



SENTINELS: BOOK ONE

KNIGHT'S WOMAN

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Knight's Woman

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Blurb

The United Terran Colonies are under attack. Desperate for pilots to combat the enemy raiders the Fleet puts out an all pilots call, hoping to fill their empty fighter squadrons. A call ignored by ex-con Radha Kaden, who figures she doesn't owe anyone anything. Since a pilot's life expectancy is slightly less than that of your average lemming, she steers well clear.

Then a bar brawl violates the terms of her release and she has a choice. Go back to Acheron, the harshest prison facility in the combined systems, or pilot a fighter...

Thanks to high casualty rates Wing Commander Davin McAvoy constantly needs new pilots. Dead men can't fly Valkyries nor can they protect the base or her crew. When he's told he's getting that rarest of creatures—an experienced pilot—he's ready to throw a party. Until he finds out not only is his new pilot an ex-con but she's a woman too. Both unforgiveable sins in Davin's book.

Until he meets her and sparks that have nothing to do with the war fly...

Chapter One

"You bitch, you're cheating!"

Radha sighed. Today had started out so well. Or at least, it had started out less shitty than her days normally did.

She looked up and across the table at the speaker, not responding at all to his hate-filled expression. Jonas had never liked her. Well, that wasn't entirely true. Jonas had only hated her after she'd turned down his advances shortly after she'd arrived on Jericho. But she suspected the real problem wasn't the rejection and more that she wasn't scared of him like everyone else. Everyone was afraid of Jonas; he worked at making people scared of him, so that made her all the more dangerous. The fact she'd turned him down was just the icing on the cake.

Jericho sat at the ass end of the universe. A mining base in the Galeata System that people didn't come to unless they were desperate. Or, like Radha, trying to hide. Even so, you had to have a pretty damn big secret to risk coming here.

She leaned back in her chair, one booted foot on the empty seat beside her. Her posture was relaxed, but everyone in the bar knew her. Knew how she could move. She was fast and lethal when she needed to be. If her reputation wasn't enough, there were the prison tattoos on her upper arms. Even the most uneducated recognized the distinctive marks of Acheron—the United Planets' harshest prison. Acheron was so harsh that even a short sentence there was considered a death sentence. There weren't many people who survived it and wore the sort of marks Radha did.

"Piss off Jonas, the way you play cards a trained monkey could roll you over," she threw back. She spoke in a mild voice. Jonas wasn't worth getting wound up over.

The room fell silent, all eyes watching the stand-off developing at the center table. No one argued with Jonas. Not publically. Not if they wanted to live.

Radha sighed again. She hadn't been cheating but she had been winning. A fact she knew would sting Jonas more than losing money. Jonas didn't like to be beaten at anything, especially not by a woman.

She threw her cards in the center of the table and stood. "Screw this, I'm not listening to your bullshit tonight Jonas," she told him and reached forward to scoop up her winnings.

A hard hand clamped around her slender wrist. "You're not going anywhere with my money bitch," Jonas snarled.

Radha gave him a look that could melt steel. It was a look she'd perfected during her time at Acheron. Jonas flinched but covered it with a curled lip. It was his best bad-ass look. Unfortunately for him, Radha had seen it all.

"You have three seconds to let go," she said. "Or I'll break every bone in your body."

* * * *

"You broke his legs, arms, crushed one hand, broke his nose, his jaw, collarbones, all his ribs ... oh no, I tell a lie, you missed a rib. The bottom one on the left side according to the medical report..."

Judge Patterson sighed and snatched his glasses off his face to look at the tall woman in handcuffs standing in front of his desk.

"Ms. Kaden, I don't think you realize quite how much trouble you're in. You almost beat a man to death and your only defense is 'he was being a tit!'" he exclaimed. "You broke every bone in his body!"

Radha quit her study of the ceiling to look at him. A shiver ran down Patterson's spine. She was a looker all right, no question of that. He wasn't that far into his dotage that he couldn't appreciate the way a woman looked. But hers was a dangerous beauty, like admiring a panther. Any moment that lethal grace could turn on you.

She looked like she should be modeling on a catwalk. She was tall, slender, and curved in all the right places. But above all it was her face that caught his eye. Almond-shaped eyes set over high cheekbones and full lips. A mass of long dark hair gave her an almost ethereal look, until you peered into those dark eyes. Patterson shuddered. Someone, somewhere had destroyed any hope or joy in her soul.

He shuffled papers and looked at her again. She hadn't moved, still looking at him.

"I'm sorry Ms. Kaden, you leave me no choice. The terms of your release were very specific. There wasn't to be any trouble. I'm going to have to send you back to the Acheron facility."

* * * *

Acheron. They were sending her back to Acheron.

Radha lay on the cot in the single cell and stared upward, her hands behind her head. She'd known this would happen eventually. Acheron was the sort of place that never released its grip. The hardest penal facility of them all, it was a place where people were locked up and the key was thrown away. Most people there were serving a death sentence, whether they were given it or not. No one survived more than two years in Acheron, it was just that tough. If it wasn't the grueling physical work, mining krellerite ore, it was the brutal regime instilled by the guards or the equally brutal mentality of the inmates.

Radha had survived nearly a year during her first sentence. She wasn't stupid or naive enough to think she would make it through another. She sighed; all her running and hiding after her release had been for nothing. Acheron had found her anyway, and sunk its teeth in once again.

"You're a pilot."

The gruff male voice broke through her thoughts. The tone was level with only the faintest hint of condemnation in it. That was impressive. The fleet needed pilots, now more than ever. The Satagosians had increased their attacks, upped their raids until the United Planets Fleet was stretched to the limit. The call had gone out to every able-bodied person with flight experience to contact their nearest recruitment office.

Radha had ignored it.

"I said, you are a pilot."

She laughed, bitter amusement in the sound. "I heard you the first time handsome. But you're mistaken. I'm no pilot."

The speaker moved closer until he had to be leaning against the bars of her cell. Radha refused to look at him, her gaze firmly on the ceiling. She liked this ceiling; it was interesting to look at. It even had spots. She started to count them.

There was a sigh, a “we're going to play this game are we?” sort of sigh.

"Are you, or are you not the Radha Kaden who took fighter training at the Academy seven years ago?" he asked again. Something in his tone told Radha he'd keep at this all day, slowly whittling her down. Or trying to at least.

"Yeah," she admitted after a long pause. They could pull her record in two seconds flat so it would do her no good to lie. "What of it?"

His voice was smug and self-satisfied. "Then you're a pilot. Why didn't you answer the all-pilots call?"

Radha turned her head, her gaze colliding with his. He was a nondescript guy, the beige uniform of the admin corps making him look drab. Correction, making him look more drab than he already was.

"I didn't graduate. Ergo, I'm not a pilot."

She resumed her study of the ceiling. She might not have graduated from flight school by the grand total of a week but she'd always had a major in attitude.

Thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six ... was that a spot or just a shadow? Radha squinted, trying to make it out.

There was another long suffering sigh, which she also ignored. She had no sympathy for him. If he couldn't handle shit from prisoners then he should go get a job someplace else. A place like this anyone in a position of authority was a prime target.

"I see you're headed for Acheron. How about I offer you an alternative?"

She turned her head and looked at him again. Any alternative to Acheron would catch her interest. One eyebrow went up. "Keep talking."

* * * *

The flight jacket landed in the chair as he placed his helmet on the edge of the desk. Standing in front of it, Davin ran his hand through his hair as he looked at the files scattered across the surface. He flopped down into the chair, a metal structure wrapped in a thin “cushion” that did absolutely nothing to comfort him. His patrol was long, his days were longer, and—with the Satagosians knocking on the fleet's door—there were no brighter times in sight.

Davin rested two fingers under his bottom lip as his gaze drifted around the tiny office. Dingy and sparsely decorated, it was more a hole in the wall to store the multitude of personnel files and reports the wing commander of a prominent UPF battle station was responsible for. Sentinel Five was a large spinning structure that appeared to be a pointy cylinder from a distance, due to its external batteries remaining in constant deployment. As the presiding station in the Prealean System, one of the furthest-flung Earth colony systems, it was the first point of contact for the invading Satagosians.

He propped one boot onto the corner of his desk, one of the only spots not covered in random notes or files, and crossed the other on top of it. Tall with long legs, he struggled with space in the cramped office. Although required to run every day and work out in the gym once a week, most of his bulk came from beating his frustration out on the heavy bag at night. Most nights.

He spent some of his nights with Lanna, a girl from Operations he'd chased since the first day of his posting on the station. She'd been stand-offish and coy at first, but he'd eventually broken through and now they were coming up on two years together. Since war had broken out with the Satagosians though, the nights with her were few and far

between.

A new file sitting atop the teetering tower in his inbox caught his eye, a personnel file. Incoming personnel were rare, especially those with the blue pilot tag on the front. Lord knew he needed more pilots. Interested despite his exhaustion he picked it up and flipped it open in his lap, the ancient chair screaming under his shifting weight. His gaze was drawn to the picture immediately. She was female, that was the first thing he noticed, and she was attractive. Not a conventional attractive though, certainly not the kind of obvious beauty Lanna worked so hard on. This woman was dark and demanding, a dangerous kind of beauty that stirred him up inside.

She'd spent time at Acheron, was released and was about to be sent back, but instead she was being sent to him to serve out her sentence in the fleet. He paused for a moment, wondering what kind of woman it would take to survive Acheron, and then continued. She'd trained at the Academy, expelled a week before graduation for seriously injuring another pilot. He scanned the remainder of her file, mostly marks she'd earned during flight tests and several citations for brawling with other students.

He shook his head at whatever jackass in the Admiralty decided to send him an ex-con with an attitude problem. Someone was either pissed off or it was supposed to signify his ability to handle it. He tossed the file onto the stack on his desk. The wing was bursting at the seams with hot-headed pilots. Male pilots. She would be swimming in a sea of testosterone that hadn't had much female contact since the Satagosians had first launched their attack. Considering her record, it was just a matter of time before she put one of his men in the brig for hitting on her.

Without warning, the door to his office swung open. Standing on the other side was Glenn Bertrand, commanding officer of the station. Davin's feet dropped immediately. The bottom one had fallen asleep on the desk, something Davin was used to. He stood and stiffened, despite the thousands of needles digging into his right foot, to throw a salute.

"At ease. What the hell are you doing still in flight gear?"

Davin relaxed, glancing down. He'd forgotten what he was wearing. The standard-issue tight-fitting sleeveless T-shirt from the waist up, but his bottom half was still wrapped in his bulky flight suit. Moving forward to remove his flight jacket from the only other chair in the room, he shrugged at the captain's question.

"Just like to decompress a little before heading to the locker room," he replied, waving toward the chair.

Bertrand fell into it, sighing heavily and kneading his forehead. The captain seemed to always have a headache, sometimes caused by the crew, sometimes by the situation. His eyes were always a patchwork of bloodshot and dryness. Davin wondered how long it had been since the man slept.

"You get the file I left for you?"

"Yessir. Just finished reviewing it. She sounds like a handful." Davin offered a smile he didn't feel.

"She's a handful all right. We need the help though, and I told the brass you could handle it."

Davin nodded, the new information cementing his jackass suspicion. It made sense that Bertrand would think him capable; everyone thought him capable. His facade was the type his superiors ate up and asked for seconds. Follow orders, don't ask questions

and do it by the book. That's how he'd gotten where he was, what his father would've wanted.

"Thank you, sir," Davin said, feigning some sense of sincerity. He was a good actor with plenty of practice, so he sounded like he meant it.

"I want you to put her on your wing, keep an eye on her. The last thing we need is some loose cannon laying out our boys before we can even get them in their birds."

Davin wanted to scream. Not only would she drive him insane, but he would be responsible for whatever trouble she caused. Jealous of any other woman around him, Lanna certainly wouldn't be happy about a woman pilot in the barracks where Davin and the other pilots were practically living on top of one another. He wanted to give Bertrand the finger and tell him where to put it. But Davin was Davin; a leopard couldn't change its spots, so instead he nodded and gave a thin smile.

"No problem."

* * * *

Hot water was a blessing and a luxury all rolled into one. Radha sighed in contentment as she stood under the hot stream and let it flow over her, washing all her cares away. She'd missed hot water most of all. Hell, some places she'd been clean water was a luxury. Clean and hot was out of the question. Radha was grinning like the cat that got the cream.

Hot water, three squares a day and no mine duty? All she'd had to do was sign on to fight the Satagosians, pledge what was left of her life to the fleet and sign in triplicate in the blood of someone's first born. Okay, perhaps the first born was a bit far but by the time she'd gotten halfway through the forms required to transfer her sentence from Acheron into fleet service, she'd been ready to agree to anything.

Her lips quirked in amusement as she emerged from under the shower. Death by form-filling, a new form of punishment. Twitching the shower curtain aside, she reached out and grabbed her towel off the hook outside the shower. Quickly she wrapped herself in the voluminous sheet.

"God, I love the fleet," she murmured, feeling clean, really clean for the first time in months. Wringing the excess moisture from her hair, she stepped from the shower and padded into the main locker room.

Well heeello handsome, where have you been all my life? She pulled up short, a small pause in her step, when she realized she wasn't alone anymore. There was someone rooting in the locker next to hers. A tall, well-built male someone. She pursed her lips as her gaze travelled down his back in appreciation.

Nice ass too. This might be more interesting than she'd thought.

*

Davin slid his jacket to the right for the tenth time, stretching to comb the corner of the locker with his fingers. What he had done with Baxter's lighter since the last card game was beyond him. Had he actually used the lighter, he would probably know where it was. He was keeping it more for the spoils of victory than for use, though, and the guy's incessant whining about it was driving him mad. So he'd decided to give it back. He just had to find the bloody thing now.

Just as he closed his hand on something metallic and promising, he heard a footfall. Turning and expecting one of his men, he blinked a little in surprise when his gaze fell on

a woman. Not just any woman, the brooding femme fatale from the file. The one he couldn't quite get out of his head. She wasn't in flight gear though, she was in a towel—long strands of jet black hair sticking to her face as those fascinating eyes studied him.

He dropped whatever he'd found and turned, offering a hand. He figured he would start with pleasantries, if for nothing else than to say he'd done it. He was slick with sweat, wearing a thin tank top and his well-travelled gym shorts. Not exactly the way he wanted to meet her, but at least it wasn't just a towel.

"Davin McAvoy, you must be..." He already knew her name, but she didn't know that.

*

Radha's eyes narrowed a little. The face was just as good, no better, than the rest of the body and in her experience men that looked that good were never what they seemed. They always wanted something, either adoration for the good fortune to be born looking the way they did or an all access pass into the pants of anything female.

His hair was a bit longer than regulation, short blond spikes that stood in thin rows with a mix of gel and sweat. His eyes were an icy blue that were somehow sharp and warm at the same time. There was an innocence in them, a softness that made her uncomfortable.

"...trying to get to my locker." She ignored the hand as her paranoia kicked into high gear. She didn't trust good-looking guys. Experience had taught her that lesson.

He gave a light grin and sidestepped, swinging the hand toward the lockers. She felt those baby blues on her right arm as she approached the locker beside his. It didn't surprise her, not with the prison ink crawling up her skin there.

"Acheron?"

Here we go. The thought was automatic as Radha fought the urge to run her hand over her symbols. She wasn't ashamed of her tattoos. It was a different way of life inside. You weren't inked, you weren't part of the culture. You weren't part of the culture, you were dead. Radha had a healthy interest in staying alive, so she got the ink.

The tattoos served other purposes as well. They had their own language, their own symbology. Radha's designs would tell another inmate that she didn't recognize authority and she wasn't a "butterfly" looking for an escape; she intended to serve her sentence. Considering the average life expectancy was less than even the shortest sentences, it took a special kind of determination to wear that mark.

"No, Mrs. Twinkletoe's Finishing School for Genteel Young Ladies... What does it look like?" she drawled, already past him and ferreting in her own locker. They'd supplied her with everything, standard fleet issue everything. Even the underwear. Her nose wrinkled a little as she pulled it out of the pack and considered it. Attractive it was not.

She flicked a glance to the side. His eyes were slits, burning holes in her side as she unraveled her new underwear.

"Ouch. That hurt almost as much as not telling me your name." His words were thick with sarcasm as he crossed his arms. She fought the urge not to glance at his chest. He wasn't overly built but well defined. He must work out a lot. That or he was naturally gifted with a body like that. Radha was more inclined to go for option A.

"That's okay, I didn't tell you the whole truth either. I'm Lieutenant Commander McAvoy, as in the commander of this air wing and, more importantly, your superior. So

watch your mouth or you'll be right back in Mrs. Twinkletoe's class."

Great, handsome had a colossal-sized ego to match his looks. Radha sighed a long suffering sigh. When would they learn that sort of crap didn't work with her?

"It'll take more pull than you've got on that collar sweetheart, considering the fleet needs all the pilots it can muster," she said and dropped the towel.

Silence filled the locker room. She could feel the tension pouring out of him like heat from an exhaust vent. He shifted behind her as she shimmied into her underwear. When she looked up he was struggling to hold her gaze. It always amazed her how easy it was to flip the switch and watch them squirm.

"Just because we need pilots doesn't mean you get to fly. I can have you on supply runs for the rest of your sentence if I want, so just keep pushing." His voice deepened, sounding more like the type of officer he was.

She flicked her hair over her shoulder, and looked at him in assessment. He wasn't joking. She'd only agreed to this because she'd be able to fly a Valkyrie again. Much as she disliked the fleet, flying the lethal combat fighters was something she missed.

"Yes, Lieutenant Commander, it's an Acheron tattoo. Happy now?"

His gaze drifted below hers, then returned quickly. "Getting there."

He turned back to his locker, reaching into the corner where he'd dropped whatever he was holding before she showed up. "I'm putting you on the 0900 patrol. Get your workout and your first square in before then and don't be late."

Chapter Two

Radha settled easily into the barracks. It helped that it was an all-male wing; female fighter pilots were few and far between and she'd always gotten on better with men than women. *Any* fighter pilots were few and far between and, thanks to the Satagosians, getting rarer by the day.

"You got any experienced pilots on this tub or just this bunch of rookies?" she asked Davin the next day as they were suiting up. The suits were a slightly different cut than she remembered from the Academy but overall pretty much the same design. It wasn't surprising. The fleet didn't have the money to splash around on fancy updates, not when it needed consumables like ammunition by the ton.

"This coming from the girl that got sent home from the Academy with a note for her mom? Fly a lot of Valkyrie-class fighters out at Acheron since then?" Davin made some adjustments to his suit, reaching for his helmet when he was done.

Radha flinched at the mention of her mother but hid it quickly. Sara Kaden had been young and scared when she'd had Radha. She must have been. Why else would a sixteen-year-old girl choose to give birth on her own, with tragic consequences? She'd bled out from complications mere hours after Radha's birth and never gotten to meet her daughter.

"At least I attended the Academy." She zipped her suit with a flick of her wrist. "This lot looks like they're being thrown in a fighter as soon as they're old enough to reach the controls."

"I don't get to pick 'em. Captain Bertrand signs the papers and they're standing in my locker room the next day."

He shut the locker, turning the latch as he flicked his gaze to her. "All I can do is try to keep them from ending up as a greasy red spot on the side of the station." He hefted his helmet and eyed her as she closed her locker. "Don't worry. I went, and I'm definitely not winging it."

"Do I look worried?"

She wasn't quite sure why she kept needling the handsome wing commander. The same handsome wing commander who was her boss, with the power to make sure she saw nothing but patrol runs for the rest of her time. But needle him she did, something deep inside lifting its head and egging her on. Perhaps it was because he was so damn squeaky clean. Radha liked her men passionate and out of control—or even better—under her control.

As they stepped out onto the deck, Davin pointed in the direction of a pair of Valkyrie-class starfighters in the western-most hangar bay. Raising his voice over the constant clatter of machinery, he looked back to her. "You're in 5702. I'll go out first; you form up on me when you get out there."

He flung his helmet on before she could reply. Radha shrugged and headed to her fighter, wondering what she'd find when she got there. Razing new pilots was a tradition, and Radha was sure she'd be no different.

Sure enough, a battalion of bright notes indicating basic controls in large bold letters were scattered through her cockpit, including one on the stick that read "Joystick" accompanied by a smiley face.

Radha climbed into the cockpit with an easy grace. She'd always kept herself in shape; first the Academy then prison had drilled that into her.

"Funny. Very funny," she muttered as she pulled the notes off the controls and flicked them out the open canopy. If anyone were looking all they would see would be a brightly colored storm of ripped-up notes. "I'll show you a joystick, Mr. Bloody McAvoy!"

Then she got down to business. The fighter was the same class she'd flown in her academy days and just running over the controls took her back. Resting her head against the seat for a moment, she closed her eyes and was transported back to a more innocent time. A time when anything had seemed possible, a time when even a street kid's brat could become a fleet officer.

"Archangel, you're next up in rotation."

The voice of the flight control officer pulled her back to reality. Radha sighed and opened her eyes to complete her checks, then thumbed the comm open. "This is Angel, I'm good to go."

*

Davin glanced behind him as he was taxied onto the launch deck, watching the deckhands scurry around Radha's valkyrie to collect all the pieces of yellow paper before the chief saw them floating around. He chuckled and finished his preparations, settling into the seat when he saw the clamp for the catapult sliding down its track in the deck to meet him.

"White Knight, this is the FCO. I need a go/no go."

"I'm all green here," Davin replied, preparing himself for the clamp to sling his fighter off the deck. "Where's my wingman?"

"We have Archangel just behind you in the launch pattern, Commander."

"Cool. Let's get this show on the road."

Moments later the red lights at the end of the tunnel turned green and the catapult rocketed forward, releasing Davin's fighter just as it turned to the underside of the deck. The acceleration forces were so great that his lips pushed back from his teeth and his vision momentarily blurred with red. The g-forces were intense, followed immediately by the serene weightlessness of floating away from the station under the forces of momentum.

He flipped the switches to activate the fighter's engines, feeling the jolt as they kicked in and he was pressed back into the seat again. Just outside the station was the border of the star system, a far-reaching black void dotted with the stars of other distant systems. From this viewpoint, it was hard to imagine a war taking place in such majestic desolation.

He banked to his left as Radha made her way out, and the black was replaced with the glinting metal of the slowly spinning Sentinel Five station. Behind it were the hazy orbs belonging to the Prealean System, filled with the people they were out here to protect.

The fighter with the new female pilot gunned its engines and effortlessly slid into place on his wing. Davin grunted in approval. He would've thought the woman had never been out the cockpit; much less had a gap of years. Despite looking for signs of trouble, and he was watching, the rest of the patrol was just as smooth.

He looked over the patrol field from his cockpit. The closest planet in the system

appeared a faint yellow against the sea of deep black. Between Sentinel Five and the planet was a belt of large brown asteroids spinning on several axes and spread about the space as if left by the trail of a comet long ago.

The two fighters zipped and spun between them, Davin in the lead and purposely rolling through short gaps to see if she would follow him. She was there all along, never skipping a beat. When she settled on his wing again he looked over and keyed his mic.

"Archangel huh? Not Ice Maiden or Ms. Freeze?"

Visible through the window of her cockpit she shrugged. "Irony at its finest. Flight instructor was a religious man," she replied simply. "Better than Spawn of Satan I suppose, which was his other choice. How about you? Why White Knight?"

Davin looked out to his left. Lanna had her own reason for his call sign, always said it was the closest thing she could get to knight on a white horse. His eyes widened for a moment as he realized that was the first time he'd thought of her this morning. Usually she was just about all he had to think about, but so far he'd been more concerned with Radha's flying. Her flying, yeah, that's what it was.

"My first squadron assignment was the 173rd Black Knights. Air wing commander said I was too green to be a black knight."

She chuckled, her voice low and seductive over the comm. "Pure as the driven snow, aren't you."

He narrowed on her, the sound coming over a little more tempting than he was willing to admit, still a smile formed as he looked out at the stars. "I've had my moments."

She laughed at that one. "Yeah right, pretty boy. You're as by the book as they come. So squeaky clean I want to ruffle your feathers just to see what you'd do."

"I might surprise you." It came out quick, before he really thought about what he was saying. It sounded like he was flirting, he was flirting, and that was something he hadn't done since spotting Lanna at the ops station two years before. He shook his head, but still turned to see her response.

To his surprise she turned until he could see her face and winked. "Oh, I'm sure you'd try."

He looked away, the wink setting off a built-in alarm he hadn't felt in a while. His cheeks flushed, or at least he could feel them burning. That sort of burn that wasn't supposed to happen. She was dangerous, the break-the-rules type, the type who had never been his type. The type he'd always wanted. He rolled the fighter over a few times, replacing the thoughts with something as equally disorienting. "That's a barrel roll. Remember that one?"

"Chicken," she muttered just loud enough to be heard over the comm as she rolled her own fighter lazily, the indolent movement evidence of her comfort behind the controls. "Anything else you want me to show you?"

An immediate answer came to mind but he clamped down on it. Just the fact that he'd thought it wasn't like him, her attitude was catching. "I think that's it for now. Just making sure you remember."

"I'm a woman, I remember everything. Which means I'll remind you of something you did wrong for years afterward."

"I'll keep that in mind." He whirled to his left to avoid a small asteroid he spotted long before the avoidance systems warned him. After it passed between them, he rolled

back to his previous position and shook his wings beside hers. He didn't intend for it to look as showy as it did, so once he was there he followed the maneuver with, "You always have to keep your eyes open out here. Things will creep up on you when you least expect it."

"Thank you Captain Obvious, I have had the training wheels taken off this thing."

He smirked. "Just couldn't remember if I put that in the notes. And that's Commander, White Knight, or Sir Obvious, thank you."

He banked wider on their fourth pass around the perimeter, preparing to cut the distance on every subsequent pass and eventually line them up for a landing approach vector.

"Oh, panties in a twist now huh? Ever considered anger management therapy?" she cooed back as she stuck to his side like glue.

He shook his head, wanting to reply, but held back for some reason. Had it been any other rookie he'd have had them pushing iron in the gym for a week, but with her it was different, almost playful. "You ever considered acting like an officer?"

"I don't know ... you ever considered losing the good-boy image?"

That was the question wasn't it? She'd circled back to that several times, and he had avoided answering it directly. Because that was the real difference between the two of them; she was on the razor's edge and he was barely skirting the blade.

"It's not really an image. Just the way I am I guess." He adjusted one of his screens and wondered why he felt the need to explain himself to her.

She chuckled over the comm, a low almost purring sound. "Yeah right. No one's that clean. Believe me, I know."

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Radha was thoroughly enjoying pressing Davin's buttons from the safety of her own cockpit. She'd never met anyone who'd taken the bait quite so quickly. The thought that she should ease up on him crossed her mind but she dismissed it. He couldn't be as clean cut as he appeared. If he was, he'd never have lasted this long out here.

"Maybe you just haven't met one yet..." He replied slowly, his face turned away to the other side of the cockpit.

Radha shrugged. She didn't believe that. She'd learned long ago not to take people at face value. Everyone had an agenda; it was just a case of working out what it was.

An asteroid loomed and the two fighters split, Davin going under as Radha rolled over it. For a moment she flew inverted, showing off, before flipping back down into position next to him.

He looked over, a half grin visible. "All right that's enough of that. You can fly, I believe you—you don't need to showboat. Especially as we dip toward the station, those asteroids are going to show up a little more often."

"Aye, aye, sir," she said, flicking a mock salute.

"Sir? See, you do have it in you." His voice held a sarcastic edge as he banked wide and left again, lowering their orbit for the next lap.

"Yeah, whatever. Don't get used to it."

She banked left, her flight vector textbook as she stayed with him. All joking aside, he was an excellent pilot, possibly one of the best she'd flown with. Not once during their patrol had she felt as frustrated as she remembered feeling with a slow or clumsy flight partner.

Their fighters neared the station and the flight control officer radioed that the two of them had clearance on the landing deck. Davin keyed the mic.

"Roger, understand. Archangel will come in first. I'll circle and make another approach. Guys, you might want to consider using the automatic guidance system for this one, it'll be her first landing with us." His voice was light and teasing but Radha didn't find much amusing about it.

"Screw that," she muttered as her lip curled. When they reached the apex of their approach vector, she dropped away from her place on Davin's wing and keyed her mic.

"Flight control this is Archangel, prep landing bay for combat landing. Coming in hot."

She grinned as Davin exploded in wrath over the comm. A swipe of her finger flicked that channel off before he had a chance to give her an order. The flight control officer assaulted her eardrums instantly. "Archangel, that's a negative. Slow your approach and initiate automated landing."

Radha thumbed the mic, turning it on and off to cause static. "Sorry FO, can't hear you. Could you repeat? I say again, coming in hot. Prep the bay for combat landing. Copy please."

A new voice, rigid with fury, came on over the comm. Senior flight control by the sounds of it. "Archangel, this is flight control, we copy. You are cleared for approach; call the ball and God help you."

"Oh he's no use, I'm headed the other direction," Radha muttered to herself before speaking up. "Copy that, I have the ball."

She hit the landing bay at speed, lights flashing by her in a blur. As soon as she felt the slight bump of her landing gear hit the deck, she slammed the brakes on and whooped in delight as her momentum was cut instantly. The landing was good; she felt it in her bones.

The fighter spun lazily and skittered across the hastily cleared deck until she pulled it to a stop in the far corner, facing the wrong way. All around the edges of the deck she could see anxious faces. Faces waiting to see if she'd end up a messy mark on the wall at the back of the landing bay.

"Not today folks." She released her canopy and snatched her helmet off her head in the same movement. She vaulted out of the fighter, slid down the steps and headed for the exits. If she could get out of here before pretty boy landed then she was golden.

*

Davin watched the fighter drop, his anger bubbling up so fast he couldn't stop it. It wasn't the fact that she'd made an unnecessary landing or that she went against procedure... It was that she was on his wing and ultimately it would be on him. The captain would want to know why he didn't have any kind of reign over his pilots and why he couldn't handle this special case that was set up for him.

He brought his own valkyrie in slow and easy, calling the ball and gliding between the large blast doors with a gracefulness that didn't reveal the temper swirling within him. Spinning the fighter on maneuvering thrusters alone at the end of the tunnel, he dropped it carefully onto the pad and began unbuckling himself as soon as it started lowering to the hangar bay.

The pad came to a stop and the deckhands approached to help him out but he was already pushing the canopy open. His gaze locked on her retreating figure like a hunter

tracking his prey. She was on her way down the corridor leading to the locker room and by God he intended to stop her before she got there.

He sprinted across the deck, catching up with her and spinning her to face him just beyond the door. He could feel sweat standing on his cheeks, his pulse beating in his temples.

"What in the blue hell did you think you were doing?" he barked at her, letting his temper get the better of him, despite the near-perfect combat landing.

She raised her eyebrow. Her cool manner highlighted his lack of control, but the little gleam in her eye told him she knew what she'd done and she was enjoying him losing his temper. "You really should reread your academy manuals, sir. I believe that's called a combat landing."

"I know exactly what it is," he bit out, his hand stabbing forward to point at her. "Maybe you need to read the chapter called 'try not to kill yourself and destroy your bird just to be an asshole'."

This wasn't like him, blowing up on a rookie for something that didn't result in a loss. The problem was this wasn't any rookie.

Radha's eyebrow disappeared into her hairline. "In case it escaped your notice I did neither. The bird's fine, no dents and I'm still breathing." She pulled the jacket of her suit open, revealing far too much cleavage for Davin's comfort. "Here, want to check?"

Davin's gaze went to her chest on reflex and grew a little wider at the display. He cut his eyes back in to hers, narrowing them. "I don't know what kind of game you think you're playing, but it isn't working."

"Really? What game would that be, sir?" she asked, giving him a wide-eyed and innocent look.

"The one where you push me around because you think you can get away with it. I'll have you up there scrubbing your marks off the deck with your toothbrush. Just try me." His eyes drilled into her, but something about him was reserved. He was holding back, but he didn't know why.

She chuckled, sudden amusement in her dark eyes. He knew then she was being an ass over this on purpose, he just didn't know why. Maybe it was a test to see if she could crack the iron control he had on himself. If so, she was doing an excellent job so far.

"Sorry pretty boy, you don't have the balls to play this game with me, and I think you know it. Go on, prove me wrong." She punctuated each word with a finger, right in the middle of his chest.

His temper rose each time she poked him, and Davin gritted his back teeth to hold it in. It wasn't as much her comments driving him over the edge, more the glare burning holes through him. He tensed, trying to hold himself back, but finally it was too much and he snapped.

Grabbing her by the arms, he slammed her into the wall of the corridor so hard she gasped. He'd dropped his helmet, and he could hear it spinning on the deck.

"Ohh, scary. What you going to do now?" Her voice dropped huskily. It didn't look like his move scared her, in fact it looked like she liked it. Then again, where Radha had been this sort of thing would be considered foreplay.

He ignored her words, backing her up against the wall and leaning in to reply. Before he could though, he got a look at her eyes—and a dark, brooding glare froze him in place. It was aggressive and fierce, something almost animalistic underneath. His gut burned as

if someone had poured lava into it, and the liquid warmth spread to the tops of his legs. Interest and something darker spiked and his body stirred, his hands numbing and his chest tingling. All he could do was lean forward, caught in a trap he couldn't resist.

He was going to kiss her. He knew it was wrong, especially in such a public place, but he couldn't stop himself. He felt her fingers curl around the edges of his flight suit as her eyelids fluttered shut.

He moved closer, pulled by an invisible force. Her grip on his flight suit burned through the heavy fabric as the tingling in his chest moved through his body. He closed his eyes, put his forehead on hers and brushed the very tip of his nose across hers so softly it almost tickled.

Then he tilted his head, his lips parting...

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. Someone was watching. He snapped out of it and drew his head back.

Just down the hall was another pilot, watching intently from the doors to the locker room. Davin's eyes widened, he could almost see the scene from the other man's view.

He released her and stepped away in one quick movement, drawing in a breath and pulling down on the edge of his flight suit to straighten it. He felt like he was in a daze or drugged. His glare went to the pilot, who was casting his eyes from one of them to the other.

"Where the hell are you supposed to be Lieutenant? Because if there is an empty bird sitting on my deck right now you better hope I don't hear about it." Davin barked at the man with the voice of a commander, giving it just enough edge to put him in a sprint.

Stepping back, he looked at Radha and tried to think of something to say.

Her eyes were wide, unfocused. As he watched they sharpened and another expression entered them. Something almost like ... fear? He didn't get a chance to ask anything, she was already sliding away from the wall. "Need to go, check with the techs ... bird was pulling to the left..." And then she was gone.

"Good idea," he replied to the empty corridor. Running his hands through his hair, he tried to figure out what just happened and what it might mean. The best thing he could come up with was that it had been a stressful time since the Satagosians had attacked, and that he hadn't been able to see Lanna much. So he decided to go to his office and call her, try to set something up for later that night. Obviously it had been too long, or at least he hoped that was it.

The more he thought about it though, the more he disagreed with himself. Something was different about this, something raw and powerful. So powerful he'd wanted to quench that thirst in the middle of the corridor while still on duty. He bent to pick up his helmet, and shook his head when he straightened again.

"I am so screwed."

Chapter Three

"I'm telling you man, she's behind that rock over there."

The two newest pilots in the wing argued loudly over the comm. It was rare to get a break between Satagosian attacks but for the time being the enemy was laying off Sentinel Five, allowing them to get in some training and much-needed rest. Predictably, because of her experience and because Davin was flying shotgun with the greenest nugget, Radha had been roped into the training exercises and was now playing cat and mouse with the two rookies in the asteroid field near the base.

"Which rock? That one there? Or there? Or there? In case you hadn't noticed it's like ... rock city out here. How do I know the rock you're looking at is the rock I'm looking at?" the more experienced of the two rookies responded. "Knowing her, she's probably looking at our tails right now."

"Ohhh, give that man a prize!" Radha cut in over the mic, nudging her maneuvering thrusters and rising into the kill slot of the two unsuspecting rookies. It wasn't the rock they had been looking at that she was using for cover. It was the one behind them. The sound of weapons lock filled both cockpits, quickly drowned out by the rookies' swearing.

"Keep your eyes on the prize boys or you get bit in the ass." She grinned as she flicked her weapons offline. Even though they were training, all three Valkyrie fighters were fully armed, just in case. The last thing they needed was to get caught out here by the Satagosians with their pants down.

"Okay, let's wrap it up and get back," she ordered as she checked the time on her controls. "Or Knight'll be preaching about fuel consumption again. Form up."

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On the other side of the asteroid belt, Davin was trying his best to train one of his worst pilots. It wasn't going so well. Sighing, the commander keyed his mic once more. "Okay Kazans, we're going to try this one more time. I want you on full thrust when you do the barrel roll, then move into a vertical flip just after. You should be facing me, which would give you an excellent firing solution," Davin said as he slid into place on the rookie's tail.

Kazans' fighter lurched forward as the ion engines brightened with thrust. The tiny wings on each side tipped once, twice, and finally the craft flipped in a sloppy roll. Spinning, the boy managed to stabilize, upside down, and rush forward toward Davin's fighter at full speed.

Davin flipped easily to the right, dodging the craft, and clenched his eyes inside his helmet, shaking his head as the rookie botched the maneuver once more.

"All right, that's enough for today. Drop the throttle down to thirty percent and get on my wing. We're taking her in nice and slow; I'll radio for assistance when we get there."

Drifting in from the three o'clock position, Radha and her accompaniment flanked the two Valkyries on each side—forming a diamond.

"Keep it level Kazans, we've only got a little way to go." Davin looked out at the other fighters, searching for Radha. The last few weeks had been long and uneventful, mostly them dodging each other and flying quiet patrols together. Even so, she was on his

mind more than he was willing to admit. Right on cue her fighter slid into the empty spot on his wing, the two fighters close enough that he could see her roll her eyes a little at the rookie's coordination problems.

He rolled his head to the side and caught her gaze. "How was your run Lieutenant? Teach these two anything?" He wanted to inject something into the words, but they came out flat.

She grinned. "Yeah, to be scared of rocks and the crazy woman behind them. How about Space Cadet there?"

Davin chuckled, switching his gaze to the trembling form on his wing. "I think we've found a call sign for you Kazans." He looked back to Radha and shook his head. "We survived. Space Cadet is going in first on auto-assist. Let's keep the pattern tight just in case." He nodded toward the looming station in their windows.

Radha grinned, and dropped out of the pattern for a second, as though she was going for a combat landing again. Within seconds she'd pulled back up into formation, grinning unrepentantly as Davin shot her a sharp look. She blew him a kiss, a return to her former, sassy self.

Davin felt a sizzle when he saw the kiss, turning his gaze to the station dismissively. The fighters fell forward in sync, Davin giving Space Cadet the extra room he needed. "Steady as she goes. Just a little further and the station will take control. We'll be right behind you." Davin gave Radha a pointed look as he said it, narrowing his eyes to punctuate his statement.

The landing went fairly smoothly, the newly named rookie only managed to run three divots into the landing bay. Before long the rest of the pilots were shipside, debriefed and heading out of the locker room.

"Hey, Knight ... you up for poker later?" Boomer, one of the older pilots called across the locker room as he shucked out of his flight suit.

Davin turned as he pulled a worn and torn T-shirt over his chiseled frame. He thought briefly about turning the offer down, he needed to get some paperwork done and would rather not spend the night boozing it up in the lounge. Then again, it had been quite a while since he'd kicked back and relaxed. "All right, I guess it won't hurt. I'll be down after I finish up in my office."

Boomer grinned broadly. "Nice one, Angel's in too so it should be a good game. Bring your chips boss, and we'll watch her take them off you."

Davin's blood ran cold when he heard that and he paused for a moment as he pulled his pants on. The whole thing reeked of bad timing, but he assured himself nothing too bad could happen with the whole wing watching.

He hoped not anyway. Turning, he smiled. "You can watch her try."

* * * *

"So who's pouring?" Radha asked as she walked into the lounge, wagging a bottle of something that probably bordered on illegal. Davin's gaze went to her as soon as she entered. He'd known she would come, and he wasn't ready to admit that it was the only reason he'd come, but he was close. She froze when she spotted him across the table. "What's he doing here?"

Davin smiled, leaning back in his chair with one foot on the table's edge. The booze had been flowing before Radha arrived, and he'd had enough to ignore the immediate

reaction she'd been giving him since the day in the corridor. He lifted his hands above his head, feeling the worn shirt pull tight on his upper arms. "What's wrong Kaden? CAG doesn't get to kick back once in a while?"

She shrugged and plunked the alcohol down on the table. Boomer made a worried noise, "Watch the drink babe. It's all in good fun."

Radha turned the chair they'd left for her the other way, straddling it before looking directly at Davin. It was a challenging look he felt all the way down to his bones. But he didn't let her see that.

"If he's man enough... I should warn you pretty boy; I was poker champion in Acheron."

Davin watched her legs spread to each side of the chair, his eyes making their way back up her lithe form to meet her challenging gaze. Smiling, he leaned forward and dropped his foot. He grabbed the bottle and filled his glass before replying. "Well it's a good thing you'll be playing against some resistance. Might help with your game."

She laughed. "Bring it on. You never know, maybe your playing is better than your flying," she threw back, the usual banter of pilots.

"Let's hope to God yours is." He took a swig from his glass and slammed it down with a twitch of the head. "Your deal." Even as he said it, his gaze dropped to the space between the rails of the chair, where her cleavage pressed against the wooden slats. Instantly the image from the locker room, from their first meeting, was all he could think about.

"Okay gentlemen, stakes on the table please," she reminded them. Chips hit the table in quick succession. All chips that was, bar Davin's. She looked up, her eyes questioning.

"Pretty boy?"

He picked up a handful of chips in response, throwing them onto the pile in the middle of the table with a wink. He knew this wasn't right, that he would be much better off to get up and head for bed. But now the chips were down and there was no going back. Radha started to deal.

The game was fast and furious. It quickly became apparent the only real players at the table were Davin and Radha. They battled it out hand after hand. Each time they lost or won to the other, never having to fold until it was just the two of them in the lounge, neither willing to give up.

Radha eyed him as she dealt another hand. "You do realize you can't win don't you?"

Davin leaned forward and checked his cards carefully. "All right, last game then. But let's make it interesting. Winner's choice for the stakes. Or are you too scared of losing to a squeaky clean guy like me?" He grinned dangerously as he flicked a glance up at her.

"Pffft." Radha wrinkled her nose. "Who says I'll lose? All right, you're on. Top up please..." She waggled her empty glass at him before picking her cards up.

He filled both glasses, having just finished his. They played the last hand slowly, gathering cards until each was sure they had the game in sight. With the help of the alcohol, he was completely relaxed with her now. He didn't want to leave, would rather play cards all night than have to do paperwork or run patrols. He dragged out the game as long as he could, taking long looks at her eyes, her hair, her neckline...

When it came to the final showing, Davin reached forward and emptied his glass in a single swig. "All right, let's see what ya got."

Radha grinned and spread her cards out in an elegant fan. "Read 'em and weep

handsome," she crowed, convinced she had the drop on him. Davin feigned a worrisome look, dropping his cards one at a time. The final one sealed the deal, widening her eyes and broadening his grin.

"What the ... that's ... that's not possible!" She breathed, shock plain on her face. She shot an accusing look at him. "You cheated!"

Davin raised his hands defensively and glanced around the lounge. "Cheated how sweetheart? Been playing the same game all along. Lucky deal is all. And now, you owe me my winnings."

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"Like bollocks I do!" Radha argued, trying to work out how he'd managed a hand like that. She flipped the deck over and started checking for duplicate cards. There weren't any. "You cheated," she told him again, not quite sure why she was getting so wound up about a simple game of cards. She stood up abruptly, knocking her chair over in the process. "I don't know how but you bloody cheated!"

Davin rose from his chair in one quick movement, walking toward her with his hands out to the sides. "I won fair and square. We're not talking about a lot of money here. I don't even want any money." As he approached, he made sure to put himself between her and the door.

Radha backed up on automatic until her shoulder blades hit the wall. She was all bluff and bluster, a sharp attitude to keep people away. She didn't like people in her "personal space". Most times it worked, but it didn't seem to faze Davin.

He closed in on her with determination, backing her into the corner until she had no place to go. It wasn't threatening, not physically. *That* she could have handled, she was more than used to violence. No, this was entirely different; this was tension between a man and a woman. And since it was coming from Mr. Clean, she didn't know how to handle it.

"No money? What do you want then?"

He searched her eyes with his. "Just a kiss."

Shock coursed through her. "What? You got to be fucking kidding me. Why?"

He took another step forward. "Hey hey, calm down. What's the problem? You can tear the arms off a guy in a bar but you can't manage a kiss?"

He was closing in. All her instincts screamed this was dangerous. She'd been avoiding this sort of situation since that encounter in the corridor. When it came to him she was far too vulnerable and she knew it. He wasn't her type but that just made it worse. It was like he was a symbol of everything she'd wanted and could never have.

Radha forced herself to stay where she was and look him in the eye. It was a look that would have frozen any other guy. She shrugged. "Sure, I just don't know why you want to kiss me."

He came within inches of her, placing both hands on the wall at her sides. His eyes darkened, moving to her lips and dragging lazily back to her gaze. "Neither do I..."

He brought his face to hers, so close she could feel his warm breath on her cheek. His eyes closed slowly, he tilted his head and rested his nose just to the side of hers, their lips centimeters apart. He leaned forward and took her bottom lip in his slowly. He stayed there for a moment, pulling slightly, before covering her lips in a quick kiss and moving away.

Radha froze as soon as his lips touched hers. She'd expected something harsh,

punishment perhaps for this game that was playing out between them, but his kiss was sweet. So sweet and gentle it reached inside her and twisted something. She wasn't a woman used to tenderness, or gentle touches. But that didn't mean she didn't like them, didn't crave them.

Why did it have to be him, she moaned silently. At his first touch a longing had grabbed hold of her. She wanted more, needed more. All her previous complaints and arguments forgotten, she shifted and placed a gentle hand on his chest as she lifted her lips to his again.

She kissed him ever so softly, wanting and asking for more. He covered her lips again, moving his hands down her back to lift her shirt slightly. Work-roughened fingertips drifted across her lower back, kneading the soft skin there as he moved in closer to press her against the wall. His tongue snaked out to part her lips.

She gave, opening up to allow him in. The warm weight of his body against hers was welcome, a shiver going down her spine as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Her fingers speared through the short hair at the nape of his neck as he deepened the kiss.

His hands drifted up her sides under the shirt. Her skin was on fire, his hands burning trails as they went. He pressed harder, pinning her to the wall as his tongue brushed hers.

She moaned, needing to get closer, needing more ... needing all he was prepared to give her. Radha wasn't an innocent by any stretch of the imagination but no one had ever affected her this way before. No one had sparked such an intense and desperate need within her. Her hands swept over his shoulders and then down his torso, pulling his shirt free and over his head in sharp movements, allowing her to run her hands over his skin.

He leaned back, searching her eyes for a moment, and then he kissed her intently, passionately, his breathing quickening. Moving to her neck, his lips left a trail to the base where he nipped lightly, his teeth gentle. Bunching the bottom of her shirt in his hands, he pulled it off in one quick motion.

Her hair fluttered down around her shoulders. She closed her eyes, her head resting back against the bulkhead as he kissed slowly along her neck. So soft, so gentle. She shivered. It didn't matter to her where they were, that they were in the lounge and anyone could walk in on them. All that mattered was the touch of his lips on her skin and the heat building between them.

He found the sensitive spot behind her ear and she melted. Her knees gave way, his arms the only things holding her upright against the wall.

His hands found the backs of her thighs, picking her up and pressing her against the wall. His lips played with the bottom of her ear, making a warm murmur of pleasure only she could hear. He reached up and pulled her sports bra off, pressing his bare chest against hers. The hardness of his arousal right where she ached the most sent another wave of pleasure through her. Fire raced along her veins, the need to be touched and to touch overriding everything else. The bulkhead was cool on her back but she paid it no mind as she wrapped her legs around his hips, her arms snaking around his shoulders to bring him closer. She wasn't just disastrously close to losing control, she'd already lost it.

And all for one gentle kiss.

Davin spun on his heels, holding her close to him as he turned toward the table. Still locked in the kiss, he raked everything off the table with one hand and lowered her onto it. The bottle she'd brought in when the poker game started, now empty, hit the deck and shattered. She hardly heard it as he worked feverishly on the buckle of her pants.

Radha shivered but not from the cold. She laid back, her hands smoothing up his arms as he flicked the buckle open with practiced ease. God, she loved standard issue when it came to things like this. The zipper sounded loud in the silent room as a counterpoint to their labored breathing.

Unable to lie still she propped herself up on one elbow and curled her hand into the nape of his neck to bring his lips back to hers. This time she took the lead... Gentle was good, she liked gentle. But she wanted more now. She nipped his lower lip playfully, inviting him to come play her way.

He flashed a light grin, running one hand up to her cheek where his thumb massaged the tender spot just behind her ear. He kissed her back, pulling lightly on her bottom lip, giving it more force this time as the heat increased. Davin slid his hands down her body, which was boiling under the skin, cupped both into her waistband and pulled the pants free with one motion.

She wiggled back on the table, warm legs wrapping around his waist. The fact that she was nearly naked and he still had his pants on was strangely erotic. She'd never let a man undress her before. Normally she made sure she was in the driver's seat. Her hands ran up his back; soft touches, urgent touches.

He found her hands with his, cupped them as he kissed her deeply once more. Then he pressed them to his stomach, sliding them down slowly.

She smiled against his lips, feeling the tension in his grip around her wrists. She didn't fight, where she might have with someone else. Somehow he'd gotten under all her guards, bypassing her normal behavior. Her fingertips reached his waist and dealt with his belt, identical to her own, in seconds. Then her fingers dipped below the waistband of his shorts, stroking along the sensitive skin under them in a soft caress.

Above them the comm speaker crackled into life. "This is Operations to all crew. Be advised automatic testing of all fire alert systems begins in one minute. One minute to automatic testing of all fire alert systems. That is all." The voice was a woman's, but not one Radha knew.

Davin's eyes snapped open. It was as if he had been in one place and was suddenly transported to another. His body stiffened into the man she had to fly with rather than the one she'd just been kissing.

He stumbled back, horror on his face as the comm cut off. Quite what about the test had him so panicked she didn't know but her question froze on her lips at the look in his eyes. Blue eyes raked her, naked, bar the regulation shorts, and widened more in shock and...

Radha closed her eyes, not wanting to see what she knew was going to be there. Disgust, condemnation. Men sought her out, entranced by her reputation, the "bad girl" aura she gave out, but their reactions were all the same when they realized what they were doing or had done. She was a bit of fun, nothing more. Not worth anything else. What else could an ex-con be?

Fabric rustling and the jingle of a belt told her he was getting dressed as fast as he could. Her heart aching, Radha turned on her side, away from the door, away from him, and just waited. It didn't take long until the door crashed shut behind him. Only then did a tear make its way down her cheek. She was an idiot who'd fallen for, not pretty words, but a soft touch.

Chapter Four

In the early hours of the next morning Davin was still wide awake. He had to be up in two hours, and had yet to close his eyes for longer than a wink. The day had been long and the drill had made it longer, but still rest eluded him. Lanna's voice echoed in his ears and it was tearing him up inside. She had given the announcement about the fire drill, and it had woken him out of his daze so fast she might as well have been standing in the room. He'd forgotten all about her for a moment, had forgotten everything they'd been through and how long he had chased her—all in the name of a kiss that had gone too far.

He hadn't called her. He couldn't bring himself to do it. She was probably in bed now anyway. Just two weeks ago he had even had thoughts of asking her the big question one day, the question that would lead to a desk job and a house planet-side that they could call home. Asking her had seemed the obvious choice then, and now here he was trying to figure out what it was that pushed him to Radha. It couldn't have been the alcohol talking. Alcohol didn't cause that kind of raw force. No, this was something else and it was something that scared him.

She was bad for him and he knew it. He was just thankful it had been late and no one had seen his midnight flight from the room. He told himself he should just write it off and forget it, keep clear and start spending more, if not all, off-duty time with Lanna.

The door to the barracks parted silently and a shadow crept in, closing the door just as quietly. Davin peered around his bunk curtain, his eyes narrowing on the figure.

Radha padded across the barracks on bare feet with her boots in her hand so she wouldn't wake anyone. Every pilot knew the value of sleep but not many would have thought to remove their boots and the commander in him appreciated that. As he watched, she put the heavy boots down next to her bunk and started to strip, her back to the room. Where had she been for the last four hours?

Davin rolled over when the pants dropped, thoughts of the kiss hitting him like a fist. Placing two fingers at the bridge of his nose, he kneaded, reaching up with the other hand to close the curtain as quietly as he could. Just like that, she'd completely derailed his thoughts again.

She wasn't someone he could take home to Mom, and she wasn't exactly a model citizen, but something about her had caught his attention. He didn't understand it and he didn't want to. He just stayed on his side of the curtain with his gaze on the wall.

* * * *

If Davin thought drawing the curtain would make the problem go away, he was sorely mistaken. He rolled out of his bunk after about an hour of sleep with an uneasy feeling. Something was wrong but he couldn't put his finger on it.

It was Boomer who nailed it, dropping down onto the bench at the table in the middle of the barracks and looking at the empty space in the middle. The space normally occupied by a steaming pot of coffee, courtesy of their newest female pilot who would make coffee but adamantly refused to do the washing up.

"Okay, who pissed Angel off?"

Davin stood and shook his head, pulling on the old T-shirt and buckling his pants. "Just forget it Boomer. She's not the only one that can make coffee around here." He flicked his gaze to her bunk as he said it and a strange sense of relief filled him when he found it empty.

"Hey? What's the problem Knight? She finally win that poker game?"

"Nothing, there's no problem. So get in there and put the coffee on if you want some or move it to the gym. We don't have time to sit around and talk about card games. We're at war in case you forgot."

Boomer raised his arms defensively and looked around the barracks for support but Davin ignored him. He wanted to start his morning run, for the exercise and so he could look for Radha. Her running amuck was not a good idea, especially when she was upset. The problem was he had to make it snappy, pull his run and a shower within forty minutes because he was due on patrol.

Radha was nowhere to be found, however. He'd checked all the hotspots, but he finally had to double-time it back to the locker room to make his rotation. But she slid into the room just as he was leaving, dodging past him in the doorway and avoiding his gaze as though he didn't exist. He did have time to catch the mess her knuckles were in though as she started to pull her flight suit on.

Thinking about that on his way to the deck, he wondered if she'd been in the gym all morning with the heavy bag, or out in a supply room somewhere painting the walls with her knuckles. Something about it bothered him, the torn and bruised skin on her hands and the upset that it indicated.

Surely cold-as-ice Radha didn't care if someone turned her down, surely it wouldn't matter to her that the drill had interrupted them? His eyes were absent as he signed off the duty paperwork and headed for his bird. Still, the fact remained that she was avoiding him, and painfully so.

The first time he spoke to her that day was on patrol when she pulled up on his wing, her bird slightly behind so he couldn't make eye contact. At least she couldn't avoid him out here. Trying to think of something to break the ice, he settled on, "Does she feel any better? I asked the chief to check that pulling you were talking about after they were done refinishing the skids."

Despite the invitation to talk she still didn't pull level. "She's fine thank you, sir, flies like a dream."

Her voice was robotic, the response dismissive. Davin got the feeling her reply would have been the same if her bird had been flying with one wing and no nav system. He turned and surveyed the area, banking left and slowing slightly to let her slide into place beside him. Radha matched the pattern but still remained slightly off his three o'clock position.

So we're playing this game are we? He shook his head at the rock formations on his left. He should say something, should try to at least console her, but he didn't know what to say. Something inside told him to let it go, told him that letting the problem go before it grew would be his best bet. So they flew without exchanging a word, only breaking comm silence for a simple question with a simple answer.

The patrol, and the one after it and the one after that followed the same routine until they were three days in and Boomer was almost apoplectic over having to make his own coffee in the morning.

"No matter how I make it, it tastes like shit." He sighed, stabbing the brown fluid in his mug with a spoon and looking mournfully at Radha's empty bunk again. Like always it was neatly made, as though she'd made it before she left ... or hadn't slept in it at all.

"Come on guys, just ... whoever pissed her off please go and say sorry. This is driving me nuts!"

Davin rubbed the chin he hadn't shaved in three days as he sat on his bunk and stared at Radha's. He missed her; it was as simple as that. He missed the back and forth on patrol, he missed the banter in the barracks and the locker room about his flying, he even missed the coffee. But not as much as Boomer, no one missed coffee as much as the caffeine-addicted veteran.

Deciding enough was enough, Davin made way to the gym, hoping that he would find her there beating the hell out of something and ripping her hands to shreds, her taped knuckles having become a common sight over the last few days.

Rounding the corner into the large room, it didn't take long to spot her. She was standing in front of the heavy bag pounding away, her arms moving in a flurry set to music with her occasional grunts. He walked over quietly, stepping behind the bag when he got close enough and making sure he was in her line of sight. She flicked him a glance, not quite looking at him, and finished her combination.

"Bag's all yours." She stepped back, sliding past him to get to the bench where her towel was. Wiping her bloodied knuckles, she studied the damaged skin dispassionately for a moment and turned to go.

Davin turned from the bag and moved to stop her before she could get through the door. He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder to slow her down.

"Radha, wait."

She stopped dead but didn't shrug him off. He could feel the tension vibrating through her slender frame. He knew without asking that the instant he moved his hand she'd be through the door and gone.

"Sir?"

"We need to talk. What are you doing this for?" He didn't expect rational answers, or even good answers, but he wanted to get down to the bottom of it the only way he knew how.

*

Radha counted to ten, her gaze following the marked lines of the court on the floor, determined not to let an ounce of feeling show. He wasn't getting anything from her, no way, no how. He couldn't have it both ways, not after walking out on her like that. Deep down, she knew it was more than that. She'd closed off because she was scared.

No one ... no man had touched her feelings for years. She'd learned to keep them hidden and protected. Now, thanks to a soft touch and a kiss she should have walked away from, they were exposed, a crack in her shields a mile wide where he was concerned.

"I'm not doing anything, sir. Just keeping fit." Her voice was neutral and level as she stared at the door in front of her.

Davin glanced around the gym, empty save the two of them. He stepped around and put both hands on her shoulders.

"I'm not talking about the exercise, and you know that." His hands moved down to hers, lifting them slowly and running his thumbs just below the bruised and torn

knuckles. "I'm talking about what you're doing to yourself."

The touch nearly undid her all over again, a fresh surge of frustration almost overwhelming her. Why do you care, she nearly snapped but held her tongue at the last minute. He'd walked out on her ... that was all she knew or needed to know. He was another one fooled by the attitude and the reputation, another one who'd never admit to having anything to do with her. She was used to it now. So why did it hurt so much this time?

She tugged on her hands, trying to free them. "I'll heal. Always do."

Davin tightened his grip and pulled her toward him. She tried to back away, to turn her head slightly. Getting too close is what got her here, she'd already made that mistake once and she wasn't doing it again. She wanted to jerk her hands free and walk out, leave him here like he'd left her. She couldn't though. Wouldn't.

Deep blue eyes tried to find hers. "I'm not worried about the knuckles. I'm worried about you."

She snorted, a small, inelegant sound of disbelief. "Yeah right, good one pretty boy. You're just worried I'll either say something and your squeaky clean rep gets shot full of more holes than a stationary Satagosian fighter, or I'll go rogue on you and you'll have to explain why to the boss."

He narrowed on her, his gaze turning to something bordering disgust. "You think that's what this is about? You think I'm worried about myself? Why don't you slide out of your shell for five seconds and talk to me?"

Radha shrugged, quite difficult when he still had her hands. She tried to free them again to no avail. Sighing deeply she looked at him. "Look, I'm not in the mood to talk or hold hands. So let's not and say we did, okay?"

Davin shook his head slightly. "Is that how it works with you? Run away and let it all take care of itself?"

"Piss off!" Anger surged through her and her lip curled as she yanked her hands free. She needed to escape. He stood in front of the door though and didn't look like he planned on moving any time soon. She took a few steps, he matched them. Great, Mr. Clean decided to grow a backbone right when she didn't need him to.

"Why the hell do you care? What is this, caring boss-of-the-year selection or what?"

"All right that's enough," he barked, stepping toward her with his brow furrowed.

"I've only got a few good pilots left and I don't intend to lose more, especially not for reasons unknown. So sue me if I don't want you to get all hyped up on pills or something because you can't talk about what's really wrong with you." He paused, his cheeks flushing slightly. "So either get it together or check yourself into sickbay. I don't need a flight risk on my wing."

Instinctively she backed up, desperate to avoid him touching her again. Already she could feel her traitorous body relaxing despite the wariness running through her. She couldn't trust him. She couldn't trust anyone. Hard experience had taught her that. So where had this longing to tell him everything come from? This need to rest her cheek against his broad chest and ask him to just hold her?

"I'm fine. I don't need to get it together. There's nothing wrong with me," she started to argue but his steely gaze stopped her. She stopped, the two of them locked in a standoff Radha didn't know how to break.

His eyes studied her, as though he knew why she was backing away, what she was

trying to avoid. He reached up and took hold of her shoulders again, applying more pressure this time. One hand ran to her cheek, tilting her head toward his penetrating gaze. "It's all right Radha. You're allowed to have feelings and get upset. You don't have to beat it out of yourself in the gym."

She should move, slide away from under his hands. She even knew the move to do it. A duck, a slide and she'd be past him. But with his gaze on her like that, the gentle tone in his voice, the light hold he had on her, she couldn't.

"I..."

One thumb slid out from his hand, running the length of her cheekbone in a gentleness that lit a fire and burned all the way through her being. Finally her eyes were fully on his, the pale blue pulling her in and chiseling at her defenses. Radha shivered and gave up. Her eyelids fluttered shut as she turned her head, seeking more of his touch. It was the slightest gesture, but it changed everything.

*

Davin stood frozen, asking himself exactly what he was doing and finding no answer. For the third time now he was drawn to her, for the third time now he'd taken her in his arms. And for the third time now, she'd let him.

But why? Radha was as heavily guarded as a Satagosian supply ship in her bird and in the corridors, but when he touched her the defenses fell and she was completely open, open enough to grant him full access. Flashes from the night in the lounge surged through his head. Her body against his on the wall, her lips on his, her touch setting off alarms everywhere it went.

He'd sworn he would shut it out, schedule more time with Lanna and put an end to it before it started—but it wasn't that easy. He missed her, missed her much more than he thought possible. He wanted to kiss her again. And she was ready to kiss him ... all from his touch.

Realization hit him. Touch was the key to her locked-down feelings and he'd been carrying it all along. His gaze darted over her again, standing there like a frightened creature pulled out of its shell. He thought of Lanna only once, then leaned in and took her lips once more.

She shivered again, the tremor running through her slender body, wound so tight he knew she'd run and avoid him for days, maybe forever if he startled her. He moved closer and gathered her to him by slow degrees. Her lips gradually relaxed under his, kissing him back. Small, gentle kisses but a response nonetheless.

He brought her in close, angling his head down as he nuzzled her. He wanted to keep her there, hold her tight and forget about everything else. Lanna was far from his mind, as was the war and the fighters and the patrol rotation. There was just Radha and the warm softness of her lips.

She murmured—a small sound low in her throat. Not panic or denial but need. Maybe even a hint of frustration, as though she couldn't help herself. Her hands lifted, the fingers of one flirting with the short hair at the nape of his neck while the other rested lightly against his chest.

He heard her, letting out a slight moan of his own as his hands coursed over her back, pulling her up full against him and into the kiss. It wasn't about want or repressed attraction anymore, it was about need. One hand slid under her hair, holding her there.

She relaxed, her soft curves fitting perfectly against his harder body, as though she

were made to be there. Then, it happened. From mere reaction, from allowing him to kiss her and responding, she kissed him, her lips clinging softly in invitation. The world contracted to just the two of them in the silent gym.

Davin let his hands trace down her arched back, curling his fingertips under her shirt and sliding them underneath. She jumped from the sudden cold of his touch, and he slid his hands up her back, then down her sides. Impatient to strip the top off and feel her against him, as he had in the lounge.

She sucked in a breath as his lips trailed over her jaw and down her neck, seeking the sweet spot behind her ear. The one which made her melt against him. His lips feathered over the pulse beating frantically in her neck and he smiled against her skin. She wasn't half as immune to him as she liked to make out. He pulled on the top and she stiffened a little. Soft words murmured against her skin soothed her and he drew the top over her head and away. She dropped her arms and her eyes caught him—wide, dark and completely unguarded.

Something inside awoke with her gaze, something raw and primal. He pulled his own shirt off, hardened lines flexing slightly as he did so. He pulled her close forcefully, hands on the backs of her thighs to lift her up until her legs curled around him. They moved toward the wall as one, and with hard and fast kisses he pressed her against it.

She gasped as her back hit the wall but before he could make sure she was okay and he wasn't being too rough, she was kissing him again. Demanding kisses that provoked a response and, slid in between them, tentative little touches that damn near broke his heart. It was as though she had to check he was real. Someone, somewhere, had destroyed her ability to trust. Davin wanted to find him ... and beat him to death.

His hands ran over her, needing to touch and feel, wanting all they could find. They slid under her black sports bra and lifted it over her head in one motion, dropping it near her shirt. His kisses trailed down her neck, soft kisses which brought quiet moans against his ear. Her hair tickled his neck, her breath stirred him up inside and her closeness brought a heat that made him want to scream.

She wriggled against him, urgency in her movements. Neither of them seemed to care, or even notice, that the door was mere feet away, unlocked. Her hands swept over his naked torso in response, a gentle finger tracing the line of his collarbone for a second as though fascinated.

He smiled, schooling his movements as he lifted her chin and claimed her lips again. Gentle was the key, gentle brought out this side of her. The girl behind the wall of shields and the attitude. The girl with the sad eyes he wanted to comfort and protect and claim for his own.

Her look was something else then, something innocent and sweet. His fingers traced gentle lines across her shoulders, down her sides, under her breasts. He placed soft kisses on her cheeks, on her lips, near her eyes. Their foreheads touching, his eyes closed, he let out a slow breath on her lips.

She shuddered, the movement going through her whole body, easily felt where it pressed against his. He had her; he could feel it in his gut, in his very bones. Pure male triumph surged through his veins as he looked around. He didn't want to do this against the wall ... hell, he didn't want to do this in the damn gym but he knew without asking it was now or never. He had her guard down and if he screwed this up, backed off or away now, she wouldn't let it down again.

He picked her up off the wall, finding the bench for the press their closest option. It was narrow, but it would do. He straddled it, taking a seat on the end so he could lower her onto it. She shivered as her back met the cool surface. His lips found hers again as his hands worked on the buckle to her pants.

Her hands clung to his shoulders as he stripped her of her boots in one swift movement. Then he realized he was stuck. How the hell was he going to get her pants off with her legs wrapped around him? A growl of frustration rumbled in his throat as he slid off the bench and yanked them down her legs with more force than finesse. Crawling back on, the air left his lungs in a small sound of pleasure as his hand swept up the length of a silken leg. For all her bravado and attitude, she was very feminine. How had he missed that?

The door behind them crashed open, loud voices announcing the arrival of a group. Davin froze, thanking the Lord they had moved, and used his broad back to conceal Radha from view. With her pale, slender legs wrapped around his hips though, there was no question what they were up to. His hand snaked into the nape of her neck and held her close to his shoulder to shield her from the curious stares.

"Holy shit! Sorry man, didn't realize there was anyone in here!" a voice said from behind him. Davin nodded, his jaw clenched firmly as frustration surged through him.

"Oh my god ... that's Knight!" another voice exclaimed, one quickly shut up by his companions as the group backed out, the original speaker carrying on. "We'll just leave you to it man. Might want to lock the door next time though, just in case."

Davin nodded, his voice a deep rumble in his chest. "I'll do that. Just got ... carried away, you know." He had no clue where the words came from, how he responded, but he did. He just had to hope they thought he was with Lanna and kept quiet. Even as he thought it, he realized that wasn't going to work. Lanna had her own room so there would be no need for them to find somewhere quiet and "private". So someone was going to make a comment if they thought she was down here with him...

He groaned. This was not good, it was so not good it was unreal. How had he...how had they ended up in this position? Why had he let it happen? In his arms Radha stiffened and Davin looked down at her, his mouth already opening to reassure her. Before he could though, she started to struggle, fighting her way free of his embrace.

"I'm sorry. I can't do this," she threw over her shoulder, grabbing her clothes and yanking them on as quickly as he'd managed to remove them. Then she was gone, the door banging in the frame behind her.

Chapter Five

The next day was hell. Of all the things that could have happened, the scene in the gym was something from Radha's nightmares. She hadn't looked him in the eye before she'd fled yesterday, she hadn't been able to. She'd known what she was going to see in his eyes. The same as last time, the same as all the other times. Unbidden pain arched through her again. She couldn't do it anymore. She didn't want to see that look in his eyes, the one that said he didn't want to touch her but he couldn't help himself.

Hot tears prickled at the back of her eyes but she ignored them. From anyone else she could have coped with that, but not him. Not from Davin. Somehow he'd gotten under her guard and every time he touched her she wanted more. More than she should want.

Not wanting to go back to the barracks and run into Davin, Radha wandered the corridors until she ended up in the very bowels of the base. Here, in the darkened and steam-filled alleys surrounding the massive reactors which provided the station with power, she finally felt comfortable.

No one knew her down here, or cared if she belonged. Here she wasn't Radha Kaden, the ex-con fool of a pilot who'd gone and kissed her commander. She was just another pair of hands to help shovel the crystallized and spent Tyrelliam ore the reactors spat out.

Pulling on a coverall and accepting the shovel pushed into her hands, Radha settled into the monotonous routine. The exercise, even if it was one of the lowest and most avoided jobs on the station, was familiar and comforting. As the muggy heat settled around her and the incessant grind of the reactors faded to a buzz, she closed down and stopped thinking. Her mind started to drift until a hand tapped her on the shoulder.

"Ye've done more than your fair share," the gruff foreman said, his face swallowed up by the huge beard and covered in dirt from the Tyrelliam. "Get yourself a shower and some sleep. Much as we need this shit shoveled, you ain't gonna do us any good if you keel over."

Nodding, Radha turned the direction he ordered—showering and changing her clothes before she left the lower levels of the base. She didn't want to track spent ore back to the barracks, or anywhere Davin might find it. She tumbled into her bunk with less than three hours to reveille and slept without dreaming.

If she thought the penal mining facility at Acheron was tough, she was in for a surprise over the next few days. Davin was tight-lipped with anger when he had to talk to her, something he tried to avoid as much as possible, even to the extent of switching the patrol rotation around. Not only did Radha not fly with him anymore, she wasn't even on the same shift. Which meant the only time she saw him was when he was in his bunk, sleeping. With his back to her.

*

Each morning for Davin started with the same numb feeling. He trudged through the corridors and paperwork and briefings without once feeling he was truly awake. Radha's abrupt dismissal of their time in the gym had infuriated him at first, but now he was to the point of desperately wanting to understand. At first he had only *thought* he couldn't stand it, now he *knew* he couldn't. But she avoided him at all costs and he was doing the same

with her. It was too hard, and too dangerous.

He tried pouring all his attention on Lanna, which helped, but didn't solve the problem. He still thought of Radha, still sat down each night with his gaze on her empty bunk, still relived the lounge and the gym in his early morning dreams. The rotation change was part of his initial frustration and anger, but now he considered changing it back.

Each time he thought of it though, he couldn't follow through. Wasn't sure he could actually handle trying to speak to her again as just another pilot. So he doubled his workouts to ensure he missed her in the mess hall and locker rooms. He spent every night in the gym with the heavy bag, so he didn't have to worry about seeing her show up at her bunk. Eventually, he couldn't do anything without the rogue pilot on his mind.

Several nights later, after running around the station nearly five times and spending several hours on the bag without gloves, he stumbled into the barracks in a daze. His hands dripping blood, his body near dehydration, he staggered toward the center table to check her bunk—which was empty.

He snorted and turned, walking to the small kitchen to remove the bottle of vodka kept in a tiny compartment behind the cleaning supplies. He stared at the label for long moments, then lifted it and drained nearly a third in two long gulps. Placing the bottle on the edge of the center table he collapsed onto his bunk, and waited for the world to stop spinning.

*

Radha had the advantage that, when she rolled into the barracks shortly after, she'd already had a shower. Tyrelliam ore was nasty stuff, it clung to everything, and she didn't want anyone to know where she went. Her hair was still wet when she walked into the pilots' barrack room and started to head over to her bunk. Then it struck her, someone was still awake.

Instinctively she froze, just inside the door, until her eyes adapted to the soft darkness after the brightly lit corridors. When they did, she saw the bottle on the edge of the table and Davin's sprawled form in his bunk.

Her heart wrenched as she padded over. His hands were a mess; it didn't take an idiot to figure out what he'd been doing. But was it to avoid her, or because of her? She didn't know and she didn't want to think about it. All that mattered was he was hurting and she wanted to help.

Shaking her head she grabbed the bottle off the table. Twisting the top off she took a sniff. The smell made her nose wrinkle. "You idiot," she murmured. "Don't you know enough to get slaughtered on good stuff, not this cheap crap?"

Not that she thought Mr. Clean here got plastered on a regular basis. This bottle was old, the label peeling back. Her nose still wrinkled, she carried it through to the kitchen and dumped the contents down the sink. When she walked back through she had a bottle of water in one hand and a med kit tucked under her arm.

The bunk dipped as she sat down. "Come on, turn over. Let me look at your hands."

A low grumble issued from somewhere in Davin's chest, his eyes opening to half-mast briefly. When he finally rolled to his back, he strung together an unintelligible sentence before finally opening his eyes wide enough to look toward her. His brow crinkled, his gaze scanning over her general vicinity several times before he spoke again.

"Radha?"

Great, he was nearly out of it. She handed him two painkillers. "Nope. Just a figment of your imagination. Now sit up and take those," she ordered, holding the water ready.

He stuck an elbow in the mattress, propped himself on it, and took the pills from her hand. His eyes drifted shut, then snapped open again as he tossed them into his mouth.

"Radha?" he asked again, his voice clearer.

She shook her head, the damp strands of her hair sticking to her bare shoulders.

"You're dreaming. Let me see your hands."

She reached out before he could answer and took them in hers, wincing as she saw the state they were in. Without a word she opened the med kit and rifled inside it for what she needed to clean him up.

He jumped when the antiseptic hit, the fizzle of impurities burning out covered by a grunt of discomfort. One hand reached for her face slowly, but she pulled it back down with the other. He had his gaze on her, moving his head around as if he was looking for the best angle.

"Why are you back? How did you get back?"

"I walked. Just like anyone else," she replied, not really sure where he was going with that one. She concentrated on cleaning his knuckles, deflecting any attempt he made to touch her. A feat that was relatively easy given the alcohol surging through his system.

"Why did you do this to yourself? You can't fly like this."

"Can't fly..." he replied, moving his head around again. His body bobbed for a moment, the hazy look in his eye starting to diminish as the blood thinners and water took effect. "Can't fly anyway."

"Don't be stupid, of course you can fly. You have to, that's your job." Her lips quirked slightly as she looked up. A lock of hair had fallen over his brow and her fingers itched to smooth it back. It was a bit too long for regulation but given that the pilots were on constant rotation, all the boss cared about was how they flew. As long as they didn't dye it bright pink no one cared if a pilot's hair was a little long, or if he'd gone two days without a shave. She resisted the temptation for all of a second. After all, he was as drunk as a skunk. There was no way he would remember this in the morning. A pang of sadness swept through her. Was this all she could look forward to, a snatched moment when she was sure he wouldn't remember?

The thought was too disturbing so she locked it away, reaching up to smooth the wayward strand of hair back. Her fingers were gentle, savoring the small touch. Before she could stop him, one of his hands clamped onto hers. It startled her that he could move that fast in his condition, but he was a pilot, trained to react as quickly as possible in the cockpit. His eyes bored into hers, held them. She couldn't speak, frozen in shock at what he might say.

He opened his mouth, but said nothing. His hand released, and his gaze fell back toward the bottle. Rattled, she offered it again, moving closer when he struggled to sit up.

Resting against the wall, he let out a long sigh and drank deeply. When he gave it back, his gaze was on her again. It was different this time, asking questions she didn't want to hear or try to answer. The silence was deafening, only broken by the occasional snore of one of the sleeping bodies in the room. Finally, he said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She looked down, feeling heat across her cheeks as she avoided his gaze. Slender fingers turned the glass round and round. She should go. He was fine so there was no reason to linger.

They sat, inches apart, for long minutes. Until Davin's form started to inch toward the bunk and eventually he sank onto it, rolling slightly with a tired moan that might've been a word. She looked over, still unable to say or do anything but watch him. Then, his hand slid slowly over to hers, the white bandage she'd just wrapped around it rough on her skin as he curled his fingers through hers.

Radha sat for a while, until his breathing had leveled out and his hand relaxed, then she stood up and packed the med kit away with brisk, efficient movements. Finally she was ready to head over to her own bunk but she stood for a moment looking down at him, trying to force herself to leave his side.

* * * *

The next day started well. Radha wasn't up at the crack of dawn nor did she linger as long as possible in her bunk to avoid Davin. Instead, she uncoiled herself from her bunk and padded over to the kitchen as though the last tense week had never occurred. She didn't look at him, even though his bunk was next to the galley, but she could feel his gaze on her from the shadows. She shivered. Like the other pilots, she wore the standard tank top and shorts to sleep in but on her they clung in places they wouldn't on a male pilot.

She made coffee quickly and carried it through to the table in the middle of the barracks. The reaction was like someone had done a casting call for a zombie movie. Male bodies evicted themselves from bunks in various states of alertness, all eyes fixed on the ambrosia sitting in the middle of the table. Radha took her mug off the tray before the stampede could start. She felt, rather than saw, Davin drop into the seat next to her.

Just his presence next to her was enough to start whispers crawling over her skin as her body responded to his. Automatically she shifted her weight onto one foot and used the movement as cover to fold her arms. The last thing she needed to do was to give him, or any of them, a tip as to how she felt.

Sipping from her mug, she reached out and slapped Boomer's hand as he tried to heap four spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee. "Hey! You know what the doctor said," she warned him, wagging her finger before moving the sugar to the other side of the tray. Boomer glowered for a moment, then stuck his nose in his mug and sighed in happiness.

As she pulled her hand back she turned the handle of one mug, hoping Davin would get the message. She'd loaded it with coffee and painkillers to cover the fact he'd tried to get blind drunk last night. Hopefully, if she'd got the mix right, no one would realize he was flying with a hangover.

*

Davin struggled for awareness in the dense fog of morning, his temples pounding as if someone had knocked him out the night before. His mouth was dry, thought took far too long to process, and he hadn't yet had a shower.

Someone moved a cup toward him and he took it, the brew smelling especially strong this morning, probably because the smell hit him unguarded like the intense light in the room. He took a sip and nearly spat it on the table; it was as strong as carbon plating and twice as thick. The taste held something else on the edge, almost medicinal.

That's when it hit him, Radha had made the coffee.

She was beside him, joining in the usual morning banter of the other pilots. He looked down and noticed the bandages around his hands, feeling confused for a moment,

and then dropping it before one of his pilots could catch it. He didn't remember wrapping himself, but he didn't remember much about the night after leaving his office. He looked over toward her, but she was turned toward the others.

The chatter increased thanks to the rising blood-caffeine level in the room's occupants, a chatter that made his head ring. Grimly he hung on to his mug and waited for whatever she'd put in it to kick in. But how the hell did she know he was suffering from a hangover?

Blurily he tried to sort through the foggy memories of the night before. She hadn't been in her bunk when he'd rolled in, that he was sure of. Frowning, he tried to catch her eye through the chatter but she avoided his gaze.

It was deftly done, but he'd watched her enough over these past couple of weeks to spot what she was up to, those little half-looks she gave to check on where he was. He was about to give up, dropping his gaze to the dark fluid in his mug for a moment, when she turned. Dark chocolate eyes caught his, wide and open over the mug of coffee as she sipped. His heart slammed against his chest.

The coffee mug waffled in his grasp, and he found the table with it before he could make an idiot of himself and end up wearing it. Still, some sloshed over the lip, landing on his fingers. He ran them to his lips to get the burning liquid off, cheeks flushing as he thought about how awkward the move must've looked. He sighed under his breath, feeling ridiculous.

"What's the matter hot shot? Forget yer pills this morning?" Boomer called from across the table, a strange look in his eye despite the joke.

"The only one around here on anything is you Boom. You and the poor bastard that has your wing on patrol." Davin gave a half grin with his response, sucking down more coffee as quick as possible and avoiding looking at Radha again. She threw him off balance in ways he wasn't sure he wanted to deal with just yet.

"That would be me then," Radha said quietly, finishing her mug and setting it down on the tray with a clink before she got up.

The statement had more bite than the coffee, stabbing him in the side somewhere between his ribs and his stomach. He'd reassigned her to fly with Boomer. His grin disappeared as quickly as it'd come, and he turned to watch her leaving the table. The shorts were flattering from that angle, and he had to snap his head back forward before the others caught on. Still, it was enough to wake him up a little.

"What's wrong with your hands Knight? Blistered from all that knocking on the captain's door after lights out?"

Davin looked down toward the bandages, feigning a smile as the others chuckled. That was a good question after all, one he didn't have a good answer for. He decided to dodge it, firing back with, "What, this? It's from that bedpost of your mom's. I told her she was slamming my hands against the wall when she tied me up but that woman is an animal."

The pilots ate it up, tapping their cups on the table as was the custom when someone was slammed. Davin didn't enjoy it as much as he usually did though, just took another sip and tried to work his vision toward the bunk behind him without it being noticeable.

By the time he managed it, she'd shrugged into fatigues and was heading out the door. Curiosity filled Davin. She was disappearing again, like she did most days. He knew for a fact she wasn't on patrol until later so where the hell did she go? He'd never

been able to find her when he went looking. Waiting so as not to seem suspicious, he finished up his coffee and walked over to drop the mug in the galley. The others continued on, flinging comments back and forth about women and flying, seemingly unperturbed by his absence. He waited a little longer, pulling the old faded T-shirt on, and then slipped out into the corridor.

Big surprise, Radha was nowhere to be found. Damn it, he was too late. He jogged the corridors, nodding to people he passed as his gaze flicked in and out of open doors. The lounge, mess hall, gym, all empty. The briefing room and head were his last stops, but she was nowhere to be found.

He stood in the empty briefing room, looking at the patrol board and scratching his chin. Wherever she was hiding, she made sure it wasn't a place where they would run into each other. He'd tried that too hadn't he? For a while it had worked, but seeing her around had messed him up. Radha was smarter than him though, she'd found a way to avoid that.

Maybe it's for the best. He turned to head back to the showers. Patrol time was coming sooner rather than later, and he didn't have time to play hide and seek.

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Radha had barely gotten into her stride down in the ore chambers when the raucous alarms that signaled an attack started blaring. Even down here, with the noise from the reactors, it was a sound that stopped everyone in their tracks. The other workers for a far different reason than Radha though. Down here, if just one shot managed to get past the shields, they were all toast. If a reactor went up, the bottom section of the Sentinel-class base would just crumple, falling away from the main. It was the reason there were no emergency pods down here. They wouldn't be able to get to them quick enough.

"Shit!" Radha snapped out of her reverie and dropped her shovel, starting to strip her coverall in one swift movement.

"Hey!" A bellow yanked her head up and she looked straight at the burly foreman. "Not in here, you'll get covered."

"No choice!" Radha yelled back over the noise, hopping on one foot as she pulled her leg free. "I'm a pilot, I need to get up there."

The looks of surprise on his face and the faces of the workers around her might have been amusing at another time. Pilots didn't come down here, like the majority of the station personnel they considered themselves above shoveling ore. A path opened up to the door as she stampeded through, hitting it at a run and disappearing into the corridors beyond.

Racing through the halls, Radha ran faster than she'd ever run before. She shouldn't have gone down to the bottom decks, not while she was on call, but she'd needed to think. She'd needed the monotonous routine to help her forget the uneasy feelings about exactly where she and Davin were going. If they were going anywhere at all that was... She still wasn't sure they were after she'd run out on him.

She barreled through the door to the locker room just in time to knock the guy coming the other way off his feet. They landed in a sprawl of limbs on the cold floor.

Davin spun from his locker across the way, half suited and now fully awake. All of them were lit intermittently in red as klaxons around the ship rotated with the alarm.

"Get off the floor! Where the hell have you been? You hear that alarm? That means get your ass in a bird and get off of my deck! Now!"

He slammed the door to his locker, helmet dangling from his hand. Moving past the

pile, he helped the other suited pilot to his feet, giving Radha no more than a glance as she worked to get back on her feet.

"Everyone out. Get in your birds as fast as you can, this is a full scramble! Move it Kaden!" With that he was out the door, headed for the deck in a sprint.

"Aye, sir," she responded without thinking, already on her feet and heading for her locker. She hauled her suit on with less finesse than sheer speed, taking some of the skin off her arm with the zipper as she did so, and was out of the room, helmet in hand, in record speed.

She hit the flight deck at a run, her heart pounding with adrenalin. The klaxons wailed and launch tubes engaged all around her, flinging their armed and fully loaded fighters into cold space to combat the attackers.

The deckhands around her bird yelled as they saw her, the platform already moving the empty Valkyrie fighter toward the waiting launch tube.

"God help us Angel, you're cutting it close," one of them muttered as she scrambled up the ladder and slid into the cockpit mere seconds before the canopy slammed shut. The locks engaged and she pulled her helmet on as the launch tube swallowed the light of the flight deck.

"Shitshitshitshit," she muttered between gritted teeth, not bothering to fasten her helmet properly in favor of running through her pre-flight checks, all at record speed. Not a lot of choice on that one. Once she was in the launch tube she was going, ready or not, and she'd rather hit cold space knowing her weapons and engines all worked.

Relief surged through her as she flipped the last switch. Not a moment too soon. The instant her finger left the switch she felt the swift punch of acceleration as the tube launched her fighter into the fray.

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Davin glanced over his shoulder as the last of the fighters left the ship. They were forming up on him in an arrowhead pattern, thrusters on full blast. The base had several scanning probes in the surrounding area, and when the furthest of them were crossed by enemy fighters the alarms had gone off—giving Sentinel Five plenty of time to scramble protection.

He saw them on the scanner between his knees now, at least twenty contacts, moving swiftly into weapons range. Mouthing obscenities below his breath, he keyed the mic.

"All fighters, this is White Knight. We have enemy contacts at position thirty-four echo foxtrot." As he was speaking, the scanner between his knees cheeped, two larger contacts showing up behind the group of fighters. "We'll split up when we can see 'em. Stay with your wingman, they are not to reach the base. Looks like cover for a bombing run."

He turned in his seat to get a look at the group, slightly larger than the opposition but not by much. Radha was out there somewhere and despite their problems, he needed her skill.

"Archangel, move it to the front. You're with me."

"Already here," her calm voice replied almost instantly and another fighter nudged into his peripheral vision. "Boomer's doubling up with Jerry and Space," she added, her voice softer. They both knew the rookie pilot would be lucky to survive a full-on engagement but his chances went up with the two experienced pilots looking out for him.

"Roger that," was his reply, slightly comforted that she was back on his wing. He

didn't have much time to revel in it but it was good nonetheless. Absently the thought crept in that he might not see her again, that one shot from any of the fighters could take out either of them and end whatever it was they had begun. He looked over when he thought it, but she was too focused on her instruments in the cockpit to notice.

Probably better. He turned back to his own. The first glint of the enemy was visible ahead, weaving through the thickening asteroid belt as if they had a map of it.

"All right, we have mark-one eyeball on the enemy. Knight and Angel have the leaders. After that it's open game. Weapons free. Let's clear this soup so the big boys have to turn around."

With that he flipped the small fighter vertical and punched the throttle, crawling around the underside of an approaching asteroid and twirling out on the other side.

The Satagosians began firing immediately, breaking formation to try and get past the Sentinel fighter teams. Davin spun his fighter to dodge the blasts, which missed him by mere inches at times. A Valkyrie in the cloud behind him burst into flames from a lucky shot, and he pinched his eyes at the unforgettable last sound from the pilot.

"Eyes on the prize, get drunk later," a feminine voice ordered sharply as a shadow flipped over his cockpit, the sharp crackle indicating it was a one-to-one channel. "You're no good to me if you get your ass shot off by one of these bastards."

Radha flipped right side up again, the two fighters in close formation as they dove into the enemy force. What Davin's men lacked in fire power, they made up in agility and sheer tenacity, continually badgering the bigger enemy craft. Blossoms of explosions lit up the darkness of space. Radha whooped as she gunned down her latest target, flying through a fresh bloom of flame as it disintegrated around her. Davin's eyes found her each time he had a spare moment. He needed to know she was okay.

Fighters from both sides formed a gleaming swarm around the asteroid belt, bright flashes from guns and occasional explosions illuminating from within. Davin and his men wore down the opposition, the result of constant training and simulation, not to mention the thrill of first conflict for some and the grim fear of losing it all for others.

Davin made his way through the crowd en-route to the two larger bombers the Satagosians were protecting. Radha pulled up on his wing, making it just the two of them behind the Satagosian's front line. He had shut down one of his engines because of a hit and she was sporting more than a few scars on her hull, but she looked just as ready as he was to push the edge of the envelope. The slower bombers loomed ahead, banking slowly to expose the gun turrets underneath. Davin looked over from his cockpit, locking eyes with Radha as they flew wing to wing.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?"

She grinned, the light of battle in her eyes. "Depends if you're thinking what I think you're thinking."

Something was different in her voice then, the playful tone of before. He smiled, one eye checking the bombers. He wanted to talk to her more than anything now, talk to the Radha he used to patrol with and not the one that had been hiding for the better part of a week.

"Well I was thinking along the lines of those big boys in front of us. Is that where you were?"

"I'm thinking divide and conquer," she came back with instantly, her smile evident in her voice. "Hit them hard and fast in a cross directional arc." Her voice dropped a little,

cracking slightly as though she were unsure as she carried on. "And I'm thinking ... the gym, tonight."

The last bit caught him off guard. He let it go and decided he'd take his chances later. After all, having to meet in the gym was better than nothing, he just wasn't sure exactly what she wanted to talk about, or if she wanted to talk at all.

His eyes widened at that thought, then focused again when the first blasts from the heavy gun turrets under the bombers skirted by.

"I'm thinking I've got the one on the left then. Watch those guns, stay close to them, you're harder to hit that way. Quick and fast. Let's do it." He broke hard left when he said it, spinning away from the guns and punching the throttle to gain some attack speed. The bomber on the left adjusted accordingly, a slow roll bringing the gun turrets into his line of sight so they could target him.

He twirled between the shots, Radha following almost the same path on the other bomber. Swinging out to the sides of the bombers, their gun turrets spinning underneath to try and get a shot off, the Valkyries crossed paths in the space between their targets and flipped to head back toward them. Davin briefly caught Radha's face when they passed each other. It showed the sheer excitement he would expect on a kid getting her first ride on a roller coaster.

Heading back down at full speed, he pulled the trigger on his guns to pepper the sides of the craft. Even as he did, he was arming his missiles with the other hand and preparing for the main event. The bombs the big ships carried would be in place just above the blast doors, ready to be dropped on the station. At the moment though, they were firmly attached to the craft that would launch them. Davin decided to take advantage of that firepower.

Radioing his plan to Radha, he got a look at the belly of the craft on his first pass and readied for his shot on the second. When he came around again, narrowly missing being torn apart by the big ship's guns, he put his crosshairs on the blast doors and sent a missile on its merry way.

Radha followed suit on the other bomber, and as the two Valkyries sped away their missiles punched through the blast doors, ignited the bombs, and turned the two Satagosian ships into a bright fireworks show against the rocky backdrop of the asteroid belt.

Davin whooped in the cockpit, roaring with laughter and flashing a big grin at his wingman. Radha flipped into place and grinned back, wagging her fighter's wings in triumph, something he'd noticed she did when she was excited. A fond smile curved his lips, it was cute to see the normally hard-as-nails ex-con indulge in something so impulsive.

The rest of the wing formed up around them as they flew a defensive pattern, watching as the remaining Satagosian fighters turned tail and ran. "And, I think that's a wrap!" Radha crowed.

"Good job guys, way to hustle. Drinks are on Angel," Davin replied on the all-ships comm, winking at her over his shoulder.

"In your dreams mister! I'm clean out," she threw back, then grumbled good-naturedly as the flight turned and headed back to the base. The main force would land now leaving just a patrol out to monitor the base. "I might be able to find something though..."

Chapter Six

The pilots assembled in the lounge that night, celebratory cigars stuck between their teeth and stiff uniforms traded for tank tops and cargo pants. To say they weren't standing on ceremony was an understatement. Davin was among them, shaking hands and talking up the story of the bombers, feeling better than he had in weeks. Several of the pilots asked where the booze was, which got Davin to checking the room for Radha. As if on cue, she sauntered around the corner.

She'd switched out her uniform for a tank top as well, but hers had to be at least two sizes too small. The same cargo pants the guys wore rode low on her hips to reveal a tantalizing glimpse of toned stomach. But that wasn't why she had the attention of every man in the room, not this time anyway. No, that honor went to the four bottles of pale green liquid she was carrying, the tops laced through her fingers.

She set them down on the table and grinned around the silent room. "What? Cat got your tongues?"

Davin suddenly realized he needed to close his mouth. Shutting it quickly, he checked his chin for drool as the femme fatale breezed past him. She was stunning, instantly quieting the woman-deprived male pilots with her sultry look and two handfuls of booze. Davin finally broke the ice, clearing his throat and pointing toward the bottles on the table. "Well, are we going to stare at it all night or drink it?"

Conversation broke out in a low roar and metal cups were retrieved from the galley and filled. Once the room was buzzing with activity, Davin walked to the table and lifted a bottle, speaking low enough for only Radha to hear.

"Satagosian rum? Where did you get this, and how the hell did you get it on the station?"

She grinned at him and winked. "That's for me to know and you to try and find out. Unless you plan on hauling me up on a charge, sir." The honorific was drawled, a teasing light in her eye. She knew as well as he did he wasn't going to report her, not if he wanted to make it out of the room alive. Pilots were serious about their alcohol, especially the good, and normally illegal, kind.

Davin smiled, her look burning into him and warming him up more than he wanted to think about. There was something different about her tonight, something a little dangerous. He set the bottle down with a sly grin. "You just keep it out of the captain's sight. He might kick both of us out. Or take it for himself—I'm not sure which is worse."

She shrugged. "I'll just get more if he does. First rule of thumb, no one ever compromises their supply line."

He shook his head, raising his hands defensively. "I don't even want to know."

With that he turned, half because another pilot was flagging him down and half because he was trying to get away from her eyes. The pilot had some questions about the bombers, and after another heavily embellished retelling of the story, Davin got caught up with a group of his men at a table.

After the third round of drinks he turned to wave Radha over and didn't see her. Standing and scanning the crowd produced the same result; she had apparently slipped out of the room while he was lost in conversation. He nearly let it go and returned to his

seat, but halfway down her words from earlier that day hit him like a fist. "I'm thinking the gym..."

He didn't realize he'd said it out loud until one of his men turned and asked what he was talking about. Deciding not to draw attention to himself, he pointed to a pilot across the table who was making impressive inroads into the rum.

"I said I'm thinking I'll never catch up with him, got to run to the head already."

The men laughed and continued, while he slipped out the door and made way for the gym.

Much to his surprise, it was quiet, dark, and empty. Most of the men were in the lounge, and the ones that weren't were on patrol or in their bunks. It was late after all, and none of them would rather work out than sleep or drink. He walked to the middle of the room, the door clanging shut behind him, and looked around.

The door to one of the storage rooms was ajar, a faint, warm light glowing inside. He frowned. That didn't look like the overhead strip lighting he knew was in there. It was almost like ... candlelight? Casting a glance behind him at the main doors first, he crept toward the room.

She had said the gym, right? He hadn't been dreaming that had he? Because if so he was very likely about to walk in on a couple who'd snuck away to grab some time together. It was a practice rife over the ship, what with over-crowding and many people put up in barracks. It was an accepted practice that wasn't talked about. Most people just knew to be careful when heading into secluded areas at certain times.

Walking over, he slowed his breathing and made every attempt to silence his steps. Maybe if it were a couple he would hear them before he got there and avoid interrupting. But the closer he got, the harder it was to keep himself quiet. His heart raced, the blood surging through his veins so fast he could hear it thumping in his ears. He held his breath when he got there and listened intently.

Nothing. He couldn't detect anything but the hum of the ship. Gritting his teeth, he reached out and tapped on the door.

"It's open." Radha's voice was unmistakable. Davin sighed in relief and pushed the door open, then stopped like he'd been poleaxed.

The room was flickering from candlelight, three cans that apparently contained them on each wall. The supplies had been pushed to the sides, a pallet of what looked like several standard-issue blankets and two pillows taking up the center of the closet.

But Davin's eyes didn't spare the room more than a passing glance, they were locked on the figure in the center of the room.

Radha stood with her back to him, but cast a simmering glance over her shoulder. She was in a black top that was far from standard issue, a silk number that glided down her back and begged to be touched, like nothing he'd seen her wear before.

Peeking out from under the bottom edge were the rounded curves of her ass, lit perfectly with the warm light. Her legs were bare, long and very feminine. His gaze traced down her frame, reveling in the chance to look his fill, then settled again on hers. They held a fiery look, wanton and inviting. Speech deserted him, his chest filled with tingling and his extremities went numb.

She broke the spell by looking away, back to the candle she was fussing with, and he knew her slender hands were making work to give her an excuse not to look at him.

"Close the door if you're coming in." Her voice was gentle, unlike the harsher tone

he was used to hearing. "If you're not..." She laughed nervously, shrugging before finally finishing the thought. "If you're not then close the door on your way out. I won't say anything."

Davin reached out behind him and shut the door without taking his gaze off her, doing it so quickly that the swinging structure clanged on its frame. The noise was amplified in the silent gym, almost echoing. He finally leaned back against it and took in a slow breath, still stunned by her appearance.

"Of course I want to come in, I'm just..." He pulled his gaze off her for a moment, eyeing the pallet. "I guess you just caught me a little off guard."

Radha half turned, her gaze following his to the makeshift bed she'd put together. One ivory shoulder lifted as color tinted her cheekbones. She avoided looking at him but not like she had in the last couple of weeks of icy silence. Not with the awareness stretched so taut between them it was like a third person in the room.

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Please don't let him walk out. Unable to turn, her fear locking her into place, Radha bit her lip and waited for him to speak again. Waited for him to do something, even if that something was to leave. She'd done her part, even if seduction wasn't exactly her strong suit.

He stepped up behind her and she jumped as he reached out, sliding his hands over her shoulders and then starting down her arms in a slow, soft embrace. Her body was on fire, sparks dancing in her skin. This felt good. It felt right.

His voice was low as he brought his hands up to her shoulders once more. "I don't think I've ever seen anything that looked as beautiful as you do right now." He dropped a tender kiss just off the side of her neck.

Radha shivered. Her eyelids were too heavy to keep open as his lips whispered over her skin, just in the curve where her shoulder sloped into her neck. Without saying anything, she didn't trust herself enough to speak, she leaned back into him. Her bare shoulders met the solid warmth of his chest and she sighed. A reassuring warmth that matched the gentle hands holding her.

He nibbled and kissed until he reached the bottom of her earlobe. Her breath caught sharply as he drew his tongue along the edge of her ear. His large hands massaged the tension out of her shoulders. His warm breath fanned over her as he sucked her earlobe into the warmth of his mouth. Radha whimpered in need.

He turned her by her shoulders. Slowly Radha looked up. Need and desire darkened his eyes, a hot and dark expression that sent shivers of excitement through her. She'd had no idea she affected him so much.

She lifted onto her tiptoes to slide her hands around his neck. "I don't do this often ... just so you know," she added awkwardly. "People assume I sleep around because of my past... I don't."

"Who said you were going to do any sleeping?" He smiled and slid his hand to the nape of her neck to pull her in for a deep kiss. Her hands fanned on his chest, he stiffened as she moved careful fingers across the solid muscles.

Pulling away he nibbled gently on her lip as his hands coursed down her back to lift the edge of her top. The heat of his body beat against her ass, covered only by the thin strip of fabric, far from the standard-issue briefs she'd worn before. A low groan rose in his throat and danced out across her lips.

Need flared deep in Radha's stomach, a delicious combination of nerves and arousal. She'd not slept around, no, but she wasn't an innocent. Yet right at this moment she felt as though this were the first time all over again. A shiver chased up her spine following the path of his fingers. She broke from his lips to trail a line of soft kisses along his jaw, pressing closer as she followed the line of his neck.

Davin's hands dropped down her back, grazed the thin strip of fabric with one finger. His fingers spread and ran down the parts of her thighs he could reach, curling into the underside. Her skin was on fire, and the higher he rose the hotter she was. He stiffened, his arousal pressing hard against her and he lifted his head so she could kiss more of his neck.

She smiled, sharp teeth nipping lightly as she pulled at his shirt. "I think, sir, you're a little overdressed." A soft sigh escaped her lips as she slid her hands under the fabric and felt warm skin. Warm skin stretched over hard muscle. Her respect for him rose a notch higher, along with her arousal. It took hours in a gym to build muscle like this. Hours in a gym took stamina... She smiled, all too aware of the benefits of lots of stamina.

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A grin rose on his lips, his hands pulling the shirt up and over his head. He flexed as he did so, giving her a view of the muscled physique he worked for, basking for a second in the admiration and desire he could see in her eyes. Davin shivered as her gentle fingers danced over chiseled abs. She ran one finger down the center of him, around his belly button and into the light trail of hair leading to the top of his pants. Then she hooked a finger into his waistband, a dark look in her eye. Sparks flew with that look, and his body tightened savagely.

Her fingertips slid further under the fabric of his pants to stroke the tender skin underneath. Soft touches designed to tease. But they didn't affect him as much as her eyes, a siren's combination of desire, heat and trust swirling in their chocolate depths. This wasn't the sharp-tongued vixen he flew with and trusted his life to on a daily basis. This was another woman altogether. One she kept buried, well protected with the walls she'd built around herself. One she finally trusted him enough to let out.

Davin caught his breath, his stomach muscles tightening hard as the stroking of her fingers brought an arousal more powerful than he'd ever felt. He wanted her now, more than ever.

She was warm and soft, inviting and passionate. More temptation than he could resist. He wanted her, all of her, and intended to do whatever it took to keep her. It was fierce and primitive, but somehow tender at the same time. His hands swept stray hair away from her face, his lips taking hers even as his pants tightened around him with the hardening bulge at his groin.

She withdrew her fingers, one hand deftly unbuckling his belt buckle as the other brushed against him through the fabric of his pants. He drew in a sharp breath at the touch.

"Still a wee bit overdressed," she murmured.

He dropped soft kisses on her cheek, her temple, the side of her neck. His hands slid down her sides and cupped her breasts through the silky fabric. She hadn't bothered with a bra, something he noticed immediately when her nipples rose against his thumbs.

Need surged through him, white hot. "I think that's a problem we share..." he whispered as he lifted the sides of the top.

She wriggled slightly, helping as he drew it up and away. Her loose dark hair fluttered back into a silky cloud around her shoulders, highlighting delicate collarbones and the pale perfection of her skin. Eyes the color of dark chocolate lifted to his, widening as they read the expression there. Davin sucked in a sharp breath as he watched her eyes darken in response, an answering need there which hit him down low, adding to the fire burning in his veins.

This time though she didn't look away, lifting her chin to look at him.

Davin's gaze swept over her body, flickering in the candlelight. Thin black panties reached into the delicate curves of her thighs, curves he wanted to touch and feel. When his eyes found hers again it was a look of reverence, communicating far more than any words he could've come up with. He wanted her to see the desire in his eyes. He needed her to see it, needed her to know how much she affected him. At that moment she was the only woman in the universe, an unrivaled beauty. Soft hands stroked at her again, pulling her close so he could feel her bare chest against his, feel the tingle their bodies made together.

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That look touched something deep inside Radha's heart. She wasn't used to this, not the tenderness, the gentle touches ... the way he looked at her, as though she were worth something. It was new and, for a woman like Radha, it was addictive. She arched against him, the sensation of skin against skin derailing her thoughts. This time when their lips met, hers were demanding. She needed more. Far, far more. More of his lips on hers, more of his hands on her, more of him. Pulling him toward the bed, she interspersed each step with a kiss until she clambered backwards onto it and knelt up to kiss him.

Heat ignited every cell in her body. She wanted him, and had from the moment she'd seen him. A need which had built up, intensified by each interruption or denial until it was unstoppable. She wanted him in the most basic of ways a woman wanted a man. Over her, within her. A low moan escaped her throat at the thought, her hands pushing impatiently at the fabric of his pants.

He pulled them down at her silent command and leaned onto the bed. The standard-issue briefs did nothing to conceal his arousal. A small groan of need escaped his chest as he lowered his body onto hers, his hands coursing over every inch and his tongue separating her lips. He lifted her arms over her head, then slid his hands down her back to pull the panties off as his mouth took in a nipple.

Radha gasped as his lips closed around her, a hot, wet pull connecting the sensitive flesh directly to the ache between her thighs. Parting her thighs she cradled his hips with hers and stroked along the back of his calf with her foot. The inside of her thigh brushed against his, the difference between his hair-roughened skin and hers adding to the sensory overload she was already in. She bit her lip as she gripped the pillows over her head, her hands where he'd left them.

Then his underwear was gone and, after a brief pause and the rustle of foil, he turned and lowered himself over her slowly. He lifted his hips and ran his manhood against her moist opening, leaning down to nibble her ear. The sensation left Radha gasping; the teasing they'd inflicted on each other had her on the edge already. And he wasn't even in her yet. Parting her lips with a gentle kiss, he slid into her with one long, slow push.

She shuddered, her soft moan swallowed by his kiss. He stroked the inside of her wrists gently, but Radha barely noticed. She couldn't. Nothing mattered except the

sensations of him in, and over her. Her body stretched to accommodate him, eased by her arousal, until he was seated to the hilt. He stopped, weight on his elbows, as he waited for her to adjust to his size. His lips brushed hers, and then trailed down her jaw to murmur soft nothings against the tender skin of her neck. The small consideration hit her deep down.

She sighed as the feeling of fullness became an insistent need to move. Her hips rocked, the tiniest movement that brought gasps from them both. She grinned as their eyes met, and did it again—deliberately.

He rocked against her, the sensation making him groan. His eyes bored into hers, a sly smile at the corner of his mouth as he met her next move, starting a slow rhythmic movement.

She arched against him again. Her hands moved, found purchase across his back, nails raking lightly as she locked her ankles around his waist. Her gasps became soft moans, then pleas ... his name amongst them as her movements became more demanding. Encouraging him to move faster, harder. The time for gentleness was well past.

Long strokes became fast, powerful thrusts. He slid a hand beneath her thigh, lifting her leg to drive deeper into her. The pace quickened, their urgency bringing her to the edge.

Radha wrapped herself around him, giving over control as his powerful movements took them closer to a joint release. Her eyelids fluttered closed as she twined her arms around his neck, lips whispering against the side. Pleasure built in her center and her body tightened around his. She'd never felt this way, not with anyone. She bit her lip, trying to hold on to the moans that wanted to escape, but it was too much. A moment later she stiffened, burying her face in the side of his neck as she shattered into a million shimmering pieces, bright sparks of pleasure as radiant as the stars they both lived to fly among.

Davin groaned, grabbing handfuls of the pillows below her as his body stiffened and he slammed into her a last time. Deep within her his body jerked and pulsed as his climax roared through him.

Radha clung to him, riding through the waves of pleasure each thrust brought until he slowed and stopped. Resting on his elbows, he kissed along her neck as he tried to get his breathing back to normal. Gently she stroked his nape, his shoulders, anywhere she could reach. She needed the contact. For the first time ever, she'd opened herself fully to someone. Not just sexually but emotionally, and now she felt exposed as all hell.

Still panting, Davin rolled to his side and took her with him, wrapping his arms around her as he pulled her against him. He planted soft kisses on the edge of her hairline. One hand slid in under her hair, holding her to him as he slowed his breathing.

She liked the possessive touch, settling against him. Part of her was waiting for him to realize what he'd done and leave. Her lip bent between her teeth as worry settled into her chest, trying to fight down the tension in her slender body. He wouldn't, would he? Not after they'd had sex. She frowned and corrected herself. That hadn't been just sex, it hadn't even been just great sex. For her it had been something much more. But what had it been for him?

Chapter Seven

Radha woke slowly. She was warm and comfortable and, with a sigh of contentment, she snuggled against the broad, male chest she was lying on. Then recollection hit her at light speed and her eyes snapped open.

Ohmygod! Davin. She and Davin...

A flush of heat washed through her at the mere memory and a smile curved her lips. Inexperienced she wasn't, but last night had been near perfect, so perfect a more romantic soul than Radha might say they were meant to be together.

Who'd have thought the ex-con and Mr. Squeaky Clean would end up together? Of course, she knew it couldn't last but, for now, she'd hold on to it with both hands. Murmuring slightly she dropped a kiss on his chest, closing her eyes again to doze. She wanted to savor the moment and the deep sense of contentment... She wanted to remember the happiness stealing over her.

Davin stirred and lifted his head long enough to let her settle. His broad chest rose then fell as a deep breath whispered over her hair, neck, and shoulders.

Radha cuddled closer when she realized he was awake. Smiling, she slid one small foot the length of his leg, hooking it inside his calf and higher to tease. The tension between them had broken last night after the second, or was it the third time? She couldn't remember, a large yawn ambushing her. He'd been right about not letting her sleep.

He giggled softly as his leg twitched under her playful foot. "Mmm... Morning beautiful. Sleep well?"

She lifted her head and flicked her hair back over her shoulders to look at him. "I think you know the answer to that one."

How the hell did he manage to look so good in the morning? He looked as though he could just roll out of bed, or off this makeshift nest, and straight into uniform. She would need at least three cups of coffee and a hairbrush to even attempt looking presentable.

He lifted slightly in the midsection, grunted and lowered again. "I think I might need a cane to get around today." One hand snaked up her arm, fingers curling near her shoulder and sliding back down. "Last night was just..."

Radha propped herself up on one elbow and rested her chin in her palm. "Was just..." she asked, one eyebrow arched teasingly.

Last night had been incredible, the best sex she'd ever had. *Perhaps more...* Radha clamped down on that thought, a little slice of hope that tried to grow and blossom, instantly. This wasn't a permanent thing, she knew that. They were at war and any enemy attack could mean one or both of them didn't make it back.

He looked at her, his eyes narrowing as if he might say something serious. "Outstanding," he said, curling his eyebrows slightly, then grinned and dropped his head back onto the pillow.

She chuckled. Buried under his "by the book" manner she'd discovered a surprising sense of fun and adventure. Right now he looked a lot younger, how she imagined he would have looked before the war.

Then her mood dropped to serious. "So, are you ever going to tell me why you were

beating yourself up in there?" she asked, nodding her head toward the door.

He sighed, running a hand to the bridge of his nose. "Only if you tell me why you disappeared for a week."

Radha swallowed, her eyelids sweeping down so he couldn't see the expression under them. Should she tell him? It would mean opening herself up wider than she already was. Making 1 ... sex was one thing. Baring your soul was quite another.

"I..."

Davin lifted to his elbows, trying to find her eyes. When she paused, he spoke. "I had some decisions to make. And I guess I wasn't ready to make them."

"Decisions?"

"Decisions."

She pulled away a little, stung by the hard look returning to his eyes.

"I was scared," she said softly, her voice little more than a whisper. Then she laughed, pushing herself up and rolling off the "bed" to sit on the edge with the sheet wrapped around her. "Pathetic isn't it?"

He sat up, leaning on one arm and running two fingers down the length of her back. His voice was softer now. "No. Not at all. I was a little scared too."

She shrugged, a gesture she used under stress. Trouble with Radha was that the normal things, like facing down a fully armed Satagosian war group, didn't faze her. Yet a simple, gentle touch could completely derail her.

"I'm used to—" She stopped, frowned and started again. "I'm not used to people like you." She rubbed her upper arms. "People just see the ex-con, the woman with the hard reputation. To them I'm a bit of fun, easy to lead on and just as easy to forget. You can see it in their eyes. I just didn't want to see it in yours. I got scared. I ran," she said, her voice clipped. It was the only way she'd get the words out.

"You don't have to run Radha, and if you do I'll chase you." His fingers drifted across her back again, his voice leveling into a more serious tone. "This isn't something I do often either, especially not with someone in my wing."

He dropped his fingers to the tender area at the base of her spine, grazing it as softly as he spoke. "But sometimes it's just meant to be."

A shiver ran through her at the gentle touch. She arched her back, looking over her shoulder as she did. When he touched her like that, all her thought processes went into meltdown. It was a good thing the Valkyrie fighters were single seaters. If she had to fly with him in close proximity they'd need to put bull bars in her bird.

"Chase me huh? That a threat or a promise?"

* * * *

That night, Lanna called Davin to her quarters after duty for a talk. He'd not seen her since he and Radha had slept together... So he'd had his suspicions about what it would entail, and he was right. It went better than he'd thought it would. She said they hardly spoke, he'd been distant and she didn't think it was working. They were going in different directions, with different goals. He nodded and hugged her, agreeing for the most part. He wasn't sure what was going on with Radha, but he knew that it felt right and that things with Lanna just weren't the same. They were better off, and they both knew it.

Walking out into the corridor, he turned and gave her a half smile. "I hope we can still be friends."

"Of course Davin. Always friends." She smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck one last time. She pulled away and gave him a quick kiss, returning the smile. "Call me sometime."

*

The lift was out. Radha sighed as it pulled to a halt. The familiar maintenance message droned on, telling her she needed to get off at this level and head over to another, working, lift.

"Bloody archaic piece of shit," she muttered under her breath as the door slid open. She was just off a tough patrol and the only thing she wanted to do was to grab a shower and get a solid half hour on her bunk.

She huffed out a breath as she pushed through the sliding doors. She had a colossal-sized headache. Boomer, her wingman, had guessed something was going on with her and Davin and had grilled her over the comm for the entire patrol. Damn that man and his perception. She'd wanted to keep the fledgling relationship a secret but it looked like the news was already making the scuttlebutt rounds.

"Just what I needed." A scowl on her face, she headed down the corridor in the direction the service message indicated. She made sure to keep to one side of the corridor and ignored the curious glances she got. That this was ops country was unmistakable. From the neat uniforms down to the huge "OPS LEVEL THREE" sign at the end of the hall. Perhaps ops officers got lost frequently, she mused as she turned the corner.

When she did, she stopped stock still. Right in front of her, in the middle of the corridor, was Davin.

Kissing another woman.

Her heart froze in her chest, not wanting to believe what her eyes were seeing. But Davin was unmistakable. There wasn't anyone on the ship who looked even half like him, especially not with CAG in big letters on their duty jacket.

*

Davin gave Lanna a wink, thinking all the while there was no way he was calling her until the Radha situation was figured out. She turned and walked back to her room, shutting the door behind her softly. He let out a slow breath, more relief than grief, and turned toward the lift.

He froze before he could take a step, the blood draining from his face. Radha stood in the middle of the corridor, motionless in the foot traffic of other crew going about their duties. The look on her face was so shocked and hurt that it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He searched for something to say. "It's not what it looks like" was on the tip of his tongue, but that never worked did it?

He could see her chest heaving as though fighting tears, could see her taking slow steps backward. Her eyes never left his, burning holes right through him. A cold feeling stretched across his chest as he raised a hand toward her.

"Radha, wait. You don't understand—"

"I don't want to hear it pretty boy. You're just like all the rest," she snapped, the shields that he'd managed to bring down the night before slamming right back up as he watched. "Just stay away from me, okay?"

"Radha, don't do this. Just let me explain."

"What's there to explain? I believed you, you lied to me—" She broke off, a bitter laugh escaping her. "Actually you didn't, you said 'decisions'. You didn't say what they

were."

"It's not like that!" His face hardened now, her words cutting him as she no doubt intended them to. Anger welled up in him and he raised his voice.

"I said decisions because I needed to come here to end it." Lanna had beaten him to it, but he would've broken it off anyway. He had to break it off, this thing with Radha was too much, too intense for him to try and maintain any sort of relationship with anyone else.

Radha shot him a sharp look. "That did not look like ending anything. You must think I'm stupid. Do me a favor and stay away from me. I've got enough problems of my own without you screwing around with me."

"I know what it looked like; I'm telling you it's over. But I guess you're just going to curl back up in your shell and run though, since that's the answer to everything." He didn't want to hurt her anymore, but she'd pissed him off. He'd tried for days to lower the wall she lived behind and it had gone back up in seconds.

"Well it's worked pretty well up to now, hasn't it?" She glared up at him, not backing down as he stalked toward her. His anger fueled hers; hers set his off even worse. The atmosphere in the corridor was thick enough to cut with a knife, the place cleared in seconds. No one wanted to get between two pissed-off pilots.

He laughed, an uncharacteristic sound compared to the bite he put in his words. "You know Radha, not everyone is like the asshole that screwed you over before. Some of us actually care. But I guess you wouldn't really know what that was like would you?"

Her face set, concealing the emotions within. "No," she said quietly. "I guess I wouldn't."

He shook his head, his body tense with frustration. "That's fine. Perfectly fine. Run on down to the gym then, maybe I'll see you there. I'm through trying Radha. I'm sick of it."

A young ensign with a tall stack of reports was trying to make his way by them, skirting the edge of the corridor. When Davin finished and spun around, he hit the boy and reports flew into the air in a flurry. Davin grabbed the boy by the shirt instantly, slamming him into the wall with gritted teeth.

Seconds later, when he realized what he was doing and saw the look of utter terror in the boy's eyes, he let go with a sigh.

"Sorry. I'm sorry." He bent and picked up a handful of the papers in a wad, slamming them into the boy's chest before stalking down the hall without looking back to the spot where she still stood.

Chapter Eight

"Come on mate, almost there. Just keep it in a little longer then you can throw up all you want in a nice clean bucket." Radha took slow steady steps as she helped her wingman down the corridor toward the med-bay.

Boomer kept up the show, hunched with his hand on his stomach and his eyes weak. He was just as sick as the others of putting up with Angel and Knight walking around glaring at each other. He knew that the matter ran deeper than discipline problems, much deeper. He'd seen them when no one was watching, and he knew that look in someone's eyes when he saw it. They were crazy about each other and everyone knew it but them.

This was his only chance to get them together. The captain had ordered a recon deep in Satagosian territory, using a stealth Falcon that had been in the works for a while. The two-man bird was heavily modified, and the CAG needed two of his best pilots to fly it. Being that he didn't want to fly with Radha anymore (no matter the excuse) he'd stuck Boomer with her. Now it was time to go, and Boomer had conveniently contracted some "food poisoning" at mess. The mission couldn't be scrubbed, and he knew that the only other pilot Knight could trust to fly the stealth bird without training was himself.

"Ugh, just leave me here Angel. My damn stomach is climbing up my throat." He staggered toward the deck again.

"Not happening Boom. We need to get you dosed up and in that Falcon or Captain Fancypants'll have a stroke," she said, hauling him down the corridor.

Boomer grunted, holding his breath in as much as possible to flush his face. He pulled toward the deck again, gagging on spit. "The-they'll never clear me Angel. Knight is gonna have to find somebody else."

"Crap, this is not happening," she muttered, more to herself than him and Boomer knew she'd made the same connections he had. Knight was the only other pilot who could make the mission. She went pale, something that looked an awful lot like panic crossing her face. "Please Boom, try? For me?" she all but begged.

He hit the deck, coughing up spit. "I can't do it. It's coming out one end or the other." He paused for a dry heave, standing warily to walk toward sickbay. "Get Knight on the horn and let 'im know. Maybe he'll scrub it."

She sighed, "Come on then, let's get you in there and I'll go speak to him," she said as she slid under his arm to support him. Guilt twisted in Boomer's gut but he ignored it, this really was the only way. There was no chance Knight would scratch the mission and three days alone together meant the two had to talk.

*

Speaking to him was easier said than done. He was nowhere to be found, but Radha knew he would find her if she waited long enough. A bird on deck to leave with no pilots would be brought to the CAG's attention quickly. She decided to wait for him in the locker room, taking longer than normal to get dressed.

A few minutes after she got there, the door to the pilots' locker room nearly flew off its hinges. Radha ignored it and quietly finished getting her flight gear ready. The rest of the pilots scattered like roaches to a lamp, telling her who had stormed through the door. As if she couldn't tell with the angry silence that filled the room.

"Kaden? What the hell is going on? You and Boomer were due up in the stealth Falcon nearly a half hour ago!"

Radha didn't look at him. She never did these days if she could help it, always focusing on a point over his left shoulder if she absolutely had to look in his direction. She finished zipping her jacket and turned slowly. Her gaze went to the wall over his shoulder. "Boomer's puking up his guts in sickbay. I took him down there myself."

Davin said nothing, just slid his hands to his hips and hung his head. After a minute or two he let out a slow breath. "There's no way the captain is going to scrub this. The bird is already fueled and loaded. The hands are pulling her to the flight deck as we speak." He paused, then walked to his locker and opened it quickly, rifling around inside. "Guess it's you and me Lieutenant." He pulled the khaki duty uniform top off, dog-tags bouncing on his chest, as he reached for the T-shirt he liked to wear under his flight suit.

Radha froze, unable to drag her eyes away. Then she realized what she was doing and flushed deeply as she turned away. "Perhaps not, I think I have the same as Boomer. Must be food poisoning from the mess," she fabricated, pressing a hand to her stomach.

This trip was a three day cruise and they'd be literally living in each other's pockets, a crapshoot whichever way you looked at it. With Boomer it was just about bearable, she liked the veteran pilot, but with Davin? No way, no how...

Davin scoffed as he pulled the shirt down, changing out the pants for the bottom half of his suit. "I had my square same as you. It would've hit before you came in here if it was poisoning."

Crap. Turned away from him, Radha grumbled under her breath. She couldn't spend three days out there with him, she just couldn't. "Could hit me later, you'd best get another pilot."

He zipped up the suit and pulled his helmet out. The locker closed with a clang and he turned the latch. Radha felt his hard glare on her but didn't turn. "You're fine. There's no one else on this wing that can fly this mission with me and I can't do it by myself. We've got a job to do. We don't have to like it, we just have to do it."

She stiffened, hearing the scorn in his voice. She didn't like it but not for the reasons he might think. Since their argument in the corridor a few weeks ago things had gone from bad to worse. They didn't talk. He gave orders, she obeyed them. They ignored each other in the barracks and Radha ignored the gym like the plague. It was just too painful to go in there. Her gaze would always steal to the door of the storage closet they'd hidden away in that night.

She shook herself. She could do this, she had to do this. Otherwise he would realize things he didn't need to realize. Grabbing her helmet off the shelf she turned to face him, a scowl on her face. "Well are we going or are you too in love with the sound of your own voice?"

Davin narrowed on her, his face contorted in an odd stare as he made the final adjustments to his suit. "Lead the way Lieutenant." His hand waved toward the door.

"Aye aye, sir," she murmured, sweeping past him with her head held high.

* * * *

A small satellite flashed silently off the port side of the Falcon as Davin flicked open the comm. "Sentinel control, this is White Knight. Falcon One has passed the final checkpoint, all systems go."

"Roger that White Knight. Godspeed."

Davin made several adjustments to the controls before him, forcing himself not to glance toward the co-pilot seat. The trip to the armistice line and over would take some time, and they would have to speak eventually, but he wasn't breaking the ice until he had to.

On the other side of the cockpit his co-pilot carried out her job in complete silence. They'd both trained on the experimental craft but never together, so occasionally she'd reach for the same control bank he did, then pull away as though she'd been burnt.

He banked the Falcon so the dark plating blended in with the black sheet behind the stars. He knew from experience that not only was it undetectable on scans, it was damn hard to eyeball. He rolled his shoulders as he tried to get more comfortable. They'd stayed in full flight suits as a precaution despite the pressurization provided by the ship, staring out their respective windows. Eventually the entire planet system, the asteroid belt surrounding it, and the bright light of their closest star faded into the darkness behind them. Davin sighed. In open space, they were truly alone.

The silence lasted hours; just the hum of the engines through the deck plating and the soft noises of the instruments could be heard. It wasn't a comfortable silence. Davin slid a glance to his side as Radha switched her systems over to computer control and rose from her seat to head into the back.

Davin turned after she passed, his gaze following her until the side of his helmet blocked him. He wanted to talk to her, just talk, like they had before everything got complicated. Talk like they had in their fighters so many times. It was different now though, much different. He checked his controls once more, set the autopilot and stood with the assistance of the gravity deck. What a good little gem that was; he could only imagine having to float around and try to avoid her.

She was rifling through some of the storage compartments, but Davin made like he wasn't watching. He unlocked his helmet and set it on the top of an instrumentation panel, reached into a small compartment overhead and pulled out a protein bar. He'd skipped breakfast in favor of beating the crowd to the gym, unaware he'd be leaving for three days. Tearing the wrapper off the bar, he walked back to his seat and sat back down, wanting to look back but not doing so.

She searched for what seemed like an eternity as Davin sat there, staring out into the stars.

Great, they were going to play this game now? He sighed to himself as she finally stopped shuffling and opened the food compartment to his right. She started pouring hot water into the freeze-dried glop in the ration packs, but he made like he didn't notice. They had gotten pretty good at ignoring each other, and this time he wasn't going to be the one that spoke first.

She walked back to the front of the cockpit and dumped one packet on the console in front of him. "You need to eat."

He shot a glance at the packet. The first reaction was to roll his eyes and ignore her, or snap back with some snide comment, but he was starving and they were adults. The game had gone on long enough. He picked up the packet with the tiniest hint of a smile and took a whiff of the steam, flinging his head back instantly when it hit him.

"Damn."

Her lips quirked as she flopped into the seat opposite. "Breathe through your mouth,

doesn't hit you that way. It is, supposedly, edible."

Davin pulled out one of the sporks and shoveled in the greasy noodles without thinking too much about it. The taste was nowhere near desirable, but sustenance was a must. He slid his gaze to her. She was eating, but much slower. She had one leg propped on the panel, and his gaze slid down to the inside of her thigh before cutting away. No matter how hard he tried, she still got to him when he least expected it.

He turned back toward her, dark strands of hair hiding her eyes from him as she chewed. He was almost thankful for that.

"Thank you," he managed, though if the craft hadn't been so quiet she might not have heard him.

She shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Can't fly this thing on my own."

Her words were brief and her manner flat. There was nothing behind them, a total absence of emotion. It was like talking to a stranger. He shook his head, wondering how she did that. Was it something she'd learned inside?

Looking away, he let a frustrated sigh seep through gritted teeth as he balled up the packet. Of course this wasn't the first time he'd gotten the cold shoulder, it was just the coldest shoulder he'd ever gotten. Not to mention this one hurt much worse because it actually meant something to him.

"So I guess this is how it's going to be huh?"

She didn't say anything, didn't even look. He didn't wait long, holding up the hand with the packet balled under his thumb. "That's okay, you don't have to answer that."

He got up and stalked to the back to fiddle with the disposal system.

She stood and sidled past him as he returned to his seat, heading into the back to dump the half-empty packet into the recycler.

Davin eyed her as she went, noticing that the packet was nowhere near empty. She wasn't eating, she wasn't talking, and he knew she was never in her bunk when he was in his. That sounded an awful lot like a broken heart. Sighing, he stood to follow her. He didn't know what he was going to say or how he was going to say it, but it really couldn't keep going like this. Something had to give.

He got about halfway to her when the proximity alarm went off, blaring like a siren in the otherwise silent craft. The proximity alarm was the second line of defense against projectiles, the first one being the scanners that constantly checked for asteroids and other debris. And the proximity alarm only went off if the projectile was nearing impact with the ship.

Her head snapped around, eyes as wide as his. Davin grabbed his helmet from the side console and they were back in their seats in seconds, moving solely on impulse and adrenaline. The alarm was still blaring, a bright red indicator flashing in the center of the console. They slapped at it simultaneously, hands flying around the consoles to unlock the controls. His gaze danced out the windows, saw nothing but a small planet from whatever system they were in.

"Do you see it? What the hell is it picking up?" His voice was frantic, the controls now in his hands and the craft banking.

Radha didn't have time to answer. An awful scraping sound filled the cockpit, a sick metal on metal grinding, then the entire craft pulled to the left before snapping back to the right. The stars outside streaked by as the Falcon entered a vicious spin, forcing the pilots away from the controls. Davin somehow managed to get his helmet on his head,

locking it in place.

Radha's was sliding across the instrument panel. He reached for it, his hands not following orders as they waved in every direction but the one he wanted.

"Get it on! Get your helmet on now Lieutenant!"

She made a grab for it but he could already see she wasn't going to make it. The helmet skittered across the console and slammed onto the deck plating before hurling off toward the back of the cockpit. She didn't go after it, choosing instead to use the few seconds she had before the craft started to tumble faster to buckle herself in.

Davin pulled on the controls with everything he had, trying to straighten them. The craft fought harder, the spin quickening and threatening to knock them both out. The warning light panel lit up instantly, row upon row of cautions flashing and making one big colorful blur. His head lightened, rolling on his shoulders as the noodles rose to the back of his throat.

Something had to be causing the spin, helping them quicken their pace. He focused on his knees, trying to block out the spin. Thousands of training missions and simulations played out in seconds as he searched for a clue. Something, anything.

Then it hit him. A thruster was stuck. One of the aft thrusters was firing away, pushing them faster and faster. Probably damaged from whatever they'd hit.

He slapped one hand on the panel at his left, grasping it as he worked his way up to the fuel-line controls. He couldn't possibly cut the right one in this state, wasn't even sure he could push the buttons at all. His fingers lifted the protective covers, pulling the switches that he hoped would kill all of the fuel lines at once. It was irreversible, and probably the only option they had.

The spinning slowed noticeably, maintaining its pace rather than speeding up. His vision darkened on the edges—unconsciousness threatening to throw a veil over him any minute. He had to save them, but more importantly, he had to save her.

He grabbed the controls, tried desperately to slow down the spin. It worked, gradually they entered a manageable tumble. Radha started reading the alarms to him as fast as she could, her hands working the controls to conserve electrical power and correct as many of the problems as she could.

Then they both fell silent when a new problem presented itself. The planet swung into view, a much larger view than they'd had before. It was pulling them in, and they didn't have any fuel to stop it.

He turned to her, trying to hide the fear in his eyes. "Go get your helmet. I'm going to try and land this thing."

She nodded, not even bothering to argue. She unclipped herself and disappeared into the back of the compartment. Seconds later she was back with the wayward helmet, jamming it on and fastening it in one motion. Shrugging back into her harness she looked over her controls.

"Gonna need to slow the inertia somehow, and find a soft spot to land in," she said quietly, her voice controlled. Too controlled. "We'll need to slow way down or we'll burn up on entry."

"Just got to get the angle right." His reply sounded cool, confident. Inside, he knew there was no way they would make it in. Regardless of the angle, they were definitely hit by something, and if it left a big enough hole it would take only the thinnest of atmospheres to tear the ship apart. He knew it, and he was pretty sure she knew it.

"Leave the angle to me, you just try to hold this thing together."

She snorted, "Less of the lip-flappin' pretty boy. If you can fly it, I can hold it together, just land us already, okay?"

He didn't have time to argue, the descent was out of his control for the most part. The windows were already showing vapor trails, beautiful blues, greens and purples that would soon turn to bright orange. If they made it that long.

Davin's eyes went to the gauges he needed, working the controls to manage the fall as best he could. A new set of alarms began to blare, the few lights on the panel that weren't lit before springing to life. Before he could say anything, or even roll his eyes, the whole board went dark. Radha had cut the power. He turned to her, and she gave him a smile. A kind of smile he had never seen before.

"Thank you" was all he could say, his gaze flicking back to the gauges in front of him. The colors circling the craft brightened and turned to orange flame, licking the windows in long streaks. Suddenly, they hit a wall of air and the entire craft heaved, vibrations from the hit staying with them and intensifying the further they fell. Panels rattled behind them, objects falling from the storage cabinets and sliding across the deck. The craft creaked and moaned. Davin's hands went numb from the vibrations of the controls.

The flames on the windows brightened, and the vibration now shook the entire craft with a force that pushed them back in their seats. The walls of the back compartment caved slightly, the metal moaning as it bent. Radha must have heard it too, because they both looked back at the same time to confirm it.

His vision was now so impaired he couldn't read the gauges, and he simply pulled at what he estimated was the same force he had been pulling with before. The craft moaned again, a sickening crinkling sound following it. He imagined a giant fist squeezing the craft like an aluminum can. Davin gritted his teeth, preparing for the inevitable. Looking toward Radha, who was gripping the sides of the panel with all she had, he felt he had to say what had been weighing on him. It could be his last chance to say it, and he wanted her to know.

"Radha ... I need to tell you something..." He was speaking loudly, despite the help of the helmet comm. It was hard to even hear himself think. He closed his eyes, then... "I want you to know that I lo—"

It stopped. The flames disappeared, the vibration disappeared, and there was only a thick cloud cover. They both looked out wide-eyed at the serene view, astounded they'd made it to the other side.

Then the clouds dissipated and all they could see was white. Snow, or ice, stretched out as far as the horizon ran. The craft was hurtling toward the surface at lightning speed, Davin suddenly pulling up on the controls with all he had when he realized it.

The nose tilted slightly, ever so slightly. He closed his eyes as the tail end struck the snow and broke off, all the air sucking out of the back of the craft and shattering the front windows. The nose went down, a wall of snow moved in, and everything went black.

Chapter Nine

Pain. It exploded through Radha's body with the speed of thought as consciousness returned.

"Fucking hell!" The curse left her lips before she was aware of being fully awake. She tried to roll to her side then gasped as crushing pain clamped over her ribs. The pain was familiar though and something nudged at the back of her mind.

Radha opened her eyes and the world swam around her. She blinked and tried to focus. The cockpit console shimmered in front of her. Oh right, the Falcon. By feel she unclipped her harness and rolled to the side. She lay, gasping with shallow breaths, until the pain from the fall subsided.

The cockpit, or what was left of it, was covered in snow. Bitter cold bit through her flight suit, forcing her to cross her arms to try and conserve some body heat.

Then she remembered the Falcon was a two-man ship.

Sparks flew from the console and, slumped in his seat in front of it, was Davin. He was motionless and still strapped in, snow settling on the visor of his helmet and blocking his face. His arms hung limply on each side of the chair and his right knee was pinned by part of the destroyed console.

"Shit! Davin... Davin!"

Panic filled her. She scrambled over the small space between them.

"You'd better not be dead you awkward bastard," she told him, her hands fluttering for a moment before her first-aid training kicked in. Her dark eyes checked for blood until she realized that if he had snow on his helmet then she'd been out for a while. Which also meant he could already have bled out.

"No, no, no..." she moaned, kneeling down in front of him. He couldn't be dead, even the fates weren't that cruel. Desperately she wiped the snow from his helmet. She was in love with him. Totally, stupidly, head over heels in love with him.

"Oh God. Please don't be dead."

She yanked his faceplate up and the light hit his face. Radha held her breath as he lay there without moving. She shook him gently, calling his name each time. Finally, he winced and his head rolled to the right. He groaned, one of his arms came up slowly and pushed on the console. Then his eyes opened and found hers.

Relief hit her like a fighter at top speed. He was alive, nothing else mattered. But before she could throw herself at him in thanks her training spoke for her. "Davin, it's Radha. You're fine but you need to sit still for me, okay?"

He coughed, his breathing a wheezing sound that was amplified by the helmet comm. "I don't think I could move if I wanted to."

"Yeah well, don't even want to," she ordered. Shivers hit her as she checked him over. He was talking so he was breathing. He didn't look to be bleeding and she couldn't feel any open fractures through the flight suit. All she picked up was a slight wince when she touched his side. Then her hands reached his legs and stopped. His knee was pinned by the edge of the console.

"Okay, your leg is trapped. Can you feel this?" She squeezed his calf firmly through the heavy fabric.

"Feel what?" His head lifted just slightly as if trying to eye the console. His arms started moving to lift himself off the seat but he cried out and pulled one arm in to apply pressure.

"What did I say about not moving?" she snapped. "They had to stick me with a blond didn't they? Sit your ass down and stay still while I work out how to get you out, would you?"

Turning, she started to scout about the ruined cockpit for something to either lever up the console or prop it up out of the way. Trouble was, she didn't know if it would make things worse. What if the console pinning him was stemming heavy bleeding? Moving it could kill him. Her eye fell on a length of metal which had broken away from the back of her seat. It would have to do. She grabbed it.

"Put it there!" Davin still had enough sense about him to analyze the situation and pointed at an area just to the left of the crack in the console. "When you lift you can slide it under my seat to hold that up."

She moved to the spot, working the pole in until she had a good feel for it. Then she pulled as best she could, her hands already numb from the cold.

The console lifted an inch.

"You got to do better than that sweetheart."

"I can bloody see that!" she snapped in frustration, closing her eyes for a moment as she centered herself. She was a lean, toned woman but her muscle hadn't been built in a gym. It had been built by hard work in the mines of Acheron. Built by repetitive movement, not unlike the move she needed to lever the console, just in a slightly different direction.

She breathed in. The bite of the cold in her lungs reminded her they needed to get out of here soon. Opening her eyes she shifted her hands on the makeshift lever and pushed in one smooth movement. Somehow, it moved. The metal creaked as it lifted away from his knee and Davin cursed.

"Move, move now," Radha ordered, her body shaking with the effort of holding the lever down. She didn't have the dexterity to wedge the thing under his seat, not without feeling in her hands. All she could do was hold it as he pulled himself clear.

Davin muttered curses as he tilted his body once to the left, then twice, and heaved himself off the seat in one movement. As he hit the deck he cried out, an agonized sound that was muffled by the fall of the console as Radha released the pole and fell onto the snow a few feet away. They both lay there, panting for breath, as the cold seeped into them.

"Pretty boy, you better not have died on me after that," she warned, trying to get her breath back. She needed to hear his voice. Needed to know he was okay.

"I'm still here," he managed, but his breath sounded ragged and wheezy. Dragging himself forward on one arm, he moved toward the open end of the cockpit where the rear of the ship had been. "We've got to move though. We won't make it long out here."

Groaning, Radha hauled herself to her feet. Of the two of them she was in better shape. Not only was she uninjured but Davin had spent his life as a pampered pilot. Radha hadn't.

"Get in the lee of the wall," she ordered as she started to root through what was left of the compartments for survival kits. Hopefully there were some still intact. She wouldn't put it past the techs to have dumped them in the interests of saving space. She

hoped not, or they were sunk.

"There, beneath the panel."

Davin pointed to the lowest equipment bay, almost hidden in the shadow. "The beacon should be in there too." He leaned back against the wall, working on the latch to his helmet. It came off finally and rolled across the deck.

"Ahhh, thank you." She spotted the packs and retrieved them. Within a minute they were both wrapped up in foul-weather jackets. Stuffing the beacon into the second pack she looked him over. Grimly she stopped and started to rearrange the packs, taking everything out of one and repacking it in the other.

"What are you doing? I'm fine. Put it back, I can carry it." He leaned forward, wincing, and shot her a dangerous look. "I can carry it."

"Not a chance in hell sunshine."

Radha stood up and shrugged the pack onto her back. "There's a storm moving in and we need to move fast. You've got at least two busted ribs and a bum knee..." She nodded toward the blood-stained rip in his flight suit. "Tell me how you're going to imitate anything approaching fast like that, with or without a pack?"

He sucked in a breath, coming up on his right knee with a loud grunt, then standing slowly with his weight on his left. He pulled the coat around, his face contorting despite the clenched teeth. "I'll manage."

Radha glared back. There was no way she was going to let him half kill himself trying to prove something he didn't need to. Not to her. She couldn't tell him that though so she went for attitude instead. "Try it and I'll knock you on your ass. Now put your ego away and let's move."

He scoffed, reaching down for the length of metal and placing it in the snow beside his right leg. He placed his weight there for a moment and moved the leg immediately, leaning on the metal rod. He was trying to hide the rod he was using as a cane, as if she couldn't tell he was hurt. Men and their pride...

"We need to find something we can use for shelter. This wind is going to get bad." He lifted his shoulders as he spoke, covering his ears with the high collar of the coat.

Radha joined him and looked out over the wintry terrain. This was such a bad idea it was unreal, but they couldn't stay in the crashed Falcon.

Somehow they'd managed to find the only high ground for miles to crash into so the wind was buffeting them like a boxer intent on winning the final round, whipping around the Falcon and driving icy snow into every nook and cranny.

She squinted looking out over the landscape. "Over there look, where the terrain dips ... looks like a copse. We should be able to rig a shelter in that. Can you make it that far?"

Davin ignored the question, lurching forward on the pole and his left leg. His face grim, his gaze was on the frosted foliage below them. She could see his jaw muscles moving as she plodded out on the snow behind him, his teeth grinding like he was chewing gum.

Bloody men and their egos. Radha grumbled under her breath as she walked behind him, using her body and the pack she carried to shield him from the worst of the wind. She'd never been an incapable bimbo, so why had he suddenly developed an attitude over her carrying the pack? They had to be sensible about things and with him injured it made sense for her to carry it. She shook her head as she kept an eye on his movements, ready

to intervene if he stumbled. She'd never understand men as long as she lived.

The trek was slow and hazardous, especially for Davin. Each time Radha offered a hand to steady him he jerked his elbow away, moving forward on big steps that nearly planted him face first in the snow. Somehow they managed to get to the bottom of the embankment, and plodded up to a leafy area of short bushes that were collecting snow.

"If we can clear that area at the back and cover it..." He took a breath, turning to her. His eyelashes were white, his lips chapped and pale. "It should help with the wind and hold heat from a fire."

Radha nodded, watching him carefully as she shrugged the pack off and dumped it in the most sheltered area she could find.

"Okay, see if you can make heads or tails of that beacon?" she suggested, turning to look at the task ahead and suppressing a shiver. The quicker they got under cover the better. "I'm shit at electronics so you'll have better luck than I will."

Davin dropped awkwardly onto his left knee, leaving the metal pole planted in the snow. Leaning forward on one hand, he reached out for the pack and dragged it over. The beacon was a simplistic device that needed only the slightest of calibration, but she would rather he think she couldn't handle it than him try to kill himself building a shelter with one leg.

Radha used longer branches from the cleared brush on the rear of the embankment to make a leaning overhead shelter, closing in the sides with leaves and brush that would help them retain heat. She frequently glanced over at Davin to make sure he was okay. He worked with the beacon for longer than it should've taken him.

Finally, she heard the tell-tale bleep as the red signal light began to flash. The homing signal would eventually reach back to the station, but search and rescue teams should be able to pick it up before then. He pulled himself up on the staff, sloughing away from their campsite to secure the beacon in the open.

Radha's hands were numb. She'd taken her gloves off to secure the branches together and form the shelter. Now her fingers were almost blue with the cold. She tied the last branch off and stepped back to admire her handiwork.

A small lean-to stood in the middle of the copse. Already the wind was blowing snow up against the sides, forming a natural barrier. With the survival bags they'd be snug and warm in there. Snug being the operative word, they'd have to cozy right up to wait this storm out.

She bit her lip, chewing it with worry. Why did she have to be stuck here with Davin? Cozying up with Boomer ... well, she didn't want to think about that one too much. But at least Boomer was just a co-worker. They'd have had a laugh and taken the piss out of each other while they waited for the rescue teams.

With Boomer there would have been no uncomfortable silences. No wanting more of his touch, a touch she shouldn't want and couldn't have.

Davin returned from setting up the beacon, moving slower than before. He tried to hide the pain but Radha wasn't an idiot. She walked over and tried to help, but he shrugged her off again with a glare, moving forward with the pole to admire the shelter.

"Good work. Let's get a fire going and start warming it. Doesn't look like we have much longer."

Chapter Ten

Three hours later they sat in the shelter, shoulder to shoulder, staring at the fire just outside. Sheltered from the wind by the lean-to and the hollow of the copse, it blazed merrily. It was the only thing that was merry. Conversation had dried up two hours and fifty minutes ago and the silence was not a comfortable one.

Every so often Radha would slide a sideways glance toward the silent, grim-faced man next to her. Then, at his forbidding expression, she carried on looking glumly into the fire.

They sat with their knees up against their chests, trying to conserve heat. Davin slid his right leg down into the snow, the sound of his boot dragging amplified by their silence. It looked painful, as if the leg fell rather than being lowered. He rubbed his hands just above the knee cap, wincing at every touch. Radha shook her head, suppressing the urge to sigh.

"How bad is it?" Her voice was low and wary, because she expected him to bite her head off. She couldn't help but ask as concern and worry filled her. If he was injured and took a turn for the worse out here she wouldn't have a clue what to do to help him. To make matters worse he hadn't let her look at the injury earlier, shrugging her off with that prideful anger.

He coughed, the breath coming out in a little puff. "I don't think it's broken, but it hurts like hell when I stand on it." He eyed the dark crease in his flight suit where the console had sat, a hesitant look in his eye. "I haven't looked yet, but I'm sure it's not too serious."

Radha shook her head. "Bloody men, you're all the same. Slightest bit of flu and you're dying. Your leg's about hanging off and it's a scratch."

Twisting, she leaned behind them and opened the pack. Rooting inside she located the small med kit at the bottom and dragged it out. "This is getting to be a habit ... patching you up," she said, a small smile on her lips as she wriggled out of the shelter to kneel in front of him.

He squinted at her, the look on his face telling her he thought he should know what she was talking about but didn't. She studied the crease, pulled on the flight suit to see if it was a rip. It wasn't, and they both reached a conclusion neither of them wanted to admit. The pants had to come off.

Great, just great. Radha scowled. Perhaps she kicked puppies or something in a former life and was being punished for it now? Steeling her expression she routed in the kit for latex gloves. "Okay pretty boy, pants off. I need to look at that," she said, snapping the gloves into place in a very businesslike manner.

Davin's eyes widened, flicking between the rubber glove and his leg. "I don't think it really has to get looked at right now, I don't see any rips or tears."

She looked away, checking in the kit again. "You know as well as I do that something doesn't have to look broken to be broken. Pants off. Now."

He looked away for a moment, rolled his head back around with a sigh. Slowly his hands worked on the buckle, then slid the pants down to his shins.

Radha took a deep breath for strength and forced herself to look at the injured knee.

It wasn't easy. Her eyes—and hands—wanted to touch the hair-roughened thighs, then wander higher...

Biting her lip, she focused on the nasty wound above the knee.

Hissing through her teeth she probed the edges with her fingertips. The bruising was already spreading, a nasty purple under his skin that hinted at a broken bone someplace, perhaps even a chipped kneecap. In the center of the bruising, like the cherry on the top of a cake, was a small puncture wound. She pressed gently, not liking the way it was seeping blood.

"Sorry," she said as he winced. "I'm going to need to dress this. Why the hell didn't you tell me it was this bad? This had to have been killing you since the crash."

His legs spread slightly on reaction to the touch, drawing her eyes instantly. As soon as he turned she looked away, biting her bottom lip and kicking herself for looking. But it was worth it.

"I didn't know it was that bad," he replied, spacing his words out as her hands worked the bandage. He was clearly in pain, his jaw clenched shut, but he didn't intend to show it.

"Like hell you didn't," Radha snapped, not in the mood to believe him as she cleaned the wound. "You do realize you could have killed yourself if it was bleeding badly?"

"I guess that would've been a real drain on you wouldn't it." His eyes were as sharp as his tone.

Pain flared in Radha's chest, closely followed by the anger she used to cover the hurt expression in her eyes. "At least I wouldn't have had to put up with your damn sulking!"

"Who's sulking? I'm not the one that was too narrow-minded to try and talk. I'm not the one that clammed up at the first sign of trouble."

Radha couldn't believe what she was hearing. He was blaming her for this? Where did he get off with that one? "I'm not the one that was bloody bed-hopping so don't you blame me for this you egotistical son of a bitch."

He gaped at her, pain in his eyes that had nothing to do with the leg. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. Bed-hopping? You can't consider for one second that you might not know the whole story? That someone might actually tell you the truth? Newsflash! I'm not like the assholes you bedded before."

Radha wanted to believe that, she really did. But she'd seen that little encounter in the corridor with her own two eyes. Breaking it off her ass!

"No, they were wankers and I knew that beforehand. I never trusted them—" She stopped suddenly, realizing she'd said far too much. Open mouth, insert foot, Radha. Nice one.

Davin glared at her.

"Trust? You don't trust me. If you did you would've at least heard me out. You don't trust anyone Radha. You don't even trust yourself." He fell back on his elbows, scoffing. "Trust. Please. I don't even want to hear it."

Radha turned away to pack the med kit up. That hurt, even if she had brought it on herself. She didn't answer, falling back into her old standard. Cover the hurt behind a blank face until they got bored and moved on. It had always worked before, so why not now?

*

She'd turned away from him, ready to run again. It infuriated Davin even more, made

him want to scream. She didn't have anywhere to go this time though; she couldn't run and hide on the station somewhere. He used that to his advantage, the dull ache in his leg the last thing on his mind.

"No. We're not playing this game again. You don't have anywhere to hide this time. You look at me and tell me what you're running from."

She flicked her hair back over her shoulder and gave him a glare that told him he was on the right track. She was running and she knew it, she just didn't want to admit it. Well, now he wasn't going to give her the chance.

"I don't hide! And I'm not running, we're just not having this conversation."

He laughed, jerking his pants back up as the wind drifted in. "Oh we're not are we? Well I guess we'll just stay right where we are then since that's fine with you. We'll just pretend nothing happened and that we didn't feel anything. We'll just roll over and play dead right? That how it works?"

"With respect, sir, piss off."

Radha stuffed the med kit back into the pack, her movements jerky and angry. He'd thought she wasn't going to answer but then she'd shrugged. Something about the movement was odd. He'd seen her closed off, he'd seen her sassy as all hell and he'd seen her sexy and slumberous as she woke in his arms. But he'd never seen her look quite so defeated.

He was getting to her, shaking her up, and rattling her cage. The realization only pushed him further. The time for games was long past, the crash serving as clear evidence that they couldn't take tomorrow for granted. He was tired of backing down and watching her hide.

"I don't think so. I think we're going to settle this right now before something else happens. Before we both freeze to death or some monster that calls this place home has a midnight snack."

"We've nothing to settle."

She fastened the top of the pack and shoved it behind her with more violence than was necessary. She avoided his eyes, sitting as far away from him as the small shelter would allow. Not that it made any difference; he only had to reach out to be able to touch her.

He shifted his weight, dragging himself closer and clenching one fist so tightly his knuckles turned a bright white. The leg screamed at him, adding to the tension that was winding him up. He spoke through gritted teeth, angry and hurt and wanting her to know it this time.

"Oh we haven't, have we? Then why all the moping? Why the cold shoulder, Radha? You just the love 'em and leave 'em sort? Looking for a way out as soon as you can find it?"

She couldn't move any further away. Unless she wanted to be sitting out in the cold there was no place to go. Flicking her hair over her shoulder again she fixed him with a hard glare, the sort of glare that said she was pissed off and only getting more irritated with him.

"You really have no clue at all about me do you?"

Davin snorted. "I don't think I could get one if I wanted to, you're so damn closed off. That's the problem. I don't know who I'm dealing with and when."

"Does it matter?" Her words were short and sharp, full of hurt.

He shook his head. Getting through to her was like taking off without the launch doors open. The wounded bit could only fly for so long, and the time had come to put the cards on the table. "You tell me. I'm through playing games with you. You're in or you're out, it's as simple as that."

"Oh God, you're fucking rich aren't you? You were the one sleeping around but now you want to start throwing ultimatums out?" She laughed, a bitter sound. It had a hollow ring though and she was still refusing to look at him.

He flattened his hands out, looking briefly at the ruts in his palms his fingernails had dug. Pushing away from her as much as possible, which was an extra six inches at most, he settled against the wall of the shelter and crossed his arms, his mouth shut firmly.

"You can call it what you want. I'm tired of being the only one with my ass in the wind."

"We need water ... a hot drink," she said finally and started to roll to her feet.

His gaze went to her and immediately he wanted to stop her. He didn't know where she was planning to go but there was no guarantee she would come back, especially in her current condition. It was her armor that he couldn't break. He needed a crack or a dent—something he could slip through to get to her. To make her understand.

Then he remembered he'd cracked it before, found a way in. Touch. His eyes widening, he stuck a hand out and grabbed her shoulder, holding on firmly and pulling her toward him.

"Hey!" She protested his hold but he refused to let go. She fought against him anyway, her arms lashing at his with what felt like slight reservation. He'd seen her in the gym though; he knew what she was capable of and this wasn't it.

The silent battle of wills ended in a sprawl of tangled limbs, Radha landing in his lap. When the fighting stopped, their faces were inches apart. Her eyes were dark and distant, staring into him and seeming almost frightened. He could feel her shaking, but didn't know if it was the cold or the hand that landed on her cheek—a soft sweep of his fingers that brushed her hair away.

The instant he touched her, she relaxed. Davin released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, praying that her reaction to his touch was still the same.

And it was. Like a switch had been flipped, all the fight disappeared. Her body settled against his perfectly, every curve and hollow fitting against his like the missing piece of a puzzle. For a moment it didn't matter that they were huddled up in a makeshift shelter awaiting a rescue. All that mattered was the soft touch of skin against skin as his fingers swept along her cheekbone and into her hair.

Her dark eyes fastened on his, wary and guarded. The walls were still there and he could almost see her trying to marshal some sort of argument. His fingers tightened in her hair, holding her still as his lips hovered against hers.

He could feel her warm breath on his chin, could feel her body relaxing and tensing, wanting to fight but not being able to. He searched her eyes for a long second, looking for some kind of understanding. His voice was softer, but still held an edge. "If you trusted me, you'd listen when I told you the truth."

She tried to move away again, a fruitless move nowhere near strong enough to break his grip.

Tension stretched to a breaking point between them, the sexual awareness they'd both been trying to avoid flaring fully into life again. Radha shivered, her eyelids sweeping closed for a moment.

She opened them and searched his eyes as though trying to find something there. What that was Davin didn't know. Deliberately Davin eased back on the anger surging through him, making sure his hands were gentle as they speared through her hair, the pad of his thumb stroking her neck gently. Anger didn't work with Radha, she was like a wounded animal and the slightest thing could set her running again.

"I'm ... not good at trusting people," she admitted finally.

"You got that right," he blurted out, frustration with her thick shell still winding him up a little. She was softening though, physically and emotionally. It had taken a lot for her to say that, as insignificant as it seemed. She still looked uncomfortable. He leaned in, searching her eyes for a long second. There was only so much talking that could be done, and they'd done enough.

Her eyes were frightened, then softened as they fluttered shut. He lowered his lips onto hers, a gentle pressure revealing the pent-up need they'd both tried to ignore.

Her lips were soft, closed against his. He felt the tension, the shiver which ran through her, and then they softened. He smiled. She was his for the taking. All he'd had to do was get close enough to touch her, get under that guard of hers.

Who'd have thought it though, that hard as nails Kaden would be susceptible to a gentle touch? It was the perfect hidden weakness... She wasn't a woman who would have inspired gentle thoughts if he hadn't seen the softer side of her.

An image of her in the candlelight sprang to mind, her skin creamy and glowing and her hair spread around her on the makeshift bed in the gym. Davin groaned, his body reacting to the memory, and he gathered her closer. A sweep of his tongue against her upper lip had her opening for him and he took the advantage to deepen the kiss.

So intent was he on sweeping all of her barriers aside, and reducing her to pure reaction that the sound outside the small shelter didn't register at first. A sound which wasn't natural and gradually increased until it was audible over the moaning wind of the blizzard raging outside.

Breaking the kiss he lifted his head sharply, trying to make it out. The voice from outside clinched the deal.

"Commander McAvoy? Lieutenant Kaden?"

Chapter Eleven

Davin watched the small planet that had saved them slip into the darkness through the cargo windows. They were strapped into passenger seats in the back of the rescue transport, he was sitting behind the pilot and Radha behind the co-pilot. Davin never thought he'd find the bulky-looking Falcon class appealing but right now he could kiss the damn thing. Since their rescue they'd put a splint on his leg and cleaned up some scrapes on both of them, but the best part about it was the heat pumping from the environmental control systems.

His gaze slid to Radha, who was staring intently out her own window. She hadn't said much since they'd been picked up, hadn't said anything at all now that he thought about it. She turned for a moment, as if she knew what he was thinking, only holding his eyes for a moment before turning away.

Davin faced forward and sighed under his breath. The walls were already on their way back up, locking her down tight. What was it going to take to keep them down and get her to open up to him? Every time he managed to get them down, they shot right back up again but, each time they weren't quite the same. Not quite as strong, like he was chipping away at her defenses bit by bit. He caught the slight movement as she looked his way again, her face blank and calm before she turned away.

Radha huddled closer into the thick blanket, rested her head back against the seat and closed her eyes.

Davin fiddled with his hands. The prospect of them—a together, relationship kind of them—was more important to him than he'd realized. He wanted to be with her ... the girl he was with in the gym and the one he'd kissed less than an hour ago.

Something was wrong though. The woman sitting next to him wasn't the girl in the gym nor the closed-off one from the hallway incident with Lanna either. He got the feeling she wasn't sure where she stood, or where he did. Could he put himself out there enough to tell her though? He'd wanted to tell her during the crash, but then he hadn't thought there was going to be a chance for her say anything. Or turn and run.

They sat there, each trying to avoid the other's gaze but unable to resist looking every so often. It was like the typical school dance with the kids separated strictly by gender—girls on one wall, boys on another, each group eyeing the other up.

She looked again, caught his eye, and offered a small smile. Her lips had barely curved when a familiar tone echoed through the cabin, a sound which made all four occupants of the small shuttle freeze.

Weapons lock.

Davin's heart leapt into his throat. His first thought was the fact they were lightly armed at best. His second was that they were too far from the base for air support to get here in time.

Instantly he and Radha were pulling on their harnesses to look over the pilots' shoulders, the natural reaction of any pilot, particularly two fighter pilots. He was the senior officer on the ship, so Davin's first instinct was to give orders.

"Evasive maneuvers! Punch that throttle and get us in Sentinel airspace as soon as you can!"

He shot a glance at Radha. "Get two helmets, storage compartment up there." Thank God they still had their flight suits on, otherwise a depressurization would be bad.

Radha was moving before he'd finished his sentence. Ripping open the compartment with more force than finesse she threw him a helmet and shoved her own on her head. He caught it neatly, barely pausing in his stream of orders.

"Hard right now, try and shake them." The pilots in the front seats obeyed without question, their movements hurried and panicky. Davin doubted they'd ever flown a combat mission before.

The shuttle banked sharply, the two more experienced pilots bracing as it rolled and breathing a sigh of relief as the weapons lock cut out.

"Out. Now," Radha ordered, before Davin could get the words out. "One at a time, pilot first... Oh no sunshine." She shoved a hand square in the middle of his broad chest as Davin made to replace the pilot. "This show's all mine."

They didn't have time to argue. The pilot stood, just as Davin caught a glimpse of another fighter directly ahead. He tried to yell "pull up" but didn't get the words out in time. A spray of rounds burst through the front windows, pelting the two pilots in a dark red spray and sucking them out into the void as the pressure rushed out of the cockpit.

Radha had already unbuckled. She flew toward the windows as soon as the craft emptied. Davin grabbed her ankle in an iron grip that pulled him forward in his harness. Radha moved on instinct and somehow reached down to cut the pressure to the cabin.

Without a word Davin let go of her leg and she hauled herself into the pilot's seat. Within seconds he was buckling in next to her. Davin slammed the last buckle home, then breathed a tiny sigh of relief. "Christ, this thing's like flying a barn!" Radha yanked the shuttle around and gunned the engines to get the power for the loop. The abrupt maneuver took the enemy fighter by surprise as he ended up looking directly into the exhaust vents of the larger vessel, just as Radha powered up. Davin didn't have time to look back at the exploding fighter. They needed to get as much distance as they could from the rest of the group.

"Crap, multiple contacts... I sure hope you got weapons online sweetheart because we're gonna need them!"

"We don't have much. You'll have to make every bit count." Davin's hands were on the controls, making adjustment he wasn't even aware of. He brought up the scanner, checked the stores list, closed off the last of the environmental systems and began to send distress signals. It was all automatic, the result of day after day of training and practice.

"Two missiles. Little over five hundred rounds. That's all we've got." His voice was flat and even over the headset comm, despite Radha's erratic weaving and bobbing of the craft. His gaze went to the scanner. "You got one creeping up on your six."

Her hands moved like lightening as she checked over her displays. "Got him right where I want him. Barrel roll in three and hit the guns, three second bursts on my mark," she ordered, throwing the craft into the maneuver. "Three, two, one... Mark."

Davin pulled back on his controls when she said it, squeezing in both triggers to release a spray of rounds that tore the smaller Satagosian fighter to shreds.

"Waxed." He looked to her with a grin.

She smiled back, and for once they were in total accord, just like they were when they flew patrol. This was the Radha he fell for, the one that made him do things he'd never done for a rookie.

For the next tense half hour they weaved and dodged, playing cat and mouse with the smaller, faster Satagosian fighters who seemed intent on making sure they wouldn't reach the base in one piece. Ordinarily they wouldn't, not in a Falcon class, something the Satagosians well knew. They just hadn't counted on the small shuttle containing two of the base's best fighter pilots. Davin could make even a half-crippled, barely armed rescue-and-repair shuttle into a streaking instrument of death if he had to.

"Outer sensor perimeter in three minutes," Radha commented. Davin started to breathe a sigh of relief. They were really going to make it. Teamwork in the truest sense had saved them again, would bring them home from what looked like a hopeless battle.

But she'd taken her gaze off the console for a split second, a second which was long enough for a fighter to pull into an arc and gain a firing solution. Davin's gaze flicked to the flashing warning light, "weapons lock", and felt sick to his stomach. He didn't have time to say anything, didn't even have time to think.

Explosions punctured the left side of the craft as rounds tore through it, the console sparking and shorting out. That was the least of their problems. Radha lurched forward as dark red globs of blood floated through the cabin. "Radha!"

She didn't answer him, slumping back in her seat with her head turned away. For a horrible moment Davin froze, grief welling up to choke him, but then his training kicked in. There was no way he could transfer over to the pilot seat so he had to do a hot-switch of the piloting priorities. It left him without weapons but all he could do now was head straight for the station and hope they'd picked up the distress call.

He worked the controls, his breath coming in quick bursts that fogged the inside of his helmet. His mind racing and his heart pounding, he flicked every other glance to her seat. She was still and quiet, and the sight brought a dense feeling to his throat every time. "Kaden! Don't you die on me Kaden! Do you hear me?"

His moves were frantic, weaving the craft in no discernable direction in hopes he could throw off the evading fighters. The helmet comm was deadly silent, small thick globs of red floating through the cabin every so often, splattering across surfaces when they touched. The suits self-sealed unless the damage was massive but even so, she was hit and he knew exactly what Satagosian rounds did to the human body. It wasn't pretty. Cringing, he fought back the thickness in his throat and barked, "Kaden! Radha! Wake up! Wake up baby, please!"

She didn't move but he thought he heard a weak moan. Then her head turned slightly. Just the tiniest movement but enough to give him hope.

Another spray of bullets refused him a second's thought. It was the right side this time, just behind the pilot's seats. There were at least four of them on his tail now. A bitter laugh sounded in his throat as he thought of how this must look ... the windowless Falcon hurtling through open space venting fuel and water vapor as four sleek Satagosian fighters followed in a swirling mass, each trying to lock on and finish off the wounded bird.

He thought he heard something again, a hint of a moan. It was something, had to be, because the helmet comm had picked it up. He swung the controls left and right, the throttle wide open as he fought to get them home.

"You are not leaving me, Radha. You can't. Do you hear me? You're not going anywhere. That's an order. We're almost home."

She groaned again, and tried to turn. It was as though the sound of his voice was

rousing her. Davin didn't know much about first aid other than what they'd all been taught. Just the basics. But keeping someone awake had to be good right?

The comm crackled and came to life, another voice filling his ear. "This is Sentinel Five to incoming craft, we have you on long range... Transmit your ID codes please." The tone was measured but he could hear the curiosity behind it. Despite the four fighters trying to blow them out of the sky, there was still protocol to be followed.

ID codes were the furthest thing from Davin's mind, and the only ones he could think to give were the codes from the stealth Falcon they'd left in. After sending the transmission, he reopened the comm channel with the base. "This is White Knight. Scramble the CAP to intercept. I've lost two men, have one injured and I've got four bogies on my tail."

"Identifying..." There was less than a second's pause before the flight officer spoke again, his voice firm. Without seeing him Davin knew the flight office had just gone into high alert. Alarms would be blazing and pilots scrambling for birds. It was a scene he'd been a part of many, many times. He'd just never thought he'd be on the other end, depending on the speed of those pilots. From this side, every half second felt like an hour as he used every trick at his disposal to keep ahead of his pursuers and to stop them locking a weapon on him.

"Fighters are in the air Knight, you just keep on course. Bay Three is being cleared for a hot landing and we have medics on standby."

Davin banked hard left as another spray of bullets peppered the small wing on his side of the craft. A spray that could've easily come down the middle of the craft and torn it in half. Sparks flew on one side of the console; the power flickered, but remained online. In the faint distance, the gleaming form of Sentinel five came into view.

"You hear that Radha? They're on the way. I can see the base, they've got the doors open for us. Stay with me."

He flicked a glance toward her, trying to see where she was hit. She could be bleeding out inside the suit for all he knew. One of the enemies nudged closer and he cursed, yanking the falcon's nose around with more force than skill, rolling the bulky craft hard to get away. He'd always known this day would come, when he'd have to fight for his life in a cockpit. He'd always thought it would be in his fighter and he would face death calmly. Go out in a blaze of glory ... a noble way to go.

He barreled out of the roll, hard on the engines as he depleted the last of his rounds. It was going to be a desperate race to get within the base's defense perimeter and he knew it. The fighters following him knew it too.

He was scared. Scared as hell because he wasn't on his own. He had Radha to consider. If he couldn't hold the fighters off then neither of them would make it.

"Not acceptable," he muttered between gritted teeth, casting another glance sideways. He bit back a yelp as he met her eyes. Confused and out of focus but open and aware.

He held her gaze for a moment, despite the chaos in and out of the shuttle. She was alive, and he intended to keep her that way. He couldn't see her mouth, the blood across her face plate obscured his view of her face. Her glare was glassy but it was her, and she was looking right at him.

"Just hold on. We're almost there."

The Falcon shook with the force of a hit, not a direct hit but close enough. He got a

new flashing light and alarm. It simply read "Thruster failure".

"Sons of bitches!" he growled in frustration, slamming a fist down on the alarm to silence it.

The Falcon was heavy and sluggish now, pulling from one side to the other took twice the time. He had to use odd vertical angles to keep the Satagosians off balance, but it wouldn't take long for the shuttle to lose momentum. Then they would be sitting ducks even the greenest of rookies could hit. He knew that, just like he knew that if he didn't get Radha to a doctor soon she was as good as gone.

He looked at her again. She was still awake but her eyelids were sagging. "Hey! Hey! Eyes forward soldier! Just stay with me for five more minutes!" He didn't know how he was going to buy that much time, but he knew he needed it.

The retort of gunfire filled the small cabin again and Davin's head whipped around. It was too close, there was no way he could avoid that. Somehow one of them had crept up while he was looking at Radha. He winced, expecting the bullets to rip through what was left of the battered Falcon and finish them off. But then the sound changed, fire blossoming the corner of his eye as one of the Satagosian fighters went up in a ball of flame.

"White Knight, get your ass back to the base. We'll take it from here." A new voice announced over the comm as three fighters sped by, guns blazing as they took up the battle with the fighters harrying the abused Falcon.

"Roger that!" Davin exclaimed, pumping a fist as the Valkyries streaked out of his line of vision. He looked at Radha, her eyes were trying to drift shut again. "Friendlies! They're friendlies! We're home free!"

The alarm blared again, another of the thrusters cutting out on him. The Falcon tried to go into a spin but he stopped it, holding the controls with everything he had. The comm crackled in his helmet as he approached. It was a nervous-sounding flight officer, speaking as fast as he could get the sentence out.

"Inbound Falcon, telemetry shows electrical and propulsion failure. Request you enter a holding position and await Search and Rescue."

Davin shook his head and keyed the mic, giving what little juice was left to the remaining engines. "Negative base, coming in hot on Bay Three. Have the medics ready."

"Falcon, there's no way—"

Davin cut the transmission with a flick of his finger, dropping the landing skids as he did so. Another alarm sounded—one of them was jammed or had been damaged by a hit. "Shit. We're minus a skid, Sweetheart. This is going to be rough."

She blinked and mumbled something. He frowned, trying to lean to the side to catch it but the words became a coughing fit. The blood on her faceplate thickened as new drops hit it, a bright red color. It was too red. Oxygenated blood that wasn't reaching her bloodstream. Panic gripped him and he gunned the engines, trying to wring the last little bit of power from them as he watched her eyes start to slip.

"Don't try to talk, just stay with me. Stay with me. We're almost home." His gaze flicked forward to affirm this comment and he was greeted with an enlarging view of Bay Three, lights flashing along the sides of the deck and giving the illusion that it was rolling away from him. He brought the throttle down slightly, fought with the controls to pitch the nose up.

"Hold tight. Here we go." The sides of the bay swallowed them, the lights and walls

much more vivid with the missing cockpit glass. It was an eerie sensation, as if there should be wind when there was none.

He kept the nose in the air, dropping off the throttle slowly as the deck unfolded beneath him. He was running out of room fast, would need to set her down or risk splattering himself and Radha on the back wall.

The Falcon lowered, and finally he felt the tug of the back skid touching the deck, then the other side. That wasn't good. It meant the missing skid was on the nose. He dropped out the throttle, pulling hard on the stick to keep the nose up. If sounds could be heard, he wouldn't be able to hear himself think over the grating of the skids digging tunnels in the deck.

Finally, there was no chance of stopping it. The nose hit the deck much harder than it should have; jarring them both with such force Davin lost his breath and the controls. He tried to steady himself but couldn't reach the console. The world was nothing but swirling lights and blurred grey lines.

The Falcon careened down the deck, a shower of sparks from the nose and back skids following it. It began to turn in what would be the beginning of a vicious spin, when it finally ran out of room and slammed into the back wall. Thankfully on Davin's side.

Somehow, he willed himself conscious after the hit. His breath came in long narrow wheezes, like trying to breathe through a clogged straw. He unbuckled his harness, vaguely aware that deckhands were preparing to drag the craft to the nearest lift and lower it to the flight deck. As soon as the harness released he fell from the seat, landing on his side as his knee screamed at him in pain. He was thankful. The pain kept him awake.

He dragged himself toward Radha. She was still, her face pale behind the visor of her helmet. There was no movement, not even the fluttering of her eyelashes against her cheeks. She looked...

"Clear the doors, coming through," a voice bellowed and the next instant the side doors of the shuttle were ripped away, emergency teams pouring through them before Davin could form a response.

He tried to yell her name as they pulled him off, tried to yell something that would wake her up but it caught in his throat and all he could do was cough. Cough while they pushed him away and unbuckled her. Cough while the cockpit filled up with medics.

He fell backward against the seat, the knee screaming at him again, as the coughing deepened. It got hard to breathe, too hard. The medics got fuzzy on the edges, one of them knelt directly in front of him, and then he was out.

Chapter Twelve

Radha was going to die. Davin sat in the medical bay waiting area and studied his hands. "The next seven hours will be critical, if she survives surgery, she has a good chance. *If* she survives the surgery, but don't get your hopes up Commander..."

At least she was alive. *At least she has a chance.* Davin's head hit the wall behind the chair as he thought, his gaze dragging across the ceiling. It was a miracle that either of them had survived the crash. Boomer said the deckhands would be pounding trenches out of the deck for weeks. Pilots were praising his landing. It made Davin sick to even think about it.

It made him sick to think he could lose Radha, that everything he'd done might not have been enough. He'd flown his heart and soul out, put everything he had on the line, and had been ready to give up his life for hers if that's what it took. But commendations and pats on the back meant nothing if he didn't have her to share it with. He'd fought hard to get them back and now it was out of his hands, out of his control. All he could do was sit. And wait.

Two long hours of waiting later, a throat clearing at the door caught his attention. When he looked up one of the lower level engineers was hovering by the door. The deep blue overalls, although clean, still carried marks from the Tyrelliam ore that blanketed every surface in the lower decks.

Davin looked the man over, squinted, and checked the halls. Usually that group didn't venture far from the reactor core, much less into the upper decks of the station where the med bay was located. They had their own medical facilities down there.

He let it slide for a moment, fiddling with his hands and rotating his head on his shoulders. Finally his curiosity got the better of him. He caught the man's eye with a small nod.

"Something happen in the reactor?"

As though he'd been given permission, the guy moved further into the waiting room and sat down on the edge of the seat next to Davin.

"No. There's a girl ... a pilot. Well, she said she was a pilot anyway. She comes down to the core on the graveyard shift ... helps out a bit. But we haven't seen her for a few days. Then ... one of the guys said there was a couple of pilots that lost a shuttle and they were in here... The guys are worried about her so I said I'd come up and check."

Davin shook his head as realization sunk in. The reactor core. That was a good place to hide when you didn't want to be found. Everything started to make sense—the late hours, the dirt on her face in the locker room before the attack, the dusty tracks he sometimes saw in the pilot's quarters. Soaking it all in he cursed her stubbornness under his breath. He let out a long sigh before speaking again.

"Yeah, it's her. Radha Kaden. She's in surgery now."

The blood drained out of the engineer's face and he swore. "What did the Doc say?" he asked, then paused as he looked at Davin again. "You're the CAG aren't you?"

Davin looked the man in the eye. The skin on his face was smeared with black, a permanent mask that his job provided for him on a daily basis. Only the spots behind his ears and under his chin showed the pale white of his skin. They were tired eyes. Most of

the officers wouldn't waste a passing glance on him. Ore shovelers were lower than the low end of the chain. Davin extended his hand, feeling tears form in his eyes as he was forced to say it again.

"Davin McAvoy. And they say that she might not make it."

"James Armitage. Jimmy. Foreman down on level three." The engineer shook his hand swiftly, but the look on his face was grim. "I didn't want to believe it but when she dashed off mid-shift at that alarm a while back and we didn't see her again..." He shook his head. "The lads aren't going to be happy. No sir. Scum of the earth but they liked her. Even shared their booze with her."

Davin chuckled, not being able to help himself. The puzzle was falling together, piece by piece. "Satagosian Rum?" His voice was soft, despite them being alone in the room. "That stuff'll put hair on your teeth."

He thought of the night when she'd shown up with it and his smile vanished. That had been the night. Their night. A knot formed in his throat again, and he swallowed it down.

Men as a whole are not perceptive creatures but Jimmy noticed the look on Davin's face. "You ain't just her boss are you?" he asked quietly. "Always thought there was a reason a woman like that made her way down to us. And I didn't buy that crap about it was all she was good for. I saw those tats of hers."

Davin ran a hand across the bridge of his nose and took a breath. "Yeah, it was me. I'm sure she did fine though. She's a hell of a tough woman."

Jimmy nodded. "That she is, that she is..." He sighed and after a pause stood. He clapped his hand onto Davin's shoulder and squeezed in reassurance. When Davin looked up at him he smiled slightly. "Remember that. She's tough, she'll pull through. If Acheron couldn't kill her ... I'm damn sure those soft twats out there..." he jerked his head toward the wall to indicate the Satagosians, "...can't do the job either. Right, I need to get back. Level three. Send word to us would you?"

Davin nodded, one hand cupped over his mouth. "Right, of course. Take care."

"And you mate," the engineer replied and was gone, leaving Davin alone with his thoughts. He wasn't alone with them for long though. A few minutes later a nurse walked into the waiting room and looked about.

"Commander McAvoy? They've finished in surgery now. I understand you wanted to see the doctor?"

* * * *

Radha came to consciousness by slow degrees. She knew something was wrong long before she was fully awake and fought it every step of the way. She groaned, the pain in her bruised and battered body threatening to send her into blackness again. Grimly she fought it, scraps of memory coming back to her.

An accident... The blaze of gunfire...

Her eyes drifted open. The lights in the room were painfully bright, driving needles into her head until she clamped her eyes shut. A form standing at the end of the bed moved toward her. She made an effort to focus. It was Davin, with a look on his face like they'd won the war.

"Radha? Hey." He was speaking softly, moving up the edge of the bed to stand next to her.

She grunted something unintelligible and lifted a hand to her head to shade her eyes. It was pulled up short by the tubes and wires attached. "Damn it," she groaned, "I hate med bays."

He laughed and took her hand, as gently as if it were made of glass. She thought she could see tears in the corner of his eyes. "Welcome back. It's been a few days. You almost bought it."

She sighed and closed her eyes for a moment, folding her fingers through his. When she opened them again the light didn't stab into her eyeballs as much. The bed dipped a little as Davin sat next to her, her hand in his and his thumb stroking her wrist, carefully avoiding the needles and tubes.

"You look like shit," she told him softly. And he did. She looked around, noting his jacket on the back of the chair next to the bed. "Don't tell me you've been sleeping in the chair?"

He smiled and ran a finger across her cheekbone, raking a strand of hair behind her ear. "No. I haven't done much sleeping." His eyes were distant and swimming in red. "Besides they're in here every hour checking these machines. No way a guy could sleep through all that. Inconsiderate if you ask me."

He'd been waiting for her to wake up, his concern evident as he looked at her, in the gentle touch of his fingers.

"Why?" she asked, her voice a mere whisper. She knew why, it was written on his face but she was a woman. She needed to hear the words to believe them. Her dark eyes searched his and she held her breath as she waited for his answer. The whole universe seemed to slow and grind to a halt as she waited.

"Because I'm in love with you."

He said it matter-of-factly, as much to himself as to her. He'd wanted to say it, been waiting to say it. She could see that in the glow of his eyes, the way his lips curled when it finally made its way out. He'd said it, and he looked like he meant it.

She closed her eyes as the floor lurched. Her fingers tightened around his as the ache she'd carried in her heart expanded and threatened to engulf her.

He loved her, he'd said it.

Men had told her they loved her before but not in sickbay when she looked like she'd been hit with a shuttle and dragged to the bed. She opened her eyes to find him looking at her, the expression on his face worried, and smiled softly.

"That's good then."

He smiled, his gaze seemed to wander for a moment, and then it was on her again. He opened his mouth and closed it, like he wanted to say something and changed his mind before he got it out. His gaze went to their hands, still locked by her side, and when he finally looked up again he said, "How're you feeling?"

He looked so earnest, so worried, Radha didn't have the heart to torture him even a little bit. She opened her mouth to tell him she loved him when the door behind them opened, a doctor walking in with a clipboard tucked under his arm.

"Ahh Commander, I thought I'd find you in here. Lieutenant, how are you feeling?" he asked, stopping at the side of the bed to check the machines. Davin started to pull away, to slide his fingers from hers but she held on.

"Like I got run over by a truck," she admitted as she tried to sit up. Her head swam a little and she clutched at Davin's arm for support.

"Well, your readouts look good. We've kept you sedated while the worst of your injuries healed..." he paused and looked at the two pilots, his gaze flicking to the way Davin's arms were curled protectively around her. His expression twisted a little, as though he didn't like what he was thinking. "I know you just woke up but ... I need to release you. We're over crowded as it is and I need this room. But, you're on bedrest and daily checks until I clear you."

Radha frowned, her fingers curled around Davin's biceps. "My quarters? I'm a pilot ... quartered in the barracks..." she trailed off, not understanding. The barracks weren't exactly the place to get rest.

Radha followed the doctor's eyes to Davin in confusion. Davin shrugged. "I ... made some arrangements to accommodate you in the Deck Fourteen officer's quarters for recovery. I need my best pilot back on her feet as soon as possible."

She snorted and looked at the doctor. "See this? Bloody slave driver here!" she groused but her fingers were gentle as she smoothed his shirt over his arm. It was an unconscious gesture but one that wasn't ignored by the doctor. "So I can go?"

"Provided Commander McAvoy..." the doctor glanced at Davin, "...or whomever he appoints, keeps you sufficiently rested, you're free to go. I'm putting you on at least two weeks of recovery leave followed by a week of restricted duty. Then we'll reassess you for active duty."

Ten minutes later, Davin stepped out as all the tubes and needles were removed and the nurse helped her into loose workout gear. It was something a little more comfortable than her duty uniform. Radha was glad it covered her up. Just the memory of her bruises and stitches made her wince.

She turned as the door opened again to reveal Davin, his eyes seeking her out before he stepped through it. They were still red-rimmed, the signs of his recent sleepless nights, but there was a sense of calm about him now.

"All right, let's get you home and settled." His voice was so reassuring and patient. Before it had almost scared her but now, now that she knew how he felt, it was just good. It was assuring and protecting. Right now she wanted him to be that way, needed him to. She'd never thought that day would come, but it couldn't be more obvious when his hands slipped around her shoulders gently to help her up.

She leaned into him with a sigh, absorbing his strength for a moment before she pushed upright. It was automatic; Radha was used to standing on her own two feet. She wasn't used to leaning on anyone or having anyone to lean on. She managed it for all of two seconds before her legs began to tremble. She was far weaker than she'd thought.

*

Davin caught her, one hand on her side near her waist and the other guiding her arm over his shoulders. She didn't object, even leaned into him as he took her weight against his larger body. That small act amazed him; those invisible barriers had disappeared as she actually let someone help her.

Her hand slid across his back, onto his side, giving a soft squeeze. It was a loving gesture, totally unlike her and yet so irresistible it brought a grin to his tired face.

"Easy does it."

She rested against him trustingly, her head on his shoulder. A shiver raced through him as her breath fanned over the skin of his throat, sending a surge of energy through him. Even though he was more tired than he could ever remember, right at that moment

he could have taken on hordes of the enemy alone. She didn't move for the longest moment and he was about to say something when she shifted.

"Davin? I... You're going to have to leave me here, my knees are shaking so much I'm not going to make the door," she admitted, her voice full of embarrassment.

Inside, he kicked himself for not thinking of it when he'd helped her up. Then again, Radha wouldn't have allowed as much help any other day as she had today. He hesitated for a moment, and then acted on impulse.

Stooping, he put one hand behind her knees and the other across her shoulders, lifting her as carefully as he could. He waited a split second for a disgusted growl or curse, then started forward when he didn't get it. Stepping through the doorway like a groom crossing the threshold, he looked down at her. "Am I hurting you?"

"No, not at all. Thank you."

Her arms crept around his neck, holding tightly. Not clinging as though she was worried he would drop her but more holding as though she didn't want to let go. She smiled at him. It was the smallest movement of her full lips, and she looked tired as all hell, but it was the first truly unguarded smile he'd ever seen her give.

"You're welcome." His knee screamed in pain, begged him to take the weight off and limp. He didn't miss a beat, even hefting her for a moment to sling the bag with her clothes and assorted belongings over his shoulder on his way out of sickbay.

By the time they reached the lift he was desperate to kiss her. Her eyes were so warm and endearing; it was like holding a different person. She was more genuine than the night in the gym, even more unguarded than she had been that next morning when they'd woken together. He was looking at the real Radha Kaden now, possibly for the first time since they'd met. Once he realized this and the lift doors shut, he bent and claimed her lips.

Her eyelids drifted shut, relaxing automatically as he deepened the caress. He shuddered. His knee was on fire and she was just out of surgery so all he should be thinking of was getting her settled in the room he'd prepared. Bed rest, he reminded himself. Rest. He had lots of thoughts though and none of them involved an awful lot of rest...

The door pinged open behind them but neither Davin nor Radha paid it much attention until someone coughed. "Oh puhlease, go get a room!"

Davin turned to find a young crewman he didn't recognize, carrying a load of supplies. When Davin's duty uniform came into view the boy's blood drained from his face and he stiffened, nearly dropping the supplies to throw a salute.

"At ease. And I intend to!" Davin called behind him as they turned down the corridor, the boy doing a double take and mumbling something to himself before stepping into the lift.

Radha chuckled. "I think you blew your 'mister clean' image there, pretty boy," she told him, but the nickname had no malice behind it.

Partway down the hall, where the officers that were married or otherwise needed a double room were stationed, Davin stopped at a door and hoisted Radha slightly to punch in his code. When the door slid open and the room came into view, he stepped in slowly and lowered her to the bed, then sat beside her. Partly because he was tired, partly just because he wanted to be close to her.

He sighed heavily, tiredness making his whole body ache as he rubbed his knee.

Radha sat up, concern in her eyes. "You sure you're okay? You shouldn't have carried me," she told him, trying to get past him.

He stopped her, taking her hand and moving it back down to the bed. "I'm fine. I've already seen the Doc. It's just going to be sore for a while." He rubbed the knee, brought his eyes back to her and flashed a grin as he lied. "And I would've carried you if it was broken in three places."

His fingers laced with hers as he held her gaze. He didn't say anything but she had to know he had questions just waiting to be answered. He'd said he loved her. He'd gone out on that limb with no idea what she would say and now he needed to know how she felt. Try as he might though, he just couldn't push her for a reply. Wry amusement filled him. Too gentle to demand. The Mr.Clean she'd named him.

"Thank you," she said quietly, her voice a soft murmur as she stroked her thumb over the back of his hand. "For getting me out of there and for this..." She nodded around the room. "Who'd you con to get it?"

"Let's just say a former pilot that's moved into a different department owed me a favor." He stood and limped toward the rear of the room, turning the corner. He'd asked for one other arrangement to be made, and he wanted to see if his old friend was good on his word. Turns out he was, for once.

Poking his head around the corner, he caught her gaze. "And I have one more surprise, if you're up to the short trip over here."

Radha raised an eyebrow and pretended to study the distance between the bed and where Davin was standing. She pouted, a playful expression that suited this softer version of her he always knew was buried deep inside. "I don't know, is it worth it?"

She got up anyway. He breathed a sigh of relief to see her moving a little easier than she had in sickbay. The docs had given him a run down on her injuries and she was lucky to be alive, let alone managing to walk around. One reason they'd kept her sedated until her injuries had had a few days to heal was that pilots were notoriously bad patients and they hadn't wanted to take a chance she'd try and escape sickbay during the first red alert.

She reached him, sliding in under the arm he extended easily, naturally, and followed his gaze through the door. He heard her swift intake of breath and watched as her eyes widened. "Is that..."

The bathroom was lit with flickering candles, the same cans and empty canisters she'd used in the gym. It had taken a good two hours of digging in the supply closet to find them, but her reaction was well worth it. They lined the ledge of a bathtub big enough for two that was filled with water.

"...all yours." He looked to her, savoring the look of pure shock on her face. "Figured you could use a good soak after being stuck in that bed."

"It's wonderful. But..." She gave him an innocent look Davin knew was fake. "I'm going to need some help. Someone to make sure I don't hit my head and drown in there."

Davin grinned, moving toward the tub already. "Don't worry. I'm here to help every step of the way."

Drawn by their linked hands Radha followed him. Holding her close he leaned down to check the water with a slow sweep of his hand. When he looked up, her eyes were warm, an expression in them that hit him right in the gut.

Davin's gaze never left her as he released her hand, unbuttoning the top of his uniform slowly. She didn't speak, a flush building on her cheeks, occasionally glancing at

his chest as the uniform top came off.

"Need some help with yours?"

She shook her head, a small smile curving her lips as she slowly unbuttoned the casual top she was wearing. She paused for a moment, then smiled. "You know that I'm not wearing underwear."

Davin's grin widened as need and affection ... love filled him. He nodded to her question.

She smiled and pushed the unbuttoned top off her shoulders. The fabric slid down her arms and fell to the floor unheeded. In a heartbeat the atmosphere in the room changed.

Her side, where the bullets had gone in, was bruised and stitched. Any other time he knew she would've felt uncomfortable about that, about someone seeing even a physical weakness in her. His gaze went nowhere near it though, only left hers for a moment to drift down her chest where her thumbs were hooking under the waistline of the workout pants.

His body tightened almost to the point of pain. She was perfect.

She slid her fingers around to the front and back again, shimmying the pants off her hips and letting them fall to the floor. She stepped out of them and looked at him, her face shadowed a little by her hair. Insecurity filled her eyes.

"Please, say something..."

He stepped forward, lost in the look he was getting from her. A hint of the old Radha was still there, a touch of reservation lingering somewhere in the back. He brought one hand forward and ran a finger across her cheek. His touch would ease that last bit, he knew that now.

He kissed her softly as his hands drifted down her shoulders and around her back. A tingle ran through his chest as her gaze locked into his. It was the same unguarded look he'd gotten in the lift. The real Radha. She shivered. He pulled her closer and into the kiss he'd wanted to give her since they'd been interrupted in the lift. As soon as their lips touched though, everything fell away. All the planning to get this room, all the preparation for the bath. There was just her and the softness of her lips under his.

It was empowering to feel her opening up to him, like he could do anything or meet any goal. He tingled all over, his body humming and more alive than he thought it had ever been. The fatigue was gone; the pain in the knee was gone. Best of all the worry was gone. She was right here, she was alive, and she was his.

Her hand smoothed over his chest and down his stomach, nimble fingers making short work of his belt and the fastenings on his pants. He stepped out of them as she pulled him back toward the bath. "I reckon we'll both fit, what do you think?" she asked between kisses.

He smiled against her lips, pulling the boxer shorts off and leaving them in the trail of clothes. His hands found her hips and he pulled her to him for another soft kiss before he turned her towards the bath. "I know we will." His foot went into the water first, and he eased it in to adjust to the temperature. Pivoting on that foot, he sank into position at the back of the tub.

She chuckled and stepped gracefully into the space between his thighs. Settling down in the water with a small hiss, she relaxed back against him, her head on his shoulder. It felt like coming home.

"Davin?"

He placed his head against her shoulder, made a gentle line of kisses there. "Yes, darlin'?"

"I love you."

A wave of relief swept through him. The feeling had been there, he was almost sure of it. Now it was official. They were official. He leaned against her, their bodies warmer than the water around them. It was a big step for her and he knew it. He kissed her cheek, whispered in her ear. "I love you, too."

All the pain, the worry and frustrations drifted away. There was just Knight, his woman, and their embrace.

The End

About the Author:

Mina Carter can be found exploring in the middle of the English countryside with her real-life hero and their young daughter ... the true boss of the family. Constantly seeking new challenges, Mina never tires of learning new skills—counting aromatherapy, corsetry and welding amongst her abilities.

She juggles motherhood, working full time and writing, tossing another ball in the air with her work as a graphic artist and web designer. For her, writing time is the wee hours of the morning or any spare minute that can be begged, bought or conned.

Her first stories were penned at age eleven, when she used a stationery set meant for Christmas "thank you" letters to write stories instead. More recently, she wrote for her own amusement to save on outrageous monthly book bills, and to quell the demands of friends for more and longer stories. Now you'll find her reading and writing original worlds where the unusual is everyday and romance is a must.

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When he's not writing, Kurt Drake is a software developer in small town South Carolina. In his spare time, he enjoys reading, music, photography, and spending time outdoors. He is married to his high school sweetheart and they have been together for ten years.

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