

ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



^ A TOUCH OF LILLY
NINA PIERCE

A Touch of Lilly

Nina Pierce

Ex-Chicago detective Lilly D'Angelo is part of a secret alien race living on Earth. With a gentle caress she can elevate the sexual energy of any male. Apprehending criminals lost in an erotic fugue is almost too easy – until she uses her gift on the wrong alien. Kidnapped and shipped into deep space, Lilly barely escapes with her life. Now she travels the galaxy alone, working as a bounty hunter and hoping to find a soul mate unaffected by her touch.

Agent Dallas Sawyer works for QAL—deep space's version of the FBI. After a disastrous mission that left a president murdered, his team member executed and Dallas near death, he's determined to take down the assassin targeting government officials. When a sexy human female gets between him and his goal, Dallas and his alien partner find themselves on the receiving end of some wild sex and a proposition that may very well blow up in their faces.

Because in deep space...true love can happen with just a touch.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

A Touch of Lilly

ISBN 9781419928840

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Edited by Mary Moran

Cover art by Reese Dante

Electronic book publication June 2010

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A TOUCH OF LILLY

Nina Pierce

Dedication

To Alan, my husband and soul mate, whose belief in my dreams keeps me going even when I can't remember how important dreams can be. I love you with all my heart.

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Dumpster: Dempster Brothers, Inc. Corporation

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Chapter One

Lilly D'Angelo could have been walking into any of the seedier establishments lining Forty-fifth and Wester on Chicago's south side. Except for the clientele, the tavern's owner had managed to replicate nearly every detail right down to the blue haze and the soft crooning of a jazz band on the corner stage. The acrid stench and gruff hum of a Friday night crowd tripped Lilly down memory lane—a place she had no desire to travel at the moment.

Lilly pushed the sour thoughts of home out of her mind and focused her energy on the patrons at the bar. Morphing her features into her sexiest vixen pout, she moved gracefully toward the long bar on the other side of the room. Her voluptuous breasts, spilling temptingly from her silk blouse, led the way. The eyes watching her ass sashay around the battered tables were clustered on various life forms—none of them human.

Yeah, definitely *not* Chicago. Shit, this wasn't even Earth for chrissake.

"Regent's ale, straight up, hold the brenic." She spoke English, hoping the two-headed Xerick behind the bar had a cochlear translator in one of those eight holes that passed for ears. Satisfied when one head nodded, she settled on a stool, making sure her fur jacket and blouse parted enough to offer a seductive view of her cleavage. Lilly shifted just enough to let the black leather skirt ride up her thigh and expose a little more silky real estate. Surreptitiously checking her image in the mirrored glass behind the liquor bottles, she was pleased she looked every bit the part. She wasn't trying to attract anyone in particular, perhaps something on the less offensive side that could offer her a bit of entertainment to help fritter away the next couple of hours.

Lilly wasn't a xenophobic bigot by any stretch of the imagination. But six months in deep space, working these kinds of joints, wasn't really long enough to become accustomed to the scenery. The Nebulae Galaxy's spaceports overflowed with aliens of all sizes and genders. Only that wasn't really a fair term here in deep space.

Alien inferred the life forms didn't belong. On the contrary, it was humans who were invading *their* territory. The treaties of 2253, signed well over forty years ago, had guaranteed the safe travel of humans in deep space. After the snafu of '34, which saw the first major space disaster since light travel had been discovered, humans had insisted on protection for their species. They'd formed some bullshit board of security, guaranteeing humans could run roughshod over the universe like everywhere else. Though most people referred to them as the QAL, Lilly nicknamed them the alphabet mafia. At one point she'd actually considered working for them until they'd discovered who she was—or more specifically *what* she was. It didn't matter. They could all go fuck themselves if they didn't appreciate her *gifts*. Lilly had found a way to use her talents and still bring down the bad guys.

Of course in deep space, *bad* was a relative term.

There was the kind of bad that got a person lost on the ice caps of Dallas Eight without a backup plan. Or the bad that forced someone to stow away in the engine room of a Drikspa alien tanker bound for unknown destinations, praying not to get caught. Or the bad that got a human female imprisoned as a sex slave on the mining colonies of Krystallos Three, hidden from even the long arm of the QAL. Lilly shivered at that one. Even *her* talents wouldn't free her from that kind of torture.

She was just happy to be here on Garalon Five where bad meant nothing more than crossing paths with every brand of space pirate, ex-con or fugitive looking for a new start. As one of the more recent colonizations in the Nebulae Galaxy, the G-5 government turned their collective back on past offenses on other planets and allowed anyone to start a legitimate business. It's what had brought her here.

Well, that and the incident on Reigis Alpha. That spaceport had netted her a broken arm, three bruised ribs, a close encounter with a Treljon laser, her first big payoff and one hell of a lesson. She flexed her fingers around the foaming stein the bartender dropped in front of her and sipped thoughtfully. Thank goodness for modern medicine. They'd fixed her up in less than two weeks and sent her on her way.

With a couple of hours to kill and no one in the bar that caught her attention, Lilly savored a long swallow of the cool libation and turned her attention to the televid on the wall. Nearly everyone in the tavern ignored the news feed of the newly elected ambassador Antonio Tervoss. Few species believed his campaign promises for a safer galaxy would change anything in deep space. Aliens definitely preferred their deals on the shady underside. They'd been living that way for too many centuries to see change as being advantageous. But it had been Tervoss' strong opposition to illegal trade practices that had finally tipped the scales for enough voters, including Lilly, to get the man where he was today.

In a little over a week, Antonio Tervoss would be inaugurated as the first human leader of the Nebulae Galaxy. Overseeing eighteen planets, seven presidents and countless government officials was nothing compared to regulating the forty-seven luna crystal mines on Krystallos Three. The mines not only supplied both energy and clean water to all ninety-eight billion life forms scattered throughout the galaxy, they also supported the largest underground sex slave trade in the universe. No ambassador had attempted to clean up that caustic nightmare.

"Yeah, good luck with that task, buddy!" Lilly lifted her stein in mock salute to the man.

"Happy you make with human leader?"

Lilly wanted to laugh at the ridiculous interpretation the translator had made of the Ickbata's come-on line clicking and popping in her ear. In her relaxed state, her energy had filled the air. Just as well, she could use a little distraction and the televid certainly wasn't providing it.

She smiled over at the Ickbata's hopeful expression as he slithered onto the stool beside her. They weren't bad little aliens if one didn't mind the smell of leather. "*Kal auct ral tsk, pa?*" *Buy me a drink, stranger?* It was a question she could ask in the twelve most common languages.

"Several. If that's your wish," the Ickbata clicked, moving closer. One of his scaly appendages snaked along her thigh-high boot. "If your body was sexy, press me against it?" It was the contact males craved when they were near her. The energy was power and power meant control.

Lazily, Lilly trailed a finger down his arm. The flesh rippled and she watched with satisfaction as the Ickbata's jade eyes glazed in a sexual fog.

He leaned in close, the soft warmth of his snout brushing her cheek. "Two cocks for me. Happiness for you," he whispered.

She'd heard about their sexual prowess and figured she had just enough time to find out if the rumors were true before she had to settle down to some serious work. "And I'm creaming my panties just thinking about them." Lilly's hand wrapped around his and she let the energy flow. The skin below his deep navel swelled.

The Ickbata's gaze dropped to their joined hands, skittered to her plentiful cleavage before settling on her mouth. He inhaled deeply, absorbing her presence with all his senses. Lilly smiled with lascivious satisfaction. Males were so easily controlled when she held their libido captive.

"What do you say about that drink?" From the expanding bulge of skin, Lilly knew he couldn't wait that long. She pulled her hand away. No sense embarrassing the guy in public.

"Out we should go?" The first appendage moved higher to caress her inner thigh while another snaked around her back to roll over her breast. "Just a faster copulation." His rough tongue darted out to rasp along the shell of her ear. "Extra credits for two *tsk tsk nok*."

She had no idea what that meant, but the way the words rolled over his tongue sparked her salacious curiosity. "There's an alley just —"

"Hey, hon."

The brawny arms hauling her from the Ickbata's grasp took her by surprise. But that reaction was nothing compared to the soft crush of two very human, very male lips pressing urgently against hers. Lilly opened her mouth to protest, but her cry was silenced by a velvet tongue sweeping in to tangle with hers. The flavor of mint and honey burst in her mouth and spread warmly down her core. She didn't want to melt against the hard wall of muscle jammed against her breasts, but the heat of human contact overwhelmed all her senses and her knees went soft. Lilly couldn't remember the last time a man had held her, let alone devoured her with the ravenous hunger this human seemed to have.

The man's mouth broke from hers and she nearly groaned at the loss.

"She's waiting on me, buddy. Sorry if you thought she was available."

Lilly ripped her gaze from the cinnamon eyes staring past her at the Ickbata. With all contact broken, the alien had once again regained control over his senses and no doubt regretted the very public sexual display. "*Ghec tung dksk.*"

Though the Ickbata's words didn't translate, the spittle flying with his indignation required no interpretation. Wrapping his appendages tightly around the swollen flesh of his abdomen, the Ickbata deflated in size and slithered away to the nearest table.

The human released her and Lilly fell back onto the stool.

"No thanks necessary." He shrugged absently and signaled the bartender. "Shot of gall's blood and a Regent's ale."

Even through the haze of lust still wrapped around her, Lilly understood this man believed she couldn't take care of herself. "What?"

He smiled at her, a rogue dimple framing the right side of those full lips that only moments ago had been working magic on her libido. "It's what I do." His assessing gaze traveled down her neck, stuttering at her heaving chest before continuing its journey over the tiny black skirt to the tops of her leather boots. "No working woman should have to put up with unwanted advances." He shrugged again. "The Ickbata obviously wasn't taking no for an answer."

"Maybe because I hadn't given it." Lilly morphed from wanton sex kitten to ice queen in two seconds flat. If he thought she was a prostitute, she could play the part. The anger slamming into her, however, required no acting. "You idiot. You've completely ruined my chance of making some money." She slugged back a good portion of her ale. "Why is it all you Neanderthals think you can come charging in to play the white knight even when the damsel *isn't* in distress?"

The nod he gave her communicated an apology, but the sexy half smile and dimple couldn't quite hide his amusement. "Because, m' lady, 'tis the noble thing to do." He captured her hand and feathered his lips across her knuckles. "These are dangerous times."

She felt the energy flow from her and for a moment panicked at the unexpected release. But when he straightened and his eyes locked hers, Lilly let loose another flux, hoping it would overload all his sexual circuits. This situation was his fault. He'd touched her first. He could pay the consequences.

Lilly smiled when his brow furrowed and the pulse in his neck quickened. No doubt he was trying to assess the sexual hunger burning through his veins. Rubbing her thumb across his knuckles, she increased the contact.

He leaned forward, brushing his stubbled cheek against hers. "You're *more* than welcome." He dropped her hand and turned back to the bar.

She stared at him, confusion binding her tongue. No male, human or otherwise, had *ever* broken contact with her first. Lilly stared at her hands. Her fingers tingled with the heat of her power. The man had to have an iron will to ignore the lust pumping through his body. He had pissed her off beyond words, but his odd reaction to her required further investigation.

Leaning into him, her breasts pressed against his biceps, she inhaled deeply and the rich scent of spicy cologne filled her lungs. "I was thinking," she said, her fingers trailing around the tribal tattoo on his forearm, "now that I've lost the Ickbata's business, I'd like to know how you're going to make it up to me."

The bartender set down the man's drinks and walked away.

"Perhaps I can buy you another drink?" His tone was infuriatingly even.

"A drink?" She laughed, mustering up all the indignation of the whore she was trying to portray. "You think a drink is in the same league as what I was negotiating with the alien?" She laid one palm flat on his forearm, the other on the taut muscles of his back and pushed her energy on him.

The man glanced down at her hand, an eyebrow arched in an unspoken question. He tipped back the shot of gall's blood, not even wincing as the acidic liquor slammed into his gut. "And what, besides a swift kick to his reproductive organs, were you trying to negotiate?"

Lilly wasn't sure if it was his lack of reaction to her power or the fact he'd pissed her off beyond words that pushed her over the edge. She'd worked herself up for a little sexual slap and tickle and now she had a human in her sights. She hadn't been with a man since before the incident on Earth nearly six months ago. It seemed right she'd take some of this asshole's credits and get a little pleasure in return. That deal would work out nicely on so many levels. "For your information we were just discussing terms." Lilly's hand slid down the hard plane of his back and settled on the waist of his jeans, her palms heating with the flux of current pulsing through her.

Unfazed, he took a long pull of the ale. "From where I was standing by the door it looked like you could use a little help." He shrugged, a motion that was beginning to annoy. "Sorry if I misinterpreted."

Lilly couldn't believe what was happening, or more accurately, what *wasn't* happening. She dropped her hands and stared at the man's profile. "Are you seriously telling me that at this moment you're not interested in having sex with me?"

The bartender set down another Regent's ale with a wink and an air kiss at Lilly from one of the heads. "This one's on me," he chirped. Well at least someone was feeling the effects of her power.

She lowered her voice. "What I mean is, when you saw me at the door, weren't you the least bit jealous of an alien hitting on a human female?"

He continued to stare straight ahead, his thick fingers toying with the moisture on the stein. "It didn't look like a mutual thing. I reacted. I moved in. I was wrong. Sue me." He drained the ale in one long gulp.

She narrowed her eyes and studied the man, wondering if he had some other motive for being here. His dark complexion and sexy-as-hell day-old scruff weren't memorable. But the faint trace of a scar running from his brow to his upper lip sure were. Lilly didn't recognize him as any of the guys on the circuit. In the last three

months she'd become very aware of her competition. It wasn't as if the Nebulae Galaxy was overrun with bounty hunters.

Besides, it had taken three weeks of intense investigation on Reigis Alpha and another two days scoping out joints here on Garalon Five before she'd figured out her next move. There was no way in hell this guy could be another bounty hunter who'd managed to follow the same path all while remaining hidden. His appearance here had to be coincidental. Still, there was the issue of his ability to ignore her sexual aura. That part completely threw Lilly off her game. "Perhaps I just like to play with my prey a little before going in for the kill."

He turned to her and stared. She smiled slow and easy, settling her hand just over his heart and focusing her energy on that one connection. "I find that method is always more lucrative."

He hauled her from the chair and pulled her hard against his chest, the amusement of earlier no longer playing along the hard lines of his jaw. His eyes stormed with some emotion she couldn't identify. "Fine. You want to play this through? Then let's." He brought his mouth down on hers, hard and demanding.

Now this was more like it. She'd almost doubted her effect on the man. But as his tongue swept her lips and she opened for him, the low growl of desire vibrating in his chest sent hot frissions of pride pulsing through her. Lilly amped up the energy.

Her fingers tangled in the caramel curls of silken hair at the nape of his neck, pulling him tighter. He changed the angle, the silken heat of his tongue brushing against hers. His hand dragged up her thigh, over her belly and cupped her breast. He pinched her nipple, the shock of pleasure clenching her pussy.

He broke the kiss, his breath panting over her face. "Not here." He scanned the tavern. "How about we take this party somewhere private?"

Damn, she'd let her ego override her common sense. Lilly didn't want to leave the tavern, but once she'd bonded him with her energy, there was no way to ease the sexual hunger until her orgasm broke the link she'd created. She nodded and he led her by the elbow through the growing crowd of the tavern.

Lilly snuck a peek at her timepiece. She still had a couple of hours before her proverbial ship docked.

Dallas Sawyer all but pushed the spunky blonde through the crowd. If she was a prostitute he was the fucking archangel Gabriel come to save her ass. *Yeah and snowball fights were a daily occurrence in hell.* Which was exactly where Dallas was headed if he acted on the thoughts clouding his judgment.

When he'd first seen the woman with the Ickbata, his radar had honed in on her hands all over the male. He wasn't jealous exactly, but it certainly was a kick in the gut to see the only human female within a hundred-click radius mauling an alien.

He lied when he told her he thought she was trying to get away from the thing. On the contrary, she looked pretty happy, wrapped in his scaly appendages. He'd stepped

in just to remind her she was human. But she'd turned on some wanton sex kitten act and scared the shit out of him. He had no idea what she was up to, so he'd backed off. Then she seemed downright insulted at his feigned lack of interest. She was a definite enigma, and if he had the time, Dallas wouldn't mind discovering the mystery surrounding this beautiful creature. But as he maneuvered them through the growing throng of the tavern, he had only one goal—get her as far from this place as he could before all hell rained down.

"I don't even know your name," she said.

"My friends call me Sawyer. You can call me Dallas."

"Like the planet? Dallas Eight?"

"No the city." He pulled open the door and motioned her onto the street.

The woman scrunched her face in that cute habit she had. Maybe she'd never been to Earth. It wasn't so farfetched. Since the first wave of humans left Earth nearly sixty years ago, hoping to find uninhabited planets to ease the overcrowding, they'd managed to reproduce on all eighteen planets in the Nebulae Galaxy. Dallas knew there were at least two generations of humans on Reigis Alpha who had never set foot on their planet of origin.

"As in Texas?" she asked.

He stopped short just outside the tavern. "You know Earth?"

Even in the blue wash of the unnatural lights lining the bustling street he could see the color flooding her cheeks. "I'm human, aren't I?" She planted her hands on her hips.

Yep, he'd screwed that up. The color was indignation, not embarrassment. "So you say, but even a Braughtot without training can take on a human form." He took her elbow, guiding her down the brick walk. "And a history-rom can download Earth memories faster than an Ickbata can wrap you in six appendages and—"

Whipping around in front of him, she pulled her arm from his grasp and curled her hand around the back of his neck. Before he could protest, she pulled him down against her hungry mouth. She bit his bottom lip then sipped it into her mouth, laving the tender spot with her tongue. Her leg slid up his thigh and she ground her pubic bone against his hardening dick. Dallas had been wrapped up in the mission plans for over eighteen Earth months. Thoughts of recreation had been left behind nearly a year ago with the flowers at President Orch's grave on Canus Delta.

But as this very hot woman fucked his mouth and guided his hand along the silken skin of her thigh, urging it under the hem of her skirt to her bare ass cheek, all thoughts of the QAL objective were lost. Blood rushed from his brain and pooled in his groin, carrying with it any coherent thoughts. There was only lust and heat and a human woman dry humping him in public. It had been so damn long since Dallas had allowed himself even one moment of pleasure. Guilt had been the only thing lying cold in his bed.

But right now, in the lull before the storm of duty hit, he could lose himself in all her sweet softness. Of its own accord, his free hand smoothed up her torso and molded

around her ample breast, the nipple beading beneath his palm. He barely registered the honking horns of luna crystal cabs or the appreciative whistles of the life forms forced to move around them.

She pulled from the kiss and dropped her thigh but kept her body pressed to his. "Now that I've proven I'm not some Braughtot in drag, and you obviously are interested," she pressed her stomach against his erection, "why don't we party somewhere private?"

Training had his gaze sweeping the street. Nothing seemed out of place. Not that he expected there to be. They were still a day away from the *Hij'Rozhod's* arrival. The QAL may not know what he looked like or even what species he was, but there was no doubt their intel was right. The assassin, who's title translated to "Mist of Death", got his name not only from his uncanny ability to take out presidents and prime ministers beneath the watchful eyes of their security detail, but to escape without leaving any trace of his existence. Save for the trail of fourteen bodies left in his wake over the last four years, no one knew anything about him. QAL had no doubt he was planning a move on the new ambassador, but Dallas' team was banking on it happening during the inauguration. If everything came together they'd have someone on the inside by then.

"Hey, Earth to Dallas." She laid her palm on his chest. "Where are you?"

He smiled down at her. Damn she was beautiful. All that blonde hair falling in kinky little waves over the fur coat and flimsy top. A top that barely contained her breasts with their tight little nipples. If he didn't know any better, he'd think she was as horny as him. But of course he was only projecting. She was faking her desire as obviously as the *working woman* persona. Whatever. He'd play this out as far as she'd let him.

"I was just looking for that private party spot," Dallas lied. "I think I know somewhere three doors down." This time, with his hand curved possessively around her hip, he guided her through the crowded sidewalk. He hadn't needed to search for a quiet place to take her. Dallas had committed to memory every business, every side street and every back alley within a five-block radius of the tavern. If *Hij'Rozhod* tried to find a hiding place, they'd hunt him down like a pack of hungry jackals. Because at the moment that's how Dallas felt—jumpy and ready to kill.

At the next corner store, Dallas turned right. The crowd thinned considerably. The blackened windows of the closed stores along this street reflected their blurred images as the two of them moved quickly. The woman's hand had snaked into the back pocket of his jeans, and even through the material the heat of it seared into his skin. Damn, he needed this.

Another quick left and he was guiding her down a back alley where nothing moved save for the velgir rodents scurrying for scraps of food. They sidestepped a Ka'al, passed out against the back of the abandoned building. Except for the deep hue of red skin and their extreme size, the Ka'al were the closest thing to human in the Nebulae

Galaxy. Formidable-looking for sure, but Dallas knew they were dangerous only when provoked.

"Don't worry about him," Dallas said as he felt a shudder shimmy down her back. "They've got more brawn than brains, and from the smell of that one, it appears he's gone and drowned himself in gall's blood." He turned her in his arms so she was facing him and pressed her back into the alcove of a doorway, his hands resting on the cold stone of the door frame. He was expecting her to bolt at any minute. "I'd like to finish what we started in the street." His gaze searched her face for any indication she didn't want him. But even in the shadows of the alleyway he could see the desire darkening her eyes. Maybe she wasn't faking it after all.

"You didn't ask," she whispered.

"I don't care how much." His mouth came down on hers, feathering across the velvet heat of her lips. As much as his cock was urging him to plunge ahead at a reckless speed, Dallas had every intention of moving slowly and savoring this woman.

She pulled back and looked up at him. "My name...you didn't ask my name."

Cradling her chin in his palm, Dallas brushed his thumb over her lips. She pressed her mouth against the pad and sucked it into the wet heat. His cock jumped. "What's your name?"

"Lilly."

"A beautiful name for a beautiful woman." He pushed aside the collar of the coat and brought his mouth down on her throat, laving the jumping pulse point. She inhaled deeply, arching her back, which both exposed her neck and pressed her breasts into his chest. A low groan rumbled in his throat as his hand dropped to her breast. He squeezed and reshaped the flesh, the fullness overflowing his palm. Damn, he loved a woman with curves and it seemed Lilly had that and more. He undid a couple of buttons of her shirt and slid his hand into the satin of her bra. Her skin was hot and soft, and the nipple already hard. Dallas didn't bother to undo the bra. Instead he lifted her breast from the confines of the material and let the bra act as a shelf to display her creamy flesh. He bent and sucked the beaded nipple into his mouth, alternately nipping and licking it until Lilly was writhing against his body.

Lilly slid her hands under the tails of his shirt, her long nails raking up his stomach and around his back, pulling him tighter to her body. Once again her leg slid up his thigh as she rolled her hips and ground against his aching erection.

"Dallas, I don't want it slow." The hot words spilled over his cheek before she pulled his earlobe through her teeth. "I want it hard and dirty, right here. Right now." Her hand snaked between their bodies and she palmed him, squeezing with just enough pressure to shoot horny sparks of current zinging around his balls. She dropped her leg to make room for her other hand and made quick work of undoing his belt and the button of his jeans.

"Jesus, Lilly, you have the most beautiful body." He lifted the other breast from her bra and pushed the two of them together. His tongue flicked from one steeped point to

the other. The areolas were puckered and he sucked one completely into his mouth, tasting the sweet flavor of her floral perfume. He rolled the other pearled nipple between his thumb and forefinger, loving the hiccupping sounds of her need filling the air.

Dallas could have lavished her breasts far longer, but she already had his zipper down and was working her hands around his hips. The way she moved he was afraid she would have him coming in her hand before he had a chance to enjoy the rest of her body.

Kissing his way up her neck, he captured Lilly's full mouth. With the sweetness of slow seduction replaced by hungry ardor, he pressed his tongue between her lips and filled her mouth. Her tongue danced with his circling and retreating, filling his mouth with her honeyed taste.

Slowly, he dragged his palms down her sides, his thumbs grazing her hard nipples. He went all the way down to the top of her boots, hooked his thumbs under the hem of her leather skirt and pushed it up as he caressed the silky softness of her thighs. On the street, he thought she had been without panties, but the barest thread of a thong curved over her hips.

Lilly pushed his jeans down over his ass and the heavy belt buckle dropped them to his feet where it hit with a satisfying thud. With experienced strokes, her hand traveled the length of his erection, from root to tip and back again, the gentle pressure making him harder. The other toyed with his balls, rolling and squeezing until he nearly lost himself in the sensations heating his blood.

Trying to ignore the pressure building, Dallas lifted her leg back on his hip. He focused on the cool leather of the boot against his skin rather than the heat of Lilly's hands expertly milking his cock. He cupped her ass cheek, holding her steady while his fingers followed the band of the thong down. His knuckles brushed the velvet skin of her mons and she sighed. The smell of her juices filled the air around them and he knew she'd soaked through the material before he'd even touched her.

Dallas cupped his hand around her mons, both surprised and pleased there was cream on her inner thighs. Pressing the tip of his finger against her clit, he swallowed her moan of pleasure but didn't release her mouth. Dallas slid his finger along the lacy edge of the thong. Slipping it under the material, he traced a slow path down her satin labia. He couldn't remember the last woman he'd been with who'd shaved her pussy. Knowing he'd soon be buried in that silken heat sent a surge of blood through his cock forcing pre-cum from its tip. Lilly's talented fingers smeared it over the mushroom head.

She pulled her mouth from his, her breath coming in hard pants. "Enough is enough. I'm hot. I'm wet. I'm ready." She wrapped her other leg around his hips and canted her pelvis so the tip of his penis ran along the wet heat of her thigh. "And don't worry about covering this bad boy, I'm protected. I just want it hard and fast."

"I just thought it—"

She sandwiched his face in her hands, her dark eyes boring desperately into his. "Really, Dallas, a little less thinking and lot more fucking."

"A knight shouldn't argue with his lady. Your command is my wish."

He pushed the lacy slip of material away from her entrance and guided the mushroom head of his erection to her hot slit. Cream coated his cock as he pressed it against her opening. Dallas had every intention of entering slowly, but Lilly grabbed his ass and impaled herself on his erection, screaming with pleasure as he buried himself to the hilt.

There was no control once the silken fist of her pussy surrounded him. He tipped his hips back and then forward, slamming back into her, his skin slapping against hers. Lilly's nails dug into his ass cheeks as she begged him to fill her harder. Dallas lost himself in the myriad sensations overtaking him—the fleshy weight of her breasts crushed against his chest, her nails scraping along his back, the desperation of her legs wrapped tightly around his hips and the slurping sounds of their fucking all mixed with her carnal cries and his ragged breathing.

He felt her arch, every muscle bowed tight. Lilly threw her head back, her mouth open with a silent cry of ecstasy trapped in her throat. He pistoned his hips faster, feeling the tight pressure radiating from his balls and gathering in his back. He held off his own climax until Lilly shattered in his arms, her pussy contracting, releasing more hot cream around his cock. She screamed profanities of bliss as her muscles trembled with the rapture of her release. Unable to hold on any longer, Dallas' orgasm pulsed through him, his hot seed shooting into her cunt. Spasms of pleasure radiated out from his pelvis, boiling his blood and stealing his breath. He gentled his thrusts, milking the last of their bliss until she fell back limp against the door, her legs dropping one at a time from his hips.

Still seated deep inside her, he buried his face in her hair and nipped the soft flesh behind her ear. He wasn't sure he wanted to let her go.

"You still didn't ask," she mumbled.

Confused, he lifted his head and looked into her heavy-lidded eyes.

"That'll be three thousand credits and cab fare."

Chapter Two

Dallas threaded his way through the crowded sidewalk back to the alley. He'd learned over the past month the residents of this territory on Garalon Five were night owls. Not that they had a choice. Things wouldn't slow down until the first two moons were well below the horizon and the third just beginning to rise. The lack of daylight had thrown him when he'd first arrived. Though the Nebulae Galaxy had a major star at its center, the weak light didn't reach a good portion of the planets. Heat on the inhabitable planets came from deep within their crusts.

He didn't give a shit about the specifics, just that the interminable darkness was fraying the ends of his taut nerves. Another two days, a week at tops, this mission would be finished and Dallas could return to Earth for a much needed vacation with some *human* companionship.

Working for the government was a lonely business. Lonelier still when he was out in deep space away from his own species. Five years ago, when Dallas had graduated from Quantico, he'd envisioned this life—traveling the stars in search of bad guys and adventures. But working for QAL wasn't all the pamphlets had promised. It seemed even in space shit happened, people died and no matter how far he ran, he couldn't outrun a broken heart.

Dallas turned the last corner to see the alley he'd left not twenty minutes ago was now empty. It worried him a little that the Ka'al wasn't here and wondered if he'd missed something crucial in his lust-filled fog. No one knew better than him that spies were everywhere. He passed the doorway where he'd been buried in Lilly's heat and cursed when her honeyed aroma tickled his nose. Probably nothing more than his horny imagination, but it ate at him just the same.

He'd known what Lilly was when he'd spotted her in the tavern—a two-bit space hooker with a full rack and luscious ass. Though he shouldn't expect her to see him as anything more than the client he'd become, Dallas had thought he'd seen something in her eyes when they'd been at the bar. He'd initially wanted nothing more than to get her out of harm's way, but that sultry voice and kissable mouth had been his undoing. Like a siren, she'd wrapped him in a spell and seduced him. Not that his dick needed much encouragement on that front. Dallas couldn't remember the last time he'd seen an Earth female, let alone held one in his arms. There weren't too many of them out this far in deep space. He'd lost himself in her body, forgetting what she was. Still it had been a major hit to his ego to pay her the twenty-five hundred credits he'd negotiated her down to and put her in the luna cab.

Dallas should be grateful. That slap of reality set him back on track and refocused him on the mission at hand. He couldn't afford to screw this one up. Not when so much

was a stake. Skirting around the Dumpster, he shot another quick glance over his shoulder before laying his palm on the key pad disguised as one of the stones on the side of the building. Experiencing the cold wash of energy flowing over him as the solid stones became gas and surrounded him never became easier to experience. He was still a little disoriented when he materialized into the bright room of the temporary QAL headquarters.

"Sawyer, where the hell have you been?"

Darren Bastower stared at him through a hologram of the tavern illuminated over a control table. Abandoning the plans, his boss strode angrily toward Dallas, his bare feet slapping the concrete floor. This night the hulking Braughtot was in the form of a Ka'al. The QAL lieutenant in charge only took that form when he was really pissed. *Lucky him.*

"We've been looking for you. We've got less than one Earth hour to have everyone in place. It might only be logistics to you, but we're treating this as the real thing." Anger throbbed in the veins at his temples and neck, turning his mahogany cheeks a bruised shade of purple. His telltale facial tattoo that marked him as a male Braughtot seemed to pulse angrily around his left eye.

"Yes Sir. I'm aware. It's not like I'm late. I—"

"Thaegan's been here nearly thirty minutes. He told me you were at the tavern together and would be right behind him."

He shot a look over the lieutenant's shoulder. The large Ka'al, who'd been monitoring the alley as a drunkard, smiled smugly and acknowledged his impudent behavior with a curt nod of his head. That bastard of a partner was supposed to cover his ass, not deliver it in a sling to his boss.

"Yeah, well, I had some business to attend to before I could get back here." Dallas headed for his desk. "Since Thaegan's been here that long, I assume he's briefed the team on their positions." He bent and pulled the Treljon laser from his boot. Though it was little, the damn thing radiated heat and sent electrical sparks tingling down his toes. Everyone told him the sensation was a figment of his imagination. Since his skin still jumped with the memory of Lilly's hands on his body, he just didn't need anything real or imaginary to be adding to the twitchy sensation. Dallas would like to rip the cochlear translator from his ear as well, but knew his boss wouldn't like speaking English. "If he's got everyone ready, then I guess we can roll."

For such a large alien, Thaegan moved around the desks with incredible grace. "You're lead on this, Dallas. We've been waiting on you." He stepped next to him, lowering his voice. "And you know us Ka'als, more brawn than brain." He crossed massive arms over his muscular chest, lifting an eyebrow with the corner of his mouth.

"Oh. You heard that?"

"I wasn't close enough to catch a whiff of the female. Other than that...there wasn't much of your interlude I missed, my friend."

"Sorry about that."

"Who said I was complaining?"

Thaegan and Dallas had been partners for nearly five years. A good portion of it spent chasing *Hij'Rozhod* across the galaxy. They'd covered each other's asses in the most dangerous of situations. Adrenaline highs had even had them sharing a female alien on more than one occasion. Dallas had brought Lilly to the protected alley because he'd known he could let down his defenses and live in the moment. Allowing Thaegan to enjoy the experience as well just seemed as natural as breathing.

"Gamma team, front and center." Though he hadn't needed to, Bastower hollered across the room.

Dallas's ragtag team of five mismatched aliens—one Xerick, a Drikspa, a Braughtot in Ickbata form, his distinctive facial tattoo swirling along his snout, Thaegan and the newest addition of a second Drikspa—had started to ready themselves when he'd stepped into headquarters. The six of them plus Bastower circled the table displaying a hologram of the tavern.

"Tonight's just a dry run," Bastower continued. "If our intel is right, *Hij'Rozhod* won't show until tomorrow night. But I want Sawyer to walk everyone through this one more time. I don't want another FUBAR like Canus Delta."

Dallas knew Bastower wasn't laying the blame of the failed mission at his feet. Otherwise he wouldn't have given him the lead in this mission. But as he moved his fingers over the panel in front of him, Dallas couldn't shake the heavy cloak of guilt weighing on his shoulders. One of his team had died on Canus Delta along with President Orch. Never mind the fact he'd nearly lost his life as well. The undeniable reality was that someone had double-crossed QAL and fed their plans to the enemy, leaving Dallas to doubt his ability as team leader. This would be his chance to prove he had the *cojones* to continue in that role, not to his team or Bastower—but to himself.

The holographic image of the tavern faded and a three-dimensional map of Garalon Five appeared. "We picked up intel that the Znedu alien, *Hij'Rozhod's* right-hand man, landed on Garalon Five about six hours ago." It was understood that time and primary language would be in terms of the home planet of the team leader. "Intercepted transmissions have him going by the name of Venair Grebetz. Though we suspect this is an alias." Another push of the button by Dallas and a hologram of a small craft landing on a lighted patch of dirt in the desert appeared. "Last position had him in the Plaintar Quadrant when the first moon rose." A gangly, humanlike alien disembarked from the craft. His thin body was covered by a full-length satin robe. From the pictures the Znedu looked more like a scholarly monk than a cold-blooded killer. "Continued surveillance has him traveling here via luna crystal shuttle and meeting with Jones here," Dallas pointed to the Xerick on his left, "at the tavern tomorrow night."

Dallas worked the panel. "The intercepted communication said he'd be scoping out the meeting place tonight." The desert disappeared and a schematic of the tavern, the surrounding shops and the street front popped up again. "Grebetz believes our man wants in on the action. We've got him set up to be interviewed by Grebetz's boss tomorrow night. We're betting it's *Hij'Rozhod*. We'll be in a position to take him down at the tavern when he shows for the interview. But we need to be sure we're ready for

anything. That's why we're going through this tonight. Every piece of equipment will be checked and every contingency covered." He looked each one of his team in the eye. "There will be no missteps in this mission. We're going in as a team and we're coming out as a team."

Dallas walked them through every minute detail of the tavern and every possible problem that had come to him in his nightmares night after night. He had studied this mission from every angle. After tonight, he had no doubt they'd be prepared to take down the asshole and keep him from killing any more planetary presidents.

But as they donned their gear and headed through the portal to the street, Dallas' gut told him that he hadn't quite planned for every contingency.

* * * * *

Lilly stood on the sidewalk, leaning through the passenger window of the luna cab. She flashed the Ickbata behind the controls a nice view of her cleavage and overpaid the fare by fifty credits. It's not as if she needed to, she'd touched his shoulder while giving him directions and pushed her energy output up a couple of notches while they were traveling. She had no doubt the Ickbata's current squirming had everything to do with his raging hard-on and the confusion over why the human giving him such a generous tip had turned him on with barely a word. Hey, she had a talent and it would be a shame not to use it whenever it was convenient. Lilly wanted to make sure if anyone asked the driver about her that he'd remember every detail of where he'd dropped her off. She almost felt bad for him as he readjusted himself again. *Almost*.

Strutting her way toward the stylish restaurant, Lilly watched the reflection of the vehicle in the large window as it pulled from the sidewalk. When it was completely out of sight, she turned back the way she'd come to walk the three blocks back to the tavern. She hadn't expected to get waylaid from her job. Or was it more like just *laid*.

Her body warmed at the thought of Dallas. She could still smell him on her. Still feel the heat of his body pressed to hers. Still taste the sweetness of his mouth. But she shook off the memory. It wasn't as if it were real. Nothing about her sexual relationships had been real for a very long time.

Lilly had been only sixteen the first time it happened. The horny tingling of lust she'd felt when her first boyfriend had kissed her had warmed her from the heart out. She figured that's how everyone felt with their first love. But the more passionate his kisses became, the hotter she'd burned. The boy's tender touches evolved into painful gropings as he lost control. Her protests had been loud enough to alert her mother, who'd managed to gracefully step in and send the boy home with his dignity intact.

It had been another year before her mother had explained the gift her genetics had produced and another four years before Lilly had figured out how to control it. And up until six months ago, it had been a secret she kept close to her heart.

The heels of her boots clicked a staccato cadence along the brick sidewalk. With her emotions so high, the energy pulsed around her, attracting the attention of every male

she passed. Lilly worked to get it under control, but it was difficult with the memories swirling around her. The encounter with Dallas had unleashed the loneliness she fought so hard to control.

She'd spent her college years living the celibate life of a nun, allowing no man to touch her. But the isolation had been too much. When she entered the state police academy in Illinois, she allowed herself to date, but there had been nothing more than friendly banter. Her classmates believed she was a lesbian and that had allowed her to become one of the guys. It was a wonderful compromise.

By the time she was working her way up the ranks of the Chicago PD, she'd found comfort in fleeting vacation rendezvous that lasted only a few days. But her time off was infrequent and the time between human contact too long. In desperation, Lilly dared a liaison with a stranger in a nearby Chicago suburb. The evening had satisfied her need for human interaction and the man definitely had no complaints when she'd left him quite exhausted in the morning. By the time she'd earned her detective's badge she had the one-night stand down to an art form.

Though they weren't aware of it, every male who fucked her did so without the knowledge that they had no control over their lust. Lilly had built walls around her heart and convinced herself it didn't matter. But Dallas had shattered that. For a moment she believed he hadn't been under the influence of her seductive gift. When he'd turned from her and ignored the lust she sent pouring through him, she believed she'd found someone who might be immune to the one part of her she couldn't change. Unlike the pitch of her voice or the strawberry birthmark on her thigh, no chemistry or cosmetic surgery could remove this albatross from her neck.

She wasn't sure why she gave a shit. Dallas was no different than every other man she'd encountered. He'd failed the second test in the street when she'd come on to him. He'd rushed her into the alley and fucked her to his own satisfaction. Not that she hadn't enjoyed it. Dallas had actually held off his own gratification to satisfy her needs first. But her tiny bubble of hope that it had meant something to him burst as he'd counted out the credits and tucked her into the cab without a backward glance.

Lilly growled her frustration at the night, startling a Znedu couple enjoying a late-night stroll. Smiling, she moved on, angry at herself for letting the human contact get under her skin. She needed to get her head back in the game.

The second moon was visible through the blue haze of lights lining the street. Lilly wasn't late, but if she didn't hurry she wouldn't be settled in place, looking the part of a woman on the prowl, when her mark arrived. If the horny informant she'd spoken to two days ago had given her the correct intel, and that was a big *if* in his lust-fogged state, then the alien she was hunting should be arriving from Reigis Alpha any time now. Lilly cut down an alley, saving herself only a couple of minutes.

Unlike the alley where Dallas had taken her, this narrow passage had no windowed stores, no other souls walking the muted shadows. Only the back-door stoops and heavy ductwork of businesses on the main street broke the monotony of the brick walls. Pulling the tiny fur coat tighter around her waist, Lilly quickened her steps. Years on

the police force had taught her how to defend herself, but it wouldn't do for a working woman to be seen turning down business. The whole lady-of-the-night getup worked for catching felons off guard, but she hadn't meant for Dallas to think of her that way. Sheesh, she needed to forget the man and focus on the job ahead of her.

"Well, look what's tripped into my hold." The gravelly clicks and pops translated in her ear as an Ickbata slithered from a shadowed doorway. Pulling up to his full height, he blocked her path and stared down at her.

She forgot how big they actually were. "*Wisc thek, schont fral.*" Good evening, sexy male. Another one of those sentences she could say in multiple languages. Silently, Lilly cursed. She'd had her mind wrapped around that damn human, not focused on her surroundings. A very dangerous thing for a human female. The energy sluicing off her was high, but she focused it in her hands and reached out to touch his bare chest. "I was just headed to the tavern." The soft scales rippled beneath her palm. "Would you like to join me for a drink?" she asked, hoping he had a translator.

"You look good enough for business." He stepped closer, the thick scent of leather filling the heated air between them.

"Actually, it's been a long day," she said, her voice a sultry whisper. The large nostrils at the end of his snout flared, scenting the air laced with her heady aroma. The temperature of his skin rose and Lilly focused the current to her palm. Even in the muted light she could see his eyes widen and the skin below his abdomen swell. "A drink with a good-looking Ickbata would be the perfect ending." Another push of energy and the soft scales of skin fluctuated.

The Ickbata, drunk on the endorphins coursing through his veins, compressed until she could look him in the eye. "We think you like us very much. Happy we make you."

"Of course you will." She wanted to laugh at his reference to his cocks as separate parts of himself. She hoped that was his ego talking and not an effect of the hormone overdose she was producing. But it couldn't be helped. One more push of energy and the Ickbata stumbled back to the wall and slid down the bricks, his appendages falling limply at his sides.

"*Tsk phleg ronk tsk tsk.*" He slurred the words out of his mouth before his eyes rolled back in their sockets. His head fell to his shoulder, a crooked smile curling under his snout.

"Enjoy your wet dream, buddy." Lilly patted him down—a habit borne from years on the force. She wasn't surprised to find the Treljon laser tucked into the waist of his trousers, but the Ba'alkin dagger strapped to his walking appendage caught her by surprise. Not street legal but definitely an effective weapon. She slipped the dagger up her sleeve and the laser in her other boot. "Thanks for the extra weapons, buddy. And remember to seek medical attention for an erection lasting longer than four hours."

With one last touch to his snout, she made sure he was breathing before heading down the alley to the tavern. If all went well in the next few of hours, she'd take down

Venair Grebetz just as easily and collect her reward for his bounty before the third moon set.

Chapter Three

Dallas hoped his posture gave the impression he was a man who just didn't give a shit—exactly the opposite of how he felt. Leaning on the bar with one elbow, his boot hooked nonchalantly on the brass pole a foot off the floor, he worked to tamp down the slow crawl of nerves over his skin. He wasn't sure what was making him edgy, but he'd learned a long time ago to trust his instincts. And his gut was definitely operating at yellow alert levels. Running his hand over the scruff of his chin, Dallas spoke quietly into the communications unit at his wrist. "Gamma Team, check."

He downed his third shot of gall's blood while one by one his men responded in his ear with the all-clear sign. Grebetz should be arriving shortly. With the two Drikspa in the surrounding alleys, the Xerick on the roof across the street, out of sight of the arriving Znedu, the Braughtot on the roof of the tavern and him and Thaegan inside, Dallas had no doubt they were ready. *Routine*. Yeah, that's what he believed about all missions. Even the ones where people got killed.

He motioned to the bartender. "Another gall's blood and Regeant's ale and make them both double." The Xerick nodded one of his heads while the other carried on a conversation with a Ka'al female two stools down. He didn't even want to imagine consummating *that* hookup.

"I think you might want to go easy on that stuff." Thaegan stepped up next to Dallas, speaking low and keeping his eyes facing the mirror behind the bar. In the noise of the crowded tavern, they both knew no one heard. Thaegan signaled to the bartender. It wouldn't look good if he didn't order something. "Whiskey neat."

Dallas raised an eyebrow. "Do as I say not as I do?"

"You Earthlings make alcohol that wouldn't get a Ka'al *baby* drunk."

"And I could say the same for alien swill." Though they both knew alcohol content had nothing to do with Dallas' ability to drink anyone under the table.

The bartender dropped off their drinks.

"Here's to bad guys getting justice and the good guys getting just ass." They lifted their glasses, quoted team gamma's motto and downed their respective drinks.

Thaegan motioned for another drink. "You know nothing's going down tonight."

"It's a dry run." Dallas took a long pull of the ale.

"We're going to get a look at Grebetz. Run the team through their paces. Have a couple of drinks. Get laid. And do it all before the rest of the world wakes for their morning coffee." Thaegan laughed, downed the second shot of whiskey and slapped Dallas on the back hard enough to make him cough. "Relax, you've got three-quarters

of that crossed off your list already, my friend.” He melted back into the anonymity of the crowd.

But the Ka’al’s words hadn’t convinced either of them. Dallas felt Thaegan’s apprehension as surely as his partner sensed his. The last two years had tested their friendship far beyond normal bonds. Dallas expected he knew things about Thaegan even the alien’s ex-wife hadn’t known. Thaegan felt the restlessness as much as Dallas. It was no doubt why the Ka’al had stopped over. But it seemed neither of them could pinpoint the source of that apprehension.

He checked his watch. Another twenty minutes and Grebetz should be arriving. Another hour after that, if nothing unusual happened, he’d call it a night, head back to the hotel room, leaving a couple of his men to tail the alien.

Dallas sipped his ale. It wouldn’t look right for a human to keep pounding down the Regent’s without showing the effects. It would surely call attention, and that was one thing he didn’t need tonight.

“Gamma one reporting.” The voice hummed low in his ear. “Heads-up, boys. It’s showtime. Gamma four reporting mark is coming in. Repeat. All is go.” The alien on the roof across the street ran through all the check points. “Gamma three, do you have him?”

“Check.”

“Gamma two?”

“Ready,” Thaegan said from the corner where he’d settled in.

“Team leader?”

“Ready on your go.” Dallas spoke softly before turning. Leaning his back against the bar, his foot still propped up, and the stein of ale in his hand, Dallas looked like any red-blooded human male checking out the female patrons.

But he’d chosen this spot not for the view – though the sensual sway of the female Ickbata on the crowded dance floor certainly added to the scenery – but from his vantage point at the corner of the bar, he could just see through the revelers to the door. So when it opened, he nearly choked on the ale he was drinking.

That sure as hell wasn’t a Znedu sashaying through the door, looking to quench his thirst.

* * * * *

The inhabitants of Garalon Five certainly enjoyed their nightlife. The tavern had been busy before she’d left with Dallas, but the crowd appeared to have doubled in the time it had taken her to screw the human, take a useless cab ride around the city streets and take down an Ickbata. And all before she did some major bounty hunting.

Lilly maneuvered through the crowd, pleased she slipped past the males with barely a glance. After the encounter with the alien in the alley, it had taken some real effort to bring the energy down to a manageable level. Of course an explosive orgasm or

two would have completely dropped her levels, but Lilly had made two promises to herself when she'd discovered what genetics had given her. Never physically hurt anyone with her gift. And never – no matter how bad her nipples ached and her pussy thrummed – *never* satisfy herself in public. Sex with someone else? Now that was another story.

It pissed her off that her gaze skimmed through the crowd in search of the man who had left his stubble burns on her breasts, even more so when a mop of brown hair at the bar made her heart rate jump. But when she glanced back to the spot, there was nothing but a Ka'al female flirting with the bartender. Dallas wasn't here. The man had gotten what he wanted and no doubt wasn't mooning over her. She *really* needed to get her head in the game. Her empty wallet depended on it.

Taking down a criminal, she'd learned, required little brawn, plenty of brain and a whole lot of her body. But timing her approach was everything. From her foray into the bar earlier she knew the best way to see everything was from the bar or the dance floor. Having no desire to fend off would-be clients, happy to buy her a drink, Lilly chose the latter.

Filled with species and sexes of every variety, the dance floor offered both anonymity and a view of the front door. Lilly undulated her body, blending in with the crowd and smiling invitingly when bodies brushed against hers. She needed to look as if she belonged. With one eye on various wandering appendages and the other on the entrance, Lilly hoped the information she had about the Znedu was accurate.

But her fears were allayed when the door opened and the alien she wanted glided in. If he hadn't been wearing his trademark satin robe, she wasn't sure she would have been able to tell this male from every other Znedu in the tavern. Their muddy skin, elongated necks and triangular heads with their prominent black eyes made it difficult to tell them apart. But this one, she was sure, was the alien who would net her a tidy sum of credits.

Grebetz made his way to the bar, greeting several aliens along his circuitous route through the tables. With a little male backslapping, the groping of a waitress or two and the obligatory pressing of flesh, he finally bellied up to the bar. He greeted the Xerick bartender like an old friend and turned, surveying the patrons as if they were all his loyal subjects. A mark with an attitude. The cocky ones were always the easiest. This takedown would hardly seem like work.

By the time the bartender delivered the drink, a group of two or three aliens had gathered around him. Maybe they were bodyguards. Maybe they were thugs in training. Either way, Lilly wasn't concerned. She wasn't leaving the tavern without Grebetz. Separating him from a crowd simply added another dimension to her takedown.

The Znedu pointed to a dark corner over Lilly's shoulder. Perfect. He was going to work his way right past her.

Closing her eyes, Lilly let the riffs of the saxophone flow over her. Already on a low hum, it wasn't difficult to pull the energy up from her core, letting it swell and heat her blood. Lifting her arms, she swayed with the languid clarinet rolling through the jazz melody, her mind taking her back to happier times on Earth when all that mattered was her job on the Chicago force and good times with friends, back when she believed she could actually have a relationship with a man who didn't think of her gift as a curse. But all that had been blown out of the water by an asshole with an agenda.

Enough of that. Without missing a beat, she brushed through the swaying bodies to the edge of the dance floor. Her timing was flawless. With one last peek, she turned her body just so and her breasts slid across the shelved chest of the Znedu. As if she were off balance, her hands came down on his shoulders, sliding humbly down his torso. A giddy giggle, a flirtatious apology and the alien became putty in her hands.

"A problem not for me." The singsong buzz of his language translated in her ear.

Lilly batted her lashes for effect, but she had no doubt the flow of energy had already put the Znedu under her spell. "*Nral arrarnc, thraschne?*" *Buy me a drink, stranger?* she asked in his native tongue. It was the final nail that sealed his fate.

"Join us. I'm sure I will be happy to."

Having others around would make her job more difficult, not impossible, just more difficult. Tonight she wasn't up for that challenge. Rubbing her body against his, a smile slid over her lips as she trailed a finger along his pointed jaw, her other hand still planted in the center of his chest. "*Rrarck schrall rectnine fragtre.*" *I'd rather be alone with you.* The words hummed over her tongue. It was another one of the few sentences she'd learned in every language.

With barely a flick of his head, he dismissed the disappointed aliens who probably felt the sexual flux of her current. Slipping a lanky arm around her, Grebetz guided Lilly to a shadowed table along the front wall. The location worked well for her. Easy seduction. Easy departure. Easy bounty.

She slid into the booth, his lithe body gracefully slipping in next to her.

"What drink have you?" His large eyes dropped to her cleavage. Lilly shifted so her blouse opened wider, offering him a better view.

"Regent's ale, but I can wait for the waitress." Lilly dropped her hand to his thigh, grateful that every species of male she'd encountered in deep space had their genitals positioned in their lap. She focused the energy in her hands. The way her own sexual levels were rising, she had no doubt the male was feeling the effects. "I'd hate for you to run off."

"There's nowhere for me to be."

A Xerick stepped up to the table. His blue cheeks were painted a mottled purple and his bubble eyes were averted to the floor. Lilly suspected he'd pay later for this interruption. "Excuse me, sir, but it's important."

Angry words of frustration hissed from Grebetz in a singsong garble that the translator didn't manage to pick up. Whatever he said, she echoed the sentiments. This had been a long evening already and Lilly was ready for it to be finished.

One head of the Xerick leaned in, speaking quietly to Grebetz, while the other looked everywhere but at her. Lilly pressed closer to the Znedu, but couldn't catch the exchange. The Znedu dismissed his minion, who gratefully melted back into the crowd. Obviously horny males of any species weren't kind to their underlings.

"I have business." He smiled down at her. "But no time will it take." Pulling a palm-sized communicator from his robe, Grebetz's six fingers worked the buttons and an encrypted hologram appeared. A Braughtot in its natural form hovered over the communicator. Though the garbled message didn't make any sense to her ears, from the quick push of buttons and low hum of the Znedu, Lilly knew this guy was higher up on the totem pole.

She hadn't really done enough research into the history of the alien next to her to know who else may be involved in his nefarious activities. But kidnapping and drug smuggling had been enough to put a bounty on Venair Grebetz's head. What he'd done beyond that hadn't been her concern—until now.

Lilly hadn't been sure where she would go after bringing in this Znedu. The Nebulae Galaxy was full of fugitives. But the submissive posture of Grebetz and the wild gesturing of the Braughtot in the hologram told her that this alien no doubt had a bounty on his head as well. Decoding the audio signal going to her translator would take time, but bounty hunting wasn't about rushing a takedown. It was the slow, precise, detail-oriented part of her work that had made her such a kick-ass detective and now would guarantee her success as a bounty hunter.

Focusing on the hologram, Lilly noted every nuance of the Braughtot. Criminals believed they were smarter than everyone and often made mistakes. No doubt her species and gender had the Znedu believing he didn't have to hide trade secrets from her. It's what made her job so damn easy.

Another garbled exchange, a rapid pushing of buttons and the Braughtot hologram was swallowed into the communicator. When the alien turned back to her, Lilly dazzled him with a smile, further confused him with a hungry gaze and topped it all off with a tempting press of her breasts to his body. Her invitation as obvious as the Znedu's arousal.

"We were where?" The glazed fog of lust narrowed his eyes, his breath a soft sigh across her cheek.

"I think you were saying you'd like to go somewhere more private," Lilly pressed her cheek to the side of his face, purring the words, hoping she was near sound organs that would catch the sultry seduction in her voice. But she didn't need to fake the desire humming in the air. Between the encounter in the alley and the energy thrumming hot through her veins, she was nearly squirming with need.

Grebetz leaned down, the soft bump of his face caressing her throat, the subtle scent of vanilla filling her lungs. The delicate wisp of air tickled her neck as he inhaled her scent. She wanted nothing more than to feel his hands skimming her skin, his cock sinking into her wet channel and alleviating the itch the sexual energy had generated. But satisfying herself would mean breaking the spell between them. And until she turned this alien over to the authorities and collected her credits, there would be no orgasms. No relief from the heavy pounding of need.

"I really would like to go to my hotel room," she whispered.

His hand slid up her belly and cupped her breast, the sharp nail of his finger grazing her sensitive nipple. "I think a private meeting would be quite nice." The buzz of his words tickled along her ear. His hand slid down her belly, fumbling with her skirt.

This stage – when the energy connected her so completely to the male and overrode her logic – was the most difficult to control. All it would take is one touch of his long fingers to her clitoris and the orgasm that lay just out of her reach would be hers. Lilly breathed deeply, focusing herself away from the sexual need. Away from the screaming tension in her loins. Away from the reality that the Znedu's desire had been created by forces out of his control.

This was a job. A job meant credits. Credits meant survival.

Inhaling deeply once again, Lilly filled her lungs with resolve, refocused and pulled the Znedu's fingers from her thigh. She brought his hand to her mouth and kissed the triangular palm. "Not here. I prefer my *parties* in private." With his hands off her, she was able to focus not on the needs of her body, but on the desperate need of her empty wallet.

"I have place not far." The singsong buzz translated in her ear.

"Let's go." She nudged his side, encouraging him out of the booth. His annoying contingent jumped to their feet as well.

His body trembled when she stood up next to him. *No one understands what you're going through better than me.* Lilly pressed her body against him. The energy pulsed through her, pushing him beyond all sense of reason. "I want to go alone." She dragged out the last word and the Znedu waved off his sidekicks again. They dropped into their chairs, the confusion obvious on all their faces.

"You lead the way," she said.

He turned and she put her hand on his back. He walked stiffly, no doubt trying to hide the erection she'd felt pressed against her thigh. Too bad for him. He'd be jacking off in some jail cell within the hour while she was back in her hotel room, putting new energy crystals in some of her latest toy acquisitions, relieving the stress of her job.

Unlike her, Venair Grebetz had no idea what was in store for him.

* * * * *

This couldn't be happening. QAL had planned every minutus of this mission down to who would wipe the guy's nose if he sneezed. To have some two-bit streetwalker waltz in and gum up the works just didn't fit into his plans.

Dallas had watched Lilly from the moment she'd strutted into the bar. The woman was good at her job, he had to give her that. Despite the number of females filling the joint, when Lilly had drifted onto the dance floor, her body swaying with the slow croon of the music, every guy in the place had turned to admire her. And it wasn't because she was the only human female in the joint, though he suspected that did factor into the drooling equation. The woman's body oozed sex. Combine that with the slow roll of her hips and the graceful movements of her hands, she was a visual hard-on. *Shit.*

When she'd scoped out the joint and her gaze nearly found him, Dallas had done a quick duck and cover, tying nonexistent shoelaces on his cowboy boots. But it appeared she was looking for someone else. He nearly gagged on his ale when she culled Venair Grebetz from the crowd. That little sway and shift as she bumped into the Znedu accidentally had been right out of the QAL handbook.

Thaegan cursed about the situation as she plied her wares in the booth. As if Dallas couldn't see her mooning over the alien. As his fist clenched and unclenched and knots wound in his gut, he couldn't be sure whether it was the team leader worried about the mission or his male ego jealous over another's attention on this woman. Either way, there was no way Grebetz was leaving this joint with Lilly. He didn't care if he cost her another trick, if indeed she was some high-priced working woman—which he was beginning to seriously doubt.

It wasn't until the pair stood and she positioned herself behind the rigid Znedu, that he knew she held some kind of a weapon on the alien.

"Sawyer, you getting this?" Thaegan's incredulous voice sounded again in his ear.

"Roger that, gamma two." Dallas shifted, keeping Lilly and Grebetz in view. The two continued to move awkwardly through the crowd. Even Grebetz's henchmen had backed away.

Yeah, this woman definitely had plans for the alien that didn't include screwing his brains out. Without Grebetz, the meeting with Jones couldn't happen. Without the meeting with Jones there was no taking down the Znedu's suspected boss *Hij'Rozhod*. And after months of planning and the shit that had led up to this moment, there was no way Dallas was going to let that happen.

"I don't know what the hell she's up to," he said. "But that hooker can't leave with the Znedu."

"Fight or flight?" asked Thaegan.

Thaegan was on the same wavelength. "Fight," Dallas said into his wrist.

"Roger that."

Dallas swigged the last of his Regent's ale. Anyone who'd been watching would believe the human's alcohol consumption would have him waxing the floor with his

face. The fact he staggered away from the bar barely caused a ripple of interest. But when he bumped into the Braughtot disguised as a human female on the dance floor and made a rather lewd body motion, several aliens took notice.

"Baby! How about you dump this loser Ka'al and come home with me?" The words slurred from Dallas' mouth as he wrapped himself around the Braughtot's body. From the smell he even wondered if it was really female. But whatever the sex, the jealous Ka'al reacted just the way he'd hoped.

"Rrracht narctch, rraollk." She's with me, asshole. Fists wrapped around the shoulders of his shirt and flung him through the air. Dallas landed unceremoniously on the nearest table, breaking up a quiet conversation between two Xericks.

Sometimes he hated this part of the job. Dallas came up swinging. A left hook to one head and a right uppercut to the second and the male Xerick went down, taking out several unsuspecting Drikspa dancers. Dallas ducked as a chair flew.

Alcohol, male hormones and boredom created the diversion they'd hoped for. The fight spread like a virus through the tavern. Dallas avoided a tussle between two Ka'als, took down another Ickbata and made his way toward Thaegan, hoping he'd managed to stop Lilly before she got through the door with their man. A very unladylike scream from the front of the bar confirmed that his partner had things under control in that area.

Dallas pushed his way to the door, watching Grebetz slip out onto the street, a Xerick close at his heels. "Gamma Team. Phase two. Znedu loose. Track him and report." It was all he got out before meeting up with Thaegan and Lilly.

"Roger that," echoed in his ear.

"I'll let you up if you stop fighting me." Thaegan had the woman on the floor, her arms behind her back. The Ka'al was more than twice her size, still Lilly kicked and bucked, trying to work herself free. As the fight around them escalated, Lilly's body stilled, but not her mouth. Dallas didn't know many dialects, but it was clear Lilly knew the word *asshole* in all thirty-two languages of the Nebulae Galaxy and several more he'd never even heard of. He had no doubt the words she strung with it would have gotten him several weeks detention from the nuns at St. Christopher's Academy back home.

He bent low and met her eyes. "Lilly, we have no intention of hurting you."

The fear in her eyes softened to confusion and immediately hardened to anger.

Well, didn't this just suck? Lilly had no idea how'd she'd gone from mentally counting her reward to a face plant on the sticky floor of the tavern. No amount of maneuvering had budged the three-hundred-pound Ka'al holding her down. And now the man who would star in her nightly fantasies for the next month stared at her with an amused expression.

Though Lilly knew fighting wasn't going to get her anywhere, she screamed her frustration and kicked out, trying to dislodge the monster. She only managed to slam

her foot into the table leg, which just pissed her off all the more. Dallas didn't do a very good job of hiding his amusement.

"If you know the asshole doing chiropractic on my spine, could you kindly ask him to let me up?" she asked, her tone dripping with sweetness.

Dallas nodded and the Ka'al stood, hauling Lilly to her feet in one effortless move. The alien's mahogany skin glistened with the coppery sheen of a man under stress. His muscular chest, barely covered by the deeply V'd tank top, heaved. Holding her down had taken no effort, but the energy she'd tried to use on the Znedu was still high and the Ka'al was paying the price of touching her.

Lilly's body pulsed and throbbed, her nipples oversensitive and her pussy tingling. Regardless of how it was affecting the Ka'al, trying to use her powers at the moment would be futile. Even if he didn't still have her hands held behind her back, she was too pissed to focus the energy effectively.

And now the bar was in a state of total chaos. The fight that had started as a scuffle between two horny males on the dance floor had erupted into a full-fledged brawl. All the better to ditch Dallas and his sidekick and recapture Grebetz.

Lilly leaned toward Dallas, careful not to touch him, and yelled over the confusion, "I didn't need saving, but thank you."

Dallas shook his head. "You don't understand. You're coming with us."

What the hell? She had work to do, and it didn't include servicing these males.

A Znedu came flying at them. The Ka'al blocked the alien's body and swung a punch at the angry Braughtot looking for a fight. Dallas turned his back to her to assist the Ka'al if the big alien needed him. It was just the distraction Lilly had been looking for. She slipped the dagger from her sleeve, and when Dallas turned back, she lunged. Lilly had only wanted to nick him, but he saw the glint of the knife and moved. The deadly weapon sliced up his inner thigh. She'd opened a major artery. *Shit.*

Disbelief had Dallas staring at the gash, blood pouring from his body. His leg gave way and he fell to his knees. He looked at her, the question written in the lines of pain in his face.

"I'm sorry." She mouthed the words and turned to run.

"Thaegan." The word croaked from Dallas' lips.

He hadn't needed to say anything. As if one with Dallas, the Ka'al turned, wrestled the dagger from Lilly and threw her over his shoulder. It pissed her off how easily this alien could control her. Nothing in her years of combat had ever taught her how to deal with an alien who outsized her by two hundred pounds. But she had one weapon no male could fight – and she had every intention of using it.

Sirens sounded in the distance.

Dallas attempted to stand, but his leg gave out once again. Without slowing, Thaegan threw the wounded man over the other shoulder and joined the rest of the patrons streaming out the door and fleeing from the authorities.

Lilly watched the stone walls of the alleys pass by in a blur. The chaos and sirens from the main thoroughfare receded as they crisscrossed their way through the bowels of the city, Thaegan's bare feet slapping out a steady rhythm on the bricks. She had no idea what they intended to do with her, but she wasn't going to wait to find out.

Shoving Dallas' bouncing arms out of the way, Lilly pressed both palms in the center of the Ka'al's back and focused the energy. The motion of Thaegan's jarring pace made it nearly impossible to maintain the contact. With so much of her body touching the alien, she focused on pouring the sexual heat out through every pore.

The grip around her waist relaxed a fraction and she held her breath willing the big alien to drop her. When he didn't slow, Lilly forced the energy higher. Her own body burned with the need searing through her. She would be hard-pressed to ease the ache between her thighs on her own. It didn't matter. All that mattered was getting away from these men.

Thaegan stumbled, a warrior cry ripping from his throat. "Stop, witch! I will not succumb."

His words startled her. How did he know? No male had ever been aware of what she was doing. She didn't have time to contemplate the question. Her only concern was freedom. Lilly pushed another wave of energy and the big Ka'al went down on his knees. His arm went lax, releasing her as her feet hit the pavement. She stumbled backward, falling to her ass. Momentum carried her back and she slammed her head on the concrete. Pain rang in her ears as she fought to remain conscious.

Rolling to her side, she watched the Ka'al fall on his face. Dallas lay motionless where Thaegan had dropped him. She had no doubt—from the way blood had been gushing back at the tavern—that she'd very likely delivered a fatal blow. It wasn't what she'd intended, but running through the events of the evening, she wondered if they'd discovered her identity and tried to stop her. Dallas had conveniently shown up at the same tavern where she'd intended to take down Venair Grebetz and then he'd gotten in the middle of her taking the alien into custody. Perhaps they were working for the Znedu. The thought soured in her stomach.

She fought to get to her feet. Lilly had expended so much energy her body was weak and screaming for sexual release. A side effect of her gift and one she didn't usually mind. But right now, with survival her top priority, she pushed those needs aside.

Standing on unsteady legs, Lilly surveyed her surroundings. A van was parked not far from where she'd taken down the Ka'al. She wondered if they'd intended to kidnap her. The consequences of their success brought on a new wash of fear and pushed her into action. With a quick glance into the night sky, she calculated direction by the position of the moons and chose a back alley she believed would take her west toward her hotel. She sensed more than saw motion from Dallas but didn't expect he could do much with his wound.

The unmistakable whoosh of a laser echoed in the alley only a second before pain seared through her shoulder and the world went black around her.

Chapter Four

Fuck. That's what this whole thing had become. One fuck up after another.

Dallas pocketed the Treljon laser and rolled to his back. Pain seared through his leg as he fought to sit up. The woman he'd just shot had attacked to kill, not wound. The thought soured in his gut. It wasn't as if he hadn't been someone's quarry before, but he'd sure as hell never had sex with someone who'd put a target on his back either.

Through the fog of agony, Dallas wondered if he'd been set up.

Whatever had happened, he'd let his guard down and managed to endanger himself and his partner – again. *A dry run.* What the fuck was that? Dallas had known something wasn't right when the human female had come on to him. He'd naively operated on the misconception that she'd actually been attracted to him and wasn't working some hidden agenda. How the hell could he have let this happen? He didn't need to ponder that question long. He'd been thinking with his fucking dick again rather than paying attention to the facts.

He'd let his team down and Thaegan may have paid the ultimate price for his lapse in judgment. Dallas had no idea what Lilly had done to the alien, but there was no doubt in his mind that she was responsible for whatever caused his partner to cry out in torment before hitting the ground like a felled sequoia.

Dallas pushed himself to his hands and knees and swallowed the bile burning in his throat. He walked his hands up the nearby handrail of the stairs until he was upright. Neither Thaegan nor Lilly were moving. The laser shot he'd delivered probably hadn't killed her, but at the moment, he didn't give a shit one way or the other. The pain in his leg had subsided to a raw ache. In the yellow wash of the naked bulb over the doorway, he checked his wound. With rapt fascination he watched the blood continue to clot and the wound slowly healed. It was an odd tingling feeling that Dallas hadn't quite gotten use to.

Satisfied that he wasn't going to bleed to death, Dallas limped over to the big Ka'al, checked for wounds before rolling him over on his back. Thaegan appeared to be sleeping, one side of his mouth curved in a drunken smile. What the hell had the woman done to his partner that had brought him down without any outward sign of injury? He slapped Thaegan's cheeks and his partner's eyes fluttered.

"Thaegan. Wake up. You hurt?"

Thaegan's eyes opened, the pupils dilated and unfocused. He mumbled something incoherent about his ex-wife's oral prowess. Without knowing what was wrong, Dallas had no idea how to help him. He slapped the man's cheeks a couple more times.

Thaegan swam from the mist of unconsciousness, focused on Dallas, and immediately jumped to his feet. "Get that woman the hell away from me." He turned in a quick circle, confusion furrowing his brow. "Where the hell is the little witch?"

"If you mean Lilly, she's —"

"No, the Seraphelium. Where. The. Fuck. Is she?" Thaegan asked through clenched teeth.

"The woman you carried from the tavern is down for the count." Dallas pointed to Lilly's still form. "I stunned her with my laser after you went down." He wondered if he'd hurt her but pushed the thought aside. He shouldn't give a rat's ass about the woman who'd tried to kill him.

Thaegan stormed over to the van and threw open the back doors. It had been parked there to collect *Hij'Rozhod*, but that wasn't supposed to happen until tomorrow night. No one expected they'd be taking anyone into custody tonight.

The big alien leaned in. From the noisy crashes and bangs, it sounded as if he were emptying some of the supply boxes on the shelves. Triumphantly, Thaegan came up with a length of rope. "You're going to tie her fucking hands." He stalked to Lilly, his breath coming hard, sweat glistening on his forehead. "I don't want her touching me again."

Dallas' leg was down to a dull ache, the blood no longer flowing from the wound. Still, he limped as he followed his partner and worked to assess the situation.

Thaegan stood a foot from Lilly as if she exuded some malevolent aura. Dallas reached out to reassure his partner. The Ka'al's muscles trembled beneath his palm with some emotion he couldn't identify. He had never known his partner to get rattled over a simple hit and split. He wondered again what exactly she'd done to the Ka'al.

"Dude, I don't think she's going anywhere," said Dallas. He looked down at the still form of the woman who'd rocked his world not two hours earlier and guilt sliced his gut. He wasn't sure how it had all come to her being unconscious, but here it was.

"I don't really give a shit what you're thinking right now, Sawyer." Thaegan shook the rope in his face. "You *will* take this from me and you *will* tie her hands. Not some sweet little granny knot she can undo when she wakes up. But some fucking double bowline square hitch shit you learned in Boy Scouts kinda knot." He shoved the rope in Dallas' chest. "I don't want her touching me again. It's too much. I can't handle it." The words growled low and menacing. Thaegan paced in a quick circle, his shaking hand running down his braid. Dallas had never seen him this hyped on adrenaline before.

Dallas knelt beside Lilly. The woman's face was angelic in its softness. He hadn't liked what had happened to Thaegan, but using the laser on her seemed overkill. Worse still as she lay so motionless on the hard-packed dirt of the alley. He gently rolled her on her stomach, bringing her hands behind her back and tied the rope.

"Don't you feel it?" Thaegan stood over him, nervous energy sluicing off him in waves.

"Guilty?" Dallas touched Lilly's shoulder where the laser beam had singed her coat. "I sure as hell do."

"Guilt? Are you shitting me? That woman's as dangerous as any fully armed fugitive we've chased across this galaxy. She'll suck the life out of any male and they'll thank her as she's doing it." With the edgy moves of a boxer getting ready to enter the ring, Thaegan bounced on the balls of his feet, his hands shaking at his sides.

Lilly stirred.

"Do it now. Before she gets her hands on either of us," Thaegan said. "Put her palms together and wrap the rope so she can't lay them on anyone."

Dallas did as Thaegan instructed, though it seemed a little obsessive. He straightened, staring at the crazed look in his partner's eye. "What the hell did she do to you?"

"Let's get her in the van. I desperately need to get back to the apartment. Thanks to her I'm horny as hell, and if I've got my facts straight—and I'm pretty sure I do—nothing but a good fuck is going to bring me down from this."

Dallas rolled Lilly over. Gently, he scooped her up and pushed to his feet. She snuggled into his neck as if she were sleeping. She felt right in his arms. Shit, at the moment she seemed about as dangerous as a lost kitten, and he felt the hard punch of guilt to his gut. He had no idea how the situation had come to this.

Thaegan reached into the van and came out holding a hood. All this equipment was here to bring in *Hij'Rozhod*, who had killed government officials and a president, not a human female who smelled like a Texas summer rain. Dallas wanted to wave him off, but if Lilly came to, it wouldn't do for her to know where they'd taken her. No doubt Bastower would want a formal interrogation and QAL protocol said that had to be done in an undisclosed location. He nodded and Thaegan brought the dark material down over her head, careful not to touch her.

The Ka'al stepped away quickly as if her body were toxic sludge from the crystal mines.

Dallas laid her carefully on the carpeted floor of the van. Rolling Lilly to her side so she wasn't lying on her bound hands, he smoothed the leather skirt down her thigh, covering the luscious curve of her ass. He couldn't keep his hand from traveling the full length of her silken thigh. Jesus, what was his problem? He was mooning over Lilly like a lovesick teenager with his first crush.

He moved back and caught Thaegan eyeing her with unmitigated lust in his eyes. Stepping around the Ka'al and closing the doors, Dallas blocked Lilly from his partner's hungry gaze.

They settled themselves in the front of the van. Dallas sent a coded message back to headquarters, informing Bastower they had the woman who had very likely fucked up their mission and were taking her in for questioning. He could only imagine how his boss would react to that news. No way was it some karmic blunder that she'd randomly chosen Grebetz as her client out of a tavern full of aliens. The lethal way she'd used the

dagger didn't bode well either. Dallas pondered the connection between Grebetz and the woman and the strange effect she had on his partner.

When the transmission was confirmed, he called up the city map on the computer, programmed the coordinates of the QAL safe house and sat back as the van lifted and began to move.

"The Seraphelium really doesn't affect you, does she?" Thaegan motioned his head to the back of the van where Lilly lay motionless. "I mean, you just touched her and you feel *nothing*?"

Dallas shook his head, trying to clear away the confusion. "You're losing me on this one, dude. We fucked in the alley. She screwed up everything tonight. So, the only thing I'm feeling right now is pissed. And I have no idea what cerebellums have to do with anything here."

Thaegan shook his head and inhaled. "Not cerebellums, though I suspect there's something involved there. Ser-a-fee-lee-um." He pronounced the word slowly. "An ancient race." He stared out the side window at the high buildings of the inner city giving way to smaller neighborhoods. It would be only minutes before they reached the ranch in the desert. Hopefully enough time for Thaegan to pull himself together.

Thaegan's voice was soft as he continued. "It's a myth. A story told by horny males in the locker rooms of Beta Mrenn. No one believes they really exist." He paused and turned back to Dallas. "But it has to be."

Dallas just stared at him, thinking the mishap in the alley had rocketed his partner into a black hole of crazy space. "What the hell are you talking about, Thaegan?"

"Here's the short version." He stared at Dallas, the green hue of the control board accenting the deep ridges along Thaegan's forehead and nose. "There's a story about a race of woman, the Seraphelium who can control a male's libido with just a touch." Thaegan's hands stirred the air as he searched for words. "Affect his hormones. Make a guy horny as hell. Make you want them so badly that you don't have any choice but to sleep with them. When buddies would give you a hard time about sleeping with someone...less than desirable...we'd say she was a Seraphelium...we had no choice." He laughed at the absurdity of how he sounded and shrugged. "No one believed they existed. Everyone knew it was a flimsy excuse." He shot a look over his shoulder at Lilly's still form. "But now I'm not so sure."

"And how does this fairy tale involve Lilly exactly?" Dallas asked evenly.

"I felt the surge of sexual energy in the tavern when I first grabbed her, but I thought it was caused by the fight." He looked away. "You know that adrenaline-induced hard-on."

Dallas nodded. Yeah, dangerous situations tended to do that. He was never sure if it was the adrenaline or the close calls on one's life, but whichever, a good round of sex usually stilled the trembling muscles and pounding heart faster than any Regent's ale ever could.

"But this was different," Thaegan continued. "While I was holding her down, I could feel it slam into me in waves."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but what I really wanted to do right there in the tavern was rip her clothes off and screw her brains out. Right in the middle of all that chaos, it's all I could think about."

"Thaegan, you're not—"

"Let me finish." He held up a hand. "I was focused on getting us all out of there and didn't think much about it *until* I was running through the alley. The feeling was overpowering. I became acutely aware of her hands, hot on my back, but it felt as if she had them wrapped around my dick. With each step, the urge to throw her on the ground and fuck her was overwhelming. And it kept growing until every cell in my body burned with the need. Then...I don't know...it just sort of swamped me. Everything washed over and completely inundated me. I must have blacked out." He looked over at Dallas. "My cock feels as if it's going to explode if I don't get some relief soon."

"So, you're saying when I did the vertical mamba in the alley with Miss Serph-a-whatever back there, she *made* me do it?"

"Actually, I'm not saying that at all."

"Then what the hell are you saying, Thaegan?"

Thaegan looked down at Dallas' thigh. "How's the leg?"

Dallas had no idea why his partner changed the subject, but he pulled open the slit in his jeans, offering Thaegan a view of the flesh. The skin was a raw welt, but it had completely closed and the pain had subsided to nothing more than an annoyance. The dried blood on his thigh and jeans, the only evidence of the mortal wound Lilly had inflicted. "It's fine. But I don't know how that..." Then he understood. Dallas looked up at his partner. Thaegan's mouth quirked in a knowing smile, one eyebrow arched as if to say *I'm not crazy*.

"Amazing stuff that artificial blood," said Dallas.

"That's exactly what I'm thinking."

* * * * *

Though the foggy edges of unconsciousness receded, the darkness still enveloped her. Panic ripped through Lilly and she fought to keep it at bay. A quick assessment found her lying on her side, hands bound behind her back, her shoulder smarting where they'd hit her with the laser and some soft cloth thrown over her head. Her mouth wasn't gagged but making any sound when her captors believed she was unconscious would not be wise.

From the low hum surrounding her, Lilly surmised she was in a vehicle. Perhaps the van from the alley. The sounds of a heated discussion drifted from the front of the

vehicle and she strained to hear them. It took a couple of minutes for her brain to make sense of their words.

"How's the leg?" She recognized the deep baritone of the Ka'al. She'd pushed him to his limits in the alley and overloaded his sexual circuits enough for the big alien to black out. She was blaming him for losing the Znedu and the bounty that came with him. Lilly hoped the guy had a painful hard-on the size of the Sears tower.

"It's fine," said Dallas.

Relief flooded through her. Lilly had only meant to threaten Dallas into letting her go, but when she'd lunged at the man, the Ba'alkin dagger had honed in on an artery of its own accord and sliced it wide open. No wonder the knives weren't street legal. She'd been sickened to see his blood spilling on the tavern floor.

Though their encounter had been brief, Dallas' talented hands had been both gentle and masterful and had played her body like a maestro coaxing sweet music from the instruments at his command. Her body had definitely bowed to his whim. She could use some of that now. The gentle vibration of the vehicle made her acutely aware of the energy ricocheting along her nerves, making her jumpy with need. She squeezed her thighs and rotated her hips. The string of her thong moved pleasantly over her swollen clit, but it wasn't quite enough to give her the relief her body demanded. Just as well. No telling what these men intended. Lilly may need to use her gift again. Having the current powered up meant less of her energy reserves would be used in defense, leaving more for an escape.

The van stopped and the engine was cut, making it easier for her to hear.

"So do you at least believe it's possible?" the Ka'al asked.

What was possible? What had she missed?

"Until proven otherwise, I'll go with your hypothesis. But that doesn't answer the question of what we..." Dallas's voice drifted off as they left the van, both doors humming shut.

Relax, she instructed her body. She might as well play this unconscious card until she got some information from them.

The door at her feet opened. "...until we have *Hij'Rozhod*. Then if she has nothing to do with it, we can let her go," the alien said.

"The hood is overkill, Thaegan. She's unconscious, for chrissake. I'm not making her wear it."

"The hood can go but keep her hands bound."

Gently, her head was lifted and the cloth maneuvered away from her face. Though it hadn't restricted her breathing, Lilly couldn't help but pull in a lungful of cool desert air. She covered it with a soft moan as if she were just roused from a deep sleep. Neither male moved, but when her body remained still, strong hands scooped under her knees and around her shoulders. The clean smell of Dallas drifted over her senses. The strong muscles of his arms and chest cradled her body as he lifted her with ease and pulled

Lilly close. Her body reacted immediately, desire and energy humming over her synapses. It took all her self-control to remain lax and not snuggle into the warmth of his neck.

Stairs creaked. Lilly chanced a peek at her surroundings. Rough-hewn boards were illuminated in the yellow wash of light from a single window. A rocking chair sat idle. She wondered if they'd brought her to the mining community in the desert. Even Garalon Five with all its updated building materials had residents who'd gone back to the land. She'd never been this far from the city's center but had talked with enough locals and studied enough maps to know her way around the surrounding terrain. A bounty hunter had to know all the places a fugitive could run.

Escaping from here would be difficult for sure, especially without the use of a luna vehicle, but if she was where she believed, then mountains lay just to the north. A night's trek away.

"Tie her here," Thaegan commanded.

"What the hell? I'm not tying her anywhere." Dallas laid her on something soft.

But rough hands quickly scooped her up. Thaegan let out a frustrated cry as if touching her burned. The way her nipples ached and her pussy throbbed, Lilly knew the energy still flowed. Add this to what she'd done to him in the alley and the Ka'al must be about ready to explode. Served him right. She hadn't asked them to get in the middle of her takedown.

His feet slapped across the floor as he dropped her unceremoniously on a hard chair, her bound hands sliding behind the chair back. She let her head flop to her chest. Thaegan's rough handling made it difficult to play the role of the unconscious victim. At some point she'd have to stop faking, but with her unconscious, she hoped they might be less guarded with their conversation.

"I'm not touching her again." Thaegan's words came out on panting breaths. "And you *will* tie her to this chair. I'm not chancing having her hands free."

Dallas's boots clicked across the floor. "You really think —"

"I don't *think*, Dallas, I *know*. This Seraphelium is dangerous."

Whoa, stop the presses. She hadn't heard that term since leaving Earth. How the hell had the Ka'al figured it out? Most aliens in deep space had never heard of her ancestors.

"And while you're at it, tie her feet to the chair legs."

"She's not going anywhere."

"Do. It." She heard the hard emotion riding on Thaegan's words. Lilly wasn't sure if it was anger or fear. She hoped the latter.

Dallas bound first one ankle and then the other, spreading her legs wide. The unmistakable musky odor of her lust filled the air. *Good.* Even better than she hoped. Males couldn't resist the smell of an aroused Seraphelium. It was almost as good as her touch. Time to put a plan in motion.

Rolling her head side to side, Lilly groaned as if waking from a long slumber.

"Lilly?" Dallas's voice was soft, her name drifting off his tongue. It had neither the hard edge of anger nor the brittle tone of a man trying to control his lust. She wanted nothing more than to drown in its whiskey heat. But that was only a pipe dream.

"Dallas?" Her eyes fluttered as she lifted her head and let it roll along her shoulders. She focused on the man kneeling between her legs, his wide palms warm on her thighs. A perfect position for her to do the most damage. "Where am I?"

The deep brown of Dallas' eyes betrayed no emotion but concern dug a deep V in his brow. "Do you remember what happened?"

Yes, she remembered every detail. And these two males would pay for having gotten in the way of her capturing the Znedu. "No. I...I remember going back to the tavern in hopes you were there, but I didn't find you...so I..." Her skin flushed from the lie, but she hoped he believed it was her shyness over their liaison. "I decided to find another client. A Znedu I believe. We'd just agreed to terms when a fight broke out—"

"Oh, that's fucking bullshit." Thaegan strode around the chair, standing behind Dallas. The moment he caught her scent, the Ka'al's shoulders stiffened. The muscles of his jaw bunched and the ridges along his forehead and nose pulsed with barely control emotion. "She's lying," the Ka'al said through clenched teeth. "You don't remember trying to take a slice out of Dallas?" He crossed his arms over his chest, his fists clenching and unclenching as he fought for control.

From the bulge in his pants, she wondered how much longer he could keep from touching her. She needed to get free. At this point, Dallas didn't seem to be reacting. No doubt the Ka'al and she were still bound by the energy thread she'd created in the alley. Lilly ratcheted the energy up a notch, hoping Thaegan would step closer.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean." She was stalling for time, trying to figure out how Dallas could be so close and not be feeling the sensual energy crackling in the air. Her gaze flitted from the Ka'al's obvious arousal to Dallas. But it wasn't the fly of the human's jeans that drew her attention. It was the gaping hole at his thigh. The flesh was covered in dried blood and showed only the slightest hint of the deep wound the dagger had ripped. Even with the medical advancements she'd seen in deep space, nothing prepared her for the sight. "Dallas, your leg...how is it possible?"

Color flooded Dallas' cheeks and he stood abruptly.

Thaegan growled low. "I'm afraid you don't get to ask the questions here, woman."

"But he's—"

"Just fine," Dallas cut her off. "No thanks to you."

"It's not like I meant to—"

"You," Thaegan shook his finger at Lilly, "need to stop talking. I've never hurt a female," hatred narrowed his golden eyes to dangerous slits, "but there's always a first time."

Lilly's gaze ricocheted from Thaegan to Dallas and back again. "Really, I—"

A full roar bounced off the wooden walls of the cabin as the Ka'al lunged for her. Dallas was quicker. His fist shot out, catching the alien in the jaw. Thaegan stumbled back and Dallas stepped between her and the angry alien.

"Don't do it, Thaegan. I'm warning you."

The hulking Ka'al's stunned expression would have been comical if it weren't for the animosity sluicing off the men.

"How the fuck can you defend her after what she's done?" Thaegan absently rubbed his jaw. "She *needs* to tell us the truth. A little *persuasion* would be a satisfying means to that end."

Dallas worked his fist, shaking out the pain. "We'll get her to tell us the truth, but not with violence, Thaegan."

The Ka'al screamed in frustration. "Let me prove to you how dangerous she is."

"What the hell?" she countered. "A tiny woman against the two of you? How the hell can I be dangerous?"

Dallas turned slowly, anger and hurt sparking in his eyes. "You know, Lilly, I've been wondering the same thing. I have no doubt whatsoever that you controlled first me then the Znedu and now Thaegan. I just don't know *how* you're doing it."

"But *I* do." Thaegan stepped around Dallas and the human didn't try to stop him this time. "I've got you figured out, *Seraphelium*."

It took all her effort to keep from reacting to the word the Ka'al spat out like a curse. She forced a laugh that sounded hollow even to her own ears. "I have no idea what you're talking about, *asshole*." She looked around Thaegan to where Dallas stood. The man's broad shoulders were thrown back, his arms crossed over his chest, as if protecting his heart. She should have expected Dallas' resentment after she'd used him, but to see it so visibly written in his hard expression, stabbed at her heart. She laughed again, this time with more conviction, trying to dismiss Thaegan's statement. "Dallas, do you have any idea what this Ka'al is blathering on about?"

"It appears Thaegan is the only one here who knows exactly what's going on. As his partner, I have to defer to him. If he thinks an interrogation is the only way for us to move forward, then so be it. I'm not going to stand in his way."

Obviously, Dallas had decided to let the Ka'al do some *persuading*. Cold fingers of dread walked up her spine and lifted the hairs on the back of her neck. Her eyes moved slowly back to the Ka'al. Her body chilled as fear knotted in her gut. Lilly didn't know these men. Had no idea what they wanted or who they worked for. If one thing had been confirmed for her in the last couple of hours, these men were on a mission. The only question was which side of the law held their allegiance.

The Ka'al stepped closer. Laying his hands on the arms of the chair, he leaned in, the smooth heat of his cheek brushing across her face. He closed his eyes and filled his lungs with her scent. She squirmed in the chair, releasing the musky odor that must be driving him insane. Controlling the men while their libidos raged was her only hope.

Warm air lifted her hair as he exhaled. "Your smell is sweet to be sure, Lilly. But we both know without your hands you're quite dead in the water." His voice was a mere whisper of breath in her ear. "I intend to prove what you are to Dallas. You can either cooperate or not. Either way, I don't give a shit."

He straightened, and for the first time since she'd left Earth—Lilly feared for her life.

The quiet snick of the Ba'alkin dagger was like a sonic boom in the stillness of the room. She couldn't control the gasp of terror or the twitch of muscle as the sound filled the cabin. When Thaegan lifted it, the blade reflected menacingly in the low light of the cabin.

"Dallas, you're not going to let him...not with the Ba'alkin dagger?" The question trembled through her dry lips. "This is seriously out of control," said Lilly as Thaegan laid the cold blade against her cheek, sending shivers of alarm through her veins. Lilly closed her eyes, waiting for it to rip through the pounding pulse of her jugular.

Chapter Five

Dallas trusted Thaegan with his life. In the past five years, the Ka'al had saved his ass more times than he cared to remember. But he wasn't sure exactly what Lilly had done to his partner. Thaegan seemed hyped up on some drug that had him operating in some alternate dimension.

"Thaegan, go easy with the knife." Dallas shifted so he was in his partner's peripheral vision. "She's tied up like some prisoner of war, for chrissake. She's not going anywhere."

The blade brushed down Lilly's neck, the hard throb of her pulse lifting the alabaster skin of her throat. Dallas had laved that spot, thrilling in the power he'd had to make it race. Now, as she forced her eyes open, the cold glint of fear offset the proud set of her jaw and Dallas worried for her safety. "Thaegan, put the fucking knife away." The command did nothing to shift his partner's attention.

"I can't," he said without taking his eyes off Lilly. Thaegan dragged the tip of the blade down her chest. "You're not going to admit anything unless we force the issue, are you, Lilly?" With a flick of his wrist, the first button of Lilly's blouse flew through the air and bounced on the wooden floor. The noise split the heavy silence like a gong.

"Thaegan," Dallas said his name evenly, stepping closer to the chair. He wasn't sure how he could take down the Ka'al without the blade injuring Lilly. Dallas was becoming more convinced with each passing minute that his partner was losing his grip on reality. "I really think you need to put the knife down."

With another twist of Thaegan's wrist, the second button followed the path of the first. "Not going to happen, Sawyer. I intend to prove," the knife flashed and a third button flew, "what she is. Then we'll figure out what the hell she's up to." Flick, flick and the last two buttons flew.

Thaegan used the knife to part Lilly's blouse, exposing the creamy flesh of her heaving breasts. The Ka'al leaned in close and inhaled her scent. The low purr of Thaegan's arousal vibrated the air. Dallas had heard it before, but never when his partner was holding a woman at knife point.

"Jesus, Thaegan, what the fuck are you doing?" Dallas stepped closer.

Thaegan turned, aiming the knife at Dallas. "Back. Off."

"I'm not going to stand here while you rape Lilly." He used her name on purpose, trying to keep everything personal.

"Leave him, Dallas. He doesn't frighten me."

Lilly shifted in the chair, sitting up straighter. The subtle roll of her shoulders accentuated her plentiful cleavage. The lines between her brow softened and Dallas could swear her mouth became fuller, more inviting.

"The Ka'al doesn't know what he's talking about. He's a big man with a knife." Her chin jutted forward. "Strip me bare. I don't give a shit."

Thaegan leaned in close, his mouth curving in a maniacal smile. "It's exactly what I intend to do, Seraphelium." The knife came up fast and hard, cutting the center of Lilly's bra. The lacy slips of material fell away, leaving her luscious breasts exposed. Pink patches of skin showed where Dallas' whiskers had burned the tender tissue earlier in the evening.

"That's enough." Dallas' words echoed off the walls of the small cabin as he stepped forward. His hand came up under Thaegan's forearm, catching his wrist, twisting the knife away from Lilly's vulnerable flesh. Dallas used his momentum to push the Ka'al away from the chair. "What the fuck are you doing, Thaegan?"

Anger rumbled through the alien's chest, vibrating the air. They both knew it would take nothing for Thaegan to break free of Dallas' grasp. But his partner just stood toe-to-toe with him, the knife between them, his eyes locked on Dallas.

"Get out of my way, human."

"You'll have to go through me to get to her." Dallas nodded his head in Lilly's direction. "You're better than this degradation."

"But I need to prove it. Even with her hands bound, she controls us." Thaegan inhaled deeply. "Tell me her scent isn't heating your blood."

Dallas couldn't admit that. The moment he'd bound Lilly's legs to the chair, he'd smelled the intoxicating aroma of her. It had brought him back to the silken heat of her wet pussy surrounding his cock. But he'd pushed that aside, he needed to focus on the madness overtaking Thaegan.

He lowered his voice. "The *only* thing that's important right now is finding out what she was doing with Grebetz."

"Sawyer." He felt the muscles of Thaegan's forearm relax. "She has the mark. I know it. I just don't know where." His partner stepped back, turning his palm up, offering Dallas the dagger. "It's the kiss of evil. I had no intention of hurting her. I was just trying to find it."

Dallas took the knife.

"You're right. I shouldn't be so close to the witch," Thaegan said, visibly shaken by what had just happened. "You search her, and when you find it, you'll understand the truth."

Dallas looked over his shoulder at Lilly. Unspoken questions ricocheted in her coffee eyes and trembled along her chin. He suspected his partner understood something he didn't. The woman definitely had some kind of hold on men. And this *was* deep space after all. There was no reason Lilly couldn't be some alien life form he'd

never heard of. Resigned to keep her safe, Dallas decided to follow through with his partner's plan.

"What does it look like?" Dallas asked Thaegan.

His partner looked at him as if he'd grown a second Xerick head. "How the hell should I know?" he asked. "It's a fucking male fantasy that I never believed would become flesh. But here we are."

Dallas walked back to Lilly. The corners of her sumptuous mouth trembled with a nervous smile. "If I untie you, would —"

"You are *not* untying her," Thaegan yelled.

Turning around, Dallas faced a very angry Ka'al. "For chrissake, Thaegan, there are two of us and one of her."

"No. No. No. And did I say *fuck* no?" Thaegan grabbed Dallas' shoulders, digging his beefy fingers into the muscle. "Please just trust me on this. Leave her bound to the chair. If there's no mark we'll release her and I'll commit myself to the loony bin on Pteran Omega. Because then I'll know this shit-assed heat sparking through my veins, driving me fucking nuts and making me horny as hell is all in my head and not something she's doing to me."

"She's not even touching you."

Thaegan released Dallas and waved his hands in frustration. "But it's in the air. Like static electricity, it's just hanging here." Thaegan's gaze dropped to Dallas' leg. "But I think you can control her."

Dallas didn't know if that was the case, but the undisciplined way his logical partner was acting was completely out of character. He had to believe something was going on.

"What do I need to do?" Dallas asked.

"Cut off her clothes and search every inch of her skin for something, *anything* that isn't a normal human mark."

He turned back to Lilly. She'd schooled her expression. Her face no longer held any emotion, as if she were resigned to whatever he needed to do. What he really needed to do was release her and sink his cock deep in her wet heat and forget that she'd nearly screwed up everything with Grebetz. What Dallas did instead was turn and drop to his knees front of her.

"You know I'm not going to hurt you, right?"

Only her head moved in affirmation.

"You would make it easier on us if you just told Thaegan what he wants to know."

"But I haven't any idea what he's talking about." Lilly's chin jutted forward, her tone pitched ever so slightly higher as she spoke.

If Dallas hadn't spent months in Quantico, studying interrogation techniques, he wouldn't have picked up on the lie.

He wasn't sure what he'd find, but he was resigned to stripping her naked to uncover whatever it was she was hiding. Looking into the chocolate pools of her eyes was too difficult, so Dallas stood and walked to the back of the chair. Gently, he put the blade of the Ba'alkin dagger into the cuff of her fur coat. The black mark on her shoulder, singed by the laser, screamed at him. As if he needed another reminder of how he'd already hurt her tonight.

Dallas tried to convince himself that none of this was his fault. If Lilly would come clean he'd have the truth and this whole ordeal would be over. He'd simply turn her over to Bastower at QAL headquarters and file this night under "Shitty Memories" category.

But Lilly was forcing him to humiliate her and that just pissed him off. Well, he'd just get this fucking mess over. He pressed the blade upward, intent on cutting through the coat's sleeve, but it jumped as if it had a mind of its own. The dagger curved toward her wrist and Dallas whipped it away before it ripped open Lilly's arm.

"What the fuck was that?" Dallas looked up at Thaegan.

"I guess I should have mentioned the dagger feeds off strong negative emotions. Anger. Resentment. Misery. It senses it in the handler and seeks to draw blood." Thaegan shrugged. "I have no idea how it works, but it's the reason Ba'alkin daggers aren't legal. I figured you knew." He shot him a false smile. "Think happy thoughts and you won't hurt her."

"You could've told me that before." Dallas brought the blade back to the sleeve of her coat, filling his mind with thoughts of her writhing against his body. With gentle sawing motions, he cut from wrist to neck, letting the front of the coat fall to the floor. He did the same to the other sleeve and soft fur lay at her feet like some wounded animal. He wouldn't bother with the back until he'd separated the sleeves of her blouse.

He couldn't quite ignore the quick rise and fall of her voluptuous breasts, their pink nipples pinched into tight points, begging for his attention. Blood rushed to his cock and Dallas had all he could do to focus on the sleeve in his fingers. With great care, he cut up the white satin fabric from wrist to throat, the material only half as soft as the skin beneath. He lifted the straps of her bra away from her shoulders before slicing them through.

Setting down the knife, he offered Lilly another chance to stop this madness. "Are you sure there isn't something you want to tell us?"

Lilly's shoulders stiffened beneath his hands. Continuing to stare straight ahead, she shook her head in response. The flaxen waves of her hair brushed seductively across the backs of his hands and Dallas had to bite back a groan.

He hated that she was making him do this, but he had no choice. He felt Thaegan's anticipation like a force slamming into him. He reached over her shoulders and laid his palms high on her chest, brushing away the remnants of both the front of her blouse and the bra. The floral scent of her perfume wrapped around his nose and he wanted

nothing more than to step to the front of the chair and bury his face between her breasts, filling his lungs with the heady scent.

When Thaegan's hungry gaze traveled the length of her torso and back, a shiver rippled up Lilly's back. Dallas gave her shoulders a reassuring squeeze as his thumbs absently stroked the sides of her throat.

"There's nothing there." Thaegan cleared his throat and pointed. "Now the skirt."

Dallas didn't think he could stand having the woman laid bare in front of him. He would do anything to keep that from happening. "It could be on her back," he said hopefully.

Dallas parted the yellow silk of Lilly's hair, brushing it over her shoulders, hiding her breasts. He thought it would be easier, but when his hands swept over the milky curve of her back, he heard Lilly's sharp intake of breath and his cock jumped. "Lilly, lean forward so I can pull the shirt and coat away."

With her arms bound behind her, she couldn't do more than arch her back, which of course thrust her chest forward and he nearly groaned at the sight of her dusky nipples poking through the gold curtain of hair. He pulled the fabric free, adding it to the pile on the floor.

Thaegan came around her back and bent for a closer look. "Pull her hair away from her neck."

Dallas ran his fingers along the back of Lilly's skull, lifting the hair and exposing the delicate arch of her neck, taunting him to lean over and kiss the satin skin until she sighed his name. Not finding anything, he dropped the hair and reminded his dick once again that this was about identification and not seduction.

The Ka'al checked through the rungs of the wooden chair. "I'm not seeing anything. Skirt next and then the boots if we don't find anything."

Dallas picked up the dagger and shifted positions so he was kneeling in front of the woman. The misery in her eyes tracked his every move. With the heat of her body radiating through his clothes, Dallas had all he could do to focus on their objective. *Jesus*. Under normal circumstances, he'd love to have Lilly naked, bound and at his mercy. But this situation was quickly deteriorating from shitty to *completely* shitty.

"Lilly, I don't want to do this," he said. "Just tell us everything and this will all be over." And Christ, Dallas wanted it to be over. If he cut that skirt off, leaving her bound in the chair with nothing but the tiniest slip of a thong covering her body, he was sure he wouldn't be able to control the lust he felt for this human. She had touched a part of him tonight that he thought had died months ago on Canus Delta. But maybe Thaegan was right and even the artificial blood wasn't making him immune to whatever power she held over males.

"Why did you pick that particular Znedu tonight at the tavern?" Dallas asked nonchalantly as he brought the knife to the bottom edge of her skirt.

"He looked wealthy." Her gaze trailed over his face, but neither of them were giving away any hint of what they were feeling. "Besides, Znedus are amazing lovers."

And business was less than stellar earlier so I thought I deserved to treat myself to some good loving tonight."

Thaegan growled at her words, but the insult didn't bother Dallas. Regardless of what they found, the woman before him had been just as turned-on in the alley as him. No female body could fake that kind of arousal. There had been nothing about their sexual romp that had left either of them dissatisfied.

"So, you didn't cull that Znedu from the crowd for any other reason?" Dallas asked.

She leaned forward, the heat of her breasts pressing against the back of his hands, her face a breath from his. "Why don't you tell me why you care?"

"Let me remind you, human," Thaegan's voice, low and menacing, came from behind Dallas, "you are not in a position to *ask* the questions."

She sat back in a huff, the motion bouncing her breasts in front of him.

"I thought you realized I'm just another working woman. What more reason do I need?"

Ignoring the pull of her body, Dallas lifted a brow and shot a look at the knife, offering another chance to stop this craziness.

"Do what you have to do, human. You're not going to find anything." Lilly smiled, but it didn't reach the dark depths of her eyes. "In the end, you're just going to have a mouth full of crow as you shovel out hundreds of credits to replace my wardrobe."

Laying his palm on the inside curve of her thigh, Dallas worked his fingers beneath the supple leather and lifted it away from her leg. Her skin was flushed and warm under his fingers, and he worked to ignore the sensation. The razor edge of the blade cut through the material like soft butter. He curved it carefully around the side of her ass and tugged a little harder to cut through the waist. He repeated the motion again along the side of the other leg, but it caught on the elastic of her thong and she squirmed a little as it pulled taut a second before snapping under the sharp blade of the dagger.

His breath shook as he released a heavy sigh. Dallas really had no desire to remove the leather and expose the velvet flesh of her pussy. But he had no choice. With trembling hands he slid his fingers down the warm skin of her belly, hooked them under the leather fabric at the waist and lifted it away.

With all that naked flesh exposed to him, Dallas couldn't help but drink in her breathtaking beauty. The soft roundness of her breasts and belly begged to be caressed. But it was the satin flesh at the apex of her thighs where Dallas would really like to press his kisses, his tongue, exploring lower into her satin folds.

"See? Nothing." Lilly didn't quite pull off the breezy indifference. "So, why don't you untie me, find me something to wear and I'll be out of your hair?"

"Separate her thighs." Thaegan's command caught them both by surprise.

"Really, I think you two Neanderthals have taken this —"

Thaegan's impatience didn't allow her to finish. "You can do it gently, Dallas, or I can do it..."

Dallas looked over his shoulder at his partner. The large Ka'al trembled, his fists clenching and unclenching at his side, his thighs bouncing with unspent energy.

"But I can't guarantee her safety if I'm forced to move closer," Thaegan said evenly.

"I'll do it." Dallas turned back to Lilly. She shrugged and the corner of her mouth trembled with the hint of a disinterested smile that made her look more nervous than cavalier. But he noticed Lilly didn't shift to open her legs wider for them either.

Dallas laid his palms on the alabaster skin of her inner thighs, her body trembling beneath his palms. Having a woman quivering at his touch usually thrilled him, but he suspected this had more to do with fear than sexual arousal. Praying there would be nothing, suspecting there was, he pushed her thighs apart until the chair hindered anything more than a cursory inspection.

"Scooch forward," Dallas said quietly as he curved his hands around Lilly's sexy ass and forced her butt to the edge of the chair. Though she didn't fight him, her reticence was obvious. With one side of it cut, the thong slipped under her as she slid forward. The heat of her body and her nakedness slammed into him, forcing the air from his lungs.

"Lilly, I refuse to pry your legs open," Dallas said quietly. "But Thaegan will if you don't." Unable to bear being near her without touching her more intimately, Dallas stood and stepped back.

Her gaze flitted nervously to Thaegan but stayed only a moment before skittering back to Dallas. She inhaled deeply and closed her eyes, her legs parting in slow increments until her pussy was completely open to them. The folds of her glistening labia opened enticingly, beckoning his cock to slide into that slick channel. But her glistening slit didn't hold his attention for long. A scarlet mark the size and shape of a ripe summer strawberry drew his gaze to her left thigh.

The heavy aroma of her arousal increased tenfold, the smell warm and inviting. His mouth watered to bury his tongue in that heat and taste. But Dallas had only seconds to enjoy the earthy scent before Thaegan lunged for Lilly. For a second time the feral cry of frustration accentuated his partner's movement.

Dallas reacted immediately. Slamming his body into the Ka'al, he managed to do nothing more than send the alien off course and crashing into the dining table.

Thaegan turned back slowly, growling low, the primal look of sexual hunger darkening his eyes.

"You will *not* touch her, Thaegan," said Dallas.

"Who will stop me?" His partner roared the words as he ran at Dallas.

But Dallas anticipated the move and used the alien's own momentum to roll him over his back. Thaegan crashed to the floor. "Thaegan. You don't need to touch her. We've proven she's a Seraphelium. Now —"

"Now she satisfies *my* needs." Thaegan charged again. This time when Dallas tried to dodge him, Thaegan anticipated the move and slammed his shoulder into Dallas' gut, knocking him into the small couch under the front window. His partner stormed over to him and hauled him up by his shirt. In quick succession he landed punches to Dallas' jaw and eye. The pain rang through Dallas' skull and the metallic taste of blood filled his mouth. Whatever had taken hold of his partner had doubled the Ka'al's incredible strength.

With all the power he could muster, Dallas brought his knee into Thaegan's groin. It was enough to loosen his grip and Dallas balled both hands together and brought them down hard to the side of Thaegan's head. His partner released him and stumbled back but didn't fall. Thaegan's dazed expression gave Dallas some hope. He charged the Ka'al, hoping to knock him on his ass and maybe knock some sense into his head. But Thaegan was quicker. He dodged at the last second and rammed a heavy fist into Dallas' side. He heard the crack of bone and the piercing pain of broken ribs forced a scream from Dallas' lips. He went down hard, his head slamming into the stone hearth of the fireplace, completely crumpling his battered body.

The thud of Thaegan's heavy feet vibrated the floor. Dallas rolled to see him moving toward Lilly. He wasn't sure what his partner intended but had no doubt that whatever had taken hold of Thaegan had robbed his partner of rational thought. As the world warbled in front of him, Dallas forced his swollen lips to move. "*Schrak nal tine kres. Rebk nesht bekin na'al.*" *Brother of my blood. Not of birth but of war.*

Thaegan stopped as if he'd hit a wall.

Despite the slur, Dallas forced the words through his swollen lips. "*Riecks lackt tral dein Ze'alkr.*" *I lay thee at the feet of the most Holy.* Dallas had never intended to utter the words out loud—ever. Words he'd heard Thaegan repeat in a nonsensical mantra for hours at his bedside on Canus Delta. The musical notes had penetrated the haze of his coma and carried Dallas from death's door back to life. "*Esch nar lemrl sesche.*" *And beg for your life's soul.*

But when the Ka'al turned, Dallas could see the prayer cutting through the madness that had engulfed his partner and dared to continue. "*Riecks kre'ick tine lemrl barkt laewsherl irk tine schrak qai'id.*" *I promise my life in servitude for my brother's health.* It had taken him months to translate the words from the Ka'al dictionary to English. And when he realized the power of what Thaegan had offered him, Dallas promised himself never to use it against the one man who had given him everything. "*Unt tine nerst tane fa'ulk.*" *If my prayer but be granted me this day.*

But desperation trumped all personal promises.

Dallas felt his body healing, the pain ebbing from his face where Thaegan had pummeled his flesh. Dallas forced himself to sit up.

"You heard?" Thaegan asked.

"Every word," Dallas groaned as pain stabbed through him.

"And you invoke this promise I made?"

"If it means you'll leave Lilly to me, then yes."

"You know what you ask?" Thaegan's gravelly voice was low and even.

"You don't want to force yourself on her, Thaegan." With his arm supporting the knitting ribs, Dallas forced himself to his feet, his head swimming with the effort.

"The witch brings it upon herself with her powers."

"It's not right to take without permission. Despite whatever has taken hold of you, you wouldn't be happy if you did."

Thaegan shot a look of pure hatred over his shoulder. "But she begs for it when she uses her magic." He turned back to Dallas. "But you don't believe that."

"I know you believe it." Dallas inhaled a shaky breath, the pain in his side already easing and his swollen lip returning to normal, his words no longer slurred. "I'm asking you to leave her alone. Regardless of what she's done, the woman deserves nothing more from us than protection."

"Now that we know *what* she is and how she controlled the Znedeu, she deserves only one thing," Thaegan's yellow eyes were hard and cold as a luna crystal, "and you know what that is."

"I understand. And we'll get to that. But you have to promise me you aren't going to act," Dallas waved his hand up and down, pointing to the madness that thrummed through his partner, "on whatever the fuck's come over you."

"*She's* come over me," Thaegan roared, pointing a shaking finger at Lilly. "You. Are. Just. Not. Understanding." He looked at Lilly again, the ridges of his nose deepening as he scented the air. "Even now she works her powers." Thaegan turned and stalked toward the door. "I'll have to leave her to you. If I stay *she* will surely push me to the edge of delirium. And if I don't release this sexual energy, *I* will surely lose my mind." He put his hand on the old-fashioned doorknob but didn't turn it. "I'm just wondering who's going to protect *you* when I'm gone."

"I think I can take care of myself against a human female. It's not like I haven't had practice in that arena." Dallas forced a laugh.

"But she's not human." Thaegan pulled the door open. "When I return, I expect you'll have her ready." He started to leave but turned back to throw one last dig. "Just be sure she isn't controlling you, *brother*."

The Ka'al slammed the door behind him, the explosive sound nearly obliterating the mournful note of Lilly's quiet sobs.

Chapter Six

She couldn't stop. The tears came hot and hard, her throat burning with despair, sending the tears running down her cheeks. *Stupid*. Lilly should have expected their resentment. The minute the Ka'al had said the word *Seraphelium* Lilly understood history had reared its ugly head to begin the nightmare all over again.

Despite the pity in Dallas' eyes, Lilly wasn't sure there wasn't anything she could do to alter her future and that scared the shit out of her. Human males were ruthless creatures when they felt backed into a corner.

"P-please..." The word stumbled out on shattered breaths.

Immune to her pleas, Dallas stalked out of sight behind her. Water ran from the faucet at the sink and she heard the man sputter as it ran over his head.

"That's not the usual Thaegan. You don't need to worry about him," Dallas said quietly.

"Anything. I'll give you anything. Just don't..." Lilly couldn't bring herself to say the words. She'd fought the good fight on Earth only to find herself alone and trapped on a frigate bound for Krystallos Three. But this was deep space. It wasn't as if there would be docking stations with aliens to seduce. One quick shuttle hop and she'd be imprisoned forever with no escape. The fear burned her throat and the backs of her eyes, bringing on a fresh wave of tears.

Dallas stepped into view, water dripping from the curls of his hair, all remnants of blood washed from his face and head. "I'm not going to hurt you," he said.

She'd seen the beating the Ka'al had given him, yet the split lip and swollen eye seemed to have disappeared. Lilly wanted to ask what the hell was going on with that, but convincing this man not to ship her into sexual slavery trumped whatever secret Dallas kept from her.

Swallowing her trepidation, Lilly found her indignation, allowing it room to give her strength. She didn't deserve to be condemned for genetics. It's not as if she could help who she was. Lilly had never asked to be given this power. Moments like this just proved once again what a fucking curse her life had become.

"You've got me trussed up like a pig and now the Ka'al is ready to send me to slaughter." Swallowing her tears, Lilly pulled in a shaky breath, resolved to get herself free once again. She threw back her shoulders to communicate her resentment but only managed to put her boobs with their traitorous, hard nipples on display.

Dallas dragged his eyes down her body, lust darkening the irises until they were rich as finely aged whiskey and just as smooth. Slow and needy, his gaze trailed gooseflesh in its wake, sending hot sparks of desire straight down her core. Lilly shifted

and another wave of her scent filled the air. Dallas' nostrils flared. *Good*. A chink in that shiny armor of his. She'd managed to seduce him once tonight. She could do it again. As much as she hated being condemned for who she was, Lilly wasn't beyond using her gift to save her life.

"Thaegan doesn't want to hurt you either, Lilly." The muscles in Dallas' jaw ticked as he stepped closer, slowly unbuttoning his shirt.

"But Thaegan's not here right now. There's only you and me – alone."

Dallas said nothing. He simply shucked off his shirt, the tattoo on his forearm flexing with the movement. The dark hair on his well-defined chest narrowed to a line that circled his bellybutton and disappeared into his jeans. She hadn't had time in the dark alley to admire the man. He'd felt solid against her, but even she hadn't imagined that this lickable torso had been at her fingertips.

A torso that seemed remarkably unblemished for the pummeling it had endured.

Curiosity spiked. How, she wondered, could he move without pain? Lilly had heard bones crack when Thaegan's fist connected with Dallas' side, yet the man moved as if nothing were broken.

"Dallas, how is it...I mean your ribs, your lip..." She didn't even know how to phrase the question.

"Suffice it to say I'm a wonder of alien medicine."

She didn't understand the cryptic statement, but as Dallas continued taking slow, measured steps toward her, his eyes locked on hers, and she didn't really care what he meant. All concerns over his injuries evaporated. Primal need flared his nostrils and tented the fly of his jeans. The man obviously had a will forged of iron if he could continue to deny his urges.

Lilly's own body thrummed with need, her nipples tight, her pussy aching, liquid heat dampening her thighs. Despite how much she craved the man, she had to put that aside for her own safety. She had to turn his desire into her means of survival.

"Perhaps you can untie me and we can replay our little adventure in the alley," Lilly suggested.

Dallas stepped between her legs, his gaze scouring her face. "Thaegan advised against it." With great care he laid his shirt over her torso, tucking it under her chin and behind her shoulders. It was warm and soft and smelled like the man bent at the waist, his breath feathering hot across her lips. "And until you tell me exactly what you did to my partner, and why you targeted the Znedu, you're not moving from this chair."

His eyes sparked with the jagged edge of danger, their pupils like endless black holes ready to consume her. Swallowing hard against the panic percolating just below the calm exterior Lilly worked to maintain, she pushed aside her body's physical needs and forced herself to focus on an escape plan.

"What makes you think I did anything?"

"Because Thaegan told me you did." Cradling her face in his palms, Dallas swept his thumbs over her cheeks, removing the last remnants of the tears. "Now start talking."

"I'd rather talk about us." If she could just touch him, freedom would be hers. "Really, it will be so much more satisfying for both of us if you release me."

Ignoring her plea once again, Dallas straightened abruptly and strode the two paces to the table. "Your story first."

She didn't want to tell him anything. Not until she knew what they intended to do with her. "Why don't you tell me what you know already so I don't bore you with details—"

"I don't play that way, Lilly." Dallas grabbed another of the battered wooden chairs and flipped it around. "Let me repeat—this is about *you*." Straddling it backward, he rested his arms casually over the chair back. "From what I know about my partner it will take the better part of the night to satisfy his needs. Which means I'm in no rush." He lifted his hands and shrugged. "And from the look on Thaegan's face, I'm thinking you're going to want to answer *my* questions before he returns. I'm not sure I have any control over him when he's around you. And I've definitely played the only trump card in my hand."

Not knowing what Dallas would do once he knew the truth, Lilly continued to stall. "I'm not sure where to start."

"The beginning's always nice."

She snorted in disgust. "The beginning's a nebulous place. Beginning of my life? Beginning of the night? Beginning of this farce? Which beginning, Dallas?"

"How about the place where you found yourself alone in deep space—running?"

His question slammed into her with all the power of a slap to the face and she reeled from the impact. "I'm not running."

"No?" He absently picked at his fingernails. "A beautiful human female alone in the middle of this godforsaken frozen abyss known as deep space, making a living as a high-end prostitute because it was her life's ambition? I'm not buying it." He looked up at her, his expression thoughtful. "Which means," he held up a finger, "you're undercover working for some agency or," he lifted a second finger, "something happened on Earth that sent you fleeing."

"There's the third possibility. I was born out here."

"Yeah, I would have gone there except you know Dallas, Texas. Nope. Not born out here." He shook his head. "And since I'm intimately familiar with the government agencies, I'm thinking you're not working for them either. Which leaves you hightailing it through space."

Lilly kept the surprise from registering on her face. She had suspected Dallas and his partner were into something illegal, but mentioning the government meant he

probably worked for them. What the hell had she stumbled into? "Yeah, I left Earth. But lots of people are doing it these days, looking for something more exciting."

Dallas stood abruptly and swung the chair out of his path. "Cut the shit, Lilly. You sought me out tonight at the tavern." His boots thudded across the floor until he was face-to-face with her, his voice a low growl in his throat. "Let's not pretend our fucking in the alley was anything more than a fact-finding strategy. And when that failed, you came back to the tavern to save the Znedu. And when that failed, you tried to kill me. How am I doing?"

"I haven't any idea —"

"Bullshit!" Dallas roared in frustration. Stomping back to the table, he cleared the decorative centerpiece with one swipe of his arm, the rock, wood and glass knickknacks shattering on the floor. His temper if not dissipated, at least under control, Dallas leaned heavily on the table, his head hanging between his shoulders, his voice quiet. "I'm actually trying to help you here, Lilly." Turning back around, Dallas plowed fingers through his damp curls. "I work for a very nasty branch of the government. When Thaegan returns, he intends to take you in for questioning. And trust me when I say you just don't want to have to face that squad of aliens."

Lilly burst out laughing. No doubt from Dallas' expression she looked like an escapee from the Pteran Omega asylum. In her opinion, when it came to interrogations, they rated about a minus three on her fear scale. Exile on the other hand, couldn't be measured. Relief bubbled out of her.

"I'm glad I can amuse you."

Lilly bit her cheek, working to control herself. "I'm sorry, but in my line of work interrogations are part of the job."

Hands fisting on his hips, Dallas stared at her, one eyebrow cocked. "And which line is that?"

Staring at the man, his naked chest heaving with frustration, something inside Lilly broke. She had no idea why it felt right to trust Dallas. He'd done nothing but screw up her plans. But she was tired of being alone. Six months drifting in space without another human to call friend was no longer an option. Dallas might not be interested in continuing what they'd begun tonight, but Lilly wouldn't know if she didn't try. And she'd start by offering him the truth. "I'm a detective. Actually, I *was* a detective. Chicago PD. Now I'm a bounty hunter."

"And the Znedu?" he asked.

"Has a rather large price on his head. But thanks to you and that oversized caveman of a partner it looks like I won't be collecting *that* reward."

"Tough life here in deep space. Why'd you leave the cushy detective's job on Earth?"

"Same thing that made your partner run from the cabin."

"The cerebellum thing?"

"Seraphelium. And yes."

Dallas picked up the chair he'd flung and set it close to her. Settling backward on it once again, as if the back were a shield for protection, he pressed his body close to hers. "Why don't you tell me what the hell that is? Seems I've got some missing pieces in this puzzle."

Lilly wasn't sure she wanted to go there.

Some emotion she couldn't decipher marred Dallas's brow. "I want to help, Lilly. But I can't keep you safe if I don't know everything." He brushed hair from her face. "Thaegan mentioned some myth, but I'm thinking it's much more than that."

The man was an enigma. She wanted to believe the compassion in his voice was real, but the hard set of his jaw communicated something entirely different. But when it came right down to it, she wanted someone to know. Someone who could share her burden without judgment. Lilly had no idea if Dallas was that person, but sitting here, bound and naked, she figured she really didn't have a whole hell of a lot more to lose.

"She was my great-great-grandmother. It's barely a part of me." Lilly looked down. Even with Dallas' hand warm on her shoulder, there was shame in the telling.

His finger came under her chin and gently lifted it. She had no choice but to stare into the chocolate pools of his eyes. "Then it's not your fault. Whatever *it* is, the responsibility belongs to someone else." His thumb brushed over her lips. "The beginning. Start at the beginning. I have no idea what it is. What you *are*."

Confusion and frustration warred within her. How could he not know? The answers were as obvious as her beaded nipples and the dizzying aroma of her arousal. Dallas was so close she could feel his body heat pressing against her, making it hard to fill her lungs. Yet the man seemed immune to the sexual energy crackling between them. Even without trying, her own arousal was usually enough to affect any male close to her and drive one with his hands on her to sexual delirium.

"I mean...you're very obviously human." One side of Dallas' mouth curved, the dimple dancing. "But there's something that makes you special." His hand brushed up her face to cup her cheek and she couldn't stop herself from leaning into it. "I just want to understand it."

His gaze searched her face, settled on her lips and Lilly thought for a moment he might kiss her. She wanted to feel the heat of his mouth on hers. Instead, he dropped his hand, rubbing them both on his jeans. "Just please explain to me what Thaegan was talking about."

Even that slight rejection stung. Seduction and escape no longer mattered. What Lilly needed now was Dallas—a human man to accept who she was. Filling her lungs with courage, she stared straight ahead, unable to witness his revulsion as she recalled the story her mother had told her the night of her first menses. "Serapheliums are an ancient race. They came from another galaxy, hundreds of light years from where we are now. It's said they resembled humans, but their beauty was unmatched. Gods

bowed down to their perfection and angels sang at their births." She chanced a look at Dallas and shrugged, embarrassment heating her cheeks.

"I can see the resemblance."

She laughed out her disbelief. "Yeah, whatever."

"You're too hard on yourself." His hand feathered across her face and settled warm and firm on her shoulder, encouraging her. "Continue."

"The Seraphelium were a small population of peaceful people. But warriors arrived on their planet, seeking new territories. Aliens from another planet. Not wanting a war, the Serapheliums offered a portion of their lands. But it wasn't enough. The warriors needed slaves to make new weapons and build their armies. The Serapheliums rose up to fight against them, but they were too weak. The men were enslaved. The women didn't know how to defend themselves and the warriors began taking them for their own pleasure. But it seemed the women had a special power. Though they had no effect on their own kind, the female touch of a Seraphelium could bring the opposite sex of another species to their knees with blind sexual need —"

"Thaegan said your hands were dangerous." His hand slid from her shoulder, down her bare arm to her bound hands behind the chair, threading his fingers in hers. "And if you touched me, you'd make me forget everything except having sex with you."

She had no idea what he was up to. The smile lighting his face reached up to soften his eyes, but Dallas didn't seem to be in the throes of any sexual overload. Lilly wished she were in on his joke.

"That's the theory," she said quietly.

He continued to toy with her hands. "How did you come to have this power?"

Though his fingers only tickled along her palms, she could have sworn it was Dallas with the sexual gift manipulating the energy flowing between them. His fingers seemed to be sending electrical impulses through her palms and into her bloodstream, kicking her heart rate up several notches. Her breaths came in shallow pants that barely filled her lungs and yet she couldn't have asked him to stop. Didn't want to lose the connection. The strumming made her acutely aware of the very male essence of him and god knew she wanted that—craved it with every fiber of her being. Lilly swallowed the burning need clogging her throat, trying to find her voice. "The females used their sexual gifts to control some of the warriors. They..." She hesitated, not sure if she could trust Dallas with the one piece of information that worked in her favor. But with him sitting so close and seeming to have no reaction to the sexual energy still vibrating the air around them, Lilly decided she had nothing left to lose and pressed forward. "They affect the hormones in the blood, overloading the sexual circuits of males and incapacitated them. While they were in the sexual fugue, the Seraphelium took their war ships and fled. But the ship held many complications. The food was wrong and there were new diseases that infected the population. Men and children seemed

especially vulnerable. Those who didn't starve, died of horrible plagues. No planet would allow them passage for medical help.

"Resigned to death, they wandered through space, waiting for the end. It appears they crash-landed in the desert of Earth. I think they call it Area 51." Lilly smiled at Dallas' stunned recognition. "Anyway, a few women survived, my great-great-grandmother among them. They worked to blend in. Many found new mates. They fell in love and had families. Their past seemed to have been forgotten. That is until the first generation of females reached puberty and the gift—as we call it—surfaced again. By then, humans were reaching out into space and aliens were colonizing Earth. The mingling of races was frowned upon. Not wanting their children to be shunned, the Seraphelium vowed to hold tight to their secret."

"It doesn't explain why you left Earth." His hand moved up to massage her forearm, absently offering the comfort she needed to continue.

"Humans, it seems, are very sensitive about the purity of their race, especially when it comes to the government and national security." Lilly hadn't thought about her fall from grace in months. The pain of the betrayal slammed into her as if it were happening again for the first time. "It seems positions like that are for those with *untainted* blood." She swallowed the hot coal of anger in her throat, closing her eyes to hold in the tears threatening to spill.

A gentle squeeze on her biceps encouraged her to continue.

"My father was a lieutenant in the Boston police department. I grew up surrounded by the code of blue. It's all I ever knew. I wanted to be a cop my whole life. When I told him his only daughter wanted to follow in his footsteps, he burst with pride." She coughed, choking on the sorrow clogging her throat.

"He didn't know, did he?"

She shook her head, fighting the sadness tightening her chest. "My mother didn't want to fall in love with him. But sometimes the head has no control over what the heart wants." Lilly shrugged. "She had no intention of having children. But fate had other plans."

A gentle finger turned her chin again. The man wouldn't let her look away and hide in her shame. "They were lucky to have you." Lilly wanted to drown in the compassion Dallas offered. "And you them. Not many people can claim to be born of such love, Lilly."

"Love couldn't change who I was. As much as I want to deny it. I'll always be a Seraphelium."

"It doesn't make you less of a woman."

Once again she laughed in disgust at his naiveté. "According to the asshole who wanted my badge, that's not the case. I'm an abomination. An out-of-control alien looking to take over the human race from the inside."

"Wait...the Chicago PD *knew* what you were?"

"Are you kidding me? I kept the truth from everyone." She wanted to turn from Dallas' probing gaze. Instead Lilly found herself leaning into the warm caress of his thumb across her cheek, knowing his disgust could take it from her at any moment. "I never slept with guys in school or later with those on the force. Though Serapheliums aren't on the alien registry, I lived in fear if I ever got too close to someone they might find out what I was."

"Sounds mighty lonely to me." His eyes roamed her face, their path as hot as if he'd dragged his finger over her skin. "How did you survive without...companionship?"

She smiled at the euphemism. "I traveled. On long weekends and vacations I had one-night stands. But that gets old really fast."

"Did you seduce them with..."

She could see Dallas was wondering about their liaison in the alley. "Dallas, it's not like I want to —"

He silenced her with a finger to her lips. "I didn't mean it that way, Lilly. Is there anyone you've slept with who you didn't," his hand waved the length of her body, "seduce?"

There was no recrimination in his tone but guilt speared hard none the less. "I never turned it on if that's what you mean. But my own arousal is often enough to trigger —"

"Are you aroused now, Lilly?" Dallas stood slowly, his gaze holding hers captive. He swung the chair out of the way and moved in front of her. "Because right now I want you with an ache that burns."

Her gaze swept up the muscular curve of his thighs, hungrily taking in the firm ridges of his abdomen, pausing to admire the well-defined wall of his furred chest, taking in the taut cords of his neck and the slight tic of muscle in his jaw until she finally dared to meet his eyes. The man was over six feet of pissed-off male, making her wetter than hell.

"I'm not doing it on purpose," she said. Her body ached to be taken by this man. The sizeable bulge in his jeans telegraphed that he wanted it too. But as much as she wanted him buried to the hilt in her heat, satisfying an itch no toy at her hotel could relieve, Lilly was sure she wanted no part of the angry frustration quivering along his muscles. "Listen, Dallas. My energy's still high. I pushed it up to gain control over the Znedu and then again on Thaegan as he ran through the alley." Now that he knew what she was, Lilly refused to feel shamed by her heritage. Nothing he could do to her would be worse than being condemned to the bowels of deep space. She threw back her shoulders and lifted her chin before continuing. "I've no doubt it's pulling on you now. I can't change that. And I've got to tell you, you're stronger than any human male I've met for resisting it this long."

With the slow deliberation of a man on a mission, Dallas bent at the waist. Planting his hands squarely on the arms of the chair, he leaned in close, his lips only a breath from hers. "If it's all right with you, I don't think I want to fight this anymore." Satin lips feathered heat across her mouth, stealing what little breath she had. He added soft

pressure that made her dizzy with its intensity. When his hand snaked around the back of her neck, he changed the angle. Dallas' tongue swept her bottom lip, begging for entrance. She opened for him and his flavor burst hot in her mouth, affectionate and fiery with a demanding edge that screamed male.

She pulled away from the assault, her breath sawing from her lungs. "Damn it, Dallas. Untie my hands."

"Nothing doing, sweetheart." His mouth curved, but the smile held no humor, only rapacious danger, making her tummy do a little somersault.

She smiled back in a seductive invitation. They both understood the bindings had nothing to do with keeping her hostage and everything to do with the sexual game just beginning. Lilly wanted this man with a hunger she hadn't felt in a very long time. "Afraid of a tiny woman?"

Dallas dropped to his knees between her quivering thighs, his lustful gaze never leaving hers. "Fear has nothing to do with it, Lilly." Wrapping both hands around the back of her head, his palms framing her chin, he pulled her down for another kiss. His tongue swept into her mouth, exploring, demanding and she met every thrust and pull with equal challenge. When he drew back to catch his breath, she rasped his bottom lip through her teeth, pulling a deep growl from his chest.

He pressed his forehead to hers. "I want you, Lilly. Like an alcoholic wants his next drink, I need you." His heavy pants heated her face. "Tell me now if you don't want this and I'll stop. I'll die a slow agonizing death...but I'll stop." His laughter filled her heart.

Lilly couldn't remember the last time she needed someone so badly. It had nothing to do with the sexual energy thrumming through her veins and everything to do with the fact that the man prostrate before her understood it was *her* need driving them both and *still* he wanted her. There was some comfort in that.

"If you stop...I'll kill you," she whispered.

Dallas inhaled a shaky breath and gently pressed his lips to hers.

Oh hell no. "Don't go easy on my account," she said against his mouth. "In the state I'm in, fast and hard works just fine for me."

He tipped his head back, his smile slow and dangerous—as if a plan was formulating. "Far be it for me to ignore a lady's request." The words were low and deadly, promising all the wickedness glinting in his eyes. "Hang on tight, Lilly. You're in for one hell of a ride."

His mouth came down hard on hers, devouring her in its breathless path to possess. Her head fell back as his lips broke from hers, raking a path of moist heat and raw desire along her jaw and down her neck. While his teeth scraped over her pulse points, his hands swept across her shoulders, peeling his shirt away as they went.

Dallas let it slide seductively over her breasts until it lay in a pile in her lap. When the broad heat of his palms slid over the achy mounds and squeezed, she couldn't hold back the moan of need keening from her lips.

Dallas chuckled. "I've only just begun." He bit playfully at her neck then licked the spot his teeth had grazed. He rolled the steepled peaks of her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers at the same time, sending sparks straight to her clitoris. His mouth kissed a hot path to her breast. The damp curls of his hair dragged along her heated skin, trailing gooseflesh in their wake. His tongue rasped heat over the nipple before he sucked the beaded pearl in his mouth, grazing it with his teeth. Her back arched of its own accord, pressing the fleshy mounds harder against his hands. Sensing her desperation, Dallas' talented fingers and mouth worked her into a fevered pitch. He pressed her breasts close together with his hands and flicked his tongue from one aching nipple to the other until she was bucking against the assault.

As much as she wanted to dig her fingers through the thick curls of his hair and pull Dallas close, being bound to the chair lent another level of eroticism to his ministrations. She could neither fight the assault nor change its course. Not that she wanted to do either. The man certainly had moves that required neither assistance nor instruction.

With one hand still on her breast, the other tripped down her rib cage and gathered a corner of the shirt still covering her lap. With slow deliberation, Dallas dragged the material over her thighs and she canted her hips, loving the feeling of the soft material over her naked mons. Besides the thick honey waves on her head, her eyelashes and brows, Seraphelium had no other body hair. Nothing to stop the musky scent of her honey from filling the air and seducing men.

She heard Dallas fill his lungs. "That's a heady perfume, Lilly. It's enough to drive a man insane with need."

She wasn't sure if he had intended them to, but his words stiffened her back and knotted her stomach. With just one sentence Dallas had slammed the door on her fantasy that being with him would be different. For once she had wanted to believe that this union was more than just a mindless rutting brought on horny fog of need. But he'd proved her wrong.

Dallas hesitated. Leaning back, he studied her. "Did I say something wrong?"

Yes. "No." She shook her head to emphasize the word she didn't feel. Now she was more interested in finishing what had begun and powering down her energy than the technique. How Dallas chose to do it really didn't matter anymore. Lilly just wasn't sure how he'd comfortably complete the task with her bound to the confining chair. Nodding toward the large sleeping pallet in the corner piled with decorative pillows, Lilly forced a smile. "But I'm thinking you'll be a hell of a lot more comfortable in the bed."

Deep lines of confusion furrowed his brow, but he smiled nonetheless. "Right now it isn't about me, Lilly." Dallas leaned over and kissed her thigh. "This is about you." His hands squeezed her calves, and she swore she felt the heat of them even through the leather of her boots. "Because from my perspective," teeth dug into the tender skin of her inner thigh and Lilly bit her cheek to hold back her cry, "I can see how much you

like being at my mercy." His palms skimmed up the outside of her legs as his teeth nipped a path to her pussy. "And I intend to take full advantage."

Dallas' actions made no sense. The man urging her thighs wider seemed willing to delay his own gratification to satisfy her needs first. Even as confusion clouded her thoughts, Lilly's hips canted, exposing her weeping cleft and allowing his thumbs access to spread her swollen lower lips.

"That's right, Lilly, open for me." He filled his lungs with her scent. "I don't intend to let you go until I have you begging." Dallas blew up her slit and she writhed at the contact. "And even then I might keep you there just to hear you continue to scream for me."

Two fingers spread her labia, exposing the aching bud of her clitoris. When Dallas put his mouth on her slick flesh, the silken touch of his tongue was like a flame licking over the pearled nub. He sucked her clit into his mouth and tortured it with hot flicks of his tongue. The pleasure blazed over her nerves, spreading out to scorch a path to the tips of her fingers and toes. Dallas' other hand slid along her inner thigh, swirling two thick fingers in her cream before pressing them into her clenching channel, pulling a moan of bliss from her throat.

She couldn't believe this was happening. Like their encounter in the alley, he was willing to satisfy her needs first. Lilly wanted to contemplate his motives, but the carnal sensations he was creating in her body made all logical thought impossible.

The sexy slurping noises of Dallas finger-fucking her, the sight of his head in her lap and the electrical currents radiating out from her pussy brought on a climax so hard and so fast, Lilly was bucking against the ropes and screaming his name before she had time to process what was happening. Because her energy level was so high for so long, the explosion of rapture trembled through every muscle of her body. With no way to move, her nails bit deeply into her palms and her toes curled in her boots. The sexual energy ebbed even as her body quaked and shattered in ecstasy.

Despite the erotic current pulsing out from her, Dallas seemed content to focus solely on her. When she looked down in wonder, the last shudders of her orgasm clenching her belly, she found him staring at her. He smiled and laved up her slit as if he couldn't get enough of her slick honey.

"Like what you see?" she asked.

"A beautiful woman reaching orgasm while she screams my name? What's not to enjoy." His triumphant grin warmed her heart.

He held her gaze as his caresses became gentle nibbles on her pussy lips and thighs. Pulling his fingers from her channel, Dallas sucked off her juices and groaned with pleasure.

"That's a smug look of satisfaction you're wearing." she said, breathless. Without the energy snapping over her nerves, her body melted into the chair. She swore the heat that had coursed through her had melted her bones.

Dallas trailed kisses up her hip and belly as he rose on his knees. "After a woman's screamed your name in the throes of a rather thunderous orgasm," his teeth grazed her nipple, "why shouldn't a man be pleased?"

He laughed and captured her mouth with his.

Dallas' tongue darted in to parry with hers and she sucked him deep into her mouth, enjoying the musky taste of her cream on his lips. His hand slid up her stomach to cup the weighty flesh of her breast and she arched into his touch, surprised her muscles could respond.

Breaking the kiss, Dallas laid his forehead against hers, his thumb brushing her sensitive nipple. "If I untie you, will you run?"

Her head shook even before she thought about the question. Only an hour ago she thought this man intended to kill her. Thirty minutes ago she believed he would ship her to the outer reaches of Krystallos Three to be enslaved. Now, despite the looming threat of an interrogation, she just wanted to curl up in Dallas' arms and steal a few minutes of security in his embrace.

Dallas carefully picked up the dagger and cut through the bindings at her ankles. He stood, walked around the chair and sliced the bindings at her wrists.

Lilly hugged herself, stretching the tight muscles of her shoulders. Rubbing her hands together, she worked blood back into her tingling hands. In the thrill of being bound before Dallas, she hadn't realized just how sore they'd become.

He stood beside the chair and pulled her to her feet. His hands massaged her shoulders, concern lining his face. "You should have said something if they were too tight."

She smiled and nipped his chin. "I had other things on my mind and didn't notice."

He laughed and pulled her against him, his arms anchoring her to his torso. The heat of his skin against her belly shot a burst of longing down her core. She thought the amount of energy that had been released had drained her. But standing this close to him, her breasts mashed to his chest, his erection obvious through his jeans, Lilly's body once again thrummed with need.

"I believe you have entirely too many clothes on, Dallas." She tipped her hips and ground her pubic bone against his fly.

"Do you have something in mind?"

She undid his buckle and unsnapped his jeans. "Well, if Thaegan's going to take all night, I'd like to repeat the performance in the alley a few more times." Lilly really wanted to ask how Dallas had managed to control himself when her energy had been pulsing and driving the Ka'al mad with need. But having sex with her wasn't really a choice any male *made*, just the result of her gift. She'd come to accept that fact years ago. Veering the conversation in that direction wouldn't accomplish anything except making her feel small and insignificant.

"Maybe we could take advantage of the comfortable bed in the corner." She nodded once again to the functional pallet that passed for sleeping space in the one-room cabin.

"That could be arranged." His dimple deepened around the smile curving his lips.

She couldn't tear her gaze from the unfathomable depths of his soulful eyes. Eyes that raked her face with the desperation of man in the desert seeking water. Eyes hooded with sexual hunger. Eyes filled with a compassion she could almost believe in.

But reality was a bitch. None of that was real and Lilly chose to ignore that fact and lose herself once again in the fantasy of Dallas' desire. She maneuvered the jeans off his hips, releasing the velvet heat of his erection to brush against her hip. Trapping his penis between their bodies, she rolled her hips, pressing her belly against his cock. She tipped up on her toes, catching his groans of pleasure in her mouth as she kissed him long and hard, the taste of her still on his tongue.

Dallas' arms slid around her back, his fingers digging into her ass, holding her tight to the solid plane of his torso. The soft fur of his chest teased her nipples into tight points. His muscles trembled with the need he'd worked so hard to control. Lilly's pussy clenched and she pretended his desire was about *her*.

Dallas had given her so much pleasure and as much as she wanted to feel him buried in her, stretching and filling her, Lilly wanted to offer him something in return. Breaking from his mouth, she trailed love bites along his chin and down the taut cords of his neck. She slid down his torso, intent on tasting his hot cock in her mouth. But as she pushed the jeans down his thighs, the dagger fell from his waistband to the floor with a heavy thud.

Lilly reached for it as the door slammed open.

Chapter Seven

“What the fuck...” Thaegan’s heavy steps pounded across the floor. “Watch out, Dallas, she’s got the dagger!”

In the split second it took Dallas’ lust-fogged mind to register Thaegan’s sudden appearance, he interpreted exactly what the Ka’al saw – the mess scattered on the floor behind them, Lilly’s unbound naked form bending seductively in front of him, the Seraphelium taking control with the deadly Ba’alkin dagger sliding toward his vital organs. With the jeans tangled around his ankles, there wasn’t much Dallas could do to protect either of them from the oncoming freight train that was his partner. He curled his body over in hopes of shielding Lilly from the blow, but survival instincts had her moving like a shot.

With the agility and confidence of one of Chicago’s finest, Lilly charged, the knife extended. Thaegan let out a war cry as he reached out to disarm Lilly. What happened next may have appeared in slow motion, but Dallas would never be sure how the petite woman had managed it. There was a tangling of arms, a juggling of the dagger and Lilly’s booted foot shot out and up. Somehow she managed to use Thaegan’s momentum against him. The large alien lost his balance, sprawled on his back and slid along the floor, smashing into the chair near Dallas. It was a wonder he hadn’t been taken down as well.

Silence pinged off the walls of the tiny cabin as the three of them assimilated the events of the last minute.

Dallas retrieved his jeans and pulled himself back together. Lilly bounced on the balls of her feet, the dagger extended, prepared for another attack. Thaegan slowly sat up, his fingers probing his scalp for damages. Dallas wanted to laugh at his partner’s pinched expression. He’d never seen the large alien bested by anyone in hand-to-hand combat, let alone a small woman.

“Enough is enough, asshole.” Lilly’s angry words brought him up short.

Dallas stepped toward her, his hand extended. But the warning look she shot stopped him cold. “Lilly, put down the dagger. You’ve got to see how this looked to Thaegan.”

“What I *see*, Dallas, is a couple of government idiots who overpowered an innocent woman doing her *job*. I think it’s *me* who should be pissed at you for costing me a bounty. Not the other way around.”

The woman had morphed from wanton seductress to pissed-off woman in two seconds flat. Not that he blamed her. They’d kidnapped her, tied her up and now Thaegan had tried to attack her a second time in less than two hours. She had every right to resent them. But, shit, she did look sexy as hell with that dangerous mien of

female indignation sparking in her eyes. Her breasts bounced enticingly with her anger, her hair disheveled from the altercation with Thaegan. And that mouth spewing fury was still swollen from his kisses. *Jesus*, the blood rushing to his groin was making it hard to focus.

"Lilly, we—"

"I told you not to untie her." Thaegan shifted and began to stand.

"Stay down, Ka'al," Lilly commanded. "I like you right there."

Thaegan acted as if she'd said nothing and stood next to Dallas, disgust deepening the ridges on his nose.

"I'm warning you, Ka'al. One move and I *will* gut you with this dagger."

His partner quirked an eyebrow. Lilly may have caught him off guard once, but Dallas had no doubt the alien wouldn't let it happen again.

Again Thaegan ignored her. "This certainly does complicate things." The Ka'al sniffed the air then Dallas. "By the gods, you didn't."

Dallas shrugged.

"She got to you too? Obviously, even that artificial shit flowing through your veins doesn't stop her witchery. Is that why you untied her?"

He turned to face his partner. Dallas wasn't sure what was irritating him more, the fact his partner was questioning his motives or the fact he hadn't bothered to resist his own selfish needs. "I untied her because she's no threat to me."

"She controls you whether you feel it or not."

"Is she controlling *you* right now? Is that why you're being such an asshole?" Dallas asked.

Thaegan paused. He inhaled deeply and turned to stare at Lilly.

"I'm not doing shit to you, Ka'al," Lilly said.

"Indeed you're not," Thaegan responded.

Dallas bent, picked up his shirt and tossed it to Lilly. Her nudity didn't seem to be bothering anyone but him. The sight of her pendulous breasts and silken mons made it hard for him to think with the head on his shoulders.

"So where does that leave us?" he asked.

But his partner ignored him and focused on Lilly. "How the hell did you stop the magic?"

"It's not magic, idiot. I control the flow of energy." She spoke as she worked the last few buttons of the shirt, the dagger held loose in her hand. "I can ratchet it up or power it down. Simple."

It was true. Current didn't seem to be humming over her trembling muscles the way it had when she was tied to the chair. Dallas would like to think it had more to do with his sexual prowess in bringing her to orgasm than her ability to manipulate her own energy levels.

Thaegan slapped his hands together. "Well, then it seems she's safe to transport to headquarters. No sense waiting until morning. We might as well roll."

"I'm not going to your headquarters now or in the morning."

"Yeah, the more I've been thinking about this the more I'm thinking that's not a good idea," said Dallas.

"What the fuck, Dallas?" asked Thaegan.

"Just hear me out. We suspect the Znedu's boss has something to do with..." Dallas paused, he definitely wasn't thinking straight. That was QAL information. He had no illusion that a former detective didn't pick up on his slip, but he continued as if he hadn't just passed on sensitive information. "Since Lilly has a connection now to Grebetz, I'm thinking it's probably not safe for her at headquarters."

He absently fingered the scar running down his face, the only part of his near-death experience he refused to let the doctors on Canus Delta heal. "There's no one at headquarters who can interrogate her better than you and me." It had nothing to do with interrogation techniques and everything to do with the suspicion that there was someone in QAL playing both sides. In the last few months, as *Hij'Rozhod* continued to evade detection, he'd come to believe it might even be someone on his own team. Dallas wasn't willing to risk Lilly's life trying to confirm that suspicion. "It's not just about Grebetz, if you get my drift."

"You mean it's about the Znedu's boss?" Lilly asked.

After everything Dallas had said of course it was the one thing Lilly focused on. He turned to look at her, not sure how he should answer her.

"I know who Grebetz's boss is," she said.

Okay, so that might not be the truth. Lilly *suspected* she'd seen Venair Grebetz's boss. The hologram of the Braughtot had certainly flustered the otherwise confident Znedu. But if this was a bargaining chip to keep her from their headquarters and allowed her an opportunity to spend some time with Dallas, then she'd go all in.

Dallas walked up to her. "What do you mean you *know* his boss? Have you been hunting him?"

"She's lying," Thaegan said. "The witch is trying to buy some time."

"Shut up, Thaegan." Dallas kept his dark eyes focused solely on her. Her stomach did a slow roll that had nothing to do with fear.

"Lilly, tell me exactly what you meant," Dallas said.

"I haven't exactly been hunting him."

"How about if you elaborate." Dallas dragged the words out slowly.

He reached for the dagger in her hand and she gladly handed it over to him. What Lilly needed was for Dallas to trust her. She no longer wanted to get away from this man, quite the contrary as a matter of fact. It had been so long since a human male had

touched her with the passion Dallas had, and Lilly wanted more of that even if Dallas didn't believe she had control over his desires.

"I'll tell you only if I still get the bounty for Grebetz," she said bravely. Even male companionship wouldn't keep her fed.

"I don't think you're in a position to make any kind of deal, Seraphelium," Thaegan said.

Dallas turned abruptly to his partner. "Damn it, Thaegan, I'm warning you..." He breathed deeply as if steadying himself before turning back to Lilly. The hard expression on his face mapped emotions she couldn't read. "Obviously there's more going on here than we can tell you. We're both a little on edge. This mission —"

"Oh, cut me some fucking slack." Thaegan threw his hands in the air. "You may be team leader, but my ass is also on the line here. I don't think a roll in the proverbial hay qualifies her to join the team."

Dallas' eyes narrowed to deadly slits. "Not that I have to explain anything to you, Ka'al, but we're looking for something from her, the least I can do is explain why."

"Oh, that makes perfect sense," Thaegan said. "She's some miscreant who tried to kill you. When that didn't work, she attempted to take me down. Now she's under house arrest and we're interrogating her. But let's not get all mean and nasty. Let's just play nice and share top secret information." Thaegan righted the chair and stuffed his oversized body where Lilly had been bound. "Why don't I just settle myself in this ringside seat? I wouldn't want to miss one minute of this fucked-up show."

"How about if you shut up and let me handle this my way?" asked Dallas.

"You've done a bang-up job so far, partner. By all means, don't let me stop you." Thaegan leaned back, casually folding his hands behind his head.

"As I was saying, Lilly," Dallas said. "The person we're looking for may be the key to cleaning up a whole lot of shit that's been thrown at us over the past couple of years."

"Eleven months," Thaegan muttered.

"Fuck you, asshole! I mean really. Fuck you all the way from here to Beta Mrenn." Dallas trembled with anger.

"I'm just saying. It's only been eleven months. If you're going to spill your fucking guts and tell her everything, get your facts right." Thaegan tipped the chair up on its back legs.

Dallas turned, his teeth grinding as he spoke directly to his partner. "What I was going to tell her was how dangerous this whole situation is and perhaps Lilly would just like to share what she knows and that would be the end of it."

"Or perhaps Lilly would like to be part of the Znedu's takedown so she's guaranteed her cut of the bounty." Lilly sent Dallas a smug smile when he turned to stare her down.

"And there you have it," the Ka'al added. "Just like that the outlaw joins the team." Thaegan began clapping.

"She's not part of the team," Dallas argued. "Lilly isn't going anywhere near that takedown."

Now Dallas was just pissing her off. She was a detective, trained in uncover work. He had no right to make decisions for her. "Well, then it looks like you're on your own, Mr. Government Man. Without my help you'll be flying blind trying to find Grebetz's boss." She crossed her arms under her breasts, challenging him.

"Oh, we are so not going there." Dallas stalked away from her, his fingers plowing through the damp waves of his hair.

"Seems to me you're the one who opened *that* door." Thaegan's chair banged down, emphasizing his words. "And now that we're headed in that direction..."

"No. We get the information and take it back to headquarters. Nothing more. Lilly goes back to whatever she was doing before we crossed paths and stays the hell away from Grebetz. We can do this without her if we have to."

Thaegan stared at Lilly, ignoring Dallas' protests. "I don't have to like the witch to see how helpful she could be. And I'm thinking she may be on to something."

"Shut up, Thaegan. Really, just shut the fuck up!" Dallas shouted.

"Get your head off Canus Delta, Dallas, and back in the game here on Garalon Five. You said it yourself. Someone's been one step ahead of us everywhere we turn. Why? Because they've got someone on the inside. Now it's our chance to put a ringer in the game. No one, not even our own team, will suspect her."

"What the fuck?" Dallas asked. "An hour ago you were ready to string her up from the rafters. Not five minutes ago you were bitching that I was sharing too much."

"An hour ago she had me wound tighter than a virgin in a titty bar." Thaegan raised his hands in the air and shrugged. "Seems everyone released a little sexual energy and it's making my head clearer. Now I'm thinking the vixen may be an asset to us." He looked pointedly at Lilly. "As long as you keep your hands to yourself, I'm willing to discuss this."

She locked her fingers behind her back. "Wouldn't dream of touching you, Ka'al."

"No. No. No. No." Dallas stalked around the room like a caged animal. "All we need is information from Lilly —"

"But Lilly's not just giving up the information," she said. "At the very least I need to know which government agency you're working for. It might not be a team I can cheer on to victory."

"*Q'orsctan Aerlheit Lunivarsium*," Thaegan stated.

"What?" Lilly wasn't sure she heard him right.

Dallas rolled his eyes. "In English, the space version of the FBI...QAL"

Laughter bubbled up unchecked, but there was no amusement riding on the sound. She knew exactly what Thaegan had said. Dallas hadn't needed to translate. "Oh, this is

rich. I knew that nasty bitch karma would catch up to me some day." Lilly threw her hands in the air. "But I was hoping for a little more time."

Both men looked at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"Ask me again why I'm in deep space, Dallas." The laughter turned instantly to hot anger that burned in her eyes and stuck in her throat.

"Lilly, it doesn't ma —"

"Ask me again, damn it." She said the words through clenched teeth. "Ask me why a decorated Chicago detective is working undercover as a prostitute in deep space."

"That was asked and answered." Dallas took a step toward her.

Lilly held her hand up. "Don't touch me. Don't you lay one fucking sympathetic finger on me. I don't deserve anyone's compassion."

"Why are you out here, Lilly?" Thaegan dared voice the question.

"Besides paying penance?" The familiar pain of guilt coiled tight around her chest, bringing tears to her eyes.

"Sins die hard in deep space, Lilly," Thaegan said evenly, his gaze momentarily flicking to Dallas.

"But no one can outrun murder," she said.

Dallas' head snapped up, his eyes narrowed. "You murdered someone in QAL?"

"Not *in* QAL. *Because* of QAL."

Chapter Eight

The silence blew open a chasm that seemed to suck the air from the room. Dallas forced his lungs to work. He'd actually been considering sharing classified intel with Lilly. No doubt she'd upped her energy and softened Thaegan. It would certainly explain why the Ka'al was acting with so much compassion toward the woman. And though he hadn't believed it had done anything to him earlier, Dallas had no doubt her little tricks were screwing with him now. Thinking with his dick had nearly put his team in the hands of a murderer. Talk about making one fucked-up decision after another.

"There's got to be more to the story," Thaegan said. "We're on the same side of the law, for gods' sakes."

"Are we?" she asked.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Dallas wasn't sure whether his irritation was directed at Lilly for playing them or himself for nearly falling for her act.

Lilly stared at him, her dark eyes glittering with emotion. "You said it yourself, Dallas, the bad guys aren't always wearing the black hats. Sometimes they look just like you and me. But deep down, pure evil chars their souls. There's no redemption for men like that."

"That doesn't tell us who you murdered, Lilly," Thaegan said gently.

"Ninety young men. Ninety innocent humans who didn't deserve to die." The words warbled as she spoke. "All because QAL screwed me over."

Dallas leaned back against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest. The woman could turn the waterworks on at the drop of a hat. There was no way he was going to let them strike another sympathy chord in him. He'd already tried that tact once tonight and it hadn't gotten him anywhere but mired in a deep pile of shit. Crossing one ankle over the other, he caught sight of the ragged tear down the thigh of his jeans. Despite everything that had transpired, he wondered again if Lilly had sought him out at the tavern. "What the hell did QAL have to do with a mass murder?"

"Not all of QAL, just one asshole at the training facility on Earth who decided to hit on the top female recruit and got shot down." Lilly's derisive laugh rippled the curtain of tension hanging around them. She turned to Thaegan, his hard expression unreadable even to Dallas. "Hard to believe, Ka'al, but Serapheliums actually *do* turn down sex."

Thaegan innocently shook his head and lifted his hands as if in surrender.

Dallas didn't have the patience for the pity party she seemed to need. "And because a man's feelings were battered – you murdered? That doesn't add up, Lilly."

“Yeah, Dallas, I got pissed off and took out —”

Thaegan growled low. “Ignore the asshole, Lilly. He’s a little testy when he hasn’t gotten his beauty rest.”

If Dallas had been confused where his partner’s loyalties lay, that statement sure as hell cleared it up in a hurry. He tried not to feel betrayed, but having Thaegan dismiss his interrogation techniques certainly grated. He was convinced the woman was playing them and even more pissed that Thaegan either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“Finish telling us what happened,” Thaegan prompted, shooting Dallas a warning glare.

“Anyway, not only did he not get what he wanted, but I managed to best him in a sting operation by collaring a Drikspa alien QAL had been chasing down for several years. Turns out the dickwad alien had been kidnapping human males and selling them into the slave trade on Krystallos Three and no one could catch him...”

Lilly inhaled deeply, biting her lip against the trembling. She turned her eyes to the ceiling, no doubt to make the whole charade more authentic or perhaps to stoke up the energy that would control Thaegan. But Dallas refused to be pulled back in by her show of emotion.

After a moment, she continued. “It turns out the QAL agent was making money working with the Drikspa. Seems my wonderful investigative talents ruined his side business and the agent decided I needed to be punished.” Her brows pinched in a deep furrow as she pursed her lips, trying to control the tears before continuing.

Damn, she was good.

“The alien not only managed to escape, but he kidnapped me and took me prisoner. I found myself imprisoned on a ship filled with sex slaves.” Lilly’s fists opened and closed at her sides as she relived the memory. “Just before we left the planet, the asshole QAL agent paid me a visit. Seems the Drikspa figured out what I was and shared that with the asshole. He got up in my face and made it very clear that if I ever managed to escape, not to bother to go back to Earth. He’d be sure to tell the whole world about my mother. He might as well have told me he would kill her with his bare hands. Earth doesn’t take too kindly to aliens with gifts.”

Dallas didn’t want the betrayal of QAL to sit cold in his gut. Didn’t want the statement about her parents to matter. And he sure as hell didn’t want the tears streaming down her cheeks to burn a path to his heart, but if she spoke the truth, then he and Lilly may have more in common than a sexual romp in an alley.

“Still doesn’t explain how *you* killed a ship full of humans, Lilly.” The words came out flat and hard, just as he’d intended.

Lilly looked at him, hatred and pain clenching her teeth. “There was no way in hell they were getting me to Krystallos Three alive. Do you have any idea what they do to humans there? Just imagine how they’d treat a Seraphelium.”

Dallas flinched at the thought. Agencies throughout the Nebulae Galaxy were aware the president of the mining planet turned a blind eye to the underground sex

trade business. Reportedly, buying, selling and exploiting humans earned more money per year than both the water purification and luna crystal mines combined. And of course that currency greased the bureaucratic wheels of the planet's upper levels of government. No one, save for the newly elected ambassador, had even acknowledged the problem in a public forum. Yeah, Dallas could only imagine what would happen to someone like Lilly in that system. He ignored the cold fingers of nausea clawing at his throat.

"How did you get away, Lilly?" Thaegan asked.

Lilly looked through them both. Her eyes focused blindly on a memory only she could see. Her hands moved absently up and down her arms as if the room had chilled.

"At one of the docking stations, I managed to *overpower* one of the male guards and get myself and some of the young men off the cargo ship. But I couldn't save them all." She dropped her face in her hands, her shoulders shudder with the sobs racking her body. "God help me, I couldn't save them all."

Thaegan stepped within arm's reach of the woman standing alone in the middle of the room, but he didn't offer a touch of comfort. "You did your best, Lilly."

"Did I?" Her gaze searched his face, seeking a truth he couldn't offer. "I just wanted to survive. I told myself there were too many for me to guarantee our safety, so I took those in my path as I got the hell off the ship and stowed away on a frigate bound for Dallas Eight. In the end, I managed to take less than ten." Anger and despair trembled along her chin as the agony of her decision brought on a new flood of tears. "There were almost one hundred scared young men and I saved only myself."

Dallas couldn't stand it anymore. The hard dam of doubt burst within him, flooding his heart with compassion. She wasn't using her tears to control them. Lilly blamed herself for a situation that wasn't of her making. No one understood better than him how that kind of guilt gnawed at the gut, eroded confidence and bowed shoulders with the weight of it. Of their own accord, his legs carried him across the room. He pushed past his partner.

"It wasn't your fault." He tried to gather her in his arms, but she shoved him away.

"Like hell it wasn't my fault! Ninety. Can you comprehend that?" Lilly tapped her fingers against his forehead as if she could pound the information into his brain. "Ninety humans I sent to a living hell. Killing them would have been more humane." Sobs racked her body. She covered her mouth with her hand and ran to the sink, her hard, dry wretches filling the air.

Christ, he understood that. How many nights had his body purged itself in penance for the ones lost on Canus Delta?

Walking to her, he rubbed her back until the worst of it was over. Dallas pulled her into his arms, hoping she thought he was offering her support, but in reality he sought solace from his own pain. The warmth of Lilly's cheek brushed against his chest as she melted into him. Her arms snaked around his shoulders, pulling him hard against the

softness of her body. He ran his hand down the silken waves of her hair. "But you survived," Dallas whispered.

"At what cost?" Lilly stared up at him, her lashes still wet with tears. "My life is a fair exchange for ninety human souls going —"

"That's enough, Lilly." Thaegan had been so quiet he'd nearly forgotten they weren't alone. "Guilt is a wasted emotion. It doesn't leave you with anything but bitterness and ulcers. There isn't one of us who hasn't done something in the line of duty that we'll regret until our dying day. That doesn't make the decision we made any less valid. We all do what we have to do to survive. There is no right or wrong in this business only adrenaline-charged gut instinct."

Dallas stiffened at Thaegan's words. He had no doubt his partner had intended them as much for him as the woman in his arms.

"Thaegan's right and you know it. You did your best and you survived." Dallas said the words his partner had repeated *ad nauseum*. But finally they made sense. This woman had been put in his path not to bring him harm but to help exorcise the demons that had been living in his nightmares. It was suddenly all very clear.

"You're here now, Lilly, and even if you couldn't stop that scum of an alien there's another shitty criminal you may be able to help bring to justice if you're willing."

"What did he do?"

Dallas looked at Thaegan and the Ka'al nodded. The silent exchange of expressions and subtle body language that happens between partners took only a moment, but what they decided was monumental. Thaegan shrugged, retrieved the chairs Lilly and he had used and rearranged them back at the table.

"Why don't we sit? This could take a little time."

* * * * *

Forty-five minutes later, Lilly fell back against the chair, her fists clenched in rage against the monster they'd dubbed *Hij'Rozhod*. She had no idea if the hologram of the Braughtot she'd seen was the mastermind behind all fourteen deaths, but if he'd somehow orchestrated this whole mess, including the disaster on Canus Delta that nearly killed Dallas, she'd like to help bring him down.

"Wow, you're sure all those assassinations are linked to one guy?" she asked.

"We're operating on that assumption," Dallas replied.

"And no one got a look at him on Canus Delta?"

Thaegan exchanged another furtive glance with Dallas. There was definitely something they weren't telling her about that operation. Their details of the botched mission had been sketchy at best as they described the mayhem that had left President Orch dead and Dallas severely wounded.

"I mean no description at all?" she asked.

"We were counting on you to fill in that missing piece," said Thaegan.

"Assuming Grebetz hasn't been scared off by the chaos at the tavern last night," continued Dallas, "we have a man who's been working undercover in hopes of being hired on to *Hij'Rozhod's* team. We have an interview set up with the Znedu and his boss tonight. Last night was supposed to be a dry run."

"That's why we couldn't let you take him," Thaegan finished.

"Just give us a description. We'll feed it into our software and it'll spit out a likeness. We can take him down the minute he enters the tavern." Dallas sounded so hopeful.

"But he's a Braughtot," Lilly said slowly, giving them time to assimilate that information. "I only saw him in his natural form."

Dallas' fist slammed down on the table. "Can this get any more fucked up?" He pushed out of the chair and stalked to the front window. "And you couldn't have told us that an hour ago? *Before* we filled you in on *classified* information."

"That's enough, Dallas. Lilly needed to know what she was getting herself into before she signed on. She's done nothing wrong."

"Except forget to mention the alien was a Braughtot." Dallas turned away from the window. Bruised skin of exhaustion sat below his eyes, the emotional weariness of the night curving the expanse of his shoulders. The man was definitely slogging around some additional burden Lilly wasn't privy to.

"With millions of them in the galaxy all those tattoos blur together. They're nearly impossible to distinguish with just one look," said Dallas.

"Oh, that's bullshit and you know it," Thaegan said.

If she didn't know better, she'd think the Ka'al had actually warmed to her.

"Lilly's a detective trained to pick up on the smallest nuances of behavior," Thaegan continued. "Every tattoo is unique in some way. I have no doubt she'd recognize it regardless of what form the Braughtot was in."

"Thaegan's right," she said, lilting her voice to sound more hopeful than she felt. "I might not be able to describe him enough for your software to create a 3-D likeness, but I have no doubt I'd recognize him in any form." Lilly smiled, trying to crack the tough exterior Dallas had erected as he'd spoken of *Hij'Rozhod*. She suspected they'd had some contact with the rest of their team since their abrupt departure from the tavern. But knowing how interrogations worked, Lilly also figured they didn't have much time before these two QAL agents would need to report back to their superiors. Dredging up the details of her past only solidified her resolve to help Dallas any way she could. "I don't see a problem. I've been a regular at the tavern for the last week or so. I'll simply go back there tonight with the rest of your team. I doubt my presence will even spook Grebetz."

"You're not going anywhere near that tavern tonight," Dallas said, his determination emphasizing his statement. "There's got to be another way."

"I think she's right, Dallas. Like Lilly said, without her we're flying blind."

"Then we'll go in like fucking bats." Dallas's angry strides carried him back to them. "I'm not going to allow Lilly to put herself in danger like that. As team leader, I make those decisions."

Whoa, stop the presses. No one, least of all an arrogant human male was going to tell her what she could and couldn't do. She'd just shared with them her deepest secret and now the asshole was acting as if he didn't trust her. Indignation had her pushing back from the table and standing toe-to-toe with Dallas. "You," her finger poked into his sternum, "aren't going to tell me where I can and can't go on Garalon Five." *Poke. Poke.* "You're not taking me to QAL headquarters." *Poke.* "You're not keeping me from that tavern." *Poke.* "And you're sure as hell not going to stop me from helping you." *Poke. Poke.*

Dallas wrapped his hand around her fingers, his touch possessive. His eyes, dark and hard, locked on hers. The smile curving the corner of his full mouth communicated only the stubborn determination to have his way. Lilly had to fight the urge to swallow against the wave of desire his obstinate stare created in her. Energy snapped along her nerves and she worked to tamp it down. Whatever they decided, she didn't want it to be skewed by overly charged male hormones.

"When we go to the tavern tonight," Dallas said finally. "You will be safely tucked away at home, doing whatever it is you do at night that *doesn't* involve bounty hunting."

"But—"

He silenced her with a finger to her lips. "I trust you, Lilly. And I know you're capable of taking care of yourself. You've proved it several times already tonight." Dallas shot a look over her shoulder and smiled, this time with genuine amusement that brought out his dimple and softened his eyes. "Hell, I'm not sure I've ever seen anyone best Thaegan."

She heard the Ka'al's mumbled curse behind her.

"But I suspect this thing with Grebetz has long arms that could snag innocent bystanders. I'll have enough to worry about tonight, keeping the patrons of the tavern out of harm's way and my team safe. I'm afraid if you were there, I couldn't concentrate. You'd be the only thing I could focus on." His lips brushed hers, touching off a wave of desire that seared straight down her core. "And I don't think you want to be responsible for one of my men getting hurt because I wasn't one hundred percent focused."

Wasn't that just like a man to turn a compliment into a guilt trip? Lilly wanted to argue, to tell him to go to hell, but before she could gather her thoughts, Dallas slid his hand around the back of her neck and his lips took possession of her mouth. Velvet soft and hot, his mouth teased hers. His teeth nipped at her bottom lip and his tongue swept out to soothe. She opened for him and the now-familiar taste of Dallas burned through her, turning to molten lust and setting her body on fire. He swallowed the moan

vibrating deep in her throat and gave it right back to her as he tilted his head and deepened the kiss. Lilly's hands fisted in his hair, reveling in the thick waves. The last time he'd had his mouth on her, she hadn't been able to touch him. Lilly had no intention of missing one thrilling moment of enjoying the hard heat of his body.

His hands slid up her ribs, curving seductively around the outside of her breasts. His thumbs teased her nipples into taut points, sending fire scorching through her veins and igniting her energy. Lilly wanted to tamp it down, to enjoy what Dallas could do to her without him affected by the current ramping up inside her, but that wasn't possible. Her own hormones controlled the energy and with Dallas' talented hands stroking her flesh, she had no desire to slow her growing desire. She hungrily would take whatever he gave, despite the fact Dallas had no control over it.

Her skin flushed hot and her breasts swelled beneath the push and pull of his palms. Liquid heat dampened her thighs. Lilly's body hummed with need and energy as Dallas broke from the kiss, his greedy mouth nipping a path down her neck.

Her head dropped back, giving him access to the tender flesh of her throat, but instead of relaxing against her shoulders, she found the solid muscles of Thaegan's chest. Her tummy did a slow roll. Confusion warred with intrigue. She wasn't sure she wanted this and her body tensed at the contact. Lilly's focus had been on Dallas and her desire for *him*. But having the heat of Thaegan's body pressed against her back certainly kicked her heart rate up another notch.

"I was hoping to join you." Thaegan's words came out as if he'd dragged them over a burning road of molten lust.

"I don't know. I..." Her body thrummed with energy and need and Lilly didn't really know what she wanted.

Thaegan's tongue rasped the shell of her ear. His warm breath caressing her throat sent aching shivers of desire straight to her clenching womb. "You know how much you make me want."

She did. And that was the crux of her dilemma.

But then sex for her had always come down to that—desire and need. Lilly wanted to be *desired*, to be craved with a ravenous hunger so overwhelming that a man would wither away without her intimate touch. What she had instead were males whose bodies were overloaded by hormones and needed—no, *demand*ed—mindless rutting.

Thaegan pressed against her back, sandwiching her in the hard heat of their bodies, reminding Lilly she hadn't responded. That had to mean something. Neither of them was taking without first making sure it's what she wanted.

"The decision is all yours, Lilly." She met Dallas' insatiable gaze as he sucked her beaded nipple into his mouth, dampening the comfortable fabric of the shirt. "I think it's obvious how much we *both* want you." Dallas ground his erection against her hip.

The orgasm earlier had only taken the edge off the energy flowing through her. With just a few deft strokes of their hands and mouths, these men had made her body

quiver with need. It would be foolish to deny them all the pleasure their bodies demanded just because her heart wanted something unattainable.

As if confirming her thoughts, Thaegan buried his face in her hair, filling his lungs with her scent. His body trembled as her energy flowed through him. A rumble of sexual need vibrated against her back, trembling over her sensitive nerves, stoking the greedy fires of lust.

No, she didn't want them to stop. Didn't want them to leave her with this pounding urgency quivering through her body. But the words wouldn't come and all she could do was nod and moan out her approval. Her restless hands glided around Thaegan's hips, squeezing the tight muscles of the Ka'al's ass, pulling his growing erection tight against her back, confirming her decision.

The men moved in synchronized harmony, playing her body like a finely tuned instrument. Their moves, choreographed without words, were meant only for her pleasure. Lilly suspected she wasn't the first woman these partners had shared. But it was most definitely her first experience with multiple partners. In all her wildest fantasies, she couldn't have imagined the security and thrill of being pressed between the heat of two men whose sole focus at the moment was her pleasure.

"Yeah, this is definitely okay," she managed to pant.

The Ka'al inhaled again, the soft ridges of his nose nuzzling behind her ear. "Good because I'd have a hell of a time stopping now if you said no." His soft purr rumbled in her ear, sending a hot flow of desire from her throbbing pussy. "Do you know what you do to me?"

"To both of us, Lilly," Dallas whispered. With the carelessness of a thirsty man who's just found water, he grabbed the lapels of the shirt and ripped it open and off. Buttons bounced off the floor. Lilly was used to the madness of males under her control, but the flames of lust sparking greedily in Dallas' human eyes as his salacious gaze raked down her torso held a different kind of hunger. But perhaps she was just projecting a fantasy onto this man.

As Thaegan's hands surrounded her breasts, pinching the steeped nipples between his large fingers, Lilly didn't have the focus to ponder it. There was only the tiny shockwaves of energy zinging down her core, clenching her womb. As her energy crackled in the air, more honey leaked from her cunt until it coated the inside of her trembling thighs. Thaegan's and Dallas' movements became more frenzied and desperate with each wave vibrating through her body.

Dallas dropped to his knees, lifting Lilly's leg over his shoulder. The erotic scent of her juices filled the air, cloaking them in its velvet warmth. The Ka'al's tongue rasped up her chin as Dallas' eager mouth teased her clit. Lilly turned her head and Thaegan's lips crushed hers, the tip of his tongue spearing into her mouth. She hungrily sucked in the velvet heat, sweeping her tongue over the unfamiliar contours of his mouth. The rough surface added a thrilling dimension to the cinnamon flavor of him.

Dallas' fingers parted her folds, his tongue laving up the slit. His moans of satisfaction pitched her to another level of pleasure. Her hands found their way to his hair, tangling in the curls and anchoring her against the onslaught of sensations tripping over her nerves.

Thaegan broke from their kiss to dig his teeth into the flesh of her shoulder, the pain just another layer of bliss for her to relish. Lilly worked to catch her breath, but the hiccupping moans of rapture ripping from her throat made it impossible.

As Dallas' tongue flicked and suckled her clitoris, Thaegan's hand skimmed along her raised thigh, sliding beneath the thigh-high boot and tickling the underside of her knee. There was something primal and wanton about being partially dressed while these men ravaged her. Their rapacious sexual hunger hadn't allowed time to strip her naked. Lilly reveled in that lascivious thought, pushing aside the fact that it was her libido driving their desire. For them, her need seemed to be their only focus—and that was what she chose to hold on to.

Dallas' thick finger speared into her aching channel, his finger curling to massage the tender spot just inside. Her internal muscles clenched, surrounding his hand in her cream. He groaned out her name as he tongue worked faster to catch every drop.

Thaegan's hand continued its path up her thigh and around the curve of her ass as his mouth licked and suckled the base of her throat. His other hand continued to reshape the heavy flesh of her breast.

The provocative sounds of finger-fucking, the guys' heavy breathing and her breathy moans of rapture filled the room. The Ka'al's fingers joined Dallas' in her cleft. Thaegan dragged her juices from her pussy to the rosebud muscle of her anus. He circled the sensitive area, the pressure ratcheting up the sensations bolting through her system.

Lilly's muscles bunched, the ecstasy rose, lifting her up on a cloud of bliss. With mouths on her throat and pussy, and hands stroking all parts of her body, Lilly let herself go limp against their talented assault, allowing her body the freedom to soar.

She rode their hands and mouths, fiery ecstasy burning out to scorch along every nerve. Screaming her pleasure, their names mingled with oaths of euphoria, Lilly floated on the heavenly sensations they pulled from her body. When Thaegan pushed through the tight pucker of her ass, his fingers stabbing into her forbidden entrance, the pain and pleasure of the action pushed her over the final edge and she tumbled into the wild abandonment of her quaking orgasm. Explosions of heaven burst over her nerves and slicked her skin with sweat as she rode the unbelievable surge of pleasure offered by Thaegan and Dallas.

Her knees gave way as she climaxed, but the strong arms surrounding her kept Lilly secure. Over panting sobs of ecstasy, she begged them to stop, but her pleas were ignored. Dallas simply widened the path of his satin tongue, giving her time to slow the contractions of her pussy. His fingers smoothed over her labia and mons as his soothing words of adoration heated her skin. Thaegan worked in tandem with her quivering

muscles, his fingers gently probing her ass, relaxing the tight sphincter with masterful talent.

Her body recovered only to have the two of them finesse her into craving more.

Thaegan murmured passionate praise as he nibbled her ear. His fingers slipped from her anus and swirled in the thick honey of her hot opening before trailing back up her cleft. It wasn't the first time she would have a male fucking her ass, but it was the first time anyone had taken so much care with her. The Ka'al toyed with her. Prepared her. Worshipped her.

She was vaguely aware of Dallas removing her boots and shucking off his own. Through heavy lids of satisfaction, Lilly watched him strip off his jeans and mold his naked body to hers from thigh to sternum. He kissed her, not hard and out of control – as males under her spell tended to do – but with a compassionate seduction that made her want to weep at the tenderness of it. His hands trailed down her arms and his fingers linked with hers. These men had no inclination to rush her. No desire to take without first giving. No need to satisfy their own desires before satiating hers.

Their slow dance of persuasion fanned the barely banked embers of her desire.

Her world spun as Dallas gathered her in his arms, his tongue sweeping in to dance with hers. It carried the musky taste of her juices and the flavor of it was another reminder of how he'd loved her. Lilly didn't have time to miss the heat of Thaegan against her back as Dallas pulled her close to his body. She thought she could easily fall asleep in his arms when he sat on the soft pallet in the corner, cradling her in his lap.

"You are so beautiful, Lilly," Dallas said, his hand sweeping hair over her shoulder, exposing the pink areola of her breast. "I can't get enough of you," he said before pulling the pearled nipple into the heat of his mouth. She sighed his name as he lay back on the mattress, taking her with him. His body was strong and hard beneath her, and Lilly stretched along the warmth of his skin, the velvet steel of his erection pressing pleasantly against her belly.

They kissed slow and deep, her heart pounding in time with Dallas'. She couldn't remember ever feeling this desired and loved. Though the energy had dissipated with her orgasm, current simmered along her skin. No doubt Dallas and Thaegan could feel the effects, but neither seemed to want to rush this moment. Her energy had obviously affected the Ka'al earlier, though his patient ministrations to her body just now spoke of a man able to control his baser needs. But Dallas, Dallas was an enigma. An iron-willed male who had yet to succumb to her gifts. *Still*, his hands moved over her body in a leisurely dance of persuasion.

The mattress shifted with the added weight of Thaegan joining them. She felt the heat of his muscular thighs as he knelt beside them and she wondered when he'd stripped. His fingers ran through her hair, lifting the strands and brushing them to either side of her neck so they curtained her and Dallas in a little cocoon.

No one spoke. There was no reason for words. What they were going to share had nothing to do with QAL assignments, bounty hunting – or love. It involved nothing

more than the primal drive of three people intent on using each other's bodies to gratify their sexual lust. Despite the fantasies she wanted to weave, Lilly needed to remember that's all this was to them.

Thaegan's tongue dragged along her spine, sending a shiver of anticipation along Lilly's back. When his teeth bit into the tender flesh of her ass cheek, she jumped, but Dallas only tightened his grip around her back, holding her still. He'd read her right when he'd seduced her tied to the chair. There was something wanton and naughty about being bound and at the mercy of two hungry males.

Moving between their spread legs, Thaegan separated her cheeks. Large hands squeezed and reshaped her butt, her hips lifting of their own accord to expose her weeping cunt. His thumbs curled in to massage the slick folds, flirting with the sopping opening. His tongue rasped up her slit and speared hot and thick into her pussy. His low groan of satisfaction as he lapped at her honeyed cunt sent another gush of liquid desire into his mouth. Dallas deepened his kisses, swallowing her whimpers of need.

She couldn't believe her body was ready. Lilly trembled with longing as Thaegan's mouth nipped and licked at her clit, sending frissions of pleasure along her quaking nerves. Pulses of current flashed to her fingers and toes. Her entire body hummed with need to have them fill her.

Thaegan's fingers once again toyed with her anus. Already stretched, Lilly simply moaned as the Ka'al pressed two fingers past the muscles and deep in her ass.

Shards of ecstasy cut down her thighs. The pressure built. The thought of what they were going to do to her thrilled like no sexual encounter she'd ever had. Lilly wriggled with anticipation, mashing her breasts into Dallas' furred chest and rubbing her belly against his erection, she begged them to take her.

With the two men working in tandem once again, Thaegan assaulted her cunt and ass while Dallas held her trapped against the hard wall of his torso, his mouth pressed against hers, giving and taking in equal measure.

Lilly knew only one thing would satisfy her needy body. She pulled from Dallas' mouth, forcing air into her lungs. "Please, I need you buried inside me."

"Both of us?" Dallas asked.

She couldn't remember ever feeling this desperate. This consuming desire to be joined with two men. Her head told her it was the sexual greed craving satisfaction. But her heart believed there was something more in their union. Regardless of which was right, her head or her heart, Lilly needed Thaegan and Dallas like she needed her next breath.

"Fuck yes, both of you."

Thaegan sat back on his hunches, giving them room to maneuver. Lilly came up on her hands and knees, allowing Dallas' cock to stand tall between them. With practiced strokes, she circled the mushroom head of his erection and slid her hands down the veiny length, her fingers unable to circle its girth. Her name came out on a breathy moan as Dallas' hips canted in reaction to the pressure of her touch.

Brushing her hair to the side, Lilly looked over her shoulder at the Ka'al. He smiled when she caught his eye, his yearning desire sparking in their golden depths. If the hooded look he gave her was any indication, then Thaegan was a male skirting the razor edge of control. She held his gaze as she slid the tip of Dallas' cock around in her cream, pleasuring herself before guiding it to her sopping entrance and sheathing him in her heat.

Dallas' eyes closed, a satisfied moan erupting from his lips as Lilly bent her knees and buried his sizeable erection in her quivering pussy. Her orgasms had merely taken the edge off her need, but the cock stretching her slick cunt touched the deep need her body hadn't quite satiated.

Thaegan's hands and mouth were once again on her ass, his tongue rimming her rosebud hole. She felt the warm wet of his saliva drip along her cleft before his fingers worked the slick lubricant in and out of her back entrance, widening the relaxed muscle.

Lilly had no idea having the attention of two men would feel so incredible. She wanted to stifle the tiny voice inside her head that said none of it was real. Everything happening to her had been orchestrated by her genetics, not by the desire of these men to have only her in their arms.

Lilly convinced herself it didn't matter. She would accept what they had to offer and hold on to it in the lonely nights ahead. No male, regardless of her prior relationship with them, had ever been this mindful of *her* needs. Thaegan and Dallas could have finished this before it really got started. But their gentle touches had given her a sense of caring she hadn't felt in a long time and Lilly chose to focus on to that.

Dallas curled up from the mattress, greedily taking her pinched nipple deep into his mouth. His teeth bit into the sensitive pearl as his tongue flicked along its tip. With Dallas' cock already stimulating deep inside and Thaegan working her ass, Lilly felt the flames of bliss sizzle along her nerves and flash out to her extremities. Her body burned with desire and need.

Thaegan straightened, the hard muscle of his thighs pressing against hers. One hand gripped her ass while the other teased her anus with the head of his penis. He'd taken so much time to ready her, Lilly quivered with anticipation.

"Lilly, I want you." Thaegan's voice was hoarse with longing. "Tell me when you're ready."

She'd never been filled by two cocks before. Her body vibrated with the desperate urge to have them both buried to the hilt in her aching body. "Fuck me, Thaegan. I don't want it easy. Fuck me hard."

The tip of his cock pressed against her ass, but her need outweighed her patience and she rocked back on her knees, impaling herself on the Ka'al's sizeable erection. Thaegan's nails dug into her hips, a guttural moan of pleasure ripping from his throat as he buried himself deep in her forbidden channel.

"It's all you, Lilly," whispered Dallas as the men stilled to allow her body time to accommodate them both.

With gentle movements, she pulsed her hips, feeling a wonderful fullness that stroked the deepest part of her. Lilly buried her face in Dallas' hair, the spicy scent of it mingling with the earthy aroma of their fucking. She mumbled their names, gathering the courage to demand more from the men. Every nerve demanded she move, encouraged her to pull away from them, but not so far they separated. And just as demanding, rocked her back to fill her aching channels. Sensation tingled down her thighs and she groaned with the ecstasy radiating out from her pussy.

Thaegan's big hand wrapped around her thigh, anchoring himself as his hips moved in time with her cries of bliss. His other hand slid seductively up her back, tangling in her hair and twisting the flaxen strands in a firm grip. His name escaped her lips as the sensual tug jerked her body back and coated Dallas' penis with a gush of cream.

With Dallas' cock stretching and filling her as well, his mouth laving her breasts, Lilly's body trembled with passion. As he rocked beneath her, Lilly's clitoris rubbed against the soft halo of pubic hair, adding another dimension to the overwhelming bliss.

Lilly's muscles bunched, sensations nearly swamping her with their intensity. Giving herself over to their skillful touch, Lilly let Thaegan's and Dallas' mouths and hands and cocks work her body. The sensuous, wet sounds of their fucking mixed with the rhythmic slapping of skin against skin and the guttural oaths of passion filling the room.

Lilly's orgasm slammed into her with all the power of a bolt of lightning. The currents of rapture crashed into her over and over and she was powerless against the storm of ecstasy. Her energy surged through her adding to the intensity of her climax.

Thaegan's fierce cry of release followed only seconds behind her, but it was the warm release of Dallas' seed filling her channel that lifted her to the peak and sent her immediately over the edge of another climax. The three of them bucked and writhed against each other's bodies, prolonging the shuddering bliss.

Thaegan pulled apart from her and collapsed on the mattress. Sliding from Dallas, her bones and muscles melted by the fire of their joining, Lilly snuggled between the men. Her head settled on Dallas' chest, his heart beating a rapid tattoo against her cheek. The Ka'al threw an arm around her waist, snuggling her bottom against the heat of his lap, his face buried in her hair.

Lilly couldn't remember a day when she'd powered up the energy so many times in such a short span of hours. Between the excitement of the hunt for the Znedu and what the men had done to her body, her muscles no longer wanted to work. She couldn't even lift her hand to toy with the soft hair of Dallas' chest.

Dallas' pounding heart slowed, his breathing becoming deep and even. Thaegan's soft purr of sleep vibrated against her neck. Swaddled in the safe cocoon of her two lovers, Lilly closed her eyes and gave herself over to the exhaustion.

* * * * *

Gruff voices filtered into her dream and drove away the pleasant images of a Chicago summer. Still lost in her childhood, Lilly couldn't orient herself. Couldn't decipher the words spoken in harsh whispers. And definitely couldn't figure out why she felt so comfortably content.

Images of the kidnapping flooded back first, the heat of the laser and her body bound and hooded. But the soft cushion below her and the heavy weight of the blanket covering her belied that memory.

"What the fuck's that supposed to mean, Thaegan?"

"I was there too. Remember?"

In full clarity, it came back to her. Her body was pleasantly sore and she knew immediately where she was and what had transpired. Thaegan and Dallas weren't cuddling with her anymore. Whatever it was that they were arguing about, they'd waited until she was sound asleep and not part of their discussion.

"Yeah, I remember the whole fucking thing," said Dallas. "Which is why Lilly's not stepping one goddamn foot in that tavern tonight."

"She's not Sarah."

Dallas was silent, but she heard the scrape of a chair against the floor and curiosity got the best of her. Daring to peek, she saw Dallas pacing, the curves and hollows of his bare torso highlighted in the low light from over the sink. It warmed her heart that the men had been considerate enough to turn the lights down and cover her, allowing her time to sleep, though the volume of their voices had made that impossible.

Sitting on the far side of the table, Thaegan's mahogany chest was burnished to a slick copper color. His hands fiddled nervously with the centerpiece Dallas had swept to the floor earlier in the evening.

"I know she's not Sarah, for chrissake. Sarah was a trained QAL agent protected by her team and *she* couldn't keep herself out of the line of fire." Dallas stopped pacing and stared at his partner. "*I* couldn't keep her safe."

"And *I* didn't protect either of you." Thaegan broke the dish in his hands, anger drawing tight lines across his forehead. "Damn it, Dallas. I lost a teammate and a lover as well. You seem to forget that part of the equation."

Dallas leaned on the table, his head dropping between his shoulders. "Being with Lilly..."

"Brought it all back."

"Yeah." Dallas hesitated. "No...I mean...it's different."

"Because Lilly's human?"

He lifted his head. "There is that. But it's more. Sarah never intended to let us in. In the months we worked together and even after we shared a bed with her, she never let down her guard. Never wanted to be vulnerable."

"Znedus tend to do that." Thaegan shrugged. "They hold themselves separate. I never expected anything more."

"Yeah, well humans aren't hard-wired that way. At first it was great. But I'm getting tired of the love 'em and leave 'em attitude of deep space. I had myself believing Sarah wanted more. I guess we'll never find out."

"I repeat. Lilly's not Sarah, Dallas."

Dallas laughed, a bitter sound that tore at Lilly's heart. "No, she's a bounty hunter looking for revenge against the very organization we work for."

"Whether you like it or not, she's the only one who can identify Grebetz's boss. I understand your reticence, but there's no way she can draw the tattoo well enough for us to identify him."

Lilly hadn't shared with them that her photographic memory would have allowed her to do just that, but she'd thought the two of them were being hardheaded and unreasonable. Now she understood Dallas couldn't bring himself to lose someone else under his command or perhaps—someone he'd come to care about.

"I'm resigned to the fact she'll be there," said Dallas. "But there will be no screwups by either of us. *Everyone* is walking away from this mission. Especially Lilly."

"I think she can handle it. That talent of hers definitely can take a man down."

"Tell me what you feel," Dallas asked quietly.

"You really aren't affected by it, are you?"

"The woman turns me on like no female in a very long time. But it's not the sexual madness that seemed to overtake you."

"It's that chemical shit flowing through your veins, isn't it?"

Lilly had a hard time staying still. She had wondered about the knife wound and again the way Dallas had healed after Thaegan's beating. The man had brushed it off and then circumstances had tumbled on top of each other and she'd never gotten around to asking him again.

"The docs on Canus Delta told me the artificial blood would keep me from ever getting drunk or sick and that cuts and bruises were a thing of the past. But no one mentioned that a Seraphelium's touch would have no impact on me."

Thaegan laughed as Lilly's heart tripped over itself.

"When she's not using it as a weapon, it's quite a pleasant buzz. Guess you're just going to have to live with your own libido guiding you on that one," said Thaegan.

"With that woman, it's certainly not hard."

"No, that woman makes it *very* hard."

Both men laughed again and Lilly felt as if her prayer had been answered. What she'd felt from Dallas had been real desire, not a figment of her imagination or spurred on by her gift. She couldn't hold back the smile that brightened her face.

From her vantage point on the mattress, Lilly could see out the side window. The first and second moons had already set and the third sat low on the horizon. Though day would never break here on Garalon Five, she knew there were only a few hours left before the official morning started. She stretched and yawned loudly. There was a lot of work ahead of them.

Chapter Nine

“Bastower say you and Thaegan bring woman in.”

Dallas’ cochlear implant translated the Xerick’s clicks and pops. In the comfort of the backroom at headquarters, his team spoke their native tongues. They were trying to relax before all hell broke loose at the tavern in a couple of hours.

“Yeah, well, the way the bimbo handled herself in the tavern we thought she might know something about Grebetz,” Thaegan said.

He and Thaegan had arrived nearly forty minutes ago. They’d taken time to change their clothes but hadn’t wasted time with showers. He could still smell Lilly on his skin.

“Gone you two a long while.” One head of the Xerick puffed on a Renilich cigar while the other ate and shot the shit.

“Turned out she didn’t know anything.” Thaegan casually leaned forward and grabbed another of the purple wraps from the overflowing platter of food products in the center of the table. “Bringing her in wouldn’t have done any good.”

As hungry as he was, Dallas knew the spicy meat and vegetable roll wouldn’t satisfy. It would only add weight to the tight knot of nerves sitting cold in his gut. He didn’t like the idea of Lilly being at the tavern and in the line of fire, but it appeared if he wanted to bring down *Hij’Rozhod*, he didn’t have a choice. “Turned out she was nothing but a common streetwalker. There wasn’t much she could do for us.”

“Thaegan say a little...” The Drikspa next to him made a crude motion with his hands.

They’d been trying to play it loose and casual where Lilly was concerned. She and Thaegan had convinced him seeing her safely back to her hotel could be dangerous. Lilly wouldn’t even agree to spend the day in his residence. She couldn’t very well show up at the tavern tonight wearing the t-shirt and gym shorts he’d given her. He’d had to be content dropping her back in the center of the city, several blocks from her hotel. Dallas didn’t like leaving her alone and vulnerable, but he’d had no choice. Just like this fucking locker room conversation—it was all part of the charade. “Yeah, well, that’s not really the information we needed...”

The Xerick punched Thaegan. “Boom boom for you.”

The Ka’al growled in response. Obviously, his partner wasn’t enjoying this farce any more than he was.

“Sawyer,” Bastower said as he stormed into the room. His boss remained in his Ka’al form which didn’t bode well for him.

“Sir.” Dallas stood, ready to present the ten-page report he’d already filed about the takedown at the tavern and the fake details of Lilly’s interview.

"I need one of your men for a couple of hours."

That was not where he expected Bastower to go. "Sir?"

"I've just been informed Ambassador Tervoss is making a refueling stop here on Garalon Five on his way to Reigis Alpha. He's decided to meet some of his constituents at an impromptu news conference. In light of recent events his private security asked if QAL would add some manpower to his security. I've got three men, one more and we can do a complete surveillance of our own."

Thaegan's gaze met his for one telling instant. This was too damn convenient. Only hours before they were supposed to take down *Hij'Rozhod* it appeared someone was pulling his team apart. No way in hell *that* was a coincidence. If their mission had been leaked again, it was highly likely there would be bloodshed at the tavern. He'd think about protecting Lilly later. Right now he wanted every man he trusted at his fingertips.

"Take Lelkin," Dallas said.

The Drikspa stood, his hard red eyes glaring at Dallas. "No problem, *Sir*." He spat the title at Dallas like a curse. "It's not like my position was critical to the success of our mission tonight."

That was true. Dallas and the Drikspa hadn't developed the easy camaraderie he had with the rest of his team. He wanted to think it had to do with the way the Drikspa kept to himself and not the fact that he'd been one of several agents rotating through his team to fill the void left by Sarah's death. Dallas shrugged.

Bastower slapped the Drikspa on the back. "Don't look so disappointed, Lelkin. We'll be back before the fireworks start."

* * * * *

Lilly bounced down on the edge of the bed and flipped through the channels on the televid. Nothing held her interest. She'd been wandering around the tiny hotel room, feeling lost and alone and more than a little on edge. She checked the time again. The afternoon continued to tick by at a snail's pace. There was still more than an hour before she needed to leave for the tavern.

The soft roll of excitement warmed her belly. She wasn't kidding herself that it had anything to a bounty payment being within reach. Lilly credited it all to the fact she'd soon be seeing Dallas. She picked up the t-shirt she'd thrown on the bed. She'd reluctantly parted with it after her shower when she'd pulled on her leather pants and a silk blouse. A perfect outfit for taking down a criminal—or running for her life. Lifting the soft cotton to her face, Lilly inhaled deeply, the unmistakable masculine scent of Dallas wrapping around her nostrils and making her dizzy with want.

After she'd gotten up at the cabin, the three of them had sat around the table strategizing. Somewhere between the cutting of her clothing and their lovemaking, they'd developed trust. But there had been something more. None of them had been anxious to leave the secluded confines of the cabin and their discussion of Treljon lasers

and vantage points had deteriorated into another round of very hot, very sweaty sex. Her own libido had been fueled by the knowledge that her energy had no pull on Dallas and yet he *still* wanted her. *Craved* her was more like it. The two of them had managed another quick session in his residence while they were searching for clothes and Thaegan was contacting headquarters.

Eyeing the computer on the desk, Lilly realized she'd be leaving for the tavern without knowing any additional information about Grebetz or his boss. The decoding program was still ticking away, working with her cochlear translator, trying to decipher the conversation she'd overheard between the Znedu and the Braughtot. A little stab of guilt twisted in her gut. She could have given the translator to Dallas. No doubt QAL computers would do a much faster job, but she'd feared it might make her appearance tonight unnecessary.

Then again, it may also save some lives.

Lilly couldn't think that way. When this mission was over, she didn't want what she'd found with Dallas to be over as well. Yes, it was selfish, but the way karma had been kicking her ass lately, Lilly figured she was owed a little selfishness. And being with Dallas was certainly an indulgence she'd like to repeat. Having Thaegan around would make it a welcomed trio she could definitely get used to.

Her body was still delectably bruised all these hours later. When she'd stripped for her shower, Lilly laughed at the bite marks on her breasts and ass, trying to remember exactly when they'd occurred but not really caring. The memory of their hands and hot mouths on her skin and their silken erections filling her so completely had ratcheted up her energy. She'd stepped into the shower with a couple of toys, trying to bring it down a notch or two. Even now the current hummed along her skin, adding to the nervousness and the unsettled feeling making her fidgety.

She studied the heavy pack next to the door, wondering if she needed to grab one of the sex toys again just to take the edge off the jumpiness. But rummaging through the neat stacks of clothes and books seemed like more effort than it was worth.

Lilly wasn't sure she would be leaving Garalon Five. No one knew how tonight would play out. She'd packed her meager possessions earlier in the afternoon with the absurd thought that if they completed their objective, she might pull out with Dallas' team. But now that seemed like a foolish girl's romantic dream.

All she knew for certain was that she didn't want to give up what she'd only recently found with Dallas. QAL had sent her away once. But here in deep space where rules were different, she wondered if there was a way she could become one of them, a member of a ragtag family who would keep her from being alone.

But putting that expectation on him didn't seem fair. No doubt she was mistaking Dallas' concern for affection. If she understood correctly, the man had not only lost a teammate but a lover. Thaegan had convinced Dallas that Lilly needed to be at the tavern and the man had reluctantly capitulated. She suspected his balking had nothing

to do with his heart and everything to do with pride. It didn't matter. Lilly would never forgive herself if she didn't at least try to continue what they'd begun.

Absently she toyed with the controller for the televid. She must really be getting bored. Everything looked the same. It took Lilly a moment to realize what she was looking at. Hitting the volume control, she tuned to the English language station and cued in to the special bulletin being televised on every channel.

"...induction only ten days away. Ambassador Antonio Tervoss has made an unannounced stop on Garalon Five..."

Lilly recognized the landing field where a crowd had gathered. It wasn't more than a fifteen-minute walk from her hotel. Five, if she hailed a luna cab. She checked her watch. Perhaps she'd go down and see the man she'd voted for in person.

"...will be speaking in less than thirty minutes. He's taken such a strong stand against the illegal trades on Krystallos Three, we wonder if he'll..."

It was no surprise aliens with official security badges milled about the podium. Ambassador Tervoss had made few friends during his campaign and his protection detail was no doubt high. A couple of Ka'al scanned the growing crowd, while a Xerick walked every inch of the open area where the ambassador would walk. But it was the Drikspa checking the podium that nearly stopped Lilly's heart. Disbelief tripped over fury as nausea rolled hot and thick in her gut.

The bulky aliens with the white skin were often hard to tell apart. But there was one Drikspa she would never forget. As he turned to speak into his communicator, Lilly's suspicions were confirmed. The spiral protrusion on the right side of his face was incomplete. Burned beyond repair in a QAL takedown, the doctors at the infirmary told her they wouldn't be able to mend the damage wrought by a Treljon laser.

The laser she'd held to the Drikspa's head as she'd taken him into QAL custody on Earth six months ago.

Lilly grabbed her coat, the Ba'alkin dagger and headed for the door, nearly tripping over her pack in her haste to leave the hotel room.

* * * * *

Dallas leaned forward on his hands, the hologram of the tavern illuminated in front of him.

"Have they changed anything in the last thirty minutes, partner?"

Thaegan slammed a wide palm on his back, lifting him from the morass of anxiety he'd fallen into.

Dallas pressed a button on the control panel and the tavern melted away. "Tell me again I made the right decision allowing her to be there."

Thaegan laughed. "Let her? Did you really say *let* her? Nothing's going to stop that woman when she's got her mind set on something."

"Hey, Sawyer, isn't this the bimbo you guys took into custody?" The geeky Xerick who monitored all QAL communication hollered from across the room.

"What the hell you talking about, Harrick?" Dallas really wanted to be left alone to stew in his indecision.

"This blonde human with the big tits." The Xerick waved his hand at the monitor in front of him. "I need your confirmation before I radio Bastower. Seems too much of a coincidence that she's skulking around a surprise visit by the ambassador."

Dallas strode to Harrick in three quick steps. Though the female on the screen wasn't facing the security camera and the honey tresses that had tickled his skin were caught up in a long braid down her back, he would have known that curvaceous ass, hugged by soft leather from any angle.

"Yes." He pushed the simple word past the strangle hold of panic wrapped around his throat. She turned then and looked into the televid, her eyes searching the crowd. Her full mouth was a tight line of determination, her hand sliding under her coat, no doubt ready to draw a weapon. "That's definitely her, but don't radio Bastower."

"But I'm pretty sure —"

"Dallas said no." Thaegan's voice was low and menacing, a Ka'al growl riding on the words. "He's team leader. Are you questioning him?"

"No Sir... No... I just thought..."

"Continue to monitor all channels." Dallas said as he headed for the exit. "I repeat, do *not* radio Bastower. If she's there, then there's a chance she's monitoring our communications."

"I'll scramble —"

Thaegan's angry roar vibrated off the walls.

The Xerick's trembling would have been comical if Dallas wasn't so worried about Lilly. What the hell was she doing? After what they had shared last night, he had no doubt she wasn't looking to harm Tervoss. But the fact she was there and armed meant she was chasing a bounty—or worse—knew something about *Hij'Rozhod* that she hadn't bothered to share with him.

"Harrick, continue to monitor all channels, radio me if anything changes." Dallas checked the charge on his Treljon laser before reholstering it. "Thaegan, you're with me. We'll hook up with Bastower and report these developments." His partner stared at him, a knowing look passing between them. In that instant, they both understood the interview at the tavern had been a ruse. Whatever was going to happen with *Hij'Rozhod*, it was no doubt going down now. "Gamma Team, sit tight. Jones, you be ready for that interview. But no one, I repeat, no one goes in before I get back. No one's getting hurt in this mission."

His eyes locked on Thaegan's. "No one."

The Ka'al simply nodded and followed him through the wall.

* * * * *

She'd seen him. He had to be here somewhere.

It hadn't even been ten minutes since she'd seen the asshole on the televid. Lilly had known the minute she'd hit the crowded street and seen the lights of luna cabs backed up for blocks that there would be no getting through the backed-up traffic. Obviously the surprise visit by Ambassador Tervoss was no longer a surprise to anyone in the Plaintiff Quadrant of Garalon Five.

Lilly had sprinted the distance from the hotel to the landing site in seven minutes flat—and in heels no less. But as she pushed through the crowd, the Drikspa was nowhere to be seen. There was no way in hell that fucking slave runner was getting away from here. Lilly didn't give a shit if the guy had a bounty on his head, she'd mete out some of her own justice if the authorities didn't want to listen to her story.

The way he'd been moving around the podium, Lilly was sure he was part of the security detail. She laughed in disgust. Wouldn't that be just the way? A criminal hired by QAL even as the alphabet mafia ripped her life apart. *Asshole*. Revenge tore through her, hot and hard, solidifying her resolve. The Drikspa would pay—not for what he'd done to her—but for the nearly one hundred souls he'd stolen from Earth.

Revenge was a mighty sword and she'd wield hers with deadly force.

This night she would not be denied. Lilly had been in enough dangerous situations to know how to take out one slave-running scumbucket of a Drikspa and slip away undetected and unharmed. Searching the crowd, she made note of all the televid cameras readied for the ambassador's speech. The Ba'alkin dagger lay in her palm, hidden in the sleeve of her jacket. Whatever she did to take this guy down, it would have to be away from the eyes of viewers. Though with the number of aliens filing onto the tarmac, she wasn't sure there was anyone in the city sitting at home watching.

The mob pressed forward, anxious to see their new leader who promised so much change. Lilly had believed it was the human colonies inhabiting Reigis Alpha who had voted him in. But this crowd of mixed aliens appeared to be happy to meet the human who would be inaugurated into the most powerful position in the galaxy.

Lilly reached into the inside pocket of her coat, pulling out the earpiece and the QAL badge she'd had forged on Dallas Eight months ago. She would like to have put on the sunglasses for disguise, but even the flood lights pouring down on the tarmac didn't make them necessary in the darkness of Garalon Five. Checking her timepiece, Lilly tamped down the panic. It was nearly time for Tervoss to take the podium. She'd wanted to find the Drikspa before he spoke, but perhaps hunting him down would be better done while the crowd was focused on Tervoss' speech.

Jostled once again, Lilly realized she needed to get out of the growing crowd. She debated working her way to the secured tented area to her left, pushing her way into the thick of Tervoss' security. But getting close to the Drikspa without him noticing her under those circumstances would be difficult for sure. If she was going to take him down without bloodshed, she'd need to do it with secrecy as her advantage.

Lilly searched for another plan. To the right of her, a staging for media had been set up. The front of the platform was lined with televid cameras pointed down at the crowd. Behind them stood several aliens she recognized as city officials. Perhaps from that vantage point she could better scan the crowd.

And that's when she saw him—behind the media, mingling with dignitaries—the Drikspa who, six months ago, had made her worst nightmares a reality. Her world became a narrow focus of anger, revenge and the alien. He spoke to another Drikspa. Their heads were close together, their eyes surveying the area, wrists lifted to their mouths as they spoke to an unknown entity. Definitely with security. The two looked at each other and nodded before separating and one headed off the platform.

That's when her world fell away and the crowd burst out in a loud applause.

She was vaguely aware of Ambassador Tervoss taking his place behind the podium, the roar of the crowd barely penetrating the rush of blood pounding in her ears. Lilly stared in disbelief as the second Drikspa took up position behind the media, hidden among the dignitaries.

The crowd quieted and the ambassador spoke. "Good evening. I'm pleased to be here on Garalon Five..."

But Lilly wasn't focused on what the ambassador-elect was saying. The Drikspa above the crowd now had her fully attention. Sometimes karma smiled and shined in her direction. The alien above her wasn't a Drikspa by birth. This alien wore the tattoo of a Braughtot and the marks snaking along his neck to swirl up his cheek and around his left eye were the same ones she'd seen on Grebetz's communicator last night. He was *Hij'Rozhod*. Lilly had no doubt. He'd come here to take out the ambassador.

"...will be meeting with the league of galaxies and begin working..."

The man's words rolled into the background noise of the crowd around her. The instincts of a detective, honed from years on the Chicago force, kicked into gear without any thought for her safety. Lilly's own problems would wait. She had probably been the sole witness to the last-minute plans of an assassin whose intended target was Ambassador Tervoss.

She had no time to stop the man above her on the media platform. Bringing attention to him at this point would only leave the ambassador vulnerable to any number of weapons the alien may be carrying. Lilly's only course of action was to get to the man behind the podium.

Propelling herself through the crowd, Lilly ignored the protests of aliens she pushed aside. Unapologetically, she flashed the fake badge, her only care—protecting the ambassador. She'd answer to the authorities later. If *Hij'Rozhod* succeeded, the galaxy would be thrown into turmoil and the criminals would score another win.

In excruciating slow motion, the other Drikspa stepped out of the tent on the far side of the security area. In sight of everyone, he lifted a Treljon laser, aimed it directly at Tervoss and managed to pull off two rounds before being taken down by security. The zip of beams cut through the air, but she couldn't tell what, if anything, they hit.

The ambassador was swarmed by security, blocking him from her view. Screams reverberated as chaos erupted.

Lilly pushed against the flow of the crowd as they swarmed in a panicked mass away from the podium. The ambassador, surrounded by his security team, was pushed directly toward the staging on her right. More security rushed across the platform, clearing the escape route for the ambassador. The Braughtot-Drikspa moved with the contingent, in direct line with the approaching ambassador. The Drikspa by the stage had only been the catalyst to put the assassination plan in motion.

She broke through the crowd with the credentials flashing and screamed, "There's another on the platform!"

A feral yell of frustration roared from her left. "You bitch!"

Lilly turned to see the Drikspa pull a weapon of some kind from his sleeve. With deadly precision he shot two of the security guards and sliced a lethal energy beam across the neck of a third. The aliens crumpled at his feet. In the time it took to blink, the alien turned to her, his eyes burning with recognition. The flashes of light blasting from the weapon were nearly blinding in their intensity, the sound of the energy unusually loud in her ears. Pain exploded in her back just before she went down hard on the tarmac.

Fire burned in her gut, spread out to lick hungrily at her arms and legs and explode in her head. Lilly rolled to her back, moaning with the wave of pain the motion brought.

"Lilly." Her name echoed through the haze of agony. "Lilly."

She was sure the angels were calling her. When her eyes focused, it was Dallas' face that swam in her vision. His halo was nearly blinding in its intensity and she shut her eyes against the beauty, hoping he would carry her from the agony crackling along her nerves into the serenity of heaven.

"Oh no you don't. Lilly, stay with me." Dallas' voice broke with emotion. "Open your eyes."

She forced herself to obey. Deep lines of worry marred his angelic features. "Why are you...did I..."

"You saved him, Lilly." Dallas swiped at her face, but she couldn't feel his touch. The fire had been extinguished by ice that now flowed through her veins. She shivered.

She wanted to talk. To ask who she'd saved, but she couldn't get her teeth to stop chattering.

"Thanks to you, Thaegan took down *Hij'Rozhod*." He leaned in close to her face, his beautiful eyes glistening in the bright lights. "Lilly, you saved the ambassador. Now I'm going to save you."

Dallas' voice was a faraway echo that she couldn't understand. The cold became a roaring black hole, surrounding her in its vortex. It sucked in light and sound, dragging her down with it. She wanted to make it stop, to beg Dallas to come with her, but she

couldn't find him in the swirling darkness as it engulfed her. The noise and heat and cold and pain disappeared as Lilly was sucked into the blackness alone.

Chapter Ten

Lilly hadn't expected heaven to feel this way. Everything hurt. *Jesus*, even her hair follicles pulsed with hundreds of pinpricks of pain. Then it occurred to her, perhaps that wasn't where her soul had gone. She wondered if she could stay in this darkness and not acknowledge where she was.

"Lilly."

Inwardly she sighed. She shouldn't be surprised someone in the bowels of hell knew her.

"Lilly, it's Dallas. If you can hear me, open your eyes."

Her lids fluttered, light spearing more pain through her skull. She forced her eyes to focus and he was there, his smile warm and inviting. Had he been sucked into the darkness with her? His happiness made no sense.

"Hi, beautiful," he said.

"Am I dead?" The words were gravel scraped over the soft skin of her throat.

He laughed and kissed her forehead. "Hardly."

"I hurt everywhere."

He offered her water and she drank greedily.

"Easy." He pulled the straw from her mouth. "You've been out for a couple of days. They told me to have you go slow. Too much and you'll puke." He shrugged.

"I thought I died and went to hell."

"You certainly were tap dancing this side of death's door." Thaegan leaned in and slapped Dallas on the back. "But thanks to this guy...we had a happier outcome."

Dallas actually blushed. "I just donated blood."

Thaegan grabbed a chair, turned it backward and sat down with his powerful arms thrown over the back, his hands resting on her shin. "Yeah, *indestructible* blood."

If it were possible Dallas' face deepened in color. "Well it's blood-blood, it's just that..."

"Your body heals faster," she said. "And obviously isn't affected by *my* prowess." She wiggled her fingers in the air.

"Yeah." Confusion furrowed Dallas' brow. "How'd you figure that out?"

"Thaegan told me."

He lifted his hands when Dallas glared at him. "Hey, I didn't say a word."

She laughed at the men, enjoying the comfortable exchange. "Well, not straight out. More like he mentioned it while I was," she motioned air quotes, "'sleeping'."

"Yeah, we wondered about that Sleeping Beauty routine," Thaegan said, squeezing her leg.

"What else did you hear?" asked Dallas.

"That you lost Sarah due to a leak in QAL."

"Well, that leak's plugged." Thaegan's hands tapped out a quick rhythm on the chair back. "Not that we give a shit."

"Who was it?" she asked.

"Turned out it was our boss Bastower," said Dallas.

"What?" Was there no end to the double agents in QAL? "How'd you..."

"Well, we have *you* to thank for that." Dallas ran his hand down her hair, letting it rest at the back of her neck, his thumb caressing her cheek. "I saw you on the televid at the news conference. I'd laid down the law about you staying put in your hotel..."

"And he knew how well you always listened." Thaegan laughed as he reached out again and gently squeezed her leg. There was comfort in their touches.

"Anyway, the determination on your face made me believe that perhaps your Drikspa had shown up," Dallas said. "A new member had joined our team several months back, which fit the timeline of you leaving space. You mentioned Grebetz's boss was a Braughtot—"

"Bastower's a Braughtot," Thaegan continued seamlessly. "He's been everywhere the assassinations have taken place over the past three years because *we've* been chasing *Hij'Rozhod*."

"Actually turns out we were giving him cover," Dallas said.

"Why would QAL want to assassinate all those government officials?" she asked.

"Not QAL...Bastower," Thaegan clarified.

"The same reason he had the Drikspa transferred to our team. Two words..."

"Slave trade," she responded.

Dallas absently brushed hair from her eyes. "At first *Hij'Rozhod* was simply eliminating anyone publically opposing the slave trade. Over the last few years, he turned his attention to Tervoss' campaign. Seems having Tervoss or any of his cronies at any level of the planetary governments would have meant a crackdown on their very lucrative business. They've been systematically taking out Tervoss' strongest supporters and filling in the positions with dirty officials who were willing to turn their backs to the problem."

"And your boss Bastower was involved?" she asked.

"Right up to his hairy Braughtot ass," said Thaegan.

Lilly settled deeper in the pillows. "The two were working together at the landing site then?"

"One causing a distraction...your Drikspa," Dallas said.

"And one doing the killing...our boss," Thaegan finished.

Lilly wanted to laugh at the ridiculous way they spoke in tandem. But from their expressions, she assumed they weren't even aware of it.

"They're both in custody?"

"Nope, dead." Thaegan said it as if the men had simply gone for a walk. "Dallas shot the Drikspa when he tried to take you out. Pushed you to the ground —"

"But not before he got off two shots with some new high-powered luna crystal gun."

"The weapon's in government hands now," Thaegan said.

"You took one shot in the gut and one to the side of your head." Dallas swallowed hard. "If I hadn't gotten to you when I did, the second shot..."

"Would have pierced your heart instead of that thick skull of yours." Thaegan smiled.

She ignored Thaegan's playful jab. "And Bastower?"

"One day in jail convinced the man he wouldn't survive the rigors of having a dirty cop in their midst," said Dallas.

"Offed himself with a bed sheet."

She wanted to feel bad, but neither man had played by the rules. "So it's over?"

"We've seen the end of *Hij'Rozhod's* reign of terror for sure. But Lilly, there's something else." Dallas flicked his eyes to Thaegan who nodded. She had no doubt now that they'd saved her life they were headed out to their next QAL assignment.

"It's okay." She tried not to let the sadness and disappointment color her words. "Bounty hunting has been good to me. Despite what Tervoss hopes, deep space is crawling with criminals. You two —"

Dallas put a warm finger to her lips, stopping her verbal diarrhea. "My turn to talk."

She blinked and nodded.

"I donated the blood. It works in your organs the same, well, sort of the same. But I'm pretty sure it's going to affect your," his hand waved up and down her body, "your gift. I'm not sure how that works exactly, but if it's something in your blood —"

"Dallas broke it," said Thaegan.

She shrugged casually, not letting any of the joy pounding in heart escape. "Guess I'll have to find a man the old-fashioned way." The gift had been Lilly's proverbial albatross, and her neck ached from carrying it all these years. The loss of the weight made her feel like she could conquer the world. "So what's next for you two?"

"We already have our next assignment." Thaegan stood and swung the chair to the corner of the room. Despite the sudden joy of a moment ago, her heart splintered. She didn't want them to leave.

"So soon?" she asked. "QAL must be anxious to put you two heroes to work."

"Fuck QAL," Thaegan said. "They've done nothing but screw us over for five years. We're leaving them in our dust."

Color crept up Dallas' cheeks again. "We've already got a new assignment with a new agency and they'd like us to start as soon as possible."

"We already accepted," Thaegan said, "but Dallas thought we needed to talk to you—"

"Shut up, Thaegan."

She laid her hand over Dallas', which hadn't stopped stroking her arm. "It's all right. I'm sure I'll be out of here—"

Dallas touched his lips to hers. Lilly lost herself in the sweet heat of his mouth pressed so gently to hers. She blinked when he pulled away, trying to stall the tears.

"*That* shut you up?" Thaegan laughed. "We're going to have to remember that, partner. When the woman gets out of hand, just kiss her."

She looked from Dallas to Thaegan and back again, but no answers were found in their expressions.

"Tervoss' head of security offered us a job. That's the position we accepted," Dallas said.

It made her feel better that Dallas didn't sound all too enthusiastic about it. "Sounds like a great job," she said tightly, not allowing the sadness burning in her throat to betray itself.

"See, I told you she'd like it," said Thaegan, his enthusiasm eluding her.

"So, you're okay that I accepted for all of us?" Dallas asked. "Well, I mean, Thaegan's heading out today to join them. But I told them I'd hold on for a week or so until you're well—"

"You don't need to wait for me to heal, Dallas. I'll be fine." Lilly's heart couldn't bear to let the goodbyes linger that long. Like a bandage removal, it had to be quick. "You go with Thaegan. The job sounds—" And then she replayed in her head what Dallas had said. *Us*. "Who do you mean by *us* exactly?"

"You, me and Thaegan," said Dallas. "I tried to negotiate without Thaegan, but seeing as he held down Bastower while the man morphed through all versions of his Braughtot self, Tervoss' security team thought he might be an asset."

"It's nice someone appreciates my talents," Thaegan said.

"Me?" she asked quietly, afraid to hope. "You want me on the team?"

"Of course we do." Dallas smiled, his full lips curving up slow and steady, his dimple dancing. "You've got a special touch that we couldn't live without."

About the Author

Nina Pierce lives in northern Maine with her soul mate of thirty-two years, her three adult children and a menagerie of pets. She is a multi-published author of erotic suspense stories. Her passion for bringing out the sensuality in her characters continues to drive her to find new and exciting stories to bring to readers.

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