jessica held Zoe's face in her hands. The tears sparkling in Zoe's eyes made her look younger and weak. A plan came to mind and Jessica acted on it immediately.

"Listen to me, Zoe."

Zoe nodded.

"You need to be brave. All you have to do is let this very nice man take care of you."

Zoe's gaze shot to the man still holding her wrist and she started using her feet to scoot away. He held her gently so she couldn't leave. He'd also been very careful wrapping her wound. Jessica prayed he'd go easier on her than Bragg.

"There, there, wee gal. Me name's Finn. Don't fret none."

Jessica feared Bragg still listened and kept her voice low. "You owe me and I'm collecting. I need you to lay claim to Zoe. Insist they take her to medical and fix her wrist. After that, don't make a fuss—just take her to your cabin. She stays with you until I can straighten this mess out. Don't let anyone near her. And Zoe," she said, looking at her friend, "don't get caught alone. All right?"

"You've asked for the gal's protection and you'll get it. Nothing will happen to her," Finn replied.

Jessica grabbed a fistful of his shirt. "You make damn sure no one touches her. You make sure *you* don't touch her or I'll make the Doxyn look like a pack of playful children. Do you understand?"

"You don't have to threaten. I get it." He appeared irritated that she'd questioned his reliability. It eased the lump that'd formed in her throat.

"Zoe?" Jessica asked, drawing her attention.

"I can't," she whispered.

"You will."

"Please don't make me."

"Cross!" Jessica whispered furiously. It snapped Zoe out of her pitiful stupor. "You'll obey my orders to the letter. You screw up and I'll give you to Bragg myself."

"Yes, Storm." Her huge, glassy, golden-eyed gaze shot to Finn and the tears fell.

Zoe flinched as Finn wiped her cheeks. "Look at me, gal. Do I look like a beastie who'd gobble you up?" He did have an amazing smile. Zoe wasn't buying it and as fresh tears dripped, he patiently brushed them with his thumbs. "Then whilst alone, I'll stay away from you. I warn you now though, you'll be kept awake with me snoring. You won't get a bit of rest."

Zoe grinned and relief washed through Jessica.

"Zoe," Jessica said. "You'll have to let him touch you. You know that. At least in front of Governance personnel."

There wasn't much time and she couldn't afford to waste it coercing Zoe into a reasonable course of action. Jessica stared and grabbed Zoe's chin to hold her still. "He's touching you now, Cross, so pull yourself together and quit that damn sniveling! Act like a soldier, not a whiny child!"

Jessica stood and turned to leave. Coddling Zoe made the situation worse. She responded to orders, not pity. Jessica walked from the area to make another deal before

they docked. Outside the engine room Tiernan grabbed her arm and twisted her around. What the hell did *he* have to be so angry about?

"You're a bitch, you know that?" he asked, indignation dripping from his tone.

"Sure. You done?" She tried pulling free and got nowhere.

"You didn't have to be so rough with the gal. Didn't you see she was scared to death?"

Jessica's eyes narrowed. She couldn't believe how angry she'd become. That level of fury hadn't surfaced in years.

"Yes, I know she's scared." She kept her voice as low as his, knowing Governance could listen anywhere on board.

"Why?"

"Why did I bark an order?"

"Aye."

"So she'd stop feeling sorry about her lot and pull herself together. I'll hold her and let her cry it out later if we get lucky. If she gets hysterical and they don't believe she's with Finn, she's fair game."

"I don't follow."

"There isn't time." She needed to hurry but took a moment to release a long breath and gaze into his eyes. "Your man Reilly, is he trustworthy?"

"Aye, any and all me men can be trusted."

"He needs to claim Angela."

"What if she were to want a different man?"

"Not possible." As if any of them would *choose* a man.

"And we're back to you being a bitch. You take much for granted."

"You really don't know?" It seemed impossible Tiernan didn't understand her position with the Governance. She'd investigated him and his tribe prior to attempting a rescue. Because Braughmen travel a lot, she'd assumed he understood her status. Especially after how she'd created a diversion.

"Nay, not what you're up to. Educate me."

The vibration surrounding them grew in intensity. They were entering *Efface*. Governance soldiers would escort them off the ship very soon.

"You owe me. Promise me Reilly will claim Angela." She hoped to gain safety for both women but Angela would understand if only Zoe could be protected. Jessica would take what she could get.

Tiernan glared at her. He wouldn't give his word and she closed her eyes in resignation. *So be it.*

"And if me man Reilly lays claim to your Angela, what happens to you?"

"If you'll keep both of them safe, your personal debt to me is paid." As if she could claim Tiernan owed her a thing! She acted under Governance orders to retrieve him. She'd no entitlement to make demands. Desperation forced her to utter ridiculous statements. Strangely, Tiernan didn't argue.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her along. She only tolerated the rough handling because he headed directly toward the command center. They found Angela chewing the side of a thumb, unaware she'd bitten it bloody. Reilly seemed most intent on her and rested a hand on her shoulder. Angela probably didn't even notice.

Tiernan pulled Reilly close, motioning for him to bring Angela into the huddle. "You'll need to take me at my word and do as I say. You'll be partnered with this gal whilst on board the Gov ship. You'll be sharing quarters. Reilly, you'll demand to have her if you're questioned."

Angela's gaze shot to Jessica as Reilly smiled. "Aye, Shane."

"Angela," Jessica said, "do as he says. You know what'll happen if you step aboard unclaimed."

She nodded hesitantly, looking way up at Reilly. "Will Bragg hold to a claim, Jessica?"

"He wants use of the Braughmen. It's the best chance for you and Zoe. And don't let Zoe sense you're upset! Let Bragg see you've no problem with this man."

"Yes, Jessica," she said, her voice sounding small.

"You'll not touch the gal, Reilly. You get me?" Tiernan warned his man.

"Not even if she was to want me?" Reilly asked.

Tiernan looked at Jessica for an answer.

She knew the possibility of *that* particular scenario unfolding. "Oh sure, go right ahead if she wants you."

Angela's gaze dropped and she chewed harder on her poor thumb. Reilly took her hand from her mouth, reached over to the console and retrieved a discarded cloth. He wiped the blood from her lips before wrapping her thumb.

The ship thudded down before the hatch and outer door opened. Tiernan straightened his posture and bellowed, "Braughmen, you'll come to mass presently. Gov's gone to some trouble to get our attention. Let's not make them wait."

Men came together with Angela and Zoe tucked in their midst. Her friends looked extremely safe with Braugh warriors surrounding them. A moment of self-pity made her throat constrict and stick in mid-swallow. She'd asked a lot of Tiernan and believed he'd keep to their deal. She'd made no provision for herself and musings of what might happen formed in her mind. Her shoulders slumped and legs grew weak.

Taking the gun from its holster, she looked at it longingly before placing it on the console. She stroked it, wishing she could keep it when facing Bragg. Something warm touched her chin before she jerked away.

Tiernan withdrew his hand and gazed at her. "We'll get your head tended soonest, gal. That'll put you to rights." He no longer looked or acted the least bit angry.

If only a cut were the extent of her problems!

Chapter Three

Jessica stood back as Braugh warriors formed two lines. Angela remained close to Reilly while Finn held Zoe. Finn's makeshift tourniquet slowed the flow of blood from her wrist but the crimson spot on the front of her uniform had increased. She'd grown weak quickly and needed assistance.

Commander Bragg never changed. The dark blue uniform hugged every inch of his six-foot frame with the glint of medals adorning his chest. His icy, blue-eyed gaze could look beyond the exterior of a being and see into their deepest recesses. He always took great care to appear impeccably groomed. A leather band across his forehead held shaggy, long brown hair away from his face. Freshly shaven, he appeared as cold and sharp as any blade she'd ever seen. Too bad his personality paralleled his image. He could make women bleed.

Bragg stepped forward and Tiernan strode away from his men. A long-legged swagger made him appear arrogant, coordinated and completely comfortable in his overly muscled body. Although in the presence of a very important Governance officer, Tiernan didn't seem the least put off or impressed.

Jessica observed Bragg size the Braughman up with an assessing glance. It never took him more than ten seconds to discern what a person had inside. In particular, he possessed an uncanny knack for finding weaknesses.

"Mister Tiernan, welcome aboard. Let the Governance see to you and make you comfortable."

"Aye, Sir, I appreciate the offer and would welcome use of your medical soonest. I fear two of the gals are damaged and a few of me men could use tech to get rid of some cuts and scrapes." Almost as an afterthought, he added with a controlled smile, "If you'd be so kind."

"Immediately, Sir." Bragg motioned and a medical team came forward.

An officer said, "The wounded can follow me."

Only three of Tiernan's men fell in line with the medical crew. One of them was Finn who carried Zoe. When Bragg approached them, the procession stopped. Bragg lifted her arm by one of her slack fingers. Thank heavens Zoe had fallen unconscious. She would've been hysterical with Bragg so close.

When her blood began dripping, Bragg let her go, wiping his bloodied fingers on a clean portion of her sleeve. "I thought you said two of the women were hurt."

"Aye." Tiernan turned toward Jessica.

She remained silent and still. She knew better than to move.

Bragg sauntered up and grabbed her chin with his fingers. Twisting her face to the side, he pulled the dressing from her hairline, taking the strips Tiernan placed to hold the cut together. "Storm, how careless. This looks terrible."

She felt a slow, thick stream of blood ooze from the wound. She did nothing to stop it. "Yes, Sir." She tried not to sneer. The inclination almost overrode her common sense.

"You can see she needs tech, Commander. I'll take her to medical."

Bragg's shoulders drew up an inch. He obviously hadn't detected Tiernan's approach. He probably didn't appreciate the threatening tone of his voice either. "Yes, Mister Tiernan, we'll have Storm seen to. This looks quite deep and requires treatment." He turned to face Tiernan. "You and your men will be shown to quarters. You can get clean, rest and you'll be fed. My officers will show you the way to available cabins. Unfortunately, they're hither and yon throughout the ship."

"And what of Miss Storm, Sir?"

"I'll personally take care of her."

At a glance, Tiernan didn't look as if he cared for that particular notion. "She was hurt on my account and I wish to see to her. I'm sure you understand. As for cabins for me men, we're obliged for your hospitality but we remain a tribe and need to close ranks. Nothing personal, Sir, but we're fresh from a rough spot. If you can't accommodate us remaining close together, we'll take what you can give, double up and make use of the room you have."

She knew Bragg didn't like Tiernan's directives but if he wanted the man's help, he'd impart the highest generosity and grant his requests. Bragg could woo and demonstrate decorum when forced. "Of course, Sir. We'll clear a bunk area and have all of you situated there. After you've settled, eaten and slept, we'll speak of a bargain in the morn." The faux smile on his face mirrored the ungracious tone of his voice.

"We'd be grateful, Commander." Tiernan held out his hand, the gesture beckoning her closer.

She hesitantly walked to his side. His hand on her back made her want to squirm. She didn't dare.

"I'll have the women taken to their quarters from medical," Bragg said. Obviously he wanted her for something.

She could face him after a turn on the healing bed. She'd be stronger and could do it.

Bragg cleared his throat. "You have my word after they've been treated, we'll see to their comfort, Sir."

"Aye," Tiernan muttered, looking over his shoulder at Bragg. "I'm sure you will. But we're Braugh warriors, Commander, and you sent them to us."

"What's that got to do with —"

Tiernan turned around to fully face Bragg while Jessica remained as she was. "In me land, Sir, it's most offensive to give a man something and then take it away."

"They were sent as soldiers on a mission that they accomplished, Mister Tiernan. They weren't *given* to you."

"Nay?" Tiernan stepped away from her.

Jessica turned slightly and found Tiernan glaring down at Bragg. Until then, she realized she'd only seen one side of Tiernan. No wonder Bragg wanted him. The lack of a smile and the deep crease between his eyes, spoke plainly of his intent. The ferocious expression came naturally to him.

The Braughmen still standing in rows reacted to Tiernan's change in demeanor. Each of them displayed similar warrior-like expressions. Their subtle alteration in stance demonstrated readiness to do battle. The tension emanating from the warriors charged the docking bay and everyone in it.

"Did you not send the gal into a Doxyn prison to fetch me?" Tiernan didn't initially seem too upset about the rescue. In fact, he appeared most appreciative. The low, rumbling voice he used on Bragg held malice.

"I did, but —"

"And you knew how she'd need to get inside?"

Again, she couldn't fathom why it suddenly bothered him. He'd enjoyed what she'd done and they'd all gotten away without loss of life.

"Yes, I suggested she request entrance as a *woman of comfort*."

"Then you gave her to me." He'd issued a statement, hadn't asked a question.

"She and other *throwbacks* are used as necessary. They aren't *given*. They're Governance property, Tiernan."

"We have nothing to discuss. I'll gather me crew and we'll trouble you naught. We'll be taking the gals with us though."

When Bragg visibly took umbrage, the Governance soldiers stepped forward. Tiernan's men weren't so polite about the situation and drew guns. They also didn't wait for an order to bring them up to power.

"You're armed, Sir!" Bragg said in amazement.

"Aye, courtesy of the Doxyn. Would you care to add to our arsenal? I see Gov weapons are a bit superior to that which we have."

"Amazing. You board my ship and have the audacity to threaten me—over *throwbacks*."

"You shouldn't spout that word as you do. You're in the presence of right fine gals who done your bidding. They should be treated with respect."

Bragg laughed and Jessica's spine straightened. Tiernan made a fool of himself by defending her and her crew in such a manner. Most men understood her status. Tiernan didn't. Too, if Tiernan agreed to Bragg's bargain, he'd find himself wealthy and with the Governance owing him and his home planet a debt. He might even be offered rank aboard a Governance vessel, depending on the magnitude of the mission. His

reputation, ability in battle and fiercely loyal men, made him a commodity. He shouldn't destroy his opportunity. Not on her account.

"Commander Bragg," Jessica said. "If my crew can room with the Braughmen for the duration of their stay, I'll take quarters where you say." She knew what he wanted. It didn't matter anymore. Saving her friends would be worth most any price.

"Wee Jess," Tiernan said, "didn't you hear me? You're mine now and I'll keep you. I won't give you away just yet."

"Storm," Bragg said.

She glanced up, not liking the way he said her name. He found amusement in something and that Generally indicated she would somehow become miserable. "Mister Tiernan seems quite intent on keeping you for a time. Of course you should stay with him until we see if we can reach an accord. I'll leave you in his care for now. Understood?"

"Yes," Jessica said and as an afterthought, "Sir."

"You're to be most gracious to Mister Tiernan."

Her gaze dropped to his boots. She completely grasped the implication of his statement.

"Jess?" Tiernan asked.

She looked up. His confused expression relayed he didn't understand exactly what Bragg told her to do.

"I'm most willing to accompany you, Sir," she said. It felt wonderful having Tiernan *take* her. Bragg *giving* her over didn't sit too well.

Tiernan drew the gun from the back of his waist. He turned her and tucked it between her back and pants. "I have men watching me back. Now you'll have something at yours."

"But—"

"Keep the weapon, Storm," Bragg said. "You're versed in its use. I'm sure you won't inadvertently shoot someone."

No, Sir. It might however, happen intentionally.

She'd purposely left her gun in the control room. If she came off the ship armed, she would've been shot.

Tiernan's hand slid up her spine to the back of her head. Gently, he turned her toward the group waiting to proceed to medical. She would've liked to have seen Bragg's face. She imagined deep down he was furious about Tiernan arming her. Because he permitted the silliness, Jessica guessed Bragg's need for Tiernan must be extreme.

Commander Adam Bragg watched as the Braugh barbarians sauntered away with his property. Under the circumstances, he couldn't afford a confrontation on the matter.

If Tiernan agreed to do his bidding, it'd be worth the lives of ten *throwbacks*. He cared little for what would happen to Drew or Cross. Storm was different. She'd become his favorite.

Over the years, no matter what he ordered her to do, she not only complied but excelled. At some point, he realized she wanted to please him. When she'd finally grown weary from all he required and her eyes became dull, he'd sent her and the others to fetch Tiernan. It'd been the first time she'd tasted that type of freedom. From the look of her, he'd accomplished his goal. The sparkle was back in her eyes. The barely controlled contempt in her voice also wasn't unwelcome. He liked a spirited woman.

Bragg watched as Tiernan rounded the corner, his hand still on Storm's back. Bragg smiled. He'd allow Tiernan to borrow her. Once business was taken care of though, Bragg had other plans. She cared for him; he could tell. He'd reward her for her obedience and loyalty.

Bragg's heart pounded as he thought about what he'd do. Storm'd been trained to repress and deny sexual urges. He wanted to be the man to provide her first true release. The way she already adored him, he imagined she'd likely fall in love with him when he sexually awakened her. The years of careful and deliberate conditioning would soon pay off.

His mother had been wrong. She'd thought to make him repulsive to women by burning and branding him so no woman would willingly share his bed. Storm wouldn't turn from him when he disrobed. He'd open his arms and she'd run willingly into his embrace. Whether she knew it or not, she yearned for even a pat on the head from him. He'd almost touched her once when she'd been particularly cunning in a training exercise. The longing in her eyes spoke volumes about how badly she wanted his attention. It'd been two months since that incident. Surely time only increased her need to gain his affection.

Soon, my Jessica. Soon we'll be together.

* * * * *

Jessica paced the expanse of the cabin waiting for Tiernan. He'd stayed with her in medical, watching everything the doctor instructed the healing bed to do while double-checking her condition as she'd been treated. For heaven's sake, she hadn't really been wounded. He'd been as vigilant when the others received healing. Either caution motivated Tiernan or he didn't trust anything surrounding the Serenity Governance.

As the Governance came into power, they brought order to the chaotic universe. Most beings viewed Governance laws and actions as a form of salvation. The sheer number of planets requesting aid provided the military with an unending supply of the very best beings from which to mold soldiers. Most sought recruitment for the honor of serving. She couldn't understand why Tiernan and the Braugh Tribe hadn't offered

service or requested protection for their planet. They were either very arrogant or downright stupid.

After a time, the door opened and Tiernan sauntered in. The casual manner of his gait oozed confidence. No wonder most beings feared Braughmen on some level. Doxyn were of the minority that challenged Braugh warriors in any manner. The Doxyn weren't noted for their intelligence. Despite his recent release from prison, Tiernan smiled quite often, but when he concentrated on something, his expression could be blatantly intimidating.

He threw gear down and placed a gun next to hers on a ledge close to the bed. She stood behind a chair at the small table and waited. When he took the seat opposite, she moved to stand beside and somewhat behind him. Her presence should be noted but not intrusive as a man took his meal.

"Jess?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder.

He kept calling her by the abbreviated name. It sounded masculine and she couldn't understand why he'd use it.

"Yes, Sir?" Her situation changed the instant Bragg ordered her to go with Tiernan. When on loan from Bragg, she must demonstrate the very best, most socially acceptable behavior. If Tiernan complained...

"Have you eaten?"

"No, Sir," she said quickly. She knew better.

"You're not hungry?"

Since when did that matter? "Yes, Sir, I am."

"Then sit down and fill your belly. Or is it you can't stand the smell of me?" He raised his arm, sniffed, cocked his head to the side and smiled. "I went through the sanitizer in medical. If I have to though, I'll try again to see if I can get the stench of the prison off me."

He still smelled like soap from the earlier bathing mixed with the herbal sanitizing mist. Whatever was wrong with him? "You smell fine, Sir."

He turned in the chair to face her and gazed. "Please, sweet, don't address me like that. I'll play the game of titles and such with regular Gov and I get your need to do so also. But it's just the two of us now. I'm not a *sir*. Not to you, Jess, so please, sit down."

"Where?" She wouldn't take her meal at his feet. She wouldn't!

He stood and she resisted the urge to step back. In her mind everything changed once they were alone.

He came around and placed a hand on the back of the chair. "Me Ma would skin me if she saw what I just did. It's been a while since I broke bread with a gal. You'll forgive me, Jess?"

She stared, unable to understand what he wanted or why he'd apologize.

His placed a hand on the small of her back and gently urged her forward. "Please." He pushed the chair as she sat. After placing the napkin in her lap, he stepped to the

opposite chair and seated himself. He removed the lid from the plate in front of her before uncovering the one by him.

Her eyes and mouth watered at the perfectly arranged meal that smelled too heavenly. It'd been so long since she'd seen anything so beautiful. Her arms grew heavy as she swallowed, practically tasting the tender looking meat.

"Eat, gal, or I swear I'll eat yours too," he said before taking another bite. He hadn't wasted time getting started and by how quickly he ate, she believed the food tasted as good as it looked.

"Here? Right now?" She needed to be sure. The last time she'd been invited to dine with a man, she'd assumed she could eat while he did. Wrong, wrong, wrong! She'd been dreadfully wrong! She'd never make a mistake of that magnitude again.

"Nay," he said, smiling, "later when it's cold."

She placed her hands in her lap and rested against the chair.

He placed the fork down and looked at her as if she were insane. "What's wrong with you?"

Her forehead throbbed even though she'd been treated in medical. She felt ill. Having the sight and smell of the appetizing meal in front of her and then having it verbally taken away, made her vision blur and hands go numb. She closed her eyes to shut out the unpleasantness.

A moment later, fingers stroked her cheek and she found Tiernan sitting close, having pulled his chair almost beside her. Food touched her lips and she opened, accepting the meat from the end of the fork. "Don't you know how to feed yourself?"

She took the fork, chewed and separated the edges of the meats, greens and mash on her plate. She hated when different foods touched each other. She liked them divided, organized and eaten one item at a time. After she swallowed, she said, "You said to wait."

"You know it was in jest. Aye?" He took the fork from her and stabbed another piece of meat and held it for her.

She took the bite and grabbed the utensil from his hand a second time. "I can feed myself."

He slid his plate over and ate while sitting right beside her. The unusual situation soon didn't matter because the food not only filled a void, it tasted superb.

With only half the meal remaining, he asked, "Since when does a gal take a joke from a man to heart?" He kept eating while looking at his plate. The question probably didn't matter because he didn't make eye contact.

After swallowing, she answered, "Why would a man make statements he doesn't mean?"

"To make a gal laugh so she'll feel more at ease. To play."

"I don't like the games men play."

When he glanced up, she studied his expression. Long, pitch-black eyelashes surrounded his light gray eyes. They were striking, especially with the artificial look of compassion on his face. The expression couldn't be real because it simply didn't go with the rest of him. Big, arrogant warriors didn't understand kindness. They lived lives of indifference, especially concerning women.

"I see now, Jess. I didn't before. I'd only seen your fire, not the pain to go with it. Forgive me."

Her appetite dwindled.

He reached out to touch her but stilled in midair. He slowly placed his hand on the table instead. "Do you know what Bragg wants with me and me men?"

He switched subjects so fast it took her a moment to answer. "No."

"It's fine that you don't want to say anything. He'll tell me in the morn."

How the hell did he know she'd withheld information? She shouldn't feel guilty over a one-word *fib*. She didn't owe him answers. Still, Tiernan gave protection to her crew and went nose-to-nose with Bragg about her placement. Mulling it over a second time didn't help or make the half truth any more palatable.

"Damn it," she said, slamming the fork down. She'd heard the men speaking in medical. "Rumor has it some slimwit General got himself captured by Theazians."

"Now that's a nasty lot of heathens. Worse than Doxyn by far."

"The Governance received intel he's still alive and they want him back."

"Where's he held, this *slimwit* General?"

"Theazian home planet."

Tiernan smiled and whistled. "No wonder Gov laid out such a fine meal and handed you over without much fuss. That's a tall order to take a man from their home base."

"It's rumor."

"Likely truth, I'd say. They think we Braughmen aren't too shiny."

Speaking of not being too smart brought something to mind. "How were you captured by Doxyn?" She really wanted to know and the question tumbled out before she could place much thought into it.

He'd every right to be angry with her audacity. But instead of displaying annoyance, he slouched in the chair, placed his elbow on the table and crossed his ankles. "They captured a Braugh transport and took our gals and cheld. We traded men to get them back."

"I don't understand. Cheld? What did you trade?"

"Cheld – more than one child. You know – babes, wee ones?"

She nodded, finally understanding. "Children."

"They took gals and *children*. Doxyn traded for full-out Braughmen."

"Why would you turn yourselves over?"

He stared while sipping wine. "Those they captured are the life of Braugh, our past, present and future."

Confounded a man would do such a thing when women and children could easily be replaced, she asked, "Why did they want you?"

"To make into slaves. They reckoned when we learned the way of it, they'd sell us off. They knew Braughmen have a strong back. What they didn't know was that we don't obey worth a shat." He smiled before correcting himself. "We don't listen to those not deserving our regard. They soon figured it out and decided we weren't worth feeding. Twice we left their hold and twice they drove us back. They thought to show the fams of Braughmen what they'd do to us so the men they take in future times wouldn't fight so hard."

"They wanted to kill you and show your people so they could gain compliance from your world?"

"Aye. See, I speak just fine. You get me. Good thing we didn't waste too much time learning Gov language."

"Oppression. Domination." Jessica shuddered. Too much of that barbaric behavior saturated the worlds. In many respects the Governance's intolerance of such actions were commendable. Some of its other beliefs...

"You know the words and they mean something to you."

They did. Personally. Funny, she hadn't thought of her situation in that manner before.

He continued sipping wine while gazing at her. "And you know how to break free?"

She shook her head. Obeying seemed to suit her most of the time, although she had an uncanny knack for angering Bragg even when she did comply.

He said, "You look around, see what others have and you take as much for yourself."

"Easily said."

"Not hard to do."

"For a man."

"For a gal if she knows how to do it."

"And how would that be, Tiernan?"

"For you, all you need to do is make the request." He leaned forward and stroked his fingertips gently over her eyebrow, nose and then mouth.

The warmth lingered before his fingers brushed under her chin. He appeared to have forgotten about the subject as his focused gray-eyed gaze studied her. "I'd kiss you if you wanted, Jess. In fact, I'd give a great deal to have you in such a way again."

Dinner was over and payment was at hand. She'd pay. She didn't begrudge him his due, for he'd made them somewhat safe. Thankfully, Tiernan wasn't repulsive.

Rising from the chair, she sat on his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. He needn't place effort into kissing her. She'd take care of it. Using her tongue against his lips, she felt him open. She tasted wine and man. The ensuing dizziness didn't disturb her. She equated it to a General lack of sleep, an abundance of excitement and worrying too much.

Tiernan wasn't like others who immediately started pawing and grabbing. Two large hands rested gently against her waist as long fingers spread over her ribs. She expected a tight squeeze or his fingers to dig in. When it didn't happen, she deepened the kiss.

Feigned passion quickened her breath and he responded. His desire was real because his cock hardened under her ass. Her palms rested against his neck as her fingers tangled in his hair. Long, dark, silken strands of thick hair anchored her. When he loosened a button on her shirt, she swallowed. She much preferred him chained down. With his powerful hands and muscled arms free to hold and squeeze, she imagined she'd be at least bruised when his desire peaked.

How bad would it hurt to have some ribs mended in medical? She leaned back to push another button through a hole.

He brushed her hands away. He obviously didn't want her help. After he undid each fastening, he separated cloth and touched a bit of skin. The manner in which he'd leisurely unbuttoned the shirt forced her apprehension to grow. With all the moaning and squirming he'd done earlier, she'd hoped he'd be aggressive and quick to have intimacies done and over.

He gazed at her breasts. The backs of his fingers smoothed over her flesh. The light touches sent small shivers over her skin. His hands settled on her shoulders and inched the shirt down her arms. He left it bunched at her hips with her wrists trapped behind her back. He covered her breasts with his hands and she waited for too tight a squeeze or pinch. It didn't happen as he very gently kneaded, avoiding her nipples.

"Jess." His hands skimmed her waist, belly and then up to her breasts again as he gazed. "I've not touched a gal who was pierced. I don't know how sensitive you are."

She pulled her hands free and the shirt fluttered to the floor.

His breaths were deep. His steady gaze examined her breasts before eventually settling on her mouth. He asked, "Could you stand it if I tasted you?"

Did the leader of the Braugh warriors just ask if he could touch her in a particular way? *Not likely.* She'd misunderstood.

His lips hovered as warm breath washed over her. He leaned in and she tensed. His lips slowly stroked a path to her upper arm. Long fingers wrapped around her wrist and gently pulled her arm straight. He kissed his way down to the inside crease above her forearm. He hovered and nibbled.

Why would he kiss her there? Fascinating sensations raced up and down from where his lips applied pressure. When he licked, her breasts grew heavy and her nipples ached. *How strange.*

He kissed his way up her arm, across her shoulder and up her neck before finding her mouth. The soft caress of his lips wasn't really a kiss. It lacked passion and intent. She'd never been with such a strange man. Could she be doing something wrong?

"You didn't answer me," he said, kissing her chin before tilting her head back so he could lightly lick her throat. "I'm a careful man, Jess. Would you let me kiss your nipples?"

She wanted to tell him she wouldn't like it, had never liked it, but did her duty instead and uttered what she should. "You can do whatever you want."

Drawn close, she held a breath as he blew on a nipple. His mouth opened and he gently touched the very tip with his tongue. She tensed, expecting pain. Her breathing eventually slowed and she began anticipating the next soft stab around the nipple and balls at either end of the thin bar. It finally came. Pressure accompanied his wet, soft tongue and it didn't hurt in the least even with how sensitive she'd become.

Below the nipple he opened his mouth, swirled his tongue over the sensitive skin before his lips closed, sucking slightly as they did. The kiss felt exotic, warm and very new. He'd been so gentle that her nerves stood on end. Her nipple budded as blood pooled.

"Does it feel good? Am I hurting you, hon?"

"N-no. F-fine." She couldn't imagine the problem. It had to be his voice, all breathy and deep.

"You taste fine on me tongue. As with you, gal, I like using me mouth. Do I do it right, Jess?"

She couldn't possibly answer because he'd shifted to her other breast and gave soft, maddening kisses over every inch. Featherlight caresses were placed as he mouthed, kissed and tongued.

"Must you?" she asked, not minding the manner in which he touched her but disliking how achy it made her.

"Aye, you taste good. I wonder though, could you take more? With your buds so firm from such a soft touch, would you like a bit of real kissing?"

She swallowed hard and braced herself. "Real?"

"Aye. Those placed with more passion, deeper. Or are you too sensitive?"

Lips closed around a nipple and he kissed, not waiting for a reply. She wet her own lips and squirmed. He worked the nipple, the metal and surrounding skin with his lips and tongue. It didn't hurt but her entire body throbbed. Lips trailed down to capture the skin below. He drew flesh into his hot, moist mouth. He tugged as he *kissed*. Oh God, did he kiss!

"I didn't mean to, hon," he said, after pulling away to look at her breast. Fingertips traced where he'd just used his mouth, spreading the lingering moisture. "I marked you and I'd say right to do it."

She couldn't seem to catch her breath. "You what?"

"Marked you. You'll bruise by morn."

"Why?"

"You moaned and I answered too rough."

"I don't moan."

He smiled. "Not ever?"

"No."

"My pardon then. Must've been what I wanted to hear."

What was wrong with him? Why would he desire such a noise to come from her? "Tiernan?" she asked, stroking his face.

"Aye."

His eyes were most uncommon and she wondered what one facet about them held her attention. Perhaps it wasn't merely his eyes. The dark hair scattered about his forehead, resting against his eyelashes and cheeks, made him appear quite barbaric while addressing Bragg and then, while gazing at her, most docile and harmless.

The firm shaft under her ass hadn't lessened. Best she moved along with her chore to have it over. "May I kiss you?"

"Nay. You'll let me kiss *you* now like we both want it."

Her belly quivered and she hoped the meal wasn't bad. She wouldn't put it past Bragg though. He'd done it before.

"Sweet?"

She couldn't seem to focus on the conversation and her thighs trembled. "Yes?"

"Your pants. Can I touch you without them while we kiss?"

When she reached for the closure, his hands moved over hers.

A slight smile formed on his lips. "I want to take them from you. I want the pleasure of sliding them down your legs. You'll let me?"

"S-sure. Whatever. F-fine." *Just get moving and get it done!*

He seemed the type of man to rush the process of obtaining his want. Why was he moving so lazily and touching her without passion? He didn't seem cruel, not in their previous dealings. As her tension mounted, she realized she might very well have been mistaken about him. He certainly afforded a great deal of time to anticipate what would inevitably happen between them.

His fingers sank into the waistband and rubbed against flesh as he unfastened the pants. Anxiety knotted her insides. "I thought you wanted to kiss me."

"I do. Lean forward so I can get at you, sweet."

When she did, he used the tip of his tongue to touch her lips. She tried drawing him into a kiss and he pulled back before gently nibbling her mouth. Small, maddening kisses barely touched her. In an attempt to hurry him along, she pushed her tongue inside his mouth. He stroked it lightly as if he'd all the time in the universe. She tried holding him still by placing her hands on the sides of his face. His jaw moved beneath

her fingers as he came more in contact. She'd never felt what happened to a man's jaw while kissing. Because of his leisurely pace, for the first time in her life, she noticed a great number of things about this curious and odd man.

His tongue curled slightly inside her mouth and as she closed on him, he slid away. The second time it happened, a sound came from her throat. "Mmm."

He repeatedly touched her mouth and stroked wetness over her bottom lip. The smooth underside of his tongue lent a completely different sensation than the textured top of it. She tasted where he stroked and took his moisture into her mouth. The scent and taste of wine sank into her. She opened to him again and this time he wet her upper lip. The game continued until all she focused on was when and where he'd lick next.

A large, warm hand spread out against her spine to bring her closer. She quickly placed the subtle restraint from her mind as he lingered inside her mouth to stroke. The gentle glide of his tongue, followed by the aching retreat, felt different, much better. She'd never craved a kiss but wished to experience another with him. When she did, he brought her closer with pressure against her back until her breasts flattened against his chest. As she pressed tightly against him, he filled her.

"Mmm," slipped from her throat.

In the next moment, he circled her with his arms but lessened his hold.

She liked where she'd been, held securely against him while he pushed into her mouth. "Oh again."

"That's it, hon. Nice and tight this time," he whispered against her lips.

Each time he entered, she held him more firmly as he drew her close. A rhythm formed and she quickly caught on. She was pulled against him until her breasts flattened. His tongue filled her mouth, before he'd gently ease away. Then it would happen again, the squeezing, heat, moisture and penetration before he'd release his hold.

She couldn't help flexing her fingers into his shoulders. She desired him near. The longer he inundated her with the confusing kisses, the more she rose to the closeness, anticipating all the sensations happening at once.

He stood and carried her to the bed, keeping his mouth gently pressed to hers. Dizziness made her hold tight to his impossibly wide shoulders when he laid her down. Had he fumbled about or been in too big a hurry, she might've noticed him stripping the rest of her clothing away. As it happened, he kept her occupied with kisses in between taking her boots and pants. Once she was naked, he kissed a trail down her breasts, belly and abdomen before his huge hands ran from her knees down the insides of her thighs. He knelt on the floor and continued rubbing, making her knees inch further and further apart.

"Easy, Jess," he crooned, his breath covering her upper thighs. "I won't hurt you. You know that. Open your legs a bit, hon and let me kiss where we both want."

An uncertain sigh came from her as she separated her knees. The dance of his fingers stroking over her naked flesh caused her skin to roughen. "Tiernan!"

"Nay, don't stop me, sweet." His fingertips traced her before something incredibly soft and wet stroked over her pussy lips. "You're so wet and smell so damn good, Jess."

One thousand monsters, sitting in the sky; shoot one down and a Blue baby dies. She focused on the childhood rhyme hoping to avert feeling exactly where he licked. Shoot two monsters sitting in the sky, and two babies die, with freak golden eyes.

He slowly spread her lips apart and heated breath touched her most intimate spot.

"Oh," he said on a groan, "no wonder you're so wet, you sweet, sweet gal. You're decorated here too."

She hated to be touched by the piercing. Hated it!

Large, warm palms stopped her thighs from coming together. "Don't hide from me. I'll be careful until I know how much you can take."

"No, Tiernan!"

He stilled.

She closed her eyes and the thudding in her chest grew loud in her ears. She'd been touched there before and never liked it. Also, something wasn't right. She was swollen and hurt as if he'd already taken her and yet, he'd not even really touched her. Heat and cold washed over her skin. She couldn't fathom the problem as her overheated body suddenly grew chilled.

He turned her on the bed and came to lie beside her. "Hush now. Settle yourself."

She'd been enfolded into strong arms as he hugged and rubbed her back. She shook as strange, small sounds escaped her throat. The trembling grew as she reviewed her recent actions. She'd refused him. He didn't like Bragg, probably wouldn't tell him, but that left repercussions to come from Tiernan for the blatant rejection. God, she needed to make amends!

She struggled until he lessened his hold. She immediately reached for the closure on his pants. If she hurried, maybe nothing would come of what she'd just done.

"What the hell!" he said, grabbing her wrists.

"I didn't refuse!"

Holding her wrists, he rolled over top of her and straddled her hips. She'd been captured in a slight way because he didn't settle his weight to hold her down. He stared at her through clumps of long, black bangs.

"You told me in every way possible you didn't want more." The words condemned her by implication alone, not by his tone or an angry expression.

She'd fix it. "I'm willing. You can touch me now. I won't pull away again, I promise."

"Yeah, you'd let me, I'm sure. Why? What changed from one minute to the next?"

She kept swallowing, trying to get rid of the lump in her throat. It wouldn't go away.

He yelled, "Why!"

Her eyes shut. He could hurt her. With the size and strength in him, it'd hurt a lot. She'd never done anything so stupid. "I wasn't prepared—for the way you touched me. I didn't know what to expect." The small, placating words suddenly seemed too small, too frightened. She didn't owe him *that* much. He could use her body but she refused to let her mind roll over submissively to avoid his anger.

Bringing her wrists up, struggling to dislodge his grip, she screamed, "So either fuck me and get it over with or get the hell away from me!"

Chapter Four

Shane held Jess down while she spat curses and fought. He admired her strength but he'd enough of her anger. He'd need to be careful how he broached her strange behavior. He didn't want more of her fury. Actually, he wanted to take it away. Whatever he did, he'd make right. "Slow down you little demon!"

Those weren't the right words.

She tried beating on him and did nothing but hurt herself in the process. He needed to hold her so tightly, her fair skin reddened under the restraint.

"Jess, I'm sorry for whatever I did." He'd given the apology to take the heat from her. It did, but he didn't like the wetness gathering in her eyes. "Settle down now. That's it, nice and slow."

Her face turned toward the wall but she couldn't hide.

"Better?" he asked.

She nodded as her arms fell slack.

Hesitantly, he stretched out beside her and cautiously pulled her against his chest. She came but not willingly. She *tolerated* the embrace. His stomach sank, knowing what probably caused her to attack. He said what next came to mind. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't." She sounded tired. Of course she was worn out. She'd had one crazy day.

"I sure as hell did something wrong." He didn't hide the smile when she looked up. Didn't anyone ever play with her?

"It was my fault. Like I said, I didn't know what to expect. I—overreacted."

"You're pierced. You didn't know what I wanted to do?"

"No." She sighed. "Why the hell would you touch me like that?"

"Like what, hon? Between your legs?"

"Any of it." She grew tense in his arms. "The kissing, the touching—any of it!"

"You're not a virgin." He thought out loud, trying to figure out what she was trying to tell him.

"Obviously not."

"But you didn't understand how I touched you?"

"No, not like *that*."

His head started aching. He knew how to touch a gal. What the hell was wrong with her? "I wanted to taste you. You've never had a man go down on you before?"

"No."

"And you didn't like the thought of it?"

"Why would you want to? And why did you waste all that time kissing me?"

"Cause you taste sweet and I like the way you wiggled against me. Your breath catches in your throat when you feel something you like. I hardly touched you and your nipples rose to me mouth."

"I don't understand why it happened."

He knew she told the truth. She really didn't understand, which made him stare. No answers suddenly appeared in her eyes. "You're not a virgin and you're pierced, but you didn't know why your nipples got hard from some kissing?"

"No. It didn't hurt but they swelled."

He ventured a guess. "Pain makes them hard?"

"Yes. When they've been pinched or sucked, it's happened. But you did neither. It felt strange and my whole body ached. It was the damndest thing."

The headache grew worse. He chose words carefully so there'd be no doubt. "Do you like rough play, Jess?"

"Pardon? Do you mean fighting?"

"Nay, I'm speaking about sex. Do you like to be touched rougher – you know, with more force." It'd explain a few things if she did.

"No."

He'd get to the bottom of her behavior and the conversation. He never minded placing effort into figuring something out he didn't readily know. They seemed to speak around and around though. He'd try being more direct and start with the basics. The trouble between them had nothing to do with a few mispronounced words. "When you've been with a man, he touched you, aye?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"For sex."

"Explain it to me."

Her eyebrow came up. "My breasts, my ass, before fucking me. Or before..." Embarrassment colored her cheeks. "Or I'd use my mouth."

"Nay, describe the way you were held and stroked and kissed. You know, before the fucking."

"I just did. They'd grab and squeeze and take and sometimes bite. Then it'd be done."

Heat washed over his skin. The room didn't suddenly grow too warm. Anger made him hot when he figured out what she tried to tell him. Before he assumed anything, he needed to be sure. "You got no pleasure from it?"

"No! I'm adorned!"

She'd told him something loud and clear with those words. He didn't know exactly what though. "To make yourself more sensitive."

"No! Damn, Tiernan, how thick are you? You've been off Braugh, traveled beyond your home. You know what the adornment means."

"I do. It's placed to increase a gal's pleasure."

She blinked and gazed. He'd somehow managed to stun her to silence. She wetted her lips before she said, "To get rid of it."

She'd been pierced to control desire? Nay, he didn't understand—or maybe he did! He spoke Gov language enough to gather meanings, especially when her words were small. "Why would you do it? Ruin yourself?"

"I didn't. You have *throwbacks* on Braugh?"

"I don't know your meaning. *Throwback* means to discard—not want, right? Bragg used the word and I didn't like his reference to you. It's an insult."

"It's what I am," she said quietly.

"Then you'll tell me what it is because I don't have it right in me head."

"Hair of no color, golden eyes...stricken. Not normal, not wanted, lowly, despised, vile, detested, ignorant, not worth—"

"Stop!"

The words would've kept coming from her by the way she rattled them off. Obviously, she'd been told those things more than once.

"Undesirable," she added, a bone-deep sadness settling over her expression.

He stroked her cheek. "You're desired, Jess. Any man can see Bragg wants you for himself. I want you."

"In one way."

"In many a way."

"To serve and obey. A *woman of comfort*."

His sweet Jess? Is that where her look of coldness came from? Hard used by enough men could do that to a gal, but she had fire in her too. "If you're really such a gal, is that why you're pierced? To make your lot more bearable?"

"They did it to remind me my purpose is to serve."

"Me head is pounding trying to follow your words and meanings. I'm not tracking you. Please, start slow and explain."

She licked her lips and closed her eyes. "There aren't many of us born with the affliction. My home planet, Blue, came to fall under Governance patrol years ago, but we still battled with each other, civil wars around every corner. The Governance studied us and sent a special team to straighten out the mess we were in. Once the study had been completed, they sent Commander Gorman to deal with our domestic problems. He gathered all the *throwbacks* and had them destroyed. Without their

presence, the planet became still and quiet. No tech, no production, no frantic and fast-paced society."

"No passion," he added, letting her know how he felt about how her home was made to settle down. "It died?"

"There was no more war. It became peaceful. After that time, when a woman bore a *throwback*, if it was born male, it was killed. If it was born female, Gorman decided to have it trained."

The reference to babes as *it*, didn't sit well in his gut. "Once they came of age, all gals were trained to be *gals of comfort*?"

"No. To be soldiers."

"Jess?" He didn't need to tell her to explain. He realized she'd stopped talking to think.

"More than thirty of us wound up in Gorman's training program. Despite our parents trying to hide us, Governance found us. Whenever a *throwback* female child was detected, we were collected. Most of us were already adorned when Bragg inherited our unit from Gorman. When Bragg had sole ownership of us, he made sure the piercings kept us focused as we learned military protocol. Those who didn't catch on died."

"I'm following now. How did the piercings help train you?"

"I was eighteen when I was adorned. I had stirrings and the piercings made them worse."

"How?"

"Vibrating, twitching. At first it felt good, heightening something already set in motion but if I went too far, felt too much..." She swallowed, squeezed her eyes tighter and swallowed again. "Pleasure isn't for a *throwback*. I learned. After a while...it didn't take long to become sick at the first sign of desire. We all eventually focused on proper things with nothing to distract us."

She'd been pierced and tortured so she'd never feel desire!

It took a moment to get control of his emotions. When he knew he could voice the next question without his voice shaking, he asked, "What happened if you let go and took the pleasure?"

"Pain—intense. It wasn't too long at all before I felt nothing, the way it should be."

Aye, she remembered the pain. By the look on her face, she took the lessons to heart. And yet despite the training, she'd grown wet from his touch. There was something about him she liked and whether she wanted to admit it or not, she trusted him on some level.

"I can't understand why Bragg made us..." She fell silent for a long moment, looking sad and hurt. "When our unit became cohesive and we grew in our abilities, Bragg began the other training."

"Other?"

"That's when we learned how to please a man."

Shane wiped his forehead, taking sweat from his brow. Listening to her story became a struggle.

"It doesn't happen often, but when we're *given*, we know what's expected. Bragg uses us to get what he wants from the men we're lent to."

The fucking bastard! Shane thought about how many piercings a dumbass commander could endure before he would bleed to death. He forced down the anger and gave Jess his attention. At the moment, she needed and deserved it. Bragg would be thought about and dealt with later, without Jess there to see what Shane would do.

"When I touched the piercings, did they hurt you?" He didn't really want an answer. He didn't know what he'd do to make it right if he truly caused her pain.

"No. The adornment hasn't been active in years."

Aye, but the memory of pain remained strong enough to make her shy away from taking the pleasure she deserved. "We'll have it taken from you. Remove that which reminds you of the torture." *So you can be a normal gal and respond to me as you want.*

"They're not simple piercings. They go deep. They can't be removed. Ever."

And he thought Doxyn and Theazians to be bastards!

He cuddled her to give reassurance. She relaxed and accepted the embrace but didn't lean against him. She didn't snuggle closer because she'd no idea what he offered. She knew torture, sex and fighting. He ventured nay man ever protected her. He sensed a wealth of things lay sleeping inside the gal. He wanted to waken them but first needed to know more of her history.

"Where are the others? The gals that trained with you?" He'd seek vengeance on Bragg for all of them. Every last one. "Your wee crew accounts for some. Are the others on Blue?"

"No more have been taken from Blue. Either the Governance has no use for new recruits, or Blue's found a better way to hide those like me. My crew's what's left of those who'd trained with me."

He knew by her look what fate took them. She'd told him with her eyes the others were dead.

Something came to mind and he thought she should know. "You said your ship came from Blue. To give a ship, they can't think you're a *throwback*."

"Maybe not. I don't know. I haven't been on Blue for many years. Bragg wouldn't let us take a Governance vessel to retrieve you. Blue offered the ship so we could earn our release."

"Your people care." He relaxed a little, knowing in his gut that a whole planet of beings worried about the special gal and her crew. They weren't alone without a soul to care what happened to them.

"Either that, or they offered the ship to keep Bragg off the planet and out of their business."

"They care for you, hon, they're your fam."

The hopeful look on her face made his stomach turn over. A huge knot seemed to form in his intestines. She truly couldn't trust that her kinfolk loved and missed her, Angela and Zoe and wanted them back. From the condition of the vessel, Blue must be in a bad way. It's probably why they didn't fight to protect his Jess and her crew. They clearly hadn't the means.

"Do you know how special you are, Jess?"

"Sure."

The one word said she didn't believe him. Why would she after all she'd been through? Words wouldn't take the bone-deep damage from her. She'd spent many years learning lessons on her worthlessness. He bet she'd be a splendid gal with a bit of support. Hell, she already was. He had the oddest feeling of attachment to her and it had naught to do with sex, torture or other shallow happenings. Lying with her and holding her felt more fitting than most things in his life.

He silently stamped down the uncommon feelings. He didn't know Jess Storm, not really. She couldn't be his other half, not in so short a time. He pitied her pain. In all his life and adventures on other planets, he'd never heard of beings treating the fairer sex so badly. Even *gals of comfort* deserved respect and honor for their chosen profession. It'd be best for him to rationalize the deep emotions for what they were and not get carried away.

"You're *broughen*," he whispered, tracing her jaw, memorizing her delicate facial features.

A look came over her that said she didn't take his meaning. He searched his brain for the Gov word so she'd understand. He suddenly remembered. "*Broughen*—beaut. Most precious."

"Why?"

"Why, what?"

"Why do you say things like that? I know what I am."

"You've not a clue, sweet." His gaze swept over her. She'd been maimed, used hard and had every right to be hateful. She wasn't that callous or beaten down. A thought occurred. "Your piercings don't bring you pain anymore?"

"No."

"You ever been with a man who made you feel good?"

"No." Her gaze settled on his chest. "The way you touched me didn't hurt. I felt odd. When you stopped, I..."

"Was glad?" He smiled, suspecting what she tried to say. God, he hoped he was wrong.

"At first, yes."

Shat. He didn't want to hear a confirmation.

"And then..."

"Go on," he coaxed.

Those eyes of hers could be most telling. The light reflecting in them made the golden color appear much lighter.

"I might be sick or something," she said.

His eyebrows rose. He'd been caught off guard again.

She hurried to explain. "I had difficulty breathing and got all shaky when you touched my breasts and everything else. I wanted to be pressed against you hard, like when you kissed me."

"You did?" he asked, trying to sound surprised because he finally knew for sure what she described. She sounded so serious and unknowing of what stirred her that he joked so maybe she'd see desiring him wasn't some horrible, grim thing to avoid. "I felt it too. What do you suppose caused it?"

"The food? Do you think it was bad?"

"Nay." He kept the smile from surfacing. Poor, wee, Jess. She'd need to lighten up and start accepting things for what they were. "You liked the touching I did."

She didn't deny it. She was smart and figuring it out. "I've never..."

"Let a man touch you like that?"

"No, none have. But what I wanted to say that's more important is—I've never spoken to a man like this."

Her wee hand on his cheek made a rush of emotion surge through him. He ached for her losses. "It honors me you shared your thoughts." It touched a spot deep inside. She'd a right not to trust any man. "Are you tired?"

"No." She didn't look sleepy as her fingertips ran over his jaw and ear.

"Would you let me touch you again?" he asked.

"You want to? Even after what happened?"

"Aye, but we'll do it different this time."

"With your clothes off?" She sounded eager at the prospect.

He laughed and brushed fine, silky strands of hair away from her face. "Aye, if you want that."

She nodded and he stood to shed his clothes. When he took his spot next to her, he said, "We need an accord prior to the touching though."

About to lay a hand on his chest, she stilled in midair.

He smiled because she took him exactly at his word. "You touch me any way you want. I'll do the same to you. If you don't like something I do, tell me and I'll stop."

"You don't have to touch me. I never meant to say you should. It's not necessary because I can't really feel the things a normal woman would."

"You've said as much."

She'd felt more than a little something when he'd touched her before. She just didn't put it all together in her head. He'd show her bad food hadn't caused her body to get hot and he bet this time, she'd figure it out. She wasn't immune to him.

"Would you mind?" He waited and studied her.

"I don't think so."

"You tell me if you do. I'm not deaf, I'll hear you." And he'd listen closely and watch for anything not right with her.

She shivered. He reckoned anxiety caused it. He hoped it was a good kind of nervousness. "Your mouth, hon, let's start there."

"Oh," she said on a sigh, "I forgot about that. Does it feel good to you?"

"Kissing you?"

"Yes."

"Let's find out." Without clothes, he figured it'd be fucking amazing.

After pulling her close and placing a palm against her lower back to bring her tight, he nibbled her lips. She opened to him after only a few seconds, and lying as they were, he couldn't help but taste inside. When she closed on his tongue, he groaned. He remained stirred over the previous petting he'd done. It took nary time to come right back to where he'd been.

She squeezed his side and he moaned long and low into her mouth. It mingled with the moan from her. He could easily tell she liked them being naked and firm alongside one another. When she thrust her tongue against his, he drew it in to capture and tease. She grew restless and strained to get closer. Whether she knew it or not, she'd gone beyond the point of needing kisses, *at least on her mouth*.

He stilled her by placing his palms against her cheeks. When she quieted, he couldn't stop from licking her lips, using his tongue to get her mouth open. He loved her taste. She looked right *brought* with opened red lips and her breath coming fast. He stopped long enough to say, "I'll kiss you different now and you'll like it, or I'll stop. All right?"

"No." Her legs came together. She knew where he wanted to go.

He'd bet on some level, she wanted it. The trick would be getting her mind to accept what her body already knew.

She frowned. "Something's wrong. I'm wet and..."

"Aye, I made you that way and I get the spoils of the victory. It should be sweet and I aim to find out. You'll open your legs for me."

"No, please."

"Do it, hon, right now. I'll stop if you don't like it. Remember?"

When her legs parted, her scent swept up and he took it in. She smelled of a warm gal and lust. She claimed she hadn't felt desire with a man before and he became determined to take every bit from her.

"Tiernan?"

Kissing her hard, he practiced patience until her knees drifted further apart. "That's it, sweet," he said between kisses. "I'm going to turn and you'll stay as you are. Keep your legs wide and I'll do the same. Vulnerable. Both of us."

"All right."

"You don't have to touch me. You don't have to do a thing."

"Sure," Jessica replied, having no inkling what would happen.

He sat up, turned and lay back down, placing his cock within easy reach of her hands and mouth. *You don't have to touch me.* Why would he place himself in such a position? Then she remembered—vulnerable. She swallowed, recalling she would be too.

As he kissed and licked her thigh, the skin grew strange bumps as if she'd taken a chill. She wasn't cold in the least. The muscles down the entire length of her leg trembled. The glide of his tongue didn't hurt but made all sorts of strange sensations race up and down. She concentrated very hard on what he did, waiting for pain. He stroked her pussy lips and her legs spread more. Tingling and heat raced through her crease as his tongue took long, languid strokes. She'd had men between her legs, but never like this!

He kept moving her as he kissed and licked. She stopped paying attention to his nonverbal requests to move this way or that and focused on when the next sensation would thrill her pussy. He brought her leg up and gently pulled until the rest of her body followed. She eventually laid over him on her belly. Warm hands on the insides of her thighs eased her open until she lay spread wide with nothing hidden. When it dawned on her what he could see, a feeling of unease descended. He ripped it away when something pliant and slippery slid directly into her heat.

"Oh God! Tiernan! What the hell!"

His tongue slid out and slithered over her exposed genitalia. It eventually settled on the thin bar and twin balls piercing her clitoris hood. He licked her softly. The feelings weren't painful in the least. Wonderful, tiny motions from him created little shockwaves that raced through surrounding tissue to eventually settle deep in her pussy. The entire experience became most disconcerting because for once, she hadn't the slightest urge to protect her tender flesh. In fact, her legs relaxed and she slid an inch toward his mouth.

He made agreeable, eager sounds as he tasted and licked. Her belly started aching and turning over. Her nipples grew swollen and hard. Pressing her breasts against his muscled abdomen set something else in motion and she felt a trickle of moisture leak from her passage. He made her feel like some enticingly edible, lickable treat.

His rigid, needful cock lay right in front of her. The scent of a clean, warm man swirled into her nose. Most men smelled a bit stale to her. Tiernan's aroma intrigued her. Once again, she found herself not repelled in the least. Strangely, she desired his

taste and kissed the head of his cock. What he did between her legs in return made her achy and anxious and without preamble, she grasped his hard shaft and swallowed as much as she could into her mouth. The ensuing bellow coming from him vibrated through her pussy. He stopped toying with her clit and slid his tongue into her core.

Instinctively, she began rocking, loving what she felt. As she swayed, his hands grasped her ass to help her move. Her thoughts wouldn't come together. She couldn't remember what she'd been taught to do when pleasuring a man. The *pleasure* suddenly became hers and she'd no experience in dealing with the new sensations coursing her insides. She compared it to the availability of food after a few days without. The need to have her insides full and sated overrode the need to actually taste what'd been made available.

Desiring to hold him deep wherever she could, she opened and took him further. It satisfied some great necessity to have a portion of him immersed in her body. She swallowed, contracted around the head of his cock and was rewarded with an involuntary spasm followed by pre-cum.

Yes, Tiernan, let me make it good for you too.

She'd brutalized him previously by teasing and holding him off. She wouldn't do so now. She used her tongue, throat and mouth to strip away any restraint he might've had. She needed to taste his hot seed in her mouth. She had to feel his cock strain and shudder.

"Aye!" he bellowed. "Swallow, Jess!"

It happened! His body shook, convulsed as his arms wrapped around her lower back. A hoarse voice kept repeating, "*Broughen, gal. Sweet broughen, gal.*"

The praise sank deep, spinning her insides upside down. Warm from exertion, her sweating palms held his hips so she wouldn't lose a single drop. Making sure he received the utmost pleasure until the very last second, his satisfaction suddenly mattered more than almost anything else.

Heated breath rushing against her wetness caused her thighs and ass to tingle. Her body became an exposed nerve. He rolled and she turned with him until she rested on her side. Every muscle in her body ached. Tiernan straightened and hovered over her as he eased her onto her back. The stroke of his hand on her belly no longer felt good. Her skin became sensitive and the lightest caress made her flinch. He'd been given release and she'd somehow been sated in the process. He needn't continue to touch her.

"Easy now, hon. Slow your breath."

"Please, don't. It hurts."

"Aye, I'm sure it does. Spread your legs for me."

Her legs drew up, bent and her knees stayed together at the last moment. If the rest of her was that sensitive, she could only imagine what touching *there* would feel like.

His smile somehow laid her fears to rest. "Do it now. Trust me a bit."

A sob came out before her shaking legs parted.

Long, thick fingers separated her wet lips and held her open. "I won't hurt you."

A fingertip touched the piercing and she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. Light, circular motions rubbed the jewelry and her clit. He applied pressure and she whined. Round and round he circled and massaged over the small area until she knew she'd go mad. She ached in the strangest manner.

His finger slid down and when she felt it at the entrance of her passage, her feet sank into the mattress as her knees spread wide. When he slipped inside, her hips jerked off the bed and she yelled, "God, Tiernan, what have you done to me!"

The finger didn't go far but turned up toward her pubic bone. It slid around until he fingered a particularly sensitive spot inside. She sucked in a breath, held it until it rushed out in a massive exhale. He kept going over and over the same spot. Aching and suddenly anxious, she shifted her hips, reaching for – something.

God, she wanted and needed nameless things just beyond her grasp. Her eyes grew wide as she stilled. Surely her heart quit beating with the intense and unexpected surge of broiling heat shooting through her. A faint tingling started between her legs and spread, waking nerves through her hips, ass and belly.

"Oh God," she sobbed. Faint, rhythmic spasms formed deep in her pussy. The weak sensations pulsed like a second heartbeat. Her insides twisted and knotted unbearably, keeping the ripples from growing. Her body fought the urges down. She couldn't take any more!

"Come for me, Jess," Tiernan's low voice rumbled.

She felt on the verge of death if something didn't happen soon. A jolt swept through her and she tried going with it, letting it get deep. It burned and fizzled out, leaving hurt and emptiness expanding in her stomach and chest.

"Please, no more!" Years of repressing sexual urges couldn't be overcome. "I can't. I'm a *throwback*!"

"You're almost there, sweet. Let me help." He came over her and crushed her with his weight as he positioned his cock between the slickened lips of her pussy. "Hug me with your thighs. Aye, like that."

Heat washed through her as he pushed a bit inside.

"Tiernan! Oh!"

"We'll take care of it." He sounded quite sure of himself before he kissed her tenderly.

She needed brutality!

His lips hovered and he said, "Loosen up for me. Let me in."

The pressure of him stretching her pussy felt incredible. It didn't hurt! "Hurry, please."

"Slow down, Jess."

"Harder. Take me. Hurry!" She couldn't wait.

"Settle down, hon."

He tried kissing her and she yelled, "Fuck me, Shane!"

He stole her breath as he slid inside with a single smooth thrust. She couldn't really comprehend what she felt after being completely filled.

She envisioned herself on a cliff, suspended with a foot extended over an abyss. The sensation of a warm wind rushing up from below beckoned her over, teasing her with false feelings of security. *If you take the step, you'll fly.* She wanted to fly badly, experience the freedom and freefall, but she couldn't step into the unknown. She'd fall!

"That's it," he said, pulling back and pushing in deep again.

"I can't." Her pelvis jerked beneath him as a burning ripple washed through her pussy, tormenting her.

"Relax and let it happen."

"Oh!"

A smooth withdrawal followed by a fast penetration definitely had something happening! His thrusts grew more serious and with every motion, her sheath grew tighter. "Aye, that's it. Stay with it."

Each time he pushed deep, he brushed against her piercing and clit. An aching pressure built and expanded.

"Tiernan!"

His motions became steadily more aggressive. "Come for me."

"Oh God!"

"Come for me!" He pushed his cock to the hilt and stayed tight against her pussy. He stopped thrusting and began a maddening kind of pushing and release. It kept incredible pressure on her clit and deep inside her pussy.

The full, close mounting not only agreed with her, it set her on fire. A wild contraction squeezed her insides and tightened her whole body. She whimpered loudly when it stopped.

"Damn, I need to come," he said.

"Yes," she replied, wanting to feel it.

Excitement and tingling washed through her. Her fingertips pushed into biceps as her legs hugged his hips. "Yes!" she cried. *Finally!* "Harder!"

Her vision darkened as a profound ring of unimaginable pleasure saturated her clit and pussy. On the peak, everything came to a screeching halt. Robbed of sensation, she'd only managed a taste. It left her shaken and brutalized.

"Jess," Tiernan said softly, holding her face between his hands.

A single tear slid from the corner of her eye. She'd nothing to cry about. He wouldn't let her turn away so she closed her lids to avoid him. Pleasure wasn't for a *throwback*.

He kissed her very gently and whispered against her lips, "You'll come past it."

The wonderful sexual feelings dulled to nothing and even the pain from having them stop quickly faded. The hollowness inside left her very tired.

"I'm sorry," she offered, barely able to get the words out.

"For what?" he asked before kissing her temple, stealing the trail of the tear with his tongue.

For not being a woman.

She couldn't answer him outright. To do so would make what she knew blatantly obvious to him. In some way, even though she'd explained it, he didn't believe she'd been damaged beyond repair.

The closeness they shared seemed more than enough for her. She knew how to keep him close a few moments longer. Placing her hands at the back of his neck, she drew herself up and kissed him. He returned the caress passionately as he pushed past her lips.

Please want me!

"Mmm," he hummed as he pressed into her pussy. With his lips hovering above hers, he asked, "You still need me?"

"Yes," she whispered, searching his face. "Do you mind?"

He chuckled as he peered at her from beneath long strands of black hair. "Why would I mind?"

"I can't respond the way you seem to want."

"Aye, you did fine. After what's been done, you gave more than I could hope."

"But you wanted —"

"I wanted to give you the same pleasure you gave me."

"You have." She studied the sad smile that formed on his lips. "I like the kissing."

His smile brightened, becoming more genuine. "You do? I find I like it too. What else?"

"I can't ever remember anyone touching me like you did."

"Nay? Is that good or bad?"

"Good, I'd say. You're very careful of sensitive parts of me."

"Aye, because you're so tiny I'd likely break you if I didn't pay attention."

The muscles in her pussy suddenly constricted and he immediately responded by pushing into her firmly.

"Oh yes, and I like you in me deep."

He rested against her. She grew very fond of his weight and the feel of his damp skin. In all, absolutely nothing about him repulsed her. In fact, she found all of him most amazing.

"Jess!" The sound of her name relayed his urgency and need. He still hungered for release. He needed to come.

She yearned for the closeness of his body pressing her down to form a barrier between her and the outside world for a time. She knew a way they could both win. "Shane?"

"Aye?" He braced himself on forearms as he strained into her.

Stroking her fingers through his hair, pushing it from his face, she said, "Take me. Come in me."

His forehead rested against hers as he gently fucked her. She ran her hands over his shoulders and arms. He was remarkably muscled and most things about him should make her wary. She found herself attracted to him instead. When his breathing and penetration changed, she knew he'd soon come. Encouraging him by murmuring nonsensical sounds, she held his biceps and offered her mouth, which he plundered.

She concentrated on heightening his experience. When a sound of utter abandon rumbled through his chest, she wrapped her legs tighter around his hips. Without warning, a microburst of searing pleasure throbbed from her core and raced outward. The trembling left in its wake stunned her. Everything between her legs and deep inside felt warm and *open*.

He groaned as he came. She felt the pulsing of his cock as he gave his seed. She clung to keep him near. The very pleasant sensation shocking her pussy needed to continue.

At some point, she realized the fluttery, nice, drifting feelings had ceased. It took a while to fully discern their departure. Tiernan remained inside her. His mere presence felt almost as wonderful as the lovely vibrations.

She wondered if she'd just experienced her first orgasm. A strange lassitude swept over her and at some point, she sensed Tiernan looking at her while gently pushing hair from her face. She couldn't open her eyes. She'd never been so tired.

Surrounded by warmth and the scent of a man, she tried falling completely unconscious to rest. Morn always arrived sooner than she wanted.

Strong, possessive feelings battered her and she turned away from their source. At times, she'd sensed similar emotions from Bragg but didn't concentrate on them or allow them inside. She'd no defense from what Tiernan projected. She hated feeling and sometimes seeing what those around her experienced. More often than not, she could shield herself from the intrusions. She'd grown too tired that eve to keep mental barriers in place and felt a great deal.

"No," she groused, fighting to keep the unwelcomed emotions from seeping into her drowsy mind.

"Easy, Jess. Rest now."

A big, Braugh body settled at her back. His arms pulled her close. She'd never fall asleep in the exceedingly soft bed with him breathing into her hair! She tried to get up to find her own room with her own hard little bed. He wouldn't let her go. She didn't sleep naked and Bragg always kept her quarters cold.

God, Tiernan pulled a blanket over them! She'd suffocate! Worse yet, if Bragg sent the combat android to see how she'd fare being woken to fight, she'd get pulverized for sure.

"Hush, wee Jess." The vibration against her back from him speaking reassured her in some manner.

A sweet, green smell flooded her senses. She grew still and for the first time ever, concentrated on what another being thought about. She saw what he did. Tall rich grasses, as far as the eye could see, warmed in a noontday light. A slight breeze rustled the tasseled tops so particles floated through the air. A massive black bird spread its wings against the bright blue sky to hover and float.

Braugh.

With such a lush and open environment, no wonder Braughmen grew so big.

She drew up mental barriers to close him out. She focused instead on the cold cabin she'd eventually find herself in. She needed to convince Bragg she and her crew should be released to go home.

After experiencing Shane's thoughts she was glad he had such a wondrous place to fill his memory and musings. She, however, didn't want to see any more of it. She'd never belong or be welcomed on a planet like Braugh. She didn't particularly want to know everything her future would lack. With a bit of luck and some perseverance, she, Zoe and Angela would find their opportunities on Blue. They all wanted to go home.

Chapter Five

Shane and Finn went to meet Bragg at his request. They'd left the gals in the care of Reilly and brethren. Shane would sit with Bragg, listen, and then kill him for what he did to Jess and her crew. It wouldn't be pleasant for Bragg. Shane would see to it.

Within the chamber, seated at a long table, Bragg extended his arm so Shane and Finn would sit. They did and Shane looked him over, deciding where he'd start taking him apart.

"You needn't have brought a second, Mister Tiernan. Your safety's assured aboard *Efface*."

Shane and Finn laughed. *As if Shane had need of Finn to be safe!* "You want to strike a bargain with Tiernan. Finn's me brother so you get two, not just one."

"I'm surprised, Sir, that your tribe allowed not only their leader but a blood relative to be traded to get your women and children back."

"Why?"

"I understand that Braugh warriors spend a great deal of time training in a military fashion. Tactically, it would've been prudent to leave your brother behind to lead in the event you didn't return."

"Any and all Braugh can lead. They chose me for now. I die—they choose again." On the surface Bragg looked like a decent man. Shane knew different. He wondered what twisted him to be so evil inside. "You called me here to bargain. Don't keep me waiting."

"As you wish, Mr. Tiernan. A very important General's being held on Theazia. The bastards besieged his vessel with more than thirty of their war ships."

The Gov ship didn't have a chance with those odds.

Bragg said, "They took the entire crew. I need the General back."

Jess had been right in her rumor. "And with all your vessels and tech, you'll not fetch him?"

"We thought General Ryker and his crew to be deceased, Sir. Intel recently revealed information to the contrary."

"How long's he been held?"

"Two months and a few days."

"Your intel isn't right. No man can live twenty days with them heathens let alone the time you say."

"It's confirmed, Sir."

"Then fetch him, Commander. You think Braughmen can do more than Gov?"

"You're quite notorious for your cleverness and unusual skills. Don't cheapen your value in this mission."

Something stunk and Shane began seeing the real man beneath the neat uniform and shiny medals.

"The shat dripping from your mouth offends me. Get to your point and we'll think on giving aid." Shane hoped speaking plainly might loosen Bragg's tongue. He wanted to get back to Jess after he killed the commander.

"Perhaps speaking bluntly might be prudent in this instance, Mister Tiernan. I'll spell it out. There's a reward for General Ryker's safe return but not at the loss of more Governance personnel."

"I don't follow. You want your man back but not at a risk to your military? What kind of shat are you handing out? Ryker's not really of import to you."

"He is but it's feared there isn't much left of him or the crew. The president won't risk the loss of more men to save ghosts, Sir."

"So you want me and my brethren to see if your intel's right. What then?"

"When you breach the laboratory where Ryker and the others are held, if their condition is such they can be made well, we'll back up a rescue and get all of you safely off planet."

"And if they're too far gone to take from the Theazians?"

"You and your men make it back to the ship we provide and we'll welcome you as heroes. You'll be decorated and Governance patrol will befall your planet." Bragg smiled slightly. "I see by your expression that particular commodity wouldn't be refused."

"Nay, I wouldn't refuse a watch over Braugh. To never worry about Doxyn taking more gals and children would be a blessing."

"Have we reached an accord, Mister Tiernan?"

"Not so quick. There're empty spots in your plan."

"Let me clarify then, please."

"What of your lost people? If they live, but not in a right way, you'd have me leave them for further torture?"

For the first time since the meeting began, Bragg looked uneasy. "No we won't and hence, the high payment for your mission. If they've been mutilated beyond repair, I'll expect you to see to their relief. Put them to rest for us. Do you understand, Sir?"

"Aye," Shane replied. They didn't want to kill their own. He didn't blame them. "And how would we get to yon lab? You spoke of a ship."

"We have a small craft in our hull that would accommodate your men. It's newly designed and with a proper diversion close to where you'll land, you should slip through without detection."

And Jess had been given a relic of a ship to rescue them.

Bragg sat back in the chair. "Getting off planet after the mission would be the greatest difficulty, but we'll bring you back safely. If you agree, I'll gather forces for the event. We're most hopeful you'll require our aid to bring our people back."

"If you have such a force why don't you use it to get Ryker? You don't make sense."

"Remember, the president specifically said we should obtain the General without further loss of life. Theazians won't touch us, not with the majority of their ships on planet. We'll pick them off, not allowing their vessels to gain airspace. Losses won't occur."

The story still didn't add up. With a Gov strike force, there'd be little loss of Gov soldiers. Too, if the *slimwit* General was truly of import, Shane bet Gov would risk many ordinary troops to get him back. He most likely wouldn't be part of what Bragg planned. He already knew the man wasn't right.

"How many?" Shane asked, needing a few further answers before he'd tell Bragg to go fock himself.

"Pardon, Sir?"

"Men? How many were taken by Theazians?"

"Four hundred and six men, eighty-nine women and five children."

"Shat, Bragg! What type of ship was Ryker commanding? You said it was a Gov vessel."

"The women were soldiers, all save one. General Ryker had his wife aboard. The children were gathered from the dead on Veeran, a distant planet. They were what remained of their people and Ryker was taking them to a trade zone for adoption by a thriving world. The attack by those monsters was most untimely."

"Damn it!" Shane said. He could turn his back on a *slimwit* General and maybe even a careless crew but not gals and children. He remembered the odds Ryker's vessel faced. *Thirty to one*. No man he knew, not even one with the very finest ship could've withstood an attack of that magnitude.

Shane's hands balled into fists. They had children aboard, wee ones not over the loss of their entire world. It no longer mattered that Bragg lied in some manner. Shane firmly believed most of the story to be true.

"Finn," Shane said.

"Aye."

"You'll stay back this time."

"I won't. Leave another behind. You won't leave me."

"The gals here need watched over. I'll be back quick."

"Then Reilly is your man, Shane. Theazians are a nasty lot and you'll need me at your back."

He gazed at Finn. Nay, by the expression on his face, Finn wouldn't stand to be left. "Reilly, it is."

"Sirs, the *throwbacks* are perfectly safe in my care," Bragg said.

"Nay, Bragg, they're not. I'll make it so. And in the course, if we don't make it back, Reilly will take the gals to Braugh. You'll consider them a gift."

"I'm amazed at your continued fascination with them," Bragg said, looking him over.

Bragg still didn't realize he wouldn't be getting Jess or her crew back. Ever.

Shane stood and placed his palms on the table before leaning forward. "How long do we have, Bragg?"

"Two days, Sir."

"And what of the diversion?"

"I've reasoned it out. Leave the details to me. It'll guarantee you access to Theazia without detection."

"You only tell part of a story, Bragg. I don't trust you."

"That's obvious, Mister Tiernan. Anything I can provide to sway your opinion will be made available. I'm most sincere in wanting Ryker and his crew back."

"Aye, you seem to be. I know what I'll be getting but what do you get, Bragg? What will you earn for getting one General and a crew for your president?"

"Decorated, a seat on Governance Council, power and great wealth."

"Aye, now that I believe." Shane took a few more seconds to stare at the man. He wanted nay confusion over what he'd say next. "We'll speak about the gals and what you did to them. Business is business and we have an accord. What you did to Jess—now it's personal. I'll see to you after I fetch Ryker. We won't be interrupted when I come for you. Be ready."

Commander Bragg stared at Tiernan, concealing the contempt he held for the obnoxious barbarian. Bragg learned of Ryker's locality more than a month ago. He didn't relay the information to the Governance. Bragg met Ryker once years prior. Ryker's arrogance surpassed Tiernan's by double and Bragg hated arrogance. Bragg made sure Ryker had suffered before rescue. He might've suffered so much that Tiernan would have to kill him, or with luck, he'd already be dead.

However the situation concluded would be suitable to Bragg. No one would ever know he left Ryker and his crew on Theazia for an extended stay. It was most fortunate the Braughmen didn't understand Governance protocol. How could Tiernan actually believe the Governance wouldn't use every means possible to retrieve its personnel?

Bragg planned on calling in forces once they got within a day of Theazia. Bragg could claim he used the Braughmen as infantry to clear a path for regular military. In all likelihood, that's probably how the situation would play out. Bragg would create a diversion and afford Tiernan a chance. Tiernan would probably become a secondary diversion for Bragg's men to either rescue or kill Ryker and his crew.

In all scenarios, Bragg would get the *throwbacks* and the recognition he deserved from the president. He could easily keep Storm at some remote location to serve his needs once he'd been appointed to a seat on the Council. At this point in her existence, he imagined she'd gladly accept her new station in life. Compared to how she's lived, she would almost certainly feel blessed. By her taking up residence with the brutish Braugh warrior, Bragg's scheme was practically guaranteed. She'd likely not be able to tolerate another eve of Tiernan's pawing.

* * * * *

Shane and Finn left the Commander to his fine room and strode down corridors on the way to quarters. The ship wasn't only first-rate in detail but in comfort and function. They'd been given Gov uniforms to wear because the clothes given by Jess weren't suitable aboard the larger ship. Dark blue uniforms matching those worn by officers were provided. It showed to the lower ranking Gov that he and Finn should be given respect.

"Shane?"

"Aye."

"The wee gal, Zoe, she's military for your Jess, right?"

"Aye," Shane replied, "in a manner."

"She doesn't have the heart for it. She cried most the eve. She's scared of me and I did naught to her. She didn't eat, nor sleep. I gave over the bed and found her curled in a corner this morn."

"Aye." He could see it, the gal not trusting a soul. His Jess was different and strong. Zoe seemed to be more delicate. "If she's a burden, I'll give her into another's care."

"Nay," he said quickly. Finn seemed to think on something for a moment. "You're older than me, been with more gals."

Shane nodded in agreement. Until the past few years, Finn seemed more interested in training and games than gals. The first gal catching Finn's eye had him talking about marriage. Sometimes things like that happened in life. His little brother found his life companion first time out.

"I don't know how to take it from her," Finn said.

"The fear?"

"Aye."

"Now that's a problem, indeed. What does your heart tell you to do?"

"To hold and hush her as long as it takes until she's not afraid. That course ain't right though. She'd be dead of fright long before she'd take to the *holding* part."

"Maybe you can't take it from her. Maybe the hurt goes so deep she'll never come past it." He spoke the truth, refusing to give him false hope.

"You think another man would be more to her liking?" Finn asked.

Any fool could see Zoe attracted Finn. For Finn to make the offer to let another tribesman try for her, and not attempt to woo her himself, showed he cared more for the gal than his own urges. Finn looked to Zoe as Shane looked at Jess. To find one life companion was hard—like finding a cricket in a wheat field. For Finn to find a second gal in so short a time...

"Nay, I doubt it," Shane finally said, refusing to think about his younger brother being blessed twice with finding a gal to spend his life with. If Zoe stirred the feelings in him, the blessing might turn out to be a curse. "I think you have your heart and head in the right direction. Words won't take mistrust from a being. Actions speak louder. Let her see what you're made of. That'd be the best thing you can do."

"And if actions aren't good enough?"

"You have two choices. Let it be and do nothing, or try the holding part. It's up to you. I say though, you're a right gentle man. Holding may do it. Besides, you haven't got complaints from any of the gals you've held so far, have you?"

Finn laughed and looked less upset. "Not a one."

"And you haven't scared one to death that I know of."

"Dumbass."

"Yeah, you've told me." After the laugh, he pulled Finn aside. His didn't want Gov to hear what he'd say. Shane needed to confirm a suspicion. "Your Zoe—you have a bigger interest in her than just a man who wants to hold a gal for a while?"

Finn looked down. "Aye and I don't know why. I shouldn't have such feelings this soon."

As with all his kind, they'd no real control over the choosing of a life companion. Some great force within each man rose up when the perfect gal was at hand—urging them to claim, love and protect her.

Shane needed to warn him. "Then take heed and hear me good. Jess and her crew—they're not like other gals."

"It's plain to see."

"You saw Jess, know she's pierced."

"Aye."

"Zoe and Drew are done the same way."

Finn swallowed.

Shane figured Finn knew something was amiss but wanted to spell it out. "They're not pierced for pleasure."

"Nay?"

With the look on Finn's face, maybe Shane shouldn't tell him the rest. But in all fairness, Finn deserved the information. If it truly put him off, he could fight the urge to wed her and move forward with his life. It'd hurt, but sticking with Zoe might damage him worse.

"Nay. The pieces of metal were used to torture. To get control of them."

"Shat!"

"The piercings—they can't be taken out either. The torture was long ago and the decorations stay as a reminder of such. It doesn't hurt them in a physical way now. It's the memory that keeps them in line. You wonder why Zoe's afraid. You have the answer. Can she come past this pain for you? Only she knows if she's able to forgive what was done. Maybe she won't be able to trust again. Not ever. Nay man."

"Who would do such to them? They're lifeblood—gifted! I've never seen such splendid gals and we've been to many worlds."

"Aye." Shane thought the same. "You remember Ma telling stories when we were children?"

"Children?"

Shane laughed. "We've been saying it wrong. *Children* are more than one child."

"Got it. Now about the stories—you mean the ones she told us about angels?"

"Aye."

"Course, I remember. As a matter of fact, when I saw your Jess, Ma's stories came right to mind. Then Jess was stripped and I didn't think more about it. Ma said naught about what lay under the fine, white cloaks an angel wears except wings. I didn't see any on Jess."

Shane regretted all his men getting a good look at her. At the time, he'd no idea his feelings for her would run this deep. Damn it, he could've ordered his men to turn their backs. They'd treat her with nothing but respect, but if she ever wound up as his wife, *she* might feel uncomfortable.

Finn interrupted his thoughts. "She's right fine in looks. She's smart too, getting us tools to set us free. And then the way she took you into her mouth and—"

"That's enough. You all saw what she did to get us out. You'll forget now and never speak of it again. You follow me?"

"But she—"

"Do you understand!"

"What's the problem? Why are you yelling at me?"

"She's not a *gal of comfort*." The thought of her being used in that way made Shane's blood boil.

"I didn't say she was. We were talking about angels."

"Don't ever speak of what she did in the prison. And if any of the others do, you straighten them out about it. No one will so much as look sideways at that gal!"

"You're too touchy. What the hell!"

"Let's talk about Meg." Shane didn't want to hurt Finn and make him relive the death of the gal he was to marry, but it was the only way he could think to make his point.

"What of her?"

"If Meg had to take you into her mouth in front of brethren, you'd be proud of her for having done it?" Ach, Finn started to catch on. Shane lowered his voice and calmly said, "Jess did what she had to."

"I never meant to insult either her or you, Shane."

"I know."

"Really, I'm sorry. You likened her to Meg. Are you thinking of taking Jess as a wife?"

"Aye, if she'll have me."

Finn stared.

After thirty seconds, Shane practically yelled, "What!"

"You'd be the first of us to wed," he quietly replied.

The sudden anger rapidly dwindled. "I'm sorry you won't beat me to it."

Meg had been a fine gal and Finn was downright taken with her. With Finn's interest in Zoe, he hoped his brother would eventually forget Meg. He was too young to be heartbroken forever.

"Da will shat," Finn said with a sudden smile. "He thought we'd never come home alive. Then Ma will shat, her brave son Shane, alive and wed to an angel. Then the tribe will shat when you tell of Gov patrol over Braugh. The whole damn planet will be covered in shat!"

"Dumbass."

"I'm a pain, but you have to put up with me."

Shane slapped the back of Finn's head playfully before grasping his shoulder so they could get back to quarters.

Finn smiled. "I don't think I'll hold Zoe. She's smart. If she doesn't come to see I won't hurt her, she wasn't meant for me."

"Sounds like a decent plan."

"I'm glad Da let me fight and train with you. I'm proud to be your second. I'd be truly proud to be a brother to Jess too. She needs to be treated good."

"You think Ma will take to her?"

"Jess is a good match for you. And it's not like you really have a choice unless Jess refuses. Ma would be happy with whoever you bring home."

"Aye, she's a good gal herself, our Ma."

"Da thinks so."

"He best. He has many a son to remind him if he ever forgets his manners again."

The door to Finn's cabin slid away. Zoe stood within the room. Smaller than Jess, she was just as *broughten* and angelic. Shane feared for Finn after studying her for a moment. Finn's angel had broken wings. She looked too fragile to suffer such brutality

and come past it. For his brother's sake, he hoped Finn's subconscious didn't demand Zoe for a companion.

"Zoe," Shane said in greeting, gauging her reaction.

"Sir," she replied.

He and Finn laughed and she crossed her arms at her stomach. Her fingers grew white from squeezing her arms. He didn't mean to scare her.

Shane said, "The title, wee Zoe, is kind indeed but not necessary. You should call me Shane."

He welcomed her smile. Jess never smiled and he wished it could be otherwise. Maybe Zoe wasn't too timid after all.

"You're a shiny gal, Zoe."

The smile left before she asked, "Why would you say that?"

"You're smart enough to see neither of us are a threat."

She looked from him to Finn and back. "Thank you," she said.

He raised his brows, questioning her.

"For not being a threat," she added.

"My pleasure, gal. We'll see to your safety. Nothing will happen to you with Braughmen about."

Before Shane could leave, Finn asked, "You'll meet us in the training center later?"

"Aye. Two morns separate us from a tight spot. And we sat too long in the Doxyn prison. Best we ready ourselves. You'll spread the word to the others?"

"Aye."

"And Finn?"

"Aye?"

"Pick three more to stay with Reilly."

"Why?"

"To make me feel right about leaving a single being aboard Bragg's ship while we're not here. Ryker's of import but what we leave behind is most precious."

"Agreed. I'll pick three."

"Good man."

Chapter Six

Shane entered the cabin and looked at the bed, expecting to find Jess. With her gone, his heart pumped double time from the rush of adrenaline before he realized she was in the second room. He strode to the table and looked beneath lids to find more enticing food. He wondered how long ago Jess woke. She should've eaten already. He wouldn't tolerate her waiting for him before she took a meal.

Music came to him as he sat down and got comfortable. The melody drifted softly at first, but as he sat, the sound grew. What did she listen to? The perfect notes had to be made by tech. Listening closer, he tried to decipher what made the music and couldn't. Words drifted to him next and he instantly recognized the song. His Ma sung it to his young brothers in the eve so they'd sleep. It was a lullaby.

He smiled and closed his eyes, enjoying memories of home. Bumps rose on his arms as the words resonated from a perfect voice in his native tongue. It'd been too long since language sounded fluent. At times it downright hurt his brain to search for the right word to fit his meaning. They'd all agreed to speak only Gov until the words and phrases came more naturally. He managed but it wasn't always easy.

Could Jess be trying to learn a bit about him? Is that why she listened to such? The intricate words and almost impossible last verse drifted through the closed door. His stomach tightened, waiting for the slaughtered notes that happened every single time someone attempted them. The composer didn't take into account a being would need to sing the notes with the words.

The door slid away and his Jess stood inside, placing things into a cabinet. In all her naked glory, she drew a breath and finished singing the last verse. He came to his feet, drawn upward by her perfectly pitched voice. She smoothly finished the lullaby with ease. As she held the last note, she turned and found him standing there staring. Her voice dried up before her gaze dropped. The hair on his arms stood on end as emotions churned within his gut. Unable to move, stunned, he saw Jessica Storm clearly for the first time.

White hair hung around her face, against her upper chest and shoulders. The gold of her eyes shone brightly, making little else exist against her pale skin. Knowing her piercings once brought her pain, she looked every bit like a bound angel, captured and denied freedom to fly as she might amongst the heavens.

Her gaze slowly drifted up to meet his while he remained silently staring. "Tiernan?"

Words came to him but he couldn't utter a single one. His lips moved to tell her things but nothing came out. How could she bear his touch? A gal like her deserved better than a common tribesman.

She walked to him with concern plainly on her face. When she stroked his cheek, he savored the softness and the peace she brought. He told Finn he wanted to wed her. The instinct besieged him now that he was again in her presence. His heart told him she didn't belong to an ordinary man. Deeper than his heart, he knew they'd match each other in every way, on every level.

He dropped to his knees and hesitated before taking her hips into his hands. He shouldn't touch her because with each intimacy, the feelings to claim her would grow. He couldn't help himself. He needed her. And he needed her to want him in return. As he kissed her belly, her soft fingers smoothed through his hair. She was his other half and he prayed some part of her understood that too. They'd been placed in each other's paths for a reason.

Contrary musings left his mind as he took in her scent. She overwhelmed him. The sanitizing mist could sterilize but didn't take the true fragrance from her. A trace of warmth, desire and wholly feminine perfume came from her skin.

"Beser me tae hedonar ye, broughen gal." Allow me to honor you, beautiful woman.

"Tiernan?" she asked as he eased her down in front of him.

He'd show her what he'd said. After kissing and tasting her, he laid her onto her back. Against her lips, he whispered, "Welcome me, Jess. Open yourself and let me have you as I need."

She answered with a kiss that burned him clear through. He didn't need provoking but appreciated the gesture. She told him without speaking that he could have his want. She tasted so good! He kissed his way to her neck and nibbled on her pulse. He tried very hard not to suck the flesh just above the artery. He failed. Her face turned, giving him access and permission to keep bruising her silken skin. Pulling away and viewing the redness, he thought to mark other areas as well. Probably wrong in doing so, he wanted physical signs of his claim to remain on her skin long after he finished taking her. If she agreed, she'd soon belong only to him.

He stripped the shirt from his back because the room got downright hot all of a sudden. He braced himself above her and gently kissed a breast. Her fingernails sank into his shoulders as her back arched. She liked having her breast kissed even though the jewelry made her most sensitive. He worked one nipple, beginning with light touches, nibbles and soft licks. After much patience, wee Jess panted and pushed her nails further into his skin, moaning for more.

He carefully sucked and she said, "A little more, Shane. A little harder please."

He answered her polite request and obediently obliged. The front of his pants strained as he played with her nipple. Much blood rushed to his cock in response to the firmness growing around her piercing. He'd nay doubt she liked what she felt. She'd have burns on her firm, soft ass though from scooting around so much against the textured floor. He needed to hold her still.

When he'd given her other nipple the same care, he straightened to undo his pants. His cock stretched the limits of confinement and he thought to ease the discomfort. She saw what he did and lifted her pussy.

"You need something, sweet?"

"Mmm, you." She sounded happy about the prospect of having him inside her again.

He was keen on it too but first had other plans. He held her knees and spread them wide. The silver piercing sat high between the lips of her pussy and begged to be touched and wiggled. He lay on his belly, got comfortable and moved straightaway to the good stuff. He'd play with the rest of her later. With her wet and needful, he didn't even try to resist the urge to push his tongue deep into her heat. Her amazing taste was like the rest of her. Addictive and sweet.

"Shane!"

I like the way that came out.

"By the heavens! Oh damn!"

His tongue remained busy until Jess started rhythmically squeezing the muscles in her pussy. When at last she tightened and stayed that way, he didn't push into her again. She breathed hard, wanting her prize, but he figured she needed to wait. Maybe if he teased her a bit and kept her nice and tight, she'd eventually forget to hold back and finally come for him.

Her clit grew thick and hard beneath the piercing. He carefully rubbed his tongue over the nub. She planted her feet on the floor and lifted to his mouth. Sensitive or not, she seemed to like what she felt. She rubbed against him, increasing the pressure. He barely had to move because she stroked her wet pussy up and down.

She'd grown ripe and obviously wanted to come. He made her wait as he sampled the rest of what lay open. He took his time and bathed her entire crease with his tongue. Tonguing from her clit to the opening, he never let her know what would follow. He recalled her doing something similar to him in the prison. He remembered it feeling nice too.

She began twitching and jumping, trying to get more pressure than he'd give. He'd never done such to a gal, making her whine to get more. He decided he liked it. He remembered how hard he came when she finally let him. He hoped it worked the same on her.

When he gave her a break and kissed her belly, she quickly sat up. Grabbing his cheeks between her hands, she drew him close for a kiss. She wasn't shy about tasting herself. He started breathing harder as she licked her juice from his lips. It drove him crazy to have her take her own desire so greedily. She grabbed the waist of his pants and shoved it down. After gaining his wits, he started to undress but she wouldn't wait. She tried pulling him atop her flushed, warm body.

"Jess, slow down."

"No, now. Right now." She twisted against him, brushing his chest with her breasts.

That did it. He'd waited long enough. The head of his cock barely got lined up before he steadily slid the whole way into her heat. He drew out in a slow manner so she could feel every inch of his cock leaving. He kept at her like that, in a slow, balanced motion in time with her breaths. He liked hard, fast, rough fucking but this pace agreed with her. She knew when to expect him full inside and she'd bunch up to hold him tight before he'd slip away. Each time he thrust deep, she'd strain harder and hold on longer.

"Ah, Jess, come for me."

She quivered inside when he bottomed out. It lessened as he withdrew. He'd likely come before long because of how she felt, all tight and trembling around him. The constant motion of his cock felt too good and the long strokes into her soft, wet center were irresistible. "I'm close to letting go. I'm sorry, can't help it."

"Like yestereve, come in me again."

He kissed her harshly. "Truly, hon, I'm trying to hold on but how you squeeze makes me wild."

"Don't hold back. I love how you feel. I love your cum in me."

The word *love* coming from her did strange things to him. He'd explode very soon. "Damn it, sweet, I need to fuck you hard." He grunted as he lost control. "I'm sorry, Jess."

He came to his knees, grabbed her hips, pulled her ass from the floor and sought relief from the burning. She felt too fine and the harder he drove into her, the tighter she squeezed and contracted around him.

"Oh, Shane!" she screamed. She got tighter and tighter!

He growled as he came, filling her with his cock and seed. Letting her ass rest on the floor, he came over her to finish. Her slick, wee body was heated and heavenly against his moist skin. She shuddered beneath him then trembled as her sheath jerked with spasms. *God, she's coming for me!*

Jessica became crazed as the climax formed and built. She imagined how magnificent it would be and concentrated on the tremors saturating her clit. A solid, heavy, brain-numbing throb of pleasure ripped through her pussy and expanded outward to tighten her stomach and stiffen her nipples. As the wave cascaded through her ass—everything inside became as silent as death.

"No!" she cried, having pleasure stolen just as she'd gotten a taste.

The air rushing harshly in and out of them filled the quiet room. After all the touching the eve before, she'd woke with a wet pussy and hard nipples. She'd paced most the morning waiting for Tiernan to return. When he finally did and kissed her between the legs, she thought for sure she'd burn and come for him. Hell, she'd barely gotten warm, let alone singed!

"Sweet?" he asked.

"What?" she replied, emotion lacing her voice.

"Punch me."

"What?" She didn't hear him right.

"I didn't wait and your teeth are clenched. Punch me and you'll feel better."

"There's something wrong with you," she said, wanting him to know. "And why are you smiling? What the hell is so amusing?"

"You know, Jess, each time you get a little closer. We keep at it and you're sure to bust soon."

"I wouldn't live through it."

He laughed and she did punch him, although it wasn't very hard. He gently eased away and when he knelt, he picked her up. He stood, turned and sat in a chair, unconcerned with the pants wadded around his ankles.

Once seated at the table, he removed the cover from a plate of still hot food. She tried to move away but his arm kept her seated on his lap. Held against him, she waited as he fumbled around before a forkful of morn yellows pushed past her lips. The fluffy substance tasted wonderful and by the time she swallowed, he'd managed two bites for himself from the same fork. When she thought to protest and opened her mouth, he stuffed more in. As she chewed, he kissed her forehead and smiled.

"What do you have to be so happy about?" she asked after swallowing and before more food was offered.

When he swallowed his bite, he said, while keeping her mouth full, "A great deal. I didn't die, thanks to you." He kissed her nose. "You trusted me and lay with me twice in the last day and you've not scratched me eyes out. I've much to smile about."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"I've not brought you off properly, hon. I will. Be patient with me and it'll happen."

Her stomach flipped and she felt all tingly again. Highly sick of the arousal, she wondered why she'd ever felt deprived. The sensations could also be inconvenient, surfacing without preamble.

She refused to let them steal her appetite and changed the subject. "What did Bragg have to say?"

"You were right in your rumor. Bragg wants his General back and wants Braughmen to fetch him."

She stiffened and turned away when he offered another bite.

"Jess?"

"He's on Theazia?"

"Aye."

"You agreed to go?"

"Aye."

After swallowing the remnants of food, her stomach soured and it had nothing to do with desire or a bad breakfast.

"What's troubling you?"

"I don't like thinking about you going there," she said, brushing bangs from his forehead.

"You fetched me for this purpose."

"I didn't know exactly what Bragg had in mind. I also didn't know — you."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"You could be hurt or captured or killed." Envisioning the countless scenarios, she sat straighter in his lap. "Don't go."

"Jess..."

"No, I mean it. Turn him down."

"Oh me Da would be proud of me if I did that. Besides, I have an accord with Bragg. I don't renege on deals. A shiny man doesn't go back on his word with Gov."

"A smart man wouldn't take a handful of friends and go to Theazia and try to take something from them. You'll get hurt."

His hand rubbing her arm didn't take away the fine tremors coursing her body.

"Do you care for me a bit, hon?"

The slimwit smiled as tufts of hair hung in his eyes. He looked like an amused child. What he contemplated doing would get him killed and he didn't seem to comprehend that fact. "I care enough. You just got out of a Doxyn prison. Haven't you learned anything?"

"Easy, sweet. Take a breath."

"Don't use that mushy voice on me, Tiernan! Don't patronize or try to placate me."

Held still by his hands on her upper arms, she watched his smile vanish. "Don't worry. No matter what happens I'm leaving men here to look after you. If I don't come back, you'll find a home on Braugh."

"I don't want a home on Braugh." *I have a home on Blue.*

Once she renegotiated with Bragg, she'd go there to find her mother and father and be with her people. Bragg promised her release and he'd damn well hold true to the bargain.

"Then I'll make sure to come back for you." When he stroked the side of her face she turned away again. "Sweet?"

She counted to ten, got her heart to slow down before twisting in his lap to face him. "You seem to have some knowledge of Theazians. If you're taken, I won't be able to worm my way in to get you out. They aren't men or even beings. They're creatures! There's no negotiating —"

He shook her hard. "You won't step foot on that planet, gal." His low, threatening voice grew menacing. "If we're taken, you'll go to Braugh."

"Regardless of what happens, I'm going to Blue." Her own voice became threatening.

"We've time to talk about this. We'll find an accord."

"Damn!" she said, frustrated with his lack of understanding.

What in the hell was I thinking? Her body finally wakes up and takes notice of a man who's gentle, incredibly handsome and doesn't care about her status in the Governance. Leave it to her to find all that in a man who's also the biggest slimwit in the universe!

"You've an uncommon voice."

She stared at him, unable to understand why the hell he'd tell her that.

"You sang *Undesta Raletstrom*."

She took the fork from his hand and stabbed at food before placing it into his mouth. She might as well since he wouldn't allow her get off his lap. She aggressively separated food items with the tips of the fork. She hated it when things got all bunched together in disarray. "I searched the data link trying to find out about Braugh."

"And you listened to the music of me people."

"Yes."

"Why music?"

She sighed and fed him more. "The history of a planet is important but I hoped to learn about the people, not what mistakes and advancements they made through the centuries."

"And what would music tell you?"

"It holds emotion. I searched for the piece of music composed on Braugh having the longest history of popularity. The lullaby came up."

He didn't give her a disbelieving look. In fact, he appeared most intrigued and acted as if it made sense. "And what did you learn?"

Why would a warrior care what she thought?

"Sweet?"

"Nothing."

"You sang it perfectly."

After grabbing the fork from her, he poked first one food and then another, spearing several all for the same mouthful. *Disgusting!* He offered it and she sealed her lips. He placed the glob of confusion in his mouth.

"You weren't supposed to hear."

"Why?"

"I'm not supposed to sing." She took the cup of steaming russet-colored caffeine and sipped carefully.

"Ah, I know why. It's so you don't make stones weep."

"What are you talking about?"

He took the cup from her, placed his lips where hers had been, and sipped. "Your voice. An angel would sing like that. You're gifted."

"Yeah, sure."

The frown on his face came instantly but rather than explain what displeased him, he asked again, "What did the song of the eve say to you?"

With one meal eaten, she pulled the other close and lifted the lid. *So what if she told him what she thought? He probably wouldn't laugh or take offense.* What she thought seldom mattered.

"It relayed the importance of your young feeling safe in their beds. It told of great warriors standing watch over them. Relatives long dead visit homes at night to check on the safety and health of those inside. It spoke of the love of a family, the closeness and tenderness each member should receive. I believe the translated word most often repeated was *cherish*."

Fingertips stroked her face and she swallowed. He was back to looking young and handsome. She felt like a fool.

"How did you grasp the words so easily? You don't speak my tongue, do you?"

"No. I had the computer translate so I could understand."

"How long did you study?"

"I read the translation and listened to it."

"Once?"

"Yes."

"And you sung it, just like that?"

"Amazing, isn't it?"

"Why do you speak like that, Jess? Your tone says you don't find worth in your ability. I didn't lie when I said your voice is uncommon. And you have the right meaning of the words but you tell me about it like it's some grand tale."

"It is like a fairytale, right?" She searched his gaze. "I understand the need to make children feel safe but why is the song still popular? Do you really want your young to grow up with those notions?"

"Aye, that's part of it."

"Why? Worlds and the universe are filled with nightmares, not loving relatives hovering to make sure nothing bad happens. Why would you do that? Don't you want them to grow up prepared? How could you instill such lies?"

A large hand brought her head against his chest. He inhaled and released a long breath. After arranging her differently, they both eventually got comfortable.

"That's how you were raised? Scared? No one made you feel safe?"

She sighed and chose not to answer.

"In most worlds, sweet, cheld — *children* are treasured. In normal worlds, beings are prized regardless of whether they're men, gals, young or old. I think Blue's not common. Didn't you ever have a time when you felt loved?"

The question didn't take long to ponder. She blurted, "Blue gave their very best ship to us."

He placed a kiss on the top of her head as he stroked her hair. "Aye, that they did." His tone relayed sadness. "Jess?"

"Yes?"

"Why aren't you supposed to sing?"

"They hid me from Governance when I was young. *Throwbacks* all have the same type of voice and they monitored the planet for those sounds. I was stupid as a child." When he hugged her, she couldn't help another sigh escaping. She didn't understand his gestures and after a proper eve's sleep, she didn't search for answers in his thoughts or emotions. "I was told *never* to use my voice. I disobeyed and they found me. When I came to the Governance to serve, singing wasn't permitted. Soldiers don't sing."

"They took you when you were how old?"

"Five."

"Oh, hon." He squeezed her again and she shifted in his lap.

Even a slimwit could sense pity and she needed none of it. She managed to sit up and get away from his big, warm chest.

"Why did you sing the lullaby?"

"I wanted..." *To feel a portion of your history. To know where you came from, why you're so odd, how you can be so large and fierce and gentle all at once.* "I don't know."

"Angela and Zoe can sing like you?"

She wasn't sure about Angela but she'd heard Zoe. Zoe had the terrible habit of humming to herself prior to falling asleep. It'd taken a month in confinement to stop the self-comforting sound. Why hadn't her parents taught her sooner, broken the childish habit? "Soldiers don't sing. Or hum." She had a question of her own. "You've mentioned both your father and mother. Are they alive?"

"Aye."

"Do they love you?"

"They do, very much."

She placed her palm against his chest and spread her fingers so she could feel his heartbeat. "How do you know?"

Lips trailed her forehead after he pulled her close. She gave up and leaned against him. It's not like he'd let her do much else.

"You know someone loves you by the way they look at you. Or when their hand touches you a certain way that makes you feel warm inside. Or they give you their very best ship."

"What's the difference between love and caring?"

The silence let her know he pondered the question for a long moment before answering. "When you yelled at Zoe to make her get a grip on herself—that's caring. When you bargained to see her and Angela safe and did naught for yourself—that's love."

"You think I love them?" She'd know if she loved someone!

"Aye, they're your sisters. Your fam."

"We share an affliction, not a family." Nonsensical musings must frequent his thoughts.

"Your birthright made them so. Your common suffering made them so. Only your blood differs and that's not of great import considering the rest."

Anger bled away and she thought considerably about his observations. Eventually, she said, "I never looked at it like that."

"No wonder. You've had a narrow view of the universe until lately. You'll see in time, there's much good in life. You only need to reach out a bit toward what you want."

"And get my hand slapped."

He laughed and she liked the way his chest moved under her cheek.

"Nay, outside Gov rule, most beings would give you anything you wanted."

"I *do* like how you Braughmen tell tales."

A hand smoothed over her arm. "I need to leave for a time but want to speak on something beforehand."

"All right."

"I want a promise from you."

The last promise she'd made was given to Brianna, a fellow *throwback*. Jessica had promised to keep her safe in a training exercise. Brianna died horribly before they could get her to medical. A sick and helpless feeling settled into the pit of her stomach with the memory. "I don't make promises."

"Not even one of import?"

"No!"

"Why?"

"Things change and much of my life is driven by the whims of others. Promises aren't mine to give."

"Will you make an exception? Would you give over just this once and promise me something?"

"I wish I could." Her voice had hardly any volume. She really did wish things could be different.

"I respect the fact you can't. So I'll tell you something instead and hope you take it to heart. When we go to Theazia, I need to know you're safe."

"I don't understand."

"You need to listen to Reilly while I'm gone. He and three other Braughmen will stay and care for you, Zoe and Angela. You'll abide him?"

"I'll try."

He placed his palms against her cheeks. Determination lit his eyes and expression. "You'll do it."

She didn't like his tone of voice. "I need to know *you're* safe," she said, countering his edict. "You won't go, then?"

"Damn it, Jess!"

"Damn you, Tiernan!"

In an instant, they'd become furious. As they glared at one another, she prepared for the fight. What she got instead was thoroughly kissed. He only managed it because she'd been totally surprised. When it occurred to her she shouldn't tolerate it, she'd already begun kissing him back. The heat flowing between them could've set the napkins on fire.

Chapter Seven

In the private training room for more than an hour, Jessica, Zoe and Angela continued with the rigorous exercises. Not even a Braughman claim excused them from morn training. Tiernan initially refused Bragg's order that Jess and her crew commence with the ritual. She eventually convinced him to concede. Conflict over such a trivial activity wasn't worth the effort. Despite Bragg and Tiernan currently working toward a common goal, she sensed the two men testing each other.

Bragg personally oversaw the drills that morn and Tiernan posted two of his men outside the room to observe. The Braughmen trained in an area close by. She really wanted to watch them. They'd been practicing hand-to-hand and by some of the thuds, it sounded as if the exhibition would be extremely interesting.

Bragg remained in a delightful mood and why wouldn't he? Tiernan agreed to the foolhardy bargain to fetch the General. It'd see Shane and his tribesmen dead sooner rather than later. She tried not to think about it because when she did, anxiety coursed her veins until she shook. She likely wouldn't have that problem after the exercise. Bragg certainly put them through their paces.

The room suddenly dropped to battle lighting and she heard the large metal door lock. Zoe could never focus her eyes in the training situation and ran full speed toward her and Angela. When she neared, she hurled herself into the air. Both Jessica and Angela caught her feet and used the momentum to toss her slight weight up fifteen feet. Zoe caught the overhead beams in the room and climbed atop one. She'd be more hindrance than help and would serve them best out of the way.

Jessica heard the dispatch of the first knife as it hurled from the wall. Both she and Angela sidestepped and ducked as it sped by and stuck into the opposing barrier. The speed and number in which they deployed would only increase. The next one came from the same wall before three more launched in rapid succession from the area behind. Bragg loved this particular game and probably enjoyed giving them a hard run.

A sickening *thud* let her know Angela caught a blade and not in a good way.

"How bad?" Jessica asked.

Angela kept moving to avoid the knives. "Thigh."

The strobe lighting grew intense. Jessica threw herself forward, somersaulted and rolled next to Angela before pulling the knife from her friend's thigh.

"Up you go," Jessica said.

"I can stay."

"You're in my way. Up!"

She heard Tiernan bellow something and broke concentration for a second. Disoriented long enough for a blade to swipe her arm, she became angry at his interference and the ensuing pain. When Angela placed her foot into Jessica's cupped hands with laced fingers, Jessica tossed her upward almost effortlessly. Angela caught the beam and would remain safe. The training would only cease if one of them stayed on the ground until the supply of knives was exhausted. More often than not, it was she who faced the gauntlet until the last blade hurled by. For whatever reason, the pain heightened her reflexes.

Able to place full effort into the objects coming at her, she moved fluently to avoid another cut. Dropping to her hands, she dodged projectiles until they changed course and headed low. She avoided them by somersaulting to land in a crouch. The only way she'd die was if one of the knives speared her brain or heart. In truth, even if her heart took a direct hit, medical would probably heal her quicker than she could die.

Kicking her legs high into the air and rotating her body, she avoided multiple knives as they sped by. Hearing the release of more, she knew too many flew to completely escape. She chose the point of impact, bent her knees and fell backward. On the way to the mat, she caught the knife that would've hit her head as another stuck into her side. The rest flew by.

She pulled the knife from her flesh and had two objects to deflect future mass attacks. She preferred avoiding the blades altogether but couldn't counter the onslaught Bragg threw at her that morn. While avoiding sharp projectiles, her hands and fingers bled and became sore as tips and edges of blades cut her skin. When the last knife hurled by, Zoe and Angela dropped from the beams to land on either side of her.

Her friends immediately drew knives from the floor when the door burst open. It wouldn't be the first time Bragg sent the combat android to see if they'd defend each other and protect the wounded. Loud words rumbled back and forth. None of what came out made sense. Angela and Zoe flew forward in a flurry of swinging arms and knives. They protected her because she'd received the worst wound.

Maybe she understood the situation first because the hole in her side disallowed adrenaline to flood her body. Whatever the reason, she quickly realized her friends attacked Braugh warriors. Finn disarmed Zoe but not before she'd stuck him several times. Reilly dealt with Angela without receiving a mark.

Tiernan helped Finn pull Zoe from her feet.

"Get yourselves to medical," Tiernan said, walking toward Jessica.

"Let them go," she countered.

"Easy, Jess, you know we aren't here to fight."

"We walk from the room."

"Mr. Tiernan," Bragg said loudly, just inside the doorway. "Storm's correct. They need to get to the corridor where a medical team awaits. The portable healing unit can't be accommodated in here and they've been trained to seek assistance under their own power."

Jessica raised the knives as Tiernan strode forward like a ship in warp. Despite the wounds, she wasn't slow or awkward. Tiernan managed to disarm and hoist her up in mere seconds. As Shane walked, Reilly and Finn followed with her crew. When Tiernan neared Bragg, he shoved one of the knives into Bragg's upper chest by the shoulder. Bragg bellowed and Tiernan said, "Best get yourself from the room or you won't be treated."

In the corridor, a medic assessed her before moving to evaluate Angela's thigh. He said, "Storm needs full-on medical. We can treat Drew here."

When the additional two medics tried taking her for transport on a hover bed, Tiernan growled something unrecognizable, held her tighter and marched away at a fast clip. Finn followed with Zoe and behind them, ten Braughmen kept pace.

"Am I hurting you?" Tiernan asked without a trace of hostility.

"No, and I can walk."

"You'll drip blood all over the nice floors, sweet."

Why would she care? She wouldn't have to clean it up. Glancing over Tiernan's shoulder, she saw the trail Finn left and asked, "Who'll clean up after Finn?"

"Finn, how you doing back yonder?"

Finn replied, "Been worse, brother."

"He's your brother?" Jessica asked.

"Aye."

She worried about Zoe because Tiernan's expression didn't look pleasant. Despite Zoe having stabbed Finn and taking no wounds herself, Finn carried her. Did he keep her close so when he felt better he could beat her? Maybe he brought her along for Shane to deal with.

Jessica thought to explain before either Tiernan retaliated. "He wouldn't be bleeding if he hadn't charged her. She defended us."

"Aye, Finn knows that now."

"You're not upset with her?"

"Nay. We didn't expect her to fight like that."

A stitch of pain pulled at Jessica's right side and she placed her hand over the wound.

"Almost there, Jess. Hold on."

"I'm fine."

"You're not but will be soon."

He walked smoothly and swiftly until they reached medical. The chief medical officer stationed himself beside the bed Tiernan laid her on. "Let's have a look, Storm."

Jessica rolled to her side and pulled up the shirt to make it easy for Dr. Dillon. He examined her side before rolling her onto her back.

Probing and turning her hands, he asked, "Bragg have you train with knives again?"

"Yes."

"How fast?" he asked before taking her right hand and flattening it out on the bed. "Keep that hand down. It's worse than your side."

"Max speed."

"And this is the extent of damage this time?"

"What do you mean—this time?" Tiernan asked.

The doctor adjusted the controls on the bed and heat moved over her from above and below.

Jessica asked, "Would you please see to the man holding Cross, Dr. Dillon? I'm afraid Zoe skewered him."

"Certainly." The doctor extended his hand to the next bed and Finn set Zoe down on a chair before he stretched out on the bed.

Tiernan's men crowded the entrance to medical as if standing guard.

Tiernan hovered and asked, "You've had such done to you before?"

"Sure."

"And you knew before walking into that room that you'd be cut up like this?"

"Of course not." What caused his anger? "The methods and strategies differ. If we knew each time what the exercise would be, there'd be little value. One's enemies won't consistently fight in the same manner."

To the doctor, Tiernan asked, "And you've healed her before with damage this bad?"

Once he had Finn settled, Dr. Dillon turned to face Tiernan. "Yes, countless times, Sir."

"You did naught about it?" Tiernan stepped around the bed and grabbed the doctor by the front of his tunic.

A few of the Braughmen turned to see what the ruckus was about.

Tiernan shook the doctor. "If you knew they were being hurt like this, how could you let it continue?"

The doctor stared at him until Tiernan let go.

"To interfere with a commander and question his orders while on board a Governance vessel is treason, Sir. It's clearly spelled out. And if I'm disposed of, this ship would be without a surgeon."

"To let it go on—"

"Please, Sir," the doctor said, scanning the people within the area carefully before lowering his voice. "The last two surgeons under Bragg's command were shot for having an opinion about the treatment of *throwbacks*. The one before them took his own life."

"So Gov is filled with cowards and sadistic men."

"It may seem so but most in the Governance are honorable. Bragg is the exception."

"Yet you do nothing to stop him."

"If one voices concern, they're dealt with. If many voice a concern, they're disposed of as mutineers."

"Those like Jess — no one took notice of how many have died? No one cares?"

"It's not known, Sir. The Governance believes most of the women are still alive. We're scheduled to dock in a month's time — much sooner if you're successful in the rescue of General Ryker. A formal complaint from most of the crew will be filed."

"In the meantime, you fix what Bragg does to those getting in his way?"

"Yes. I keep my mouth shut and repair the wounded. *Throwbacks* aren't the only ones aboard who've tasted Bragg's craving for peculiar things. I either take action on what turns my gut and help no one, or I stay the course, help where I can and live to see the bastard hung."

Jessica closed her eyes. Never in a thousand years could she have imagined the doctor to be anything but a loyal Governance soldier. Such talk made her skin crawl. She personally despised Bragg, but to hear the majority of the crew would turn on him once they docked made her very uneasy. The doctor also relayed Bragg visited his cruelty upon others. *Throwbacks* hadn't been singled out?

"Storm?" Dr. Dillon asked.

"Yes." She opened her eyes and a very worried man gazed at her.

"You won't say anything?"

The word *mutiny* kept rolling through her mind and she'd been trained in a certain fashion. Regardless of her treatment, she'd been taught to take pride in her service, no matter what the responsibilities. Part of her engrained belief system made her obey her commander, no matter what happened. If every soldier questioned every order, nothing but chaos would ensue. Too, Bragg's superiors kept tabs on him. They had to. The Governance trusted Bragg. And as a soldier it'd become her duty to follow his command and demonstrate some loyalty.

After a time, she'd made herself believe, because of her lower status, she'd been blessed when the Governance took her. To view Bragg as nothing more than a monster would then make her a victim. Could a woman get lower than a *throwback*? She quickly decided a victim would be worse.

"Jess, make a promise to him," Tiernan said.

"I can't."

He studied her and probably remembered their earlier conversation. "So be it. I'll kill Bragg."

Jessica tried sitting up. "You and your men would be put to death instantly."

Tiernan kept her still by placing a hand on her arm.

She said, "Whether the crew toys with the idea of mutiny or not, they won't tolerate their commander's murder. That's why they're waiting until *Efface* docks."

"If you can't promise the doctor your word on silence, I've nay choice. If Bragg finds out what the crew's planning, he'll be inclined to take action. Many would die."

In her heart she knew Tiernan was correct. Dr. Dillon touched her arm and said rather sadly, "Storm doesn't need to give her word, Sir. I believe she'll do the right thing."

"Jess?" Tiernan asked, beseeching her with a look to give the doctor a small insight as to what she'd do.

She huffed and remembered to keep her hand against the bed. "I didn't hear a thing. And you best stop speaking of such around me. Bragg's probably been treated and could be monitoring in here. I want to stay deaf and dumb to any more of this talk. Understand?"

The doctor smiled and squeezed her shoulder before turning his attention to Finn.

"You did the right thing," Tiernan said.

"Sure. Glad I have your approval."

He leaned close and spoke against her ear. "What's wrong with you?"

She couldn't name a single thing. In fact, her mind worked rapidly to sort through years of engrained beliefs. She loathed Bragg but it didn't change his status in her life. Tormenter, disciplinarian, trainer, commander...protector?

While she'd served as a *woman of comfort*, he never allowed any man to really hurt her. Before a man could partake in her company, they'd been scanned for disease, temporarily sterilized and weren't permitted to release inside her. The only exception had been Tiernan. Too, Bragg hadn't *given* her out as many times as the other women.

She thought about other incidents surrounding her history with Bragg. *Murderer!* A great number of *throwbacks* died while under his command. Most of those women had been her friends—or as Tiernan so aptly put it, her *family*. But when she'd reached a point of not caring, Bragg sent her to fetch Tiernan. It gave her a new purpose and they'd never been turned loose like that. In the end though, he'd lied when he said they'd be able to go home if they completed the mission. Laying on a tech bed in medical kept his lie foremost in her mind. She and her crew should be happily adjusting to life on Blue.

"Bragg's been with you since you were taken from your home?" Tiernan asked.

"No, but not too many years after, he became our commander."

"Bragg's not a righteous man but he's all you know. Is that what's in your head?"

"Yes." She closed her eyes and tried to relax. The more she tensed on the bed the more it hurt.

With Tiernan stroking her, for the first time ever while being treated, Jessica felt safe enough to drift off. It'd been a long few days and she didn't want to think anymore. Too many things crowded her mind already.

* * * * *

Shane paced the confines of the cabin. While Jess slept soundly, he contemplated what she'd endured in her short life. *More than a gal should have.* Every instinct told him to make Bragg suffer before chopping him to bits. Those types of actions would make reclaiming a slimwit General and the children near impossible. The cowardice of Gov on the matter of rescue made his stomach burn.

"Tiernan?" Jess tried sitting up.

"Aye, sweet." He helped her to her feet after she swung her legs off the bed.

"How did I get here?"

"The same way you got to medical."

"You carried me?"

"Aye."

"Why?"

She hadn't been resting easy in the place and he meant to see her in a more comfortable spot. It was a wonder she didn't have night terrors. Had he been able to get the door open sooner and get to her...

"The place was too noisy for you to rest," he said.

"And Bragg let you bring me here after you stabbed him?"

"Nay, the dumbass didn't allow a thing. You're mine now and I'll do as I want."

She took a step back and glared at him. "I let your reference to me being property slide before. I think I need to remedy an assumption you obviously have. I belong to the Governance. I'm on loan to you."

"Why are you correcting me now? You didn't seem to mind when I claimed you before."

Golden eyes stared at the floor. "I expected to go home. The change in orders put me off balance for a time."

"Bragg lied to you."

"Yes."

"And you welcomed being placed with me rather than face Bragg."

She strode toward the table and lifted the lid on a meal. She replaced it and wrapped her arms around herself. "I wanted to avoid him for a time."

"Turn and speak to me, Jess."

She turned but didn't raise her eyes. She found something on the floor of more import.

He rested a hand on his hip. "You thought Bragg would put you back to being used by men."

"And he did. I simply didn't mind being used by you at the time."

Fury swept over him as he aggressively took the needed steps to stand in front of her. He tried not to grasp her arms but wasn't able to stop. "And how did you feel—being *used* by me? Did I make you feel low?"

She looked small with her face pointed down and silken strands of colorless hair surrounding her.

"Answer me!"

"No." The wee word barely came out of her.

"Do you know why?"

"No."

Letting her go, he stroked her upper arms to gentle the flesh he'd held too tight. "When I say you're mine, sweet, I'm not talking about the use of your body. I've had such with a gal and it wasn't that way with you." Stroking her soft hair settled him somehow. "Me hand would take care of those types of urges. Do you get what I'm saying?"

"You don't know me." She pulled away but didn't get far.

"I'll settle this business with Gov and then you and I will talk. It'll be concerning where you'll find a proper home with a proper man to see to you."

"And what if I want the home and not the man?" As she tried pulling away, she trembled.

Why was she still afraid of him? Maybe it wasn't him at all. Maybe any man stepping up to take Bragg's place in her life wouldn't sit well. He wouldn't do that type of keeping. She'd learn in time. "If it's not me, then you'll make your choice on a fitting man. On Braugh." It damn near killed him to give her a choice. He wanted her permanently.

She didn't cry over a knife stuck in her side but her eyes held tears then. "I need to go home, Tiernan."

She didn't want to make her home on Braugh. And he couldn't live anywhere else. "Shat!"

"The word is *shit*!" she yelled, walking to the door.

He caught up and spun her around. "You'll listen to me."

"I think I've had about enough." And she made her point by drawing back a fist.

"Jess!" The warning came out too late. She'd already swung.

Her name fit her. She became a violent *storm*. He didn't understand her sudden fury. She didn't have sufficient reason to get so hot. When he caught her fist, she drew her leg back. He twisted to catch it before she kicked him. He couldn't deflect the strike and she landed the side of a wee boot against his ass.

He staggered. Her small body didn't throw him off balance, laughter did. He'd never had his ass kicked by a gal.

He'd warned Finn about laughing when a gal was intent on something. He didn't follow his own advice and Jess got more irate. The worse the situation got, the louder he laughed. If he didn't control himself soon, she'd likely try to really hurt him.

"You won't be laughing in ten seconds," she said, trying to get out of the hug he gave.

She fell to dead weight and almost got free. She moved so fast he barely managed to catch hold of her before she punched his eye. He actually placed effort into the struggle that followed. Eventually, he got her arms pinned to her sides. Her feet were another matter and when she tried using one to kick, he sidestepped and lost his balance. Turning to hold her in front when they landed, he took the brunt of the impact.

She screamed in fury, "Tiernan, let go!"

"Nay. My ass hurts and I'll not risk a blackened eye. I'll let you go when you settle that red hot temper of yours." *Ach, how would he know the words would incite rather than calm her!* "You little demon!"

As she twisted, shiny light hair fell across his face, which left a slender neck exposed. He thought to do some attacking of his own and opened his mouth against her neck just below an ear. She stilled quickly and held a breath. Fear seemed to keep her motionless as he kissed and gently sucked her flesh. A rush of tension coursed through her before leaving as suddenly as it came.

With her atop him panting, he did some panting too. She wiggled around. The movement wouldn't get her free but it sure as hell had an effect on him. "Damn, Jess, have a care where your hipbone is grinding!"

She instantly calmed. "Did I hurt you?"

"Aye," he groaned, doing his best to sound wounded. For someone intent on bringing him pain, she seemed concerned when he complained. He loosened his hug because she moved differently. He decided to give her a chance to show some sanity.

Small hands framed his face as her breath rushed over his mouth. "I'm sorry. I don't know what happened."

The frantic apology didn't sit well. She really thought she hurt him!

"It's not too bad," he said, smiling, hoping she'd realize he wasn't damaged.

"Where? Tell me."

He coughed when her hip pushed against his cock. The wrestling woke something in him other than anger. It was displayed against the tight-fitting, dark blue Gov pants. She slid from him and checked for damage. He couldn't help smile as she tried to find what hurt.

"Where, Tiernan!"

His head came up to look down his body. Her gaze followed his until she saw the problem. He still grinned like a short-wit but watched closely for her fury to return. He expected it once she saw the state of his cock.

"Damn! I didn't mean to," she said, placing her hands at the waist of his pants.

Whether she took a liking to his cock and didn't want to damage it, or if she truly feared hurting him—it didn't matter. His stupid smile left as she hurried to get his pants undone and inspect what lay within. He opened his mouth to put an end to the charade but she'd found his cock with both her hands. Nothing came out of him but a groan.

"Really, I'm sorry."

"Jess." He tried making the rest of the words come together. He couldn't speak because he choked on his own drool.

"What can I do, Tiernan?" She rubbed him gently between her hands, kneading his sac and cock carefully. "I was warned how sensitive a man is here. I wanted to bruise your face not maim you."

"Oh damn, sweet," he said, expanding more in her hands before huffing. "Not hurt—not damaged."

"You're all right?"

"Aye."

"Nothing broken?"

"Nay."

He was in heaven though and rested his head back because of the sudden weakness. Light wee kisses spread over him and he enjoyed each one until she licked the length of his cock. Shit, he didn't deserve her tongue like that. She tried making amends for something she hadn't done.

"Jess, don't. Ach!" he roared, when she sucked him inside her wet, hot mouth.

He weakened and took a minute to savor the experience. As soon as the stars left his vision, he made things right. He sat up, reached around her and unfastened her pants. Like a man possessed, he stripped them down to her knees as she knelt beside him. No blood pumped to his brain, so he lay back down. In his next clear moment, he stuck two fingers in his mouth, wet them, and pushed between her legs. He needed to be in her and ready or not, he'd get there.

She spread for him as best as she could. When he touched her pussy, he found her wet and ready. Carefully, he pushed into her until his fingers became buried deep in wet, scented heat. *Damn, I want to make her feel as good as her mouth makes me feel.* He tried easing his fingers out but she countered his move and brought her hips back. She took him right back to the hilt. Her legs trembled. He held still whilst she ground her hot, wee pussy against his fist.

The only reason he didn't flood her mouth with seed was because she kept gripping his fingers, trying to come. No matter how she moved or thrust against him, she didn't go over and after a time, her climax became of more import than his. He wanted to help her and ease the torment but the whining sounds coming from her had an odd effect. It wasn't fair she felt such misery but God, the vibration felt fine against his cock. Still, he

held on, hoping she'd find the stroking needed to make her climax. She grew crazed, needing it more and then more.

They fucked endlessly with neither of them getting off. The stimulation without release was hurting both of them and he likely couldn't stand much more. Kicking out of his boots, he pulled his fingers from her warmth and brought her to his chest. Her cheeks were dry but she sobbed. Holding her tight with one arm, he managed to get his damn pants off.

With the lower half of his body free, he held her tight and stood. He placed her on her feet, turned her away and eased her down so the upper half of her body stretched out against the table. She whimpered and he bent, shoving her pants down to her ankles. There wasn't time for particulars then. He meant to make her come and hoped changing penetration would do it. *Damn, but I'll make it happen this time, hon.*

With his legs apart, he bent his knees and came in behind her. "Easy, sweet. You liked me coming at you from behind. Let's see where this type of fucking takes you. Aye, that's it. Push against me."

Her legs could barely separate but it'd be enough. Once positioned, he opened her from behind and slid in. Her plump ass cheeks were tempting and when his cock sunk in far enough to go it alone, he filled his hands with flesh. He did love a gal's ass. He prayed he wouldn't come too fast this time but the odds were against him. All her slick heat sucking on his cock with the sight of her ass would be hard not to react to.

On and on they fucked without reward. He knew she wanted to quit, which made him all the more determined to see things through. She remained wet and he'd find a way to make her come. The intense scent of her came up as she wet his balls from them slapping against her.

Finally, her pussy gripped tighter and he felt a spasm. "Aye—aye, come for me. Come for me!"

"God!" she cried out, another and then another contraction pulled at him.

"Let it happen."

He held her ass cheeks firmly and spread them to really get at her. When he did, she started to climax but the spasms remained random. So involved in keeping the exact pressure and thrusting to finish her, he'd not paid attention to what else he'd done. His thumb rubbed and pressed until he'd opened her ass. She grew wild beneath him, bucking and humping in a flurry of crazed motions. Trays of food rattled and one toppled to the floor. The lid from the other shifted from the plate.

"Shane! Oh, Shane!"

A wee cup of bread spread caught his attention and a plan formed. Reaching over, he stuck a finger in the greasy substance, separated her cheeks and buttered her tight entrance.

Her palms smacked the table as she came up on forearms. "No!"

"Aye, sweet, you need it." He poked a bit inside and she started rocking against him harder. "That's it now. Let me get at it."

"Oh! Ugh!"

As he slipped his thumb in, at last she started shuddering and claspings his cock with firm, gripping, rhythmic pressures.

"Pour it out, hon, all over me. Mmm, you feel so fucking good." And she did. He'd not felt anything so tight and intense since he'd last been in her mouth. "*Broughen*—so *broughen*!"

He got a wee bit rough with her ass but couldn't help it. One last thrust into her pussy and he burst in her, nice and deep, yelling out because it felt so incredible. "Aye! Don't you stop! Come hard as I fill you."

Wave after rolling wave of intense pleasure swept over him as his cock jerked and thrust inside. His chest swelled with pride at having finally brought her off. He'd done for her what no man before had accomplished. Wholly possessive and downright overprotective feelings flooded his mind and heart.

He'd never produced so much cum and never had it taken with such force. She gripped tightly until another burst creamed her insides. He could feel cum drip out as he thrust a few last times.

Weak legs kept him standing when all he wanted was to lie down. He'd finished, but Jess hadn't gotten nearly enough. She'd waited a lifetime for that particular reward and he'd make sure she got right sore from enjoying it. As he pulled out of her pussy, sticky white cum followed and ran down the insides of her legs. The sight and smell of their mingled sex made his cock involuntarily jerk.

She moaned and carried on as if she'd die from the pleasure of what she felt. Her wildness transcended to him and made him contemplate things not common. Placing a foot on the center of the pants bunched at her ankles, he ordered, "Pull your feet free." When she did, he said, "Now spread those legs wide."

Damn, what a sight! He'd done a fine job of filling her. He took the small cup of spread and hooked a large dab. When he put it against the tight entrance, she tensed. "I just came from there, sweet, and you need me. Reach back and spread your ass for me so I can get at you."

"Tiernan..." she said, starting to complain.

"Do it now!" he demanded.

To his surprise, she flattened out on her stomach and reached around. Her fingers grasped her cheeks and spread them wide. Smearing the glob around, he meticulously pushed, breaching the opening to get her nice and slippery. A few long, thick fingers would slake her need. She needed to be ready to take both.

"Nay, don't let go. I said to hold yourself open."

One fingerful after the next got pressed into her until he emptied the cup. Carefully, he took two slick fingers and worked the tight muscular ring open. Sliding into her with

twice the width had her up on tiptoes with the muscles in her legs quivering. When he got all the way in, her ass strained to close. She rocketed straight into another full-blown, uncontrolled climax. She thrashed so much he had to place a palm against the bottom of her spine to hold her on the table.

He thought he'd given all he could but his cock didn't go down. Focking her with his fingers made the rest of him stay hard. Watching his greasy fingers slide in and out made him think about a different form of penetration. Jess seemed up for it and before he could reason it out, he pulled his fingers from her ass and stepped up behind her spread legs.

Grabbing the base of his cock, he rubbed the head around her opening, making sure to get it good and slick.

"Shane?"

"Aye," he replied, concentrating on not ramming into the slightly opened spot all at once. He'd need to go slow.

"No, please."

"Ah, sweet, if it starts to hurt for real, I'll stop. Give me a try and see if you don't like it."

Jessica tried wetting her lips but her mouth had gone dry from the quickened breaths and all the moaning. Coming down from the climax, she couldn't believe there'd be anything left to experience. Oh God she'd been wrong, because as Shane worked himself inside her ass, waves of trembling excitement and shaky uncertainty coursed through her blood.

"Oh!" she yelled.

All motion ceased as he ever-so-gently grasped her hips. "My fault, hon. I hear you. I never meant to hurt you. Forgive me?"

Every strained muscle in her body weakened as she lay panting against the table top. When he began to withdraw the small portion of his cock he'd gotten inside, she protested. "No, please."

"We'll give it a minute and try again. Take your time now and rest."

Since she'd relaxed, the slight intrusion no longer hurt. In truth, it never hurt to begin with. Bad memories of prior experiences made her issue the protest. How the hell could something like this feel good?

A spasm tightened her pussy and ass. "A bit more now, please," she begged.

"Give it a second or two and I'll ease out. You're too tense for me to—"

"I want you. More."

The pressure of him pushing gently forced a sob from her throat. God, she wanted to take him deep.

"I'll stop," he said.

"No!"

"Nay, stop? Or nay, don't stop?"

She bent her knees slightly and took another full, solid inch of him. Something that had previously been a travesty of pain and agony suddenly became more than tolerable.

"You sure?" he asked.

Perspiration dampened her skin from excitement and lust. She released her ass cheeks and placed her palms on the table to gain leverage so she wouldn't slide atop the wet, slick surface.

"Take me."

"You'll give it a try then?" he asked.

"Take me!" Another inch stretched her open. "Yes, hurry."

"Take a breather, hon."

He'd best rush the process because constant, low orgasmic vibrations hummed deep inside, just waiting for her to tighten up. If that happened again, she'd explode into climax and he'd never gain another inch. If she managed to hold all of him when it happened, she'd wager the experience would at least compare to her first true climax. She couldn't remember anything else in life feeling better.

Purposely calming herself, she tried to remain still and relaxed as Shane slowly worked his cock inside.

"Almost there, hon," he said, massaging her ass cheeks, holding her open.

When at last she'd taken him, she felt too full to breathe properly. He began sliding from her and she cried out. "Shane, please hold still!"

He groaned and his fingers sank into her cheeks. He shifted and she felt the slight movement through every centimeter of her ass and pussy.

"Ach!" He pressed against her and she tightened. "Jess!"

He didn't pull out but the pressure eased. Large hands grasped her hips as he pushed in firm against her ass a second time. The ensuing humping motion sent her headlong into gripping, spiraling waves of climax. Her hand balled into a fist before winding up in her mouth. She bit down so she wouldn't scream from the pleasure.

She recalled thrashing, crying out and feeling lightheaded as nothing made sense but the next moment of ecstasy. She soared and savored every exquisite throb of delight until he ground against her and came. As he did, endearing, deep sounds of repletion and immense satisfaction rumbled from him. She couldn't stop the sounds slurring from her own mouth, mirroring those he made. No words or noises would ever be enough to relay the magnificence of the experience.

It took a long time to drop down from the euphoric high. When she did, he eased out. He grasped her shoulders and gently pulled until she stood in front of him. He cuddled and rubbed and touched her while placing kisses along the side of her face. Eventually, he took a napkin, spread it on the table and lifted her. Very gently, he

placed her down and spread her legs. He stepped close, took her face between his palms and stroked her cheeks.

She stared into his eyes, couldn't look away because she'd never witnessed anything remotely similar to the penetrating gaze. He said very seriously, "I'd give my life for you."

An emotion surrounded him and the longer she studied it, the stronger it grew. She let go of her defenses and felt what he felt. The intense sentiment rose from his depths. She could sense its origin and was fascinated a being could feel something so extreme. Her heart ached and beat quickly as her blood stirred and rushed. She tilted her head, needing another angle from which to scrutinize him.

A realization came to her and she spoke without forethought. "And I'd give my life for you."

She would. And if her heart were needed to keep his beating, she'd gladly hand it over. Tears gathered in her eyes and she hadn't the slightest notion why the moisture bothered to surface. Perhaps it was his overwhelming, extremely gentle presence.

"You're not of me tribe, Jess, but you know what I'm telling you, don't you?"

She did. He believed they'd been fated to be bound together for all times. She somehow knew he equated the strong emotions to love. She reached up to stroke his face. His eyes closed as if savoring her touch. She'd never been regarded in such a manner. She'd never been loved.

"Do you feel a bit of something for me?" he asked, his gray eyes opening to gaze at her.

"I do but I'm uncertain exactly what. I've a strong urge to hold you and..." She suddenly felt foolish and couldn't finish what she'd been about to say.

"And?" he asked, stroking her arms before turning her chin up.

"To hold and protect you. You've no need of me for that. It's ridiculous."

"You'd feel the need to protect someone you care about."

She thought about it and silently agreed.

"The holding part is easy to understand. You want me close." He seemed to comprehend a great deal about her, perhaps having more insight than she possessed. Even in the prison, he sensed when she'd become nervous or hesitant and put her at ease.

"I'm confused," she admitted. Everything about him attracted her. In some way, she'd been overly engaged by him since she'd first seen him.

"Let me help. We'll start with what's easy. I'll tell you how I feel, what I want and we'll see if you might not want something similar."

"All right."

"All unions on Braugh come from a love match. No marriages happen for materialistic gain of any nature as they do on other planets. Over time, men of Braugh evolved in such a way that conscious thought really isn't part of choosing a life

companion. We know when we've found a gal to match. It happens on many levels within us. Jess, everything in me tells me you're my equal."

"You don't know me."

"Not too much about your circumstance or history. My instincts tell me that on a prime level, we're suited. It's not common to know such a thing in so short a time. I'd been taught when the feelings surfaced I'd know what they meant. I wondered if I'd ever feel such for a gal. I do, right now, for you."

"And what does that all really mean? You have feelings for me and – what?"

"I want to take you as me wife."

"Again, what does that entail?"

"I want to hold you and give you happiness. I want to share simple pleasures as well as the more complex ones." He smiled and she placed her hand over his heart. "Simply put, I'd cherish you for all times."

In truth, she could envision herself liking that sort of relationship. It sounded so easy with many benefits. He knew a great deal of things not familiar to her. He wasn't a youth and perhaps knew more about love than she ever would.

"Would you take me, Jess?"

She'd never been in the position to *take* a thing! "What specifically are you asking me?"

"I've explained what I feel. I'm yours if you'll have me. The decision lies with you, hon. If you agree to a union, we'll be together. If you're unsure, nothing will change."

"Nothing?"

His smile grew. "Well maybe. Slightly. I'd have to try harder to convince you to agree. I'm a very determined man in many ways. I'd not give up on you without a big effort first. I'll not ask you again though. I've declared what's inside me. It's your right to reject me outright. Or if you make up your mind to have me later, you'd need to tell me."

She'd never remotely considered being anyone's wife. She mentally reached out and opened herself to experience all he felt. She found countless things stirring his insides. He wanted to hold her gently, feel her against his skin. He yearned to bring her pleasure. He also wanted something from her in return. He desperately wanted a small portion of what he felt mirrored back to him. She cared for him already, more than any other being she'd known.

"I'll stay with you," she said.

His eyes closed and he knelt down. He took her hands into his, bowed his head and said, "May we learn from each other, forgive mistakes, forge a righteous path together and exist in harmony."

He looked up and smiled. "I know you don't make promises and I won't ask one of you now. For the time being, would you try to care for me a bit and trust in me?"

She could do that and nodded. She greatly admired his ability to commit and his willingness to overlook her inability to do the same thing.

He stood, took her face carefully into his hands and bent forward. Against her lips, he said, "Jess, let me see what a wife tastes like."

"We're married?"

"Aye, by Braugh standards, all that's needed is the commitment. We've such between us now, don't we?"

"I believe we do."

Opening for him, she discovered the burning passion of a husband. His emotions engulfed her and she felt dual tears slip from her eyes because of the potent sentiment oozing from him. All those lofty feelings for her?

She became still and focused on the sudden darkness surrounding him.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Jess?"

She studied him while blinking and trying to make sense of the unexpected vision. She saw a small boy with dark hair and the most beautiful gray eyes. He couldn't breathe and lay deathly still. Her blood chilled as a woman's mournful wails filled her head. Information flooded her mind and the vision made sense.

She said, "Contact Braugh. Speak to your mother."

"I'll speak to her and me Da after we make it from Theazia alive."

"Now. Your mother needs to know you and Finn are safe. She can't stand not knowing with Devin hurt."

His hands drifted to her shoulders. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Contact your mother." The woman's grief battered Jessica until she wanted to cry herself. She'd never experienced such anguish. His mother feared for three children when she only really needed to worry about her youngest.

"Jess..."

"Contact your mother! Please!" she begged.

He released her and gathered his clothes. The vision faded as Shane walked quickly to the wall console, depressed a button and said, "Finn?"

After a moment, she heard, "Aye, Shane."

"We need to go to communications. It's time Braugh knows we're safely off Doxyn."

"I thought we weren't going to tell them until after. You said —"

"I know what I said, but I changed me mind."

Chapter Eight

When Shane finished explaining the course of events since the trade with Doxyn to his parents, his Ma wept. His Da said nothing, standing arrow straight, looking proud of his sons. Many fam of the warriors with him stood in the background to hear the transmission. They worried about the other men, just as his Ma and Da worried about him and Finn.

"And what of Devin? How does he fare?" Shane blurted out.

His Ma could be an emotional gal, but the flood of tears wasn't common. She appeared barely able to hold herself together. He couldn't stand not knowing if his wee brother was hurt.

Their Da stepped forward. "Why are you asking about Dev, son?"

"A gal told me to ask after him. He's well?"

"No," his Ma said, sniffing pitifully as she wiped her eyes. "Med tech's making him so, but he's not well just yet."

"What happened?"

"He was," she said, before her hand covered her mouth.

"He drown," his father said, finishing for her.

Shane didn't react outwardly, but Finn almost doubled up. Thankfully, he pulled himself together.

His father's chin rose an inch as he placed his hand on his wife's shoulder. "Charles O'Shea found him and beat the water from his lungs. Got him to breathe before taking him to industry side for medical. He's coming around now and the doc says he'll be well in a time."

Both he and Finn remained silent. Dev just turned five and the wee boy's intelligence surpassed any of the Tiernans'. He'd been gifted with knowledge beyond his years. Having to transport him to the other side of Braugh for treatment told how badly he'd been damaged. No wonder their Ma couldn't stop crying.

Shane finally asked, "He'll come back to us a whole boy?"

"Aye," his Da replied. Their Da wouldn't tolerate anything less. "And what of me eldest sons? You plan on coming home to me whole men after fetching yon slimwit General?"

"Aye," Finn said.

"Good boys!" His Da changed these last years. After almost losing their Ma, he found good things in life and rejoiced openly. "You'll be good and drunk within the

hour of touching Braugh soil. Then we'll find you some gals to quench a certain thirst you may have."

"Richard!" their Ma said, slapping his arm. "Fam are present here. Speak naught of such things in front of them."

"Pardon, Missus." He looked at the screen and winked.

Shane and Finn laughed outright when their Da rolled his eyes toward their Ma, as if sometimes she acted too proper.

Finn piped up suddenly. "You won't believe what Shane's bringing home."

That comment drew their Ma's attention. "Tell us, son. I don't like surprises these days."

"Dumbass," Shane said quietly while pretending to clear his throat.

Finn didn't take the hint to shut his mouth. "He's bringing home the gal he chose to wed."

All present on the screen dropped their mouths open. They looked as if he'd suddenly grown a third eye.

"What's the problem?" Shane demanded.

He didn't think all the staring in his direction was funny at all. Finn however, laughed his ass off.

His Da stumbled for words. "In all these years, you haven't found a gal and now... What I mean to say, son, is you were taken from here in chains. And you're en route to help Gov. When did you have time to find a gal?"

"She's a Gov soldier," Finn answered.

If he said one word about the incident in the prison to the fams back home...

Finn continued with, "She was most brave when she rescued us. She was clever too, sneaking past the bastard Doxyn, tricking them and then standing shoulder to shoulder with Braughmen while fighting our way out."

"Nay!" their mother said, her eyes rounding in disbelief. "A gal that belongs to Gov? A soldier! For my Shane?"

"Ach, Ma, you haven't seen Shane's Jess. For that matter, we'll bring home her crew as well. Both Zoe and Angela agreed to come back with us."

"Since when?" Shane asked.

Finn turned to him. "Both gals know Jess is downright set on getting to Blue. If she demands it, they'll go with her. She looks to their best interests though, and I figure if they wanted to go to Braugh, Jess wouldn't cause a fuss. Blue doesn't hold appeal to them like it does for Jess. Maybe I spoke out of turn and Jess isn't coming. Eh?"

"She'll go where I go."

"How can you be so sure? She's a right spirited gal."

"She'll go where I go."

"Son," their Da said, "if she's Gov, they may have different plans for —"

"If we make it off Theazia, I'll have Jess with me when I come home."

"Shane – sweet," his Ma started to say.

"She's me wife. She'll obey me before she does anything for the damn Gov. She'll go where I go. Get me?"

Again, he witnessed the open mouths and stares. This time, Finn's mouth hung agape too. Shane placed his hands on his hips, lowered his head and regretted spitting his news out like that. After being taken from the prison, dealing with Bragg and fucking Jess every chance he got, he'd simply been too tired to think straight.

"You're wed?" his Ma asked.

No wonder they all appeared stunned. Once the fact had been verbally repeated, he could hardly believe it himself. He'd also never been more certain about anything in his life. "Aye."

"Jess agreed?" Finn asked.

"I wouldn't have a wife if she didn't."

Finn slapped his shoulder before laughing. Those watching on Braugh gave a cheer. When they settled and the congratulations quieted, his Ma asked, "You said she's from Blue?"

"Aye."

His Ma looked strange as did some of the other gals present.

Shane asked, "A problem with that, Ma?"

"Nay," she said, shaking her head.

He worried for a moment she didn't like the idea of a gal from Blue. *What the hell is wrong with Blue?*

His Ma smiled. "She's one lucky gal to have me eldest. Jess Tiernan has a nice ring to it." Her eyes filled with tears.

With one eve separating his men from Theazia, they needed to make plans. Shane stood quietly for a moment scanning the faces of his fam and those of his tribe. Each of them was precious. He sorely missed home.

"Braugh," he said, loudly, forcefully, "your sons, brothers, das and tribesman will make you proud. We'll fight smart and strong for you and earn the watchful eye of Gov so we can live in peace." Their people bowed heads so he could give a short prayer. "In our absence, watch over the wee ones and those who've grown old. Take care of each other and pray for our safe return. On the morrow, drink to our health and let all Braughmen who fetch brave Gov from their suffering, come back to you alive and whole."

Those on Braugh raised their eyes. Opening his hand and slowly passing his palm in front of his face, he said, "If it takes me blood to keep Braugh safe, so be it."

Finn mimicked the age-old gesture that relayed conviction and repeated, "Aye, if it takes me blood to keep Braugh safe, so be it."

"Go with our hearts and best wishes." The words came back to them from each of those present on the screen.

He hit the button and ended the transmission. The flicker before the screen blackened signaled they'd been monitored. It mattered not. Shane didn't really give a shit that Bragg watched and listened. In fact, it'd be best for Bragg to know he no longer had power over Jess. A husband's claim surpassed any Gov assertion.

Finn said, "Prior to making a plan, I'd like to welcome Jess to the tribe."

"Nay," he replied, "give her some time to get used to things. She wasn't keen on going to Braugh before we got personal."

"And then she agreed?"

"Not really. She accepted our union. We didn't speak about much else."

"Shane?"

They left the room and began walking to quarters. "Aye?"

"Don't take offense to a question, okay?"

"Dumbass, you asking practically guarantees I'll take offense."

"Then remember I'm your brother and have a similar interest in a similar gal. I'm not making reference to the incident at the Doxyn prison either."

Shane sighed, knowing where the conversation would likely go. "All right, ask."

"Was it good? You know, getting *personal* with Jess?"

"Nay."

"Nay?"

"It's like nothing I've felt before."

"I get you."

As they walked he could practically see the wheels turning in his brother's head. He wondered if Finn tried holding Zoe yet. If he did and Zoe didn't respond, he pitied the gal. Tiernans weren't known for backing down and with Finn's interest, he'd likely try a different tactic. Poor Zoe.

"And one more question," Finn said. "How did you know to ask about Devin?"

Actually, he planned on finding that out the moment he saw Jess again. Some of the older gals on Braugh possessed the strange ability to see outside of the here-and-now. *Beyond sight* wasn't common. If Jess held such intuition, he'd find a way to cope. The odd ability made his skin crawl a bit, but he'd get over it. He'd have to.

"Jess insisted I check home. She said Ma was upset about Dev."

"With fucking and training, when did you have time to tell her about our fam?"

"I didn't. I never mentioned Dev by name."

Finn looked unsettled. "Shat, what the hell does that mean?"

"The word is *shit*. Jess poked around on the data link to get some history on Braugh. Could be she found things of a personal nature, but I doubt it."

"It was in jest, the comments about her being an angel. I didn't mean it for real." The notion of Jess seeing *visions*, didn't seem to sit well with Finn either.

"She's flesh and blood like us. She's no dead spirit floating about. I'll get to the bottom of it." And he would when he got two minutes alone with her, which didn't seem likely when the ship tilted sideways.

"What do you think?" Finn asked.

"I think we're close to Theazia and they don't like Gov ships in their district."

When both of them were thrown toward the wall, he stopped Finn's head from smashing against it. "Careful, I thought you wanted to come with me in the morn."

"Do you think Bragg knows to stop a warring ship from getting away? It could cheapen our attempt on the morrow."

"Aye, he knows."

"You should be on the bridge."

"Bragg let me have Jess. He didn't say much over the knife in his chest either. I doubt he'd let me take control of his ship too." After a bit, they felt *Efface* answer by deploying weapons. "Took him long enough!"

"Maybe a tech maneuver Gov teaches. Who knows?"

"And maybe Bragg worked on spit shining his medals before he went to the bridge."

Crewmen ran past as Shane helped Finn stand. The thought of Jess being tossed about the cabin and getting hurt hastened his blood. It figured he'd find the right gal to marry in the middle of a mess. It didn't seem like an appropriate time for a man to be new to a wife. He settled his mind and remembered that more often than not, he was sensible. Besides, nothing would happen to her. She'd remain safe while they completed the mission. Also, he believed she'd been through enough. With everything that'd happened to her, she was due for a change in her circumstances. One gal could have only so much bad luck.

* * * * *

After the bandit ships that had attacked *Efface* were efficiently destroyed, Jessica found herself at odds emotionally. Bragg gathered Braughmen and *throwbacks* into the large conference room and began detailing all that needed to take place. She, Zoe and Angela stood in a corner listening. It seemed highly unusual that Bragg not only allowed their presence but seemed to speak to them at times. She didn't like the plan he sketched but no one asked her opinion. Shane shouldn't be risking Braughmen for this. Governance soldiers should take care of their own.

Bragg detailed a relatively simple plan. Shane and his men would be aboard *Shadow*, the small anti-detection prototype ship, waiting for the diversion. Bragg promised a distraction so Theazians in the area would be scouting a crash site, oblivious

to Shane's landing. Once the bulk of creatures had been drawn away from the laboratory, Shane could land, breach the complex and begin the hunt for Ryker.

His main purpose would be to determine if the General and crew were worth saving. She wondered how Governance could trust an outsider to conclude the fate of its people. If Shane deemed they were sane, *Efface* would descend to transport groups of Ryker's crew aboard. The Governance armada would keep the rescue efforts safe by pounding any ship trying to gain air, or any land attack attempting to thwart the rescue. If Shane discovered Ryker and the crew had been tortured past a point of rehabilitation, the Braughmen would turn into executioners and lay them to rest. The armada would then guarantee Shane a safe retreat.

Heros or assassins, which would they be noted for? Either way, Shane was very brave and somewhat slimwitted to take on the mission. She wondered what motivated him.

Having the session draw to conclusion Shane said, "I'll not take the lives of children regardless of their condition, Bragg. You follow me?"

"There were only five, Sir. If you must, bring them back."

"And they'll not be rescued for you to kill. They're children. You'll promise to work with them regardless of what shape they're in."

"You'll destroy men and woman but not children? What possible hope could they have if the adults are deemed too far gone?"

"If a man or gal is broken of reason, their chances of a normal life are far less than that of a wee one. You'll give them time to heal. If you don't want them, I'll take them to Braugh."

"We have an accord, Sir."

"Aye," Shane said as he stood. "That we do, Bragg. For now. Don't forget you and me have other business to settle when I'm back aboard."

Bragg smiled and Jessica swallowed the lump in her throat. "Of course, Sir. I'm looking forward to it."

She'd known Commander Bragg for many years. His confident smile and the undercurrent in his words were unmistakable. She knew the man had no intention of facing Shane. In order for him to avoid the confrontation, Shane would need to be removed from the equation. Bragg would certainly wait until after the mission on Theazia. Is that when he planned to do it, after Shane did all the dirty work?

"Jess," Shane said, drawing her from thought. Most of the others had already left the room.

He held out his hand and she walked slowly toward him, keeping her gaze on Bragg.

"Storm," Bragg said. She stopped short of Shane. "You've something you'd like to discuss?"

She thought and stared, contemplating whether or not to voice suspicions. What good would it do if she accused him of some form of trickery? He'd simply deny it. "No, Sir."

"I understand your Mr. Tiernan will leave you in the safety of his men while he accomplishes this mission."

She glanced at Shane. "So I've been told, Sir."

"Is Mr. Tiernan's company agreeable to you?"

She wasn't up for whatever game Bragg wanted to play. "I'm not sure I understand the question, Sir."

"It's really quite simple, young lady. I'm asking if getting used by Tiernan is tolerable to you."

Shane's hands drew into fists. There wasn't a need for him to get so riled. Bragg wanted a reaction from her, not him.

"Forgive me, Sir and let me rephrase my statement. I understood your words and meaning completely. I meant only to say that I can't comprehend why you'd ask. You never cared how we felt when you'd pandered us before."

Bragg pushed against the table to stand. The furious motion unsettled her. The only reason she tempted his anger was because Shane remained a short distance away. She'd never been so bold and in a way, tested her new status as a wife. She'd no right to do such a thing and regretted it.

"You'll mourn using that mouth to hurl insults, Storm. I guarantee it."

"Again, forgive me. As I understand it, Mr. Tiernan isn't paying for me. I guess in this instance, you'd not been pandering. As a matter of fact, Commander, you didn't offer me until after Mr. Tiernan *took* me."

If Bragg ever got her alone, she'd require a week in medical. She'd never seen him more enraged. When she focused on Shane, she swiftly walked the slight distance and grabbed hold of his arm to stop him from going after Bragg. Who was she kidding? She'd never stop him. "Finn, Reilly!" she called. They quickly entered the room. "Shane needs to leave now. Right now."

It took a full minute for him to loosen up. His hand cupped the back of her head before drawing her close. He kissed her forehead, turned and took her from the room, gently rubbing her back to keep her moving. She'd handled the situation poorly.

"What was that about?" Reilly asked.

"My fault. I'm sorry. I targeted Bragg, not you," she said, looking up at Shane.

He didn't reply, just squeezed her shoulder and brought her closer as they walked. Zoe zipped around Finn to walk backward so she could talk. "What did you say to him, Jessica?"

"Nothing appropriate, I'm afraid."

"At least we won't pay for it this time."

"You don't think so, huh?"

Zoe smiled, which was rare. "I know so. Finn told me on Braugh they don't beat, stab, maim or otherwise intentionally hurt women. He promised."

"You've been asked to go?"

"Yes," she replied, beaming with delight.

"You've agreed?"

"Yes. Angela too."

Jessica would be going to Blue alone. Quite happy for her friends, she couldn't stop the equally distasteful sadness that descended.

Spinning to walk beside her, Zoe lifted Jessica's arm and slipped beneath, placing the arm across her shoulder. "Are you angry? I know you wanted us to go home too."

"Of course not." Jessica was amply accustomed to never having situations turn out as she wished.

"Don't worry, Zoe," Finn said. "Jess will get used to Braugh fast with you and Angela there."

"I'm going to Blue," Jessica said.

"Braugh," Shane and Finn said in unison.

She planted her feet and her escorts stopped to stare. Glancing from one to the other, she said very slowly, "Blue. Home."

Finn's mouth fell open as he looked at Shane. Shane stared at her and said quietly, "Get to quarters." He never glanced away to see if the others followed his order. When they left, he held her gaze as he grasped her upper arms. "Your place is with me now. You go where I go."

Her eyebrows rose. "Zoe and Angela were asked and allowed to make a decision, but I'm not offered the same courtesy?"

"Nay."

"Why?"

"I'll ask your opinion on many things in the future, Jess, but I've been too long from home. After a time, I'll take you to Blue to see your fam."

"Thank you so much for the promise of future generosity."

"You'll need to stop speaking in that manner. You say one thing and mean another."

"By all means then, let me say it slowly so you'll understand. I do *not* have to go *where you go*, Tiernan. Is it clear now?"

"Aye," he said, walking her slowly backward until she bumped into a wall. "I hear what you say but don't agree. The hold on you stems from me claim as your husband."

"Pardon?"

"I'll be patient with you and explain as these things come up. You'll get the hang of it."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"We'll be together which means you'll go where I go. As your husband, I won't tolerate anything less."

"Damn it!" she yelled. She knew of military marriages where a husband served on one vessel while the wife served on another. Spouses also lived on different planets if necessary. She'd never really thought she'd ever step foot on Braugh! If having a husband meant going to his home...

"You don't want me for a wife after all, Tiernan! Think about it for two seconds." She'd laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation if it wasn't so tragic.

"It's done, Jess. Over. Settled. I wanted you, you accepted me and we're wed."

He wasn't a youth. He was man-sized, full grown and showed intelligence every once in a while. God, how and why would he let this happen!

"And you want me to go to Braugh and – what? Meet your family?"

"Aye."

Tears filled her eyes because of the thoughts running through her head. If he lived to make it off Theazia, she'd explain why he wouldn't want to ruin the rest of his life. "And I'll meet your mother."

"Aye, all of me fam. Is that what's worrying you?"

"You should be worried about it!"

"Why?"

"Very nice to meet you, Mrs. Tiernan," she began, flipping her hand over as if conversing with his mother. "Yes, yes, I have many fine qualities."

She placed her hand on her heart as if responding to someone talking. "Oh by the heavens, no, I don't know a thing about what a normal being does on the day-to-day. I can however, tell you how to go down on a man."

"Jess!"

"Or the many vast ways in which to kill a man."

"Stop, Jess!"

"Why would your son want me? Let me detail my experiences with all the men before him."

"Jessica!" He shook her before bringing her hard against his chest. He accomplished it just in time to muffle the sob that escaped. "Shh, sweet. Stop now."

"Bastard!" she whispered, letting the nightmare unfold in her mind.

A big, warm hand rubbed her back as he bent so his breath filled her ear. "They'll not judge you. I'll tell me Ma and Da when they need to know."

"They'll be so proud of you." She couldn't cry. She'd gone from Bragg to Tiernan without even a morn between. She'd traded one life of disgrace to enter another where she could also feel shame on a daily basis. "From bad to worse."

"What's worse?"

"Let me go now before you hate me."

"I'll keep you, I think. And I'll never hate you." When he tried to kiss her, she turned away. "Nay, Jess, don't make this eve one of anger. I need to know you're settled and have things right in your head."

She shuddered, realizing he'd risk his life in the morn. More than that, his tribesmen would count on him to make good decisions and keep them all safe. He asked she not take his mind from the upcoming mission. He needed a quiet eve so he could face what lay ahead. She cared very much for him, even though he wasn't too shiny sometimes. Besides, she could be a widow by noon on the morrow.

Stroking his face, she said, "I'm sorry. You're right. We'll speak when you're back aboard."

"Aye," he said, smiling, "we've a lifetime for such talks."

"When will you be shown how to pilot the *Shadow*?" She brushed hair from his forehead but it fell right back into his eyes. He had that boyish quality again.

"Early. You're all right now, sweet?"

She nodded. At that exact moment she felt more in control.

"Promise?" he asked.

She looked down and tried to do it—make a promise but couldn't. Nothing seemed right. Something deep inside gnawed and turned her stomach. She didn't want to lie.

His fingertip touched the tip of her nose. "I forgot you don't make promises. Forgive me for asking. In time you'll do it."

He kissed her gently before placing his arm across her shoulders. Crewmembers of *Efface* glanced in their direction as they maneuvered corridors. Many had seen her previously but never with a man. They all knew how Bragg sometimes used her. She hung her head so she wouldn't see any of the strange expressions they gave Shane. She hated to bring questioning looks upon him because they walked together. He might not understand then, but he would in time. A Braugh warrior doesn't marry a *throwback*.

Chapter Nine

"You're really quite a woman, Storm," Bragg said.

Jessica's eyes flew open as she sat up in the bed. She remembered Shane leaving her a short time ago and couldn't fathom how Bragg wound up in the cabin.

He spoke loudly from across the room. "I can't believe you cast a spell on a man like Tiernan and he actually took you as a wife."

Two crewmen walked in carrying Zoe and Angela. The men dumped her crew on the floor. Jessica threw the covers back and knelt down to check them over. Both were alive but unconscious. The two guards returned with Reilly between them. His eyes were barely open and he couldn't walk by himself. He was thrown on the floor at Bragg's feet.

Jessica ran to him and rolled him partially onto his side before one of Bragg's boots caught her in the shoulder and shoved. She lay sprawled and unmoving as Bragg stepped close to stand over her.

"You'll need to dress and ready yourself," he said

"Tell me what you did to my crew and the Braughmen."

"As you get ready."

Reilly moved slightly before grabbing Bragg's ankle. He couldn't get Bragg off balance. He appeared very weak. Bragg took his gun from the holster and shot Reilly in the back.

When Jessica tried crawling to him, Bragg pointed the gun at Zoe. "Now, Storm. Hurry."

She stood, grabbed clothes and began pulling them on. "Why?"

"You've been quite a handful of late and your misbehavior last eve gave me an idea."

"It'd be a first, Sir."

"Best you silence that mouth of yours and do as I say if you'd like little Cross and Drew to remain alive. It depends solely on you."

As she dressed, she asked, "Why are you doing this?"

"I won't lose you. Let me explain what Tiernan will be told and you'll see how I'll keep you."

His image blurred and she shook her head.

Bragg's hands rested on his hips. "Cross and Drew followed your orders. They drugged the Braughmen so you could take your ship to Blue. I'd wager Tiernan won't look favorably upon your actions, running off the second his back's turned. When

Reilly here fought the drug and tried to stop you, you shot him in the back. I believe your husband will be most displeased. Don't you agree?"

"He won't believe it."

"The other Braughmen left on board won't remember exactly what happened, so they won't be able to corroborate a thing. That's when I'll explain that I monitored the ruckus in this area and sent men to check it out. He'll be most surprised to find out you shot a private while escaping. Shooting a Governance soldier supersedes any claim a husband might assert."

"You'll let Zoe and Angela live?"

"Yes, I'll keep the three of you."

"They'll tell what happened. They won't go along with it, Sir."

"Again," he said, sighing, "you're wrong. You know better. As for the other Braughmen—do you think they'll want Cross or Drew after drugging their kinsman? I think not."

Tucking in her shirt, she couldn't stop her hands from shaking. "What next? If Tiernan believes you, he'll most certainly want nothing to do with any of us. Will you also have me stand trial for killing a Governance soldier and one of Tiernan's crew?"

"Of course not. Once we deposit Tiernan and his men back on Braugh, *if* they make it back to *Efface*, I would imagine life would go on much as it has in the past."

She thought seriously about killing Bragg just then. She wouldn't go back to being used. A court-marshal and hanging would be preferable to being given out by Bragg to men he wished to gain favor with.

He held out his hand. "Come with me now, Storm. We have to hurry."

She walked beside him, stepped over the fallen crewman in the hall as the two soldiers followed, weapons drawn and targeting her. "Where to?"

"Your ship. Tiernan and the others are hovering over Theazia. I promised a diversion and you'll provide it. Your ship's been programmed to crash at the predetermined location. I'll apprise Tiernan of your escape and he'll be able to monitor your progress. I'll explain to him what havoc you wreaked here prior to stealing the ship. And of course you didn't know we planned to use *your* vessel for the diversion prior to you absconding with it. I'll transport you back to *Efface* safely before impact. The display should convince Mr. Tiernan of your treachery."

"You're quite the schemer, Sir. Well done."

"You surprise me. No debate on the matter?"

"You have Braughmen and my crew at your whim. I wish to have this over so Tiernan and his landing party can complete their mission and come safely back aboard. I'll comply."

"Good girl."

She immediately began processing options. The first order of business would be to get shields up on the ancient vessel to deflect Governance transport. She'd have more

than thirty minutes to make adjustments prior to impact. Wiring schematics clouded her thoughts as they entered the docking bays.

Before long, Jessica found herself alone on the ship and in space. The first hail from Bragg came over the speaker. Tiernan had probably already heard the lies and would be monitoring what happened. They'd taken her ability to communicate so that prior to impact, she wouldn't be able to make a plea to Tiernan. To fix communications would waste precious time. She focused on getting shields up.

Ripping a chunk of wiring from under a console, she heard Bragg say, "Storm, you won't be able to divert the course that's been set. Transport back to *Efface* immediately."

She kept working and ignored him.

Tiernan's voice crackled over the speaker. "Jess, transport back and wait for me there." His words were filled with controlled rage. He'd a right to be angry. He believed she'd killed Reilly and tried sneaking off without facing him.

"Bragg," Tiernan said, "take her from the damn ship!"

"You're correct, Mr. Tiernan. Storm, prepare for transport."

Splicing two wires together, she felt the power drain as the shield came up. When the wires arced and she received a mind-numbing shock, she crawled from beneath the panel.

"Storm!" Bragg bellowed. "You'll remove shields now! We've programmed a repeating distress call in Theazian language to allow your ship to get in. If you get closer to the planet with shields up, they'll shoot you down."

She'd suspected that. The only shield up on the poor ship was the one riding above. Theazians wouldn't detect it. It also allowed her time to program coordinates for a transfer to where *she* wanted to go on Theazia. She began frantically working to accomplish it.

She'd been paying close attention as Bragg pointed out locations on Theazia the eve before. With any luck, the area she chose to materialize would be close to the laboratory. She'd get there well before Tiernan and could begin the search. She might actually do him some good before he strangled her for killing his man.

The other option would be to transfer to the *Shadow* and place herself within an arm's length of Tiernan. With the impending mission, there wasn't time for explanations and her presence would distract him. Also, if she managed to convince him of her innocence, that wouldn't bode well for the three Braughmen and her crew on *Efface*. *He probably won't believe me anyway.* Why would he?

The hum of the engines dropped and her heart sank. Did Bragg find a way to gain power over the ship even with the shield in place? The control panel showed a single engine failure. If she couldn't get it back on line, she'd never generate the power needed for transport. It was either the shield or transporter—not both with the loss of an engine.

The alarm sounded and the lights dimmed. Security lighting replaced the brighter lights and cast the command center in an eerie haze of red. The second engine rumbled under the strain of keeping the craft on course. She might not need to worry about much of anything. If the second engine died, she'd do an amazing free fall to the planet. She also wouldn't be able to transport or disengage the shield.

Thinking the scenario through for a moment, regardless of having the ship fully operational or not, she'd create a diversion. If she blew up with it, there wouldn't be the problem of facing Tiernan or Bragg. She'd be free.

"Damn it, Storm," Bragg yelled, "get that engine operational! Do it now!"

She sat down tiredly in the command chair. It seemed an appropriate thing to do and the chair felt extremely comfortable. She craved a nice long nap. Nothing appealed more.

"Jess." Tiernan's voice sounded controlled, steady and without emotion. "You'll need to do something."

She was. She was sitting. The thought of him hating her twisted her stomach into a painful knot.

He said, "Would you go to the engine room now?"

She placed her hands on the arms of the chair and pushed herself up. In a trance, she did what the very pleasant voice asked. She walked unhurriedly to the engine room and scanned the silent engine. It'd been the same one that'd bitten Zoe. The coupling had come undone again and she trudged around to the side of it and sat down. Without enthusiasm, she picked up the wrench and began working.

"A bit faster, Jess."

After the coupling held together, she stretched out on the floor and reached beneath. Flipping switches to bring up power, she heard stirrings inside the mammoth casing as it tried to catch. When nothing changed, she got to her feet and listened. Dropping the wrench on the floor, she walked over to the reactor, picked up the huge two-tone wrench and thought about what to do next.

"I know what to do," she said, gripping the wrench with both hands. She remembered the eve prior with Tiernan and how she'd come apart beneath him. Thirty stinking minutes of believing her life may indeed work out in some manner, made her take a swing at the reactor. *Bang!* A few hours ago, her biggest problem was either getting to Blue or meeting Tiernan's family.

"Jess!" Tiernan bellowed.

Bang! Bang! Bang! The reactor took more of her sudden fury.

"Storm! Cease this instant!" Bragg yelled.

She whirled around and targeted the dead engine to vent her rage. She beat the metal casing leaving dents from every hit. She didn't want to die. She didn't want to be Bragg's property again. She was terrified of meeting Tiernan's family and she wanted—to go—to Blue! *Bang, thud, bang, thud, thud...*

The engine grumbled to life and the wrench fell from her hands. She staggered and almost fell.

"Good gal. Now get back to the console and lower shields. You don't have much time."

Not once had he referred to her as *sweet* or *hon*. After making it to the command center, she set coordinates and waited. If she transported too soon, *Efface* would detect the transfer and could pick her up immediately. She'd need to wait until the last possible second so her escape couldn't be traced.

With nothing more to do than sit with her finger on the button, she listened to Bragg scream out edicts and consequences for non-compliance. After a certain number of them were shouted, they held little threat.

His transmission was interrupted by Tiernan. "Jess, you have ninety seconds to lower shields. Do it now." He sounded very reasonable.

Once in the planet's atmosphere, she burst through the cloud cover and viewed the land mass. It rather looked like how she imagined hell. Patches of sparse greenery were surrounded by desolate gray and black mountains. Multiple volcanos had thick clouds of vapor hovering. Some had tremendous spurts of flame channeling out of the openings.

A deep, growling voice entered the cabin, ordering her to do something in a foreign tongue. *Theazians*. Everyone in the universe knew what they looked like. Having a beast close, if only its voice, created a deep shudder in her arms and legs.

"Twenty seconds, Jess. Take down the shields."

How could he sound so reasonable? He thought she killed Reilly.

She lifted her index finger and rubbed it against her thumb. *If it's meant to be...*

"Jess. Jessica!"

As the ship hurtled toward the ground, she closed her eyes, hit the button and became weightless. One's mind still worked during transport and those few seconds took forever. There was no ship now and no power to finish thrusting her to the predetermined destination. She wondered if it'd worked.

A second later, she realized she'd not only made it alive but found herself inside a massive chamber. The sound of pounding footsteps made her slide into a crease near the corner of the room. Seven-foot-tall armed beasts rushed by. How the hell did she manage not to transport herself into the middle of a wall? She'd programmed the computer to land her outside of the compound. Obviously, the ship crashing threw her adjustments off slightly.

Once the Theazians passed, she glanced around. Finally, something to smile about! Weapons galore lined the walls and she helped herself. *Oh my, pulse rifles, evaporators – a mini HERF cannon!* The high energy radio frequency launcher could come in handy if she got cornered.

She slung the straps of multiple weapons over her shoulders, choosing two *finder guns* for quick defense. She left the area and swayed to the hallway beyond. She wouldn't move very fast, but she'd sure as hell make an impression on any Theazian she stumbled across.

To her dismay, the halls were easily navigated and deserted. She'd anticipated fighting her way through the structure. Her luck wasn't Generally this good. The temperature inside the place made her shiver. She'd expected extreme heat because the average temperature on the planet stayed over one hundred and twenty degrees. The echo of voices drifted to her and she followed them. Theazians didn't make the noise.

As she took a stairway down, the temperature decreased as wails and moans grew louder. A smell assaulted her and she took air through her mouth to avoid it. She'd thought the Doxyn prison smelled vile, but this was worse. After she carefully rounded a corner, a beast spotted her and rushed forward. She let a finder gun drop and grabbed a pulse rifle. A mere gun wouldn't do the job. She brought it up and fired. He kept coming. It took three shots before his head splattered the wall. Another Theazian appeared. Three quick shots to his chest left him as dead as the first.

Her boot slipped in gore as she stepped over them. She followed the continuous, low moans of tortured souls until she entered a massive room. She froze, temporarily unable to mentally digest what her eyes saw within. Long rows of cages held beings. The scraps of clothing covering some resembled Governance uniforms. She'd been inside prisons, thought she knew what to expect. Her fingers and toes grew numb as she scanned the area.

Approaching the first cage, she gained a clear view of what was inside. The man had only one eye. A dreadful hole sat where the other should be. "General Ryker. Is he alive, Sir?"

The man stared and urinated where he stood. She moved on. A man and woman occupied the second cage. The man's head was cradled in the woman's lap with old blood covering the filthy dressing around his forehead.

Jessica asked, "Is General Ryker alive?"

The woman started shaking and nodded before pointing.

"Help is on the way, Miss. Stay calm."

Cage after cage held Governance soldiers who bravely pointed out the General's whereabouts. After seeing what'd been done to them, she decided the treatment she'd endured at Bragg's hand was pleasurable in comparison. She'd never whine about her lot in life again. It took a great deal of time to find those with some semblance of mind to guide her, but she eventually came to a large metal door.

She twisted the massive latch. The hinges creaked as it swung open. With a rifle in hand and ready, she stood immobile and stared at what lay inside. A smaller cell in the corner of the room stood opened. The bodies of six Theazians lay scattered hither and yon. They'd died brutally, having their throats torn out and faces smashed. The stench of Theazian blood assailed her and she gagged.

In the middle of the blood, gore and bodies, knelt a large naked man. Punctures and long wounds laced his back. The green ooze covering him came from the monsters to blend with the crimson blood of a normal being. He remained still as death.

Her vision grew increasingly bright, as if many lights came on to glare from above. Concentrating, she heard the steady sound of someone panting. They seemed to come from within her head. Grief and rage washed into her. She could practically *taste* the emotions as her heart sped and body trembled.

Something touched her shoulder and she spun to find Tiernan's chest. When she looked up, disdainful gray eyes gazed at her. Without a word, he stripped the guns slung over her shoulders and passed the sophisticated weapons to the group of Braughmen stationed behind him. She refused to give up the *finder gun*. She wouldn't be in such a place without a weapon. Tiernan had other ideas and jerked it from her hands.

"Ryker?" Tiernan called. The man didn't move. "General Gage Ryker!"

His head slowly turned. Wild looking, huge blue eyes gazed at them without the slightest spark of recognition. His expression held not a hint of comprehension. In fact, he appeared crazed and ready to do damage. A sensation settled in her chest and squeezed. Unbearable pain gripped her insides and wouldn't let go. After a moment, she realized its source was the General.

"He's not with us," Tiernan said.

"You don't know!"

"Look at him. You saw the rest of them. Ghosts. They're fucking ghosts."

"No!"

"Aye. We don't have much time."

She reacted and ran toward Ryker, leaping over bodies while slipping through bloody puddles.

"Come back this instant!" Weapons strummed to life from the doorway.

She approached the kneeling man cautiously.

Tiernan said, "Move away. I don't have a clear shot."

She glanced back to find Tiernan, Finn and five others in the room with guns pointed in her direction. The strangest urge to remain at Ryker's back made her indecisive about the correct course of action. She couldn't understand why the urge to protect him became paramount. Common sense told her to move and she eventually did, to come to his side, leaving his back exposed.

He held something and as she stepped around, she saw a lady. His glaring and wild gaze followed Jessica's every step. Within his arms lay a very beautiful and completely dead woman. Instantly, she knew he'd caused the demise of the monsters within the room. Yet he held her so carefully, possessively. His fingers stroked her arm and thigh as if reassuring the lifeless body. Tears filled her eyes as grief and pain rolled into her

chest. Even in death, he sheltered her. His sense may be absent, but his instinct to look after the woman remained.

She dropped to her knees and studied the once beautiful woman with long, flame red hair. Her throat lay open where it'd been slit.

"Jess, move away." Tiernan's voice was closer. He and the others had come into the room.

Such pain the General felt. Such grief. Very slowly, she raised a trembling hand and reached out. She watched him for any reaction as she touched the woman's striking hair. She gazed into his eyes as she stroked. "She's quite beautiful, Sir."

The corners of his eyes flinched. Agonizing, throbbing sorrow filled him. She could plainly see and feel the emotion. She also sensed anger, urgency and apprehension. It didn't come from the man. It came from Tiernan.

Images rolled through her mind and what'd happened within the room became clear. The General held his wife. He'd seen it happen—her murder. He avenged her. The strange replay of events made her skin roughen. The whole situation seemed more a dream than reality. Strangely, the odd sensations didn't frighten her. "General Ryker?"

He blinked as if trying to make his mind work.

"I'm very sorry for your loss, Sir."

"You've come to take her, Miss?" His voice was impossibly deep. It didn't match the dark blond hair, beard and crystalline blue eyes.

"No, Sir," she said softly, stroking his forearm gently, "we've come for you and your crew."

"Don't touch him! Move away, Jess! Do it now!" Tiernan's voice was angry, deadly.

Ryker looked down and watched her fingers rub his arm. His head tilted slightly and he appeared curious. "Your touch, Miss. I thought it would be different."

"How so, Sir?" By stroking him, she felt even more connected, drawn into his pain and confusion.

"I thought when one of your kind came down to take me beyond, there'd be..."

"Sir?" Their gazes remained locked.

"Why are you here?" He looked slightly more coherent.

"To help with your rescue. Do you take my meaning? The Governance sent Braughmen to fetch you and your crew."

Intensity and intelligence flooded his expression.

"Tiernan," she said, looking over Ryker's shoulder, "the General will need something to wear."

From the bit of research she'd done, she knew Brigadier General Gage Ryker to be an important man. Those in high places within the Governance admired him. Soldiers revered him. He shouldn't leave Theazia without clothing.

"Your name and rank, Miss." He spoke with authority and power. At that moment, nothing about him resembled a senseless man. He'd come beyond the self-imposed prison in his mind to the here and now. "You wear a Governance uniform, but they're not issued in white."

"Storm, Sir. My rank—*throwback*." A General in the Serenity Governance should understand her rank. Why did he ask? "Your wife, General. May I find a blanket to wrap her in?"

His head fell forward as if he'd forgotten the woman in his arms. He kissed her forehead and struggled to his feet. Jessica also stood and stepped aside as he walked back into the small cell. With exquisite care, he laid her on the cot and covered her, stroking her head and arm before turning. "She bargained for death, Miss and received it. She'll be laid to rest here."

Tiernan came forward and held out a pair of pants. "Are you tracking what's taking place, Ryker?"

"Your name, Sir?" Ryker accepted the clothing and without further preamble, hastened to step into them and pull them up.

"Shane Tiernan of the planet Braugh."

"Mr. Tiernan, the Governance sent you?"

"Aye, Sir."

"And you're to discern my mental capacity?"

"Aye."

"I'm clear-minded. Let's get my crew out of here post haste, shall we?"

"Aye, Sir." To his men, Tiernan said, "The General wants his people. Let's make quick work of it."

Seventeen men blasted locks from cells in the outer corridor. As the Governance soldiers walked from the cages and discovered Ryker, they became alert and quick to respond. Jessica reached for a gun lying on the floor close to a dead Theazian and Tiernan caught her wrist.

"Nay, Jess, you'll not be armed."

Because you think I killed Reilly. She understood, withdrew her hand and stepped away.

The General came between her and Tiernan. "Is there a reason Miss Storm should fear you, Sir?"

With the look on Tiernan's face, there certainly was. Ryker stood slightly taller than Tiernan but suffered from a time of starvation and abuse. It'd be best if the General watched what he said. Tiernan currently had control of the situation.

Tiernan surprised her when he unwound a bit and replied, "Nay. And you'll have me pardon this once, Ryker, for your lot ain't been easy of late. I'll warn you now though, don't ever come between me and Jess again."

General Ryker stared at him, appearing to size him up. Despite his bruised body with torn skin and partially healed puncture wounds, he looked more than capable of doing battle if necessary. "If you refuse to arm her, she'll stay close to me until we're clear. Once we reach safety, Mr. Tiernan, we'll speak about Miss Storm."

Tiernan's expression grew angry and he glared at her. "Aye, Ryker, we'll have that talk. Before we do though, her name's Tiernan, not Storm. Best you know she's me wife when you tell me what's proper between us."

With that, Tiernan turned and left her standing behind the General. Now the General thought she lied. In truth, she figured Tiernan no longer wanted the claim. He'd surprised her. The General took her arm and led her from the room. A rush of shabby crew members surrounded him and he ushered them forward.

After releasing those who survived, two of Tiernan's men came to walk behind the large group. The General took the weapon handed to him. The rest of the Braughmen guided them from the laboratory with Tiernan on point. Random attacks became more frequent the longer the procession droned on.

As the line of battered beings spaced out in the caverns, two Theazians leapt down from above, one grabbing the warrior behind her. She'd no weapon and did what she could to help. When the creature lunged at Tiernan's stunned man, she kicked at its face. She placed all her weight behind the next kick and landed her boot against its throat, effectively forcing its head to snap back. The impact didn't have near the effect she'd wanted, but it'd been enough for multiple shots to throw it against the wall before blasts ended its life. The General shoved the second monster into a wall and shot it point-blank.

As one Braughman helped the other from the floor, both glared at her before resuming their spots at the back of the group. The condemning looks made her arms and legs feel heavy. Everyone stopped as Tiernan pushed through the beings. He gave her the once-over before fixing his gaze on one of his men.

The man said, "She didn't get a mark." The flat tone of his voice made it sound as though he regretted her current state of good health.

The cold surrounding her came from more than the walls. The only source of warmth emanated from the General. The loss of value to Tiernan and his men made her insides freeze up. They'd thought highly of her for a handful of hours. She shouldn't have gotten used to it. Why did it hurt so bad to have their regard taken away?

Tiernan turned and strode off, leaving her with the General. He took her arm and positioned her to walk before him. She hugged her middle and followed the others. She placed one foot in front of the other. The blasts of weapons from ahead and behind sounded distant. At times, more than twenty Theazians tried to stop them. They were cut down and stepped over as the march continued.

When they'd reached the exterior, the real battle began. Blasts from the sky as well as Braughmen and the General held off Theazians as groups of twenty made it to the transport spot to be taken aboard *Efface*. With a full-out Theazian attack focused on

them, the *Shadow* would be abandoned. Everyone would be taken directly to the larger Governance vessel.

General Ryker fought the enemy with Tiernan and the others. Storm had been pressed against a wall as men assured the safety of the small groups being transported. It didn't take long at all before Finn grabbed her arm and shuffled her forward. He said not a word as he positioned her within nineteen other beings. In fact, he didn't even make eye contact. The few other Braughmen in the group surrounding her acted similarly. It didn't matter. She'd been treated that way before. She could stand it until Tiernan left her with Bragg.

Her eyes remained downcast. Accustomed to a certain form of treatment didn't necessarily make it ache less. Damn, but she'd never been so—empty. She couldn't bear the thought of facing what lay ahead. She brought her palm to her throbbing forehead. If only her brain would go as numb as the rest of her body. A second later, she became weightless.

Chapter Ten

Shane observed the activity in the area once they boarded *Efface*. They'd taken sixty-five Gov from Theazia and not but two male children. When he questioned a member of Ryker's crew about the others, the only response he got had been a shake of a head. They probably didn't make it long.

Jess stood off to the side with eight Gov surrounding her. He'd been warned to expect her arrest and hadn't been permitted to go beyond the line of soldiers. They treated her as if she murdered the Gov president.

She didn't look right. Before transport, she held her head and slumped forward. If she'd been hurt before they found her in the lab, why didn't she speak up?

The group began walking when one of the men shoved her forward. She stumbled and fell. Shane pushed beings from his path, cleared the distance, grabbed the dumbass man by the arm and punched his face. He didn't care the guard wouldn't get up for a while either.

Shane carefully pulled Jess to her feet. When golden eyes set upon him, he released her and stepped back. If he didn't let go, he'd shake her hard enough to make her teeth rattle. He wanted answers and knew he couldn't get them straightaway.

Ryker arrived and stood next to him. "I suppose he deserved that, Sir." To the other men with Jess, he said, "You'll escort Mrs. Tiernan with the utmost decorum. Understood?"

"Sir!" they said before taking her more gently.

Ryker asked, "Mr. Tiernan, what has she done?"

He'd let Bragg explain the circumstance of her arrest. He needed to see Reilly with his own eyes before he'd truly condemn her. Even then, he wanted to hear what happened from Jess' lips. As for the Gov soldier she killed... "Bragg has your answers, Sir."

Ryker glanced over the area of milling people. He looked down and saw a wee boy looking lost. Scooping him up, he held the child close and bellowed, "Everyone will go through medical. Dr. Nare!"

A man dressed in rags came forward. "Sir?"

"I want the crew to have the best, Sir. Are you able to see to them?"

"Yes, General."

"Begin with the boys then women then men. Spend some time on a healing unit yourself."

"General?"

"Yes."

"You've taken some bad —"

"Call me after the others are seen to. I've business to attend."

"Yes, General."

The man walked away after taking the child from Ryker. When Bragg sauntered up, Ryker didn't waste time. "Commander..."

"Bragg, Sir. So very glad —"

"You and Mr. Tiernan will accompany me. I require a uniform and cabin soonest. See that Colonial LeRoy gets the same. Lead the way."

It couldn't be any more plain that Bragg didn't like being ordered about on his ship. It made Shane smile. Bragg led the General to the closest cabin and Ryker stripped out of the pants they'd found him. He walked to the relief area and made use of the sanitizer. When Ryker finished, Bragg handed him the uniform brought in the interim.

Once Ryker shaved and dressed, even having been starved, he had a look of authority about him. "Commander Bragg."

"Yes, Sir."

"I'm taking command of *Efface*. You'll accompany me to the bridge and inform your crew."

"General?"

"Have I asked a question?"

"No, Sir."

"An opinion, perhaps?"

"No, Sir."

"Then we have an understanding." Ryker left the room and they followed. As they walked corridors, Bragg eventually moved forward so that he could show the way. "Why was Mrs. Tiernan arrested, Sir?"

Bragg didn't hesitate to answer. "She murdered a private in her attempt to steal a ship and make an escape to her home planet."

"Why would she run?" Ryker asked.

"I've no notion."

"Mr. Tiernan," Ryker said, "can you enlighten me?"

"Nay. She'd been left safe in a bed when we set off to Theazia."

"Would one of you *gentlemen* explain why Mrs. Tiernan would refer to herself as a *throwback*?"

Tiernan waited for Bragg to answer. The reply should be a good one too, with a General in the Gov having to ask. He thought Jess' treatment hadn't been common.

When Bragg didn't answer, Ryker asked, "And what of a white uniform, Sir? Serenity Governance doesn't issue white uniforms. Did she make it herself?"

Bragg said not a word.

They reached the bridge and a man walked forward. Ryker asked, "LeRoy, can you see to your post?"

"Yes, Sir."

"No ill effects?"

"None, Sir."

"Good. Glad to have you at my side. Get the president for me soonest."

"Aye, General."

Within a moment, the Gov president appeared on the large screen. "Gage! I can't tell you how good it is to see you."

"Thank you, Sir."

"The others?"

"There are sixty-five aboard *Efface*, Sir."

The president looked upset. The number was small considering how many were taken. "Your wife?"

Only a muscle in Ryker's cheek twitched. "Deceased, Sir."

"I'm sorry."

"Permission to voice a request, Sir?"

"Anything."

"Military in the area?"

"Full armada, although Commander Bragg didn't make use of it to get you off that bastard planet. They're positioning themselves in flanking positions as we speak. It was foolish to attempt a rescue without backup."

"The power wasn't necessary with the Braughmen. They were most effective in getting us out."

"I saw. We might think about recruiting on Braugh."

"Yes, Sir."

"And now what of your request, Gage?" The older man held a look of admiration when speaking to Ryker.

"The destruction of Theazia, Sir."

"Total planetary annihilation?"

"Yes, a coordinated planetary strike."

"We left no survivors there?"

"No. Sixty-five lives aboard *Efface* are all that remain." Ryker's whole body grew tense as he confirmed the number of crew that'd died. Despite his lack of visible emotion, the loss of life appeared to burden him greatly.

"Granted. And Gage?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Try to get all of them. Good hunting."

"Thank you, Sir."

The screen blackened before Ryker spewed orders, which the crew immediately obeyed. The General didn't waste time calculating. He seemed to have coordinates etched in his brain as he strategically placed ships. His man LeRoy began a countdown. Without any fuss at all, Ryker gave the order and Shane watched a planet turn inside out.

The screen eventually cleared and Ryker said, "LeRoy, turn us about and head home."

"Aye, General."

Ryker stepped down from the command chair and turned to face Shane and Bragg. "Lieutenant?" he asked.

A man at a console looked to the others in the room and hesitantly stood. "Yes, General?"

Ryker continued to stare at Bragg. "Mr. Tiernan, this concerns your wife. I'll broach the subject in the open. If at any time you wish to leave, please do so."

"Nay, Sir. I heard plenty from Jess over questionable Gov rules. I'm a right curious man and would like to hear all of a story. I'll stay."

"Very well, Sir." He stared at Bragg but spoke to the man who stood waiting. "Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"Detail the meaning of the term *throwback*."

Bragg's chest swelled and his chin rose a few centimeters.

The lieutenant replied, "A being of lesser lineage, Sir. Colorless hair, golden eyes, unworthy, detestable, abhorrent..."

Shane closed his eyes. To hear the words made him angry and sick all at once. When he opened them again, the lieutenant wore a frown. "I'm sorry, Sir." To Ryker, he asked, "Permission to speak freely, General?"

"Go ahead, son."

"The definition was given by Commander Bragg, Sir. It doesn't relay my personal feelings."

"Understood, Lieutenant. How long have you served on *Efface*?"

"Two years, Sir."

"Under Commander Bragg?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Where in your training have you ever seen a white uniform awarded to a soldier in the Governance, Lieutenant?"

"Here, Sir."

"Only here?"

Shane drew himself up and prepared to get some answers about Jess' treatment. He thought to gain them over a period of time with her relaying the details. To hear about such from those having witnessed it would be difficult. She wouldn't be close to comfort and hold.

"Yes, Sir."

"Did you question its rank, son?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Detail the rank to me."

The lad remained immobile and silent.

Ryker turned to face him. "Lieutenant?"

The young man's gaze fell to the floor.

"Lieutenant!" Ryker demanded.

"No, Sir."

"No, Sir, what?" Ryker asked. He wasn't angry. He seemed shocked he hadn't been answered. He took a step and stood in front of the lad. In doing so, he blocked the lieutenant's view of Bragg. "You'll look at me when I speak."

Shane could see the lad gaze up at Ryker. He'd no color in his face. "It signifies—the rank is below that of a private, Sir."

"Go on," Ryker prompted. His voice held compassion.

"Women only, Sir. Women from the planet Blue who have the traits, Sir."

A woman stood and turned to face Ryker. "General, I beg your pardon, but I've been assigned to *Efface* for six months. There were five *throwbacks* then."

A man came forward from across the bridge. He'd been working close to LeRoy. "Five years, Sir. At the onset of my assignment, there were fifteen."

"How many women like Mrs. Tiernan are there at this exact moment, Sir?" Ryker asked the last man who spoke.

"Three." He glared at Bragg. "There'd only be two but they managed to get Cross to medical before she bled out."

"How was she injured, Major?"

"She couldn't stand the assignments anymore, Sir."

"Explain."

"She—tried to take her life, Sir."

"Because of her assignments." It didn't come out as a question but Ryker expected an answer.

"Yes, Sir."

"And those assignments entailed..."

The man looked down and didn't speak.

Ryker stood there staring before turning to his second. "LeRoy?"

"Yes, General."

"I want Bragg's officers assembled in a board room with the medical officer assigned to *Efface*. I want the other two women from Blue located and brought to me soonest. Get officers from one of the ships flanking us to come aboard to replace Bragg's. Make sure they have no past with him. Request that Field Marshal Brody join us for the proceedings."

"Yes, Sir."

"And, LeRoy?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Have food brought here and to the board room as well as a few bottles of wine. This may take a while. Summon me should the need arise."

"Aye, General."

* * * * *

Jessica couldn't seem to get enough sleep. Each time she woke, there'd been a different tray sitting in the cell with more food. The food didn't appeal because she'd no appetite. At some point, she'd been escorted to a cabin and locked within. She got most comfortable on the soft mattress. The cot in the cell had lumps.

Other than using the relief area, she didn't stray far from bed. She couldn't muster the energy. On occasion, anxiety would descend to hasten her heart. One thought of Tiernan settled her immediately. Losing his regard made everything move in slow motion as her life appeared a distant black and white transmission.

The door opened and lights brightened the room. She glanced over and found General Ryker poised next to the table. Tiredly, she sat and swung her legs over the side of the bed. With the comings and goings of different soldiers bringing her food, she'd remained dressed. With a General suddenly appearing in her space, she was doubly thankful she'd chosen to keep her uniform on.

Before she could stand, he said, "Please, Mrs. Tiernan, remain seated."

She stood anyhow. She knew how to behave in the presence of an officer. Swaying on her feet, she clasped her hands behind her back and looked down.

He asked, "Are you well?"

"Yes, Sir."

"May I have a word with you, Missus?"

"Yes, Sir." She waited patiently for him to begin.

"Please sit down so I might also. I've had a rather long few days."

She sat and he took a seat near the table.

"I've learned a great deal about you."

She didn't look up and folded her hands in her lap.

"You *do* realize that in the Governance, it's not only permissible to look at someone speaking with you, it's expected?"

If that's what he wants, I'll try. She glanced up and tried very hard to maintain eye contact. "Yes, Sir."

"We've been hard at work discovering the nuances of your training, Missus. I'd like to say that what you endured is most uncommon."

"Yes, Sir," she replied, knowing full well the Governance treated *throwbacks* differently.

"I'd also like you to know the Governance doesn't, nor has it ever, sanctioned the abuse bestowed on you and those like you."

"All right, Sir."

"Are you sure you're well?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Did you know that Mr. Tiernan's man Reilly lives?"

"Bragg didn't kill him?"

"No."

"Wonderful news, Sir." She took in a deep breath, stopping the yawn from surfacing.

"The private however is quite dead, Missus."

Too bad for the private.

"Hence, until we can discern the truth of what happened, I'll need you to remain confined."

"Certainly, Sir."

"Jessica?"

She stood, coming out of her stupor because her name coming from him sounded urgent. "Yes, Sir?"

He stood as well. "Do you know who murdered the private?"

"No, Sir. It happened before Bragg came to get me."

"Then we'll get to the bottom of it."

"I'm sure you will."

"Truly, Missus, I'll ask again. Are you well?"

"Yes, Sir."

"All right then, to the matter of Bragg. For what was done to you and the other women, Bragg was found guilty of pandering, conduct unbecoming an officer, assault, sedition, disloyalty – the list is endless. Seldom has such a man gone without notice."

What can I say to that?

"I need to know if you wish to be present at his hanging."

"Hanging, Sir?"

"Yes, Missus. Your crew both wished to attend. It would set a lot right for them to see him get just rewards."

"Hanging." She tried to absorb the word, envision what it meant. When she finally conjured an image, a shudder ran down her spine.

"Yes, Missus. He'll be punished in the morn."

"Will mine follow, Sir?"

"Pardon?"

"Hanging. Will I be hung in the morn too?" She imagined the noose tightening around her neck would be very painful. Maybe she'd sleep through it.

He stepped closer. "Of course not. We'll figure out what happened and all will be well."

"Bragg. Hung." She forced her gaze to meet his. Bragg would be killed in the morn? Did she get that right? "But who would command us, Sir? We'd have no one."

"LeRoy!" he said rather loudly.

"Yes, General?" The voice came from the overhead speaker.

"Find Mr. Tiernan."

The mention of Shane made the room grow dark.

When the General next spoke, it was very close. "Have him meet me in medical. Tell him his wife has taken ill."

"Right away, General."

"Missus!"

She was being bounced and bounced. Soon it felt somewhat good, lulling her back to sleep.

"Wake up, Jessica!"

Yes, Sir. Right away, Sir.

"Give her to me!" Tiernan said a moment later.

When she felt his arms and took in his scent, she gave up trying to form words. He likely hated her but probably wouldn't hurt her, at least not until she woke. She felt very relaxed.

"What the hell happened, Ryker!"

"She didn't look right when I went to speak to her and then she collapsed."

"Damn it! You know she didn't kill your man but you kept her locked up."

"Protocol," she mumbled.

"What, Jess? I didn't hear you."

"Protocol. Good men follow."

"Aye, sweet."

He called me sweet.

"He's a good man and I'll tear his head off just the same for keeping me from you."

"No. Please."

"Easy, Jess, I won't damage him if you're not hurt. You'll do that for me, Jess? Be all right?"

"Sure."

"Promise me."

"I..."

"Jess!"

"Don't feel good."

"Aye, almost there. They'll patch you up."

Shane laid Jess on the bed in medical and Ryker's Dr. Nare began an assessment. After many moments, he said to Ryker, "Dr. Dillon has experience with her, General. I'd like him to consult, if he may."

"You've spent time with Dillon. Do you find him trustworthy despite his allegiance to Bragg?"

"I do, General."

"Then fetch him."

Shane stroked hair away from Jess' face. She'd fallen unconscious. He glanced at Ryker who studied her with obvious concern. Shane thought to clear up a few matters while they waited for Dillon. "You look to me wife more than a man should, Ryker. If you have an interest in her, best you spit it out now so we can deal with it prior to Jess waking."

The General stared at him with great intensity before his gaze swept back to Jess. "I find myself overly concerned with her welfare, Sir. The fascination is for a great many reasons."

"You'll explain what they are. We're newlywed and it seems I'm dealing with a certain degree of emotion where she's concerned. Especially since you've denied me requests to be with her." The last of what Shane said came out hostile sounding. He didn't give a shit. He was a second or two away from pounding the fine slimwitted General to the floor.

"My fixation with your woman—I find myself worried with her ability to move beyond what's been done in the name of the Governance. I'm a ranking officer and Bragg's ability to torture women while serving, is deplorable. I too must bear the shame of what happened to the women of Blue."

Shane let him have a moment to collect his thoughts.

Ryker continued with, "Her outward appearance is somewhat fragile. To hear the extent of misuse and exploitation bestowed on her and her crew infuriates me. I've lost enough beings to such cruelty over the past months. I suppose I'm somewhat devoted to making sure she'll not be another casualty."

"General, she's not as you fear. She's strong." In his gut, he sensed his wife's courage. He wouldn't look beyond instinct. It dictated a great deal of what he believed and how he acted.

"Shane?" Reilly asked.

"Aye," he replied, turning to find his man in the next bed over. "You're awake finally, having missed a high adventure."

"I didn't mean to sleep through it." He'd remain on a sick bed for a while yet. He damn near died. "I'm sorry I didn't protect your woman, Shane."

"Things turned out and you'd no way of fighting the gas Bragg used on you."

"Is that Jess over there?"

"Aye."

"What's wrong with her? Did Bragg shoot more knives at her?"

"Nay. We're waiting for Dillon to give a verdict. She collapsed. She's been through a lot and maybe just needs to rest."

"Who's with you, Shane? Me eyes don't work too good yet."

"General Ryker."

"Is he the slimwit General you went to fetch?"

Shane turned to see how Ryker took the insult. At first his face looked blank and then a smile crept up. Before long, he started laughing. Shane joined in as Reilly's face turned red.

"Shit," Reilly said, "me brain took a hit, General. I'd not meant to be so free with me tongue."

"I'm sure you didn't, Sir," Ryker replied, still chuckling. Shane couldn't believe the General had a sense of humor. The manner in which he handled Bragg's proceedings showed an efficient and unforgiving man. "This *slimwitted* General is indebted to your Mr. Tiernan. His rescue was greatly appreciated."

Dr. Dillon walked into medical accompanied by Dr. Nare. He approached the bed with unease.

"May I, Sir?" he asked Ryker.

Ryker replied, "Permission will be granted by her husband."

When the doctor glanced over, Shane said, "Aye."

Both physicians spoke as the bed gave vitals. Dillon eventually said, "With your permission, I can bring her around soonest."

"What's wrong with her?" Shane asked.

"A simple stimulant medication will see her right within a day or two."

"Why would she need something like that?"

"To counter the effects of stress, Sir."

"And she's required this before?"

"No. Others of her kind have. Although they appear quite resilient, they're very sensitive."

Shane instantly grew angry over the term *her kind* before realizing the doctor hadn't meant to insult her. Anyone could see Jess and her crew weren't like other gals. Dillon had simply stated a fact.

"Why specifically were the others treated with the drug?"

"As in all beings, Sir, they're individuals. Through the years, many of the women from Blue found their circumstances too much to bear. It seems when they reach a point when they feel little hope..." The doctor looked down and cleared his throat. "I don't know quite how to put this."

"Bluntly always works for me, man. Say what you mean straight out."

"It appears when they feel no hope, they tend to sleep. Without the medication, most have died within a few weeks from the onset of the drowsiness."

"There's not a damn thing about me wife's future that's hopeless! She came past what that bastard Bragg did to her." His hands balled into fists and he fought the urge to beat the dumbass doctor to a bloody lump.

"Under Bragg's command, what happened to her wasn't exactly personal, Sir. All her kind were treated the same. Your wife has been remarkably strong through great ordeals. But think about her current situation. Because of her, her commander awaits execution. There are those on board who question whether or not she murdered the private. Until you and your men learned of Reilly's health, how was she treated?"

"Not one of me men said a cross word to her!"

"I watched how you and your men behaved toward her prior. You held her and her crew in high esteem. Could you imagine how that felt after years of deplorable treatment? Can you imagine how she'd react to having that suddenly taken away?"

Shane recalled her expression as he'd helped her from the floor after the guard knocked her down. When he pulled away from her, she'd looked crushed, beaten.

The doctor said, "She's had no personal contact other than meal delivery. She probably believes most on board this vessel hate —"

Shane bellowed in rage and drew his weapon when Ryker stepped toward him. He kept the gun trained on the General while he pushed an arm beneath Jess and brought her up. Holding her close, he pulled her from the bed. Completely limp, she didn't even twitch.

"Clear this area immediately," Ryker said.

Everyone left with the exception of Ryker and Reilly, who could barely lift his head.

"Hand over your weapon, Mr. Tiernan." Considering the General's current situation, he didn't sound overly bothered by the fact Shane was a hairsbreadth from blowing him away.

The doctor said continued confinement would make Jess feel even lower. She hung lifeless in his arm the way it was. She couldn't descend another centimeter and Shane sought to rectify the situation in the quickest manner possible. He'd likely be killed for drawing a gun on Ryker.

The General walked forward until the end of the gun rested against his chest. He casually took the weapon, powered it down and stuck it in the waist of his pants. Shane wasn't rational at the moment but also knew what would have happened if he'd fired.

Ryker said, "Regardless of the situation, Sir, she'll remain confined until I find the private's murderer."

Shane glared at him as he finished pulling Jess into his arms. If she woke, he wanted her to be comfortable. "You heard what'll happen to her."

"You'll have unlimited access to her cabin. Her crew and your men will be granted access as you see fit."

Shane smiled, not believing his luck. "I'm surprised I'll be able to come and go after what just happened, Sir."

"You were protecting your wife. Besides, I didn't feel particularly threatened."

Reilly's soft chuckling made Shane laugh too. Shane eventually cleared his throat and said, "You've balls the size of *Efface*, General."

"Your missus gave me the benefit of the doubt at an unfortunate time in my immediate past. I simply afforded you the same courtesy. See that it doesn't happen again, Tiernan."

"Aye, Sir. As long as Jess is seen to properly, we won't have another mix-up between us."

"I'll summon the doctor back and have her medicated. She'll attend Bragg's punishment and perhaps she'll begin to understand she has the entire Governance protecting her as well as you and your men."

"Thank you, General. Again, I beg your pardon for the earlier demonstration."

"It's forgotten, Sir." Ryker gazed at Jess before glancing at Shane and leaving medical.

With the General's wife barely gone, Shane wondered exactly what type of attachment the man felt toward Jess. What happened between them in the prison? Shane couldn't believe the attraction Ryker displayed to be inappropriate because if he wanted Jess, Shane gave him a perfect opportunity to make it happen. Ryker could've had him hung alongside Bragg and kept Jess for himself. He'd need to think on it for a time and see if he couldn't reckon it out.

Chapter Eleven

Jessica stood between Shane and General Ryker as the procession of soldiers escorted Bragg up the stairs onto the temporary structure. She kept swallowing but couldn't make the lump in her throat go away. Zoe and Angela stood in front of them, wanting to have an unobstructed view of the hanging. They looked very smart in the dark blue Governance uniforms. They'd been promoted to the rank of Major because of time served and their unusual circumstance. Jessica remained dressed in white. She'd refused the General's offer of a different color uniform. She wouldn't bring shame on her crew or the Governance. She'd wear her usual outfit until they believed her innocent of murder.

Bragg stood facing the large crowd, standing at attention on the platform that'd been constructed in the docking bays. His gaze fell on her as a high-ranking officer detailed his crimes. She wouldn't be so brave when she faced execution. Her legs would likely tremble. For once, Bragg knew what it felt like to have a number of beings condemn him with their gaze. Her stomach hurt in sympathy. She'd likely lose her morn meal.

Bragg kept staring.

He'd been a constant in her life. Him, Zoe and Angela. There'd been others who'd been close. They died. Bragg murdered them. But he remained.

Constant.

In all the years, occasionally her performance with a task or training exercise made his eyes brighten when he'd look at her. He'd called her *dear* twelve times. Twelve. He'd bestowed the endearment only on her. Twelve times he'd told her she'd been special to him in some way. Twelve times she'd pleased him and received the compliment.

Bragg didn't flinch, kept gazing at her. He wanted to tell her something. He didn't fear what would happen. He didn't regret anything he'd done. He believed he'd done it for her good. On some level, he cared. Before Tiernan, he'd been the only man to care, if only twelve times.

She jumped when he dropped. She'd blotted everything out until that moment. He swung. He stared. She'd be next.

"Jess," Shane said quietly.

"Missus?" General Ryker asked.

"Shane?" she asked, watching Bragg swing. His face grew red, his eyes got large. Back and forth, to and fro, he swung. Staring.

"Aye, sweet?" He stroked her hair. Bragg saw him do it. He probably wouldn't want Tiernan touching her.

"You're not angry with me?"

"Nay. You know better."

Bragg's shoulders moved because his wrists were bound behind his back. He struggled. His shiny black boots kicked. They'd taken his medals.

She watched him swing. "The Governance. You did a great service. They owe you a debt."

"What of it, Jess? What's that got to do with—"

"Please."

"Please, what? Tell me what you need. I'll see to it."

"Not like that." She blinked and tried to swallow. She flinched when Bragg jerked. What would finally kill him, the lack of blood or the lack of air? How long would it take!

"Missus?" General Ryker asked.

"Firing squad," she said, unable to look away. Bragg twitched and her body convulsed in a sympathetic spasm. With Ryker and Shane each holding an arm, she didn't move more than an inch. "Please, make them shoot me. Not that."

"Mr. Tiernan!" Ryker said.

Shane picked her up and she stared over his shoulder watching Bragg. It still wasn't over. General Ryker walked next to them. They'd been the only ones to leave. Bragg's eyes followed. He wanted her to stay. She needed to see it through.

"You won't be shot, Missus," the General said.

She stiffened and Shane hugged tighter. "Easy, Jess. Didn't you hear what he said?"

"Not shot."

Bragg kicked out and flailed unbecomingly. He'd never lost control. Ever.

She tried closing her eyes but her lids wouldn't budge. "Hung."

"For the love of Braugh, Ryker, tell me wife she isn't being hung!"

"He'll follow protocol," she said.

Bragg's boots lashed out again. She jerked and tears ran down the back of her throat. They wouldn't come out of her eyes. Bragg would see.

How long did it take to die like that!

"Ryker!" Shane yelled.

"You won't be hung, Missus. You have my word. You said two men were with Bragg when he came for you. One of them murdered the private. The other will confess as not to be hung with the guilty party. We've narrowed it down to twelve men."

Twelve!

"You'll be cleared soon, Missus. Are you following?"

"Yes, Sir." After rounding a corner, she couldn't see Bragg anymore. She slumped against Shane and wanted to go back to sleep.

"Jess?"

"Yes."

"We're heading to Blue. The General's taking us. You'll see your fam before we go to Braugh."

"Home?"

"Aye. The General will tell your people of Bragg's death. No more babes born like you or your crew will ever be taken or killed. It's over. Your tribe will be protected by Gov from now on. You're the reason it'll stop. You, wee Zoe and Angela."

"And," General Ryker added, "you'll be cleared of any suspicion prior to reaching the planet. You have my word on it. By, God, this nightmare will end."

She mumbled, trying to tell them how glad she felt. It simply couldn't be done with the warmth and sway of motion from Shane's long-legged strides. *Home*.

* * * * *

Jessica started off the morn in the training center. Nothing felt right and she couldn't name why. As promised, General Ryker received a confession from the man who murdered the private. With swift justice, the corporal found the same fate as Bragg. She didn't attend his execution. She should be happy all was now well and she could wear the uniform she'd admired for years. The collar happened to be too tight, the color wasn't becoming and it itched. The real problem lay in the fact that everything considered, it seemed too little, too late and Bragg didn't live long enough to see her wear it.

She jumped for the bar, caught it in her hands and hung while simulated gravity pulled the kinks from her spine. Shifting her bare feet forward and back lazily, she began swinging, letting the force test the muscles in her arms. Her arc grew steadily higher with the forward and back motion. On the first complete revolution over the top, she allowed her back to arch before swinging her feet forward to increase the speed of rotation. That motion agreed with her for a while. When her hands grew tired, she slowed and stopped as her body aligned perpendicular to the bar. Upside down, she let her legs part until her toes rested against the rail. The exercise and stretching helped relieve the anxiety she woke with.

Her legs came back together and she began the quick rotations again. On a final pass, she released the bar and hurled forward to catch the dual rings fifteen feet away. No one watched, so it mattered little if she looked awkward. Flattening her arms out, the rings held at length, she brought her body upside down before bringing the arch of her feet to rest on the back of her head. She moved from complex to simple stretches, loosening muscles and relieving tension at the same time.

When Shane woke that morn, she was gone. As he searched the ship, LeRoy questioned his actions. Apparently LeRoy summoned the General who escorted Shane

to the room to watch Jess. Maybe with all the sleeping she'd done, she'd finally got sick of lying in bed. Shane watched with Ryker from the outer room as Jess pushed herself through intricate and flowing movements.

"She's most gifted, Sir," Ryker said as he watched Jess.

"Aye, that she is," Shane replied, admiring the strength in his gal.

"Your statement has the slightest hint of trepidation. Why? Certainly you're most pleased and proud of the fine woman."

"In learning what she's truly capable of, I wonder about our union. I'm a tribesman." He watched Jess' grace and strength and finished his statement, still in awe of whom he'd wed. "She deserves better. More. She wasn't created for a mere Braughman."

"Perhaps once," the General said, turning to regard him. "But with her unusual education, I truly believe there's not a better man to have at her side." He cleared his throat and Shane turned. Words appeared difficult for the General to muster. "There was a time when sallow messengers lived greatly beyond the rest of us. Bragg and his predecessor changed that in a single lifetime. He decimated the only living creatures in the universe that all people, all worlds, held in regard."

"Sallow messengers? I don't know the term or its meaning."

"Angels, Sir. I'm sure your world has fables of such. Blue was the origin of those myths. Most beings embellished the messengers' abilities and physical characteristics, but the woman in yonder room and those like her, were the foundation of most eve time stories."

"She's not what you think. Jess is made of flesh and blood."

Ryker chuckled. "Most assuredly, but many beings haven't researched the origin of the sallow messenger. The Governance did. I've recently studied their investigations. They were sought out for the purpose of military implication and found to possess nothing useful."

Watching Jess, Shane disagreed.

Ryker said, "I gather by your expression I've offended you. My apology. Let me be more explicit. While their military value was nil, the Governance deemed their inherent gifts to be most precious to those having contact with them."

"What abilities, Sir?"

"Their voices."

That gained Shane's complete attention.

"It's the basis of most folklore. There isn't a sound in the universe more exquisite than the voice of a sallow messenger in song. Once heard, it remains with a being for life. A gift, Mr. Tiernan. A gift that can't be recorded or duplicated. Many have tried to no avail. Some say the music comes from their souls."

"Aye," Shane agreed. The remembrance of Jess singing created warmth within him. "They can't capture the songs with any form of tech?"

"No. It's not understood exactly why. Hence, only word of mouth has spread what some have witnessed in the flesh."

"If Gov thought those like Jess and her crew to be precious, how did they become targets by some of your officers?"

"I looked into Gorman's military records and found he'd been treated for a disabling brain malady. He died from complications of the disease."

"That explains one sick man, but what of Bragg?"

"Unfortunately for your missus and those like her, Bragg also suffered impairments having gone undetected by the Governance. He'd been severely tortured as a child by his mother. We learned this after his death. His mother was quite beautiful and strongly resembled your wife. We believe his treatment of the women stemmed from some sick need to retaliate for crimes committed against him."

Shane remained quiet for a time and thought about how two men with different forms of mental defects could wind up in control of Jess. He'd spent confinement time with Jess doing some research about Gov while she slept. For her to suffer two sadistic commanders was unfathomable. The odds of such happening were astronomical. She clearly had shit for luck. He'd make sure things improved for her.

When Ryker spoke, Shane drew himself from his deliberations. "Were you aware, Sir, there's never been one recorded instance of a messenger taking a spouse?"

Shane's stomach dropped as he turned toward the General. "Not one?"

"No, Sir."

"Why?"

"I'll make the Governance study available for you to read."

"I'd be in your debt if you'd explain it to me now."

The General turned to watch Jess and peered through the glass. He looked downright uncomfortable. "It seems, from what the report said..."

"That bad, eh?"

Ryker cleared his throat and said, "They've no appetite for intimacy."

"Pardon?"

"The report cited some unnatural ability to *sense* or *see* what lay inside other beings. Because of this skill, the messengers found it impossible to trust. Because they could see faults, and couldn't trust, they remained without physical attachment to other beings. Have I clarified, Mr. Tiernan?"

One word kept circling Shane's brain and he blurted it out. "Virgins?"

"Exactly."

I'll go to hell because I fucked an angel and made her come! Once he allowed the thought to surface, it seemed so ridiculous, Shane laughed. The smile left his face as another thought surfaced. "I wonder what the hell that all means. How could she come past so much?"

"It's obvious. She loves you."

"Damn, but why? In all those years not one of her kind found someone appealing enough to rut with?" When he realized he'd spoken what lay in his mind, Shane said. "Your pardon, General, I'm thinking out loud."

"Your missus is an exceptional woman, but perhaps a bit more information would give you something else to consider."

"All right."

"The sallow messengers had always been treated in a particular manner and were raised with certain expectations. Most beings adored them and held them in great esteem. They received adoration for their vocal abilities. Perhaps, for them at the time, it'd been enough to satisfy their need for acceptance and love. Without the praise and adoration of billions of beings, as well as an unusual childhood, could it be they finally craved attachments of a more normal, personal nature?"

"I'll study your report and come up with an answer," Shane said, already plotting how he'd attack the problem.

"Do you really want to?"

Shane pondered the question. "On second thought, nay. I'm not overly shiny but I'm also not a fool. I don't want to know exactly why Jess cares for me. I'll simply accept it."

"I'd say you're a very intelligent man, Sir."

They both turned to watch Jess. As they stared, Ryker said, "It's still early and I've not been able to sleep. Perhaps I can steal an hour or two prior to the morn meal."

"Aye, good eve, Sir."

The General didn't leave. His chin rose an inch as he gazed at Jess. "My deepest gratitude for your rescue, Shane."

"My pleasure. And I return the gratitude, Gage, for not having me hung when I pointed a gun at your face."

They laughed and when Ryker turned toward him, Shane turned as well. A firm handshake settled any remaining issues. Ryker cared for his gal but would do naught to break the trust between them. He knew in his gut the General was a righteous man.

"Perhaps you'll bring your wife and her crew to take a meal with us."

"I'll make it a point to."

Ryker left and Shane strode into the training room. Jess swung around in circles on the bar. Watching made his head spin. "Mrs. Tiernan!"

He meant to surprise her, not scare. She lost her grip and flew through the air. He quickly caught her before any harm came. He took a beating however, because in catching her, the momentum knocked them both to the floor. Jess wound up on top.

"Tiernan!" she said, seething and trembling.

"Aye." She knocked the wind from him and he had a hard time answering.

"Are you hurt?"

"Nay." The one word made him cough. His breath wasn't back yet.

"You are. I'm sorry."

When last she squirmed around on top of him, afraid she'd hurt him, he'd gotten much compensation. Gov could monitor the room and what came to mind wasn't something Gov needed to see. With carnal thoughts racing through his head, they needed to get to their cabin soonest for privacy. Having made the decision, he found himself unable to move. Before he could distance himself from his wife and walk her back to their bed, he needed a moment or two to get closer first. A few kisses should tide him over. It'd have to because he wouldn't have a repeat of what happened in the prison. What he and Jess did together wouldn't be observed by others.

Very carefully, he rolled his soaking wet gal to her back and came over her. "You didn't hurt me, sweet. It was me fault you lost your grip so let me apologize."

"Tiernan," she said, trying to get up.

"Let me kiss you. It's been a while and I can't stand it another minute. Just one quick kiss."

"They can see us!"

"Aye, I said quick."

"No!"

"Don't be shy. We're wed."

"No one needs a demonstration."

"Maybe not, but your husband needs a demonstration." He leaned closer. "Open to me."

"Tiernan." By the tone of her voice, the anger was fading. He licked her bottom lip and she shivered. "Oh."

"Aye, ohhhh." He took her mouth for a taste and groaned, instantly getting as hard as stone. The time spent watching her sleep while his head ached from worry made relief come about in a certain way. She kissed him back. In fact, she sucked his tongue and wiggled and stretched out beneath him. He nipped her lips before moving his mouth beyond her reach. "Hon, we need to get to quarters."

"Oh." It came out as a protest this time.

He knew if they didn't leave quickly, he'd do something in ten seconds they'd both regret later. He got up and offered her assistance. After pulling on her boots, she accepted his hand and got to her feet. Pushing her toward the doors, he kept her moving by placing pressure on her lower back. Once they'd gotten to the corridor, they separated and walked quickly. She was probably tired from all the exercise. He didn't see a problem because he'd do all the work as soon as they got to quarters.

When they passed an officer, Shane nodded an acknowledgement. The man nodded back and looked to Jess who dropped her gaze. Her shoulders rolled forward too. The change in posture didn't sit well.

"Jess?"

"Yes?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

They turned a corner. "You didn't give the major back yonder a proper greeting. Why?"

She stayed quiet and walked a bit faster.

"Jess, answer me."

She didn't and the next man they passed was a private. Shane acknowledged him but Jess didn't. His spine grew stiff as they reached the cabin door. Once inside, he asked, "Why do you look down when you should make a greeting to those you pass?"

"Congratulations." She took a step away.

He closed the gap with one long stride. "On what?"

"Learning appropriate Governance gestures in record time. Well done."

"Don't be sarcastic." His temper could be a bad thing. It didn't surface often, but when it did...

"Your vocabulary steadily improves too."

"You're pushing, Jess."

"I need to get cleaned up."

She turned and he twisted her so she'd remain facing him.

"I think you'll answer me instead."

"I've forgotten the question."

"Why do you drop your eyes when you walk past another soldier?"

Her eyes stayed cast down then too.

He touched her chin. "You should answer me. Right now."

"Embarrassed."

His gut turned. "Of me?"

"No." She didn't look up. "For you."

When her meaning took hold, he grabbed her shoulders. "Why? Have any of those men—have you been with them? Did Bragg make you..."

She picked at her fingers before trying to leave. She gave up, slumped and shook her head. "None on board."

"We're married now. No man would dare think of you in any way but as me wife."

"Being your wife doesn't discount what I've been! They know it. The whole of the universe knows it! You're the only slimwit that doesn't seem able to comprehend who and what I've been!"

He pulled her close. "Hush now. Things aren't so bad."

She trembled with more than anger. Her shame knotted his stomach. He took her to the bed, sat down and pulled her onto his lap.

Cuddling her, he said, "So you truly think Ryker's a slimwit too."

Her golden eyes brightened with tears. "No, I think quite highly of him."

"Oh."

"What do you mean — *oh*?"

"The detail of what you were made to do was told to him."

"I know."

"And you look him in the eye when the need comes. You think less of him than you do other men aboard."

"No."

"And then there's me men. You speak when spoken to and give them attention. You don't hold them in any regard. I get it. We're naught but Braughmen. They're not of import so you feel nay shame in front of them."

"No!" She shook her head and sat a little straighter. "It's not that. You know how I feel about your men. Even when they thought I killed Reilly, they weren't cruel. You weren't either. You all had a reason to be though."

"I guess I was wrong then. It's not shame making you hide from people you find of import." He held her chin so she'd continue looking at him. "I know what it is. The Gov crew was bad to you."

She needed to start thinking about her actions. He hoped she would when he added, "The bastards treated you as a *throwback*."

"No," she said, leaning against him, needing his strength for a time. He'd give it, as much as she wanted so she could figure things out. "Only Bragg."

"Then why don't you give them their due? They suffered with you, hon. They didn't like what Bragg did. They damn near mutinied because of you and your crew."

She inhaled and held a breath before it rushed out with a sound of distress.

Aye, just as I thought, she didn't think of that. When a being felt low, they behaved low. After a lifetime of being cast down, it was hard to rise up. It was long past time his gal stretched some.

"Do you think they view my actions as disrespectful?"

"Nay," he said, stroking her back. "They see what I do when you walk as you did."

"What's that?"

"You've been hurt so terrible you can't come past it yet. You carry the weight of many crimes. Crimes they didn't stop. They see how sad Bragg made you."

"I'm a reminder of what happened." She trembled.

He bet she didn't like what she learned.

Her eyes grew glassy. "I don't want to remind anyone of Bragg in any way. What can I do?"

"It's not hard. Settle against me while we figure it out." When she stopped shaking and breathed normally, he said, "You hold your head high, don't hide from those you pass. Acknowledge them as you do me men and Ryker. It's a brave thing to do, especially at first because you won't feel right in doing it. But after a time, it'll get easier. Let them see you're not some broken gal, creeping by to go unnoticed. Tell them with your shoulders back, standing straight while meeting their eyes that you're Jess Tiernan, and no matter what that piece of shit did to you, you'll never be held down again."

"I can do that." Her soft voice held conviction.

He smiled. *That's me strong, brave gal.* "Of course you can. And in doing so, you'll show wee Zoe and Angela they shouldn't feel ashamed of what's been done."

Her arms twined around his neck as her cheek settled next to his. "I'll do it."

"Aye, you will and I'll be with you."

"I'm glad."

"And if any of them give you a strange look, I'll punch them to the floor."

She squeezed him. "Like you did that guard?"

"Aye."

"One punch and he was out."

"He focking deserved much worse."

"The word is *fuck*. F-uhhhh-kah."

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

With the word spoken, his thoughts turned to an immediate need. He kissed her neck and licked the salt from her skin. "God, Jess," he breathed in her scent, "you smell so good to me."

"Stop it." She struggled but didn't get far. "I must smell like something left under a bed."

"Oh sweet," he groaned, turning them both and settling above her. "*Ye're speldon donyeh and me dishalia fi'erdan besucha soonadah, me broughen gal.*" *Your scent's erotic and I need to fuck you gently now, my beautiful woman.*

Jessica strained against him after the harmonious, melodic phrase. She'd long since looked beyond his unusual words to the passion beneath. Her Braughman—her husband, struggled with Governance language but his meaning somehow transcended. It had little to do with her ability to sense thoughts. This was something entirely to do with what lay between a man and woman.

Clothes came away torn with how hastily he removed them. When he stretched her out on the bed, he said, "I've thought morn and eve about something."

Very little in life required that much attention. She mentally braced herself. "What?"

He brushed his fingers against her cheek and down her throat. "You've been trusting and shared your body and heart with me. But I want something more. Something of great import to me."

She'd give him most anything. "Name it."

"I want to watch while you find your own pleasure."

Her heart sped and her mouth watered. "You're joking?"

"You're so damned different than most gals, hon, I'd like to learn how best to touch you."

"You do just fine."

"Aye, so far things have worked out. It would settle me mind to know for sure though. Teach me. Show me." He took her hand into his and caressed it with his thumb.

"I wouldn't know what to do."

"I'll help a bit until you get the hang of it. Are you willing?"

She tried to fathom exactly what he wanted to see. It's not as if she'd thought too much about sex prior to meeting him. She'd been conditioned to do the exact opposite. Hesitantly, she nodded.

He leaned down and placed a gentle kiss upon her lips. "Keep your eyes closed and think about what would feel good to you."

Things immediately came to mind. "Your hands on my breasts, your mouth on my nipples."

His tongue slowly spread moisture over her bottom lip. When she tried to deepen the kiss, his mouth lifted. "Shane?"

"Nay, don't open your eyes. Relax. I'm right here. Your nipples, hon, they're aching for attention."

"Please touch me."

His hands grasped her wrists. He placed her palms down on her belly. She squirmed and arched her back. God, she could feel his breath wash over her breasts.

"I'll kiss them if you make them stand proud for me?"

"Yes," she said, sliding her hands up her belly before covering her breasts.

"Oh that's it. Cup and hold them. Squeeze them a bit."

Caressing herself in front of him didn't sit well, but after a few minutes, she concentrated on how her hands felt on her breasts. Of course she'd touched them before when need dictated it. The touching she did then wasn't necessary.

"They're perfect, Jess. Feel them as I do. Touch all that soft skin covering your firm flesh. Did you know the sight of your breasts is very sexual to me?"

"No," she said on a sigh. She knew men found them interesting and wanted to touch her there, but she'd never contemplated exactly why.

"And while they feel fine and firm, when I touch them, you respond so sweetly. I can gauge your desire from holding and kissing your breasts."

"H-how?"

"Like now, when they're touched and stroked the right way, with the right amount of pressure, your nipples lengthen and get firm. They swell and tell me they want kissed and licked."

The thought of him using his mouth made her thighs clench together in anticipation. Knowing he watched had somehow made her very wet. Or perhaps the pressure of her hands gently kneading her breasts did. Whatever the reason for her desire, she no longer cared. She wanted more.

"Does that feel good to you, pinching your nipples and pulling on them? You seem to like the licking and kissing I do, but when your need comes up, you want things a bit rougher, aye?"

"Yes."

"Find out how much you want, how hard you like it."

When she squeezed each nipple between her thumbs and fingertips, her heels dug into the bed and her thighs clenched tightly. A jolt of pleasure shot through her pussy as she moaned. She never knew touching herself could be so erotic.

"Pinch those nipples harder, hon, you like it. You need it. That's it; press your legs together too. You know what feels good, how to make your body sing. Show me."

"You promised," she whined. "Said you'd help."

"You think your nipples are hard enough now?"

"Yes, please."

"Please, what?"

"Lick and kiss them. Do it, now."

"Aye, and while I see to those nipples, why don't you slide your fingers between your legs."

She opened her eyes and stilled. He hovered above with an intense expression. He leaned down, gave a few leisurely licks to a nipple before kissing and tugging on the stiff peak. By the time he finished, she could barely catch her breath.

"Clearly you know what's below," he said.

"Of course I do."

He straightened and cupped her face. He kissed her and smiled. "I'm sure you've taken care of your needs down there, but you've never taken the time to explore. That's all I'm asking you to do now. I've seen a gal before, touched a few between the legs too, but each is different. You're different."

"Because I'm pierced."

"Aye, that's part of it. But what I'd meant is that each gal requires a different type of touching. And even if you figure out what gets them hot, the touching should change as desire burns. I want to see what type of touching you like as your pleasure builds."

"How will I know? It's not like I've ever done something like this."

"Easy, sweet."

"You've touched more women than I have. Shouldn't *you* be the expert?"

He chuckled. "No one knows better than you what you need and when you need it. I don't have your second sight. I try to be in tune with you, read your body language to know what you might like. If you show me though, I'll know for sure."

"This is so unexpected."

When he kissed her again, he afforded long moments for her to relax. Soon, all she concentrated on were his lips and tongue and how good he made her feel. Her mind clouded as she floated on a blissful cloud of desire and contentment. She barely noticed when he'd stopped kissing her mouth to feast on her breasts.

"Oh Shane, don't stop."

He didn't until he began kissing a path down her belly. The thought of him kissing lower made her legs separate. He gently grasped her wrist and brought her hand close to his mouth. His warm breath danced over it. His lips nibbled before his tongue stroked her middle finger.

"Shane!"

He answered her cry by sucking her finger into his hot, wet mouth. Her hips shot off the bed as her legs spread wider. God he used his mouth on her like she'd done previously to his cock. The sensations were incredible. No wonder he liked it so much. Lost in hazy lustful musings, she hadn't noticed other things he done until she felt the piercing and her clit beneath the fingers of her other hand. Startled, she tried to pull away but his large hand held her still. The pressure and suction from his mouth increased and she forgot what'd disturbed her the moment prior.

By the time he stopped sucking, she found herself focused on the lovely pressure over her swollen clit. The bed shifted as he repositioned himself to sit next to one of her legs. She didn't bother opening her eyes because everything felt wonderful in the darkness. No, she wouldn't think about Shane watching what she did to herself.

Something gently touched her pussy. His thumbs! He slowly separated the lips until her fingers had unhindered access. God, her swollen clit pushed against the pierced hood, begging for attention. As he held her open, she felt moisture trickle from her entrance down the crease by her ass.

"Damn, you're so wet," Shane said between long purposeful breaths.

Knowing he watched her fingers and could clearly see how excited she was, had an erotic effect. She slid two fingers further into her crease and began rubbing her clit. Her fingertips skimmed and strummed the soaking entrance to her vagina.

"That's right, Jess. That's me good gal. Make yourself come."

"I can't."

"Let it build." He shifted again but she couldn't figure out where he'd gone. Actually, she didn't care. His thumbs continued holding her lips wide open.

"Fuck me, Shane. Please. Now!"

"Almost there, sweet, you're doing fine. Keep it up and when it happens, I'll help. I'm going to fill you when you start to come."

"Yes!" That's all she needed to hear. Her fingers rubbed harder and faster. She could hardly wait to feel his length sliding in.

Pressing hard on her clit with her fingertips, she exploded into climax. In the next instant, she felt strong hands grasping her ass, pulling her cheeks apart and Shane sliding his incredibly thick erection into her sheath. The muscles in her vagina had been tightened in orgasm when he pushed inside. She screamed in pleasure, unable to believe how huge he felt.

The climax continued in long, strumming pulses that built and built toward something just beyond her reach. She'd die if she didn't get it. "Harder!" Her mind spun as she dug her nails into his shoulders, trying to find an anchor. "I need...I need."

"What, Jess!"

"More!" She'd no idea what she needed more of however. It loomed, waiting a hairsbreadth away, teasing her.

He labored, giving her the most exquisite pleasure she'd ever endured. Still, she knew something hovered in the distance and she kept reaching, striving to claim it.

The cabin rolled. After a moment, she realized the room hadn't moved. Shane merely turned them over. She sat on an incredibly long, thick cock that reached further than before. Tentatively, she shifted atop him and received the most thorough stroking she'd ever felt. After no more than a minute, she found each movement creating throbbing pulsations in the piercing above her clit. With him buried deep, in a strange way, it seemed as though she were the one *taking* him. *What a feeling of power!* She'd never been astride a man.

Twisting her hips, shifting forward and back, up and down, she experimented until she found the perfect combination of sensations. The room darkened as her body tightened, tensed and stretched. The climax remained fixed, unyielding, but the *something* she sought drew ever closer.

"Ach! Shit!"

"Hold on. Don't come!" She rode him more urgently, forcing her body to open and accept what would happen. As with her first climax, when she finally got what she'd been after, the euphoric intensity of the experience stunned and surprised her. All three of the piercings trembled and pulsed, creating shockwaves through her body. For a split second, a cold feeling washed over her. In the next heartbeat, she knew the jewelry hadn't suddenly come alive. Her body created the quivering in the jewelry. By the heavens, the sensations were beyond anything she'd felt in her life.

She sobbed before she cried out. "Shane!"

"Aye," he said as his cock jerked and warmed her insides with cum, "finish me. Ride me 'til the end!"

She tried but after the mind-blowing orgasm, her limbs became sluggish and useless. He helped by grasping her hips and rocking her back and forth. Slowly, their motions slowed until she sat atop him, worn out, dumbfounded and fully sated.

He gently grasped her upper arms and eased her down beside him. He cuddled her and repeatedly kissed her forehead and cheeks. Both of them were bathed in perspiration. She glanced at the wall monitor and discovered they'd been together more than a few hours. Hours!

"Wow!" she said.

He gently nipped her lips before stroking her cheek. "Aye. Wow."

She peered at him through sleepy eyes. "You don't look too good, Shane. Are you all right?"

"I will be," he said as his chest rose and fell against hers. His Adam's apple moved when he swallowed. "After a spell, I reckon."

Slowly they managed to regain their breath. He stilled completely and she found him gazing at her with a shocked expression.

"Jess, you're smiling."

"Am I?" Her smile grew, she couldn't help it. *As if I never smile.*

"Have I told you yet this morn how dear you are to me?"

"In a manner, yes. I'd say you've gotten your point across." A trickle of perspiration ran down the side of his face. She wiped it away.

"You were incredible. I'd never felt anything like that. What happened?"

Because of you, the piercings placed to torture me now bring me the utmost pleasure. She'd bet other women didn't feel anything compared to her recent experience. He somehow thought she alone created the incredible event. She wasn't so sure he should know differently. Perhaps in time. "Sometimes things just work out."

"Aye, they do." He leaned down to tenderly kiss her nipples. When he straightened and settled next to her with their noses almost touching, he said, "Remember that when you meet me fam."

The smile vanished and her stomach soured.

Chapter Twelve

After arriving on her home planet, Jessica stood next to Shane as the General detailed the aid forthcoming from the Governance. She couldn't remember Blue smelling like the Doxyn prison. A crowd gathered in the filthy street as General Ryker spoke with the leader of her home. The shabby dwellings kept releasing more untidy beings until Jessica wanted to run. They stared at her, Zoe and Angela in horror. She couldn't recall what she'd expected upon her return. She certainly didn't imagine the nightmare taking place.

When the General gave permission for members of their families to come forward to greet them, no one stepped up. Brother Damius, the current leader of Blue, explained their reluctance. They'd been punished for bearing *throwbacks*. It'd take more than some words from a Governance General to take the mistrust away. Jessica knew the less than enthusiastic welcome stemmed from the reports given to Blue about the treatment of *throwbacks*. The entire meeting took no more than an hour before General Ryker turned to her. "Missus, may I have a search conducted for your parents?"

There wasn't a need. She'd spotted her mother standing in the crowd. A brief fifteen-second assessment let Jessica know she wouldn't be welcome. Her mother's expression clearly demonstrated disgrace and humiliation.

"No, Sir," she said quickly. "I have no home here. There's no reason to dally."

"As you wish, Missus."

The General, Shane, Finn, Angela, Zoe, her and twenty Governance soldiers prepared to leave. As they walked the slight distance back to the transport area, someone grabbed her hand. A small girl held tight and tugged her away from Shane. When Jessica stooped to her level, she saw golden eyes peering from inside the hood.

The girl suddenly threw herself into Jessica's arms, which made them tumble to the street. Jessica instinctively embraced the child and held her close. From inside the hood, she heard a small voice exclaim, "You're like me! Take me with you. I belong with you."

The terror coming from the girl made Jessica tremble. She asked, "Aren't you a bit warm inside all that cloth?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to take the coat off, little Miss?"

"Can't."

"You can now. Nothing bad will happen. Like you said, we're alike and I'm not hiding."

"Monsters in the sky."

"Not anymore."

Shane walked over and squatted down. "Aye, little one, she's telling you true. Jess and the other special gals from Blue made it so no more monsters could come gobble you up." His deep voice and accent immediately enchanted the girl. Jessica felt it. "What's your name, Miss?"

"Jannah."

"Well, Miss Jannah, may I have a look at you? See what's under such a big, dark cloak?"

She swiped the hood away and gasps from surrounding beings filled the silence.

Shane said, "Aye, that's what I thought. A right fine wee gal was hiding under there."

She giggled and showed a smile lacking a few front baby teeth. General Ryker squatted at her other side and studied her. His hand came out slowly before he opened it. Jannah looked at the treat lying on his palm. Hesitantly, she reached out.

The sight of a Governance officer giving a treat to a *throwback* child made Jessica's stomach clench. If she had such a reaction and trusted General Ryker, she could only imagine what the beings of Blue felt.

"You may take it, Miss. The Governance rewards bravery and you've been most courageous coming forward as you did."

Jannah carefully took the treat. Without hesitation she placed it in her mouth. Her eyes widened and the sun reflected in the golden irises. "Oh my," she said, before smiling, "such a lovely thing!"

"There's a ship coming to bring supplies, Miss," General Ryker said. "I'd forgotten how children love sweet things. Because of you, I'll make certain to have a great deal of them brought."

"And what of payment? I've nothing to trade."

"You do, but I won't ask it of you, Miss. I find your fear of me quite detestable."

"I'm not afraid, at least not now. What can I pay so all can have the sweet?"

"They'll have it whether you pay or not, Miss. I'd just hoped..."

Jessica gazed at him, wondering what his intention could be. She couldn't begin to imagine what he hoped to gain from the child.

"Sir, please say what you'd like. I want to give something." She swallowed and chewed some more before saying, "This is really quite lovely."

Jessica glanced at Shane and the General. They both appeared mesmerized by the beautiful girl. Jessica knew she couldn't have been anything like the small, perfect child when she'd been as young. She couldn't recall anyone ever looking at her with anything but disdain.

The General finally said, "It's a simple request, Miss. A song."

"But I'm never to sing. It's forbidden," she said quickly.

"And it's good to obey your parents, Miss. Very bad men made it unwise to sing. They've been dealt with and no longer hover over Blue. The people watching over you now will protect all that's precious here. You, Miss, are one of those commodities. I understand your reluctance though. The treats will be brought on the morrow regardless. Your smile's been payment enough."

When the General stood, Jannah glanced back at a woman who'd walked to edge of the crowd. The woman closed her eyes and quickly nodded. The girl swallowed the rest of the candy and took a step toward the General. Jessica's fists clenched and her toes curled in her boots when Jannah took a deep breath and released it with sound. The shaking in Jessica's limbs slowed as the notes and melody sank into her. The Governance was already present. Nothing bad would happen. No harm would come.

Another voice seasoned with age blended in absolute harmony. She recognized Zoe immediately and sat in stunned silence as Zoe walked forward and knelt beside the girl. The women surrounding them wept and Jessica fought a similar urge. The blending of voices relayed more than perfection. For the first time in years, the people of Blue heard freedom.

The crisscross of intricate soprano notes rose higher and grew stronger. Jessica sang with them, silently. She'd forever heard the music in her heart and only once since her abduction had she allowed freedom to her voice. Zoe struggled continuously to keep the sound in. Jessica could only make it come out when she'd thought about Shane.

When the song ended, General Ryker cleared his throat. She felt the high emotions surrounding him and the entire landing party. He said to Jannah's mother, "Missus, thank you for allowing your child to grace us."

"It's really over, Sir?" the woman asked.

"Yes, Missus, most assuredly. The Governance will provide needed help so the beings here may recover."

"Mrs. Tiernan?" Shane asked.

"Yes, Mr. Tiernan?" she replied, smiling.

"You ready to come home with me now?"

The smile left her face. "I am."

* * * * *

"Major Tiernan," General Ryker said, drawing her from thought as she, her crew and the Braughmen stood at attention.

Jessica walked forward twenty feet. At least three hundred Governance soldiers stood straight and still at his back. The General had spoken privately to Shane earlier and she thought all that remained was to board the smaller ship. Colonel LeRoy smartly stepped up to the General, planted his feet and extended a hand containing a moderately sized box. The General took the box, opened it and brought out a two-inch round, shining silver medal attached to an intricate red chain.

He said, "Majors Drew and Cross?"

Her crew stepped forward on either side of her. The General applied a medal to each of them and they stepped back. As he brought a third medal toward Jessica, she tightened her jaw and stared at the space where Bragg's life ended. A crazy wave of emotion rolled through her and she couldn't decipher either its origin or exactly what she felt. Relief, disappointment, justice?

"Majors Tiernan, Cross and Drew," he said, his voice loud and commanding. "On behalf of those present, I'm proud to award you these medals of Honor. It serves to denote your inner fortitude, your ability to serve under the most grievous of circumstances and your ability to move beyond trespasses to attain the greater good of all beings."

After he placed the medal on her uniform, he remained close and spoke only loud enough for her to hear. "Missus?"

"Yes, General," she said, her eyes teary. She'd likely never see him again.

Crystalline blue, intelligent eyes gazed at her. He could be most intense but it didn't bother her. It's simply who he was. "Are you well?"

"Of course, Sir."

"You may call on me should you require aid, Missus."

"I'll remember. And, Sir?"

"Yes, Missus?"

"I'd like to impart the same courtesy to you. Please, call on us anytime."

His eyes wandered to the medal adorning her before looking beyond at the Braughmen at her back. "Perhaps in time, Jessica," he said, stepping back.

She glanced over her shoulder to summon Angela and Zoe. Both came forward again. When the ten drums rolled and echoed through the massive area, the entire body of assembled soldiers saluted them farewell. Emotions in her swelled and overcame thought. She couldn't stop the sound that broke free and didn't try. The Governance Anthem burst from her as Zoe and Angela quickly joined in.

United in a common bond, to serve the space we know. Through parley, power and control, protection we bestow. Advancement from the knowledge gained, to further move beyond – the limits, hurdles and the like. Our Governance responds.

The voices of those present came together for the refrain. *One people, one power, of one mind, for all time.*

The echo of silence following the song nearly deafened her. Or perhaps it was the pounding of her heartbeat in her ears. The General stared at her intently and she mouthed the words, *I'll miss you.*

She and her crew turned sharply and marched to the vessel that would take them to their new home. When she reached the ship, Shane turned and silently walked on board beside her.

* * * * *

Men strode down the ramp to greet the hoard of beings amassed on Braugh. *Dear God!* Did the whole planet turn out for their homecoming? The noise from the beings outside had Jessica's stomach turning over with anxiety. She smiled at Shane and excused herself, pretending to forget something on board. She promised she'd join him presently. She guessed Zoe and Angela made similar excuses because she found them lingering in the departure area as the scent of sweet greeneries washed into the ship.

Shane and Finn kept looking back as they greeted men, women and children. The women were dressed in long, flowing, brilliantly colored skirts, sleeveless blouses and most had long, free flowing, dark hair. She felt colorless, bland and plain. All of his people expressed their emotion so openly, she knew she'd never fit in. Once put at ease, Zoe could be more than exuberant. She imagined Angela could learn. She, however, lacked the obvious spark inherent in every other being present.

"Shall we?" she asked her friends.

She certainly didn't feel like moving from where she'd taken root. Her husband looked more and more impatient. Before he came to get her, she straightened her spine, threw her shoulders back, brought up her chin and preceded her crew down the ramp. As beings noticed them, conversations stopped. Halfway to Shane, she did too.

A woman standing at his side questioned him. Jessica couldn't understand because they spoke in their native tongue. The question came out urgent, demanding. Shane responded and Jessica heard her name. She also recognized the words *Ma* and *Da*. *His parents. He spoke to his parents!*

His words were deliberate and sounded placating when he glanced over his shoulder at her. The color drained from the woman's face as she said something quietly.

Fear made her unable to reach out to scan the true emotions of those in attendance. Her heart sank and her knees grew weak because she believed she already knew what they felt. Having been rejected one too many times forced her to draw certain conclusions. She could practically hear the accusation from his mother. *What have you done, Shane!* Jessica's gaze drifted over the crowd and she saw similar expressions on the faces of other mature women.

"Jessica?" Angela asked. She should answer because her friend sounded concerned.

The only nightmare left in her mind came to fruition as she watched faces swirl against the overly green grass in the bright valley. She hadn't expected a particularly warm welcome. She hadn't been braced either for a repeat performance of what happened on Blue.

They'd force Shane to abandon her. The open-mouthed staring was more than she could cope with. She took a step back. Zoe and Angela came to her sides. They should retreat, not come forward.

Shane placed a boot on the ramp and his mother grabbed his arm. She wanted to keep her eldest away. Uncontrolled fluttering erupted inside Jessica as the warm breeze

became chilly. Moisture flooded her mouth as her vision narrowed. Darkness crept from the edges as the beings standing in the grass tilted alarmingly. The last thought drifting through her mind was *battle stations!*

Shane jumped to the ramp and gained three long strides before Zoe and Angela drew weapons. They quickly brought them up to power. They meant to do him harm. He stopped where he stood because the gals looked panicked. With Jess lying on the ramp behind them, there wasn't a doubt in his mind they'd protect her, even from him.

"Zoe, Angela, let me get to her," he said in a calm, almost casual manner.

"Hold, Tiernan!" Zoe said. Her voice didn't shake and neither did she.

Zoe held the gun on him while Angela bent at the knees and reached back to lay a hand on Jess. "She's breathing. Strong pulse."

Finn jumped up beside him. "Zoe, stow your weapon."

"No. Stay back."

Braughmen who'd been with them aboard *Efface* spread out through the crowd to get a vantage point to disarm them. The gals noticed and their guns targeted movement.

"Nay," Shane said to his men. "Stand down. And get a medic to treat me wife."

Needing to touch Jess and having to wait made another word come out overly loud. "Soonest!"

"Zoe," Shane said, regaining his calm, "you know I won't hurt her. I need to see if she's all right. You'll let me pass?"

Hesitantly, Zoe shook her head. Jess usually told them how to respond in a tense situation. She wasn't awake to do it. With the gals left on their own, he needed to stay composed and reason it out. His instincts told him to get to his wife. He took a few more steps and both guns followed his movement. He stopped again and spoke quietly to settle their unease.

"She ever black out like this before?" he asked.

"On board, when they confined her," Angela replied. He couldn't believe she'd been the one to have hands that trembled and a voice that shook.

"Aye, she did. You remember she came through it fine. I'll have a medic give her something to set her straight."

"No. No one touches her."

"You know what to do for her?"

"No. We'll take her back to *Efface*."

"Nay, you won't." He wouldn't lie to them. They'd not get back inside that ship. They'd take his wife nowhere. "I'll go to her now. Shoot if you don't trust me. Think on it though. Think hard."

He gave them ten seconds and began walking. Although the guns stayed trained on him, he got to Jess. After gathering her up, he sat down and arranged her in his lap. Finn and Reilly convinced Zoe and Angela to stow their weapons before walking them down the ramp.

He brushed the hair from Jess' face and she didn't stir, not even a bit. Her arms and legs were slack and her face held little color. The ashen hue and cold dampness of her skin scared the hell out of him.

He bellowed, "Get a fucking medic!"

The man came quickly thereafter and tended her. Shane knew she'd gone unconscious from too much worry and instructed the medic on which drug to give. She'd be checked daily for a while to make sure she stayed in good health. Every precaution would be taken.

Many milled about, afraid for the wife he'd brought home. His Ma walked up the ramp and stopped a few feet away. "Shane?"

"Aye," he said, stroking Jess' cheek so when she woke she'd see him straightaway.

"I was shocked, that's all," she said, stepping closer.

"Aye." He didn't realize many of the gals his Ma's age had seen a sallow messenger when they'd been young. One of Jess' kind visited Braugh and made a lasting impression.

His Ma sat beside him and began touching his wife. She gathered Jess' hair and gently pulled it away from her face. "She's broughen, Shane. She's nice?"

He wanted her to wake. "Aye, sometimes."

"They say their voices weep because they're not able to feel all a normal being can. They know something's missing and they mourn the loss."

"Jess is a whole gal. Zoe and Angela are too. They're not lacking. In fact, they have more inside than most do."

His Da asked as he sat on the side of the ramp, "Do they know a gal's not permitted to be armed on Braugh?"

"Nay, and you'll not tell them. Until they feel safe, they can keep their weapons."

"You sure about that, son? They almost put some holes in your hide."

"They're shiny. They won't blast things at random."

Finally! Her eyes came open and she squirmed in his lap.

"About time, hon. If you were tired, you only needed to say so." Shane placed his cupped hand over her soft eyebrows as she adjusted to the light.

"I had the worst dream." She shivered and his Ma shook out a blanket someone handed over and covered her.

"I bet."

Jess looked up, saw his Ma, moaned and closed her eyes. "Just shoot me."

It startled his Ma and she pulled her hands away.

He said while sitting Jess up a bit, "You need to greet me fam now. I'll shoot you later."

"Shane!" his Ma said. She was aghast. "Don't speak to her like that."

"Aye, Ma. But she knows it was a joke."

"You all right, sweet?" she asked Jess.

Jess squirmed. "Yes, Missus, fine. Your son's comment was my fault. I'll be more mindful."

"Nay! He was raised better. I'm Catherine Tiernan and this," she pulled his Da close, "is Richard Tiernan. To you, Jess, it be Ma and Da."

Tears gathered in Jess' eyes and she leaned against Shane. His arms tightened. She sought strength and protection. He'd give it. He knew what hurt her. She expected a slap, not some kind words.

"Shane?" his Ma asked.

It'd be best for Jess to learn things in his fam were discussed, dealt with and laid to rest. Most beings on Braugh treated issues in the same manner. His Ma worried she'd offended Jess in some way. He explained, "A few morns back, Jess visited Blue. She'd been off world many years."

"Please, don't," Jess said.

"Hush, sweet. Me Ma feels low about hurting you. Your pain isn't her fault."

She closed her eyes. The strain left her body, which relayed she trusted his judgment.

He stroked her cheek. "She and her crew went to reunite with fam. Because they were soldiers for Gov, no fam came forward to greet them."

His Ma looked at Jess with a sympathetic expression. When his Ma silently cried, his Da's arm slipped across her shoulders. Shane would spare them most of the details for now. His Ma would be heart broke and his Da downright irate with everything his wife had suffered. Most on Braugh would be outraged.

"So, we turned to leave," Shane said, "dropped our pants and told Blue to kiss our asses. Bastards!"

"Aye," his Ma chimed in, "good for you! To turn away such fine gals is a sin. They're dumbasses to do such a thing!"

She took Jess' hand into hers and said, "We'll keep you, sweet."

Jess' lips came together. Whether it was a smile or more tears she withheld, he didn't know.

His Da's hand came over his Ma's to hold both gals. "We're blessed with seven fine, strong sons. We've been waiting for this day to welcome a gal into our midst."

"Aye," his Ma agreed.

Shane held Jess close and got to his feet. "I'll be taking her home for a time I think."

"I can walk," Jess said.

"Nay, I'll not have you flopping all over so I have to pick you up every few feet."

"Shane!" his Ma warned.

"It doesn't matter what I say now. She's stuck with me." He nuzzled her cheek and kissed her nose.

"Think before you speak, boy. You know your Ma will steal her away if you don't treat her right," his Da said.

Shane smiled and asked Jess, "You'd let them steal you away?"

"I'd sneak right back." She was catching on.

"Promise?" he asked, wishing he'd thought before speaking. Jess didn't make promises.

"Promise," she said without batting an eye. Her voice held a great deal of conviction.

The whole of his world lessened until the only thing in his universe at that exact moment was a fair-haired, golden-eyed gal that he loved. She'd passed over a slimwitted General for him. He'd make sure that men trying for her in future times would be left in her wake too. She'd never look over her life with him and feel regret. He'd see to it.

About the Author

Kathleen Lash wrote a first novel with a friend at thirteen. She eventually married the “bad boy” who, a few decades later, provides wild times and stability. Working full time as a supervisor, she holds a Bachelor’s in business, and continues to rebuild the highly affordable, unique fixer-upper. Leisure hours are packed with writing, stock car racing, demolition derby driving, Toyota bonfires (cutting torch plus fuel line equals hysterical laughter and a newspaper article in the local paper—sorry, sweetie), motorcycle and horseback rides, fun with adult children (boys, girls and adorable dogs), and trips to various states and Mexico.

Affiliations with the Romance Writers of America and the Northeastern Ohio Romance Writers groups have allowed her to hone her skills and give characters a rich past and precarious future. Kathleen is also published in other romance genres.

The author 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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