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# PRINCE OF DRAGONS

THE ORION SERIES

CATHRYN CADE

His beast will have her beauty—but only on his terms.

*Orion, Book 3*

Sirena Blaze has left a string of smiling males across the galaxy—but she's not smiling now. After two attempts to sabotage her ship, it's time to call for backup. Her warriors deserve the best, and that means recruiting a member of the elite Serpentine guard as co-commander.

One look at Slyde Stone, and Sirena's smile returns. She sets out to indulge in the sensual delights for which his people are legendary.

Slyde would like nothing more than to bed the famous beauty, but a secret binds the hands that burn to take her. He is a half-dragon shifter, a race thought to be nothing more than a myth. He's real, and so is the code he must live by—he can mate only once.

Sirena's fury at Slyde's refusal knows no bounds—until saboteurs loose a pair of deadly serpents on board the *Orion*. And the infuriating man has the gall to make a wager. If she finds them first, she can have him. But if he wins, she must agree to be his alone—for life.

Warning: Space cougar on the prowl, a handsome virgin in her sights. Hot love scenes, and even hotter dragon shape-shifting.

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# Prince of Dragons

*Cathryn Cade*

# Dedication

To Louisa Kelley. Thanks for your unfailing encouragement and for always knowing what the story needs.

## Prologue

Once, long ago, dragons lived among the jagged mountains of the desert planet of Serpentina. When the peaks rang with fierce cries and swift shadows skimmed across the valleys, Serpentians knew the dragons were hunting.

Unlike the huge dragons of myth and legend, Serpentine dragons were compact, the size of a small horse. Those who looked them in the eye and lived never forgot the light of intelligence in their fiery eyes. These dragons hunted not to lay waste, but to eat. They took sparingly from each area, ranging far and wide to feed themselves and their young.

The people of the valleys used great caution when traveling through the mountains. Those who lived close enough to lose livestock were grateful they paid only a tithe to the winged ones and could carry on their livelihood of herding their shaggy hummels.

Descended from explorers who had set out centuries ago from a crowded, polluted Earth I to find new homes, Serpentians had evolved into a people with unique adaptations to their hot, desert planet. They now shared some characteristics with the reptiles that shared their planet—eyes and skin that were impervious to the searing sun, and the deadly quickness of a striking serpent. They learned to coexist with the planet's native inhabitants and treat them with the caution they deserved, for nowhere else in the known galaxy were there so many species of reptiles—including the dragons that lived in lonely splendor, high in the rugged Serpentine mountains.

But legend says that a young woman, a daughter of the valleys, traveled into the mountains with her father. No one knows why they were so foolhardy. Some say he was in search of dragon hoard treasure and she went along to care for him.

Others say she was a creature of great sensuality who had tired of mere men and longed to be taken by a dragon. While her father slept, she slipped from their shelter, or was taken.

Either way, she found herself high in the mountains, in the lair of the prince of all the dragons, a red-gold male magnificent in his fiery glory. When he found her there, she slept on a pile of furs before his hearth, her lovely body nude, her tumbled curls spilling across the furs.

The dragon king had fed well that night. When he returned to his home and caught her woman's scent, it aroused in him a different hunger. His nostrils flared, sending streamers of smoke swirling through the cave, and his eyes glowed with jeweled heat.

He prowled silently around the sleeping woman, admiring her full curves, the lush boldness of her lips. He sang to her a sibilant song of seduction and stroked her skin with his wings.

Instead of screaming in terror, she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

*"You have entered my lair,"* he crooned to her, dark dragon magic in his smoky voice. *"Present yourself for me, lovely one."*

She was afraid, but aroused to the point of madness by his seduction. Rising onto her hands and knees, she presented herself so that all her feminine secrets were visible to him. He began to make her ready for him, bending his fierce head to inhale the rich scent of her arousal. She trembled and whimpered her pleasure as his hot, leathery tongue trailed up her swollen labia, tormenting and teasing her.

"Taste more of me," she pleaded.

He laughed richly. *"Fear not, O Eager One. I will taste all of you—have all of you."*

As she arched her back, displaying herself wantonly for his eyes and his touch, he rewarded her with a deeper caress of his tongue, thrusting it into her heat. She cried out to him, pleading for more. When he had driven her nearly mad with his tender whip, he withdrew it.

*"And will you have me, woman?"* he asked. *"Will you be mine?"*

"Yes!" she cried, writhing as she hovered on the precipice of joy. "Oh, yes, anything, if only you will go on."

With a laugh of triumph, he caressed her again until she came, pleasure imploding through her, the sound of her soft cries echoing in the vastness of the cave.

*"Very pretty,"* he approved. *"You sing your song of surrender most fetchingly. And your pretty sex weeps for joy. You are nearly ready to receive me."*

"I am ready now."

He stalked around her, so close that his great, heated body brushed hers and his wings trailed over her, caressing her skin and her face. Rearing up before her, he tipped her face up to his.

*"Look at me, woman,"* he commanded. *"Will you receive me as I am?"*

Still quivering with her pleasure, she looked up with awe into his molten, jeweled eyes. Her gaze wandered down over his sculpted snout with her cream still on his lips, over his mighty, armor-plated body, to the phallus that thrust out between his loins. It was huge, suffused with blood, quivering with arousal. He was beautiful, savage, the most exciting thing she had ever seen, the stuff of wicked, forbidden dreams.

"Yes," she breathed. "Oh, yes."

*"You are certain?"* He stroked her face with one jeweled claw, his fiery gaze demanding that she speak her desire.

"Yes, I want your mighty cock in me," she said, blushing at her own boldness. "Please, my lord."

*"Ah, you ask so prettily,"* he approved. *"And so you shall have it, long and hard."*

He covered her as a stallion covers a mare, planting his claws beside her hands, folding his great wings over her and thrusting himself into her softness.

He took exquisite care with her, working his way little by little into her sleek channel, all the while crooning to her, enfolding her with his wings and stroking his face against hers, gentling her as he took her.

*"Now you are truly mine,"* he growled when he was seated deep inside her. *"You will never be satisfied with a mortal male again."*

Skittish with nerves, her sex stretched taut, she tried to throw him off as a mare tries to dislodge a stallion. He laughed softly and held her easily, crooning to her as he enjoyed the sight of his phallus buried in her and the tight heat of her possession of him.

"Now, pretty one. Now."

And he began to thrust. As his great phallus worked in her, she screamed, not with pain, but with the greatest pleasure she had ever known. And the dragon king roared his pleasure so loudly it echoed down the mountains.

He was delighted with her. He kept her there with him, clothed her in silk, furs and jewels from his hoard and treasured her so that she forgot anything but his fierce possession, living in perfect contentment. He taught her to accept him anywhere he desired, whether on a craggy mountaintop or before the roaring fire, while his servants worked quietly in the far corners. She learned to glory in his open possession of her and grew more beautiful in her sensuality.

But her father did not give up hunting for her. He came back to the mountains, bringing the man he had chosen to wed her along with a band of warriors. While the dragon king hunted, they stole the woman back. She pleaded and wept, but they thought her bewitched and bore her away with them.

Maddened when he returned to find his mate gone, the dragon king followed the party far into the valley. In his rage, he slew several of the warriors and was about to kill the father and the young man when the father begged for their lives, telling the dragon king that his daughter had relented and wished to go with them.

The dragon lord demanded that they bring her out to him. So they did, but the crafty father had drugged her so she could not even recognize her lover. He knelt before her and humbled himself, pleading with her to return to him. She simply gazed at him as if she had never seen him before, her lovely face like marble.

Brokenhearted, he flew away, and the men congratulated each other and bore her home in triumph. But when she came out of her drugged trance and realized what they had done, the young woman vowed that no matter what, she would not stay in her old home, but return to the mountains.

So she smiled and used pretty manners and, meantime, she planned carefully. One evening she, in turn, seasoned the dinner with the same drug they had given her. As her father and her betrothed lay



senseless, she left her home and rode away on the fastest horse in her father's stables, back to the mountains.

Her mount would carry her only so far, for horses are terrified of dragons and the poor beast could scent them in the peaks above. She dismounted and, letting the horse run home, began to walk.

But when she staggered wearily up the last ledge before the dragon king's lair, she saw a terrible sight. Her lover lay near death on the stone escarpment. Dragons mate only once, for life. If they lose their mate, they are likely to die as well.

She cradled his head to her bosom and wept over him all the cold, starry night. When the sun first lightened the eastern sky and the stars winked out, he woke. Her tears had revived him. At first he thought her a vision of his delirium, but when he understood she had returned to him, he vowed to her they would never be parted again. And so they were not.

In due course she bore him four sons. They were half man and half dragon, handsome men who were able to shift at will. When they were grown, they each ruled a portion of the mountain kingdom. They dealt well with both man and dragon. They came out of the mountains only to seek their brides, among the bravest and most beautiful Serpentine women.

And so began the race called Dragolins.

# Chapter One

The Black Hole was the rowdiest bar in Sunspot City, one of the toughest space-ports in the galaxy. Tonight it was full of raucous dock workers, off-duty spaceship crew and space vagrants. A band sent music crashing over the crowd, along with streamers of color and light. The holo-marquee outside featured strippers. Males and females from several planets gyrated in various stages of nudity on tiny stages hovering over the crowd.

The doors were thrown open to catch any breezes that might stray in off the Solarian desert. Despite the huge fans turning overhead, the smell of alcohol, fried food and sweat pervaded the air. It was a hot night on Solaria, with tempers and lusts running even hotter.

The lovely, golden-skinned female who sauntered in from the dark seemed to have no idea of the danger. Clad in a scanty, clinging outfit of red spider-lace, she threaded her way through the tables as if walking through a cocktail party.

The instant he saw her, Slyde Stone froze with a shot of Serpentine fire-whiskey poised at his open mouth. Every cell of his body sprang to full alert. He'd never felt anything like the sheer want that seized his brain—and his cock.

She was Serpentine...the embodiment of everything female. Her auburn hair curled about her head and shoulders, framing a face with slanting emerald eyes, high cheekbones and a full mouth curved in a tiny, mysterious smile. She carried herself like a queen or a courtesan, her hips swaying, breasts moving temptingly in their precarious cradle. Her slender arms were bare, her long legs nearly so, golden skin gleaming in the lights. She held nothing in her hands, wore no adornment. She needed none. She stood out in the motley crowd like a fire-ruby in a pile of space rubble.

The females who frequented the Black Hole were either sturdy space crew as raucous as their male counterparts, or paid sex companions. There were a few others, but they were guarded by mates who looked ready to slash the throats of anyone who came too near. It was that kind of place.

And of course every male present was now watching the beauty. Slyde saw avid stares become leers, watched lips move in what he was certain were lewd suggestions. Primal anger flamed inside him. He quenched it with an effort—he was in a public place and could not afford to indulge his emotions. Besides, he didn't need to; he was one of the best hand-to-hand combat fighters in the galaxy and bigger than most of the males in this place.

Remembering his drink, he tipped it down his throat with a shudder and slapped the glass back on the bar. He rose from his bar stool to go rescue the lovely fool, just as a huge, rough Argonautian stood up directly in her path, his purple lips spread in what was no doubt supposed to be a smile. On his pocked face, it looked more like an attack of painful gas. He was going to be showing genuine pain in a moment—at the end of Slyde's fists.

"Hello, pretty one," the huge Argo roared. "Looking for me?"

A hand caught Slyde's arm, and he glanced over in irritation. The Serpentine on the next barstool shook his head, his eyes twinkling under his shock of startling green-gold hair.

"Wait," he yelled over the crashing music. "This will be good."

Slyde shrugged off his hand in disgust. They'd been acquainted for only a few hours, but he'd thought Izard a man of honor. "You'd let one of our women be molested by that pile of space scum?"

Izard grinned, white teeth flashing against his golden skin. "I'm telling you—just watch."

Ready to spring across the few yards that separated him from the woman facing the Argo, Slyde hesitated. She certainly did not look frightened—or even worried. She tipped her head to one side, her hair falling across her bare shoulder, and looked the Argo up and down.

Slyde could not hear her voice, but he could clearly see her luscious lips form the word "no".

With a roar, the Argo reached for her with ham-sized paws. Slyde watched in astonishment as the female literally flashed into action, her body twisting, slender bare limbs a chord of concentrated force. First one leg, then the other in lightning succession connected with the Argonautian's huge head.

Though the impact was inaudible over the pounding music and the roar of the crowd, his massive body rocked with the force of the blows, arms flailing as he swayed in his tracks, mouth open, eyes glazing over.

Planting her hands on the table behind her, the female braced herself on one heel, pointed her outstretched foot at the middle of his huge chest and shoved. The Argo went over backward like a felled tree, taking a table and its contents with him.

The crowd roared with approval, even those who'd been forced to leap out of the way. Izard smacked Slyde's arm.

"There. Didn't I tell you?"

"Who is she?" demanded Slyde. He could not take his eyes off her as she slipped off the table, shook back her hair and smiled at the cheering crowd.

He hadn't come in here looking for a woman, but he'd found one. And he wanted her with everything he was.

"That's Sirena. Sirena Blaze—the *Orion's* guard commander."

*Magnificent.* Sirena Blaze looked across the crowded bar, panting and laughing a little from her exertions, and locked gazes with the huge Serpentine standing by the bar, obviously poised to come to her aid. His sheer male beauty struck her like a solid blow to the solar plexus. *Want that*, was her only coherent thought.

Even the sight of Izard, one of her guard, grinning like a crested shark-lizard over his shoulder, did not deter her from turning and walking straight to him. She had come into the place looking for a lover and she wanted this one. Oh, how she wanted. Excitement quivered deep in her loins, and she felt the spider silk rasp deliciously against her mons and her taut nipples as she sauntered toward him. She knew her scanty outfit did little to conceal these changes, and she gloried in the fact that he would see her arousal and know it was for him.

The crowd parted before her, genial after the entertainment she'd given them. Some of them knew her and called her name. She smiled lazily, acknowledging their praise, but did not turn from her goal.

He just got better as she neared him. Six feet plus of huge, virile male—clearly Serpentine, but larger and more massive than the usual lean, lithe males from her planet. He held himself with an innate arrogance that said more clearly than words he could meet any other male in the place in a fight and win. That he was an alpha, a ruler, and he knew it.

He wore his dark gold hair ruthlessly short, but it only emphasized the sculpted flare of his wide jaw and the beauty of his eyes, deep set under heavy arching brows.

And the look in those golden eyes was the best part of all. He watched her with a hungry intensity and something more she couldn't quite place, until she was close enough to sense the way his big body tensed at her nearness. The glow in his eyes was more than desire—it was yearning.

It slammed into her like a body blow and swept through her, hot as the wind blowing in off the desert. She didn't stop until she stood before him, her hand on the broad, hard plain of his chest, a clear invitation. "Hello. I am Sirena."

Her shock was complete when he covered her hand with his own, bowed over it with exquisite courtesy, and then...let it go.

"Yes, I know," he said in a deep, smoky voice. "I'm Slyde Stone—your new partner."

## Chapter Two

It'd been Sirena's idea to hire another guard commander for the cruise and transport ship *Orion*. She was confident of her skill to lead her elite guard, had been doing so for years, but since saboteurs had targeted the *Orion* on her first two voyages, she was glad to have backup.

Having met Slyde Stone, she knew exactly where she wanted to begin their partnership—in the luxurious bed in her shipboard quarters. When they met over drinks in one of the *Orion*'s small lounges, she wore another of her favorite outfits. The semi-diaphanous green lily leaf wrap clung to her statuesque form, hiding and revealing at once.

As she sank gracefully into their booth in a shadowed corner, he watched every move. But though the heat in his golden eyes set off little fires of response all through her, her new co-commander behaved as he had the evening before: with exquisite courtesy.

Baffled by his strange reticence, Sirena saw no value in subtlety.

"I think we'll work well together, Commander." She set down her empty moon brandy glass and pushed the tiny hover table out of the way, leaning closer to him. She knew that her special perfume, distilled for her on Pangaea, would be tantalizing his senses. "We can also enjoy each other in other ways."

He set his own glass beside hers, lashes veiling his eyes as he watched her hand slide up his thigh. Then he looked up. She caught her breath at the intensity of his gaze and the heat in his big hand as he grasped hers, stilling it before she reached her target—the impressive swelling in his groin. Her new co-commander was obviously as large there as everywhere else. Just the thought of taking his huge cock inside her made her tingle with delight.

"I've no doubt you're right," he agreed, his deep voice husky. "However, I...am not at liberty to explore that."

She blinked. "You're wed?" Serpentians did marry, although it was infrequent. But he didn't look at her like a man whose passions were elsewhere.

"No," he replied. She saw, even in the soft light of the lounge, that his sculpted cheekbones had reddened. The big lug was actually embarrassed. "I'm not wed, nor promised to another. And I find you...completely alluring, Sirena. But a casual liaison wouldn't work for you and me."

Stunned at being refused, Sirena jerked her hand from his. To her irritation, he rose with her so she stood looking up instead of down. She lifted her chin proudly, ignoring the heat flaming in her own cheeks.

“Never mind, Commander, there are many attractive females—and males—aboard the *Orion*. I’m sure you’ll find someone to your tastes.”

He stepped in front of her, his broad shoulders blocking the gaze of interested viewers.

“No. Because I won’t be looking. I’ve said I’m attracted to you. And I’d like nothing more than to explore that attraction.”

“But?” She arched a brow at him. “I see nothing stopping you.”

“The only thing stopping me is you.”

“I don’t understand you,” she hissed.

He moved a little closer, so they were nearly touching. His scent teased her, heady, virile male. “If we were to become lovers, Sirena, it would have to be...exclusive.”

She laid her hand lightly on his chest, feeling the power and heat radiating through his thin uniform jacket. “Oh, I don’t think that would be a problem, Commander.”

As if unable to stop himself, he lifted one hand to cup the side of her face, his thumb brushing the corner of her mouth. Ah, she had him now. Curling out the tip of her tongue, she tasted the calloused pad of his thumb.

His broad jaw clenched, his eyes riveted on her mouth. There was that raw yearning again. But it was quickly veiled as he looked into her eyes, his gaze probing.

“No,” he said. “Not yet. You’re not ready.”

Sirena stared at him, shocked as if he’d slapped her. “What do you mean *I* am not ready?”

He brushed his fingers through the hair that curled against her throat, then dropped his hand.

“You’re not ready for more between us.”

Sirena blinked. She’d never been refused before, and especially not by a male who so obviously wanted her. Did he dare to toy with her? Anger flamed, a welcome relief to the confusion roiling inside her.

“This is ridiculous,” she hissed. “You’re a fool, Commander, if you believe I’ll wait for you. Why not just enjoy each other?”

“In time.” He bowed politely, belying the anger flaming in his golden eyes—he hadn’t liked her frank words—and stepped aside. “Good night, Siren.”

“Oh, it will be for me, at least,” she said, tossing her head. “You see, Commander, I’m more than ready to enjoy a male tonight. Too bad it won’t be you.”

She smiled as she walked away, hips swaying enticingly. It was the smile of a predator who knew she could have any male who crossed her path. As she passed a table of InterGalactic Space Force pilots, she met the eyes of the handsomest of them. Arching one brow at him, she crooked her finger.

She didn’t look back to see if he was following her out of the bar. They always did.

Inside, she was fuming. Slyde Stone might be eminently qualified to be her co-commander, but he was a fool when it came to women.

It wasn't until much later that Sirena realized he'd mispronounced her name. She gave a hiss of displeasure. Perhaps he indeed saw her as a siren of legend—leading space travelers to disaster.

*Two months later, on Serpentina...*

"This way, sir, if you please."

The Serpentine bowed obsequiously, gesturing to the open door which led from the lobby of the low stone building into a large atrium. "Exotic Pets—We Import from All Reaches of the Galaxy", read the discreet sign.

The Pangaeon businessman followed him onto the wide balcony. He heard his companion's quick gasp as she stopped beside him at the rail.

"Quite something, eh, my dear Lly?" Rra asked.

Below them, draped over rocks, coiled in the sand beneath desert shrubbery and lazing around a shallow pool that simulated a desert oasis, were dozens of huge snakes.

Lly didn't answer. Glancing at her, he saw that his mistress' green skin was as pale as a honeydew. She gripped the railing tightly. Even her silky green hair wrapped about her throat, a clear sign of distress in a Pangaeon.

His lip curled slightly. She amused him both in and out of bed, but he'd suspected for some time that the lovely Lly lacked the stomach to be truly ruthless. Come to think of it, he'd never met his match, unless it was the creatures below.

The edge of the balcony fell away into a sheer stone pit. The vipers in it were beautiful, if one viewed them dispassionately. Pale gold, with strange markings along their sleek lengths, as if they'd been dusted with an artist's brush. Their cold flat eyes were bronze, the tongues that flickered out before the triangular heads as red as blood. Framing their open mouths were two crystalline fangs.

"My beauties are restless-ss," said the Serpentine. "They are hungry. Would you like to watch them feed?" His eyes glowed with malice. Pangaeons were well known to be vegans and opposed to killing any live creature.

"Of course," Rra answered carelessly. He'd come here with a mission, after all. These serpents certainly looked lethal, but it wouldn't hurt to see them in action.

The Serpentine hurried into a room off the balcony and reappeared holding several small, furry creatures with long ears. They hung quivering over his arm.

"Desert bunnies," he said. "A favorite prey of Serpentine reptiles."

The bunnies were struggling now, kicking their long hind legs, eyes wild. But their captor flung the lot of them into the pit. Small shrieks of distress were cut off as the snakes struck, their crystalline fangs

sinking deep into the soft fur. The small creatures died instantly, eyes going empty in the way of dead things.

Lly gagged, one hand clapped over her mouth, and whirled away from the railing. Her footsteps pattered away toward the exit.

Rra ignored her. He watched with interest as the snakes claimed their prey, beginning the process of swallowing them whole.

“You say they can kill a much larger creature?” he asked. “For example, the size of a man?”

The Serpentine looked at him in complete understanding. “And go on doing so for days. They are quite tireless-ss.”

“Excellent. I’ll take two of them. With the...specifications we discussed. You’ve a handler to go with them?”

“My nephew has already joined the party, as we arranged.”

Rra smiled, his green skin glowing with approbation. “You’re a most helpful associate, snake master. There will be a bonus for you if we’re successful.”

The Serpentine smiled back, his eyes as dark and dangerous as those of his serpents.

“I’m certain you will be satisss-fied.”



## Chapter Three

Sirena looked down at the naked male straining beneath her and smiled. She might be a siren, but she led males not to disaster, but to pleasure greater than many of them had ever known. And this one wouldn't forget her any time soon.

"Ah, gods," he groaned, his hands clamped on her hips as she rode him with sinuous abandon, letting his cock slide nearly out of her before enveloping it once again. His pleasure-glazed eyes were locked with hers. Sweat soaked his short dark hair and gleamed on his skin, enhancing the play of muscle beneath. "That's so damn good! You are...unbelievable."

Since he was approaching his third orgasm, she chose to believe him. She herself was far ahead of that number. She supposed this would be his last effort—human males were lucky to be able to achieve arousal more than twice in such a short time.

She rose and fell on him, closing her eyes to enjoy the sensation of the shaft working inside her, stroking her tight channel. Tipping back her head, she lifted her arms and twined them behind her head, knowing that the motion thrust her breasts out more prominently.

Her com-link beeped a tiny warning in her ear. She ignored it as the pilot surged upward, filling his hands with her breasts and suckling greedily on her nipples.

"Mmm, yes. Like that." The pleasure began to tighten inside her, and she rode harder, feeling her orgasm begin.

Her com-link beeped again. Protocol demanded that whoever was paging her wait for an answer before opening a holo-vid link. She hoped for their sake they abided by the rules, because any commander who opened a link now was going to get an eyeful.

A hologram sprang up in sharp relief against the shadowed stateroom. It was Slyde Stone, watching her ride the other man. His stance was rigid, jaw clenched, his eyes flaming with such heat she was vaguely surprised her skin didn't burn.

In the two lunar months they'd been working together, they'd been through a major crisis, trained new guards and improved the quality of security on the *Orion*. And through it all, the heat of desire hadn't faded, and he still refused to act on it.

Her gasp of shock caught in her throat and, as their eyes held, it became a soft, escalating moan as she climaxed harder than she had all night, pleasure imploding deep within her pussy and then exploding outward through her body. Her co-commander's voyeurism was as delicious as the cock inside her.

By the time she finally managed to open her pleasure-drugged eyes, he was gone.

A short time later Sirena stepped outside the pilot's stateroom and stopped short, startled to see her co-commander of the Serpentine guard walking toward her. Walk—such a colorless word to describe the way he moved. He strode, he prowled like the magnificent male creature he was. His tall, heavily muscled body erect and graceful, his beautifully shaped head held high, he surveyed her with narrowed eyes.

His sculpted jaw was still clenched, his nostrils flared. Pushing back her hair, she eyed him cautiously. Great serpents, he wasn't embarrassed. He was furious.

Perhaps it would teach him a lesson. He could have been the male groaning with pleasure beneath her.

Her own body hummed with satisfaction. She'd left her latest lover sprawled across the bed in the stateroom behind her. He wouldn't wake for a long time, but when he did, it would be with a smile. As she recalled some of the things he'd done to her and with her, the corners of her mouth curled up with satisfaction.

If she'd sighed, feeling detached even as he groaned his eternal devotion, that was no one's business but her own. As was the fact she'd come most deliciously of all with Slyde watching them.

"Commander Stone," she said now, ignoring the way his narrow gaze made her want to touch her flight suit to see if it smoldered. Even after coming several times in the last hours, she still felt the usual low curl of desire at his nearness. But she'd resolved from the beginning that she wouldn't hang on his sleeve. That was for dewy-eyed ingénues. Let the great beast tell her what was wrong, if he wished.

Otherwise, she was headed straight for a hot shower-dry.

Slyde berated himself in savage silence. What had he been thinking to confront Sirena here outside her lover's door? Nothing coherent, that was certain. Since the instant he first saw her, he'd been thinking mostly with his cock.

After he'd refused her in the bar that first night, he'd seen the fighter pilot preen himself before her. Had known how it would end when the fellow swaggered out of the bar after her. And he'd watched the scene repeated several times in the last two months. The lovely, sensual Sirena was a typical Serpentine, sharing her body with any male she chose. And he was nearing the end of his patience. He'd done his best to show her how well they got along as they trained, planned and worked together, had even resorted to showing off in sparring. But still she turned to other men.

In a savage mood, he'd spent the last few hours patrolling the passageways of the *Orion*, from the command deck to the lowest cargo storage levels. He'd been between the ballroom and the passenger quarters when he was jolted out of his foul temper by a slight, acrid scent.

He'd stopped and closed his eyes, opening his olfactory senses further to the smells eddying around him. A cruise and transport ship, the *Orion* carried cargo and beings from the far ends of the galaxy, all on various intersecting journeys across the galaxy.

Some of the beings, to be honest, stank. Serpentians, with their enhanced olfactory senses, had to put up with those who weren't as meticulous in personal hygiene as they. Once in a while, fresh cargo spoiled and the stench invaded the area outside the cargo bays before it could be jettisoned and the bay cryogenically cleansed. Those incidents were to be expected.

But this scent left uneasiness slithering through him. He couldn't trace it anywhere in particular, but he *knew* it. It was the scent of danger. Since his first duty was to the safety of his ship, he tried instantly to contact his co-commander to alert the guard and begin a concerted search.

When she didn't answer, he'd overridden a prime rule of courtesy on board ship and opened a com-link between them. He bitterly regretted his decision. Because now he had to do more than imagine the things she allowed her lovers to do to her—the things he dreamed of doing to her, with her, himself.

Now he'd seen her. Her lovely body naked, kneeling astride another male, riding him with perfect, sensual grace. Had seen the other man's hands on the taut swell of her ass, his mouth on the perfect globes of her breasts.

Now he knew her skin was the same silken gold over her entire body, save for the dusky peach of her nipples and the delicate line of auburn that limned her mons. Knew how those scant curls looked soaked with another man's seed, how the pink lips of her labia stretched taut around another man's glistening cock as he drove it in and out of her.

Now he knew her soft, escalating moans as she enjoyed her orgasm. And the look in her eyes as she came, because their eyes had locked and he'd been unable to break away, drowning in those emerald depths.

Controlling his anger with a supreme effort, he stopped before her. Her golden cheeks were flushed, emerald eyes sleepy, her auburn mane tousled. Even the collar of her sleek top was crooked, which she would never allow on duty. It was obvious she'd just come from her lover's arms. Arms that Slyde wanted to rip off and feed to the bastard.

He grimaced as her fragrances mingled with the stench of another male ripped at his sensitive olfactory glands like rotting Pangaeian fruit.

She raised an arching brow at him.

"Commander?" she asked in her throaty voice. "Are you well?"

"That's a question I might ask you," he answered, his deep voice as rough as mountain stones grating together. "Were the answer not so obvious."

She straightened, frowning. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Merely that a shower-dry is in order. You reek of your lover's sweat."

“Commander Stone. You forget yourself.”

“Forget?” he sneered. “I’m not the one who has lain with too many lovers to remember.”

She drew in a hiss of pure rage, her emerald eyes going molten.

Good—let her have a taste of the frustrated rage he’d been battling since he laid eyes on her and realized that here was the woman of his dreams—his fervid, tormenting dreams—and that she would never be his... unless she agreed to his terms, which she was unlikely to do. Why should she, when she could enjoy any male she chose, for as long as she chose, instead of pledging herself to just one?

“I presume you had an important reason for following me?” she asked with dangerous softness. “And for spying on me?”

“It will wait,” he bit out.

He’d come on this voyage to look for a woman—a far different kind of woman. The kind who’d saved herself for marriage and who was chaste. Instead, he’d taken one look across that hellhole of a bar on Solaria and fallen like a space rock for this beauty, a warrior who could fell a man as easily with a kick or a look—and did both with regularity.

He turned his back on her before she could reply and before he could do what he really wanted: throw her over his shoulder, carry her off to his quarters and toss her in his shower-dry until she’d been through three or more cleaning cycles. And then...imprint his own touch and scent on her, so thoroughly she would never want another.

Slamming through an open hatchway, he raced down one of the many small spiral staircases, not caring where it led as long as it was away from her and what he wanted of her.

## Chapter Four

The doors of the *Orion's* arboretum slid open, and a young passenger wandered in, clad in brief vacation wear. Mina Starline inhaled a deep breath of the damp air, full of the mysterious spicy scents of the lush, green foliage. A brilliantly colored bird darted past her head and she ducked, then giggled.

Flipping back her long blonde hair, artfully streaked with pale blue and turquoise, she touched the jeweled earpiece of her com-link. The melting tones of a hit love song filled her ears as she wandered along the winding path to the edge of the grotto-like pool.

Sinking down on a large faux rock, she gazed at the cascading waterfall. Trailing fern fronds danced in the spray. Orchids dangled, delicate pink and orange blossoms swaying.

It had been worth every bit of wheedling, convincing her parents to give her a cruise for her birthday. Wait until she told her friends in Frontiera City about the hot Serpentine ship guards.

Chaz Jaguari launched into the chorus of his ballad, "I would follow you to the end of the stars," in his trademark lazy growl.

But instead of listening, Mina wrinkled her nose. What was that smell? It reminded her of a family vacation on their home planet of Frontiera. They had stayed in a geo-tent and in the evenings sat around a fire made of wood.

She peered into the deep shadows beyond the pool. Had someone or something moved back there? If there were other passengers in here, she wished they would speak. Lurking was just creepy.

Another, larger bird burst out of the shrubbery, trailing purple feathers and golden topknot. It uttered a liquid burble as it landed on the path and strutted toward her. She sighed with relief—only a gemcock.

The bird stopped midstride, one claw lifted, head cocked to peer in her direction. Then suddenly it dropped its jeweled tail and scurried away behind a large clump of gently swaying orchids.

Hearing a sound behind her, Mina froze. That had sounded like footsteps—and not those of any bird. A low growl followed, sending a chill of fear through her. Oh, stardust, she was obviously not the only being in here, and she really didn't want to meet the owner of that menacing growl.

She shot off of the rock, looking around her. This path must come out by one of the doors. She scurried around another bend in the path. The footsteps sounded again, closer behind her. She whirled.

"W-who's there? Show yourself," she said, her voice quavering.

The foliage rustled violently, and the scent of smoke filled her nostrils again. Her eyes wide, she stood frozen with terror as a huge, golden shape emerged from the shadows.

Half man, half mythical beast, he stood upright like a man, looked like one in most respects except that his skin had a golden, scale-like sheen. His forehead looked even more reptilian, plated in heavy scales which swept up from a point to form prominent brow bones, then rose to two flaring horn-like protrusions above his skull. And behind his back—were those *wings*?

He looked like a...*a dragon!*

He looked straight at her with his fiery golden eyes, and his lips parted, revealing glistening white teeth. He emitted a deep, guttural growl and took a step toward her. That was when she realized he was naked and a huge golden phallus hung between his thighs.

With a faint whimper, she fainted, collapsing to the soft earth.

The beast stalked nearer. For a long moment he loomed over her, his nostrils flaring as he drew in her feminine scent. His mighty claws clenched into fists. Throwing back his head, he let out a roar that echoed through the quiet arboretum. Flames shot from his mouth, arcing through the air to a low hanging branch. Smoke billowed. A bunch of leaves smoldered and then hung limp, wisps of smoke drifting upward.

With a low hiss, artificial rain began to patter down through the branches—the arboretum sprinklers reacting to the fire. The drops fell in silver curtains until every hint of smoke disappeared.

The rain spangled the dragon's shoulders, ran in rivulets down over his horn-plated skull. Shaking the moisture from his partially furled wings with an irritable twitch, the dragon paced down the path and stopped at the curve to look toward the main doors. He sniffed the damp air and tilted his head to listen. His jeweled eyes examined the lush growth. At last, satisfied that there was no sound save the pooling raindrops, dripping off the leaves and that nothing else breathed in the arboretum save the birds, he turned back.

She lay where she had fallen, a delicate picture of feminine grace in her pale outfit, her long blonde hair flung out in disarray across the mosses. Molten gaze fastened on her, he prowled slowly nearer.

The female was young, lovely and completely defenseless. He could do what he wanted, with no one the wiser. But she was not the prey he desired.

He flung back his head and roared his frustration and rage to the jungle.

Sirena stepped out of the shower-dry unit in her beautifully appointed stateroom and stretched. Ah, that was better. The hot water and her special herbal soap had soothed her, helping her regain her earlier relaxation. She would sleep like a hatchling for the rest of the night—if she could stop thinking about Slyde Stone.

Drat the big fang-lizard. Bad enough that she'd most enjoyed another perfectly good male when he was watching, but now he'd attacked her verbally. Just wait until they were on duty—she'd give him the tirade he deserved.

She frowned into her mirror. Her freshly washed hair waved back off her face to fall about her shoulders, bright as flame against the pale gold of her skin, accentuating her emerald eyes.

Smoothing her hands down over her hips, she relaxed, her full lips curving up in a tiny smile. She had the body of a courtesan, voluptuous and lithe. It was only when she moved that one saw the taut muscles, the balance and grace in each movement.

Males loved her body. Rarely did one refuse her. In fact, she had to only to select from those who pursued her. As Slyde had not.

But he was jealous. Her eyes narrowed as a thrill of pleasure shot through her. She gave her body where she chose, for as long as she chose. But with Slyde... perhaps she could use his jealousy to reel him in. She definitely knew what to do with him once she got him.

Touching her lips, she imagined him bending to kiss her. She drew in a shaken breath, and stared at herself in the mirror. What had come over her? Just the thought of that great hulk kissing her had her silly as a young girl.

She shook her head, turning away from the mirror. She was as big a fool as he. She curled her lip delicately—his exclusive approach to sexuality was clearly the cause of his anger. Serpentians were highly sensual creatures and suffered sexual frustration if not allowed frequent outlet for their passions.

She'd just belted her flame-silk robe about her waist when her com-link sounded. She tossed her head impatiently, wanting to rip the tiny ear piece out and throw it across her room. The new surgically implanted com-links meant that one was never out of reach, but that was sometimes a curse rather than a blessing.

"Speak," she snapped. She wanted rest. Her lover had fallen asleep immediately after their last coupling, but she never allowed herself to fall asleep with a male. It left a woman too vulnerable. Males had superior strength—a female must be watchful of every look, every intonation, using cunning to manage brawn.

"Commander, you'd better see this." The voice was that of Raile, one of her guards.

"Holo-vid on." She focused her attention on the holographic image that sprang to life.

Raile sat beside a narrow exam table in the infirmary, holding the hand of a pretty human in tourist wear who gazed up at him as if he were her savior. Dr. Tentaclar, the *Orion's* physician, stood on the other side of her.

"Continue." Sirena sank onto her divan, watching closely.

"This is Mina Starline," Raile said. "Mina, can you tell the commander what you saw in the arboretum?"

The girl nodded, her lip quivering. “I saw a *dragon*. It was a dragon...and a man, at the same time.”

Sirena blinked. A dragon? She could recall no beings on board who could be mistaken for such a mythical creature. There were the Lupinians, but with those short stubby horns, they resembled Earth bovines or hummels more than any other creature.

If only Commander Navos was here—he could tap into the girl’s thoughts, ascertain which was true. But he wouldn’t board until they passed by his home planet of Indigon tomorrow.

“Were you touched or harmed in any way?” she asked.

The girl shook her head. Dr. Tentaclar agreed. “My examination shows no sign of any physical contact.”

“Raile? What does the security holo-cam show?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. There was an aberration in the feed for that area of the ship.”

Sirena frowned. Unusual. That would have to be checked. “You searched the arboretum carefully?”

“Yes, Commander. We did find some singed branches, but that could’ve been the glow-torches at the wedding last evening. The only recent life traces found were from garden crew and passengers. Oh, and Commander Stone had walked through a short time before the, er, incident.”

“And he noticed nothing?”

“His com-link is off. But wouldn’t he have alerted you?”

She nodded. That settled it. If there had been any being or creature in the undergrowth, Slyde’s Serpentine senses would have picked it up, even in his foul mood. “Dr. Tentaclar?”

Two of the doctor’s several eyestalks swung her way. He winked solemnly.

“I believe the best thing for our young patient would be a medicinal libation and a good night’s rest.”

Raile’s handsome face fell. “You mean you’re going to give her a sleeper?”

“I think he means we comp her a couple of free drinks in the nightclub,” Sirena said dryly.

“Commander, I’ll take very good care of her,” Raile promised.

“I have no doubt you will. Thank you, Doctor.”

Sirena closed the com-link, but sat for a moment. A dragon-man, hmm? She’d met many strange beings in the course of her interplanetary travel, but none that resembled a dragon or could breathe fire.

In fact, it sounded as if the girl had been watching holo-videos of Serpentine legends. The *Dragolins*, dragon kings of the mountains, were the subject of many a children’s tale. She smirked. Perhaps Slyde Stone was a Dragolin. That would explain both his great size *and* his demand for monogamy. The legendary beings were said to have mated for life.

As different as could be from her typically Serpentine father, who had drifted away when she was a hatchling, returning only for casual visits. For an instant she remembered herself as a little girl, weeping in her mother’s arms as she watched him fly off through the sunny desert.



Sirena shook off the memory with an annoyed hiss. Great serpents, but she needed sleep. She was becoming maudlin. She rose, stretched and then let her silk robe fall in a slither of color behind her as she slid naked into her bed.

Mina Starline fell asleep with a smile. Her space cruise adventure now had the added cachet of a frightening encounter with an alien being. She hadn't been hurt, either, so she'd have the fun of recounting every nuance of the creature's appearance and her own emotions to her friends, but she hadn't been raped or murdered.

And she had met the handsome, sexy guard Raile. So far it was a great cruise.

## Chapter Five

Sirena glided into the command deck of the *Orion*. The sleek command console framed a breathtaking view of deep black space, dotted with twinkling stars. Nearby glimmered the deep purple of a small planet. Flung out behind it lay the red gold shimmer of a swirling nebula, light years away.

Nearly all the *Orion*'s crew commanders were seated in the tall-backed chairs. Halix, head of operations, his round lavender face beaming; Ogg, chief mechanic, wiry and weathered; Dr. Tentaclar, head medical officer; Panthar, the Tygean navigator, relaxed as a big hunting cat on a limb; Mra, the Pangaeon chief interpreter, shimmering with a faint green aura. They all wore the silver grey of the *Orion*, with commander epaulets over the symbols of their specialties.

Only Sirena wore the distinctive golden yellow guard uniform. But she knew it was not only that which made every male turn and watch her entrance. She smiled as she sank gracefully into her seat, accepting their admiration as her due.

The lean blonde man in the captain's chair nodded to her. "Sirena."

"Captain," she returned. She looked enquiringly at the empty chair beside him. "Commander Navos has not returned?"

"His shuttle just boarded," Captain Steve Craig replied. "He should be joining us in a few moments."

"He has recovered from the strain of having to examine the entire crew and passenger roster on our last voyage?" Mra asked, her green corn-silk hair waving gently with compassion. "He was exhausted."

Craig nodded, brows drawing together. "Yes. Dr. Tentaclar will be keeping an eye on him on this run to make sure he doesn't overdo."

"Several, in fact," chirped the doctor, wagging his eyestalks.

Sirena joined in the chuckle of response. She liked and respected the *Orion*'s chief medical officer. On their last voyage, Tentaclar's skill had ensured that a young guard, attacked by a vicious saboteur, suffered neither pain nor lasting injury.

"Tessa is well?" Mra echoed Sirena's thoughts.

Their captain's blue eyes softened. "She'll be joining us in a few days. Had to organize our new condo on Earth II."

Ogg nodded. "Lots of wedding gifts to put away. That takes time. A bride likes to line her nest the way she wants it."

Panthar eyed him with lazy interest. "You married, Ogg?"

“Was once,” the mechanic replied in his gravelly voice. “Didn’t last.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Ogg shrugged. “Don’t miss her. Too busy taking care of this lady.”

The hatch slid open again, and a deep, smoky voice sounded behind Sirena’s chair.

Her pulse galloped, although she remained outwardly serene.

“Sorry, Captain,” said Slyde Stone. “I was pursuing a small investigation.”

Sirena looked at him sharply as he slid into the chair beside her. He shook his head as their eyes met.

“Later,” he murmured as the hatchway slid open once again.

Craig smiled, his face creasing attractively. “Commander Navos, welcome back.”

Sirena looked at the lean man who stood in the hatchway. With the cool face of an ascetic, he gave the impression of leashed power. His eyes were a deep indigo, nearly black as his hair.

“Captain. Commanders. I trust the lateness of my arrival has caused no inconvenience.”

He sat. Above the center of the console, a multi-dimensional holo-video sprang to life, swirling through a complicated pattern that became the LodeStar corporate logo—a sleek ship speeding toward a guiding star. After a moment, the ship accelerated out of the hologram, and the area settled to a quiet glow, awaiting input commands.

Craig looked around at all of them.

“Crew commanders, welcome aboard the third voyage of the *Orion*. As you know, we are bound for Carillon, by way of Aquarius and Hibernux. Thanks to the news services, the whole galaxy knows that we were attacked on both of our previous voyages.” He added dryly, “It says a lot about the adventurous spirit of our galactic travelers that we have a full passenger roster for this voyage.”

“Or perhaps the positive spin the LodeStar publicists were able to put on the last voyage,” smirked Sirena. “After all, the *Orion* is ‘captained by the hero of the Solar Wars’.”

“I preferred the glowing reports about our ‘elite Serpentine guard’,” Craig shot back.

“Touché,” she murmured, although she felt none of the chagrin Craig displayed at having been in the public eye. The elite of all ship guards, her Serpentine guards deserved every kudos they received. LodeStar paid handsomely to keep them.

Panthar’s eyes gleamed.

“You’re both forgetting the heroics of Commander Jag, on the *Orion*’s first voyage,” he put in smoothly. “Doesn’t hurt to have a Tyger on board.”

“Easy, big guy,” Ogg quipped. “No bloodletting on this voyage. Nice and peaceful.”

Panthar shrugged.

“Maybe—maybe not. We still don’t know who hired the slime-worm with the bio-bomb on our first voyage, or who paid off two of our own to sabotage us on the second voyage.”

At this reminder, the levity around the command console faded. They looked to Captain Craig, faces grave, waiting to hear if there was a name, a face, an organization on which to focus.

“We don’t know—yet—who is behind the attacks, except that we are going to make damned sure it *cannot* happen again,” he said grimly. “The *Orion* and her sister ship the *Cassiopeia* are en voyage, each carrying three hundred some passengers and crew. The *Pegasus* is online to disembark in a few months. If we don’t discover soon who’s behind these sabotage attempts, we’re risking the lives of hundreds of LodeStar crew and passengers and the livelihoods of thousands more. There are plenty of other shipping lines who would swoop in and take our business.”

He nodded at Sirena.

“Commander Blaze will brief you on our security upgrades.”

Sirena leaned forward, glad to have a chance to channel the anger that uncoiled at mention of the terrorist attacks—especially the one that had come from within her own guard.

“Holo-vid, bring up security command crew brief.”

“You all know about our new security debriefing system,” she said.

The others nodded with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. All LodeStar crew, from the guards to the galley assistants, were now required to undergo an extensive mind scan before each voyage. This meant a mentally draining session in the medical clinic on board the *Orion*, but guaranteed that any plans to harm LodeStar cruise and transport spaceships would be discovered.

“Had this been in place before our last voyage, we would have known the saboteurs’ plans before we disembarked,” she reminded them.

Halix’s round lavender face brimmed with pride. He and Commander Navos had combined their skills in mind scanning and technology to create the new system.

“We also have the new holographic micro-scanners in place, as well,” Slyde put in, gesturing at the holographic display to pinpoint an area of the ship and magnify it. “These will examine the luggage and cargo minutely. Passengers obviously wouldn’t put up with the extensive mind scans, but they are physically scanned as they enter the boarding area. Reports fed into our computer system will bring any anomalies to the attention of crew, so that any suspect cargo or being can be examined further and if necessary neutralized or removed.”

“For example, if a dragon tried to board?” Panthar lifted one sleek brow. “Heard we had a sighting last night.”

The others chuckled.

“Merely an excitable young passenger,” Sirena said.

“Can’t do anything about those,” said Craig dryly. “But with these new systems in place, I believe we can all do our jobs, confident in the security of the *Orion*. Mr. Halix?”

Halix beamed. “Thank you, Captain. We have some rather special passengers coming aboard—a royal household of Aquarius. Prince Azuran and his retinue will take up a large block of staterooms, including Mr. Stark’s personal suite. They have also reserved the adjacent ballroom for evening entertainments. They will be a large party—forty-five, er, beings altogether.”

“Beings?” Sirena echoed, raising her brows.

“The prince travels with a variety of life forms from the far reaches of the galaxy, including several that boarded from a Pangaeon shuttle last night. He visited there recently and was intrigued by some of their, er, wildlife.”

“Any that will need to be confined to the cargo area?”

Halix looked uncomfortable, and Craig sighed. “We’re dealing with royalty here, folks. So long as he keeps his guests—and pets—in his area of the ship...”

“Are there any that might be a danger?” Mra asked, looking concerned.

“Not according to the boarding intel his people provided. If there are, believe me, we’ll deal appropriately with them. Oh, and by the way, you’re all invited to attend the prince’s evening entertainments whenever your duties allow. I understand they’re quite something. The prince apparently knows how to throw a party.”

Mra’s green corn-silk hair folded primly about her throat. “I have heard of these Aquarian parties from my friends in the diplomatic service,” she murmured. “They are said to be very...licentious.”

“Oh, goody,” Sirena said with relish. “I must be sure to attend.”

She looked forward to meeting this Prince Azuran.

## Chapter Six

Slyde followed Sirena out of the command center. Despite her serene public demeanor, hostility had radiated in his direction during the meeting. The lady was still angry. Well, so was he. She turned to the left, into the passageway that led toward the gymnasium, and he followed her a little way, watching the roll of her gorgeous ass. He wanted to spank it, he wanted to caress it. He scowled. He wanted to kill any other male who touched it.

“Sirena.”

She turned, raising one arching brow, and waited for him to catch up with her.

“The risk investigation I mentioned? I was trying to locate a scent.”

Her expression changed, all attention.

“I believe there’s something dangerous on board.”

He looked around sharply as a pair of crew members came toward them and reached past her to key open the hatch beside them. A tiny escape pod bay, but it would do. Urging her inside, he shut the hatch behind them.

“I caught the scent last evening when I was... patrolling.” The memory of why he’d been driven to stride the passageways roared up inside him, and he fought it back.

Her eyes sharpened like faceted emeralds. “What do you think it is?”

“A serpent,” he said. “I’ve smelled it before, in the desert on Serpentina.”

“You’re certain? None of our guards have reported anything.”

All Serpentians had acute olfactory senses, especially when the scent meant danger. On Serpentina, every child knew the acrid odor of vipers.

“I’ve an unusually keen sense of smell,” he said, watching her warily. He did not want to tell her who he was—not yet. Since he’d come of age, females had thrown themselves at him. He didn’t think Sirena would give a space rock for who he was, but until he was sure, he meant to keep quiet. He wanted her to desire him for himself, not for what he could give her.

“We must alert the other commanders and guards,” he said, moving to open his com-link.

“Wait.” She grasped his arm. “Slyde, we can’t. If word gets out that there’s some kind of dangerous serpent on board this ship, there’ll be panic. We’re in the middle of deep, cold space—we cannot have hysterical passengers swarming the escape pods.”

He scowled down at her. “What do you propose we do, find it ourselves?”

Her eyes narrowed, his sarcasm hitting home. “Yes. We’ll divide the ship into quadrants. If we can’t locate it by tomorrow, we’ll bring in the guards.”

She patted his arm in mock sympathy. “Don’t worry. If it’s here, I’m sure I’ll find it very soon. I know this ship like the back of my hand.”

“If it’s here—I’ll find it first.”

“You’re on. And whichever of us finds it first must destroy it. I’ll tolerate no danger to my ship.”

He nodded. The search was serious business indeed. But she was competitive to a fault. Perhaps he could use that to his advantage. “Oh, and Sirena...when I find the serpent, I’ll expect to claim a prize of some sort.”

“Name it.”

He moved closer, crowding her against the closed control panel, so close he could feel her warmth, so close her luscious lips were only a few centimeters away. He looked down into her eyes, saw her pupils dilate, her nostrils flare as she inhaled his scent. He planted his hands on the smooth panel beside her shoulders.

“You want me,” he murmured. “If you find the serpent first, you can have me—with no tethers attached. But if I find it first...you’re mine. For as long as I want. Exclusively.”

Her lips parted—as close as his siren ever got to her mouth hanging open, he supposed. She blinked. Then she looked him up and down, those luscious lips curving in a smug little smile.

“You’re on,” she repeated.

“Good. And one more thing.” His blood thundered in his veins. “No other males during the search, either.”

She shook her head pityingly, belying the fire in her gaze. “Since it will take me only a few hours to find the beast, that won’t be a problem.”

“It’d better not be,” he warned. Why not tease both of them and raise the stakes? He lifted one hand and stroked it down her throat, finding the tiny tab on the fastener of her top and pulling it down very slowly, so that her jacket parted, revealing her deep cleavage and the tiny cami she wore beneath it. “Because if you do...”

She stood very still, watching him as he parted her jacket with the backs of his fingers, only the slight hitch in her breath revealing she was not as serene as her expression indicated. The semi-sheer fabric was nevertheless snug and strong. Under his gaze, her nipples peaked, thrusting at the fabric, and her breasts lifted on a deep breath.

He stroked his fingertips down over satin skin and slick fabric, filling his hands with her breasts and squeezing gently. The soft, warm globes fit perfectly in his hands. He wanted to rip the cami from her so that there was no barrier between them, but this was not about his want, his need. This was about pleasing

her, coaxing her to come to him for good. She was a deeply sensual creature, and she wouldn't respond to clumsy grabbing.

She tipped her head back against the wall, eyes drooping, arching her back to push herself into his hands.

"If I do, what?" she asked huskily.

He pinched her nipples, a firm pressure on each, and then rubbed them between his thumb and forefinger. Oh, she liked that very much. One of her arms lifted, curling back against the panel behind her, and she caught her full bottom lip in her teeth.

"If you do..." he drawled, slipping his finger down into the snug waist band of her stretchy tights. "There'll be seven hells to pay."

She put her other hand on his chest. Heat rushed over him, and he wanted to rip off his own uniform as well as hers so that she could touch him too. Instead, he gathered both of her hands in one of his and pulled them over her head, holding them against the bulkhead.

She didn't resist, merely looked as if she were considering whether she liked this new development and deciding that she did. Which was good, because if she got her hands on him, he'd never hold out long enough to please her.

The tights slipped down easily once he found the fastening. She wore tiny panties underneath. They cradled her mons in sheer fabric, but slid aside with ease as he hooked his fingers carefully under the side. She was all silky skin and sleek heat as he turned his hand, slipping his fingers into the tender folds of her labia. Fighting for control, he stroked just deep enough to draw her wetness up into the downy curls on her mons, and find the tender knot of flesh hiding there.

She watched him, her eyes glittering as he stroked her clitoris with his fingertip.

"Is this how you intend to punish me?" she asked. "For straying?"

"No," he admitted hoarsely, watching her carefully as he stroked harder, faster. "This is how I intend to convince you not to."

He clenched his jaw harder on the waves of arousal that threatened to swamp him. The flesh under his fingers was so delicate, so soft and so hot, that it was all he could do not to rip his own tights off and beg her to let him thrust his cock between the soft lips and into her heated depths. He was rigid, aching in his tight cup, which thank the gods beyond he was wearing, because otherwise his erection would be tearing a hole in his tights.

She shivered under his touch and, as he watched, enthralled, she turned her head sharply and arched in his grasp, pushing herself eagerly against his marauding finger. She gave a long shudder and then went limp against the panel.



He cupped his hand over her mons, triumph and tenderness surging through him, nearly enough against the raging heat of desire. He was ready to step back and force himself to let go when she opened her eyes and smiled up at him.

“Have me here, now,” she invited.

He froze. She offered temptation beyond any he had ever known. His mind filled with the image of the two of them naked, him holding her up against the bulkhead while he thrust into her. The most difficult thing he had ever done was to let go of her hands and step back. His voice, when he spoke, was a mere husk of sound.

“Not yet, siren.”

She made a little moue of regret, then shrugged carelessly and wriggled back into her tights, setting her uniform to rights. “Very well. I certainly enjoyed our little ‘talk’, Commander. Carry on.”

He forced himself through sheer strength of will to key open the hatch.

“After you,” he said.

He followed her out into the passageway.

“Commander Stone.” It was Navos.

Slyde turned, masking his irritation at the interruption. The Indigon bowed courteously to both of them. “I’m sorry, but I wish to speak with you.”

“Certainly,” Slyde said. He nodded to Sirena, ignoring her smug look, and turned to walk with Navos, who was silent until they had crossed the passageway into his office, and the hatch shut behind them. Then he turned to Slyde.

“I received a communiqué on my shuttle about the incident in the arboretum last evening,” he said. “I’m curious about something. When do you plan to tell the others that you are the dragon?”

## Chapter Seven

Slyde stared at Navos. He felt as if he'd been stripped naked in public; indeed, would have preferred it to this. His deepest secret was known. The flesh across his shoulders tensed and heated, his hands flexed into the shape of great claws as the beast inside him stirred. He forced himself to relax, took a deep breath to calm himself.

"How long have you known?" he demanded.

"That you're a powerful shape-shifter?" Navos raised a dark brow at him. "I knew at once. You conceal your identity well. No one else suspects, I'm certain. But it was immediately apparent in your psychic profile that you are...two creatures in one being."

"Why are you telling me this now?" The Indigon had thus far behaved with the highest integrity. But Slyde had learned the hard way that if others found out what he was, they generally discovered they wanted something from him.

"Don't be alarmed, Commander Stone. I don't intend to give you away, nor attempt to take advantage of your situation. But, as second in command of the *Orion*, I will not withhold information from Captain Craig."

Steven Craig was a tough yet honorable captain. He seemed unexcited by the impending arrival of the Aquarian prince, so hopefully if it became necessary he know about Slyde, he'd be equally sanguine.

"Fair enough. As long as no one else knows."

"The Dragolins are considered merely legend on your planet, are they not?" Navos asked. "In truth, I myself was not sure."

"Yes," Slyde said shortly. It was a notion he and his family actively nurtured. It made it easier to live their lives under the name Stone, if few Serpentians believed the Dragolins existed any more.

There were vestiges of other ancient royal lines, tribes who clung to the remote lifestyle of the mountains, even lived in a kind of elegance. The "Stone" family had managed to blend in for generations. Their employees all descended from retainers who had been with them for many years, making a fine living keeping their secrets.

He certainly wished to keep his identity secret on board the *Orion*. While Navos and Craig might remain unimpressed by a Dragolin among the crew, he was not so sure about others. The Dragolins were the guardians not only of their mountains, but of great wealth.

And, unfortunately, there were others who still believed. At least a few times a year, adventurous souls made their way into the mountains, hoping to find dragon hoard, or to holo-vid a Dragolin in flight. They usually had to be rescued.

Secrecy was vitally important on this voyage, because now he was pursuing not just a business deal, but a woman.

“If you don’t shift into your dragon form on board again, I see no reason why anyone else has to know who you are. I assume you disabled the holo-vid cameras in the arboretum?” Navos asked. “There’s no record of your presence there.”

“Yes, I overrode the security system.”

“Ah.” Navos nodded. “I see. I have one final question. Why are you on board the *Orion*?”

Slyde felt himself flush. He shrugged. “Perhaps for the same reason you are, Commander Navos—searching for adventure. I’m sure you could have a prestigious position at the university on your planet, had you chosen to remain there.”

Navos raised one dark eyebrow, then nodded. “There is truth in what you say. Well, thank you for your time, Commander.”

Slyde nodded, turned to go, then stopped. “You must know a great deal about everyone on board the *Orion*,” he said, looking back at Navos.

Navos looked at him, his deep blue eyes fathomless. “Yes. I do.”

Slyde thought about Sirena, then shook his head. He doubted Navos could explain her, even if he would. After all, she was a female, as mercurial and mysterious as a supernova. He and Navos, when all was said and done, were mere males.

Sirena made good use of Slyde’s distraction, slipping into a crew elevator down to the main passenger level. However, once there she was waylaid by a passenger wanting to know if the ship was safe from asteroids. It was several moments before she could get away.

She headed straight to the arboretum—clearly the most logical place for a serpent to hide. She stopped inside the doors, scanned the security holo-cams to ascertain that the only inhabitants at this hour were the resident birds, and locked the doors with a voice command.

Walking slowly into the open area by the pool, she closed her eyes and opened her other senses. She heard the hushed roar of the waterfall, the soft burbling of birds in the branches of the vegetation, the rustle of leaves in the simulated breeze. She smelled water, spicy vegetation and damp earth, minute traces of bird droppings, sweet blossoms—and Slyde Stone.

Her eyes flew open, and she whirled.

He stood a few paces away near the pool, watching her. Quark! The big sneaking serpent had not only chosen the same place to begin his search, he'd arrived first.

"It's not here," he said.

Sirena advanced on him. "How did you get here before me? And how did you hide from the security cams? They showed no one when I came in."

He shrugged slightly. "I'll tell you, if you'll tell me where you'll look next."

"Nice try." She strolled closer. "Wait, I know. I'll look *in the pond!*" As she uttered the last words, she moved with the lightning speed of which only a wild creature and a Serpentine are capable. Hooking her foot around the back of his, she pulled with her leg and shoved him hard on the chest with her hands.

He fell back into the pond with a huge splash—and took her with him.

Sirena let out a shriek of displeasure as she plunged into the water entangled in his arms. They went under, down into the warm, clear water. Slyde held her under with him, evading her every move, holding her knee away from his balls and her hands from his face. He even grinned at her under the water, holding her hands captive against his broad chest. Finally, her lungs ready to burst, she dug her nails into him as hard as she could. He let her go with a grimace of pain.

She shot to the surface, gasping for breath and coughing as water poured over her face along with her hair. Ducking again, she tipped her head back so that her hair streamed sleekly off her face.

"Aaugh!" Slyde surfaced with a growl of pain. "You little clawed lizard."

Sirena glared at him. She was soaked and she would have to walk half the length of the ship to her quarters for dry clothing.

"That's nothing compared to what I'd like to do, you great beast," she hissed.

He surged forward and hauled her into his arms. He was, impossibly, even handsomer with water gleaming on his taut, golden skin, his hair a sleek cap on his head. He looked like an angry god.

"Don't kick me," he warned a low growl in her ear. "Or I *will* dunk you again, siren."

She believed him, but this close, she had a better idea for revenge. She gave him a smoldering look. Turnabout was fair play—she would leave him panting for her.

"I don't need to kick you. I have other weapons."

"I know," he growled. "You used them on me." He pulled open his soaking jacket with one hand.

She looked down at the broad expanse of golden chest that appeared. The swelling pads of his mighty pectorals were marred with four small blotches on each side, a few oozing blood.

"The wounds of battle," she murmured sweetly. "Let me heal them."

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his chest.

He should've known, was his only coherent thought. He should've known she'd find another torture, far worse than the sting of her nails.

Her mouth was like wet silk on his skin as she kissed each tiny bruise in turn. He sucked in a breath as he felt her tongue lapping at the place where she'd broken his skin. His arms tightened around her.

His eyes slid shut, and his cock stiffened eagerly—it had barely subsided from their encounter in the escape hatch. It only grew as her arms slipped up about his neck and she kissed her way up across the plain of his chest, to the far more sensitive skin of his throat.

He should stop this now—should pull her twining arms from round his neck, hold her at arm's length and tell her calmly that she couldn't best him this way, either. Because he was afraid that she could. She was demonstrating clearly that she could also arouse him whenever she wanted.

But even knowing this, he tipped back his head, inviting more.

Then she curled her legs around his waist, locking them behind his back, and began to rock herself slowly against his cock as she bit him gently beneath his ear. Their thin, wet uniforms, even his protective cup made of soft but strong fabric, was little barrier between them. Her breasts pillowed against his chest, and the soft crease between her thighs cradled his erection. Arousal roared through him so hot he was dimly surprised the water in the pond did not begin to boil.

She moaned her approval of his hard length and rode him harder, faster. The steady pressure, the feel of her in his arms, was more pleasure than he could withstand.

*No, no*, he thought, bemused. Surely this was only supposed to happen when they were nude, locked together in full coitus. He felt his balls tighten, felt the feathering of ecstasy at the base of his spine.

With a low groan of surrender, he turned his face against her hair and let a fast, furious orgasm rocket through him.

Dimly he heard her cry his name as she too climaxed. She stiffened in his arms and shuddered deeply, her breath hot against his throat. Then they were both still, panting. Slyde staggered a little and sank back in the water, letting it hold them up.

His body and brain felt as loose and liquid as the water surrounding them. He tipped his head back in the water, simply feeling. She was lithe and relaxed in his arms, her breasts sweet cushions against his chest. Her scent, the spicy smell of the foliage and earth in the little faux jungle seemed sharper, sweeter.

Then he remembered where they were. His eyes flew open, and he stared up at the swaying branches over their heads. Had they lost their minds—the co-commanders of the ship's guard mounting each other in the arboretum like two drunken cadets? Not only that, he'd come perilously close to forswearing his personal code and mating with her completely.

It was just that she was even more beautiful wet, her sleek hair molded to her lovely head, emphasizing her high cheekbones and those siren's eyes.

"Quark," he muttered savagely.

Sirena's head lifted quickly from his shoulder. For an instant he thought he saw vulnerability in the emerald depths of her gaze, but it was gone like a shadow, replaced with amusement.

“Never mind, Commander. I’m sure you can rinse out the, er, evidence before you walk back to your quarters.”

She pushed at him, and he let her go, his cheeks burning. She was right—she was merely wet, but he was now awash in semen as well as water.

“And I’m sure no one will comment on your appearance between here and the gym,” he shot back, wading toward the shore. “Where you are due to meet with the new guard cadets.”

She waded out beside him, wringing water out of her hair. She looked relaxed and amused, unfazed by the riskiness of their encounter. “That’ll only take a short time. We need to search for this serpent of yours.”

“Fine. Contact me when you’re ready.” He yanked off his sopping jacket, held it in one hand, watching it drip onto the mosses.

“I am always ready, Commander. And so, it appears, are you.” She cast a look of sultry satisfaction down his body and sauntered away down the path.

He watched her go, waiting until he was sure she was gone before unfastening his pants. He might as well dive back into the pool and rinse himself and his pants at the same time. Filters worked constantly to cleanse the little lagoon, so all evidence of his passion would soon be gone. If only his desire could be as easily washed away.

## Chapter Eight

The two new cadets were waiting for Sirena in the gym when she appeared after a swift shower-dry and change.

Sirena was very pleased with Arde. He was intelligent and fast. Tawnee, a pretty, brown-eyed blonde, showed promise in the hand-to-hand combat drills held each morning in the gymnasium, but Sirena had caught her watching Slyde Stone instead of the holo-vid on the new security system. After dismissing Arde to leisure time, Sirena turned to Tawnee.

“You did well in combat training today,” she said. “Your drop-twirl kicks are superb.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” The girl was obviously confident of her physical abilities and, like all Serpentians, enjoyed using her body.

The drills in the ship’s gymnasium were hard work, but Sirena herself still loved the rhythmic, lightning fast moves to the cadence, eerily like the war chant of Earth tribes of eons past. Close combat was even more fun—watching the opponent for the slightest hint of which attack or defense moves would work the best to take them down.

“Let’s move on. Recount to me the three stages of the security scanning system,” Sirena asked smoothly.

“I—I seem to need to review the holo-vid.” The cadet’s cheeks reddened.

“Ah.” Sirena nodded, looking down at the laser pointer she was twirling in her fingers. “And do you also need to review Commander Stone’s appearance, or do you have that committed to memory?”

She looked up. Tawnee froze, her eyes wide. Good, she was sensitive to danger.

“I will not tolerate lack of attention to any portion of your training, cadet,” Sirena said softly. “Do I make myself clear?”

Tawnee swallowed visibly. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Those duties do not include a flirtation with Commander Stone.” Sirena rose. “You may go.”

The girl scurried out of the office. Sirena gazed after her for a moment, her eyes narrowed. She hoped the girl was not going to be a problem.

Then she shook her head, dictated a quick message to Yvene into her com-link about the girl and forgot about her.

“Commander Stone,” she said. “What quadrant of the ship are you searching?”

"The cargo bays," his deep voice said immediately. She could hear the sound of heavy containers being moved in the background. "There's nothing here and we're due on the starboard docking bay."

Sirena sighed, knowing it was true. The guard always made themselves highly visible at the beginning of every voyage, patrolling all the passageways and public areas, stopping to chat with the passengers, assist them with directions and unfamiliar protocols and help the interpreters quiet any unrest between planetary beings unused to occupying common space with others very different from themselves.

She and Slyde were also expected to flank Captain Craig as he greeted important passengers, such as the prince of Aquarius.

A short time later, the captain and crew commanders of the *Orion* stood in a receiving line just outside the main docking bay, watching with interest as the royal Aquarian party boarded. They were a magnificent lot, with skin pale as an ice field. Their crystal eyes and flowing silver hair completed the illusion that they were ice sculptures come to life. In dress they favored silver robes and large jewels that glittered with every movement.

The prince strode on first. After looking down his blade of a nose at them all, he stopped before Captain Craig. His retinue paused behind him.

"Prince Azuran," said Craig. "Welcome to the *Orion*."

"Captain, well met," the prince replied. "Stark's new ship is quite something."

He spoke perfect Galactic, but his accent made clear it was not his first language. Behind him, his followers murmured quietly among themselves, their native tongue like liquid chimes.

Craig nodded politely. "Thank you, Your Highness. We hope your voyage will be very pleasant. Allow me to introduce my crew commanders." He began with Navos and worked his way along the short line. The prince said nothing, merely bowing very slightly to each of them, until he came to Sirena.

His eyes held the lazy interest of a connoisseur as he held out his bejeweled hand to her.

"A warrior queen," he murmured.

Sirena laid her hand lightly in his, discovering that, despite its icy hue, his flesh was very warm indeed. So was the look in his crystal eyes.

She smiled back, pleased and amused. The prince was clearly something of a rogue, but despite his funning, his admiration was clear.

"Your Highness," she replied. "Welcome to the *Orion*."

"Indeed," he replied, his tone as sultry as hers.

Behind her, Slyde moved, his big body brushing hers. She heard a dangerous rumble behind her ear, so soft only she could hear it, but chilling in its menace. The hair stood on the back of her neck, And then



fury shot through her. How dare he? She was no subservient female from a remote desert tribe, to be kept in her place.

Still smiling, she pulled her hand casually from the prince's grasp. The last thing they needed now was a diplomatic incident.

Casting one last smoldering look at her, the prince turned to Slyde, looming at her shoulder. The two males exchanged a measuring look. After a tense moment, Slyde bowed slightly and, to her surprise, Prince Azuran returned the courtly gesture before moving on.

Sirena blinked. The prince evidently considered Slyde Stone to be his equal.

If she weren't so annoyed with the big fang-lizard for asserting his claim in the middle of a state greeting ceremony, she would question him. There was indeed something different about Slyde. Not only his great size and physical beauty set him apart, but also the way he carried himself. Not to mention his peculiar sexual mores.

She shrugged inwardly. Perhaps he was some minor royalty of the mountains.

Besides, her co-commander might be a handsome prince, but that didn't make him any less irritating.

The royal vanguard was followed by servants with what proved to be a number of exotic space creatures, both leashed and unleashed.

"I thought we didn't allow pets loose on board," muttered Panthar, eyeing the menagerie promenading past.

"They allow you to roam free, do they not?" Mra answered sweetly.

The big Tyger grinned appreciatively. As head interpreter, Mra was ordinarily the soul of politeness. Even now her green corn silk-like hair twitched restlessly, revealing her chagrin at her own sarcasm. Leaning close to her, he made a teasing sound like an angry cat "mrrowing" under his breath.

"When it's the Aquarians, we allow latitude," Craig answered Panthar. "Prince Azuran is a friend of Stark's."

"Although to tell truth, I'm not so sure which are the pets," he added under his breath as a tall lavender female of some species glided by. She had a single, beautiful golden eye, and long tendrils of dark purple waved about her narrow shoulders. She turned her head suddenly and winked at Craig. The rest of the welcoming crew hid grins as his lean face reddened, and he bowed in quick apology. She had clearly heard and understood him.

Sirena watched a large blue iguana amble past, its jeweled leash held by a small Pangaeon. She hadn't seen such a reptile since she'd vacationed at the huge oasis resort of Dune City a few lunar months ago. She wished crossly that she were there now, lazing in the heat beside the water, with nothing more to do than nap and wake to order another cactus-flower drink.

She frowned as she caught a slight, acrid scent. This one was somehow familiar. It was muddled with the scents of the iguana and the jeweled cages of chameleons she had seen hanging from servants' hands, but it made her uneasy.

Behind her, Slyde Stone moved restlessly.

"You smell it too?" she murmured over her shoulder.

"Yes. And not for the first time."

She froze. He really had scented a serpent. And it was close at hand.

Sirena shifted closer to Craig.

"Captain, permission to examine the prince's pets once they've been settled."

His brows drew together, his piercing blue eyes meeting hers. "Is there a problem?"

"I'm not sure."

"Just be discreet."

"Of course."

## Chapter Nine

Izard was waiting for them in the main lobby, however. On every voyage, there were questionable carry-on items to be inspected. On this one it was an antique bomb found on an ancient Boron battlefield by a tourist and packed in his luggage for the voyage home to Carillon. It had passed the initial boarding inspection, but was now emitting a strange sound, as if the mechanism inside was creaking to life.

After a short discussion, the device was loaded on a tiny unmanned space pod, programmed to land on an uninhabitable planet along the *Orion*'s route. The passenger was calmed with a handsome gift certificate to a stellar resort.

"Come on," growled Slyde to Sirena, after they watched the pod disappear in space. "Let's get back to our other project."

Sirena nodded, shaking off her anger at the fool of a tourist. How dare he jeopardize the safety of her ship?

"Going up to the command level?" she asked Izard.

Izard's gaze slid between the two guard commanders.

"You two go ahead," he said. "I, ah, promised to meet Yvene."

He was frankly grinning as he walked away. He couldn't wait to share his latest observations with his lady. Great serpents, the two guard commanders were like seething volcanoes, just waiting to erupt—had been since that first night on Solaria. He and Yvene had a wager as to how long it would take the two Serpentians to break. It had been two months, but now it looked as though things were heating up between them. Finally.

He and Yvene weren't the only ones to notice, either. He had caught more than one crew member surreptitiously observing the guard co-commanders at dinner.

This was as entertaining as watching Captain Craig and Tessa circle each other on the last voyage. Their brave captain had needed coaxing to get past his strict code of honor, which forbade sex with one of his subordinates, but when the fiery Tessa had declared her intention of sleeping with every other attractive male on board, he had shown himself as the warrior he was and taken the prize.

Izard thought back even further to the *Orion*'s maiden voyage, when their Tyger navigator had undergone his mating shift on board, becoming a huge half man, half cat, maddened with lust. Commander Jag had denned up in the arboretum and demanded a mate before he would resume his duties. Izard winced.

That had been more like two wildcats in heat, but it had ended in romance as well. Jag wed his Calla and by all accounts they were perfectly suited.

Who knew what romance might heat up on this voyage?

Sirena and Slyde jogged from the docking bay to their office off of the gymnasium. A few of the younger guards were working out. Slyde looked their way with approbation before closing the hatch of the small, glass-walled office behind them. Sirena perched on the edge of the sleek command console, swinging one leg.

"How are we to search the prince's pets without offending him?" she mused. "We can't just show up and announce that he's brought aboard a dangerous creature. That would be most undiplomatic."

"No." Bringing up a hologram of the ship, Slyde zeroed in on the area behind the ballroom. Sirena turned to watch as the three-dimensional image of passageways and rooms revolved slowly.

"Here's where they've stowed the pets." He indicated a room that connected the quarters reserved for the Aquarians with the passageway behind the ballroom. "Some of them came on from Pangaea, as Halix mentioned in our briefing."

"Why, if you scented the serpent earlier, did we scent it again today when the Aquarians boarded?" she asked, frowning.

"I don't know," he said grimly. "I hope to the seven hells that what we smelled today is just some harmless snake."

"I could bat my eyes at the handlers and ask for a personal tour," she said.

"Yes, and have to dropkick one or both of them when they assume you want more than a tour." He shook his head. "Azuran's hosting a party tonight. We'll slip away and search through his pets then."

She looked him up and down wryly. "*You'll* slip away?"

"I can be subtle."

"I've yet to see it."

His lips twitched. "You have seen it, you just didn't know it."

She rolled her eyes as she slipped off the console. "Right. Well, we know where the creature is, if there is one."

"There is one." Concentrating on the hologram, he looked up as she spoke again.

"And one more thing, Commander," she said coldly. "Do not ever again presume to control my behavior as you did when we greeted Prince Azuran. You had no right—"

He stepped closer to her, his back to the gym and its occupants. Anger flared at the memory of her flirtatious greeting, but it was tempered with reluctant admiration. She was going to fight him every step of the way, his siren.

"I do have the right," he said. "You gave it to me, remember? In the terms of our wager."

She scowled up at him.

“I certainly did not. I agreed not to have sex with another male during the wager. I said nothing about conversing with one.”

He touched her cheek, stroking the petal-soft skin. “We both know that kind of ‘conversation’ is a prelude to sex.”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“No,” he growled. “I’m explaining that Azuran wants you, and he’s accustomed to getting what he wants. So unless you want me to be forced to fight for you, refrain from flirting with him.”

Her eyes widened with alarm. “Slyde! You can’t fight him. Not only is he royalty, those men of his would kill you for touching him. They’re warriors, not just court followers.”

He bit back the retort that not only was he of royal blood himself, but his brother dragon could take them all on and win. A growl of frustration rumbled in his chest.

She lifted her own hand to touch his face, concern deepening the hue of her eyes. “Slyde, swear to me you won’t think of doing such a thing.”

The touch of her hand inflamed him. He wanted those clever, capable hands all over him. “Persuade me.”

Sirena slipped her other hand around the back of his neck and urged him to bend his head to her. She tipped her face up to his, her eyes drooping. Arousal heating his blood, he set one hand on her waist and cocked his head, waiting for the touch of her lips on his. Why had they not kissed before this? Now that it was imminent, he felt as hungry for her lips as a starving man for food.

Her lips brushed his. Her breath puffed softly against his skin as she spoke.

“If he kills you, you’ll never have me,” she murmured. And slipped away.

He blinked. He nearly grabbed her and hauled her back into his arms to take the kiss she had so teasingly denied him. But she was watching him, ready for just such a move. He could easily best her, but would such a move persuade her that he was the male for her?

“Not much of a persuasion, siren.”

“We’ll call it a warning—much like yours.”

He bowed in acknowledgement of the hit. “I need a workout. I’ll meet you on the mats.”

## Chapter Ten

Sirena sagged against the padded wall, gasping for air. Slyde leaned over, hands braced on his knees, broad chest pumping like a bellows. They had gone from a ferocious session of sparring with dummies to a run around the gymnasium's moveable obstacle course. It had become a competition. What Sirena lacked in sheer strength, she made up in agility. But now both of them were spent.

"Is that all you've got?" He cast her a look from under his brows.

"Huh. I ran circles around you." She panted. "I'll show you how to better that twist kick, if you like."

He straightened, still breathing heavily, and looked down at her. In the brief singlet they wore to train, he was magnificent, his heavily muscled body displayed to perfection.

"Is that an invitation, Commander?"

She snorted, lifting her arms to push back her hair, ignoring the fact that she wanted to lick the satin skin on the massive column of his throat. Although Serpentians didn't sweat, their skin glowed when heated by exertion or ambient temperatures. His smooth skin was nearly luminous, especially where the pulse beat in his throat. She was surrounded by his scent—musky and tantalizing, smoky. Maybe she should just trip him and jump on him while he was down.

"When I issue an invitation, a man knows it."

"Yes, I've seen it—several times."

She narrowed her eyes dangerously. "And that bothers you, doesn't it? Why?"

His face tightened, and suddenly they were two alpha predators, facing each other, battle ready.

"An invitation means little when it's open to all," he grated.

They glared at each other. Then she thrust out her breasts and tilted her hips, a taunting pose that contrasted sharply with the molten rage inside her. She made no secret of her pleasure in men, but she gave equal pleasure in return. How dare he act as if she were in the wrong.

"Sanctimony also means little when it is prompted by jealousy," she hissed. Turning on her heel, she stalked away into the women's locker room.

She refused to admit that the tight, icy ball lodged high under her ribs was hurt.

Slyde stood there, breathing as hard from anger and frustrated passion as from his workout. Damn the woman. Could she not see that he only wanted...

He gave a snort of humorless laughter. That he only wanted her glory all for himself? That as a Dragolin, he'd mate only with a female who'd cleave to him for life, giving all her sweet fire to him? No, of course she didn't. She was Sirena—a law unto herself. Be damned to her, then. He wouldn't apologize now.

He walked toward the men's locker room, already pulling his brief singlet open. As he walked into the gleaming changing room, rolling his shoulders to ease the tired muscles, he stopped short. The new female cadet, Tawnee, stood in the center of the room, looking around. She bit her lip, her lovely eyes wide.

He frowned down at her. "What are you doing in here?"

She stared at his bare chest. "I—I didn't pay attention to where I was going, Commander. I'm sorry. I'll go, and let you take your shower-dry."

She walked toward him and then paused, so close he could smell the sweet scent of her.

"Unless you'd like me to give you a shoulder rub?" she offered. "I am trained in all kinds of massage."

He looked down into her wide, guileless eyes. Was she as naïve as she appeared? She was a lovely girl, and he was almost tempted to take her up on her offer. He was used to women hitting on him—Serpentians were forthright about their desires. So were many of the passengers. Just now, his control was stretched thin. He didn't think he could bear much more sparring with Sirena.

"No, thank you, cadet," he said stiffly. "The ship's massage specialist can do that for me. Go along—and watch where you're going next time."

"Yes, sir." She smiled up at him and sauntered out of the room, slender hips swaying. Slyde locked the door behind him before stripping down.

Sirena was in a foul mood as she readied herself for the Aquarian prince's first party that evening. As she stepped out into the main lobby, Slyde Stone appeared from another elevator. His gaze swept over her and his face tightened, his impressive jaw clenched.

Sirena narrowed her eyes and strutted to the huge double doors that led to the ballroom. He disapproved of her ensemble. Let him. She wore her favorite outfit of gold raw silk, the two pieces bound on by narrow ropes of gold that wrapped about her throat, arms, and hips. Though brief, it was comfortable and not nearly as precarious as it appeared. Of course, if every male in the vicinity wanted to hold their breath hoping it might slip, that was all right with her.

She was going to enjoy herself this evening, and Slyde Stone could choke on it. Though she would sooner choke herself than tell him, he was breathtaking, elegant and handsome in olive silk smoothly tailored to his huge frame. The cut emphasized the breadth of his shoulders and the lean length of his legs; the color set off his golden brown hair and eyes. She wanted to draw him back into the elevator and take

him straight back up to her quarters and have her way with him—several times. She would bet he had more stamina than most.

He followed her across the lobby without a word. Two Aquarians stood guard. At the sight of the two Serpentians, they pulled the doors open wide. Sirena knew that she and her co-commander were an impressive couple as they paused in the open doors. Smiling lazily at the faces that turned their way, she strolled into the party.

The *Orion*'s ballroom was a unique space, with an interlocking series of walls and ceilings that could be changed according to the planned use. Tonight it resembled a seraglio, with ornate columns and latticework panels framing conversation areas made cozy with sumptuous rugs and cushions. Holographic fountains tinkled among ferns. A Barillian trio piped soft, haunting music. The prince, enthroned in a divan with a beautiful woman at each elbow, held court in the largest enclosure. An elaborate game board sat before him, scattered with gem-studded playing tokens.

"Ah, welcome, Serpentine friends," he said as Sirena and Slyde crossed the room to him. "Come, eat and drink with us."

Servants appeared at their elbows, bearing trays with an array of libations. Sirena chose a crystal flute of pale blue wine with the delicate scent of rare Pangaeian ice-berries. She saluted the prince with it, watching his gaze sweep over her.

Sipping her wine, Sirena watched the Aquarian ladies drift nearer to Slyde. She snorted inwardly—she wished them luck. He might look good enough to eat, but he would be a cold mouthful, even for an ice princess.

She sank gracefully onto a cushion and gave Prince Azuran a look over her glass.

"Lovely wine, Your Highness."

"It is a good vintage—very old. You must eat." He beckoned slightly, and another servant appeared, kneeling beside her with a large tray of delicate hors d'oeuvres. Sirena selected several. She could eat what she liked, as many hours as she spent training with the guard. With a deft twist, the servant activated a hover mechanism on the underside of the plate and it floated at her side, ready for use.

Slyde sat nearby, an Azurian lady at each elbow. He didn't appear to be working very hard to fend them off. With laughter like soft chimes, they helped him select a huge plate of hors d'oeuvres. One of them laid a napkin across his lap. When he downed his drink, the other immediately signaled for more.

Sirena chose a stuffed lily blossom from her plate and bit down on it, hard. The crisp petals crunched between her teeth and the creamy stuffing spurted into her mouth.

"Umm, delicious." She licked her fingers slowly as the prince watched.

"Yes," he agreed. "I am sure it is."

They smiled at each other. From the look in the prince's eyes, he was perfectly willing to do more than flirt. This knowledge warmed her like healing balm.



One of the Aquarians leaned over and moved a playing piece on the game table.

“Do you play?” Azuran gestured at the ornately carved board. “Galacticus, a particular favorite of ours.”

Sirena shook her head. She didn’t often play games of chance, although she’d enjoyed a match on her last leave with a handsome club owner on Indigon. It had involved forfeiting items of clothing. She suspected he’d used his telepathic powers to cheat, but no matter—they’d both gotten what they wanted in the end.

“I won’t interrupt your current game, but I would return at another time for a match,” Slyde’s deep voice cut through the hum of conversation, the background of music.

The prince bowed slightly. “I will await the opportunity,” he replied. The two men raised their glasses to each other and Sirena smirked into her drink. A pair of alpha males, metaphorically pawing at the ground and snorting.

“But, come,” the prince said, holding up his glass high. “Tonight, we celebrate.”

At his cue, the party sprang to life. A horn called out a long, triumphant note. The music swung into a swift, lilting beat that thrummed through the very fabric of the room. A burst of laughter drew all eyes to a flurry of movement as several young women whirled into the center of the room. Clad in nothing more than light, shifting veils, they were lithe beauties of every hue from dusky to pale. They shimmied, twisted and twirled to the beat of the music, smiling flirtatiously at their audience as they danced.

Their audience called out in delight and, as servants circulated again with drinks, the party came to life. More passengers streamed in. Sirena saw the other crew commanders in the crowd, as well as several of the guard. Serpentians were always up for a party, particularly a wild one. Navos and Craig appeared, the only ones in uniform.

The dancing girls beckoned others to join them, and soon the room was traced with syncopated lines moving to the beat of the music. Guests began to toss items of clothing away, imitating the girls who were now shedding their veils. Cries of approval and laughter echoed.

Sirena danced with the prince, another Aquarian and a few of the passengers, including one whose mate appeared in the middle of their dance, scowling at Sirena, to drag her partner away. Sirena shrugged at him with a moue of amused regret and snagged another drink off of a passing servant’s tray.

She sipped it, surveying the room over her glass. Strangely, she was not in the mood for further flirting, even with the gorgeous Azuran. It was more entertaining to spar with her maddening co-commander.

Ah, well. Perhaps this would be a good time to check out the prince’s menagerie. She sauntered slowly around the perimeter of the room, inhaling delicately. Through the scents of food, drink, perfumes and the assorted fumes of aroused and overheated dancers, she could still make out the faint scent of creatures.

Slyde stood in a group on the far side of the room, his princesses hanging on him like icicles. Well, she could call him on her com-link if she needed help. As if anything was likely to arise that she couldn't handle.

Still carrying her flute of wine, she glided out of the ballroom.

## Chapter Eleven

Slyde watched her go. Damn the female, where was she going? She wasn't slipping off to meet Azuran—he was talking with Craig. If she'd found another lover, Slyde would have noticed—he'd been watching her like a cobra.

If she wasn't trysting with a male, that meant she was going to look at the prince's menagerie, searching for the source of the scent. Sirena cared fiercely about her job. He knew she would die to protect the *Orion* and its crew and passengers, just as he would. He considered it one of her most admirable traits. However, she was supposed to wait for him. If necessary, he could shift into his brother dragon and deal with any dangerous serpent.

One of the Aquarian princesses stroked her hand up his arm, swaying closer to him so that her fragrance wafted up around him. Her silver hair shimmered as she tilted her head to smile up at him, and her milky skin gleamed.

"More wine?"

"Thank you, but no," he said. The two were a pleasant distraction and a useful screen between him and any other interested females, but he'd had enough of their clinging ways.

Extricating himself from them with an apologetic smile, he strolled behind a screen as if headed for the men's room. Instead, he worked his way around the perimeter of the room, until he reached the door where Sirena had disappeared. He could still catch the faint scent of her alluring perfume, though here it competed with the scent of animals. He grinned to himself. His lovely co-commander would not appreciate the juxtaposition.

The scent of creatures was stronger in the passageway, the music fainter. Crossing the passageway, he used his com-link to unlock the door of the large storeroom, and the door hissed open.

The first thing he saw was her wine flute, sitting atop a large cage. Cages of varying sizes had been set in rows the length of the room. From behind the narrow bars, eyes watched him, some beady, some large and bright, some flat and shiny. The blue iguana flicked its tongue from a large cage to his right, and he tapped the bars in casual greeting as he passed.

Then Sirena's auburn head popped up near the far end of the room.

"Ah, you're here," she said coolly. "I'm nearly done with this row."

"It'll be faster if we work together."

“True. Come and help with this creature, then. I’m not at all certain what this is, much less if it has teeth.”

He strode the length of the room, past snakes, iguanas and lizards, which he knew she would’ve handled without a qualm, being a Serpentine. He bit back a smile as he saw the creature she was regarding warily. A dark, hairy hump in the center of its cage, it regarded them with two liquid eyes, but did not move until Sirena opened the latch of its cage. Lifting its head, it whined plaintively.

“C’mere, fella.” Slyde reached into the cage, lifting out the silky animal in one hand. A long pink tongue shot out and swiped his chin. Slyde grinned at Sirena. “It’s a juvenile canine—known as a puppy.”

“Oh. I’ve heard of them, of course, but I’ve never seen one. They sometimes bite, do they not?”

“When threatened. However, this one signaled no fear or hostility, did you, little one?” He stroked the puppy gently and it wriggled happily, tail flapping against his cradling arm. Sirena watched them with a fascinated gaze.

“Would you like to hold it?” he asked.

She stepped back, but Slyde thrust the puppy into her arms. Great serpents, the woman was prickly. She acted as if she’d never held a pet before. He dropped to one knee and examined the empty cage.

“Nothing else here,” he said. “I don’t discern the troubling scent in this area, either.”

He looked up. His imperious co-commander was eye-to-eye with the puppy as they gazed at each other, neither moving. The puppy’s back feet rested on the upper edge of the gold fabric hung so precariously across her magnificent breasts. Slyde’s jaw clenched as heat streaked through him at the sight. One push, the bodice of that thing would slip and he would see paradise.

The puppy’s tail wagged as it darted out a pink tongue to swipe her chin.

“That’s quite enough of that,” she said severely, but Slyde saw her stroke the little creature before she placed it carefully back in its cage. It whined and stood up with its paws on the bars, wagging hopefully. She smiled, wiggling a finger through the cage and laughing when it was licked.

“I know how you feel,” Slyde said to the puppy silently. “I’m damn near ready to do the same.”

“This cage is empty.” Sirena turned to the next row. “I don’t see how anything could have escaped, with motion sensors as well as iridium bars.”

Slyde read the label on the cage.

“Blue radix lizard. Probably loose in the Aquarian quarters,” he said. “They seem to like to have pets about them.”

“Oh, of course,” she said with relief. “I’ve seen them.”

They worked smoothly along the next row of cages. Open the cage, distract the inmate while the other searched quickly, sniffing as well as rifling through the bedding and under feeding receptacles.

Slyde worked in a state of near torture. The scent of her body accented with her perfume, spicy and tantalizing, overlay the scent of every other creature. This, combined with her lithe, silky body so close and so scantily clad, nearly drove him mad.

He burned to do two things—first, throw her over his lap, pull up that tiny excuse for a skirt and spank her ass until she cried mercy for teasing him so. Second, lay her down on the floor and thrust into her right here, while the creatures in the cages watched. His cock was hard and aching, his balls drawn up so tight he felt as if he would explode.

He clenched his teeth and forced himself to concentrate on their task.

They found nothing, but as they neared the corner of the room, Slyde flared his nostrils uneasily. There was something—but where? He could not hone in on it. Then they both sniffed and exchanged a look.

“Here,” said Sirena, reaching for the lock on a large, closely barred cage at the end of the row.

“Wait!” Slyde shot his hand protectively in front of hers, then slipped his weapon off his belt, and aimed it through the bars. A narrow, powerful beam of light shot out, lighting the interior of the cage. With a loud hiss, a hideous specter reared up in the beam of light, swaying from side to side. The mouth gaped open, and sharp-looking frills flared on either side.

They both flinched, and Slyde let out a curse. “It’s a kronos—a false dragon. They are foul, but harmless.”

“Ewww!” Sirena wrinkled her nose. “Why does Azuran want one of these? Not only are they ugly, they stink.”

“Ask him while the two of you are flirting.” Slyde peered down the beam of light he was playing under the squat, bowed legs of the large lizard. “There’s the reason for her hostility. She’s sitting on a clutch of eggs.”

Sirena leaned over his shoulder to peer along the beam of light. “I count three, no—four eggs. They’re huge.”

He grunted in assent. He couldn’t formulate a coherent response with her silken hair brushing his cheek.

“I don’t suppose anything else would hide in there,” she said, rising to head for the dispenser of sanitizing fog on the wall by the hatchway. “Couldn’t stand it. So she must be the source of the smell we noticed. We’ve checked every other cage. I’m going back to the party.”

Busy training the small micro-scanner on the cage, Slyde grunted. Nothing, just the kronos and the eggs. He hadn’t realized reptilian eggs were so dense. He couldn’t see the young inside.

He looked up sharply as Sirena opened the hatchway, posing for a moment against the opening.

“Enjoy the rest of your evening, Commander Stone. I’m sure the princesses will take very good care of you—if you let them.”

She sauntered gracefully back to the ballroom. His fists clenched, and he felt his dragon self stir and growl. Was she daring him to go to another woman, or even women? It was all he could do not to shift and roar after her. He was aroused and enraged to the edge of his formidable control—with absolutely no outlet. How was it possible for the two of them to work so well together, yet be so at odds in this?

## Chapter Twelve

“Commander Stone?”

He whirled at the sound of the soft voice.

It was the cadet, Tawnee, dressed in a tiny fitted evening sheath of plum lili leaf. Her dark blonde hair curled about her head, her slanted eyes gleamed under a coating of cosmetics.

She smiled with pretty shyness as she paused in the doorway. “I saw you leave the party, and I...I wondered if you needed help.”

She walked toward him, her lashes fluttering as she let her gaze drop down his body. Slyde saw her soft lips part, and form a soft “o”. His cheeks reddened. She was looking directly at his erection thrusting against his snug clothing. Her forked tongue flickered out and wet her lips as she stopped before him.

“Oh, Commander,” she crooned. “You do need my help.”

She sank gracefully to her knees, giving him a great view down the front of her little dress. Great serpents—did she mean to...?

Stunned, not sure what was about to happen, his usual iron will hammered to the breaking point by Sirena, Slyde stood frozen as Tawnee reached up, her clever hands unfastening his pants. His cock sprang out, so engorged it slapped his belly, the broad head swollen, even spangled with a drop of arousal. He bit back a groan as she looked at him with obvious delight. Her gaze, the very air, seemed to caress him, tease him.

“Tawnee—” he managed. “This is not right. You should not...”

She looked up at him and smiled, reaching around to cup his ass with her soft hands. And then she licked him into her mouth. Her hot, wet, silky mouth.

A helpless groan rumbled from his chest at the exquisite sensation. Ah, it was nothing like his own hand slicked with gel-soap. Her touch was so delicate and yet so firm. He flinched as she raked him lightly with her teeth.

He was so big she had to stretch her lips over him. She did so eagerly and then, to his astonishment, she took him even deeper until his cock was half buried in her mouth and throat.

One of the reptilian adaptations that Serpentians had received was the lack of any gag reflex. Slyde had seen them win bets in bars with it, swallowing pickled gremel fruits whole, but this was the first time he had ever had a female demonstrate how pleasurable the skill could be for a lucky male.

He groaned again, riveted by the sight as she let his now-glistening phallus slide almost all the way out and then took him in again. Sensation rocketed through his exquisitely sensitive shaft. His balls drew impossibly even tighter as she cupped them in one hand, stroking and squeezing.

Still treating his cock to the amazing suction of her mouth, she looked up at him with knowing blue eyes and moaned deep in her throat, clearly demonstrating how much she enjoyed what she was doing for him.

He felt the surge of ecstasy begin deep inside him and tilted his hips, thrusting himself into her mouth in tense, short strokes. He clamped his hand on the cage next to him, cradled her silky head in the other and surrendered to the sweet suction of her mouth.

It was a sixth sense that made him open his eyes and look toward the door. His blood thundered in his veins; his brother dragon growled and stirred within him.

Sirena stood in the doorway, her gaze riveted on the woman kneeling before him and what she was doing. She was as still as a golden statue. Then her eyes lifted and locked with his. The emerald depths held powerful emotion, but he was too preoccupied to know what it was. All he knew was that she was watching him as another woman serviced him.

The sensation of the soft, wet mouth caressing his cock and Sirena watching him being pleased by another woman was incredibly arousing. Slyde came so hard he staggered. A deep groan rumbled out of his chest as he felt the girl drinking the spurts of his come.

His eyes slipped shut. When he opened them again, Sirena was gone, as if he had only imagined her.

Only when he was finally still, breathing heavily, did Tawnee let him slide out of her mouth. She smiled up at him, leaning back far enough to show him that she had tugged up her skirt, and was caressing herself, fingers buried in her little mound, slick with her arousal.

“See, Commander?” she crooned breathlessly. “See what you do to me.”

She rubbed her cheek against his now-drooping cock and shuddered with pleasure. She pressed a last kiss to his hot, moist flesh.

“Tawnee—” Slyde looked down at her with mingled tenderness and regret. He broke off as he heard a sudden noise at the door and realized that, incredibly, they had a second fascinated audience. Raile and a pretty blonde stood gaping at them from the hatchway. Oh, great gods and serpents.

As he tensed, Tawnee turned her head to follow his gaze to the newcomers.

“It’s all right,” she said throatily. “We’re finished.”

Slyde closed his eyes and wished fervently that there really was such a thing as molecular beam transportation so he could just disappear.



Raile stood for a moment after the huge guard commander had stalked out of the room, the cadet at his heels. He caught Mina Starline's eye, and they gazed at each other. Her cheeks were flushed, her breasts quivering with her quick breaths.

"Wow," she breathed. "Right here, where anyone could catch them."

"Yeah," he agreed. "Damn risky. Also... totally hot."

She nodded, not looking at him. Slowly, casually, he slipped his arm about her waist and drew her a little way along the cages. He dropped to one knee before her and looked up into her eyes. Flicking his forked tongue at her, he curved one hand around her slender bare leg.

"Lift your skirt for me, sweetheart."

She caught her breath. "Oh, we can't... That is, we shouldn't. What if someone comes in, as we did?"

"Yeah," he said. "What if someone sees you showing me your pretty pussy?"

Her eyes widened with shock, then excitement. She looked back at the door, then at him. Very slowly, watching his eyes feast on her, she inched her skirt up to her waist. He smiled like a shark-lizard at the tiny white thong guarding her mons.

"That little bit of lace isn't going to get in my way," he said. "But if you don't want it torn, maybe you should take it off."

"Oh, but—well, just a little," she said. "In case someone comes."

She pushed the tiny thong down around her thighs.

"Mm, I like that," he approved. "And I like your little pussy even more. That ribbon of blonde curls looks like a garter snake with its head buried between your sweet lips. Lucky snake."

"Oh, Raile!" She let him pull her legs wide apart, grasping the cage behind her for support.

"Hang on, baby. I'm going to show you why the commander was moaning like that."

He demonstrated his skill with his forked tongue, then he turned her around and bent her over with her skirts hiked high up over her bare ass and took her that way. She screamed this time, waking the animals. Raile laughed against her shoulder as he leaned over her, catching his breath.

The hatchway slid open again, revealing a small Pangaeon in the blue livery of the Aquarian retinue, looking harassed. His green hair waved agitatedly about his head.

"Do none of you have anywhere else to go for your sexual liaisons?" he grumbled.

With a shriek of embarrassed laughter, Mina hid her scarlet face against Raile's chest, yanking her skirt down over her bare bottom.

"We were just leaving," Raile managed, laughing as he struggled with the fastening of his pants.

## Chapter Thirteen

Slyde did not return to the Aquarian party. Reeling from the guilty pleasure of his release and the realization that his ecstasy had sprung as much from Sirena's voyeurism as from Tawnee's ministrations, he wanted only to be alone.

He had forsworn his own code of ethics, and not even with the woman of his dreams. Sirena, he realized grimly, was no doubt furious with him. He had done the very thing he had warned her not to do. He wanted nothing more than to go to her, but it was not fair to her to go from another woman's arms.

Adding to this the shock of discovery by one of his own guard *and* a passenger, he soon realized he had a third problem. The girl, Tawnee, was going to expect a reciprocal encounter. And she had chosen the one Serpentine in thousands who would refuse to give it her. He had to tell her they would have no further trysts.

This was compounded by the fact that, as a cadet in the guard, she was under his guidance. Even though she had initiated the encounter—hell, she had damn near attacked him—it was still his responsibility. He was her superior officer. He had betrayed not only that responsibility, but his personal code.

He knew he would not sleep that night. He changed and went to the gym to spar with the special robotic dummy he'd had built. It was the only partner on which he could fully unleash his strength—one unguarded blow from his huge fists could kill a normal-sized male.

As he hammered, dodged and kicked, memories of the intense pleasure he had experienced with the cadet gave way to thoughts of Sirena watching him climax in another woman's mouth. Sirena, the one woman he really wanted kneeling before him. Distracted by this vision, he didn't see the robot's arm flash around until he had received a solid blow to his solar plexus.

"Oof!" He staggered back, wincing as lights flashed triumphantly through the robot's "eyes".

"Yess," crowed the robot. "A solid hit."

Slyde grunted, circling as he planned his next attack.

He had learned something new these last few days—how sweet it was to give in to temptations of the flesh. No wonder other Serpentine did so regularly.

He pictured Sirena kneeling before the Aquarian prince, gazing up at him with sultry promise in those emerald eyes as she opened her mouth to receive his cock. He gave a roar of rage, landing a crashing blow to the dummy that sent it reeling onto the mats, lights flashing and motor whining in protest. He stood over

it, panting. There was only one way to remove the prince from the competition. And he would execute it now.

“Stand down,” he commanded breathlessly. “Return to your station.”

“Very well, Commander. Good match.” The robot righted itself with a clank and rolled over to the side of the room.

Slyde headed for the shower-dry and breakfast. Suddenly, he was ravenous.

In the dining hall, which was nearly empty, he ate a huge breakfast of sweet rolls, fruit, bacon and eggs, topped off with a carafe of strong coffee. A few of the younger guards, hanging bleary-eyed over cups of strong coffee, watched with awe and revulsion as he plowed through the platter of food.

“Commander, no offense, but you must have a cast-titanium system,” said the new male cadet, Arde.

“Shh,” hissed Tahh, seated next to him. “We don’t talk about it, but he’s actually a new generation robotic. Like his sparring dummy, but more advanced.”

The others snickered. Their commander merely smiled as he rose from the table. “I am as Serpentine as you,” he said calmly. “I simply refrain from imbibing too many intoxicants the night before an early guard shift. You might keep that in mind the next time the Aquarians throw a party.”

“Yessir.” But as Slyde walked away, Tahh was already regaling the others with the story of his adventures the night before with a certain Aquarian princess.

Enraged by Slyde’s betrayal, Sirena stalked the corridors of the *Orion* for nearly an hour. She had actually believed him. She had been so sure that Slyde Stone was a Serpentine of honor, a man who would give his word to a woman and keep it.

And to think, she had gone back to the storage room to invite him to come and dance with her. She had felt guilty about taunting him—she, who never felt guilt about her dealings with males.

She wanted to scream, she wanted to weep. It was this which jolted her out of her funk. She did not weep—she got even.

She briefly considered going back to the party and Azuran. She discarded the idea with a shake of her head. He was not a male with whom to trifle, and she did not want a grand passion. She wanted a faceless male to use and discard.

She strolled into the Lido Lounge to find a male for the night, only to discover that nothing and no one pleased her. The lounge was full of silly, inane tourists and macho, posturing space crew. Male after male failed to catch her interest. That one’s shoulders were not broad enough. This one’s eyes were too close together. And so on, until she gave up and went back to her room alone.

She opened a bottle of cremarte, the drink of choice for Serpentes, and nibbled a quantity of charnelle—Serpentine chocolate. It was dark, rich and so spicy that few but Serpentes could eat it without

searing their mouths and digestive systems. She finally fell asleep watching a favorite holo-video, but in her dream she searched endlessly for someone.

## Chapter Fourteen

Prince Azuran, it turned out, was still awake, and alone, when Slyde was ushered into his suite. Slyde already knew, courtesy of his complete access to the *Orion*'s security system, that through some miracle Sirena was not there with him. Why not, he didn't know. He was here to make sure it never happened.

"Commander Stone," the prince greeted him. He was lounging on a settee, wearing a simple robe of blue-and-silver-figured silk. It hung open to his waist, revealing the sculpted chest and rock hard abdomen of a man who used his body for more than pleasure. A small blue lizard perched on his thigh, and he stroked it idly with one long forefinger.

He gestured to the other settee. "Please, sit down. You will drink a stimulant with me? Tea, or coffee?"

"Thank you, but no," said Slyde, who remained on his feet. "This is not a social call, Azuran."

The prince raised his arching brows. "No? Then what is it?"

"I have come to issue you a challenge," Slyde said. "For a lady's favors."

"Have you indeed?" Azuran asked softly. Setting the lizard aside, he rose. The two men stood facing each other. They were of a height, although the Aquarian was of a much leaner build. "I suppose I've no need to ask which lady?"

"Sirena."

Azuran gave Slyde a measuring look. "And may I know who offers me this challenge, sir?"

"I am Dragolin."

"Ah." Realization dawned in the silver eyes. "I wondered... But, tell me, why is a prince of the Dragolins posing as Commander Stone on the good ship *Orion*?"

"I have my reasons."

Azuran's eyes narrowed. "You are a dangerous creature, Dragolin. But I have gifts of my own."

"I am aware," Slyde said, with a slight bow. "I do not underestimate you."

Azuran nodded, accepting his due. "Then, sir, as much as it pains me, I concede to another prince in his territory. The lady is yours...if she will."

Slyde felt his cheeks redden. "That is between the lady and me," he bit out. "Good day, sir."

The prince bowed gravely, but his eyes held a twinkle that made Slyde long to flatten that arrogant nose with one blow of his fist. Instead, he bowed in return and stalked out of the suite.

As the door closed behind him, the two princesses who had taken a liking to Slyde glided into the room. They were pouting a little.

“Ah, my dears,” Azuran greeted them. “You heard? What d’you say we have a little fun with our fiery dragon prince? Not to mention his siren—she refused me, you know.”

In the storage room which housed the prince’s menagerie, two of the keepers huddled over a large cage. They had just discovered that the kronos’ eggs had hatched. But all that remained were the leathery egg cases—empty.

“The hatchlings have escaped,” said the young Aquarian handler nervously. “We must tell the ship’s crew.”

“No, no, not me,” replied the other, a small Pangaeon. His hair wrapped around his neck as if he were afraid. “I’m not telling anyone. You tell them. You were supposed to be watching last night.”

The young Aquarian’s pale skin whitened even further, his crystal eyes widening. “I-I’m afraid. You come with me.”

“Shhh.” The Pangaeon looked behind them, then ducked his head close. “We won’t say a word. They’ll think she ate them. Who knows, perhaps that is what happened. She’s in captivity, after all.”

The Aquarian nodded hopefully. “Yes, perhaps that was it. All right, we’ll say nothing.”

The Pangaeon nodded. “We’ll say nothing.” But as he turned to follow the other down the row of cages, the ends of his green hair coiled around him. “You’d better bring some more food out for the creatures,” he said. “Extra for the kronos, so she will be quiet.”

“All right.” The other nodded, eager to have a task to expiate the guilt he was feeling. He turned and hurried into the storage closet at the far end of the room. The doors closed behind him. After a moment, he hurried back out, his arms full of a large basket.

The Pangaeon’s face fell. “Oh, good, you have it,” he said flatly. As he turned away, he eyed the storage closet. What had gone wrong?

## Chapter Fifteen

Unable to sleep, Sirena had just stepped out of the shower-dry and belted on her flame silk robe when she heard musical laughter out in the corridor. It sounded familiar.

“Holo-cam on,” she commanded. “Passageway.”

She stood stock still, rage burning inside her as she saw the image that sprang up. Two of the Aquarian princesses were just coming out of Slyde Stone’s room. One was patting her tousled hair, the other fastening her robe.

“Thank you, Commander.” One of them giggled. “That was lovely.”

“Yes,” the other added. “We hope you enjoyed it too.”

Sirena’s eyes narrowed dangerously. He was grinning like a fool, his uniform was unfastened halfway down his broad chest and his short hair was tousled, as if someone—or two someones—had been running their fingers through it.

“Thank you, ladies. My compliments on your treat. I’ll take care of cleaning everything up.”

Why, the sneaking, slithering bastard. He had lied to her so completely, so thoroughly. She had actually swallowed his tale of waiting in solitude for her.

She waited until the two had rustled away and then snapped open her hatchway.

Slyde looked over at her, still smiling a little, until he saw the look on her face.

“What is it?” he asked.

Leaning on her door frame, she crossed her arms and looked him up and down.

“Oh, I’d say it’s about one hundred and ten kilos of hypocrite.”

He blinked and then his mouth twitched. “Ah, you mean because of my...visitors. You want to see what we’ve been up to? Come here, I’ll show you.”

She followed him across the passageway, peering suspiciously into his room. Jealousy burned sick and cold in her middle. The place was a mess, cushions torn from his air-recliner and bed, a pile of brightly colored objects that looked rather like toys heaped in the middle of the floor. They had obviously been up to something, but...what? If those were sex toys, they were very odd ones—in fact, they resembled the toys of a young child.

There was a rustle of movement from under the bed and a dark, familiar head poked out. It was the puppy. Erupting out with a happy yip, it leaped on Slyde’s soft boots, tail wagging madly.

“I mentioned I liked the puppy, so the princesses brought it for a visit,” he said. “Playful little thing.”

“Yes, I see it drinks moonring champagne and eats hors d’oeuvres,” she said, fighting for equilibrium. What was she to believe?

He turned to look at the silver tray floating near the divan. It held a nearly empty bottle and three flutes, as well as half-empty plates of delicate viands.

“No, that was for me,” he said calmly. “And just so we’re clear, yes, an offer was made—a doubly generous one—and I refused.”

She straightened with a snap that made her unbound breasts jiggle in her flimsy robe. “I didn’t ask.”

Turning on her heel, she stalked back across the passageway to her own quarters.

“Why did you refuse Azuran?”

She froze. He had followed her. The hatchway hissed shut behind him, enclosing them in her private space. Her eyes focused on her bed, covered with spider-silk the deep swirling hues of a Serpentine sunset. How many times had she imagined him here with her?

“I didn’t want him,” she said without turning.

“Why not?” His deep voice was nearer. She could feel his heat, although he was still inches away.

Sirena lifted her head proudly. She wouldn’t lie.

“Because I want you.” Of course, he already knew it. She’d been panting after him like a fool for days, while he played her.

“You haunt me,” Slyde said, the words as deep and rough as stones grating together. “I’m never free of you. When I sleep, I dream of you. When I’m awake...”

His huge hands closed on her waist, and she felt them tremble. Or perhaps she was the one trembling. She was bewildered. She would stake her very life on the aching sincerity in his voice. Heat, power and need emanated from him.

Sirena let her eyes drift shut and stiffened her spine to keep from drooping back against him like a silly girl. His yearning seduced her far more effectively than any honeyed words. His breath gusted against her cheek as he spoke again, his face against her hair.

“When I’m awake, I look for you. If you’re not near, I have to know where you are. And if you are near, all I’m aware of is you. I listen to your voice, coiling about me like a velvet rope. I smell your perfume, the scent of your body. I watch the way you move, a warrior queen among her subjects...a courtesan selecting the next male who’ll receive her favor.”

His hands flexed on her waist, testing the suppleness of her, then drew her back against him. Her breath shuddered from her as his hard body pressed against hers. His scent surrounded her, potent male.

She gloried in the raw need revealed by his words, but at the same time, sharp tears pricked behind her eyelids. Males wanted her, wanted the pleasure they’d find in her body—had from the time she reached maturity. But none had ever revealed such a yearning for *her*.

“I choose *you*,” she breathed. “You.”



He shuddered. “For how long?”

“For as long as we both want,” she promised, putting her hands over his and moving sensuously in his grasp, rubbing herself against him. Ah, he was so big, so hard—the heat and power in his body, all would be hers.

She staggered as he released her. She whirled, not understanding.

The light of the blown glass lamps gleamed on the hard planes of his face. His deep-set eyes were in shadow, but she could clearly see the grim set of his mouth, the clenching of his jaw.

“Sirena...desire is not enough.”

“What do you mean, not enough?” She stared up at him, unable to believe her ears. “Pleasure beyond anything you have known—not enough? Slyde, you and I could be incredible together! What more can you want?”

He shook his head slowly.

Fury such as she had never known blazed through her, molten in its intensity. That it was fueled by hurt, she would never admit.

“Who do you think you are?” she hissed. “Males will fight to the death to have me and you refuse me?”

He reached out to her and she jerked away from him, not caring that her eyes were full of tears of rage, or that she was shaking visibly. Her voice slashed at him like fangs. “Don’t touch me again. I’m not some little fool to be toyed with! Or are you waiting for me to service you in some public place? Is that the only way you can find satisfaction? Is my room too private?”

She watched him flinch as this jibe hit home.

“That was—I never intended for that to happen,” he said.

She laughed in his face. “Poor male. The cadet overpowered you, did she? You were unable to break free?”

His cheeks reddened, but he stood his ground. “I’d just spent the last few hours being slowly tormented out of my mind by a siren,” he said through his teeth.

“Oh, blame the female,” she said scornfully. “It wasn’t your fault. I drove you to it.”

He clenched his fists so hard the veins in his arms and neck stood out. Then he took a deep breath, visibly controlling himself.

“Sirena,” he groaned. “Why do we always end up savaging each other? You’re right. The fault was mine, not yours.”

She gaped at him, astonished by his concession, only to be further astonished as he slowly and deliberately dropped to one knee before her. He looked up at her, his face in shadow, golden eyes gleaming up at her, riveting in their intensity.

“Sirena, listen to me.”

“Listen to what?” she demanded, clutching the folds of her robe to keep from reaching out to him. Such was the turmoil inside her, she didn’t know whether she would fall to her knees with him, or savage him.

“To me, you are a queen among females,” he said. “You...you own my heart. You have since nearly the first moment I saw you. It has only become stronger in our time together. I would fight to the death for you, but, Sirena...I don’t live by the same rules as other Serpentians, or even other males. The only way we two can be together is if you’ll agree to mate with me. For life.”

Bending his head, he lifted the hem of her robe, pressed it to his lips, then let it drift through his fingers to fall back around her bare feet.

He knelt there for a moment, while she stood frozen, unable to react.

Finally, with a deep, shuddering sigh, he rose and turned away. The hatch hissed open and shut behind him, and he was gone in the shadows of the great ship. Her robe fluttered about her, fell still, and she was alone.

## Chapter Sixteen

Sirena looked blankly about her. Finally she stumbled over to huddle in her divan, her arms wrapped about herself.

“Warmer,” she mumbled to the climate controls. “Warmer.”

She shivered until the temperature rose to the baking heat of the Serpentine sun. She was torn between rage and tears. How dare he turn her down—*her!* The great fool. They could be lying sated in each other’s arms even now. She closed her eyes, a moan tearing from her throat. She wanted him *so much*—more than she could recall ever wanting another man—and he had refused her. *Her!*

And all that drivel about mating for life. Who did he think he was, a quarking Dragolin? They were the only ones on Serpentina who had ever chosen one true mate for life. And they were only legend.

He was lying about being true to her, anyway. He was a Serpentine, just as she was. Just as her parents had been, as her first lovers had been. Serpentes mated for a while then drifted apart, as capricious as a desert cloud burst.

Everyone left. Everyone. All those she had loved, back when she used to acknowledge that she had a heart, had left her.

Even her mother and her sister, although of course they had not wanted to. They had been ripped away by the caprice of her beautiful, yet deadly, home planet. She could still see them smiling and waving at her from the verandah of their rented cabana. She had left the oasis resort early to go back to the academy, little dreaming that it was the last time she would see their lovely faces. A huge sandstorm blew in the next day, smothering the oasis and all its inhabitants.

Her father had already drifted away. She saw him occasionally, but she had learned a lesson, beginning with his leaving, then in the deaths of what remained of her family and culminating in her first love affairs.

Reeling from the loss of her family, she’d been easy prey for one of her instructors at the martial arts academy, a charming, handsome male who soothed her tears and made love to her so urgently that she was lulled into believing he would be at her side as long as she needed him. Instead, he’d grown bored with her clinging and gone on to the next attractive new cadet. She could still see his careless smile when she’d walked in on them in his quarters. He invited her to join them. Her already broken heart shattered.

The other male trainees flocked to comfort her. She nearly believed the first, was skeptical of the next and so on. By the time her years at the academy ended, she had learned her lessons exceedingly well. Not

only was she a deadly fighter, she was known as a beauty who outdid Serpentine males in using and discarding lovers. As a mature woman, her beauty and her legend only grew.

She had one rule for sensual affairs. She carried it with her like a standard. *She always left first.* She was the one who said goodbye when her lovers were still yearning for more. That way, she was never left behind. It was all she knew of relationships and all she cared to know.

When she finally slept, she dreamed that Slyde knelt before her in the sand of a Serpentine desert, kissed the hem of her robe again and then, just as she stretched out her hands to him, her heart in her eyes, he threw back his head, laughed and flew away, bursting up away from her as if he had wings.

Slyde moved back toward his own room like a robot. He felt incapable of any thought or action, other than simple forward movement.

*Sirena... Sirena... Sirena...*

She pounded like a fever in his blood, a refrain that whispered in his mind, fascinating and seductive. Knowing that if he went back to her, if he simply swept her into his arms and made love to her, she would give in, would take him on the sensual flight of his life, nearly drove him back to his knees there in the corridor.

He wanted her with everything that was male in him, but he also yearned for so very, very much more. He wanted to be the first one those emerald eyes saw each morning and the last one at night. He wanted that sharp tongue arguing with him through the years and those arms winding about his neck. That body yielding and demanding by turns beneath his.

He wanted what he very much feared she could not give—her heart and her fidelity.

He stopped in a shadowed fork of the passageway, staring blindly at the choice of corridors before him. Sirena Blaze was a legend in her own time, known as a beauty who would give a lucky male the sensual night of his dreams, but never her heart.

Great God beyond, what made her so merciless? She was certainly capable of fidelity—she was fiercely true to her ship. He knew she would die to protect the *Orion*.

Why would she not do the same for a man? Was it because she became so quickly bored, or was there some deeper reason? She could not be as heartless as her legend suggested. He refused to believe it. Somehow he would find a way to break down her barriers, and reach the real Sirena.

Perhaps if he told her who he really was, promised her a life of luxury and prestige while she gave him the chance to win her heart. But that was the one thing he had sworn he would not do. He wanted to be, he must be loved for himself, not his fortune. If a female accepted him with currency in his hands, how would he ever know how she really felt about him?

He had just humbled himself to this one, opened his heart, and she had gazed down at him as if he were some being she had never seen before. Had that been pity in her eyes, or merely shock? *Why had she not answered him?* Did she not know a Dragolin humbled himself for no one in the galaxy?

He clenched his fists, fighting the urge to shift and roar out his pain to the silent passageway.

“Commander? Are you all right?”

Oh, no, not her. Anyone but her. Tawnee walked up to him, reaching out to touch him, eyes soft.

Slyde held out his hands, palms out, in an emphatic signal.

“No,” he said starkly. “No.”

“But, you are upset,” she persisted. “Let me—”

“No!” He couldn’t control the deep roar of his voice, or the anger he knew was written on his face. He was too near shifting, too precariously balanced between rage and pain. “Leave me.”

Tawnee stepped back sharply, coming up against the wall of the passageway. Her mouth trembled. And he couldn’t bring himself to care. He walked away.

He could not believe this black hole he had allowed himself to be sucked into.

*Sirena... Sirena...*

He reached his quarters through habit. He shut himself inside and then stood in the middle of the room, breathing slowly with the effort not to allow himself to shift into his dragon self, roaring to be free.

He was nearly maddened with pain and he couldn’t relieve himself by shape-shifting and flying to exhaustion. He was also still aroused from holding Sirena in his arms.

He finally closed himself in his shower-dry unit, turned the water as hot as it would go and took himself in hand. Then he staggered over to his bed and fell face down on it. Just like Tawnee’s servicing, all his own handful of slippery gel-soap had accomplished was to make him want Sirena even more.

And if he knew anything about his lovely temptress, she was going to make him sorry he had refused her.

## Chapter Seventeen

Sirena woke with one resolve burning inside her—despite all Slyde Stone’s fine words, she was going to make him sorry he had dared to refuse her.

Showered and dressed, she looked in her mirror, making sure her hair shone, that her collar was fastened neatly about her throat. As usual, the golden yellow was a perfect foil for her coloring, bringing out the auburn of her hair and the tiny gold flecks in her green eyes. Only the faint shadows in and around them gave any hint of her inner turmoil, or her lack of sleep.

She lifted her chin proudly. Slyde Stone might think he was so special there was only one female for him, but she was enough for any male alive. In fact, she would no doubt spoil him for other women. Especially if he had not—

She stared at herself in the mirror, dazed as if her reflection had reached out and slapped her. Oh, great serpents. *He had never been with a woman.* The handsome, virile, urbane Slyde Stone *was a virgin!*

Sirena sat down abruptly on the side of her bed, her mind whirling. Virginity was practically unknown for a Serpentine of maturity. Sexuality was such a fundamental part of their fiery makeup that most Serpentes accepted promiscuity as a matter of course. There were so many partners to be enjoyed, all with the same easygoing attitude toward relationships. When children arrived, they lived with the mother, their fathers drifting in and out of their lives as hers had.

But not Slyde Stone. For some reason, he’d avoided sexual experimentation. She wondered again about his reasons, dismissing now the religious angle. He seemed, from his words the evening before, to have some quixotic idea that somewhere in the galaxy there was one perfect female for him. She rolled her eyes at this foolish notion, resolutely ignoring the pang in her heart as she recalled how he’d sworn *she* could be that female. The great, handsome moon-dreamer.

No, all his talk of fidelity was only a fantasy. But, if not his only lover, she certainly intended to be his *first*. His virginity meant he’d never known the ecstasy of being locked in a lover’s arms. Never buried himself so deep inside a female he forgot where he left off and she began. Never lain sated with a lover, already plotting the delicious variations possible for the next act.

She would be the one to show him all of this. She had to be. The thought of all that gorgeous masculinity being hers to enjoy was too delicious to pass by. And when she pictured those golden eyes gazing into hers as she showed him how to please himself and her, she felt a deep swell of what almost felt like tenderness.

She simply couldn't bear the thought of his training that look of deep yearning on another female. Of course this feeling would pass, after they'd been together for a time, but for now, she wanted, no, craved him.

That the cadet had been the first to show him how delightful a female mouth could be enraged her for reasons she refused to examine. Her eyes narrowed. She would see to it the little opportunist never got to touch him again. A transfer to another LodeStar ship was easy enough to arrange.

And so was his seduction. That this path might not be the best for either of them, she refused to acknowledge. What she craved, she took. Had she not learned the hard way that this was the Serpentine way, and was she not a quintessential Serpentine?

Slyde wandered into the male guard locker room. It was empty but for him, the padded massage table and benches neat, the sinks and commodes gleaming.

Wearily, he stripped off his singlet, tossed it into the cryo-cleansing unit and walked into the nearest shower-dry. The hatch slid shut behind him. He leaned on his outstretched arms, letting the hot water jet over his head and body. He'd worked out with the robot again, trying to tire himself so he could sleep. Perhaps tonight, it would even suffice.

Slowly he pushed himself upright and began to soap himself with the soft gel-soap. As usual, he was half aroused. He stroked the length of his cock, contemplating taking a swift release, but then grimaced. It would relieve him for a short time, but it was so far from what he needed that it wasn't worth the effort. Instead he soaped himself all over then turned, rinsing.

He tipped back his head and let the jets of warm air puff over his skin, drying him. He inhaled deeply and nearly groaned. Great serpents, he even imagined his siren's perfume here, wafting on the drying jets.

Then his eyes flew open, every part of him alert, his weariness falling away. He *did* smell her perfume—and her womanly scent under it.

He opened the hatch.

She leaned against the massage table, watching him. Her emerald gaze was sleepy with carnal intent. As their eyes met, she smiled slowly and began to unfasten her little wrap of scarlet silk.

Frozen, he watched, a helpless thrill of response in his groin as his cock rose and swelled, his balls tightened. Heat flooded across his skin, every muscle taut and ready. Fierce primitive joy sang in his heart, warring with sheer self-preservation. To stay meant a fast road to ecstasy and a slow descent into emotional agony.

He had never retreated from a confrontation in his life, but if ever there was a time to start, this was it. He had to get out of here.

When the wrap loosened enough that her breasts nearly burst from it, she stopped. Straightening, she prowled toward him. He stepped out of the shower dry and sidestepped around the nearest bench, watching her carefully. If he could just make it to the door, naked and aroused or not...

Her eyes narrowed, and she shook her head chidingly. She stepped over the bench, cutting off his escape route. Down to the barest survival instincts, he backed up, one blind step at a time, until the padded edge of the massage table struck him in the back of his thighs.

She prowled nearer, smaller, softer, but so very dangerous. For the first time in his life, Slyde knew what it felt like to be prey, with no hope of escape or rescue.

As she neared him, she reached out one hand and touched her fingertips to his chest. She pushed gently. Knowing he was sealing his own doom, he sank down on the padded bench.

Her gaze slid down over him, and he sat, his hands clenched on the seat beside him.

He groaned deep in his chest. He could smell her...the scent of his chosen female, her arousal and her special perfume.

"Sirena..." It was a deep husk of sound, a plea for he knew not what. For mercy? For anything she cared to do to him, he acknowledged achingly.

Sirena was who she was. She could no more resist taking him than she could fly. As for him—he surrendered. He was so in love and lust with her that he was going to let her, even knowing how it would end.

"Yesss," she answered. "Yes."

She raised one knee and planted it beside his thigh, then the other so she straddled his lap. Her warm hands stroked across the broad slope of his shoulders, resting lightly as she lowered herself so the silk of her shift enveloped his cock and slithered against his torso and chest. With a croon of pleasure in her throat, she stroked her fingers invitingly into her open shift, baring the inner slope of her full breasts and the deep shadows below them.

His hands clenched into fists, then, with a deep groan, he gave up and put his hands on her. Her hips flexed in his tender grasp, the silk sliding over the supple curves beneath as she rose then sank again on his lap. This time warm flesh brushed his cock. Shuddering, he caught his breath and waited, knowing the touch would come again.

The open shift teased him, inviting him at last to know everything that lay beneath. Reverently, he raised his hands and caught the delicate fabric in his grasp, then pushed it back and off of her breasts. They were gorgeous, just as he had known they would be—such a contrast to her slender arms and shoulders and her tiny waist. The full mounds were tipped with long, thrusting nipples of dusky peach.

His hands trembled as he carefully cupped them and squeezed. They fit perfectly, the most exquisite things that had ever filled his hands. She caught her breath, then her fingers slid into his short hair. Arching her back, she offered herself to him.



Tilting his head slightly, he took a nipple in his mouth. The texture of the small, firm nubbin on his tongue, his lips, was all he had dreamed.

He suckled her delicately at first, tasting the textured velvet of her nipple and areola. Testing their resilience, he sucked harder and learned the power of this caress as she shuddered with delight, her fingers caressing his head in fervent reward. She moved in his grasp, so tender and lithe, so silky, so warm.

Fondling her other breast with his hand, he enjoyed her at length, then gave equal attention to the other. The throaty sounds she made as she pressed herself into his ravening mouth were heady applause.

But even as he enjoyed her thus, his cock jerked and twitched impatiently, slapping against what he knew must be the inside of her thighs—silken skin so hot and soft it maddened him even as it pleased.

He yanked at her shift and it fell away, slithering down his legs to the floor, leaving him with a naked siren in his lap. Rearing back, he looked down at her. His huge hands spanned her waist, then slid down to cup her bare hips, finally her ass, so full and round. He squeezed it, his fingers kneading restlessly as he stared at the delicate folds of flesh that he knew guarded heaven.

Her mons was nearly bare, only a narrow trail of auburn curls arrowing down to the velvet folds of her labia. And a bare inch away, the massive shaft of his cock strained up toward her, the broad head spangled with his arousal. His hands tightened on her hips, and he groaned deep in his chest as he thrust himself up toward her.

“Now!” The word was all he could manage.

She slid one slender hand down her flat belly and touched herself, stroking her fingers into her labia. The succulent sound of wetness as she stroked them back out, parting the sleek pink folds, sent desperation shooting through his cock. Her scent swirled up around him. Her other hand closed around his shaft, fogging his mind, leaving him with only one primal goal—get inside her immediately.

“Yes,” she murmured, her lips brushing his face. “Now.”

She guided him into the sleek, hot furrow of her body. Holding her in the vise of his hands, he pulled her down on him.

She was impossibly tight and yet she urged him on, rocking against him, uttering soft cries of pleasure as he thrust again and again, forging his way into her silken heat. He thrust one last time, felt himself buried to the hilt in her wet, living caress—and lost all control.

He came immediately, in one long explosion of shuddering ecstasy.

## Chapter Eighteen

Sirena sat astride her lover, holding him as he shuddered and groaned in his release. She turned her face against his, pressing little kisses on his hot skin, drawing in his scent. He was so big and delicious, she wanted to lick him all over, eat him up like a melon.

The feel of him filling her so tightly was indescribable, as if she were an untried girl again.

His hands relaxed on her hips, and he took a deep, shuddering breath. Slowly, his arms came up about her, holding her in a gentle vise, although his eyes remained closed.

For a long moment, they simply held each other. Heady triumph filled her, mixed with a queer tenderness. She had made this huge, powerful male lose control. She had given him the ultimate pleasure—and been the first female to do so. Never had she received so much joy from pleasuring a lover, and without coming herself.

“You feel... I cannot describe the feel of your sex holding mine,” he murmured finally. “Like the most sensual, sweet glove. Hot and wet and tight.”

“Mm-hmm,” she agreed, smiling against his mouth as she moved slowly, sliding up and down his shaft. His hands tightened on her bare back.

“I am—sorry,” he said. His cheekbones reddened, and she realized with a tender pang that he was embarrassed by his lack of control. “You didn’t find release.”

“Then you’d better fix that,” she said.

His golden eyes opened. She gloried in the intimacy of his gaze as she held him deep inside her.

“How?”

She drew his huge hand down to where they were joined and guided his thumb to the swollen bud of her clitoris. “Mm,” she approved as he circled it gently. “Like that.”

Only to discover that he had some inventive ideas of his own. His other hand cupped her ass, his fingertips stroking into the deep furrow there to find another tiny opening, and play it at the same time. She dug her nails into his shoulders, her head falling back.

“You’re supposed to ask before you...do that,” she managed, as pleasure spun through her. His importuning finger thrust deeper, and she opened her mouth to scold him, but crooned with pleasure instead.

“Come for me,” he urged, watching her.

And she did, her pussy clasp his still-turgid shaft as she shivered into a delicious orgasm.

He groaned. “Ahh—I can feel that.”

She opened her eyes. “The next time, we’ll be together. Let me show you.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “We will. But I’ll show you.”

She nipped at his lower lip. “You have little experience.”

“No. But I’ve had months to decide exactly what I want to do with you,” he said.

Laughter bubbled up inside her. “That sounds dangerous. Are you sure either of us will survive such a marathon?”

He cupped her face in his hands and looked into her eyes, his thumbs sweeping across her cheekbones. “No,” he said wryly, although she could have sworn the depths of his golden eyes held pain. “I doubt that I will. But I’ve decided I’d rather die of pleasure than never know it.”

“Oh, Slyde,” she chided. “I haven’t killed a lover yet.”

“Then let me be the first.” He stood, still deep inside her.

She clung to him as he turned and knelt on the padded bench, then came down on top of her. She lifted her legs, locking her feet in the small of his back.

Cupping his face in her hands, she pulled him down to her. “Kiss me,” she invited.

He looked at her lips, turning his head slightly to invite the caress of her hands. As she stroked his silky head, she could not help smiling.

“You do not wish to kiss me?”

“I’m not sure,” he teased her gravely. “I’ve been flayed by words from this mouth so many times, I believe I’m afraid to offer up myself up to it.”

She hissed at him, and he winced as her nails dug into his scalp.

“You deserved each time, you great beast, and you know it.”

“Hmm, maybe or maybe not. I believe I deserve its sweetness now.”

He bent his head, but instead of swooping on her, he brushed his lips along hers. He returned again and again, with such gentle nudges and tastes that she found herself held captive, waiting only for more. The room was very quiet, only their soft breaths breaking the silence as they learned the tender contours, the moistness of inner lip, the resilience and clever play of Serpentine tongues together.

Sirena had never thought much of kissing as a part of love play. Males enjoyed her tongue employed on sensitive parts of their bodies, but humans did not enjoy kissing Serpentine, and she did not enjoy kissing any male who wanted to shove his wet tongue down her throat or slobber on her.

But this was an unspoken conversation. Never had she known another mouth could say so much without words, could tell her that he reveled in this chance to know her taste, the yielding give of her mouth beneath his, in learning what made her lift up to him in a demand for more.

Their kisses began to have an effect on another part of him, as well. His cock swelled inside her, and he began to move in slow, subtle strokes. She moaned in approval as his cock dragged over exquisitely sensitive nerves in her sheath, stretched taut by his presence.

The sheer delight that it was Slyde moving over her, Slyde whose face was a mask of pleasure, golden eyes molten with heat, sent pleasure melting through her pussy and then out through her body. She came with delicious rapidity, his name on her lips.

“Sirena!” he groaned against her mouth, and she felt his hot seed flood her once again.

Part of Slyde wanted nothing more than to sink down on her and let himself fall fathoms deep into sleep. But another part knew if he did he would miss too much of this one precious night. When he’d recovered from the enervation of his second orgasm, he pulled slowly out of her and lay down beside her on the padded bench. He felt so good, he wanted to roar.

Sirena stretched sinuously and sat up.

“Where are you going?” he inquired, his hand on her hip. She wasn’t going to leave him yet.

She patted his leg. “Not far. I brought refreshments.”

Slipping off of the bench, she reached underneath and lifted up a basket. He watched with bemused interest as she pulled out a carafe, a dish of charnelle and an assortment of small jars.

Leaning up on his elbow, he took the carafe as she offered it to him and took a swig. It was a delicate wine, with the faint echo of berries.

“Frontieran,” she said, smiling at his look of approval.

He handed her the carafe and watched her drink. “A fine wine. What else do you have there?”

“Charnelle.” She handed him the dish of truffles, each with an ornate design of a tiny lizard bearing a hot chili pepper in his mouth. “Do you like it?”

“Very much.” He took one and bit into it. The taste, at once velvety and hot, seared across his tongue.

Her eyes danced as she selected one for herself. “Good. It builds endurance.”

He let his gaze travel slowly down her as she ate her truffle. She sat gracefully erect, legs folded beneath her, letting him admire her bare breasts, tiny waist and flared hips to the delicate mound of her mons.

“So does looking at you,” he said.

He reached for her, wanting her close. After all the months of watching and yearning, he could not get enough of touching her—warm flesh under satin skin, the play of strong muscle and the intriguing feminine padding of even such a highly toned female.

She slithered away from his touch. “I need a shower-dry. Care to join me?”

## Chapter Nineteen

Rising with alacrity, Slyde followed Sirena across the locker room and into one of the units. As the hatch slid shut behind them, he had to crowd to fit into the space with her. He was amazed as always, how he towered over her. She was such a vital force that she seemed somehow to take up more space.

She leaned into him, silky skin against his own. “Hmm, you’re going to take a great deal of washing.”

The naughty satisfaction in her voice surprised a chuckle out of him. She looked up at him, clearly intrigued.

“What?”

“That is the first time I’ve ever heard you laugh,” she said. “I like it.” She stood on tiptoe and gave him a kiss. “Water, on. Hot.”

Hot water and steam gushed from the high spigots. It felt wonderful, but not as wonderful as the feel of two clever hands laden with gel-soap fastening on his cock. He grunted with surprise, and she laughed up at him. “You like this,” she said. “I’m so glad, because I plan to be very thorough.”

She was. Her slippery hands slid between his thighs and ass cheeks, learning every contour and crevice. She made him laugh again, tickling him. They wrestled playfully until she got a mouthful of water and had to duck her head against his chest, sputtering. He smoothed her wet hair back from her face, leaning over her to shelter her from the water and then kissing her again because she was so beautiful glistening and wet, her hair sleeked back, emphasizing the emerald power of her eyes.

By the time she was through, his cock was drawn hard and tight as if he had never had her. He wanted nothing more than to lift her against the wall and drive into her, take her right there. But first...

“It’s my turn,” he said. He filled his hands with the gel soap and began to wash her. Unlike her, he didn’t content himself with just her nether regions. He started at her throat and worked his way over her shoulders and arms. He gave special attention to her breasts, admiring the way they swelled in his hands, the soap suds glistening on her thrusting nipples. Pulling her against him, he kissed her lazily as he washed down her back and her waist, over her hips. Finally he cupped her mons in his hand and held her for a moment.

She smiled against his mouth, making a little sound of pleasure. Sudden fierce male possessiveness flooded him. He wanted to hold her just this way before the entire galaxy—wanted every male alive to see that she was his and his alone. Anger and desolation threatened as he remembered that she likely never

would be, but he thrust them fiercely away. This one night he'd have her. Perhaps it would even be enough to convince her to stay with him.

He gathered another handful of the soap and washed her with exquisite care, enjoying every slippery crevice and crease with his fingertips. That she loved his ministrations was clear as her eyes drooped, her hands tightened on his arms and she moved with his hands. She tipped her head back against the wall and smiled up at him.

"Drying, commence," he said. "Now, siren, I'm going to taste you—all over."

Sirena nearly moaned at the heated promise in his eyes. Her knees trembled as a delicious flood of heat filled her loins. Her clitoris swelled and throbbed in anticipation.

He stepped out of the unit, and held out his hand to her in as courtly a gesture as if they were clad in evening wear, stepping from a hover-limo. She laid her hand in his and followed him back to the massage bench, where she lay back, offering herself to him in a wanton, graceful pose.

"Why don't you open one or two of the jars?" she invited, gesturing at the basket.

"What are they?" he asked, without taking his eyes off her. He pushed her feet gently apart, making a place for himself between her legs.

"Unguents and gels. They produce some interesting effects."

He shook his head. "I want only to taste you," he said, and slid his hands under her ass, holding her up like an offering.

She started to answer, but it became a whimper of such girlish shock that her cheeks burned as he flicked his long, clever tongue up through the furrow of her labia straight to her clitoris.

"Yess," he commanded. "Sing to me, Siren. Tell me what you want, what pleases you."

Everything he did. He employed his tongue with absolute ruthlessness, swirling her clitoris so that she shot up a swift slope toward orgasm and then thrusting it deep inside her in such a tantalizing mimicry of sexual possession that she writhed in his grasp.

She opened her mouth to command him back to her clitoris, only to whimper again as he did exactly as she wished, his tongue laving the swollen bud with a rough pressure that sent ecstasy shivering deep through her pussy and made her dig her heels into the bench, pressing up against his kiss.

"Ahh!" she cried out. "Yesss. Slyde..."

He thrust two fingers carefully inside her, and she came even harder, clenching around the invading caress, riding his fingers with eager abandon.

She opened her eyes at last to find him watching her. Holding her gaze, he stroked his fingers in and out of her a few more times, clearly enjoying the way she tilted her hips to enjoy his touch to the fullest.

"I enjoyed the way you pleaded with me," he said gravely.

She kicked at him, piqued as she realized she had indeed pleaded wordlessly with him, and he grabbed her legs, his eyes gleaming. “I liked it very much.”

“Let’s hear what sort of noises you make when I take you in my mouth,” she offered, narrowing her eyes at him.

His pupils flared. “You would...enjoy this?” he asked.

She sat up, cupping his face in her hands. “With you? Oh, yes.” She leaned over and kissed him. “I have imagined tasting you,” she whispered to him. “Imagined holding your cock in my mouth while I explore you with my hands.”

He groaned. “Sirena!”

He let her push him onto his back, but then he touched her face as she looked down at him, stroking her hands over his broad chest and lower, her fingers trailing over each ridge of muscle on his taut belly.

“I—I don’t believe I can maintain control,” he said, sounding so abashed she nearly smiled. “Perhaps you should not.”

She considered him gravely as she put one leg across him, straddling him and leaning over close enough to kiss him.

“Why would I want you to maintain control?” she murmured, lowering herself enough to rub her breasts on his broad chest, loving the feel of his plush skin abrading her nipples. “I want all of you, Slyde Stone. I want to feel your ecstasy in my mouth. I want to taste it—swallow it.”

He pulled her down for a deep kiss. She returned it lavishly, tasting herself on his tongue, reveling in the raw power of the arms holding her to him, in the massive strength of the body beneath hers. He was all heat and strength and male need and he was *hers*...for as long as she could convince him to stay.

What his siren could do with her mouth was indescribable, Slyde decided dimly. He came so hard he arched like a drawn bow, shouting out her name as he poured himself into her ravening mouth. Then he fell back, so enervated and sated that this time he could not keep his eyes open.

“Don’t leave me,” he rumbled.

“I won’t,” she answered softly.

He felt her settle beside him, felt the silk of her hair across his belly, the weight of her arm. He twined the fingers of one hand in her hair and fell asleep.

Sirena woke to find herself face down on the bench, under the heated press of a large male body. She gasped, tensing for flight or fight in that instant before she remembered who held her. She never allowed herself to fall asleep with a male—never. And this was why—he now held the upper hand and could subdue her completely in any physical struggle.

“Let go,” she mumbled, shoving at him.

“Hush, love,” he soothed. “It’s me. Slyde. You are safe.”

Her cheeks flamed with chagrin. He sounded like he was soothing a panicky child. What a fool she must sound. She forced herself to relax.

He held her carefully, surrounding her with his heat and strength, one huge hand flattened on her belly as he rubbed himself against her.

She smiled, pleasantly distracted as she felt his hot, silky shaft stroke against her ass cheeks.

“Hmm,” she approved. “It certainly is you.”

“I want you like this,” he murmured into her hair. “The way a wild beast covers his chosen female.”

She moved sinuously, stroking him deeper in the soft furrow of her ass.

“Hah,” she snorted. “The female chooses the male and draws him to her. He cannot help but come to her.”

He groaned deep in his chest. He lifted her enough for his cock to slide under her.

“Oh, you speak truth, siren. So much smaller and yet you hold me in your thrall.”

Since he was forging his way into her wet heat, she responded only by arching her back to help him. He thrust again and again, until he was deep inside her, then moved slower, simply enjoying being one with her. She tugged on his hand, pulling his fingers down over her mons to her clitoris.

Under her tutelage, he stroked her there as he slipped in and out of her.

She moaned her approval as pleasure twined through her and that wonderful urgency began to build, as if she would do anything to keep him moving inside her.

“Slyde...” she murmured, for the sheer pleasure of saying his name.

“Yes, my love.” He thrust harder, rocking her with him.

Her eyes widened in shock at the endearment, but then he did something extremely wicked and clever with his hand as he drove even harder and she gasped as she began to come around him.

He rode her hard through her orgasm, until his great body was burning with heat over hers, and he came with a muffled roar, his hot seed jetting into her. She came again with him and this time she screamed his name.



## Chapter Twenty

The two pet handlers stood in the door way of the *Orion*'s makeshift pet enclosure. The Aquarian boy was rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"You see?" said the Pangaeon, pulling him into the room. "You see why I woke you? We must do something. The creatures are very restless."

The boy looked around him, frowning. The prince's pets were indeed restless. Many of them were pacing about in their cages and some were emitting hisses or cries. The puppy was whimpering, scrabbling at his cage. Seeing the two, he began to yip and cry.

"We had better see if we can find what is wrong," the Pangaeon said. "I will walk this way. You go that way. Better look in the food closet. Perhaps one of them has gotten in there."

The boy yawned. "All right. But I don't see why you can't look in the closet."

He paused to pet the puppy, then continued on across the room to the storage closet. Opening the door, he peered inside, then stepped in. The door closed behind him.

Peering around the row of cages, the Pangaeon lifted a small device in his hand and pressed a signal into the glowing screen. Then he waited.

There was a faint hiss and a muffled scream, then a series of thumps, as if a struggle were taking place. The storage closet did not open. From the rows of cages came scuttling, hissing and scrabbling as the inmates signaled their distress and tried to hide in their bedding. The puppy yowled pitifully, then huddled in the corner of its cage, whimpering softly.

The Pangaeon stayed where he was, his eyes avid with a cruel excitement, breathing quickly. Then he turned and hurried from the room.

At last, it had begun.

The Aquarian majordomo surveyed the servants assembled at the early shift breakfast, in the small room reserved for their dining hall.

"Where is young Pool?" he demanded in Galactic, so all could understand.

Everyone shook their heads. A few looked at the Pangaeon.

"I haven't seen him since last evening." He shrugged. "We cleaned cages and fed the creatures, just like always. Is he not in his bed?"

"I've already looked for him there," snapped the majordomo, frowning down his aquiline nose at the small green servant.

"Everyone, keep an eye out for him. Boys that age get into trouble. He must have wandered off last night and fallen asleep somewhere."

The Pangaeon nodded obsequiously. "Yes, sir. I certainly will."

The other Aquarian servants eyed him with disfavor.

"Fawning jellyfish," one of them said in Aquarian.

"Indeed," agreed another. "We'll all look for Pool. He's a favorite of my princess's."

The others nodded.

"I'll begin in the arboretum."

"And I in the holo-surround theater. Pool loves holo-vid."

"Commander! Commander!"

Slyde opened his eyes, gazing blankly at the locker room around him. Had he dreamed an intruder? Then the warm, silken woman curled against him stirred, and he woke with a start, recalling where he was and just what he had been doing before he slept.

He relaxed his arm, which had tightened around her with protective instinct, and turned his head to look into sleepy, emerald eyes. She lifted her head from his shoulder, a crease between her arching brows. His gaze slipped down to her breasts, and his cock stirred as arousal slid through him, warm and sweet.

"Commander Stone! Sirena!" This time the voice was accompanied by loud knocking.

Sirena sat up beside him, pushing back her tousled hair. She followed as he vaulted off of the bench.

"Yes, we're here! Doors—unlock." They flew open, revealing Raile and Tahh. Both of them were in uniform, their faces grim. Foreboding seized his gut in an icy fist. "What is it?"

"What's happened?" demanded Sirena beside him. She wore the red shift, wrapped hastily around her. She shoved a towel wrap into his hands, and he fastened it about his hips, his eyes on Raile.

"One of the Aquarian servants," said Raile. "The boy is...dead."

"Dead?" The ice spread. "How?"

"It's—horrible," Raile said, his eyes haunted. "He's been savaged. And I know it sounds impossible, but it seems to be some kind of serpent."

Slyde and Sirena exchanged one swift look of horror. Their instincts had been correct—they *had* scented a dangerous serpent on board. Somehow they'd missed it in their search.

"Where?"

"In the prince's quarters. A food storage closet off the room where all the prince's pets are caged."

"Who's with the body?"

“Izard,” Raile said. “The captain’s on the way.”

“Wake up every guard,” Slyde ordered. “We need a complete lockdown.”

“No one else is to know for now,” Sirena added as they hurried out into the passageway. “If anyone outside the guard inquires, even crew, tell them it’s a drill, but that no one is allowed from one section of the ship to another. We Serpentians are going to have to find the snake, or whatever it is.”

“And fast,” Slyde added. “Before it claims another victim.”

## Chapter Twenty-one

Craig and Navos stood in the short passageway between the caged creatures and the ballroom, once again swirling with activity, but this time not for pleasure. The Serpentine guards, summoned from their sleep and night pursuits, paced nervously. The decorative seraglio screens and plush conversational areas favored by the Aquarians formed an incongruous backdrop to their militant bearing.

"Look at them," Craig murmured to his second in command. "They're like a herd of grazers that have scented a predator."

Navos nodded, watching the Serpentine. "I believe they have, in truth," he replied. "They have heightened olfactory as well as auditory senses. And they aren't grazers, but fine hunters themselves."

"They're going to need those abilities now," Craig said grimly. "Who or whatever killed that boy is a predator of the worst kind. If we don't catch it soon, we'll have a full-scale disaster on our hands. The passengers will panic."

"Yes. Which is perhaps exactly the intention."

Craig stared at him. "You've picked up a thought pattern behind this?"

"I have. A sentient being. Until this evening, he managed to hide his malice in the normal range, perhaps ingesting some kind of palliative drug. I'll explore that more thoroughly when I can. In any case, now he has unleashed his malice. It's as if...he is somehow urging the creatures onward."

"Another attempt to bring down the *Orion*," Craig said, his jaw clenching. "By the great God beyond, when I catch whoever is behind this, I will kill them with my bare hands!"

Navos nodded grimly.

"Do you wish to make an emergency landing on Carillon? We'll be within range in two hours. We could evacuate the ship."

"If necessary," Craig said. "Safety is paramount. But meantime, we've got to see what our guard can do."

They watched as Sirena ran into the ballroom, belting on her weapon. She sprang lightly onto a serving table near the passageway and called the guards around her, a warrior queen rallying her troops.

Sirena surveyed the faces of her guard. As one, they were pale and grim. They could all smell the same thing she could—death slithering.

“You all know a boy is dead,” she said. “We’re charged with finding the killer. Commander Stone and I believe it’s some deadly serpent—probably from *Serpentia* itself. We scented something the first night and searched the prince’s pets, but found nothing. It’s now clear our mistake was not to keep searching.”

“Be prepared for the worst. Whatever this is, it’s deadly. One of the handlers is dead, one missing. We may find another body. You’ll work in pairs—no solo patrols. Each duo will carry a molecular scanner and weapons at the ready. Com-links on at all times. I don’t care if you’re relieving yourselves—stay together and do not turn off your com-links.”

“Commander,” said Gart, a young guard with a cocky half grin. “If it’s just a snake we’re after, why the fuss? I hunt big vipers with just a blade back home.”

“Because this one has thus far managed to navigate this ship without being detected,” she said. “That means it’s either invisible, which we all know is impossible, or it’s using the ventilation system. It could be in many places.”

“Isn’t the ventilation system sectioned?” asked Layla, a female guard. “The screens should keep it cordoned.”

“Very good,” said Sirena with a nod of approval. “The system is indeed screened, to prevent anything from fouling the central generators. Whatever this is, it’ll be somewhere in this quadrant of the ship. But we still have to act fast.”

“Won’t the snake want to go to ground, now that it has killed?” asked another.

“It didn’t kill to eat,” said Slyde, entering the ballroom from the passageway with Craig and Navos. His face was taut. “It didn’t try to feed on the boy. It may be simply searching for a den, as you said, but if it encounters a living being, it will kill again.”

“Especially since Commander Navos believes it was set free by someone with a purpose,” added Captain Craig. “And if it succeeds in killing a passenger, or is even seen by one, the *Orion* is doomed. Our ship can’t survive another public disaster.” He looked around at all of them. “This is our third voyage. With your help, it won’t be our last.”

“You can count on us, Captain,” said Izard. There was a chorus of assent and restless movement. Sirena watched with grim satisfaction. Her guard was ready to be on with it.

Craig nodded. “I believe we can.”

“We’ll each take a section of this quadrant,” said Slyde. He moved forward, holding a holo-projection device and using it to send up a hologram of the ship and gesturing at it as he spoke, highlighting the ballroom, then the sections of the ships around it. “We’ll fan out from this area. Yvene and Tawnee have already worked these passageways within the prince’s quarters, so we know the creature’s not in there. Izard believes from the scent that it may be moving toward the passenger quarters. You’ll report back here

to central command as you search each passage, each room along the way. If you find anything, we'll all move in immediately."

"We have less than two hours to find this thing and destroy it," Sirena added. "If we haven't found it when we pass by Carillon, we'll land there and evacuate the ship. Let's go."

In a moment, the teams moved out at a jog.

"I'll go with Tahh," Slyde told Sirena. He looked down at her. "You'll stay here as central command?"

She nodded. Then she touched his arm. "Be careful."

He looked down into her eyes, his hand over hers. "And you, siren. I cannot lose you now."

Then he was gone, leaving her staring after him.

On his sleek space cruiser, Rra sat back in his seat, a smile of satisfaction on his thin, green face as he and his small crew watched the holo-vid feed from the *Orion*.

"So, it begins," he said. "Or should I say...it continues."

He threw back his head and laughed. "The *Orion* is besieged once again. Poor, poor LodeStar crew. This time they won't know what is among them until it's too late. Dead passengers and crew, bodies littering the ship, all with the marks of great fangs on them."

Beside him, Lly smiled, her lovely face serene, although her corn-silk hair wrapped tightly about her throat.

"Yes, it will be most horrific," she agreed. "They'll never survive the negative publicity."

He laughed harder. "They won't survive at all!" he cried.

Lly and the pilot exchanged a quick look. Rra was becoming more erratic, more emotional. A tycoon himself, his shipping line could have simply entered into direct competition with LodeStar, but Rra had an irrational hatred of Logan Stark and his company. He wanted to destroy them in the most public, humiliating way possible.

Lly didn't care about Stark or his company, but since Rra had become consumed with his vendetta, her position as his mistress had lost much of its appeal. She was afraid of him now. Caution, she could live with. Living in fear was unacceptable.

## Chapter Twenty-two

Sirena turned to Layla, who waited beside the hologram. "I'll be right back. I want to see the body."

"Captain, I'll go to the bridge," said Navos.

Craig nodded. "You have command of the ship."

Craig walked with Sirena through the back passageway. They found Dr. Tentaclar kneeling beside the body. The boy lay crumpled on the floor of the storage closet between two large containers of feed. His blue eyes stared flatly, his skin milk white against the pale red of the blood pooled on the floor beneath him. Fang marks were clear on the skin of his throat and torso as Tentaclar carefully cut away his shirt.

Sirena swallowed hard against the stench of death and the acrid miasma of a large serpent. Sick fury balled in her gut. This could have been prevented, if only she and Slyde had searched harder, longer. They should have trusted their instincts. And she should not have allowed herself to be distracted by her anger at him.

"He tried to fight it off," Tentaclar said, lifting one of the boy's hands. It was torn and bloody. "It would have been waiting. Curious, though..."

He stared at the body, and Sirena watched him carefully. "What is it?"

"Look at this," he said, turning the lanky form over so they could see the back. It too bore numerous fang marks. "I find it very odd that the serpent attacked so many times, and from all directions. It is almost as if..." Four of his eyestalks twisted to regard her and Craig. Ice slithered down the back of her neck.

"You believe there are more than one of the creatures," she said, her voice calm despite the surge of adrenaline. As a warrior, she knew how to use her body's responses instead of being controlled by them.

He blinked solemnly. "I am afraid so."

"Oh, great God," Craig said. "That means they could be moving in more than one direction."

"Yes," said Sirena. "Although they killed in tandem here. They may stay together."

"Can you tell from the marks what kind of serpent it is?" he asked.

"I've seen fang strikes like this once before, at a desert oasis in the wilds. They were caused by Serpentina's most deadly serpent—the golden wraith."

Craig sucked in a sharp breath. "I've heard of those. This just keeps getting better, doesn't it?"

Sirena spoke into her com-link. "Commander Stone, guards. We have a new development. We think there are at least two of the serpents. And that they are wraiths. You all know how dangerous those are. You are fast. They're far faster. Do not let your guard down for an instant."

“Any sign?” Slyde’s deep voice demanded.

There was a chorus of negative replies. “The scent dies off the farther we get away from the attack site,” said Izard. “We followed it toward the passenger quarters, but there’s nothing.”

“Yvene, Quarle, Raile, move your teams back toward the ballroom,” said Slyde. “They may be still holed up near there. The rest of us will continue searching out here.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Craig said to Sirena. “I can see this stench is wearing on you.”

She nodded. Between lack of sleep and the smell of death, she was a little shaky.

“It doesn’t bother you?” she asked, following him out through the passageway.

“The smell of death isn’t pleasant for anyone,” he said. “Even a veteran like me. But my human senses can’t pick up the serpents’ spoor, as you can.”

“Be grateful for small favors,” she said wryly.

She took a deep, relieved breath as they entered the ballroom.

Then she grimaced. The scent of the vipers should be much weaker here. Instead it was still strong. Moving her shoulders uneasily, she looked around the big room, then up at the ceiling. What lay above the smooth expanse of swirling miraculite and hanging lamps? She would have Layla bring up the holo-prints of the ballroom ventilation system.

At that moment, there was a commotion in the passageway leading from the prince’s quarters. Sirena and Craig straightened, hands on their weapons.

“I will enter,” said a familiar, imperious male voice. “Stand aside.”

Sirena and Craig dropped their hands from their weapons and exchanged a swift glance. It was Azuran.

“I’ll handle him,” Craig murmured. He walked back toward the door. “Your Highness.”

“Captain,” snapped the prince, striding into the room. His silver hair tied back, he wore a flight suit and a weapon. He was followed closely by three of his men, similarly dressed. Their appearance was a sharp reminder that the Aquarians were a tribe of ancient warriors. “I wish to know what is going on. These guards of yours tell me I must remain in my quarters with the women. Unacceptable. One of my people has died—I will deal with the beast that did this.”

Craig nodded. “You do your people great honor with your concern. But this is a matter for our guards to deal with.”

Azuran stared at him down his aquiline nose. His men did the same.

“I have seen the wounds. It is some kind of serpent, the physician tells me.” He turned to Sirena, no trace of the sensual playboy now in his demeanor. “What do you know of this?”

“A serpent,” she agreed. “A deadly one native to my planet. I believe it was smuggled on board among your menagerie. Why, we cannot say.”

“To kill,” he snapped. “That much is obvious. But why? And why this boy?”



"Because he was here," she said. "He was the pet handler, so he was the first one the snakes found when they emerged from wherever they were hiding."

"Where is the other handler?" Azuran demanded, looking around. "The Pangaeon?"

Sirena shook her head. "We are searching for him."

"What's his name?" Craig asked.

"I don't know the fellow," Azuran said with royal disdain. "He came on with the reptiles I purchased on Serpentia. We stopped there for a visit before the voyage. Ask my majordomo—he'll know more about him."

"We've already accessed the ship's records. His name is Lloy," said Sirena. She turned to Layla. "Bring up the prince's servants. We want a visual of the pet handlers."

"Yes, Commander." The slender dark-haired woman worked swiftly and, in a few seconds, two holo-images rotated before them, both wearing the prince's livery. The boy and a pale green Pangaeon with a weak chin and green corn-silk hair.

"That's the fellow," the prince said.

"From Jardin City, Pangaea," Layla reported crisply. "Former employment, the reptile gardens owned by one Llo—his uncle."

"So a new servant came on board and now we have two deadly serpents loose on the *Orion*," said Sirena. The three of them looked at each other. "It's possible this Pangaeon is responsible for the serpents being on board. He certainly would've had the best opportunity to smuggle them on."

"Navos did say someone did this on purpose. But how would he have gotten them through the micro-scanners?" Craig scowled. "He sure as hell didn't have them in a body cavity—that we would've detected."

The Aquarians looked revolted. Sirena merely nodded. A terrorist had used this method to smuggle a bio-bomb aboard the *Orion* on their first voyage.

She gestured toward the pet quarters. "One of the reptiles purchased on Serpentia was the kronos, am I right, Your Highness?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"She was sitting on a clutch of huge eggs," Sirena said. "I saw them the evening of the party. They're gone now—we looked. What if the handler slipped some wraith eggs under her, along with her own? I don't believe a kronos is clever enough to notice."

"So you think these killers are hatchlings?" Craig frowned. "I don't know much about snakes, but that seems farfetched."

"Yes, I know," she admitted, clenching her fists in frustration. "But so does having killer serpents loose on the *Orion*."

"Good point," he said dryly. "All right, as this Pangaeon seems the most likely perpetrator, better put out another bulletin to the guard to be on the lookout for him."

“And meanwhile we do nothing?” Azuran demanded.

“Meanwhile, we let our elite guard do their job,” said Craig, looking every inch the commander of his ship. “Your Highness, the Serpentians are uniquely qualified to find and bring down these creatures. As much as it pains me, you’ll note I am not among the hunters, either. Were we on your planet, with its many waters, you and your men would be the experts.”

Azuran acknowledged this with a regal nod. “I will remain here. We are ready if needed.”

Craig bowed politely. “Very well, Your Highness.”

The prince and his men stalked a short distance away to converse.

“Nicely done, sir,” Sirena murmured. “Now, I think we’d best look at the ventilation system around here.”

“Should we ask the Aquarians to return to their quarters?”

She shook her head as they reached the holo-display. “At least here they’re surrounded by guards.”

## Chapter Twenty-three

As Tawnee jogged out of the ballroom with the other guards, impatience warred with hurt and envy inside her. The news that Sirena and Slyde had commandeered the male guards' locker room for a night of sex had already flown through the ranks, a delicious bit of gossip in sharp counterpoint to the macabre task ahead. The other female guards had made sure she heard about it.

She tossed her head angrily. They were just jealous because she'd had a taste of the commander and they hadn't.

Yvene stopped when they reached a fork in the corridor behind the ballroom.

"Sir, I think we should search all of the storage units here."

Commander Stone turned to her. "Good thinking. Arde, you go with them. I'll take this passageway."

Yvene frowned. "I thought we weren't to go alone."

"I'm the exception," he answered calmly. "You're in charge of these two young ones."

Tawnee watched as his huge frame disappeared to the left into one of the narrow hallways that ran around the back of the ballroom.

"Tawnee," said Yvene in a sharp voice. "Come along. We've a job to do, and I need you focused."

"I'm coming." Pouting, she followed the others into a large storage room with several compartments. Sleek containers were stacked in neat rows.

"You two take this end," Yvene said. "I'll go around this way."

"Yes, ma'am." Arde started along the row toward the end of the storage room, but Tawnee hung back. As soon as the other two were out of sight, she ducked back out into the passageway. Her heart pounded with exhilaration as she hurried after Commander Stone. This was her chance to get him alone. Somehow she would make him see that she was the right female for him. She would search alongside him, showing him how brave and clever she was.

He was not in the other passageway. She frowned, wrinkling her nose. She could certainly smell the acrid scent left by the serpents. Ugh! She turned a corner and hesitated. Which way had the commander gone? And how was she going to be able to find him with that horrible smell clogging her nostrils?

She felt rather than heard the movement above her. She froze, every nerve taut with sudden premonition. Very slowly, she tipped her head back and looked up.

The two sleek twisting shapes, the size of her arms, seemed to pour endlessly from the opening of the air vent above her. Their triangular heads swayed slowly back and forth as they watched her with their cold, flat eyes. The nearest one opened its mouth and hissed loudly, a long, blood red tongue tasting the air.

She opened her mouth to scream and it struck, catching her on the throat. Her cry died in a horrible gurgle of sound. As she fell back to the floor of the passageway, the other snake dropped to join the kill. The poison began to work instantly, sending agonizing shards of fire and ice shooting through her body. All she could do was twitch convulsively as they struck again and again.

“Tawnee. Where are you? Tawnee!” Yvene’s voice crackled from the com-link, sharp with fury and concern. “Commander Stone, come in. The cadet is gone.”

The snakes, their task finished, slithered from the body and disappeared into a shadowy corner of the passageway.

Nearby, in one of the lavatories along the passageway, the Pangaeon huddled on the toilet, the remote control device shaking in his hands. He was sweating, fear and yet triumph in his eyes as he watched on the tiny screen. The serpents had done it—he had succeeded yet again. Now to go after the real quarry, the one that would rock this ship and the entire galaxy.

He switched displays and watched the spy device to see where his quarry was going.

Slyde stopped in the middle of the small storage room as Yvene’s furious command to Tawnee rang out in his com-link. Foreboding seized him.

“I’m on my way back,” he answered, his deep voice echoing in the quiet. “Meet me in the passageway.”

He found her just as Yvene and Arde arrived from the other direction. Arde took one look and turned away, gagging and retching. Yvene stepped forward beside Slyde, staring down at the body.

Tawnee lay with one arm out-flung, her laser weapon on the floor beside it, as if she had drawn it but not had time to fire. Her eyes stared sightlessly at some horror only she could see. Across one cheek, two ugly gashes oozed blood. Puncture wounds dotted the bright golden yellow of her flight suit, bright red slowly dripping to the floor.

“Little fool,” Yvene hissed, her voice shaking. “I told her to stay with us. All right, these quarking snakes are near here. We’ll find them!”

She began to turn in a slow circle, watching the molecular scanner in her hands.

“Commander Blaze, guards,” Slyde rapped out. “All on high alert. The snakes have struck again. Tawnee is dead. We’re in the passageway behind the ballroom. I want all guards back to this vicinity.”

There was a chorus of terse, excited answers. He knew the guard would be racing as one back toward him and the area, lasers at the ready.

He stared down at what was left of the pretty cadet, guilt and rage colliding inside him. Impulsive, silly girl. He knew damned well she had been following him when attacked. He should have made it clearer that she had no chance with him. He should never have allowed her to harbor any illusions, should never have allowed her to touch him at all. Her death was as much his fault as the serpents that had killed her.

“Got them,” Yvene hissed.

He looked up sharply, the predator in him roaring to life, regret swept aside by the fiery instincts of his other self. He took a deep breath, drawing in the scent of the serpents with the smell of death. Sureness settled over him. It was nearly time to loose the real hunter.

“They’re back in the ventilation shafts,” Yvene told him. “Headed for the ballroom.”

He was already in motion at a dead run. “Sirena!” he roared. “They’re coming your way. Get all the civilians out of there into containment.”

As Slyde’s voice roared through their com-links, Sirena and Craig stared at each other across the holo-vid showing the ventilation shafts above the ballroom.

“You were right about the ventilation system,” he said, already drawing his weapon as he whirled to look up at the nearest chandelier.

“Now you tell me,” she shot back.

She moved past him, looking up at the ceiling. Blowing out a sharp breath, she tilted her head back and sniffed. She quartered gracefully across the floor of the room, weapon at the ready, filling her nostrils with scent. There was human male, strong and spicy. The familiar scent of other Serpentians. The faint exotic scent of the prince and his men, watching closely with weapons drawn. And there—she grimaced. Above all the other scents, stronger as she turned back toward the rear passageway, coiled the miasma of serpent.

“They’re up there,” she called. “Moving back this way.” Holding her laser before her, she dashed toward the passageway. She heard pounding footsteps as Layla and the others followed her.

“How can they move so fast?” Craig demanded as they burst into the pet quarters.

“I don’t know,” Sirena called back, already lifting her weapon to aim it at the ceiling as she moved sideways down the aisle between cages. “I’m beginning to wonder if they’ve been enhanced in some way.”

“Well, they’re sure leading us on a wild asteroid chase.” He crossed the room to aim his weapon at another air duct.

She scowled. “You’re right. This is not normal, even for serpents that have been cornered, like these.”

She sniffed again, grimacing as she scented the snakes, and cast a swift glance at the hatch beside her. “Where does this lead?”

“Into the Azurian quarters,” Layla called across the room.

"I'm going in," she said. "Guards, follow me. Tahh, you'll come with me. Layla, Amar, go to the right. As the others arrive, they follow."

The hatch slid open, revealing a wide passageway with open doors. And as they moved farther into the area, Aquarians watched warily from luxurious rooms. The scent of the serpents faded the farther they got from the pet quarters.

"They're not here," Tahh said. "Have they doubled back?"

"I think they're headed back to the area above the ballroom," put in Layla.

Sirena froze. "The prince!"

Afterward, she did not even recall her dash to back to the ballroom, only that the hatchway, the cages and the passageway, with guards emerging from all directions, seemed to float by her. Faces turned her way, voices cried out, but she did not deviate, did not slow, even when she had to shove someone out of her way.

The prince's men were poised in a loose formation about him, a warlike tableau against the seraglio screens. Their faces turned toward her, weapons raised, but she spared them not a glance, her eyes fixed on the slender golden shapes pouring out of the vent over their heads.

"*Get away!*" she screamed. "*Get—him—away!*"

In slow motion, the prince's men threw him sideways with them, one of them twisting far enough to gaze up in horror at death swaying above them. The prince, even as he fell, raised his laser weapon and fired upward, the burst of laser light flashing in tandem with Sirena's as she fired on the run.

## Chapter Twenty-four

To Craig and the others who could only watch, too far away to do anything, Sirena was like a yellow flame streaking across the ballroom, firing her weapon as she ran. Even as the snakes dropped from the vent, she threw herself between them and the Aquarians, a living barrier of flesh and laser flame.

The snakes struck, bodies coiling and slashing out with red mouths wide. One checked in midair, hit by a slash of laser beam. The other struck Sirena full on, crystalline fangs sinking deep into her forearm. She fell to the floor, the snake writhing on her.

Craig felt a roar of rage and anguish erupt from his own throat, heard it echo from a dozen others. The guards dashed forward. He followed, adrenaline surging through him as if he were in a wartime battle.

One of the Aquarians fired again, missed.

“No!” The prince knocked his arm up as the shot sliced dangerously close to Sirena, now struggling on the floor with the viper. The prince surged forward as she grasped the writhing body in her free hand, trying to yank it off of her. Two of the guards dashed between the Aquarians and their commander, daggers out.

A deep bellow of rage shook the ballroom. Slyde Stone burst in at a dead run.

“No!” he roared. “*Sirena!*”

The Aquarians scrambled to their feet, bearing their prince away. The Serpentians skidded to a halt by Sirena, Izard slashing at the snake with his dagger. The laser-wounded snake dropped to the floor, slithering away beneath a divan, followed by laser blasts as two of the guards fired at it. The other, blood now streaming from a cut, released Sirena from its fangs. Twisting out of her failing grip, it followed its mate with lightning speed.

“They’re getting away!”

Craig and the guards started after them, but Navos grabbed his arm. “No, Captain—wait.”

Craig followed his gaze, his mouth dropping open. Before their eyes, the huge Serpentine braced himself, legs wide. Then he flung back his head and let out another mighty roar, shaking the room. The air around him shimmered with a conflagration of heat and smoke.

From it burst a golden creature who unfurled his short, powerful wings, turned his head toward them and roared again, this time a soft, guttural warning, full of sharp, gleaming teeth and a long, forked tongue.

Stunned, everyone in the ballroom fell back, gaping at the golden-scaled apparition who stood over Sirena.

*The commander was a shape-shifter!* As one, their mesmerized gazes swept from the flaring horns above his heavily boned skull, the wings unfurled on his shoulders, to the short curving claws on his huge hands and feet. His golden yellow uniform hung in tatters.

“A dragon,” someone breathed. “He’s a *Dragolin!*”

“Stay back,” the Dragolin demanded, his voice a deep husk of menace. Smoke drifted from his mouth as he spoke.

Azuran, who had been the first to break the thrall and move, stopped short. Their eyes met and then he nodded abruptly, acceding.

It was so quiet everyone could clearly hear as the woman on the floor at the dragon’s feet gave a great sobbing gasp for breath. Her body jerked.

The Dragolin dropped to his mighty knees beside Sirena. Carefully he lifted her into his arms, his huge, clawed hands cradling her high against his chest.

He looked into her eyes.

“Trust me,” he growled.

Her body was beginning to convulse, the poison working its deadly force, but she gazed up into his eyes.

Bending his head, he opened his mouth. As the others watched in horror, he sank his teeth deep into her flesh.

Sirena focused on the heat radiating from the mighty arms that held her. The icy pain wanted to devour her, to drag her down into its black jaws and freeze her. She had never experienced such shooting, slicing agony. Only his heat kept her from surrendering to it, letting it take her.

Then he sank his teeth into her wounded arm and a new agony seared through the ice.

Dimly she realized he was sucking on her wound. She fought for breath, fought to stay conscious. She would not give in—would not let it defeat her. The ice eased just enough to allow her to breathe.

He lifted his head. Blood trickled down the golden scales across his flared jaw. Her blood.

“I’m sorry, my siren,” he said in that deep, smoky voice. “This is going to hurt even more.”

“Go...ahead,” she managed to mumble. “Hurt...you worse...”

His golden eyes gazed deep into hers, their lambent flames warming her deep inside, where the poison could not touch her.

“Yes,” he agreed. “It will. A thousand times.”

He bent his head to her again, drew a deep breath and breathed fire into the wound.

She screamed, arching like a drawn bow in his grasp as this new, even greater agony scorched through her.

“Come and take her,” he roared over her head. “Get her to Tentaclar.”



Sirena sank back, her gaze blurring as she drew in one long, painful breath after another. Then she saw something that made her eyes fly open in horror.

Behind him, two long, sinuous golden shapes danced forward, mouths wide, flat black eyes fixed on their new goal.

“Slyde...” she gasped. “They’re...back.”

The Dragolin thrust his woman into the arms of the first guard to reach them: Iward. The other male gathered her close and backed away, flanked by Yvene and Raile, their weapons aimed behind Slyde. He watched until she was safely out of range and then he turned on the enemy.

With a mighty blow of his arms, he swept a set of the decorative screens crashing aside, then shoved a grouping of furniture after it, thumping and tumbling across the floor.

With a soft growl of satisfaction, he stepped into the cleared area and watched the pair of wraiths advance. Heat filled him, the roaring heat of battle. He drew in their foul scent, welcomed it, stoked his rage with it. He would avenge his female with their destruction.

“Yesss. Come to me,” he growled. “I am a worthy opponent.”

Opening his mouth, he drew a deep breath and coughed out a gout of flame at them. It flashed through the air. The deadly serpents struck through the thick cloud of smoke, one after the other, the wounded one just a nanosecond behind its mate. Reaching out, he let them take him, one on the shoulder, one on his arm.

With a roar of defiance against the pain of their fangs, he grasped the writhing body of the snake hanging on his left shoulder and ripped it away. He squeezed it in his mighty armored fist until it lashed wildly and fell hissing to the floor. He planted one foot solidly, stepping on the still-twisting body. It writhed and fought, mouth wide, then turned its head to attack his leg.

He ignored it, grasping the other. Yanking it from his arm with a roar, he held it out before him and grasped the flailing body with both hands. With all his strength, he squeezed.

The serpent fought wildly, mouth agape, hissing with fury. But slowly its struggles ceased, and the slender body fell limp.

He cast it aside, then bent to grasp the other one. Holding it out before him, he roared again, coughing a gout of flame that enveloped the serpent’s head.

Overhead, the Orion’s fire retardant system came on. Water shot down from myriad tiny nozzles, drenching the ballroom and all its occupants. The Dragolin scarcely noticed it.

Dimly he heard a thin cry, a pettish wail of distress. Dropping the smoking body of the snake to the ground, he turned, peering through the mist at the small, slender green man who darted out of the jumble of furniture. Disheveled, squinting against the rain, he wore the livery of the prince of Aquarius. His green hair twisted wildly about his head. In his hand he held an electronic device.

“No!” he cried again. “No, it can’t end like this! It was all planned—all of it. The serpents killed the boy, they killed the woman. It worked perfectly—and they will kill Azuran. They must!”

He aimed the device at the ruined bodies of the serpents on the floor, one smoldering, one oozing blood.

“Get up!” he shrieked. He pressed the device in shaking hands, and the snakes’ bodies twitched violently, splashing in the water pooling around them. “You must get up and finish it.”

“*You!*” said the Dragolin. “You are responsible for this foul attack.”

He prowled forward with a chilling growl, his teeth glistening, wings flaring, claws outstretched toward the little man who was still gibbering, trying to animate the serpents.

Navos was the first to react.

“Commander,” he called. “You must not kill him. We want him alive. Do you hear me?”

The Dragolin checked and turned his head slowly toward Navos. He snarled his defiance. One of his mighty arms shot out, and he grasped the Pangaeon around the neck, lifting him off of the floor.

Craig strode across the floor toward them, one hand raised to shield his eyes from the water.

“Commander,” he shouted. “As your captain, I am ordering you to stand down. Do you hear me? *Stand down!*”

As the rest of them held their breath, the huge beast cast one last, longing look at the little man hanging in his grasp, thin face turning a dark, congested green. Then the Dragolin opened his grasp and let the Pangaeon fall to the floor in a sodden heap, gagging and gasping for breath.

“Let Commander Navos have him first,” the Dragolin said. “Then it will be my turn.”

Yvene and Raile jerked the Pangaeon off of the floor, fastening soft restraints on his arms and legs.

“We’ll keep him for you, Commander,” Yvene promised the Dragolin.

“You’ll take him to the infirmary isolation unit,” Craig snapped. “I want him checked over, and sedated if necessary, until we’re ready to question him. I want *nothing* to happen to this prisoner, are we clear on that? And will somebody get this quarking water turned off?”

“Yes, sir,” the Serpentians chorused, although more than one cast longing looks at the captive.

Craig watched them haul the Pangaeon away, then turned back to face the Dragolin.

He bowed, ignoring the water dripping off his face. “Commander, thank you. You have saved us all.”

With a deep rumble of sound and drifting smoke, the Dragolin turned to the carnage on the floor. “Get some bio-toxin suits and get this cleaned up. All their secretions are deadly.”

“We’re on it, Commander,” said Izard. He gestured to two of the guards.

“We’ll want to autopsy these,” Craig said, moving to look down at the lifeless snakes. “They have some kind of implant, from the way he was using this controller.” He picked the device up, shook the water off and handed it to Arde. “Make sure Halix gets that.”

“At once, sir.”

The Dragolin let out a deep sigh. They all watched as he staggered slightly, and then turned away.

“Commander?” Raile hurried forward, but the Dragolin motioned him away.

“Leave me.” He stalked away behind a row of screens that were still standing. They heard him sink heavily to the floor.

“He is about to shift back,” said Navos. “He is nearing the end of his strength.”

Craig motioned Raile to follow the Dragolin. “Some of you get him to the infirmary. He took three strikes from those snakes.”

“All right.” Craig looked around at the rest of the guard, drawing their attention back to him. “I want absolutely no other crew admitted besides guards, is that clear? None of this can go any further than this room.”

The Serpentians all nodded resolutely. “You can rely on us, sir,” said Yvene. “For our ship and our commanders.”

Craig nodded back. “I know I can,” he said with a tired smile. “I know I can.”

## Chapter Twenty-five

When the ballroom had been restored to its usual splendor, Iazard and Yvene looked around one last time before they opened the doors to step out.

There, they stopped short. A group of passengers had gathered in the lobby and were talking nervously among themselves. When they saw the two guards, they fell silent. Then a short, plump man stepped forward, possibly pushed by the woman at his side.

"You there, guards," he said. "What in the galaxy is going on in there? We've heard all kinds of loud noises—like a fight of some kind. And my wife distinctly smelled smoke. If there is trouble on this ship, I demand to know. Seems to me this cruise line would be watching its Ps & Qs after the excitement on the first two voyages."

Iazard's expressive brows shot up. He exchanged a look with Yvene, who widened her eyes at him and shrugged unhelpfully. Iazard bent closer to the tourist.

"Well, sir. It's that Aquarian prince. Another of his little...entertainments."

The tourist gasped and Iazard nodded wisely. "A magician from Teradathia."

The tourists let out their breath on a collective sigh. Yvene bit her lip.

"But what was he doing?" one dared to ask. "It—it sounded like a wild beast roaring. And—and the smoke?"

"Well, I'm really not allowed to say, sir, but just between us, it involved a large smoke-wolf and several dancing girls."

"Oh, my stars," breathed the man. "You don't say."

"Disgusting," said Yvene virtuously.

"Oooh, yes," agreed the tourist's wife, who had sidled close enough to hear. She scurried away.

"Don't breathe a word about this, will you?" said Iazard, looking concerned.

"Oh, no, of course not," said the man. "Wouldn't dream of it. Er, the smoke-wolf isn't on the loose, is it?"

"Oh, no, sir. Back into its cage and probably on the magician's shuttle by now. I believe he mentioned another engagement on Carillon this evening."

"Oh." The tourist's face fell.

Iazard and Yvene sauntered away.

"A smoke-wolf?" she murmured. "That was a masterful touch, my love."

He allowed himself a small smile. “Yes. How long before the story is all over the ship, d’you think?”

She shrugged. “Oh, an hour, give or take. It’s a big ship.”

They reached his quarters, and he ushered her inside. They both sank onto the divan, breathing identical deep sighs of weariness.

“Did you suspect?” she asked without opening her eyes, “that Commander Stone was Dragolin?”

“No more than you did,” he said ruefully. “I merely wondered whether he and Sirena would cause the *Orion* to burst into flames with the force of their passion.”

“Very poetic,” she approved, amusement clear in her voice. “When we’ve had a rest, perhaps we can cause a small conflagration ourselves.”

He pulled her into the curve of his lean body and rested his cheek on her hair.

“I’m certain of it,” he mumbled. “Just give me time to rest first. It’s been seven hells of a day.”

Craig, Navos and Halix stood in the command deck, looking at the device that lay in pieces on a lab tray.

“Just as you suspected, Captain, this is a controller,” Halix said, his round lavender face for once grave. “The lab techs have found that it correlates with the devices found implanted in the wraith serpents’ cerebellums. We also found another piece—a tracking device planted on the prince.”

“There is a diabolical mind behind this scheme,” Navos said. “The intention seems to have been to kill the prince publicly, along with any others they could manage and thus completely discredit the *Orion* and LodeStar Corporation.”

“And the boy and the cadet were simply experiments,” Craig said disgustedly. “To see if the device would work.”

“It was more than that in the end,” Navos said. “The handler discovered that he quite enjoyed the hunt and the kill.”

“Well, we’ll see how the little slime ball enjoys his trial and a life sentence on the prison planet, Deep Six.”

“So even though they came out of eggs, those were not newly hatched wraiths, but full grown adults?” Halix asked.

“Yes, the serpents were sedated and placed inside false kronos eggs, made with some iridium alloy, which is very difficult to penetrate with a micro-scanner, by the way—we will want to study that, Mr. Halix. The false eggs were then placed with her real ones, which were about to hatch. When we were out in space, the handler activated the controller and woke the serpents up. They ‘hatched’, devoured the kronos young and a few other small pets, and were set loose to begin their hunt.”

Craig turned away from the device, striding over to look at space flung out before them. Aquarius was in view, growing larger as they neared it, a hazy blue ball.

“Meanwhile, the prince and his party are nearly safely home. Now that you’ve examined the perpetrator, are we any closer to knowing who is behind this, Daron?”

Navos joined him, shaking his head. “I am afraid not. The handler knows only his part in the scheme. His uncle, who supplied the snakes, has fled. The InterGalactic Space Forces will find him, of course, but it may take some time.”

“Access his credit history,” Halix suggested. “He will have been paid.”

“A large infusion of credit was recently deposited to his account,” Navos agreed. “But it was generic—untraceable.”

“What about sat-com surveillance?” Halix asked. “Pangaea has a most comprehensive system in place. All visitors to the serpentorium should be recorded.”

“Mr. Halix, I am grateful you turned your talents toward LodeStar and the *Orion*,” said Craig wryly. “You’d have made an excellent addition to the space forces. Why don’t you access the sat-com system and let us know what you find? I imagine the space forces investigator, Lt. Qwerx, will welcome your input.”

Halix bowed, beaming. “Thank you, Captain. I will contact him at once.”

“Yes,” said Navos. “I believe he is a compatriot of yours.”

“Ah.” Looking intrigued, Halix hurried away.

Craig sank into a chair and rubbed his hand over his face. Then he looked up, a smile lighting his tired face as Tessa walked into the room. She carried a tray with three steaming mugs on it.

“I brought you a hot drink,” she said.

“And the sun,” her husband murmured as she leaned over to hand him his mug.

She smiled at him and he grabbed his mug hastily as it tipped dangerously over his lap.

“Oh, sorry,” she winced.

“Didn’t spill a drop.” He grinned. “Here, sit down with me.”

“I will, as soon as Commander Navos has his drink.”

Navos joined them, and the two men drank deeply.

“How is Sirena?” Craig asked.

“She will recover,” Tessa said. “But Dr. Tentaclar says that if Commander Stone had not sucked out some of the poison and cauterized the wound, she might well be dead.”

“I doubt she would have survived at all, were she not Serpentine,” Navos said.

Tessa nodded. “Yes, we have some immunity to venom. Still, wraiths can be deadly even to us.”

“Commander Stone was bitten several times, yet he has suffered no ill effects,” Navos mused. “His Dragolin side appears to be completely immune.”

“Not entirely,” Tessa said with a shudder. “I saw the bite marks on his arms. He will have painful bruises for some time.”

She shook her head wonderingly. “I can’t believe he’s a Dragolin. I mean, it’s as if Prince Azuran had disguised himself and decided to work on the *Orion*.”

Her eyes met her husband’s, and they shared a look of amusement. The Aquarian prince, with his lordly manner, clad in a ship’s uniform and serving the passengers? Impossible to imagine.

“The serpent’s bites would have killed Prince Azuran, that’s for damn sure,” Craig said. He drained his mug and set it down with a sigh. Then he laughed without humor. “Well, we’ve averted disaster once again, and all thanks to a shape-shifting guard commander I didn’t know we had onboard. I honestly can’t think of one more damn thing these saboteurs could try to take us down. And if they do, who knows? Perhaps we’ll turn out to have a wizard or faery in our ranks.”

“That would be most useful,” his wife agreed dryly. “But surely you’re right, and there is nothing left to attempt that will get past our defenses.”

“The most potent weapon is that which does not know it is a weapon,” Navos murmured.

Craig and Tessa looked at him, and he shrugged. “Merely a quote from my studies at the Indigon university. I don’t know what made me think of it at this time.”

He rose. “Thank you for the drink, Mrs. Craig. Captain, I’ll be in my quarters if you need me.”

Craig nodded. As the hatch slid shut, he turned to his bride.

She was looking after Navos, a slight frown on her lovely face. “He’s very cryptic at times.”

Her husband grunted, his face weary and drawn.

“Enough of Commander Navos, Mrs. Craig,” he said. “Why don’t you come over here so I can thank you properly for that drink?”

She slipped onto his lap, her arms curving about his neck as his arms settled around her.

“Yes, Captain.”

He pressed his lips to the tender curve of her throat above her uniform. “I’ll never get tired of hearing you say that.”

She leaned her cheek against his hair. “Just keep asking the right questions and you won’t have to.”

“Hmm. I can think of one I’ll ask you later, in our quarters,” he murmured, but his face was still troubled.

She cupped his cheek in her hand. “It will be all right, won’t it, Steven?”

He sighed. “I hope so, love.” He kissed her, and then set her on her feet, rising with her. “Now I’ve got to go and placate a prince.”

She bit back a grin at his wry look.

“I’d rather face a phalanx of Ogre’n,” he said.

“Princes,” she agreed sympathetically. “You can’t just shoot ’em.”

*Cathryn Cade*

Her husband was laughing as they parted in the passageway.



## Chapter Twenty-six

Slyde sat beside Sirena's bed in the infirmary. He held her hand in his; small, cool and nearly lifeless. So different from when she was awake. She was so fiery, so decisive, that she seemed to take up a larger space. Now she looked slight and feminine lying in the airbed.

"Don't even think of letting this take you, siren," he whispered to her. "I can't go on in a galaxy without you."

He felt an unfamiliar emotion coursing inside him—fear. Fear that she might yet succumb to the poison working in her system.

"You're sure you got all the poison?" he asked Tentaclar as the doctor came in once again to check the IV and the cellular monitors. A tech hovered nearby, but Slyde noticed the doctor did not move far away from his patient. That was fine with him.

"I am sure," the old doctor said, two of his eyes swinging around to focus on Slyde. "Don't worry, Commander. Your quick reaction saved her. You were able to remove enough of the poison and cauterize the wound so that no infection could take hold. We then flushed her system completely. She just needs rest."

Slyde sighed deeply. "I don't doubt you, Doctor," he said. "I simply will not be able to accept that she is safe until she's awake and alert."

"You should rest as well," Tentaclar said. "Although you've an amazing constitution—fascinating how your body was able to repel the wraith venom—your wounds will heal more quickly with sleep. We can bring another airbed in here for you."

Slyde shook his head. Though his wounds ached and throbbed with cold fire, he knew he wouldn't be able to rest until she woke.

Because, he acknowledged silently, he feared her waking as well. What would her reaction to him be once she recovered? Would their passion stand the test of time, or would he simply be another sensual interlude for her?

Through the long hours of the night, others came and went. Tentaclar was in and out, as were the medtechs. Craig and Tessa, Navos, Izard and Yvene were allowed in to her bedside. They came quietly, looking down at her as she lay pale and still in the thermal wrappings of the air bed, her flame bright hair the only color. They asked him how she did, if there were any changes.

There were not, until the next morning. He had at last been coaxed away from her side for a meal, a shower-dry and a change of clothing. He walked back into the infirmary to find Tentaclar beaming and the techs hovering with cheerful faces.

“Her vital signs are picking up,” Tentaclar told him. “She will wake soon.”

Slyde sat down with a thump, his legs suddenly weak. Relief fizzed through his veins like champagne. He gazed down at Sirena and saw her lashes flutter. Then her eyes opened and she gazed blankly at the room before her.

“Siren.” His voice sounded as rough as rocks rumbling down the mountainside and he swallowed hard against the tightness in his throat. Leaning over her, he lifted her hand to his face.

Her eyes focused on his. One corner of her mouth quirked.

“This must not be...the heavens,” she mumbled. “If my irritating...co-commander is here.”

He gave a snort of laughter. “No, it’s still the *Orion*. You’re not rid of me that easily, Commander Blaze.”

He turned her hand over and pressed a kiss to her palm. Then he sat back to let Tentaclar move forward.

“It’s about time you decided to wake up, Commander,” chirped the doctor. “I was ready to jump start you with one of my handy little lifesaving devices.”

“A girl can’t even take...a little beauty rest...without you two pestering her,” Sirena retorted, but her voice trailed away and her eyes slipped shut again.

Tentaclar worked over her, fussing with various gauges and tubes on the machines monitoring her.

“Well, she’s lucid,” he said. “This is good. Very good. She’ll wake a little longer next time.”

Slyde sat, holding her hand, stroking the soft skin of her inner wrist with his thumb. He gazed bleakly at her sleeping face.

Yes, she would wake again. And then they would have to talk.

Sirena woke with a jerk, her breath catching in her throat. She lay there for a moment, her eyes darting wildly around her, searching for the slithering evil that had threatened to envelop her.

No, she was safe in the *Orion*’s infirmary, wrapped in warm, cozy blankets, floating in the comfort of an airbed. And beside her, sprawled in a chair, snoring, was the male she had just seen attacked by a nightmare apparition that had dragged him down and devoured him in blackness.

She closed her eyes against the hot tears that threatened, shuddering with a silent sob. Ah, she was as weak and fearful as a babe. This was not her, weeping in terror of losing a man. She was stronger than that.

She drew a deep breath, then another, forcing the tears back with the strength of her will. She was Sirena Blaze, commander of the elite forces of the Serpentine guard, the envy of many and servant of none. She did not weep for maudlin emotions.

She turned her head, though, just to look at him again and found his eyes open, gleaming like amber jewels in the soft light. He smiled drowsily, creases appearing in his cheeks.

“Hello, siren. Welcome back.”

He looked so delicious, part of her wanted to lie there and just drink him in, lap him up like a big fruit drink. She scowled at such syrupy sentiment.

“I’m thirsty.”

He rose, stretching, although she noticed he winced as he did so.

“I’ll get you a drink.”

He brought her a packaged gremel juice and tipped the straw into her mouth so she could drink. It was sweet and refreshing, nectar to her parched mouth.

She gazed up at him while she drank, her eyes widening as she remembered everything that had happened to bring her here.

“You,” she accused as soon as the straw left her mouth. “You ... are the dragon.”

“Yes,” he said calmly. His eyes met hers.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’re a shifter?”

“I wanted you to accept me as Slyde Stone, not because I’m a Dragolin.”

“A Dragolin?” She blinked at him. “Huh. I wondered...but Stone—that’s not your name.”

He shrugged. “My family uses the name of Stone in our public lives. We have business interests. It’s convenient to be simply Serpentine most of the time.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “If you’re a Dragolin, you’re wealthy,” she accused. “What are you doing working on a cruise ship?”

His cheeks reddened slightly. “Having an adventure. Searching for...what I want out of life.”

She snickered. “You certainly found adventure, didn’t you? Was it everything you’d hoped?”

He looked at her under his brows. “Parts of it have been.”

For the first time in years, she blushed. To cover it, she frowned at him.

“Those quarking serpents bit you too. Why are you not forced to lie here like a swaddling babe?”

He grinned, showing his teeth. “Because, unlike a mere slip of a female, there is a great deal of me. It requires more than a couple of snakes to take me down.”

Even though she knew she was being played, she went for it.

“Hah. Not my fault I can’t grow scales and breathe fire.”

He stuck the straw back in her mouth and, though she glared at him, she sucked thirstily.

“I don’t know,” he mused, his gaze caressing her face. “You may not have scales, but you can certainly ignite fire, siren.”

As weak as she was, desire curled through her at his intimate murmur.

“And don’t forget it, you big beast. I can take you down any time.”

He took the empty drink container away and brushed a tender kiss across her lips.

“You already have,” he whispered.

She was smiling as she slipped back into sleep.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

By the next day, resting had lost much of its allure. Sirena wanted out of the bed and out of the infirmary. Tentaclar disagreed, and Captain Craig backed up his physician.

When Slyde sided with them, she pouted. "I'm a grown woman, and I've been in charge of myself for a long time. I know when I'm well enough to get out of this bed."

"You are an impatient, headstrong warrior," Slyde told her calmly, "who thinks she can inveigle me into countering her physician and her captain's direct orders. Orders given, I might add, because they care about you."

She sighed. "Oh, play the guilt card," she said. "You don't fight fairly."

He chuckled and took her hand in his, playing with her fingers. "Anyone who fights fairly with you is destined to be ground under your lovely heel. Now be a good patient, and I will play holo-dice with you."

"Hah. A game for children."

"Nonsense. It is played in all the worst dives on Serpentia. The night we met, I watched a man at the bar wager his custom glider on a game."

"The fool." She shook her head as he took out the small flat board patterned with colored squares. The holo-display hummed to life, the dice spinning slowly above the board. "I can think of much more interesting wagers, none of which involve financial considerations."

He looked at her, his eyes narrowing. "I'm sure you can," he said. "But what if I win?"

"Oh, we both win, either way," she assured him.

He gestured at the game board. "Then let us begin."

They'd just begun their game when one of the techs stuck her head into Sirena's cubicle. Her face was pink with excitement. "Commander Blaze," she whispered. "It's the prince. May I tell him to come in?"

Sirena nodded, and the tech disappeared. Wordlessly, Slyde moved their game board to the side. He rose as Azuran swept in, filling the cubicle with a blaze of silver and gems. He wore state robes, ready for travel. Two of his men hovered outside the door.

"Commander Blaze, Dragolin," he greeted them. Amusement lurked in the look he gave Slyde. "Why am I not surprised to see you at her side?" he murmured.

Slyde bowed. "Azuran."

He didn't respond to the jest, and Azuran turned to Sirena, who smiled up at him. He smiled back and bowed as he handed her a small jeweled container.

"A small token of my boundless admiration and esteem," he said. "Not only was it my pleasure to meet you, you saved my life. For that I thank you."

"I am glad to have met you, also," she said. "And as for the rest, you are most welcome, Your Highness."

He bowed again. "I leave you now. If either of you are ever on Aquarius, you must visit me, yes?"

"Indeed," Sirena promised.

Slyde nodded, and the prince swept out.

Slyde sank into his chair again. He looked at Sirena. "Aren't you going to look at his gift?"

"Hmm? Oh, I suppose." She opened the little box, then blinked. An enormous jewel gleamed up at her, the blue-green of an Aquarian ocean swirling in its depths. She had heard of Aquarian sea-stone, but she had never thought to own one. She admired it for a moment, then closed the box, setting it aside. She would no doubt enjoy it far more when she felt better.

"I thought we were going to play holo-dice," she said.

Without a word, Slyde pulled the board back into place.

After an hour of playing, Sirena grabbed the game board and hurled it into the corner. Her head ached, her arm throbbed, and she had just lost eleven games out of twelve, a resounding defeat. She was sick of lying still, sick of inactivity, she mistrusted the gleam in her opponent's golden eyes and she wanted to smack the smug smile playing about his gorgeous mouth.

"All right," she said pettishly. "You've won. What do you want?"

"For you to take an analgesic," he said calmly. "You are hurting."

"I don't need—"

"Yes, you do," he interrupted her. As if on cue, the hatch hissed open and one of the med techs came in. Sirena glared at Slyde, but held still as the med tech pressed a small capsule into the crook of her elbow, and held it for a moment. She felt a small jolt as the analgesic entered her system and then the pain melted slowly away.

"Do you need anything else, Commander?" asked the tech.

"No," Sirena said. Then, as Slyde eyed her steadily, she added, "Thank you."

The tech glided out, and Sirena scowled at Slyde. "You haven't said what you wish from me for your winnings."

He watched her broodingly for a moment. "What would you ask, were you the winner?"

She grinned at him with deliberate naughtiness. "A night of you doing my bidding. I would work you very, very hard."

He picked up her hand and held it in his palm, studying the difference between her slender, capable hand and his own huge, sinewy one.

“Is that all you would wish for?” He looked at her, and she saw sadness in the golden depths of his eyes.

“That will do,” she said haughtily, lifting her chin. For some reason, she felt as if she’d failed a test of some sort. Why must he push and push? She felt deeply uneasy, nearly frightened, panic hissing softly in her ear. “What will you have from me?”

He hesitated, then closed his hand around hers, leaning over her. He cupped her face in his hand, his gaze burning into hers. She saw it again, that yearning that had so intrigued and called to her since the night they met. But now it was deeper.

“I want you to come with me,” he said. “Away from here, to Serpentina. To the mountains. I want to show you my home. It’s wild and beautiful, like you. You’ll love it there, as much as I do.”

Her heart began to race, the strange panic hissing louder, slithering into her very heart. She tugged her hand from his, clutching at the covers. “Why do you care what I think of your home? It’s just a place. We can as easily go to a resort somewhere.”

“Because I want you to see it. I want you to come and live there with me. Siren—we could be happy, you and I.”

She interrupted him, the words bursting out of her, panic hidden under derision. “Oh, Slyde, you are such a boy. You saved my life, and you’ve given me much pleasure. That doesn’t mean you own me.”

He flinched as if she had slapped him, his face paling. She steeled herself against the naked pain in his golden eyes and against the hot curl of shame in her gut as resignation settled on his sculpted face.

“No,” he said very quietly. “I don’t own you. No one ever will, will they, siren? You’ll never allow anyone close enough to own even a part of you. Even if they only want...your heart.”

He closed his eyes, as if he could no longer bear to look at her. Then, without another word, he rose and walked away.

She watched him disappear. She shook her head slightly, her lips parting to call after him. No, that wasn’t the way it was supposed to go. He hadn’t even argued with her or tried to carry her off and make love to her until she changed her mind.

He hadn’t offered to slay the coiling fear that deviled her.

She lay back in the bed, gazing sightlessly at the empty hatchway. She had been a fool to expect anything else. Everyone left. Everyone.

## Chapter Twenty-eight

Without giving himself time to think, Slyde strode down the passageway from the medical center and rode the elevator up to the command deck. He found Craig and Navos there, studying star charts.

“Commander,” the captain greeted him. His heavy, sandy brows shot together. “What is it?”

“Captain, Commander Navos,” Slyde said. “I regret to inform you that I am resigning my position as co-commander of the guard, effective immediately.”

Navos raised a dark, arching brow, but said nothing. Craig, however, shot out of his chair.

“Resigning?” he echoed. “Great God beyond, man. You’ve been through a harrowing experience, but surely a furlough—some R&R on your home planet will fix you up.”

Slyde looked him in the eye. “I’m sorry, Captain. This goes a little deeper than that. I...cannot continue to work onboard the *Orion*.”

“This is between you and Commander Blaze?” Navos put in quietly.

Slyde nodded shortly.

“Ah-hah,” Craig said, realization dawning on his face. “Well. Damn.”

“I am sorry to spring this on you so suddenly, Captain,” Slyde said. The words seemed to echo from a deep, howling fire growing inside him. “But I must get off of this ship.”

“Your cruiser can be readied in a docking bay in moments, Commander,” said Navos. “Until then, hold steady.”

Craig eyed him warily. “I trust you can make it off the *Orion* without shifting again?”

Slyde nodded with an effort, fighting the flames. “I can and will.”

Craig held out his hand. “Goodbye, then, and Godspeed.” The two men shook hands.

Navos rose and walked around the command table to him. He held out his hand and, as Slyde took it, a cool, soothing current flowed from the other man’s grasp, surrounding the flame of his brother Dragolin.

“Travel well,” Navos said, his dark blue eyes holding an ocean of calm as he looked into Slyde’s. “Time enough when you reach your home to let your other self free.”

Slyde nodded, embarrassed but also relieved by the Indigon’s calming. Shifting now would have been the final humiliation, even beyond admitting to these two men that he needed to get away from Sirena, couldn’t bear to be near her any longer, knowing that she placed no value on him other than a sexual partner. That he was just another callow youth who had fallen at the feet of the legendary siren.



“Goodbye, Commander,” Craig said. “Thank you again for what you’ve done for the *Orion*—for all of us. We’ll be in touch soon.”

Slyde nodded again, then turned and strode from the command deck.

In the *Orion*’s vehicle docking bay, he boarded his sleek cruiser, sliding into the pilot’s seat and taking the familiar controls with relief. Within moments, he had powered up and was gliding along the aisle to the release hatch.

“All set, Commander?” asked a voice. A small hovie with the Lodestar emblem on the side hovered alongside, a docking bay tech at the controls.

“All set.”

The tech saluted him and zipped away. The hatch doors sealed shut behind him and the outer doors slid open, nothing before him but limitless black space, spangled with stars.

“Launch when ready. Have a great flight, Commander.”

Not trusting his voice, and knowing he was on holo-vid display, Slyde nodded shortly and shoved the accelerator forward. The cruiser shot out into space. He banked away from the huge cruise ship, turning toward Serpentia. In seconds the *Orion* had vanished into the panoply of stars.

*Meanwhile, on Pangaea...*

Lly watched as Rra paced the bedroom of his luxurious penthouse on Pangaea. He wore only an open robe of lii leaf silk. The dark fabric billowed around his thin frame as he strode, his narrow face fixed in a scowl, green hair writhing about his head.

He had just received word that his latest saboteur aboard the *Orion* had been captured and his extremely expensive serpents destroyed. And although he’d first channeled his anger into sex, throwing her onto the bed and thrusting himself into her until he was spent, he’d soon worked himself into a rage all over again.

“The very stars are against me,” he ranted. “The perfect plan once again brought to ruin, through no fault of my own! I paid an astronomical amount for those quarking serpents—outfitted with cerebral goads, for Pan’s sake! And as for the services of my fellow Pangaeans—who would suspect so many of us were so *stupid*?”

Lly moved on the mounded silk pillows, wincing as her delicate body protested. Although a skilled lover who knew how to send her to the heights when he chose, Rra no longer chose to be concerned about her pleasure. Or her comfort, it seemed. He had used her like a paid sex companion, forcing himself on her without even allowing her to use unguents to ease his entrance in her unaroused body.

Her fear of him was rapidly being replaced with a new emotion—hatred.

“Let me bring you a drink,” she said, proud of the soft submissiveness of her tone.

She slipped on her own silk robe, the pale pink of a lili blossom, and hurried from the room. At the bar, she prepared his favorite drink, moonstone brandy tempered with gremel syrup. Looking in the mirror over the bar, she saw him still pacing the bedroom. She picked up a small, decorative box on the bar and pressed a latch. A tiny drawer, concealed in the ornate carvings, slid open. She pressed her finger lightly into the nearly invisible powder in the bottom of the shallow space, then used the finger to stir one of the glasses.

With another quick glance in the mirror, she closed the box and rinsed her hands carefully before carrying the drinks back into the bedroom. Handing Rra his glass, she went to the window that looked out over the jungle as she sipped her drink.

She could see his reflection as he paused long enough to drain his glass in one gulp. He threw the empty tumbler into a corner. She winced, but it thudded harmlessly on the carpet.

"I *am* PanRra Air," he shouted. "I am the best—everyone knows this. *Do they not?*"

She turned, a placating smile on her lips. "Yes, my love. You are the envy of all."

"Thass right," he sneered, his eyes falling over her. "C'mere an' show me you know it." His voice slurred.

"Of course." She set her drink on a low table and walked slowly toward him. Her head was held high, but her hair wrapped around her throat. He smiled cruelly. But then his smile slackened into bewilderment and he staggered and fell sideways onto the bed, out cold.

Lily hauled him up into the middle of the bed where she covered him with the silk coverlet. Picking up her glass again, she drained it in one draught and stared down at him. He would sleep the rest of the night and remember little in the morning, if the sleeping powder worked as it was supposed to. She had purchased it recently for an occasion such as this, from a dingy shop near the docks.

She really didn't want to have to start over with a new lover and a whole new set of problems. She'd created a cozy nest for herself, lined with jewels and silk, as well as currency stashed in her private credit account when she could manage it without him knowing. As his mistress, she moved in only the best circles on Pangaea and the surrounding planets, drove a luxury hover-car and traveled on the private PanRra Air cruiser.

She turned back to the window just as the lights of a huge spaceship lifted into the night sky and then zoomed off on its galactic voyage. It might be either a PanRra or a LodeStar ship—they both flew in and out of the nearby port.

The crew commanders of the *Orion* were no doubt celebrating another narrow escape, she thought bitterly. Damn them, they had all the luck. If they would only die, her life might once again be one of ease and comfort. But she feared that Logan Stark and his successful LodeStar Corporation weren't going to go away, and Rra's obsessive hatred of the man would never ease. Therefore her position here was untenable.

She sighed, running her fingers through her hair as she looked down at the man sprawled in the bed. She was either going to have to leave him or kill him.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

Slyde flew straight to his mountain lair, to be alone in the place that had always welcomed him, soothed him. The cave that had sheltered his grandfather and his father before him had been passed down to him as eldest son. From the outside, to the casual traveler, it was only one more slit in the rocks high above a narrow mountain valley.

Inside, it was a retreat. A huge hearth had been carved into the rear wall of the cave, and stairs into the soaring walls, leading to other rooms as well as passages back into the mountain itself. Rugs and furs covered the stone floors; massively hewn furniture cushioned with hummel leather invited rest and relaxation.

Each time Slyde walked into the cave, the troubles and cares of the outside world seemed to slip off his shoulders, fall away like empty husks in the wind whistling down from the peaks.

This time it didn't help. Navos' calming had carried him through his voyage to Serpentia and his landing on the small plateau near the cave. But as he strode into his retreat, the Dragolin in him reared his head and roared in rage, in agony.

He had returned alone. He had failed in his greatest quest—that of finding a mate, a female he loved who would cleave to him, bear his children and love him for life.

Like his father and grandfather before him, going all the way back to the dragon king who had first mated with a Serpentine woman and brought forth the line of Dragolins, half-man, half-dragon princes of the mountains, he must mate for life. And once he had done so, if she rejected him or died before him, he must live out the rest of his days mate-less, childless. For unlike other Serpentine males who cast their seed carelessly, he gave his heart and his seed to only one.

He'd fallen head over heels in love with Sirena the first instant he saw her. And even once he knew who and what she was, he wanted her so badly that he'd gambled it all on the chance she would find him the one male she couldn't do without. He'd gambled it all, and lost.

He turned, stumbled back out of the cave and stood, trembling on the brink of the cliff, the night wind whispering around him. Above him the stars twinkled soullessly.

*Alone...* It filled his mind, echoing in his ears, a silent scream echoing down the empty canyon. It stretched out before him like his life, full of cold empty shadows, a dark abyss.

*Alone... no mate, no children, no her—alone, alone, alone...*

*"No!"*

He threw himself off the edge, the wind tearing his voice away and sending it flying out into the chasm.

He felt himself shifting as he fell dangerously close to the stony ground at the bottom of the canyon, not caring if it was in time.

Tentaclar's analgesics kept Sirena from being in physical pain while her body fought off the last of the wraith venom. But she refused to ask for the kind of drugs that would dull the other pain she felt. When Slyde didn't return to her side, she didn't allow herself to ask for him. The big lug obviously needed time to brood. He'd calm down, and then they'd resume their partnership and she'd convince him they should continue their affair as well.

So she told herself and, for a while, she almost believed it. But in the long hours of the night, she finally admitted such rationalization wasn't going to work.

She couldn't shake her deep, wrenching guilt. She'd tempted Slyde Dragolin into suborning his personal code and, however quixotic she thought his morality, it was obviously tied to his sense of honor, to his Dragolin life.

Sirena Blaze, commander of the elite Serpentine guard was, for the first time in her life, ashamed of herself.

And she began to wonder if there was something in his talk of fidelity. She'd tired months ago of the endless string of males who passed through her life, spending a few hours or days in her bed. But it was what she knew, what she understood.

Slyde was the first lover she didn't wish to lose. It wasn't just that he was such a beautiful male creature, either. Or such a clearly alpha one, and no wonder when he was half dragon. She would love to see him shift again. Her memory of the breathtakingly fierce creature that had roared into being to kill the serpents and save her was distorted by pain and near-delirium.

She wanted the Dragolin Slyde back while she was well and whole, able to admire and enjoy. The thought of facing him in his Dragolin form filled her with delicious trepidation and excitement, especially when she wondered if he could take a woman in that form.

No, she didn't want to lose him. Any part of him.

She explored this thought with wonder. There were other important males in her life. Tentaclar was a good friend. Craig, she admired as a soldier and leader. IZARD she could always rely on. Her father was important, she supposed, although she rarely saw him. Yes, if any of them died or were lost to her she would mourn and their passing leave a hole in her life.

But Slyde... The thought of his turning away from her, refusing to adapt himself to her lifestyle, filled her with such a fearful chill that she pulled the covers up around her in a cocoon of warmth and safety.

She knew what it felt like to lose those she loved. The other losses she had suffered had caused her to hide her tender heart inside a nearly impenetrable armor, but the thought of losing Slyde seemed to promise that grief multiplied to the point that she saw herself gazing across the rest of her life as if it were a barren ice planet. If this was love, it was a vast and fearful thing that threatened to swallow her whole.

Chagrined by her maudlin imaginings, she sat up in the bed, rubbing her hands over her face.

"You are awake?" It was Tentaclar. He came into her cubicle and perched on the stool beside her bed, two of his eyes studying her while others checked the readings on the various medical apparatus. "You are troubled," he observed. "I cannot have my patients fretting. It delays healing."

"Do you think beings can change?" she asked him. "I mean...even if we don't quite believe we can?"

"Ah!" he chirped. "A philosophical question. It is amazing how the long hours of rest and healing after a traumatic event can lead to such wonderings."

She looked at him suspiciously, wondering if he was making fun of her, but he was rocking back on his stool, nodding emphatically.

"I most certainly do believe we can change," he said. "I am two hundred years old, my dear. I not only have seen such changes, I have experienced them. Sentient beings like ourselves can change, indeed must change, or we will not continue to grow. And that would be a sad thing, would it not?"

He winked at her. "Think back to when you were very young. What did you want then? Do you still want the same things now? Certainly not. And when you are old, will you still want the same things that you want now?"

"Some of them."

"Oh, of course. Safety, food, companionship, even love. We want those things all of our lives. But adventure, lust, the thrill of danger—those are passions for the young."

"I don't plan to give up on lust any time soon," she murmured.

He chuckled. "A beautiful creature like you? Of course not. But is it the same lust as it was a decade ago? Even a year ago? Or have your desires changed?"

She sighed deeply. "I'm afraid perhaps they have. But what if...this is only another passing fancy?"

He patted her hand. "You will never know, will you? Unless you trust yourself."

"But if I'm wrong," she whispered, "I'll hurt someone very deeply."

"And what if you do not try at all?" he asked. "You must ask yourself what you and the commander *may* lose if you try, and what both of you *will* lose if you do not try at all." She cast him a look, and he chuckled. "I did not say it would be easy."

And with that, he left her. It didn't occur to her until later that he'd known she was talking about Slyde.

## Chapter Thirty

A few hours later, Sirena stood in Slyde's quarters, staring about her at the empty room. He was gone. Nothing remained of him, even his scent obliterated by the cryogenic cleansing given each unit as soon as it was vacated.

Now that she'd actually admitted she wanted him, needed him, *now* he left her behind? How dare he treat her this way? Save her life, claim her as his mate with the most beautiful lovemaking she had ever experienced and then leave her?

And worse, what if...she could not find him? What if he didn't want her to find him? What if he had changed his mind?

She stood in the center of the room and began to shiver again, hollow and cold inside. Whirling, she stalked from the room. She slammed into her own stateroom and glared around her at her own belongings. Her hands were shaking with the need to hit something, break something, smash it against his thick head.

She grabbed the nearest object, a delicate shell spun of Serpentine fire-glass, and flung it against the bulkhead. It hit with a smash and fell to the soft carpet. The pieces drew together and began to reform, but she ignored it. Her holo-vid player hit the other wall with a solid thunk. Her favorite chunk of iridium ore, given to her by her father, smacked into the hatch and bounced onto the soft flooring.

"Sirena?" It was Craig's deep voice on her com-link.

She stopped with the Aquarian sea-stone in her hand. "What?"

"Ah—permission to enter."

She glared at the closed hatchway. He was outside her room.

"Very well."

He stuck his head through the hatch as it hissed open, such a look of caution on his tough, handsome countenance that she rolled her eyes.

"Do not worry, Captain, I am done hurling objects."

"Thank you," he said dryly. "At least I know you won't shift—unlike your co-commander."

She willed her face to impassivity, saying nothing. Her captain looked back at her for a moment, then sighed.

"I don't know what happened between you and Commander Stone," he said. "And it's none of my business. But your well-being is. Sirena, you've been through a very stressful event, one that nearly took your life. I want you to take a leave."

She glared at him. “I don’t need a leave. I am fine.”

Craig raised his heavy brows. “That was not a request, Commander. You’re to take at least two weeks—although a lunar month would be better. Go home to Serpentia for a while. Soak up the sun at one of the oases. When you are rested, we’ll talk.”

She bit back her anger. “Yes, sir.”

He ran his hand over his short silver-blond hair, looking harassed. “I know you’re angry. I’m sorry. Ah, Tessa would like to speak with you, when it’s convenient.”

She relaxed a little. She had nothing but affection for his young bride.

“Thank you, I’ll be glad to speak with her.”

Tessa tapped on Sirena’s door a short time later. She looked so wide-eyed and serious as she stood in Sirena’s doorway that Sirena had to smile.

“Come in, Mrs. Craig. I won’t eat you.”

Tessa came into the room, holding up a bottle and two goblets in one hand. “I bring gifts—cremarte.”

“Mm,” Sirena approved. The fiery liqueur was a favorite of Serpentine females. She took the glass Tessa held out to her, and took a drink. It slid down her throat, sweet and heady. “Now, what do you wish to say that requires mellowing me with cremarte?”

Tessa blushed and took a healthy drink. “Well, I’m probably going to overstep the bounds of our friendship, but I...I’m worried about you, Sirena.”

“I’m fine, Tessa. I’ll recover completely from the wraith bite. Tentaclar said so.”

Tessa looked at her. “I know. That’s ... not what I meant. I’m worried about *you*. About your happiness.”

Sirena blinked. “Oh.”

“Sirena, Steve told me about your talk with him, how you planted the idea I would...go on to be a legend like yourself if he didn’t convince me to be his alone.”

“I suppose I did meddle a bit.” She’d done a very good job too. The captain had also been something of a legend in his day. Sirena’s suggestion that other men like him would enjoy Tessa’s charms, once he’d initiated her into the pleasures of the flesh, had goaded him into admitting he wanted her for himself. They were now happily married.

“Yes, you did,” Tessa said. “And I’ll always be grateful to you. That’s why I’m speaking up now. Sirena—do you love Commander Stone?”

Sirena drained her glass and held it out to Tessa. “Oh, great serpents. If we are going to have a ‘girl talk’, I need another drink.”

“Me too.” Tessa filled both of their glasses to the brim.



They drank in silence for a moment, then Sirena sighed. “If you knew how many males have told me this would happen—that one day a lover would leave me begging him not to go.”

“As you have left so many,” Tessa finished.

Sirena nodded, not cheered by the thought, for some reason.

“Well, they were all damned lucky to have you,” Tessa said. When Sirena blinked at her in surprise, Tessa shrugged. “None of them could hold onto you, obviously. They didn’t deserve to keep you. Now, Commander Stone...” She raised her brows delicately.

Sirena shook her head. Heavy pressure ached behind her eyes. It was only her long training as a warrior that held back the tears. “He doesn’t deserve me,” she said. “He deserves much, much better.”

“Why?” Tessa asked gently.

Sirena drained her glass. “Because he’s so fine and true. He’s—he’s the legend of the Dragolins come to life. I should’ve known. I think part of me did know he’s a prince.”

She told Tessa haltingly about how she’d made up her mind that she wanted him, and pursued him, even after he told her he wanted only a woman who would be true to him.

“So I had him,” she whispered. “Because my pride wouldn’t let him walk away from me.”

Tessa looked puzzled. “Um, didn’t you simply desire him?”

“Oh, I desired him. More than I’ve ever wanted another man.”

Tessa nodded wisely. “That’s how I felt about Steven. He didn’t want to desire me, just like Slyde didn’t want to desire you. Do you think I was wrong to tempt Steven when he was vulnerable?”

“Of course not. The man is besotted with you.”

“Mm-hmm. As Slyde is with you.”

“So much so that he’s gone,” Sirena snapped. And then froze as she remembered why he had gone.

“Do you want him back?”

“Of course I want him back,” she hissed. “I want him more than my next breath. But don’t you understand—I *cannot trust myself to be true to him!*”

She didn’t know what she expected, but it was certainly not the response she got. Tessa Craig stared at her for a moment, and then rolled her eyes.

“Great God beyond,” she muttered into her drink. “Is that what all this is about?”

She sat up very straight, and held up one of her fingers.

“One,” she said. “How many offers have you received from other ships since you have been in command of the *Orion*?”

“Eighteen or twenty,” Sirena said, mystified.

“And did you consider any of them?”

“No, of course not. I pledged my loyalty to the *Orion*.”

Tessa held up another finger. “Two: How many of your lovers have been married men?”

“None! I would never interfere in a marriage.”

“Three: What percent of your wages do you send each and every pay period to fund the intergalactic charity hospital ship fund?”

“Um—ten percent.”

“Four: How many days of each of your shore leaves do you spend visiting the space force’s old soldiers’ home on Serpentia?”

“Two or three. How in the seven hells do you know all these things about me?” Sirena demanded uncomfortably.

Tessa smirked. “Everyone in the guard knows these things about you, Commander Blaze. Would you like me to go on? How about the scholarship you give each year to send a female cadet to the academy? Or—”

“That’s quite enough,” Sirena snapped, her cheeks burning.

“I’m sorry, but it had to be done,” Tessa said. “Sirena, I admire you more than any other woman alive—well, except perhaps Steven’s mother, who managed to keep him safe and loved and fed even in the roughest port city on Earth II. But you don’t seem to know yourself at all. Don’t dare to sit there and tell me you aren’t as fine a person as Slyde Stone, or Dragolin, or whoever he is.”

“Oh,” Sirena said faintly. She lifted her glass to take a drink, then found to her surprise it was empty. She held it out silently and Tessa refilled it. They drank in silence for a moment. Sirena felt a new emotion begin to unfurl inside her—hope.

“You know, I think he does deserve me,” she said. “The bastard. How dare he leave me behind. I’ll make his life a living hell.”

“But only until he’s learned his lesson,” Tessa said wisely.

“Oh, of course.”

The two women smiled at each other, in perfect agreement.

“I’ll leave tomorrow,” Sirena decided.

She took another drink, then set her glass down as it trembled in her hand. “If he still wants me.”

“Oh, please.” Tessa gave her a look. “It’s clear to everyone else on the *Orion* that all other females ceased to exist the moment he saw you.”

“Except Tawnee,” Sirena murmured.

“Well, she threw herself at him. Poor girl. She leaned forward. “Did you know the others were placing bets on how long it would take you to have your way with him?”

Sirena raised a brow. “Oh, really?”

Tessa nodded. “I lost. I bet one month, but it took two.”

Sirena laughed again, she couldn’t help it. “How much did you lose? I’ll repay you.”

The younger woman blushed again. “Um, you can’t. The bet was with my husband, and it didn’t involve currency.”

Sirena took another drink. Even the captain had been placing wagers on her and Slyde? Perhaps it *was* best if she got away for a time. She was accustomed to being very open about her sexual liaisons, but this...this was a bit too much, even for her. Although it was funny. She snickered into her drink.

“I’ll leave tomorrow,” she said again, this time with certainty.

“Oh, good. I have the coordinates of Commander Stone’s mountain home for you. That’s where he told Steven he was going.”

She rose, and Sirena rose with her. Then Tessa threw her arms around Sirena. Sirena hugged her back. It felt good.

“Call me when you get there,” Tessa ordered.

“I will,” Sirena assured her. “And Tessa, thank you.”

Tessa smiled mistily at her. “That’s what friends are for. Travel fast and safely.”

Captain Craig looked up from the holo-reader he was perusing when his com-link beeped. He had set it to alert him when his wife came out of Sirena’s quarters. He watched on the holo-vid as she came out into the passageway, then frowned as she wavered and reached out to steady herself on the wall.

“Tessa,” he said, already rising. “What’s wrong?”

She blinked and smiled owlishly, flapping her free hand. “Hi, honey. I’m fine. Just had a little girl talk with Sirena.”

He stared at her, his mouth open. Then he shut it with a snap and strode from their quarters to their private elevator. “Exactly how much have you had to drink, Tessa?”

She giggled, a musical sound. “Little more ’n I should’ve, Captain.”

“Wait there,” he ordered. “I’m coming to get you.”

“Oh, good.” She began to hum to herself.

He was grinning as he jogged down the passageway to where she leaned on the wall, admiring the light fixture above her.

He scooped her up in his arms and carried her back along the passageway.

“Well, you and Sirena must’ve had one hell of a chat,” he said dryly.

“I talked sense into her,” she informed him grandly. “I told ’er to go after ’im, and get ’im.” She leaned her head on his shoulder. “I want her to be as happy as we are, Steven.”

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head, grinning. “Just wait ’til we get to our quarters, Mrs. Craig. Then you can make me very happy.”

## Chapter Thirty-one

Izard threw up his hands in disgust. “My second day as guard commander, and already I must deal with this.”

He sat in one of the guard commander’s chairs on the command deck of the *Orion*. Craig sat across from him, and Mra and Ogg were in their customary chairs, as was Navos. The other commanders were not present.

Navos wore his customary cool expression, but Craig was fighting a grin as he listened to his old friend rant. Even Izard’s shock of green-gold hair seemed to be standing on end in indignation.

“It’s one thing to conduct a liaison,” he hissed, “but Raile and his little tourist have been caught in a number of inappropriate places. I’m ready to send him back to Serpentia.”

Craig cleared his throat. “Yes, getting caught *en flagrante* in the arboretum pool by the Carillonian tour group was a bit much. How will you, er, discipline him?”

Izard scowled. “That’s the worst of it. I can’t. He has just announced he’s disembarking with her on Frontiera. Going to go and meet her father and ask for her hand in marriage.”

He said the last with such patent disgust that Craig frankly grinned.

“Marriage can be quite pleasant,” he said mildly.

Izard blinked. “Ah. Didn’t mean any insult, Captain. Tessa being half Serpentine and all. But she is also half human. Serpentine—full-blooded ones—don’t take to marriage worth a quark.”

“I certainly hope you are wrong,” Mra said primly. “Since Commander Blaze and Commander Dragolin are to wed soon.”

“Oh, that’s different,” Izard shrugged. “He’s Dragolin. They have to mate for life. He’ll keep Sirena in line all right.”

Ogg shook his head in disgust. “Getting to be more romance around here than business. The *Orion* is like that ancient Earth I legend-ship I heard about in the archives from the Galactic Library. The...romance barge, or something, it was called. It sailed the waters of Earth I.”

“The Love Boat,” said Mra, smiling at him. “It was the Love Boat.”

Ogg stared at her, and she lifted her eyebrows at him. “I too enjoy ancient entertainments,” she said. “My beloved Pangaea hasn’t been settled long enough to have archives such as those on Earth I.”

Ogg nodded, a smile creasing his face. “My favorites are what they call the ‘westerns’. I love to watch them ride those horses and shoot ancient firearms. Good times.”

“I’ve never seen a ‘horse’,” she said with interest. “Have you?”

“Nah. Never have.”

“Well, I think we’re finished here,” Craig said, smiling as he rose. “Commander Navos, will you walk with me?”

The two men strolled out of the command deck and into the nerve center of the great ship, the main control deck where techs and crew monitored the many systems.

Panthar, the Tyger navigator, was visible in the navigation deck, monitoring the auto-nav systems and readying the ship to dock on Carillon. Which they would be doing safely, thanks to the extraordinary feats of their crew, especially their Serpentine guard commanders.

“What will you do on shore leave, Daron?” Craig asked as they watched Carillon loom ever closer. It looked like a fine day on the little planet.

“After I ascertain that our prisoner has been turned over to the space forces, I plan to take a fast flight back to Indigon,” Navos said. “I have been asked to take on an intern. A young man from the college on Indigo. What about you and Tessa?”

Craig smiled with quiet satisfaction. “We are going to a little resort in the mountains here. Lots of cool water, sunshine and relaxation.”

Navos nodded. “I too plan to relax. The seas of Indigo are very fine this time of year.”

Sirena realized as she entered the high mountain valley that she was under surveillance. The instrument panel of her small, sleek hovercraft had a few special accessories added on, courtesy of a former lover who worked for the InterGalactic Space Forces. However, no one tried to stop her as she glided along, following the clear river rushing down out of the steep valley.

The mountains were stark and bold, carved out of Serpentine goldstone that shimmered in the hot afternoon sun. Trees and plants clung to the edges of the river, their branches nodding in the spray as the clear, golden water tumbled downward.

She glided around a bend and caught her breath at the sheer beauty of the scene before her. She had reached the end of the valley. It culminated in a high, beautiful bowl, a kind of desert Shangri-La. An actual castle, carved of the same goldstone, scaled the side of the mountain, with verdant gardens and sparkling waterfalls cascading down the steep cliffs around it.

Great serpents, he really was a prince. Lived in a castle, with servants running about to do his slightest bidding. No doubt had princesses throwing themselves at him too. The great handsome beast.

She clutched the controls more tightly and blew out a breath, straightening her shoulders. She wore her most elegant travel attire, a sleek flight suit of cream and gold. A quick glance in her mirror reflected her usual look of serene confidence, but her insides were in a seething turmoil.

She was doing the right thing, wasn't she? Part of her, even now, wanted to twist the control levers and scream back out of the mountain valley, back to the emotional safety of her old life. The life she understood and could control.

No! She'd come this far and she would go on. Prince or not, he had offered her his heart, and she wanted it, and all the rest of him too. And if any princesses got in her way, she would kick their asses back to their own castle.

She landed the hovvie before the castle, and walked up the stone steps to the great doors. As she reached them, they swung slowly open, and a servant bowed politely from the aperture.

"I am Sirena Blaze. I'm here to see Commander Stone."

"Yes, madame. Please, come in."

She found herself ushered across the cool shaded tiles of a soaring hall into a large sunny room that looked out over a large terraced patio. It was furnished with the exquisite taste that meant currency had been no object.

The woman who glided into the room matched her surroundings. Although silver-haired, she was beautiful in a timeless way. Her eyes and smile looked strangely familiar. A chill raced up Sirena's spine as she realized she faced Slyde's mother.

"You are here to see my son?" The other woman's voice was calm, but her gaze ranged over Sirena, who suddenly felt like a young girl in the presence of an elder she wanted very much to impress.

"Yes, I am."

The golden eyes narrowed. "Yet you ask for him by the name of Stone."

"I know he's Dragolin," Sirena said. "I'm used to addressing him as my co-commander."

"Ah. So you are Sirena Blaze."

"He...has spoken of me?" Sirena asked, cursing inwardly as her voice trembled slightly.

Slyde's mother shook her head. "No. I've made it my business to know my son's whereabouts and his companions."

As her own mother had once done for her. Sirena nodded in acknowledgment, although her heart sank. Slyde hadn't even mentioned her to his mother?

"Is he here?" she asked. She knew that for once her heart was in her eyes.

"Perhaps. Why have you followed him?"

Sirena lifted her chin proudly, allowing none of her trepidation to show. "Because he invited me."

"Did he?" Slyde's mother eyed her with interest and then at last smiled. "Sit down, my dear. I'll go and find him. He is somewhere about."

Madera, crown princess of the Dragolins, didn't hurry from the library, but she did manage to order cool refreshment for their guest and send servants scurrying to find her son, all in the time it took her to cross the great hall.

Slyde was deep in the huge gardens. She followed the sound of shattering rock to find him. Wearing only a brief singlet, he was breaking up rocks with a huge mallet, to extend the garden paths. His powerful muscles gleamed in the sun.

His mother watched him for a moment, feeling a tender pang as she watched the force with which he struck each blow. Her son was not a pouter, but when he thought no one saw, he looked as if someone had stolen his favorite plaything. Hmm, perhaps someone had. The young woman waiting in her library was quite lovely, and a deeply sensual creature, if her looks were anything to judge by.

"Slyde," she called softly. "You have a guest."

Her son straightened, but shook his head.

"Mother, can you please—I'm in no mood for Princess Anresand," he groaned.

"Oh, it is not she. It is another lady."

When her son's eyes widened, she smiled at him and held out her hands.

"It is your Sirena," she said. She held on tightly to his hands when he would have rushed past her. "My dear, go carefully. I believe she is suffering as much as you have been—but you can win her if you speak tenderly and wisely."

"Oh, do you indeed?" Her son's eyes narrowed on the house above them, and his great jaw, so like his father's, clenched. "Thank you, Mother, for your advice," he said through his teeth.

She winced as he stomped up the hill toward the castle, but then she grinned as she gave the voice command to activate her com-link.

"Husband," she said. "I have good news. Our son has found a bride."

## Chapter Thirty-two

Sirena whirled as the heavy doors to the library crashed open. Slyde stood in the open doorway. Her heart leapt with a surge of joy and excitement. She took an impulsive step forward, but then stopped short. He was obviously in the grip of powerful emotion—but was it positive or negative? She suddenly felt as if she did not know him, here in this strange place that was his home.

He stalked into the room, his eyes slits of molten gold.

“Sirena,” he growled. “Why are you here?”

“Because you invited me to come,” she said, lifting her chin proudly. Oh, this was not the way it should go. She had pictured a tender reunion, not his expression hardening.

“So, you’ve come to torment me in person, as if haunting my dreams every night is not enough.”

Sirena, her pride instantly aroused, hissed back at him, “You left me.”

“I left you *free!*” he roared back. “Free to decide. Free to be as you have always been—a law unto yourself—to stay, or to follow me.”

“You left without a word!” She was practically shrieking now, and she didn’t care. Rage and hurt swept away all her vows to be sweet and reasonable, to explain to him that she had been uncertain, but now knew her heart. “You told me you loved me, invited me to come and live with you, and then you left! How was I to know where you were going?”

“Because you’ve a very intelligent brain in your head. I knew you’d use it—eventually! Enough of this talk. You understand only actions. I will give you action.”

With a roar, he shifted. Sirena stood transfixed, her breath frozen in her throat, her eyes wide with awe, as he disappeared in a cloud of smoke and shimmering heat.

Then a low growl issued from the smoke, and a huge golden menace prowled forth, his fiery golden eyes, so like Slyde’s and yet...not, fixed on her.

Against her will, Sirena stepped back. “You’re right,” she managed. “We—we must talk.”

“No more talk,” the Dragolin growled in that deep, chilling husk of a voice. “You’ve come to my mountains. Now, my proud warrior queen, now you’re mine.”

He was so beautiful, and yet so frightening. She knew logically he wouldn’t hurt her, but every protective instinct hissed at her to flee. As he reached out his huge, clawed hands to her, she, who never ran from any opponent, broke, bolting for the open doors out into the garden.



He caught her on the terrace steps, swept her up into his mighty arms and kept running with her, hurtling down across the terraced garden, up onto the ledge and out into midair.

She shrieked as they plummeted off the side of the cliff. The wind ripped it out of her mouth, along with her breath. The world hurtled by, a blur of hot wind and sky and flashing golden rock. She clung to him, trembling, waiting for the crash that would kill them both.

Then he beat his outstretched wings once and again, mighty efforts that slowed their fall. They swooped into a long, breathtaking glide out over the valley far below, and up, up on the drafts of the winds blowing around the mountain peaks.

Caught somewhere between terror and wonder, Sirena clung to her captor as he bore her to his lair.

They landed heavily on a high rock ledge. Panting with the rush of adrenaline and the effort of hanging on for dear life, Sirena sank to the ground as he set her down. She twisted away from him, scrambling shakily to her feet.

Taking a deep breath, fighting for composure, she pushed back her hair as she gazed out. They were high in the peaks, no leaf or blade of green visible, only the sun-seared vault of Serpentine sky overhead and the lofty peaks around them. Below, a deep chasm fell away. It was as beautiful and frightening as the Dragolin himself.

“Welcome to my cave,” he growled behind her. “I have waited a long time to see you here.”

She whirled to find him standing before a huge, studded door cut into the rock. He struck it with his mighty fist, and it swung slowly open, revealing a vast, shadowed cave.

He faced her, standing proudly, the merciless Serpentine sun displaying him in savage glory. Man and yet beast, all in one. *Dragolin*. And yet... She took a step closer to him, gazing into his golden eyes. Was that a hint of uncertainty she saw in their molten depths?

“So,” he said. “You see me where I live, as I am.”

She smiled up at him, reaching out with one tentative hand to lay it on his chest. It was leathery, so hot she nearly snatched her fingers away. But he was still Slyde. Her Slyde.

“You are magnificent. The most magnificent male I have ever seen.”

“Good,” he said, a deep rumble of approval in his chest. His eyes glinted with what might be relief, or humor. “Now, take off your clothing.”

She raised a haughty brow at him to conceal the way her body responded instantly to his command. Her nipples tightened and her pussy clenched at the thought of being taken by this magnificent beast.

“What? Just like that? You frightened the life out of me—jumping out into thin air that way! How was I to know you could fly?” She still could barely believe it. She eyed his wings warily. They flared out around his shoulders, then settled again.

“I am sorry for your fright, my own. You must never run from me again.”

He moved nearer, and the wind carried his scent to her, musky, smoky, potently male. She inhaled, taking it deep within her. She nearly moaned aloud as she saw that he was doing the same, his mighty chest expanding with his breath.

“I must have you now.”

“Here?” she raised her brows in delicate incredulity. “Is there no one about?”

He bared his fangs at her. “We’ll get to the bed...eventually. I can wait no longer to have you. The servants need not concern us.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. She would rather choke than let him see that she was aroused by his regal disdain for any onlookers.

“You are huge in this state. Be gentle, or I’ll make you sorry, dragon or not.” She fumbled with the fastening of her jacket, watching in fascination as his cock stirred and sprang up toward her, swollen and rigid with excitement. Oh, great serpents, he was indeed huge.

“I would never hurt you,” he growled. “But I may lay my hand on your ass if you don’t get those tights off.”

Her laugh was carried away on the wind. She had never been so aroused by undressing while a male watched. As she revealed her naked body to him and the sun, his mighty phallus quivered with eagerness and smoke drifted from his nostrils.

She reached up to hold him, but he flipped her around onto her hands and knees on the sun-baked rock. She had only time to brace her hands on the smooth ledge of rock, all that protected them from plummeting into the abyss, and he was on her, surrounding her with his heat and power.

He was as hot as a reactor, smooth and leathery. She fought to turn and face him, and he held her with his huge, clawed hands on her hips, his knees pushing hers apart so she was open and vulnerable to him.

“You great fang-serpent,” she hissed. “I want to hold you.”

“Be still,” he warned her. “I must have you this way the first time. It is tradition.”

She opened her mouth but lost all thought and words on a gasp of shock and arousal as she felt his hot breath on the folds of her sex.

His grip tightened, and she felt him tremble, a deep groan shuddering through him.

“Ah, siren, the scent of your pussy—how I’ve longed for it.”

His tongue delved between the lips of her labia, and she cried out, a high moan of shock and pleasure as he tasted and explored her. She arched her back, thrusting herself back into his caress.

“Oh, Slyde. I’ve longed for you so.”

His tongue flicked in and out, teasing her with a parody of what he would do with his cock. She writhed in his grasp, needing more. His tongue flicked over her clitoris, and she moaned again.

“Yes! Oh, please.”

“Oh, not yet, siren.” He rose over her and hauled her back into the curve of his great body, surrounding her with heat and power and intent. “You’ve tormented me—made me wait. I believe it’s your turn to please me.”

His cock slapped against the inside of her thighs, scalding the delicate skin.

“Open yourself to me,” he urged, his incredible tongue following his words into her ear. “Take me inside you, siren.”

Nearly mad with frustration, she reached between her thighs. He was fiery satin and stone in her hands. Part of her wanted to stroke and enjoy holding him, but she needed to get him inside her. She guided the broad head of his phallus into her labia, now swollen and wet.

“Now, Slyde!”

With a growl that rumbled up through him, he thrust carefully into her. It was frightening. It was wonderful. He was so hot, so huge—he was exactly what she’d been waiting for. He thrust again and again, forging into her tight channel, stretching her to the utmost, possessing her utterly.

When he was deep inside her, he let out a roar of triumph. As it echoed over the mountain tops, a tiny part of her mind hoped that perhaps all his servants were deaf—it was the middle of the day and they were on what was apparently his front doorstep, for serpent’s sake. Another part of her gloried in his possession of her—let the whole planet see him having her. She cried out in answer, a softer, feminine cry of surrender.

Then she forgot to think as he began to thrust inside her. He held her with one hand under her belly, the leathery pad of one huge finger on her clitoris, the other hand clamped on her hip. With each thrust, his armored chest rasped her back, his leathery heat slapped against her ass, and his huge phallus rasped sensitive tissues stretched to the utmost and slammed against the magical spot deep inside her.

It was glorious. She screamed with pleasure as her body convulsed around him. The wind carried her cry out across the peaks.

The Dragolin’s roar joined her cry as his seed filled her. Their orgasm seemed to go on and on, feeding off of each other. They writhed together, rocking to prolong the joy of this—their true mating.

She felt his great teeth close gently on her nape and gasped with shock. He growled softly, holding her there for a moment until she relaxed, accepting his possession, knowing he could snap her neck with one bite, but she could trust him utterly. Then he released her and laved the slight marks with his tongue. She crooned her pleasure.

## Chapter Thirty-three

After a time, Slyde drew carefully out of her, cradled her high in his arms and carried her into the cave. Sirena looked around her as they passed into the warm shadows. The door closed behind them, and she saw a quiet form whisk away around a corner.

She bit back a guilty smile—there *were* servants about, then. Hmm, that was going to take some getting used to. She was used to being in close combat with minimal clothing, and certainly naked around the other female guards, but she had never had sex while others could hear and see.

“Where are we going?” she asked, stroking his jaw. It was pure Slyde, still the same broad, muscular angle, even under the armored face plate that swept up around his ears, and surrounded his jeweled eyes.

“To the baths.” He carried her into a passageway, steam billowing out. “I’ll have you there next.”

Since she could feel his seed dripping down her inner thighs, she was pleased by the thought of a hot bath. His arrogance was another matter. “Oh, will you indeed?”

He walked down into the hot pool rimmed with smooth rocks, carrying her with him into the depths. Even when they were immersed in the hot water, he held her in the circle of his great arms. Now he tipped up her chin, holding her eyes with his own.

Sirena’s heart skipped at the implacable fire in those jeweled eyes. This was a new side of Slyde Dragolin she had not seen. Sheer feminine trepidation warred with excitement. Perhaps she had at last found the male she could not handle.

“I will have you, sweet siren,” he growled. “You’re my mate now.”

“I’m still myself,” she hissed up at him, refusing to give in to the urge to twine herself around him in supplication.

“Yes, and you’re mine.” He moved backward, towing her with him to an underwater ledge, and sank back on it. She found herself straddling him on her knees, the water foaming around her waist. His hot gaze dropped to her breasts, bare and glistening, her nipples tight spears of peach. “Mm, so lovely, siren.”

He stroked her nipples carefully with his claws, and then watched her as he pinched them between his thumbs and forefingers, twisting them a little. “And so sensitive. You enjoy this.”

She did. His leathery grip, so hot and powerful, sent sensation shooting from her nipples all through her, clear to her pussy, now bathed in the intense heat of the water. She moved on his massive thighs, enjoying the sensation of being astride such a dangerous creature. He palmed her breasts, squeezing and fondling them.

“I want to kiss you,” she told him, cupping his face in her hands.

“First, take me inside you. I need you again.”

She rose up on her knees and reached down to hold his cock steady as she began to sink down on him. She had to rock her hips to take him inside, and she was even more sensitized than before. He watched her face as she shivered with pleasure.

“I’m going to come so quickly this time,” she breathed. “Oh, Slyde, I love—”

Then she heard a movement behind her and froze, knowing they were clearly visible to whoever had entered the bath room.

“Just put the tray there and go,” the Dragolin said over her shoulder. He moved under her. “You were saying, siren?”

Sirena twisted in his arms and once again saw only a form whisking away through the swirling steam. A huge hover tray gleamed by the pool side, laden with a bottle of wine and other things.

Then he thrust farther up into her, and she moaned with pleasure, not caring if an entire phalanx of servants came and watched. She rose and sank onto him, loving the look of him, the feel of him. She was riding a dragon, a deadly beast, pleasuring him in his lair. She loved it.

“Tell me,” he urged. “Say the words, siren.”

“I love you,” she moaned. “Slyde! Oh, I love you.”

He growled and began to thrust harder, so that the water slapped in waves around them, splashing up out of the pool.

“Siren, you are mine. Mine!” He came with a roar that filled the bath chamber, magnified by the low ceiling and walls, rigid under her. With a scream of delight, she came again as well.

Sirena sat for a moment, panting. Then she dragged her eyes open and looked at him.

He lay back against the smooth rocks, his eyes slitted, chest heaving with his breaths.

“Slyde?”

“I’m going to...shift,” he managed.

She slid off of his cock and his lap in one graceful twist, watching him anxiously.

The steam seemed to coalesce around him, wrapping him in a shifting curtain. It cleared, and Slyde lay there. He gave a great, shuddering sigh and opened his eyes.

“You are well?” she asked, touching his arm.

He smiled slowly, a broad slash of white teeth. Then he laughed, a deep huh-huh of sound in his broad chest. His eyes gleamed.

“I am well, siren. Very well indeed.”

She splashed water at him. “I meant does it hurt you, to change?”

He shrugged. “Yes. It burns. But that’s part of being who I am.”

She sank into the water, letting it cover her head, and then emerged, sleeking her hair back with her hands. Slyde slid into the water with her, immersing himself as well. When he came up, he reached for her, and she floated into his arms, wrapping her arms about his neck, her legs about his waist, letting him support her.

Then she kissed him, as she had been wanting to since the moment she saw him. With her lips, her tongue and her heart and soul.

It was a very long kiss. When at last their lips parted, he held her tightly, his forehead against hers.

"Say it again," he murmured.

"I love you," she answered, her heart swelling with tenderness.

"And I love you, siren."

She laughed shakenly. "I believe you do. In a most uncivilized way. Such manners, Commander. Not what we on the *Orion* became accustomed to."

He reached over her shoulder. She heard the clink of glass and the gurgle of liquid. He handed her a delicate flute of blue wine.

"Your favorite wine," he said. "Civilized enough for you, princess?"

She choked on her mouthful of wine, staring at him over the glass. What had he just called her?

"Are you really...a prince?" she asked when she could speak.

He grinned at her, clinking his own glass against hers and settling back on the bench with her on his lap.

"I'm really a prince," he said. "And you'll be a princess. If you wish."

She sipped her wine thoughtfully. "Hmm. I wondered, when Azuran bowed to you. He knew, didn't he?" she asked, frowning at him. "Who else knew?"

He shrugged, his attention on her bare breasts. He cupped one in his free hand, and she felt his cock stir again.

"Pay attention," she said severely.

"Navos divined the truth," he said without looking up. "Do you know how long I waited to see these bared to me? And now I can look at them and touch them, whenever I like."

She swallowed the last of her wine and reached over his shoulder to set her empty glass down, kissing him while she was close.

"Yes, and I can do this whenever I like," she said, and nuzzled her face against his, kissing his ear and then moving down, nibbling a leisurely path along the powerful line of his throat, his trapezius, following the bulky muscles down to his broad shoulder and across his chest. She rubbed her breasts against him as she went and he groaned as though she were torturing him. "Because you're mine. All mine."

She licked his small, flat nipple, and his cock sprang up, slapping her on the belly.

"Already?" she asked, nipping him even as she took him lovingly in hand.

“Already, again, still...” he said, looking a little abashed. “Because of you.”

“Oh, Slyde.” She smiled at him tenderly. “You don’t know what a gift you give me with your honesty and passion. Never stop wanting me.”

He let out a hiss of pleasure as she rose and sank onto him. “Oh, I can promise you that, siren.”

She stilled, staring down at him. Then she started to laugh.

“What?”

She leaned forward, tipping her forehead against his. “I just thought of something. Our wager—you won. So now I must stay and make love with you exclusively.”

She sighed elaborately and tried to look resigned as she began to ride him, but mischief gleamed in her eyes. With a breathless laugh that was half groan of pleasure, he grasped her and picked her up with a great swish of the waters, swinging her around so she sat on the ledge, and he knelt between her thighs, the water lapping around his chest. With a flex of his powerful buttocks, he drove deep within her.

“Good,” he said. “I told you I would win.”

She smiled at him. “Yes, you did.”

Then they stopped talking, intent on how good it felt as he thrust harder and harder inside her.

Dressed in light robes of lii silk, they lay on cushioned chaise longue on a small balcony cut in the stone of the mountainside. Below them the mountains fell away in golden splendor. He kissed her tenderly, then gazed into her eyes for a long moment, as if he would peer into her very soul.

“It may take me time to trust this between us,” he said slowly. “I’ve wanted you so badly, for so long. I may be demanding for a time. I’ll want to know where you are, where you are going, who you are with.”

She snorted delicately. “For a time? You big beast—you’re going to be a jealous husband until we both totter on the edge of death.”

His cheeks reddened slightly, but then he shrugged. “Perhaps. For you, my crown jewel, will be the most sensual old woman ever. I’ll have to protect you from other males’ advances even then.”

She chuckled. “Perhaps, but I’ll never give in to them. And I will protect you from other females, also.”

He considered this, then lifted a brow. “You’ll let me watch you fight them off? And perhaps all of you could be naked?”

He gave a grunt of laughter as she pinched him. Capturing her hand, he raised it to his lips. His eyes laughed at her over their entwined hands.

“I used to wish you would laugh with me,” she told him. “I would see you smiling with Panthar, or Izard—but then you would scowl at me.”

“I was angry at you. You stole my heart the first moment I saw you—but you didn’t want it.”

“I think I loved you even then,” she said ruefully. “I was afraid to admit it, even to myself. Especially to myself.”

“Are you certain, siren? That you are willing to be with me alone?”

“Oh, yes. My love, I’ve been with other males. And never has one come anywhere close to comparing with you. Why would I ever again be tempted by lesser beings? Besides, you’re a prince,” she added wickedly.

“I’m a Dragolin,” he said arrogantly. “And if you ever even look at another male, I’ll remind you of that.”

“Mmm, I have such a short memory. Perhaps you should remind me now.”

“Perhaps I should.”



## About the Author

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Look for these titles by Cathryn Cade

*Now Available:*

Her Commander  
Tyger, Tyger Burning Bright

*She just wanted to forget. What she gets is her destiny.*

## Emergence

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Life as Jaime Dalton knows it is almost over. Come morning, she—the forbidden offspring of a human and a gryphon—will be owned body and soul by the First Dragon, ruler of the mythoi. He will control everything. What she wears, what she eats, when she sleeps. And with whom.

Determined to have a final fling, she seeks out the comfort of a stranger's arms. Except he turns out to be "stranger" than he first appears.

Kaden Rhodes knows what it's like to be owned. Before he follows his orders to escort Jaime to the same fate, he can't resist joining her in one last act of defiance. Before the night is over, though, he finds she has inched her way under his skin.

Their connection is hot, fast, completely irresistible...and they're playing with fire. Discovery will render them useless to the First Dragon. And those marked useless end up dead.

*Warning: This title contains wild sex, dark violence and irascible dragons who shift into brooding men. Oh, and the utter perversion of mythology.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Emergence:*

The soft click of the hotel door as it closed skittered nervous energy down my spine.

Kaden leaned against the thick, dark wood, a speculative smile cutting his mouth. Soft lamplight carved gold over his smooth features, and his amber eyes gleamed. His shadow pulsed hot and heavy in the short corridor leading to the sitting room, and I backed away from him. My heels caught in the thick, pale carpet, and I kicked the bloody shoes free. My toes thanked me. Again.

"Changing your mind?"

The walk from the club had been quick, silent. He'd gripped my hand and the strength, the promise of his touch had kept the fire sparking under my veins. In the wide, steel-lined lift, our reflections had bounced back at us, and I'd wanted to push him up against the cold metal and find his mouth...but the red light of security cameras glared balefully from the lift's ceiling. And now I stood on the edge of the long sitting room and my nerve failed me.

"No, not changing my mind." He pushed himself away from the door, and my feet, of their own volition, backed farther into the room. Kaden was beautiful, powerful. I wanted him, I did, but...it, he, the moment, made everything real. My gut clenched, the sudden pain making me bite at my lip. I would sleep with Kaden and then the First Dragon's envoy would escort me to his superior. At which point my life would be over. The man in front of me was my last dose of freedom. "I only have a short time," I said, watching Kaden move towards me with liquid grace. "This time I have..."

“It’s running too fast.” His head tilted, and the smile lurking on his mouth forced my heart to beat hard. He stood close again. His fingers brushed my jaw, and I sucked in a quick breath. Something about Kaden, the man, his shadow stealing over mine, made my body ache. “This room was another promise to yourself?”

“Yes.”

He glanced behind me, no doubt seeing the mess of my clothes thrown over the corner couch and the papers spread out over one end of the long dining table. “How long have you been here?”

“Two nights.” I willed myself to step towards him, to press my body against his lean hardness. My palm skirted over his chest, teasing, playing with the smooth material of his shirt. “I wanted luxury before...”

“What?” Kaden threaded his fingers through my loose hair and turned my face up to his. His lips brushed mine, soft, tender, and it stopped my breath. “What’s taking you away?”

I couldn’t answer, didn’t want to. I only wanted more of his mouth, for him to deepen the kiss into something molten, wild, and for me to forget for the few hours I had left. I bit at his lip, and he growled, a low, primitive sound, and it pushed me hard against him.

Kaden murmured something. His shadow wrapped around me in a dark, enveloping wave and I arched into him. Whatever he was, whatever ancient mythoi rode in his blood, it sank into my core. I couldn’t wait. My mouth took his, my tongue, teeth, lips battling, wanting more of him.

Kaden groaned, his hands shifting until he could snake his arms across my back. He tugged at my skirt, yanking it up my thigh. A hot palm and fingers caressed my backside. He squeezed, urging me up, and I obeyed, lifting my legs. With an all too easy strength he held me, and I wrapped my thighs around his waist, my arms linking behind his head. Our shadows merged, shifted, unsure at the closeness, at the need burning up through us, but wanting it, wanting it as much as we did. And that wasn’t right. Mythoi didn’t cross species—

“Who are you?” The question escaped after I dragged needed air into my lungs. My hand framed the hardness of his smooth jaw. His eyes had darkened and something sparked in their depths, a fire than made me want to strip him and fuck him. “*What* are you?”

“What you need.”

A chair clattered to the floor behind me, and my backside hit the cool mahogany table. “That’s not an answer.”

He smiled, brief, hard, and need for him tightened low in my belly. “Do you want to say why you want me here? Why you want to fuck a stranger?” His smile grew, and something must’ve reflected in my eyes as he said, “I thought not.” He brushed tangled hair back from my forehead, and the unexpected tenderness hurt my chest. I breathed past it. “So, till the morning, we’ll both have our secrets. Agreed?”

My throat ached and I couldn’t speak. I nodded instead.

“Good.”

He tugged at my clinging top, pulling it over my head. Cool air brushed my bare skin. The top slid from his fingers, dropped in a golden puddle on the carpet, and Kaden let out a slow breath. My nipples hardened under his intense gaze, and everything in me ached for his warm lips, his tongue to find my skin and lick—

“Here on the table?” he asked.

“You want to eat instead?”

The smile he turned on me, wicked, possessive, squeezed my heart. “Later. I promise.” He leaned over me, his lips close to mine. “Right now, I want you.”

I resisted the urge to cover his mouth with mine. If *I* was getting naked, then I wanted to run my fingers and tongue over the smooth muscles hinted at under his shirt. “Then you have too many clothes.”

His fingers moved and the shirt joined mine on the floor. My own hands, nervous, eager, reached for him, and Kaden shivered under the first touch of my fingertips over the rippled hardness of his stomach. His breath warmed my cheek. “Better?”

“Almost.”

“You want more?”

“I want all of you.”

Kaden grinned. “I can do that.” His smile turned evil, and he traced a languid, shuddering path over my ribs to the thin-banded edge of my skirt. He made quick work of the zip. I wriggled and the skirt and my underwear joined the growing pile on the floor. “Though you first.”

“So it seems.” His hands were already moving to his trousers, and my fingers covered his, joining him in pushing the heavy fabric away from his hot, smooth skin. I traced my fingers along his cock, my thumb teasing over the sensitive head. Kaden hissed. “Ready?”

He laughed and gripped my hips. “Isn’t that obvious?”

My thighs held him, my calves sliding over the hard, hot muscle of his legs, tugging him closer. This first time would be fast, fierce, and my blood pounded at the thought. I guided him, teasing his cock over my wet flesh, little sparks of need firing under my skin as I made both of us ache for more.

“Jaime…”

My name was a soft growl, and his shadow thickened around him, encasing us, vast wings cocooning my own shadow, melting over it. The feeling was…bliss, deepening at the first push of his hips, of the slow, *slow* tease of him into my body.

Kaden’s ragged breaths rushed warmth over my mouth, and his darkened eyes held me. “We need to fuck you. Right now. Hard.”

“We?”

“My...” He sucked in a breath, and I had to have imagined his pause, before he rolled his hips. The sensation of him hard and deep within my body rioted in my flesh and I groaned. “My shadow. It wants yours.”

I blinked. The idea seemed forbidden...and delicious. “We...” He distracted me with a palm sliding up my spine, pressing me hard to his chest. His mouth brushed my jaw, my chin. He nibbled at my bottom lip, and the urge to deepen the kiss, to find a fast and furious release, warred with my need to question him. The question won. “How? I’ve never...”

“I *know*.” The satisfaction thickening his voice pushed me against him. He groaned, and his teeth sank, hard, sharp. The sudden pleasure-pain forced me to grab at him, pull him tight against my body. “Let us share both of you.”

*How do you choose between freedom and love?*

## Her Master's Pleasure

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When Jalil first wakes up after her ship crashes, she thinks she's having some kind of head injury-induced hallucination. She's a starship pilot, not a sex slave, but she finds herself tied naked to a rack and examined by her new master. It doesn't matter that Zand of Teymour, is hot enough to melt an ice queen. The last place she belongs is in a harem.

Zand is fascinated by the first outsider to stumble upon his planet in thousands of years. His people hide themselves from the rest of the galaxy by choice—therefore, Jalil can never be allowed to leave. But Jalil refuses to submit, and if he can't find a way to tame her, life on Teymour will be its own kind of torture.

Soon Jalil learns that Teymour possesses priceless, First-Civilization technology long thought lost. If she can distract Zand with her body and escape back to the Federation with what she knows, she'll be rich. But with each passing night in her master's embrace, she discovers the dark pleasures of passion.

In the end, gaining her freedom may cost her only chance for love.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Her Master's Pleasure:*

Straining with all her senses to compensate for the engulfing blackness, Jalil heard her retreating footsteps and the sound of a door opening and shutting.

Alarmed, she pulled against her cuffs. They refused to give. Warning pains shot down her arms and up her legs. A gust of wind blew in through the open doors, lifting the silky fabric and exposing her even more. Not that the gown hid a damn thing. She might as well be hanging naked.

An almost inaudible click told her the door had opened again. Jalil's throat went dry. Her heart began to pound. Despite her blindfold, she felt a powerful presence in the room. Zand?

Footsteps crossed the room. Only one person, as far as she could tell.

"You are lovely. I thought you would be once you were cleaned up." The deep male baritone rumbled somewhere near her ear. With a start, she realized Zand had halted next to the rack. Damn, she could picture him standing there and staring at her.

The thought made her traitorous nipples grow harder. She squirmed in her cuffs and swore at him, but only a muffled grunt emerged from the gag.

"You're a woman of spirit, I see." Zand's breath tickled her ear. He possessed a cultured voice and something warm and playful in his tone eased a little of her fear. At least he didn't sound like an insane despot.

Without warning, a finger touched her chin. She jerked back. Zand chuckled and pressed his hand into the soft flesh of her breast. His palm brushed over her taut nipple. A zing of electricity rushed down her nerve endings to curl her toes. Outraged and mortified, she writhed in her constraints.

“Relax, my beauty. This is the seraglio. There is no escape. You’ll submit to whatever I desire.”

Footsteps circled the rack. Jalil imagined him staring at her body through the flimsy silk, at her back, at her buttocks.

As if he’d read her mind, Zand cupped the bottom of her butt with his strong hands. Jalil gave a muffled cry of surprise. She stiffened with anger and glared into the blackness.

His hands moved upward, kneading her ass, caressing her skin through the silky garment. She tried to hold onto her anger, but his hands were deft and skilled, massaging her buttocks with a firm but pleasing touch, creating little rivulets of pleasure that prickled over her skin and roused a surprising heat deep in her core.

His fingers slid into the crack of her butt cheeks, spreading them. This time she stayed motionless, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a reaction.

He chuckled again and encircled her waist with both hands, his fingers playing with her navel.

She cursed her ticklish skin, cursed the heat that uncoiled in her belly, cursed the wiggle she could not control. For a moment her butt pressed against him. Something long and hard dug into her rear. He had an erection.

She froze, not daring to breathe. He laughed and kissed the back of her neck. His lips were warm and soft and full. They lingered a long moment on her skin, tasting her. He lifted her hair and swept his tongue along her hairline.

“Yes, I like you, and I’ll have you soon, very soon.”

She yelled a protest through the gag, but the only sound that came out was another helpless grunt. Laughing, he lightly slapped both her ass cheeks.

Blood pounded in her temples, but she could still hear him walking around her again. He stopped and faced her. Her breasts rose and fell with her quickened breathing. With maddening deliberation, he continued her sensual torture.

His hands touched her thighs where the hem of the gown fell. He pushed the silk upward, and a cool breeze teased the suddenly smoldering flesh between her legs.

“The pathway to your womanly core is marked with gold.” She heard surprise and delight in his voice. His hand stroked the soft patch of hair between her thighs. The tips of his fingers brushed over the place where her clitoris lay hidden beneath the folds of her pussy. It hardened, swelling upward, and she squirmed in mortification.



“Ah, what’s this? You like my touch.” His finger circled the thickening flesh, rubbing it. The pressure made her pussy throb with need. Little bursts of pleasure shot through her body. Her inner flesh grew damp and tightened with anguished need.

Jalil stiffened, her breath caught in her throat. She stared into the darkness behind the blindfold. What next? Was he going to finger-fuck her, rape her before she’d even so much as seen his face?

Instead, the man gave a low growl of approval and withdrew his touch from her intimate flesh. “You are indeed a prize, one to be savored, not rushed. I hear your eyes are the color of the sea and the sky. I want to see them, and I want to hear your voice. Sepella warns me, though, that you’ve not yet learned obedience. So I tell you this: If you act against me, you’ll be punished, and the punishment will be severe. Do you believe me?”

Jalil pressed her lips together. She wanted nothing more than to spit in his face the moment he removed the gag. But that wouldn’t get her back to the *Gypsy*. Forcing down her anger, she nodded.

“Good. Act with wisdom and I’ll treat you with respect.” He sounded amused. “Attempt to revolt and you’ll find yourself back on this rack, bound, gagged and blindfolded. And I won’t be so gentle a second time.”

His fingers plucked at the knot behind her head, and the gag loosened. He pulled it out of her mouth. Breathing hard, she bit back a curse. She hated yielding to him, even in the smallest thing, but she needed to regain some measure of freedom so she could figure out how to escape from this tyrant.

When she’d stayed silent a few moments, he untied her blindfold and it fell away. Jalil blinked and saw the handsome man who had leaned over her in the wreck. He was standing a few feet away from her, regarding her with calm possessiveness.

“You find the idea of revolt by a woman laughable?” She put all the scorn she could muster into her voice. Lifting her head, she swept a haughty glance over his body. Midnight black hair hung to his shoulders in the many braids she’d remembered. They framed a strong face with a long nose and full, sensual mouth. As before, his eyes reminded her of the dark, velvety depths of space pulsing with the distant sparkle of stars.

He was tall, half a head taller than her, with a broad chest and wide shoulders. He was no weakling, this Lord of Katarsh. Unlike her, he wore clothes, a long thick purple robe belted in scarlet at the waist. It fell to the floor, hiding his legs. His muscled arms were bare, though, and adorned with golden bands.

To her surprise, her pussy tightened and a series of little shivers darted up her spine. This man was smokin’ hot. She’d like to tie him down on a bed and have her way with him. The idea that he might do that very thing to her was making her insides go molten.

He took a step back and stood with his hands on his hips, regarding her. “Despite what you may think, Teymour is not a savage world. But I imagine our culture is unique.”

Jalil struggled to regain her equilibrium. His nearness was overwhelming. Somehow he managed to dominate the space around him. She was finding it difficult to breathe. She had to fight back. With an effort, she found her voice. “It is, although not in a good way. Where I come from, a man isn’t allowed to touch a woman without her consent.”

He lifted his brows. “Forgive my ignorance, but we’ve been cut off from other worlds since the First Civilization fell. Where do you come from?”

“It’s called the Federation. It rose from the ashes of the First Civilization.”

“But it’s just as sexually prudish, it seems.”

“If you call simple decency prudish.”

Zand laughed. “You think I have sex with women without their consent? Each of the women in my seraglio is chosen—and thrilled to be here.”

“Like you chose me? Against my will?”

His expression grew serious. “You would like the alternative less. If I hadn’t brought you here, the Lord Emperor would have claimed you. I assure you, he cares nothing for the niceties.”

“He’s worse than you?”

“Far worse. The sexual rules are different here on Teymour, but I enjoy conducting my sexual games with mutual consent. That is a tradition on our world. In certain hands, though, our games of submission and dominance can turn darker.”

He stopped, but shadows moved in the depths of his eyes. Jalil shuddered, imagining what he meant. Was she lucky after all? Frick! The thought shocked her. Her wrists and ankles already ached from the cuffs holding her in place. The man was trying to brainwash her.

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