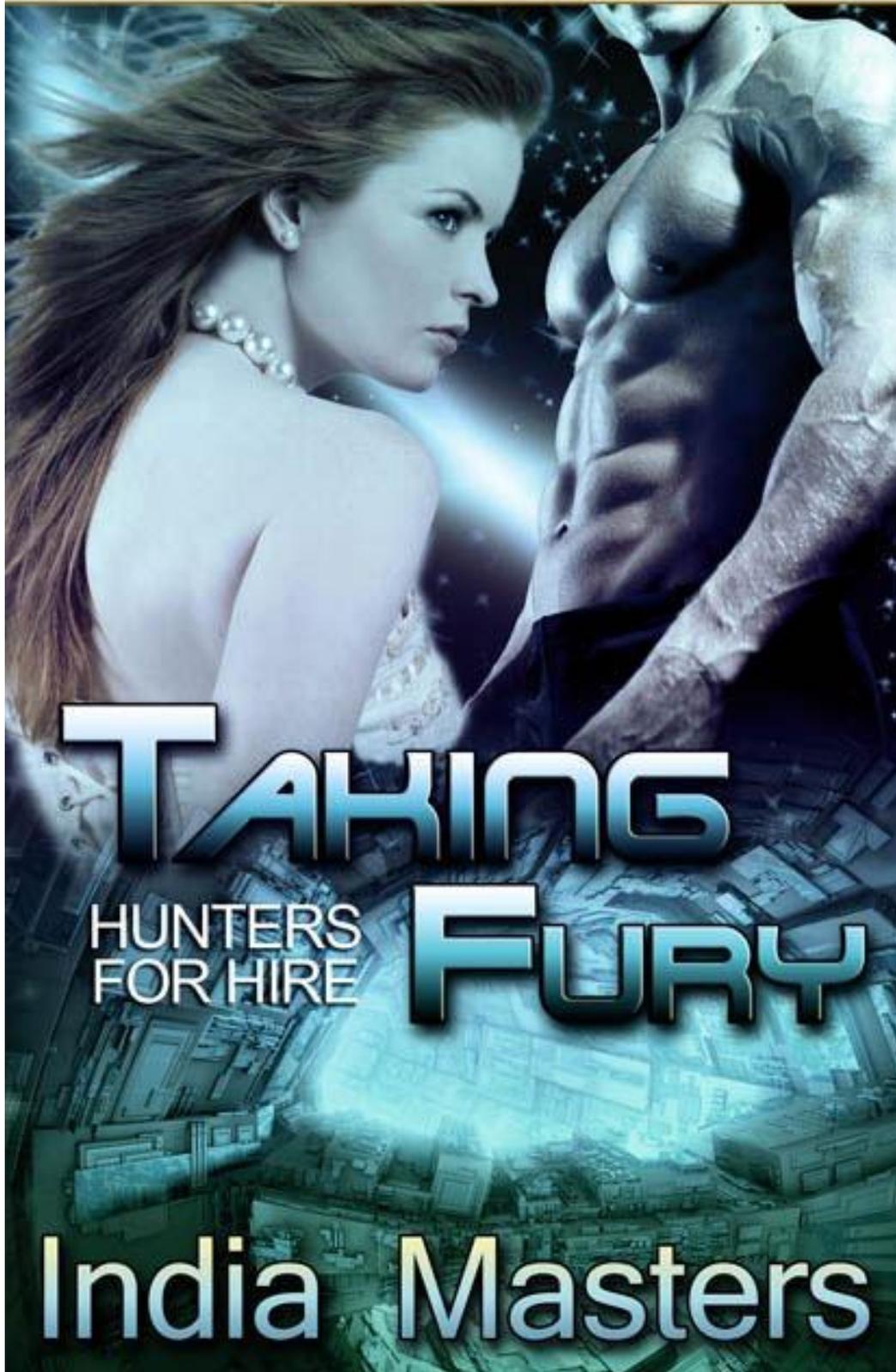


ELLORA'S CAVE AEON



TAKING
HUNTERS
FOR HIRE **FURY**

India Masters

Taking Fury
India Masters

A standalone story in the Hunters for Hire series.

Anari Fury—daughter, sister, fiancée. Life on Sa-Ro Five is good...until a ruthless pirate spies her. Refusing his advances sets in motion a chain of events that will change her life forever.

Taken from the only home she's known, Anari is sold as a sex slave. But she possesses a secret that puts her at even greater risk than that posed by the man who uncovers desires she never suspected—a frightening man with opaque gray eyes and a past that could get them both killed.

Duncan Storm is an AWOL super soldier. Conscience drove him from the IMF. Necessity drove him to Bounty Hunters, Inc. But Duncan's skills are no match for the woman destined to teach him the one thing he's never known...love.

Together, Duncan and Anari must fight to regain control of a technology capable of providing a better life for millions, or destroying entire worlds. Along the way, both will learn what it means to give their all for the love of another.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Taking Fury

ISBN 9781419929120
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Electronic book publication August 2010

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Prologue

Welcome to the Devil's Pit. Home sweet home. My name is Ulric Vonner and I run The Web, the base of operations for Bounty Hunters, Inc. You need criminals found? We will find them. The crime doesn't matter. Remember that we don't work for free—our fees are high, but we always catch our man, woman, or whatever species it is that you're after. Of course, catching them and bringing them in are two different things. We may be scoundrels but we aren't without conscience.

I started this business fifteen years ago. Hunters come and hunters go, but that's life. No one lasts forever, not in this business. Each of my bounty hunters has his or her reasons for turning hunter. I don't ask what they are and I don't care. They war with their inner demons, carve out a living for themselves, and then they move on—provided they survive their stint as a hunter. I don't get attached, and I don't mourn their loss. I learned long ago not to depend on anyone but myself. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, which is the primary reason I deal with the Amalgamation.

Behind every great power is corruption, and the Amalgamation is no exception. However, they do pay well, and I'm not without my own agenda. I fight to survive and to hold on to what little I have left. Bounty Hunters, Inc. gives me a purpose and a damn good excuse to move in the circles I do. It's said a man is judged by the company he keeps, so what does that say about me? In a galaxy fraught with danger, Bounty Hunters, Inc. will strive to satisfy all our customers—if it's in our best interests to do so. Though we may wear a veneer of legal process, we are bounty hunters and we hunt those we are paid to hunt. If in the process we bring down those who would do harm to others—so much the better.

What is a bounty hunter? We're just glorified rogues trying to make the best out of what life tossed our way. The galaxy is not without its flaws or its bad seeds, and that's what we're here for—to do the jobs no one else wants.

The best way to learn about Bounty Hunters, Inc. and me is to first get to know the people who work for me. They are good people in their own ways, but if you cross them, be prepared to face the consequences.

Let the hunting begin...

Chapter One

“This is the little bitch I told you about.”

“Yes, she’s quite the beauty, Captain Tur. I still don’t see why you won’t let me keep her at one of my bordellos. I could make a pretty penny off her before she was used up.”

The Algeran pirate, Tur, took a step forward, wincing at the effort. “Because I want her stripped bare and put on the block. I want her humiliated. She unmanned me, Hurik. Turned my balls to nothing more than a sack of jelly. The best doctors couldn’t save my manhood. She needs to suffer for that, and if you can’t see to it she does, I’ll find someone who will.”

“Come closer, pirate scum,” the woman said, baring her teeth. “I’ll finish the job and tear off that useless tool.”

His companion restrained him. “Easy, Captain Tur. You’ll get your revenge. I have just the right auction venue for her. Rest assured she’ll suffer.”

“She’d better. I want updates on who purchases her and for what purpose. She didn’t want to give up her precious virginity to me, so you make sure she goes to someone who will take it, in every orifice.”

* * * * *

Gods’ balls!

The curse threatened to fly from Anari Fury’s lips but she swallowed it down. No need to call more attention to herself than she already had. How had her life taken such a drastic turn?

Life had been good on Sa-Ro Five. As a teacher of physics and ancient Earth history, she’d been beloved by her students, cherished by her family and engaged to the sweetest man alive. Until the Interplanetary Military Forces set up a base.

The Amalgamation was to blame for it all. Their method of governing was the reason her picture-perfect life had turned into a living hell.

They’d disbanded the schools. No need for farmers to be educated. The galaxy was expanding. People need food, not the mythology that pervaded the educational system. So teachers became farmers.

Not that Anari minded being a farmer. In fact, she grew some of the finest melons in the Secundus System, to say nothing of her tomozava crops. She gritted her teeth. Her green thumb had begun this whole mess. If only she hadn’t entered her prize fruits in the harvest festival contest. Laran Tur, an Algeran pirate captain, had come to Sa-Ro Five to trade for fresh foodstuffs. He and his crew had descended on Anari’s small community in the middle of the harvest festival and she’d been unfortunate enough to catch his eye. When she’d refused his attentions, life had quickly become a nightmare.

With her father off-world on Senate business, and no local forces in place to curb the pirates’ behavior, Tur had killed her betrothed and taken her. When he’d tried to rape her, she’d fought tooth and nail, causing him no small amount of damage. Now, here she was, on the block in Mermean, the second-largest city on Symetria, destined for the bed of the highest bidder. Her younger sisters were enslaved, too, while her fiancé lay moldering in a muddy grave on some lonely hillside. All because she’d refused the pirate’s disgusting advances.

Anari gave the audience of mostly drunken men a defiant glare. She may have to submit to the man who bought her, but he’d know damn well she wouldn’t do so willingly. The grubby fingers of her handler grasped her chin and she bared her teeth at him. The crowd laughed as the bidders crowded around the wooden stage.

“She’s a feisty one, gentlemen,” the filthy pirate hooted. “And a virgin to boot. Who

among you is man enough to take her on?"

"Show us a little more than her pretty face, auctioneer," a loud voice boomed from the back of the room.

Anari straightened her shoulders, glaring, her chin set at a rebellious angle. "Lay a finger on me, you filthy whoreson, and I'll bite it off."

Once again, the crowd cheered. All but her handler. He looked downright pissed. "It's time you learned your place, wench," he growled, then shouted. "To the submission cross." Bidders and gawkers whistled and stomped their feet.

When would she ever learn to think before speaking? Her belly clenched and roiled and her mind shrieked at her to run. Just run. As far and as fast as she could. To be tied, unable to protect herself was...unthinkable. She struck out at her filthy handler, raking jagged nails across his scarred face. He backhanded her, hard, and she staggered under the impact. Tears welled in her eyes—no man had ever struck her before Tur had come into her life.

With a nod, his helpers approached and dragged her, kicking and screaming, across the stage. Amidst the jeers and catcalls, her tormenters stripped her, attaching her to the device. The metal cross, in the shape of an X, was deceptively strong despite its thin design. The crosspiece joined at shoulder blade height, allowing for a full view of the captive's body.

Her fear increased as the reality of what was happening slammed into her. She was nothing to these horrible people. A commodity, a product to be haggled over. They would use her and throw her away when her beauty faded and her usefulness ended. She looked into the audience full of men, praying for a sympathetic face, but found none. Lust lit the eyes of the people watching her. They wouldn't be satisfied until her humiliation was complete and she was led off the stage in chains. She would never see her sisters again, or her beloved father. Her throat ached with tears she refused to shed. These men would not have the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

The auctioneer approached, a brown-toothed grin splitting his face. "Not so cheeky now, are you, wench?" He reached out and gave her right nipple a vicious pinch, then faced the crowd. She fought against the ropes in an attempt to bite him.

"Line up for a closer look, gentlemen, but not too rough on the merchandise. The pleasure of deflowering her goes to the highest bidder."

"Be strong. Do not cry," Anari chanted softly to herself as the men approached. She resisted the urge to shudder each time one of them touched her.

"Open your mouth," ordered a fat, scruffy man, checking her teeth as though she was some kind of farm animal. He grinned. "You'd give better head without those teeth, wench. If I buy you, we'll see about having them removed."

Anari stared at the disgusting man in horror. Pull her teeth?

Nearly all of them felt inclined to tell her, in great detail, exactly what they expected of her. Hope flared once as a handsome man in rich clothing approached.

"You are a lovely creature," he said wistfully. He caressed her face with soft, gentle hands. "Is it true you've never been with a man, in any way?"

Anari nodded. "It is true, sir. I was to be married before pirates took me. Now my man is dead and I never had my wedding night."

"Ah, I see. You were saving yourself. How noble."

Fear snaked up her spine. His tone had changed, somehow. She turned her head to watch as he walked around behind her.

"Eyes forward," he barked.

Those pampered hands stroked her back, moving slowly downward to her bottom.

“Yes, absolutely exquisite. You have a marvelous ass, my dear.” He parted her cheeks, stroked the tiny pink rosebud and shoved his finger into her, hard and deep.

Anari yelped. The bastard had his finger up her ass! She choked back a sob, wishing she were home preparing the evening meal, waiting for her sisters to get back from the market. The finger in her ass wiggled and probed and her humiliation was complete...or so she thought.

He moved up close behind her, reached around and grabbed one breast in a cruel grip. “Sorry, pet. Didn’t I mention I preferred ass fucking? And pain. I adore hurting pretty, young virgins.” He squeezed her breast again, forcing a cry from her. “Oh, how nicely you scream. I simply must have you.”

Suddenly, a large shadow fell over them and a man’s voice spoke. “You say you’re a virgin, wench?”

Serephim’s Belt, she thought she might faint. He was a giant of a man, dressed in tight, black leather pants and a black vest that highlighted a lightly furred chest with slabs of muscle. To her everlasting shock, two zippers to the left and right front of the pants’ waist formed a flap that would fold down, allowing for unimpeded access to his cock. The cut of his breeches left little to the imagination, stretched as they were over lean hips and massive thighs. Sunlight glinted on his jet-black, spiked hair as he scrutinized her. There was a hint of cruelty around his full, sensual mouth and sly silver eyes.

He leaned down, put his face close to hers and whispered, “Don’t be afraid. I’m going to fix it so this bastard won’t want you, then buy you myself.”

She felt reassured for about five seconds, until she felt him grope between her thighs. One very large, blunt finger found her opening and drove into her with a single thrust. Anari screamed in pain.

Son of a death-poxed whore. He’d taken her hymen. She uttered a feral growl and tried to bite him but the big oaf merely grinned and held up his finger, stained with her virgin’s blood.

“Oops,” he smirked at the well-dressed man. “Looks like she’s not a maiden anymore.”

The crowd’s reaction varied from dismay to outright laughter. The auctioneer was not happy to have lost what would likely have been a bidding war for her.

“You just bought yourself a slave,” he growled.

The big man merely shrugged. “She’ll be no hardship to have around.”

The filthy little man snorted, deducting the amount from her purchaser’s data card. “Says you.” He turned to his assistants. “Cut her loose.”

Anari crumpled to her knees, anger and humiliation warring with the pain throbbing between her legs. Would this torment never end? Had she merely exchanged one ruthless captor for another?

Her new owner towered above her. “On your feet, wench.” When she didn’t respond fast enough, he grabbed her hair, pulling her head back so she could see him clearly. “Obedience is a quality I look for in a slave. Shall I leave you here to their tender mercies, or will you follow me willingly?”

A sob escaped her despite her strongest efforts to squelch it. “Yes. Yes, I’ll come.”

Her captor’s eyes burned with lust as his gaze roamed over her naked form. “Yes, you will, wench.”

Anari gasped. His meaning was certainly clear enough. Before the day was out, he’d have her beneath him and expect her enjoyment. An involuntary shudder shook her and he raised an eyebrow.

“Am I so bad, woman?” He cast a meaningful glance at the wealthy man who’d intended to hurt her, then the sniggering oaf who’d wanted to pull out her teeth. “I could always make a deal with one of them. Your choice. I’ve already popped your cherry, the hard part’s over.”

Anari snatched her clothes and forced herself to her feet, dressing quickly. “It would seem you are the lesser of evils, sir.” She didn’t balk as his strong hand closed around her wrist.

Shaken to the core, she would have gone quietly had it not been for the screams. Her head whipped around just in time to see her twin sisters hauled onto the block. Her hand flew to her mouth as the auctioneer yanked the coarse robes from their bodies to display them to the lascivious crowd.

Whatever relief she might have felt escaping the sadistic merchant was gone in a flash with the sight of Sumi and Katri stripped bare, displayed like exotic animals. This was all her fault. If only she’d given in to that disgusting pirate. Her precious honor was not worth the price of her sisters’ lives.

Fool. You selfish fool. What have you done?

Someone standing at the foot of the stage shouted out a price and Anari craned her neck to see who it was. A tall, muscular man with golden skin and feline features was bidding aggressively for her sisters.

“Two fine specimens, gentlemen, maidens both, and only seventeen years old. Milky white breasts, soft skin, hair the color of ripe wheat.” The auctioneer’s assistants forced their legs apart. “Natural blondes, as you can plainly see.” The crowd laughed. He spun one sister around and forced her to bend over, legs spread wide. “And just look at that pretty pink pussy, boys. She’ll have a juicy, red cherry, ripe for the picking. Imagine having two of them.”

Anari turned to the man who had purchased her, clutching at his arm. “Please, sir, I beg of you, buy my sisters.”

The man paused and looked at the two delicate girls before shaking his head.

“I have no use for three women. You’ll be trouble enough, unless I’ve missed my guess.” He gave her a tug. “Come away, wench, and spare yourself some grief.”

She was sobbing now, begging. “Please, oh please. Do not allow this to happen.” Her father would be inconsolable. “It’s my fault.” Oh, Father, please forgive me for my careless abuse of your trust. I should have protected them.

Her captor grasped her arm. “There was nothing you could have done, wench. Dry your tears and come with me now.”

The bidding was brisk, blonde-haired women were such a rarity in a blended society that the men shouted to be heard. Anari cried out when the auctioneer shouted, “Sold.”

“Katri. Sumi,” Anari cried. She was going to be sick.

With a strength born of desperation, she yanked herself from her captor’s grasp to run to her sisters, but he snatched her back against his steel-hard body. She cried their names again as their master led them away, naked and in chains.

“It’s too late, wench. They are beyond your reach now. Take comfort in the fact their master is not the same man who wanted you. Come, we must leave this place.”

Anari fell to her knees and wrapped her arms around his legs. “Please, Master, I beg of you, buy my sisters from that man. I will do all that you ask of me, without complaint.” Tears streamed down her face, soaking the coarse material that covered her body. His impassive expression spurred her into action. She pulled the scratchy gown over her head and spread herself on the floor, legs wide apart. “Take me now, for all to see, if it pleases you. Sir, they are my sisters.”

Fluent curses exploded from his sensuous mouth as he leaned down and yanked her to her feet. “Dress yourself, woman,” he barked. “And be quick about it.”

She yanked the gown over her head. “I hate you!” she shrieked in anger, and shoved him as hard as she could, nearly knocking him off the platform.

“You little she-devil!” he roared, snatching her up and tossing her over his shoulder.

Anari kicked and scratched, trying in every way she knew to free herself from the strength of his grip around her thighs. At the very last minute, her sisters turned their heads, seeking her out. The look of utter desolation on their faces would stay with her forever. She levered her body up, arms outstretched, and keened their names as they disappeared from sight. At that moment, Anari Fury’s life changed forever.

* * * * *

He hadn’t even spoken to her. No words of comfort, no reassurances, nothing. He simply lengthened his stride, climbed the ramp to the docking station and unceremoniously dumped her into a seat, strapping her in as if she were a side of randwulf beef. The bastard hadn’t even spared her a glance as he checked the hovercraft’s gauges. How she hated him.

Gods’ blood, could her life get any more complicated? Where in the galaxy was that stranger taking her sisters? What of her father? Did he even know his daughters weren’t home awaiting his arrival? And what of her own fate? What kind of man now had control of her life? She huddled in her seat, mute with fear.

“Miss, you need to know, nothing I do to you will cause you any permanent physical harm.” He pressed a switch on his wrist cuff and his appearance changed. Anari gawked at him, shocked. Long brown hair swirled around his shoulders as he moved. Green and gold tattoos marked the corners of strange, grayish, opaque eyes, identifying him as a super soldier. Serephim’s Belt, a genetically enhanced soldier? His face was narrow, with cheekbones like knife blades, and the olive skin tone of an Earth native. The hump on his nose told her it had been broken at least once, but his mouth was wide, with straight white teeth and remarkably sensuous lips.

He had to be over two meters tall, and she put his weight at close to a hundred thirty-six kilos. His shoulders far surpassed the width of the pilot’s backrest. She glanced at his lap and swallowed hard. Holy shit. The mother of all erections pressed against his leather breeches, showcased by the V of the harness straps where they clipped into the seat between his massive thighs. Everything about him was different. Suddenly, she was sorry she’d never been a praying woman.

He glanced over at her as her eyes rose from his lap to his face. She reached out to touch his hair, jerking her hand back at the last second.

“Personal hologram device,” was all he said. Seconds later, the retention claws released the small craft and they eased into the traffic flow above the buildings. “What’s your name?”

She gave him her best scowl. “I’d supposed it must be wench.”

A sharp bark of laughter escaped him. “You’re a plucky little thing, I’ll give you that. Now let’s try again. What’s your name, princess?”

She folded her arms over her chest and glared. “Anari.”

“That’s it? Just Anari?”

“What more do you need?”

He shrugged. “Nothing, I suppose. Where are you from, Just Anari?”

She sighed dramatically. “Sa-Ro Five.”

He raised an eyebrow. “How’d you manage to wind up in the Vergosa System?”

She clenched her jaw before answering. "I pissed off a pirate by refusing to spend the night with him. He didn't care for the manner of rebuff."

"What did you do?"

"I squeezed his balls until they were sacks of jelly. Apparently, he can no longer perform as he once did."

He whistled through his teeth. "That would do it." He paused for a moment. "Why didn't you just fuck him and get it over with?"

"Because I was engaged to be married and, until you came along, I was still a virgin."

It didn't escape her that he completely ignored the accusation. "So, where's your man now? Why didn't he come after you?"

"Because he's dead," she said, her voice cracking.

He looked away then. "I'm sorry, princess."

"Yeah? Well, so am I."

He sighed. "Just try and relax. We have much to discuss and we'll be spending a few days here. I'll pick up some clothes for you and we'll get some rest before we leave for our next destination."

Anari nodded. "What's your name?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

"Duncan Storm," he answered.

She offered up a weak smile. "Thank you for keeping me from that man, Duncan Storm." Her flesh crawled thinking about what the rich merchant would have done to her. He would have hurt her, badly, she suspected. As distasteful as the thought of servitude was to her, a part of her truly was grateful to her new captor.

He gave her a wicked grin. "You'll be thanking me in a more tangible way once we're out of this hovercraft, princess."

Shit. Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

* * * * *

Duncan programmed the hovercraft for their destination and put the controls on autopilot, leaving his hands free to enter his report into his reader. He wouldn't have to do any flying until they actually left the planet. He'd have just enough time to get his report to Vonner before they reached the resort. Hell, he had to have something to do with his hands besides put them on the tempting morsel currently occupying the passenger seat.

The woman had spine, he'd give her that. She'd stared her tormentors down, despite the trouble it might bring her later. His jaw clenched when he remembered the wealthy merchant who'd shoved his finger up her ass. He had little patience for anyone who abused the weak or helpless. That one deserved some pain of his own and Duncan made a mental note to find out who he was so he could see it delivered personally.

He finished his report, considering the words he'd entered into the device. The assignment had gone as planned, the only glitch being Anari's maidenhead. A small price to pay for her freedom, he reasoned, and he'd been ordered to rescue her by any means necessary. Besides, he intended to make it up to her in the most pleasurable manner possible. He grinned, recalling the expression on her face when she'd seen the evidence of his desire for her.

Too bad about her sisters, though, but even that had been planned. Word was, Ulric Vonner had given the Sheta shifter a blank check for their purchase. The girls would be kept as pampered pets and returned to their father when the time was right. If the Sheta didn't decide to keep them. Healthy women were in short supply on Zeta-phi.

Vonner hadn't told him why it was so important to separate the sisters and Duncan hadn't

asked. The owner of Bounty Hunters, Inc. played his cards close to the vest, but he'd been very specific about the business with her sisters. Anari was to remain in the dark as to their whereabouts. All he knew was that Vonner wanted the redhead kept under a watchful eye, and that job had been assigned to him.

Who are you, Anari Fury? She hadn't told him her last name and he considered that for a moment. As a senator's daughter, her name would mean something. Why hadn't she used it? She was a prized pawn in someone's game and Vonner was evidently a player.

His gaze swept over her. Exhausted as she was, smudged with the dirt and grime of captivity, she was a true beauty. Cleaned up, she would capture the breath and heart of many a man who glanced in her direction. Duncan knew himself to be a rough man, one not given to sentiment or tender feelings. He would protect her, as his assignment required, and he'd fuck her every chance he got, but lust was as far as it went. He shoved his seat back and made himself comfortable. Bo Bay resort was less than ten minutes out and they would spend a couple of days there while he filled her in on what would be expected of her.

* * * * *

The moon was rising over the Unisan Sea, the silvery orb's reflection sending shards of light bouncing on the waves. The streets were filled with revelers, mostly male, out for a good time at the multitude of sex clubs that had sprung up since the Algeran pirates had taken over control.

Street hookers competed with flesh hawkers standing outside the clubs, and when Duncan stopped abruptly to avoid bumping into a young prostitute, Anari walked right into him. Squeaking an apology, she continued to stare in awe at her surroundings.

Obviously, she'd never been to this particular corner of the universe, if her reaction to the flashing signs and lewd crowds was any indication. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist and gave her an impatient tug now and then as she stumbled along behind him, gawking at the neon lights and colorfully dressed whores. He'd reactivated his holographic appearance so no one outside his work environment would recognize him. Vonner had been very specific in that no one must know the woman was in the care of Bounty Hunters, Inc. or that she was being transported by a man most people would consider a fugitive. Toward that end, he led her through the door of an intimate little bungalow he'd rented the day before. The private cottages were notorious for serving the needs of the wealthy and dissolute.

She balked when she read the nameplate on the door, prying at his fingers in an attempt to escape his grasp. "A training suite? You dare," she gasped. "You dare bring me to this place? Even I have heard what goes on here."

"Then you shouldn't be surprised by anything you see, should you, pet?" He suppressed a grin at the look of heated outrage staining her cheeks. "Besides, Bo Bay's private bungalows offer excellent room service, luxurious baths and very soft beds." He chuckled as her face and neck flushed a brighter red, and unlocked the door.

"Bastard son of death-poxed whore," she hissed, and set about trying to pry his fingers back once more.

He merely laughed until she kicked his shin, hard enough to make him grunt. "That's enough of that, wench," he growled, leaning down to toss her over his shoulder.

She uttered a pained "oof" as her diaphragm met his shoulder, then promptly burrowed her mouth against the small of his back and bit him.

"Ow." He paused before entering to smack her ass. The resounding crack and her shriek of anger drew the laughter of several men passing by.

“Give her what-for, mate,” a rakish-looking pirate hooted.

Duncan threw back his head and laughed. “That and more, mate. Rest assured, the next scream leaving her beautiful throat will be one of pleasure.” At her outraged gasp, he swatted her again, just for fun. He wondered if Anari aroused would be as entertaining as Anari pissed off.

She was still cursing and pounding his back when he kicked open the door. He looked around, always pleasantly surprised by the luxury of the rooms. A massive four-poster bed filled the center, complete with an array of devices for those inclined to bondage play. He especially liked the heavily padded leather footboard that converted to a spanking bench, and the suspension device that could be lowered from the ceiling. That little detail ought to send her right through the roof.

He reached the bed in two long strides and dumped her into the very middle, putting his finger over his lips to indicate she should be quiet.

“Stay put,” he barked. He pulled a small device from an inner vest pocket and pointed it all around the room and into the bathroom. Returning, he locked the door, grabbed a chair, turned it, and set it near the edge of the bed. Straddling it, he rested his arms on the back and looked her in the eye.

“The room is clean. We can speak freely. Miss Fury, my name is Duncan Storm and I work for Bounty Hunters, Inc. I’ve been tasked with rescuing you from the block and bringing you here.”

“I—I don’t understand.”

“Your father was taken, under cover of darkness, from his chambers at the Senate building.” He opened his reader and keyed in pictures of her father’s abduction and showed them to her. “We believe the masked men are Amalgamation soldiers. Do you know of any reason they might want your father?”

She raised a trembling hand to her mouth to cover a sob. “No, Mr. Storm. My father has always been a staunch supporter of the Amalgamation. He’s a senator, for mercy’s sake. What is it they think he’s done?”

Duncan shook his head. “No one knows. No charges have been filed and not a word has leaked out that he’s even missing.”

“What shall I do? How can I help? You see what’s been done to me, sir, and to my sisters.” She gasped in horror. “My sisters.”

“Your sisters are fine and will be well-cared-for until this is over. It is your help I need, Anari.”

“Of course, Mr. Storm, anything.”

Duncan took a deep breath and set out to explain what he needed. “My employer believes your father’s abduction has something to do with his early research. Some biological project he was working on, but no one seems able to find any records.”

Anari shook her head. “Well, no, there wouldn’t be. He never published anything. He shut down his research and destroyed all his work.”

“Why?”

When she shrugged, he reached for her hand and held it. “This could be very important, Anari. Do you remember anything?”

Tears welled in her eyes. “I was just a child. I remember he told me the world was not ready for his discoveries. And I remember going to the lab with him, helping him log his formulas.”

“Miss Fury, if the Amalgamation wants that information, you could be in very grave

danger once they find out what you know.”

“But I know nothing... I...oh, suffering gods. They can extract the formulas whether or not I remember, and that—”

“Could very well kill you.”

Anari slid off the bed and began to pace, her red-gold hair swaying as she walked. Duncan could almost see her mind working, trying to think of anything that would help them solve the mystery of her father’s disappearance. She stopped.

“Does my and my sisters’ abduction have anything to do with what happened to my father?”

Duncan shook his head. “So far, we don’t think so, but we can’t be certain. We think it’s a case of Tur’s wanting to cause you more pain. The thing is, I have it on good authority that Tur wants a report from the flesh peddler, Hurik, as to who purchased you and for what purpose.”

Anari stopped in mid-pace, cursing under her breath. “Yes, he made that very clear when he visited me in that filthy animal stall they used for a cell.”

“Anari, I cannot safely get you off of this planet and out of the Vergosa System until he receives word that you are...receiving the treatment he set out for you.”

Anari’s golden skin paled visibly. “You mean, I must...we must. That’s why we’re in a training suite. You intend to...initiate me?”

Duncan took a lungful of air and exhaled on a sigh. “There are things you must learn to do—sexual things. I will have to take you out in public tomorrow, make sure you are seen by those who are watching. There are clubs where people go to...show off how well they have trained their sex slaves, or to punish them if they are recalcitrant. Are you going to be able to do this?”

“I said as much, did I not?” To her credit, Anari straightened her shoulders. “Is that what you meant when you told me that the things you will do to me will cause no permanent physical harm?”

Duncan gave her a terse nod and stood up. “Put the chair back where it belongs, Anari.”

Anari blinked. “I don’t understand.”

“When a Master gives a slave an order, she is expected to obey, immediately, or she will be punished.”

Duncan stifled a smile when her jaw clenched. She brushed past him to pick up the chair, replacing it in its designated spot. “Happy now?”

He folded his arms over his chest. “That’s the attitude that will earn you a public punishment, wench. Best you learn now what that entails.” He pointed to the chair. “Bring it back and put it in front of me, seat side out.” There went that mutinous jut of the chin again, but she did as he told her and he sat down. “Now raise your dress and lie across my lap for your punishment.”

Anari gasped. “I will not.”

“You will, Anari, because if I have to make you, I promise your little backside will blush much brighter when I’m done with you. Now do not make me tell you again. Lie across my lap for your punishment.”

Duncan kept his face expressionless as she took a couple of steps toward him, then stopped, teeth worrying her bottom lip. With an impatient sigh, he grabbed her wrist and gave her a hard tug, tumbling her across his lap.

“Don’t you dare!” she shrieked, struggling to get up.

Duncan rested one arm across her middle and caressed her upturned ass. This shouldn’t

be turning him on, but it was, and his cock thickened as she squirmed on his lap. “You were warned, Anari.”

His hand came down on her perfectly shaped bottom with a loud crack.

“When your Master tells you to do something, your reply is ‘yes Master’ and you do it immediately.”

“Ow. You bastard,” Anari screeched.

Oh, she was making this too easy. Whap. “You do not curse your Master.”

She cursed and burrowed her hand under his pants leg, tearing out a fistful of hair. Super soldiers didn’t feel pain as ordinary men might, so she hadn’t really hurt him, but he figured it was time for a good lesson.

Whap, whap, whap, whap. “Never strike your Master or otherwise attempt to harm him.”

Suffering gods, but her ass was a pretty pink. He caressed the tender flesh gently. “You know, they say that spanking can be extremely erotic,” he said softly. “The friction of my hand against your delicious little ass causes the blood to rush to the area, making you more sensitive. Now spread your legs, Anari, and let’s see if my theory is right.”

Anari made a little choking noise in her throat and inched her legs apart just enough to allow him to dip a finger into her pussy. When he drew it back, it was glistening with evidence of her arousal.

“I thought so,” Duncan said with a chuckle. “You’re wet and ready to be mounted.”

“No,” Anari said. But she gasped when he slid back into her moist heat, pumping until she moaned.

“All right, lesson number one is over. What have you learned?” He lifted her up and sat her on his lap. When she refused to speak, he grasped her chin and made her look at him. “You have a lot to learn before we go out in public tomorrow. Now tell me what you’ve learned.”

Bless her heart, her face turned bright red as she answered. “When my Master tells me to do something, I say ‘yes Master’ and do it immediately. I do not curse my Master, nor do I try to harm him in any way.”

“Good girl. Now hop up. I’m going to start a bath.”

The black marble tub was large enough for four people. Duncan leaned down and twisted the gold-plated spigots to run a bath and pulled off his shirt. An incensed expletive from the other room told him Anari had discovered the suspension system attached to the ceiling over the bed. Since he’d likely put it to good use at some point, a little lesson in pleasure and control would serve him well.

“Come in here, Anari,” he bellowed. He wasn’t really angry with her but his tone of voice hid that fact. A little fear went a long way toward gaining a new slave’s cooperation—or so he imagined.

“What?” she snapped, coming to the bathroom door.

Gods, she was sassy. “You need a bath. Take off that filthy rag and get in the tub.”

“I will not.”

Her voice said no, but her eyes reflected her indecision. “Since you are new to this, I will tell you one last time, Anari, to undress and get in the tub or I’ll do it for you. I assure you, the consequences will be much more unpleasant than what you just experienced.”

Duncan could barely contain his laughter as she glared. If looks could kill, he’d be dead where he stood.

“Fine,” she snarled, stomping into the room. She refused to look at him as she disrobed and stepped into the tub.

“Sit,” he ordered, kicking off his boots. His pants followed, along with the PHD, and he stood before her nude, his erection twitching against his belly. She sat, arms covering her breasts. She gasped. “Surely you don’t intend—”

“Oh, but I do.” He stepped into the steaming water and eased down behind her, drawing her rigid back against him. He draped her luscious red hair across her shoulder and placed a kiss on the curve of her neck. “Relax, Anari. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“You think rape is not hurtful?” she huffed.

He stiffened. “I have no intention of raping you. Believe me, by the time we’re done, you’ll be begging me to fuck you.”

“I sincerely doubt that, you egotistical oaf.”

He smiled and reached for the soap. “Oh ye of little faith.”

Determined to take his time with her, Duncan soaped his hands and ran them over her shoulders and back, his fingers pressing against tight muscles to ease the tension. He rinsed, nibbled her neck and soaped up again, skimming her ribs as he reached around to cup her breasts in his slippery hands.

She stiffened. “What are you doing?”

“Washing you. I intend to wash all of you, princess. You need to get used to my hands on you.” He demonstrated by exploring the creamy globes, molding them to his hands, tweaking her nipples.

His hands soaped and rinsed, stroked and teased until she moaned with pleasure. “A kiss, Anari,” he purred. “Lean back and turn your head.”

She turned her head and he pressed his mouth to hers. Softly, at first, just a gentle glide of his lips across hers, a playful nip at her bottom lip before sucking it tenderly.

“Open your mouth so I can kiss you properly.” She opened for him and his tongue darted inside, swirling against hers.

Duncan caressed her breasts, teasing her nipples as he rinsed her, preparing them for his mouth. He deepened the kiss as his hands found her waist, turned her, and set her astride his thighs.

“Shhh,” he soothed, when she struggled to escape from the erection pressed against her belly. Better she get used to it now so what would come later would be less of a surprise. Circling his arm around her trim waist, he pulled her closer to capture a full breast between his lips. One quick, tight suck had her gasping and arching into the tug of his mouth. Gods’ balls, she was responsive, even when she didn’t want to be. Teaching Anari the pleasures of the flesh was going to be a treat he wouldn’t soon forget. His free hand stroked her other breast as he continued to feed.

Duncan smothered a groan. Hard as an anvil, his balls ached and his cock twitched with the need to be relieved. For an innocent wench, she had the instincts of an inspired whore. He wanted nothing more than to lift her up and impale her but it was too soon. He’d meant it when he told her she would beg him to fuck her, and this was just the beginning of an all-out offensive assault on her senses.

He released his hold on her as he teased her breasts, sliding his hands along the inside of her thighs with a featherlight touch. She was panting now, grasping the sides of the tub to hold herself upright. He ran his thumbs along the crease of her legs, caressing the delicate flesh while barely grazing the outer lips of her pussy. She whimpered and he parted her folds with his thumbs, trapping her clit between them as he stroked ever so gently. He knew if he dipped a finger into her core, he’d find her slippery with need. He withdrew his hands and pulled her

mouth to his for another searing kiss. “The water’s getting cold, time to get out.”

Lesson number two complete.

Anari blinked. What? He wanted to get out? He was stopping? She sat back on her heels, confused. What kind of game was he playing? Did he actually think she’d beg him to make love to her? Not likely. She surged to her feet and stepped out of the tub, furious with herself for responding so wantonly to his touch.

She reached for a towel, only to have it snatched from her grasp as he climbed out and stepped up close to her.

“I’ll dry you off, princess.”

Anari gritted her teeth. She didn’t miss the laughter in his voice as he spoke to her.

“Fine,” she snapped, holding her body stiff.

The whole process began again as he rubbed her down with the soft towel. She shuddered as he held her close, his erection snug against her lower back. When one hand cupped a breast, she bit her bottom lip to keep from moaning, but the battle was lost when a long, thick finger slid between her legs to delve into her pussy.

She moaned as his lips grazed the lobe of her ear and he whispered, hoarsely. “This is where I’m going to put my cock later tonight, princess.” His finger thrust deep, then retreated to circle her clit. “And this is where my mouth will be in just a few minutes.”

Why, oh why, couldn’t she keep quiet? It was as if she had no control over her voice or her body as his finger stroked over her clit, circling it, pressing hard then moving to dip back into her pussy. Two fingers thrust into her and she cried out. She moved against those probing fingers, moaning, on the verge of losing all her pride and begging him to take her—just take her and get it over with before she died of the wanting. Then he left her again, swinging her into his strong arms and striding from the room.

The mattress gave beneath her as he placed her on the edge of the bed and pushed her onto her back. He didn’t spare her a word, he just lifted her legs over his shoulders, spread her wide and buried his face in her pussy.

He devoured her. Lips, tongue and teeth ate at her. He gave her no quarter, forcing cry after cry from her as his fingers thrust deep, stretching her for what would come later. Something wicked and hot coiled tight inside her, and her legs gripped the breadth of his shoulders as she ground against his ravaging mouth. His hands found her breasts, plucking at the nipples as she cried out.

She might have maintained some sense of dignity had he not stopped, looked her straight in the eye and spoken.

“You like what I’m doing to you, princess. Come for me now.” Then he took her clit between his lips to nurse in earnest.

“Whuu...oooh,” she cried. Vicious heat and ravenous pleasure built inside her. What was happening? What was he doing to her? His fingers moved faster, his lips sucked harder. It hit her like a wave of scorching heat washing over her as her body went stiff, then began to quake. She screamed.

Anari lay still, gasping for breath as Duncan’s mouth leisurely lapped and sipped, causing her to whimper as tiny shards of pleasure, bordering on pain, contracted her pussy. “Gods’ balls, what did you do to me, Duncan Storm?”

He eased her legs from around his shoulders and rose to his feet. “Gave you your first orgasm, princess.” He smiled smugly. “Now climb under the covers and get some rest. You can

count on several more when I get back from my meeting. And, Anari, my cock will fill you this night, so you might as well resign yourself to that fact while I'm gone."

She frowned. "You're leaving me here alone?"

"Just for a while. I have to meet someone, then I'll return to your waiting arms." He scooped up her tattered dress as he headed for the door. "Just in case you get any ideas about leaving without me. I'll have some food sent to the room. Eat hearty, you're going to need your strength."

Chapter Two

Duncan made his way to Quasar, a respectable watering hole in the upscale clubbing district. His informant sat alone at a table in a darkened corner of the bar wearing an inscrutable expression. Duncan didn't know much about him other than that he owed Vonner his life. There was something dark and dangerous in his past, but what, no one knew. Except for Vonner, who was an enigma wrapped in a mystery.

The little Duncan knew of Vonner was based on the few interactions they'd shared—his initial employment meeting and the times the bounty hunters met to take new assignments. Whatever his story, Vonner kept it to himself and that was just fine with Duncan. The less he knew about people, the easier it would be when he had to part company with them.

He took a seat across from the informant. When the server approached, Duncan shook his head. He never partook of intoxicating substances.

"You got my request?" he asked.

The man nodded. "I did."

"So tell me about her, and the other one."

"Smart. Fiercely loyal to her family. Not a big fan of the Amalgamation," the informant told him. "As for the man, I ran a check on the auction records based on your information. His name is Ruic E'coyo. Has a reputation for purchasing pretty, young virgins, and a penchant for knife play when he gets tired of them." The man gave him a sardonic smile. "You did her a favor. I could handle this if you'd like."

E'coyo was a menace and Duncan had no tolerance for men who got their rocks off by hurting women and children. Anari had shown courage in the face of danger and he'd damn well defend her honor. He knew Inferno well and had just the right revenge in mind for Ruic E'coyo.

Inferno had a reputation for serving patrons with more exotic tastes in sexual activities. Upstairs, it did a fair job of passing for a typical meat market, but downstairs was where the real action took place. Duncan nodded at the door muscle and headed to the bar where E'coyo stood, eyeing the talent. Duncan wrapped an arm around a buxom blonde and whispered in her ear. They had a quick, quiet conversation during which he slipped her several credits, then he approached his target.

E'coyo glared at him. "I thought you'd be locked in a room completing your deflowering of the little bitch."

Duncan shrugged. "Didn't buy her for myself. I bought her for the old man I work for, and now I learn the old bastard went and got himself killed this afternoon. What the fuck am I supposed to do with her now?"

The merchant's eyes lit up. "Perhaps I could take her off your hands—at a reduced price, of course. She is damaged goods, after all."

Duncan raised a brow. "Of course."

"Where is she now?"

"I stuck her in a room downstairs. Thought I might auction her off again, but if you're really interested..."

"Oh, I'm interested all right."

E'coyo's eyes filled with a rapacious light as he unconsciously licked his lips. Duncan knew a moment of revulsion so complete his immediate instinct was to rid the world of the perverted bastard. Instead, he slung an arm around E'coyo's shoulder and guided him toward the

downstairs entryway. “Well then, my friend, do I have a surprise for you.”

The two men bounded down the stairs and knocked. Moments later, the door opened and Duncan followed the merchant inside. With a nod, two massively enhanced men caged E’coyo between them, propelling him through the door to a glass-enclosed room. As he was being stripped and secured to a submission bench, Duncan strolled to the door and pushed the intercom.

“I thought it only fair for you to experience some of what you like to dish out to innocent women.” He smiled at the two bulky attendants and the crowd gathering to observe. “He’s yours for the night, boys. Feel free to pass him around to the other patrons. No lubricant.”

Duncan left the intercom open so the observers could hear the cries of his victim. “Have fun, E’coyo. Be sure and give your audience a good show. I’m going back to my room to fuck my pretty little virgin.” The last thing he heard as the door closed behind him was a screech of pain.

Anari lay curled in the middle of the huge bed, confusion warring with delight. So that was what an orgasm felt like. She’d been kissed before, of course. She’d been engaged to be married, after all, and she’d lived on a farm so she had a general idea of how the mating business was done. What surprised her was the intimacy of the act, and the heated passion she’d felt as Duncan’s hands and mouth worked between her legs.

Guilt assailed her as well. Keltar had been a good man, and Laran Tur had ordered his death because of her. They’d never had a chance to be together. Would she have responded to him the way she’d responded to Duncan? Somehow, she thought not. His kisses had never heated her blood the way Duncan’s did. He’d never even attempted to touch her in any of the ways her bold captor touched her. Had she loved him or had she agreed to marry him because that’s what her father wanted? Gods, it was all so confusing.

And what of Duncan himself? There was a barely contained violence within the man, yet he’d taken the time to calm her, to pleasure her. He was going to help her find her family. Wasn’t he?

She wasn’t a woman who spent an inordinate amount of time dwelling on the cards life dealt her. Up to this point, life had been good—though she’d lost her teaching career, she’d discovered a talent for growing food for the body if not the soul. She’d been content with her lot in life. Happy, even. A beloved daughter and sister, her home life had been better than that of many people she knew.

Keltar had loved her and would have been a devoted husband. His touch might not have thrilled her like Duncan’s, but she would never have been fearful, never have doubted he loved her, never have been treated as less than a cherished wife. But all that had changed when Laran Tur cast his eyes toward her.

She was nothing now. A slave. A plaything in the eyes of the law. Duncan could do with her whatever he chose. She had no choice but to trust him. Suffering gods, a super soldier, bred to fight and die to protect Amalgamation interests. How could she possibly trust him?

Anari shook her head. She’d heard stories of certain generations of super soldiers able to resist the indoctrination techniques of the Military Sciences Labs, though only the newest models had been sent to Sa-Ro Five to establish the base. Aside from crystolium, agriculture was the next most profitable intergalactic resource, and the farms on Sa-Ro Five produced the best crops in the Secundus System and beyond. According to Amalgamation officials, protecting that resource was only logical. Just like shutting down the schools had been “logical”. But the people

on her home planet weren't stupid. They were well aware of the fact that two or three generations without education would put the planet's citizens firmly under the thumb of the ruling classes. They educated their children in the privacy of their homes.

Total domination of the universe, that was the Amalgamation's plan. Why did so few see it? Why were people so willingly led like cattle to slaughter? And slavery was part of it. Gods, it made her tired just thinking about what was happening. She was about to snuggle down and take a nap when someone tapped at the door.

"Who's there?" she called uneasily.

"Room service, miss. Shall I leave the cart in front of the door?"

"That would be fine. Thank you."

Suddenly, she realized she was starving. All she'd eaten in the past few days was some dry bread, a bit of cheese and some bitter-tasting wine. She yanked the top sheet from the bed, wrapping it around her before going to the door. Despite its luxurious amenities, this resort had a scandalous reputation, so she flipped the burglar bar and peeked out into the hallway. Empty. She released the bar and opened the door, rolling the cart inside.

Anari only recognized about half the foods on the overloaded cart, but she was too hungry not to try them all. She filled her plate with a little of everything and kept an open mind as she began to eat. A slice of roasted meat first—it tasted like shearling, but not as strong. The vegetables were a colorful mix of red, yellow, green and purple, all sautéed in a rich-flavored oil. The bread was crusty on the outside and delicately light on the inside and she spread it liberally with some kind of soft cheese. She'd have to be careful not to eat too much too fast or she'd have a stomachache. Still, it felt good to be clean, warm and full, despite worrying if the man who'd purchased her sisters was treating them as well.

Things could be worse, she reasoned, attempting to allay her fears of what was to come. Duncan hadn't harmed her, despite the fact that he'd brought her to the most notorious resort in the known universe. A place frequented by hedonists and pirates. Gods' balls, they'd covered the ceiling in expensive glass mirror, if that wasn't depraved she didn't know what was. And there was some kind of pulley device hanging above the bed and what looked like polished metal shepherd's hooks jutting out of each corner post of the frame. At first she'd thought they were there to hang candle lamps from, until she realized the ends formed eyebolts. Heaven only knew what that was for.

Still, he'd plucked her from a very dangerous situation, saved her from a sadistic slave master, treated her to a scalding orgasm and provided her with the first decent meal she'd had in days. And it certainly didn't hurt that he was probably the best-looking man she'd ever laid eyes on. The opaque eyes accented with the strange tattoos gave him an exotic look.

The sheer masculine beauty of him mystified her. She was horrified by the acts she would be forced to perform in public. Nevertheless, if she had to give her body to a virtual stranger, at least she'd be giving it to one who heated her blood.

As if her thoughts had summoned him, she heard the thump of boots outside the door. The security light switched from red to green and the door opened. The look he gave her betrayed nothing about his frame of mind. He merely studied her for a moment, then closed and locked the door behind him.

"The meal was to your satisfaction?" he inquired, hanging a garment bag on the door hook.

She nodded. "It was quite good, thank you."

Amusement glinted in his strangely colored eyes. "So proper and polite," he teased,

removing his shirt as he crossed the room. "One might never imagine you'd had a screaming orgasm less than three hours ago. Or that you're soon to have another one."

Anari watched through hooded lids as he sat in a chair to remove his boots. "How gentlemanly of you to remind me of my unladylike behavior."

He chuckled and stood up to dispense with his breeches. "There's not a gentlemanly bone in my body, pet. You'd do well to remember that. Nor do I desire a lady in my bed."

Her eyes widened as he approached. Why, he was touching himself! His hand cupped his balls, then wrapped around his cock, stroking gently. Dear gods, it was getting bigger. She licked her lips nervously and scooted back on the bed. She stifled a yelp when he grasped her ankle and pulled her to the edge of the mattress.

"What I desire...no, what I require in my bed is a woman who appreciates a man who can pleasure her, and who pleases me in turn." He tugged the sheet away from her body, casting it aside with a laugh as she glowered at him. "I think it will be very entertaining to teach you how to please me, Anari. So what say we get started?"

She gasped in shock as he grabbed her other ankle, spread her legs wide apart, and bent her knees to her chest. Serephim's Belt, why was he just standing there looking at her that way? She dragged in a shuddering breath as her pussy clenched in anticipation of what he would do. What kind of woman was she that she could want this man to have his way with her?

"Very pretty," he said softly, sinking to his knees. "Shall I tell you what I'm going to do to you, Anari?" He leaned into her, giving her a light lick. "First, I'm going to lick you, like this." He gave her another light, teasing lick from the base of her pussy to her clit. "Then I'm going to suck on these pretty little lips." He sucked delicately at her labia, then ran his tongue the length of each plump lip, chuckling when she moaned. "You like that."

It wasn't a question and Anari saw no reason to deny it. "Yes...ah...yes."

When he released his grip on her ankles, she kept her legs drawn back to her chest. He opened her with his thumbs, gently caressing the tender flesh, then burrowed his tongue in her entrance.

Anari clutched the sheets, uttering a mindless moan as he sipped noisily. Never in her life would she have imagined a man could make her feel such things. She wanted to grab him by his hair and pull him hard against her, force him to give her what he'd given her earlier. She cried out when he found her clit, sucked it between his lips, nursing the tiny bud until she began to babble incoherently.

"Ohmygods," she crooned. "Duncan...please...I need—"

"What do you need, princess?" His voice was black velvet, smoky and hot as he slid one thick finger into her pussy. "Do you need my cock? Do you want it inside you, deep and hard inside you? Do you want me to fuck you, Anari?"

"Yes," she gasped, heat rushing to her face. "Yes, fuck me, Duncan."

"Mmm," he purred, rising above her. "I'll fuck you, princess."

She felt him then, the broad head of his cock gliding through her slick folds, entering her slowly, a centimeter at a time. Suffering gods, he was so thick. How could he possibly fit? Yet he did, easing into her, pausing to let her body adjust to the size of him, until he'd buried himself to the root. The fullness was almost painful, but more than that was the clenching ache that demanded all he could give her.

His mouth found hers and she returned his kiss, tasting herself on his lips, on his probing tongue. She ran her fingers through his hair, arching her body against him.

He began to move within her, easing back a bit, thrusting in, going slowly. She'd always

been a fast learner and she found her rhythm, moving in concert with him. Oh, but it felt so good. He was so big and hard, filling her so completely that she didn't know where he ended and she began. All she knew was she didn't want him to stop. Instinctively, she wrapped her legs around his hips and hung on for dear life.

Nothing in his life had prepared Duncan for how it felt to be surrounded by Anari's glove-tight pussy. He'd been with many women, some paid companions, others merely women of experience, but this was different. Her cunt gripped him like a vise, the friction heating the sensitive head of his cock even as her woman's juices coated him. Heaven help him, she was a snug fit. And she instinctively knew what to do, wrapping her legs around his hips to allow for deeper penetration. Yeah, she liked it, wanted more, and he was happy to give it to her.

Duncan braced his arms on the mattress and lowered his head to take a distended nipple into his mouth. He uttered a satisfied grunt when she cried out, pumping into her slowly, almost pulling out before going deep again. He liked her firm, young breasts, and savored them for a time, wringing more moans and cries of pleasure from her. Until he felt her inner muscles begin to tighten around him. He released the breast he was tormenting and took her mouth, his tongue thrusting deep.

Now. Now he picked up his pace, fucking her hard and fast, making her howl with need. He wrenched his mouth from hers. "Open your eyes, Anari," he rasped. "I want to see your eyes when you come."

She opened her eyes, staring into his as he thrust harder, faster, slamming into her. Her back bowed and her nails clawed at his shoulders. "Oooh," she wailed, arching her neck. He buried his mouth there, teeth closing over the tendon where neck met shoulder.

"Oh gods!" she cried. Her hips thrust up and her body stiffened for a beat before she screamed, bucking against him. He powered through the contractions, fucking her hard, reaching for his own completion. Finding it, he thrust one last time, shouting as he emptied his balls deep inside her.

Holy Christendom! He couldn't remember a single time when he'd come with the intensity he'd just experienced. He was still semihard, still deep inside her, so he lifted her up, turned, and stretched out on the bed, holding her against him. She was still breathing hard and he stroked her back, soothing her as she lay draped over him, her head on his chest.

Finally, she raised her head and looked at him. "Is it always like that?"

"No, but it should be, eh?" He smoothed his hands down her back, cupping her ass. "And it will be between the two of us, princess, you've my word on that."

He felt her stiffen. "So, you intend to—even once we're away from prying eyes?"

"Oh, I intend to have you in every way a man can have a woman, and you'll howl like a Sheta cat as you ride my cock."

He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing as the heat of temper rose in her cheeks. He'd figured that would get her blood boiling and he'd been right. She struggled in his arms but he held her tight and felt himself hardening inside her, laughing as she slapped at him.

"Let me go, you son of a stink weasel," she demanded in a strangled voice.

"I don't think so, princess. I'm not done with you."

She fought him but to no avail. He sat up, reached for the silk cords attached to the pulley above and wrapped them around her wrists. Giving it a quick tug, the cord reeled back, pulling her up to her knees. Making sure the restraints weren't too tight, he slid from beneath her and rolled to his feet.

“Don’t move,” he said, patting her bottom. “I’ll be right back. We’ll clean you up so I can eat that pretty pussy again, then I’ll show you a new trick or two for your debut tomorrow.”

“Conceited oaf,” she huffed when he returned with a sanicloth. “I hope you’ll fail to perform in public and humiliate yourself.”

He chuckled as he reached between her legs and gently cleaned her. “Never happen, princess. Just looking at you makes me hard.”

Duncan climbed back on the bed and sat facing her. She made for a fetching sight, perched on her knees, her arms stretched above her head. There was no denying she was a beauty, with that mass of red-gold hair swirling about her hips and tilted amber eyes that brought to mind the color of fine whiskey. Even the fact that those eyes were narrowed in anger and that sumptuous mouth was compressed to a straight line didn’t detract from her loveliness.

“I demand you release me from this contraption immediately,” she said through gritted teeth.

Duncan laughed and reached up to cup her breasts. “I don’t believe you’re in any position to make demands, princess. Besides, I’m of a mind to fuck you again, and I promise you’ll like it.”

“How is it your neck doesn’t snap from the weight of your swelled head? I loathe what you’ve done to me.”

He skimmed his thumbs across her nipples, chuckling at her sharp intake of breath. “Liar.”

“I’m not—” she gasped as his teeth scraped one jewel-hard tip.

“You lie very badly, princess,” he murmured against her heated flesh. “Did I mention you look very tasty displayed the way you are? And I’m a very hungry man.”

With those words of warning, his hands slid around her rib cage to press her against his waiting mouth. He suckled, he nipped, he laved, tormenting each sensitive breast until she arched into him, demanding more. If he hadn’t known he was the first, he would have thought some lucky man had spent a long time teaching her the ways of physical love. He’d never taken a virgin before, but somehow he hadn’t imagined an innocent would be so abandoned.

His hands moved to her ass, kneading lightly, sliding between the cheeks to gently brush her anus before teasing the outer edges of her pussy. “Open your legs, princess, let me in.” She trembled as she complied, moaning as his fingers glided into her, gently stirring, then departing. She was creaming so hard, he could hardly wait to taste her.

Duncan slid between her parted legs and stretched out. “You’re going to like this,” he purred. “No doubt about it, my lusty little princess.” Before she could protest, he grasped her waist and tugged. He adjusted the tension so the pulley fed out enough cord to allow him to settle her over his hungry mouth. He slid his tongue along her slit, sucking the moisture flowing from her. “Oh yeah,” he groaned. “That’s what I’m talking about. Honey, you have the sweetest pussy I’ve ever tasted.”

Duncan held Anari’s ass in his hands as she rode his mouth. He was remorseless as he fucked her with his tongue, then licked his way to her clit, sucking ruthlessly until she begged him to put her out of her misery. When she came, he slid from beneath her and climbed to his knees, pulling her back against his chest.

“Now,” he said thickly, his hands roving from her breasts to her cunt. “Now I’m going to fuck you, princess.” Grasping her hips, he guided her over his cock and slowly filled her. When she was completely impaled, he took her breasts in his hands and began to fuck her, leisurely, with long, drawn-out thrusts guaranteed to keep her just on the edge of deliriousness.

“Can you feel me, princess?” he whispered, pinching her nipples. “Tell me how it feels to have my dick stretching your tight little pussy.” He skimmed one hand down her side, sliding it over the point of her hip until his middle finger settled over her clit and began to stroke. “I’m going to make you come so hard, Anari. So hard you’ll think it’s never going to stop. So hard you’re going to scream and beg me to fuck you harder. Deeper. Faster.” He shifted his hips in a slow grind, prompting her to moan and undulate on his cock.

“Please,” she rasped.

“Please what, princess?” His tongue flicked at the sensitive spot just below her ear. “Tell me, Anari. Tell me what you want me to do to you.”

“Fuck me,” came the plaintive cry.

He chuckled. “But I’m already fucking you, pet. How do you want me to fuck you? Slow and deep, like this?” He eased out of her and glided back in with exquisite ease. “Or hard and fast, like this?” His hips bucked up, driving into her hard and fast until he had her sobbing with need. “Which is it, hmm?”

“Hard, Duncan. Please. Hard and fast.”

He reached up, removed the cord from her wrists and pressed her to the mattress. “Ass in the air, spread your legs wider.” When she didn’t move fast enough to suit him, he gave her bottom a resounding smack. She yelped in surprise and scrambled to do his bidding.

Anari cried out in surprise when Duncan smacked her ass, but she forgot about the minor insult to her backside when his cock parted her swollen flesh and slid deep in one hard, fast thrust. His hands were less than gentle clutching her hips as he withdrew and plunged again, pulling her hard onto his length.

“Yes,” she hissed. “Like that. Just like that.”

Carnal laughter preceded his lustful onslaught as his hands gripped her ass, spreading the cheeks. She could feel his barely controlled hunger as he drove into her again. Heard him take a deep breath and curse at himself to tighten the rein on his animalistic need to plunder. To dominate. To conquer.

“This is going to be a rough ride, princess,” he growled, slamming into her fast and deep. “I’m going to fuck you until you come screaming on my dick, and then I’m going to fuck you some more. Goddamn, that’s some tight pussy.”

Oh, it felt so good, that big cock pounding into her, his rough voice telling her how he was going to fuck her, make her scream. How was it possible for such coarse language to make her burn for him all the more? She’d been gently reared. In her world, men did not speak to women in such a manner. At least, she didn’t think they did, couldn’t imagine Keltar saying such words to her. Or her father talking that way to her mother.

And still, moans of delight emanated from her throat. Her fingers curled in the sheets as she thrust herself back onto his meaty cock.

“Yes,” she shouted. “Yes, Duncan... ah, so good.”

And his voice encouraged her to take what she wanted. “That’s right, princess, fuck yourself on my cock. Take all of me. Every centimeter. Come for me, Anari, come for me.”

She felt it bubbling, the now-familiar heat building deep inside her. Felt her pussy clench, tiny spasms at first, a tight fist of need curling inside her so intense it was as though it were a living thing. Each thrust of his cock moved deeper, stretching, burning, thrilling, consuming. And suddenly, “Oooh,” she was there. She heard herself howl as she came, just as he said she would, and yet he would not free her, but kept on pumping through each contraction, fucking her

with short, fast thrusts, his fingers like vises on her hips as he sought his own release, found it and roared victoriously.

Anari collapsed on the mattress, sated and too exhausted to think of revenge. He rolled to his side and reached for her, pulling her against him.

“Rest, princess,” he murmured, kissing her damp shoulder.

Too tired to protest, she snuggled against him, knowing she was anything but safe with Duncan Storm.

* * * * *

After a round of rousing sex, a hearty breakfast and a leisurely soak in the huge tub—to ease the soreness—Duncan made Anari dress in an outfit he’d purchased the previous night. It consisted of skintight crop top and matching miniskirt that rode low on her hips. As he expected, she protested vigorously that the outfit was too revealing. She was right, of course. The thing was made of an elasticized lace that clung to her body, outlining every curve. The only concessions to modesty were the closely woven lace flowers that covered her breasts and crotch. She’d been even more livid before she saw the clothes, when he’d wrapped a titanium slave belt around her, clipped a thicker chain to the back of the belt, pulled it between her legs and attached it to the waist. He found it supremely erotic, the chain firmly nestled between her vaginal lips, chafing that delicate flesh as she walked, keeping her primed for sex at any moment. The fact that people would see the chain and know its purpose outraged her all the more. Once he was satisfied with how she looked, he engaged his PHD and led her out of the bungalow.

“You’re a heartless bastard,” Anari berated him as she walked behind him down the sidewalk. “Look at how people are ogling me. You care nothing for my feelings. You didn’t even let me wear undergarments.”

“You’re my slave. It is your duty to care about my feelings, not the other way around.”

Because he knew Laran Tur had spies everywhere at the resort, he’d planned this excursion as she slept in his arms last night, and reasoned she would react exactly as she had. Therefore, the sharp kick to the back of his knee came as no surprise. Nor did the venomous spew of curses that followed. He nearly laughed, for she’d played right into his hands.

Duncan spun around, grabbed her by the belt and yanked her to him as a small crowd gathered. “You dare much, wench,” he growled, then gestured to the establishment outside which they stood. The sign read *Obedience Training*, in bold black script, and below that, in smaller print, *private punishment booths available*. “Time you learned a lesson about who’s the Master here, princess.”

“Nooo.”

She struggled to escape him but he had a firm grasp on the titanium belt and it was an easy task to guide her through the door. This mission just kept getting better and better. The pay was exceptional and he got to indulge in his deepest, darkest fantasies with the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen in his life.

Digging into his pants pocket, he tossed money at the doorman. “I need your best booth, one with a nice padded bench and some toys.” His voice was terse and anyone observing him would think he was furiously angry. In truth, he was more aroused than he’d ever thought possible. Like any other man, he had a healthy side of kink, and Anari was about to be introduced to that side of him. She’d scream blue, bloody murder to start with, but if her responses last night meant anything at all, his lusty little minx would appreciate what it meant to fulfill his fantasies. Besides, with any luck, word of her public punishment would get back to those reporting to Tur.

The doorman eyeballed Anari, licking his lips in what Duncan knew was anticipation. “Will you want the room screened for privacy or open to viewers?” It was obvious he hoped to view Anari’s humiliation.

“Open, I think. My slave has much to learn,” Duncan said. “And engage the intercom for everyone’s listening pleasure. Let the other slaves know what to expect if they’re disobedient to their Masters.” He slipped the man a tip and engaged the lock.

“Strip,” he barked.

“I won’t.” Her stubborn chin jutted defiantly as she skittered away from him.

“If I have to do it for you, I’ll tear those clothes to shreds and you’ll walk out of here wearing nothing but your slave belt and a brightly blushing ass. Your choice, Anari.”

“You wouldn’t.” But she dodged away and pulled the revealing top over her head, throwing it at him. “I hate you.”

“You’ll hate me more by the time we’re done here, but that won’t stop you from coming all over my dick.” He frowned. “The skirt too, wench.” He watched the color rise to her cheeks as the people listening outside the booth cheered, and he calmly removed his clothes.

The woman really was a marvel to look at. Her full, firm breasts rode high on her chest, a testament to the fact that she’d never been bred. No babe had ever suckled at those lush breasts but her pretty nipples jutted tight and hard in anticipation of his mouth. She trembled slightly and Duncan continued to look her over, knowing the possessiveness he felt showed clearly on his face. Until this mission was over, she was his, and he intended to make full use of her. She turned away to remove her miniscule skirt, giving him a beautiful view of her ass as the tiny garment slid past her hips and hit the floor. He nearly groaned aloud when she bent over to pick it up, her ass thrust up and out, the titanium belt nestled between her cheeks. Suffering gods, he wanted to bury himself in that little pink hole, make her his completely. His cock swelled and twitched, seeking a warm, wet home.

Duncan stifled a grin when Anari turned back to him, caught sight of his engorged cock and licked her lips. Oh yeah, she wanted it buried in that hot little pussy, and she’d get it—but first some of his favorite fun and games. He sat down on the long padded bench and gestured to her.

“Come here, slave, and lie across my lap.” When she shook her head, he glared and growled. “If I have to make you, you’ll feel more than my hand on that firm little ass.”

With a reluctant nod, she approached, waited for him to remove the belt, and lowered herself across his lap. His cock jumped in anticipation and he smoothed his hand across her cheeks. “You have a beautiful ass, princess.” He ran a finger down the cleft and inserted it into her pussy. “It’s time you learned the pleasures of having your ass filled, and I’m just the man to teach you.”

“No,” she protested, struggling to get up. She cried out as he delivered a stinging slap to her backside.

Her protest was just the response he wanted. He hadn’t missed Hurik’s presence in the city, nor the men tailing them so carefully. They were being watched and he needed Anari to give the performance of a lifetime. He’d make sure she wasn’t faking it.

“You do not tell your Master ‘no’,” he growled, smacking her again. “Ever.” Whap. “If I tell you,” whap, “I want to fuck your tight little ass,” whap, “you say ‘yes, Master’,” whap, “and bend over. Is that understood?”

He followed the question with several more sharp blows, one arm holding her down as she writhed in his lap. “Nice and pink,” he murmured, soothing her burning flesh with a gentle

caress. As he dipped his middle finger into her core, he chuckled. "What's this? Why, I do believe you like being spanked, little slave, you're creaming as though I were eating you out." He laughed again. "I bet you'd like me to do that too. Shall I eat your creamy little pussy, princess? Before I lay you across that bench and fill your pretty ass?"

He dipped his finger into her once more and worked it into her ass, pleased when she moaned. Pulling it out, he swatted her again, enjoying the feel of her firm, heated flesh beneath his hand. "I asked you a question."

"Yes!" she cried, as the finger slid back into her bottom again.

"Yes, what?"

The finger pumped deep, several times. "Yes, Master."

"Good girl." He ignored her surprised cry as he lifted her, put her on her back, and spread her wide. "Here comes your reward."

There would be no gentle licking and teasing this time, she judged. His hands were hard on her thighs as he held her open and clamped his mouth to her core. Why was he doing this? Why had he left the screens and intercom open so all could see and hear her?

She cried out as his tongue stabbed at her dripping cunt. He was turning her into some kind of sex-crazed slut, the kind of woman who spread herself for any man. For him. The dominance he displayed turned her into a whimpering, sodden fool, keenly aware of how that massive cock would fill her, pleasure her. And she wanted it. Wanted him.

How was it possible for her to be aroused at such treatment? But she was and she felt the orgasm coming hard and fast. His lips closed over her clit and he sucked ruthlessly. When he jammed two fingers into her, she felt her pussy contract and arched, climbing toward release. And then he stopped.

Anger washed over her when he laughed and said, "Not so fast, little slave. You're not ready to come yet."

"I am!" she protested, and screamed her frustration at him. "Bastard."

She shrieked when he lifted her and tossed her over a padded bench that looked very much like a pommel horse.

"I decide when you come, wench," he roared, paddling her ass several more times. "Best you learn that now, before you're unable to sit for the next few days." He walked around in front of her, tapped her on the cheek with his dick. "Open your mouth, slave, and suck your Master's cock."

She hesitated and he reached over her, smacking her ass again. "If you make me use a ring gag, I'll fuck your pretty mouth until your jaw aches." Anari didn't know what a ring gag was, but she was pretty sure she didn't want him to use one on her so she opened her mouth.

Oh my, it's soft as velvet, and yet so hard.

"Suck it, princess," she heard him moan, so she did, closing her lips around him to suckle.

His hands went to her hair, holding her steady as he flexed his hips. When she gagged, he adjusted his thrusts. Shocked by her own daring, she reached up and stroked his balls, then closed her hand around the base of his big cock, sucking harder.

"That's enough," he growled, pulling out to walk back behind her.

The sound of a drawer opening caught her attention and she tried to turn to look over her shoulder to see what he was doing.

"Eyes forward," he barked.

She turned back, ducking her head. What was he doing? She didn't have to wait long to find out, because his fingers slid between the cheeks of her ass, oily and warm. "What?" she exclaimed.

That earned her a swat, then a darkly sensuous answer. "I have a special toy for you, princess, made to stretch you. This heated oil will make it easier on you...but not too easy, because once I have it seated in your delicious ass, I'm going to bury my cock in your pussy."

Oh gods, he wasn't kidding. Something hard and smooth parted her cheeks, probing the tight star of her anus.

"Now take a deep breath and push out, princess."

She did as he told her without questioning him and felt the device pop past the ring of her anus. "Oh." It kept pressing into her, larger now, and she hissed with pain, pushing against it in the hopes of expelling it completely, but it only moved deeper, widening the narrow opening farther before it narrowed again, fully seated in her ass. He tapped it with a finger and she gasped at the strangely dark sensation of pleasure it brought.

Anari shivered as Duncan stepped up behind her, leaning over her back to whisper in her ear.

"I hadn't intended to introduce you to anal play just yet, princess, but we've had a couple of men following us around and I figured them for Hurik's men. If we play this right, he should get the message that you're with someone who will use you as Tur demanded. Are you all right?"

He was apologizing? It wasn't a traditional apology, but a man like this would have a hard time saying he was sorry, wouldn't he? She stifled a moan as his fingers plied her, keeping her arousal high. Whatever his motivation, he cared about whether he hurt her and that was a good thing. She took a deep breath—best to cooperate and get it over with. Besides, his fingers, oh gods, the things the man could do with his fingers.

"Yes," she whispered. "Will it...will it hurt more than it does now?"

"Shh...let me answer that aloud." He straightened, caressing her ass. She tensed as the head of his cock pressed against the opening of her pussy. "I won't lie, slave, this is going to be uncomfortable as hell at first but I promise you'll come screaming my name before it's over."

Anari let out a pained yelp as the head of Duncan's cock slid into her.

"Breathe, wench," he purred, pressing deeper.

"Oh, Master, it hurts," she cried. When he would have pulled back, she followed.

"It's...more...please, give me more of you."

Anari whimpered, it hurt, yet it felt good too. He pressed forward at her urging, the fiery heat filling her cunt as he seated himself balls-deep.

She shuddered as he withdrew and pressed back in, moving slowly so as not to hurt her. There was pain, yes, but also a tension building deep in her womb, a conflagration that threatened to engulf them both in unbearable pleasure.

"Yes, yes," she panted as he increased his pace. Her pussy burned and her ass throbbed as each thrust jogged the plug buried there. "Oh...Dun...Master. I can't...it's too much...too much."

His breath was a harsh rasp in his chest as he fucked her. "You'll take everything I give you, wench, and happily."

"Oooh... I'm going to come, Master."

He was slamming into her now, and she knew the listeners could hear the slap of bodies coming together, the liquid sounds of his cock ramming into her gushing pussy, but she felt no

shame. She was too far gone to focus on anything but the feel of that big cock fucking in and out of her and the jolt of the plug in her ass. Until he reached around her hip and pressed his thumb against her clit.

“Ahh!” she screamed.

“Don’t come until I give you permission, woman,” he demanded, increasing the pressure on her clit. “You must always ask, Anari. If you come without asking, I’ll paddle this ass until it’s red.”

Tears of frustration trailed down her face. How could he make her beg? “Pleeease, let me come, Master.”

He slammed into her. “Not yet.”

He pinched her clit between his thumb and forefinger to help her along as he thrust into her one final time. Her body went stiff and began to shudder as she came. She screamed, coming again and again, oblivious to the fact that she’d disobeyed him.

He pulled out of her and she sighed, not heeding the sound of a drawer opening.

“I…” she said breathlessly. “Could you please take that thing out of me?”

He frowned. “That sounds distinctly like an order, princess. The plug stays. And you’ll have it inside you every day until you learn some manners.” He walked around in front of her, tapping his leg with the paddle. “Did you forget what I told you would happen if you came without permission?”

Anari shuddered, tears springing to her eyes. “I…please Master, I couldn’t help it. I-I tried.”

Duncan caressed her cheek with the business end of a long, leather slapper. “Perhaps next time you’ll remember.” The cool leather slid down her bare back.

Oh, mother of us all, he’s going to use that thing on me.

He walked around behind her, his free hand caressing her bare bottom. “Such a lovely ass. I can hardly wait for the plug to do its job and stretch you. You want me to fuck your ass, don’t you, slave?”

Anari hesitated for a heartbeat and heard the hiss of the paddle a second before it connected—whap—and she cried out.

“Ow. You sadistic bastard.” Gods, that hurt… and yet her pussy clenched as the blow caused the plug in her bottom to shift. She was ready and anxious for him to do it again. Pain mixed with arousal. Humiliation with desperate need. Any minute she would begin to beg.

Whap. “Every time you curse, you’ll get another taste of the paddle. Is that clear?” When she didn’t respond, he swung again—whap, whap, whap—three times in succession. “When I ask you a question, you will answer immediately, whether you think I’ll like the answer or not. Is that clear?” He punctuated the question with another light tap of the paddle.

“Yes.”

Whap. “Yes, what?”

“Yes sir.”

Whap. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, Master. Please, Master. I’m sorry. I’ll be good, I swear it.” Her ass was on fire and her pussy was so saturated she could feel it dampening her thighs.

“Now, when we leave this room, you’ll walk behind me like an obedient slave. If you’re a good girl, maybe, just maybe, I won’t shove my dick up your ass when we get back to the bungalow. Now get dressed.”

She opened her mouth only to close it when his eyes shifted toward the viewing

windows.

“Yes, Master,” she said, hoping she sounded contrite, and began to dress.

Anari followed Duncan out of the punishment room, allowing herself a peek at the crowd of people lounging in the club. Never in her life had she seen such depravity. Most of the men had their slaves with them, displaying them in various stages of undress. Some were sitting on the floor at their Masters’ feet. Others straddled laps while one man played with their pussy and another suckled their breasts. If Duncan did that to her, she just might die of humiliation.

When they were nearly to the door, the attendant stopped Duncan.

“You might want to use this.” He handed Duncan a leash.

Duncan shrugged. “Good idea, thanks.” He attached the clip of the leash to the junction where the chain between her legs attached to the belt and gave it a sharp tug. She gasped, as she knew he’d expect her to, and he grinned. “Come along, wench, we have things to do.”

Chapter Three

Duncan hadn't been kidding when he said they had things to do that day, and most of those things entailed buying clothes and other items needed for her care. His tastes ran to two distinctly different styles. On the one hand, he purchased sturdy, no-nonsense garments for her—jumpsuits, soft cotton pants and tops, sensible shoes and undergarments. The other items were made especially for seduction, tops with deeply plunging necklines, dresses so sheer her nipples and pubic hair were exposed for everyone to see. The undergarments were sheer, too, bras with holes for her nipples, panties with openings in the crotch to grant him access whenever he wanted her and shoes that screamed “fuck me” just by their height and fastenings. The dichotomy both fascinated and repulsed her.

When they finally got back to the bungalow, Duncan couldn't have been more solicitous.

“Are you all right?” he asked, locking the door behind them, then removing the slave belt. “Did I hurt you?”

Anari felt the heat rush to her face. “No, you didn't hurt me, but if you don't mind, I'd like to bathe. That place...” She shuddered. “Those men in the lounge, using those women in public like that...I'm so grateful you didn't do that to me.”

He couldn't look at her, looked everywhere but at her. “But I did, princess. That booth was unscreened. I'm so sorry to have put you through that, but reports had to get back to Hurik that you were being used as Tur wanted.”

“I understand.” And she did. She didn't like it, but she understood.

As she headed for the bathroom, Duncan engaged the communication system and placed an order for a room service meal. At least she wouldn't be expected to go out in public after what she'd just gone through.

* * * * *

Anari relaxed in the tub, thinking about everything that had happened today. She'd been horrified at the thought of being used in such a public manner, but once Duncan had taken her in hand, she'd been so completely overwhelmed by the pleasure of what he'd done to her, she'd gone past the point of caring that the punishment booth was unscreened.

What was it about the man that made her utterly forget her upbringing? She'd been so turned-on, she'd spread herself out on a table in that loathsome place and let him have his way with her. And those things he said to her as he was fucking her? She wanted him to do those things to her. Wanted him to slide his cock into her bottom, where the cursed anal plug had been lodged until she removed it before her bath. Would he punish her for disobeying? Would he, if she asked? He'd promised not to use her as a slave in their private moments together, but perhaps... She finished her bath and slipped into a thigh-length, ice blue, silk chemise that tied loosely on the side. She had no idea how to seduce a man, but maybe the sexy garment would help.

Dinner consisted of herb-crusted antelope, steamed vegetables and a lovely heta fruit salad. Duncan seated her and poured her a glass of wine before sitting down across from her.

“Feeling better?” he inquired. Anari couldn't help but notice how his eyes seemed to follow her every move.

“Yes, thank you. Dinner smells delicious.”

He nodded, swallowing hard when she bit into a chunk of heta fruit and the juice dribbled down her chin. She patted the juice away with a cloth napkin. “Is something wrong, Duncan?”

He cleared his throat. “Not at all. You—blue suits you.”

She ran her hand down the front of the chemise. “It is beautiful. I don’t think I’ve ever owned anything so fine before, at least, not for sleeping.”

Duncan did a lot of throat clearing and tried not to ogle her, but Anari could see that he was having trouble concentrating on his dinner. It was obvious he wanted her.

“Duncan,” she said. He looked up from his plate. “At that place today...the things you did to me, and the things you talked about doing...could you...what I mean to say is—”

“Anari, are you saying you enjoyed what I did to you in that room?”

She captured her lower lip between her teeth and nodded, looking at him through hooded lids.

“Apart from the public bits, yes.”

“You liked the spanking and the cock sucking, the plug.”

“Yes.”

He set his fork down and wiped his mouth. “And the plug, you’re still wearing it?”

“No. I—I took it out before I got in the tub.”

A slow smile spread across his sensual lips. “Did you? Without my permission?”

“Yes.”

“I see,” he said, standing up. Anari nearly gasped at the sight of his erection straining against his trousers. “Did I not tell you that plug would stay there until I told you otherwise?”

Anari nodded.

“Stand up, Anari.” She did, watching with avid interest as he rolled the food service cart to the door and set it outside. He turned to her, eyes smoldering, nostrils flaring. “Go and stand by the bed. Remove your nightgown.”

“Yes, Duncan,” she said, her voice quavering with excitement. She removed the expensive little gown and dropped it on the floor.

Anari flinched when Duncan’s hand fisted in her hair and pulled her head back, but when he lowered his mouth to hers for a hard kiss, she shuddered and kissed him back. The passionate savagery of his kiss overwhelmed her. His tongue plundered her mouth and he uttered a deep growl when her fists closed in the material of his shirt, dragging him closer. What was it about this man that moved her to such feelings of violence and desire? Was it because he’d kept her from the cruel merchant, or because he pleased her so ruthlessly and exposed her forbidden desires? Was it the way he mastered her in a manner Keltar would never have been moved to?

His strong arms lifted her onto the bed and tied her hands with the silken cords again. Using the pulley, he hauled her to her knees, locking her in place. She shook with desire as his hands skimmed her body possessively.

She was completely without morals if the thought of him using her like this sent such a scandalous thrill through her, drenching her cunt with an urgent need to be taken. Devoured. Fucked. And yet she hung there, waiting, the anticipation of what he would do next filling her with such impatient longing she thought she might die from it. He hadn’t hurt her, not really. His big hand paddling her ass had stung, but the heat shot straight to her core, focusing there. When he’d slid the toy into her ass, a dark thrill had rushed through her and she’d wanted his cock to fill her. To pound mercilessly until she had no choice but to come screaming. How could she have known? How could she ever have guessed that within her lay the overpowering need to be sexually dominated, to give up complete control to a lover who would force her to give all? The idea repulsed her, but her body had a mind of its own.

“You like not being in control sexually, Anari?” he asked softly. “I’m happy to take control, especially in how I fuck you. Are you mine to do with what I will? You want my cock in

your ass, princess?”

“Yes. Yes, Duncan, whatever you want. Anything you want.”

He climbed off the bed and she watched in the ceiling mirror as he rummaged through a shopping bag and pulled out a bottle of lubricating oil. An electric shot of fear snaked up her spine. Oh yes, he’s really going to do it. He’s going to take me up the ass with that big cock. Did she really want this? She struggled against her bonds but only succeeded in pulling her arms higher above her head. She heard a soft laugh.

“Too late to change your mind now, little slave. Struggle all you want, pet. That only makes it hotter.”

They were heavy into the role play now, so she spurred him on.

“I hate you.” I want you.

“Of course you do, princess.”

Her pussy clenched when he pulled a slapper out of one of the bags. It looked exactly like the one he’d used on her in the punishment booth.

“Now for your punishment.” He tapped her bottom lightly with the leather-covered head of the paddle. “Should I make it burn, princess?”

Before she could answer, he swung, the paddle connecting with a loud crack. Anari whimpered as the sharp bite of pain shot straight to her core. She was deprived, completely without shame.

Whap. Whap. Whap. She burned, throbbed, moaned with need. Heard the paddle hit the wall as he tossed it aside with a curse.

The mattress shifted as he climbed onto the bed and his big body pressed against her from behind. A feverish cry escaped her as his fingers probed.

“Your honey is flowing, little slave,” his raspy voice whispered in her ear. “You liked the paddle.” She didn’t even pretend to protest. Shivers ran through her as one big hand covered her breast while the other toyed with her pussy. Two fingers slid deep and she moaned.

“Mmm, such sweet little sounds, princess,” Duncan murmured, his tongue flicking against her earlobe. He worked his fingers, fast then slow, as the base of his thumb pressed ruthlessly against her clit. “How shall I fuck you, hmm? Shall I make you come like this? Or should I stuff your pretty little cunt with my great big cock? You like my cock inside you, don’t you, Anari?”

Yes, oh, yes, she did like his cock inside her, but what he was doing to her felt good too. How was she supposed to choose when everything he did to her made her scream with need?

“Answer me, pet. Tell me what you want and maybe you’ll get it.”

“More,” Anari cried out as he ground his palm against her clit. “Your cock...I...ah...please, I need you inside me.”

“Yes, I can see you do, little one.” He slid his fingers from her heat and spread her legs wider. She watched in the mirror as he coated his fingers with the lubricating oil. “Let’s get this sweet little ass ready for reaming, shall we?”

Sparks of desire shot up her spine as his thighs moved between hers and he released the pulley, lowering her down.

“I want those legs spread wide and that ass in the air, princess.”

“Yes,” she whispered, as she felt the head of his cock nudge her pussy lips.

“Take it, Anari,” he commanded. “Take it all.”

She did, shivering when two fingers slid into her ass and he started pumping.

Anari sobbed in frustration when Duncan's cock abandoned her pussy. She'd been so close, so close. Damn him. Then his fingers left her ass and she pounded the mattress in frustration. Behind her, Duncan laughed softly.

"You like having your ass filled, don't you, princess?" His fingers slicked more of the warming oil on her tender ass, pumped briefly inside, then departed.

When the head of his cock pressed against her anal opening, she knew a moment of fear. He was so big. Bigger than the plug, bigger than the fingers he'd been using to fuck her rear entrance. Would he hurt her by ramming himself into her, or would he go slow and easy?

"I'm going to take your ass now, Anari. I won't lie to you, it's going to hurt, but I'll go as easy as I can. You tell me if it gets too bad and we'll stop but, now that I know your submissive desires, before we leave this planet, your ass will be very familiar with my cock. Now take a deep breath and push out while I move in."

He pressed into her, moving past the tight ring of muscles designed to push things out, not take them inside.

"It hurts, Duncan," she said on a sob.

Strong hands gently stroked her ass. "Not much more and I'll be past the muscle, then it won't hurt as much." He flicked his hips and moved past the protesting barrier.

He was inside.

Suffering gods, what manner of devilry was this? His cock swelled and twitched as he held himself still, giving her time to adjust.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Yes...I think so."

"Ready for more?"

"Yes, yes, give me more, Duncan."

His cock, combined with the warming oil, eased the way, opening the narrow tunnel for deeper penetration. She moaned at the feel of his gradual advance and a dark pleasure washed over her at the continued intrusion into this forbidden part of her body. She was truly his now, taking him in the most intimate manner possible. The burn of his cock plowing the sensitive tissue branded her just as surely as if he'd pressed heated metal to her tender skin. No man would ever compare, no man could. He gave her intense pleasure laced with a bite of pain and she knew she would never be the same again.

A needy moan escaped her throat as he went deeper. All rational thought fled. All she could think about was the feel of him sinking deeper, all the way to his balls. And then he was there, completely buried, his sac snugged against her backside.

"Now," he said. "Now is when the real pleasure starts." He eased back a few centimeters and pressed forward again.

"Oh gods," she breathed. "Do it again."

He pulled back again, farther this time, and eased in with a bit more strength. Oh, the feel of him was like nothing else. She loved it when he fucked her pussy, slamming into her hard and fast, so deep within her that it felt as though he touched her womb. But this, this pleasure was more potent. Forbidden. Wicked.

"Again?" he asked. "Harder?"

"Yes, harder. Oh, Duncan, it feels so wicked, so good."

Anari cried out as his cock withdrew. He pumped deep once more and kept on moving, gliding deep, fucking her harder with each thrust. His balls slapped at her pussy as he hilted her. Oh, how she wished she could see him, see the expression on his face as he drove into her. Then

she remembered the mirror over the bed and looked up.

Anari propped herself on her elbows and stared into the mirror, fascinated. That was her staring back, watching as he pumped his majestic cock into her ass. The expression on his face made her pussy clench with the need to come. His face was a study in concentration as he fought to maintain control of his body. The cock pounding into her ass was thick and red, hard as a stone and ready to spurt his essence deep inside her. She saw him reach between her legs, felt his fingers dip into her cunt to gather the silky moisture pooling there. She knew what he was going to do and she wanted it. Knowing fingers found her clit and began to stroke.

She wanted to come, needed to come, but he hadn't given her permission so she clenched tightly, fighting the urge to let go. How much longer could he expect her to go on like this? The heat built and built until she thought she would surely burst into flames. And then he said the words she longed to hear.

“Come for me, princess.”

Oh, mother of creation, she had the tightest ass he'd ever fucked. There was much to be said for taking a virgin. Both pussy and ass were tight, tighter than most men would ever experience. And there was something about being the first that gave him a possessive thrill. She was his—for however long this mission lasted, no other man would touch her. She'd learn that about him too. Duncan Storm did not share.

By the gods, she was a marvel. She took everything he gave her and responded with abandon. He'd never had a preference for ass fucking over a warm, tight pussy, but the way his cock felt, fisted snugly in that little opening, he was about to become a convert.

And the sounds emanating from those full, pink lips. Had any woman he'd been with made such obvious sounds of pleasure? She struggled to hold herself still, to keep from coming as she studied their coupling in the mirror above. Was she seeing what he saw as her sweet little ass swallowed his dick?

Duncan picked up his pace, moving faster, harder, pumping into her with abandon. He clenched his teeth to keep from spilling into her and reached between her legs to slick his fingers with her juices. Her clit protruded from its protective hood and he stroked it, slathering the little organ with her essence. He'd make her come so hard she'd think she was flying out of her skin.

“Come for me, princess. Come for me while my cock takes your ass.” He pulled back and slammed in again. In. Out. Hard. Deep. Tugging her clit. She began to keen.

“Yes, pet, that's it,” Duncan growled, plowing into her ass. “Give it to me. Give me that ass, give me your cum. Scream for me, princess. Come. NOW!”

“Duncaaaaaan.” His name came on a drawn-out scream as he slammed into her one last time. His hips jerked as his balls emptied and he roared out his own release.

Their bodies shook as the power of their mutual orgasm washed over them. Anari sobbed his name and her body trembled under his weight as he slumped over her. He stretched over her for several moments, pressing her down on the mattress.

“Maker's balls, woman, I don't think I'm capable of movement at the moment.”

Beneath him, his little princess giggled. “Neither can I, especially with you on top of me.”

Duncan groaned and rolled off her, flopping onto his back. “Don't move. Just give me a minute and I'll help you clean up.” He allowed his hand to wander over her ass, patting gently. “You did well, Anari. Did it pleasure you as much as it seemed to?”

“Yes. I...I never imagined anything could be like that. Never in my life.”

“You have much yet to learn, princess, and it will be my pleasure to teach you.” He sighed and rolled to his feet. “Be a good girl, now, and stay put. I’ll be right back.”

He raised an eyebrow when she lifted her head to look at him. “Duncan, did I please you?”

He rewarded her with a smile. “Very much, pet. And you’ll please me repeatedly before this night is over.”

Duncan padded to the bathroom and dampened a sanicloth, taking it back to the bed where he gently cleansed Anari.

After cleaning her up, he crawled into bed and pulled her into his arms.

“Tell me of your life before the auction. Have you always farmed?”

She looked at him and smiled. “Oh no, I was a teacher. I taught theoretical physics and ancient Earth history. But we always had a big garden, and the orchard. One of my earliest memories is of the smells in my mother’s kitchen during the fruit harvest. Father brought her several apple and peach trees back from a conference on Earth and we’d spend hours baking pies and tarts, making applesauce and preserving peach pie filling.”

Duncan smiled, enjoying her reminiscence because she interested him. Anari had grown up with a family who loved her, unlike himself, who had essentially been manufactured and reared in a dormitory with others like him. She had cried over her sisters, had offered to submit herself to further public humiliation to get him to help the two young girls. Duncan knew about honor, but knew nothing of love, and he’d never shed a tear in his life.

Her smile turned to a frown. “Until the officials closed down the schools.”

He gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “Have you ever been to Earth?”

“No, but I would love to visit someday. My father goes frequently, though, and always brings back something unique for us girls to marvel over. Last year, he brought back a dozen strawberry plants. I crossbred several of them with cavel plants and developed a much larger, sweeter berry with a denser flesh. The fruit won first place at the festival this year.”

She ducked her head, unable to look at him. “That’s what attracted Tur’s attention. The old Earth expression is true—pride goeth before a fall.”

“Anari, look at me.” Her expression made his chest tighten. “You did nothing wrong, princess. There is no crime in protecting yourself. The blame is Tur’s, not yours.”

Tears welled in her eyes, prompting him to pull her tight against his chest.

“But he took them because of me.” Warm tears fell on his chest. Duncan had never dealt well with a woman’s tears, was essentially helpless when faced with them.

“Your sisters are all right, Anari. They are being cared for by friends of Ulric Vonner, and will be restored to you when it’s safe to do so.”

She gasped in disbelief. “How can you be certain?”

“Because it was part of his plan.”

Anari struggled to pull away from him and he let her go. “Why couldn’t we be kept together?” She sat up, anger flushing her cheeks. “Did it never occur to you that knowing, having them with me would ease my mind? Suffering gods, they’re my family. Do you not know what it is to lose someone you love?”

He skewered her with a look. “No, I don’t. I’m a Gamma, a Gen 8 super soldier, in case you hadn’t noticed. I was raised in a military barracks with others like me. I have no family.”

Her features immediately softened. “Oh, that’s right. I’d forgotten. You seem so—”

“Lifelike? Human?” He practically growled when she reached out to touch him, but she

didn't back away. Instead, she wrapped her arms around him and held on tight.

"Please don't put words in my mouth, Duncan. Do you think me so cruel that I'd say something like that to you?" He didn't turn away when she kissed him. "I was going to say you seem to feel so much more than the soldiers I saw on Sa-Ro Five. I never saw one of them smile or laugh, and you smile a lot."

He closed his arms around her. "You give me reason to smile, pet. Besides, they were probably newer versions."

"What's it like, being a super soldier? Did they treat you badly, is that why you left?"

Duncan stroked her silky hair. "They treated us as well as could be expected. We had the best of everything—the best food, the best equipment. They tried to alter us to the point that we had no conscience, but it didn't always take with my generation, particularly the Gammas. Most who were like me were terminated but a few of us managed to get away." He shrugged before continuing. "If they ever found me, they'd execute me. That's why I use the PHD whenever I'm out in public. I've been lucky so far, but one day my luck will probably run out."

"I hope it never does." She was quiet for a moment, her head resting against his shoulder.

Duncan was of the opinion that women thought entirely too much, a definite drawback for men, because a woman with something on her mind was a formidable adversary. He eased from her and into the bathroom to fill the tub.

"Duncan," she said softly, when he went back and scooped her up. "When will I see them again—my sisters and my father?" She plucked one of his nipples and nuzzled his neck.

He chuckled. "I don't know, pet, but you can ask Vonner himself. We'll be leaving for Quartus Seven tomorrow."

"Is that where Sumi and Katri are, on Quartus Seven?"

"No, Anari, they most certainly aren't on Quartus Seven. I don't know where they are, exactly, only that Vonner assures me they are in good hands and will be treated well until you can be together again."

"And do you know why this Vonner wants to speak with me? You mentioned my father's earlier work. It has to do with that, doesn't it?"

"I thought you didn't remember anything about his work."

She shrugged. "Some of it is beginning to come back to me. If his abduction does have something to do with his earlier work, wouldn't my sisters be safer with us, or with this Vonner person?"

Duncan stepped into the tub and sat down, positioning her so she leaned back against his chest, then turned on the tub's jets. "What kind of work did he do before the Senate?"

"He was an environmental scientist, an engineer. His specialty was terraforming. That's it, isn't it?"

Duncan kissed her long and hard to distract her from the relentless questioning.

"Patience, my pet. You'll meet Vonner tomorrow and find out what this is all about." He turned her atop him and pulled her thighs apart. "In the meantime, let's try a little experiment."

"What kind of experiment?"

"This." He chuckled at her surprised gasp as he slid her down over his cock. "Your turn to ride me, pet."

"Ride you... oooh... that's—"

"Going to make you come, very hard. Now put your hands on my chest and move up and down on my cock."

"Oh, Duncan." Her words came out on a sigh he'd come to appreciate.

“Good?” He nuzzled her cheek.

“Very good.”

“It’s about to get better.” He reached out, stroked her clit, then slowly rotated his hips to grind his cock into her.

“Ah... gods... it’s so strong... and you’re so—”

“I’m so what, pet?”

“Hard,” she gasped when he pulled back and thrust. “And deep.”

Suffering gods, she was so tight around him in this position he had to clench his teeth to keep from coming. He grasped her hips and began to thrust with her, slow and deep. With each long glide, her cunt clutched at him. Head thrown back, she squeezed her eyes shut in an attempt to delay her orgasm until he gave his permission for her to let go.

How was it possible for her to give so much when everything she’d ever known had been so cruelly taken from her? Duncan didn’t—couldn’t—understand that kind of generosity, that kindness of spirit. So often, he’d simply wanted to give up, to give in to the demands of his IMF training, knowing what was asked of the super soldiers bordered on criminal. They’d been sent into places to subdue indigenous populations with no regard for their rights.

The IMF mission was to serve the needs of the Amalgamation, no matter what those needs were or that they constituted the worst kind of subjugation possible—the enslavement of an entire people. But Tur was the bigger villain because he had ordered a worse fate for Anari simply because she’d refused his advances. Could Duncan count himself any different than Tur? Hadn’t he done the same—humiliated her in public? Yet here she was, riding his cock, striving to please him in every way. Trying to obey his arbitrary mandate that she not come unless he gave her permission. He was humbled by her gift of submission. She deserved so much more.

“Ah, gods, Duncan, I can’t... I have to come... pleasee.”

He began to thrust harder, faster. “Go ahead, little one. Come for me.”

Her body arched as he fucked through the contractions, eliciting howls of release as wave after wave washed over her. With one last thrust, he buried himself deep, roaring out his completion as he emptied himself into her. She sagged against him, limp, and he realized she’d passed out.

Anari opened her eyes as Duncan lifted her and laid her down beside him. His smile was infinitely gentle as he touched her cheek.

“Did I fall asleep?”

“For a moment. Let’s rest a bit, then we’ll dress and go out for a stroll on the beach.”

Anari ducked her head, her cheeks heating with embarrassment. She supposed he’d make her wear the revealing clothes he’d purchased for her. The idea of wearing one of those outfits in public again was more than she could bear.

Duncan tucked a finger under her chin and drew her head up. “What is it, princess? Don’t you want to go?”

It was hard to meet his eyes knowing what she was going to say would likely piss him off. “It’s not that—it’s the clothes. They’re so revealing. You can see... everything, even the—the hair between my legs.”

Duncan led her to the bed and sat her down on the edge. His eyes lit up as he grinned and she sighed. “I know that look, Duncan Storm. You’re up to something.”

He leaned in for a kiss then stood up and moved to the foot of the bed for the supplies he’d purchased from the adult store. “I have the perfect solution.” He held up the beam razor and

a bottle of oily liquid. “We’ll remove your hair so no one can see it, and you can wear the pretty white thong. You’ll look wonderful.”

“But—” she started to protest, when he raised an eyebrow. “Yes, Duncan.”

“Good girl.” He strode to the bathroom for a towel. “Now, we’ll put this over the edge of the bed and you lie down on it.” When she did as he commanded, he raised her legs and propped her feet on the mattress. “Spread your legs wide, pet. We’ll shave you this time, and afterward we’ll use the waxing kit I purchased.”

Heat suffused her body as Anari lay back, her legs spread wide. She didn’t understand how she could still be embarrassed by showing herself to him. After all, he’d fucked her in a public place so everyone could see, could hear her cries. He’d had her in every way a man could have a woman, including her ass. And yet the heat of embarrassment still held power over her. When he began to smooth the special oil over her pussy, she squeezed her eyes shut.

The first pass of the beam razor warmed her as Duncan worked it over the tender flesh of her pussy. His touch was exceedingly gentle as he carefully removed the hair from her labia. By the time he was done, the room smelled of coconut oil and desire.

“Mmm,” he purred. “Someone enjoyed having her pussy shaved.” He wiped the oil from her body and ran his finger through the silky moisture pooling between her legs. “I love pretty bare cunts, princess. I love touching them.” He ran his finger through her slit once more. “I love eating them.” Now his tongue teased her delicate folds. “And I love fucking them.” Two fingers glided between her lips and played at her opening. “I think I’ll do all those things right now.”

A soft sigh escaped her parted lips as Duncan’s fingers teased her. “So soft and sweet,” he murmured against her damp folds. Then his tongue burrowed between her lips to lap and lick, drawing more and more of her juices from her weeping cunt. He took his time, teasing, tasting, stroking, until Anari felt as though her body would melt from the heat as he stoked her fire to the boiling point.

“Ahh...so good, so good.” His lips closed over her clit, sucking gently while he pumped his fingers deep.

It wasn’t fair that he had this much control over her. That a simple stroke of his hand could arouse her to the point that she was mad with need for him, no matter how often he had her.

“Duncan,” she whispered.

“What do you want, Anari? Tell me and I’ll give it to you.”

“Inside me, I want you inside me. So deep, so hard.”

She opened her eyes as he rose to his feet and positioned his cock at her opening. He smiled as he entered her, gliding smoothly into her, the broad head of his cock sinking deep as her body accepted the size and shape of him. He leaned down and lifted her legs over his shoulders, burying himself to the hilt.

“Ah, princess, you feel so good. Like coming home.” He withdrew, plunged again, fucking her with even, measured strokes designed to drive her wild but keep her on the edge. His voice was smoky, thick with desire as he spoke to her. “Such a sweet, bare little pussy. Thank you for trusting me enough to let me shave you, love.”

Anari couldn’t believe her ears. He was thanking her for letting him shave her, just like a man might thank his woman. Is that how he thought of her, as his woman? For the first time in weeks, she allowed herself to hope that something good might come of the calamity that had befallen her. Maybe he would keep her with him forever. Perhaps, someday, he might even come to love her. She felt him pick up his pace and moaned as his thrusts became more demanding.

“Yes, Duncan. Oh gods, I love it when you fuck me like this.” He eased her legs from his shoulders and wrapped them around his hips, hammering into her hard and fast. What would it be like to have the love of a man like this? Not just physically, but with his heart and soul. Her hips jerked as his thumb grazed her clit.

“Come for me, princess. Scream my name.”

Her orgasm bubbled up from deep inside her, boiling through every sensitized nerve until it felt as though it were erupting through her pores. “Duncan!”

He slammed into to her, holding himself inside as came. “Ah, fuck, yeah. Oh, baby, you feel so good.”

Like coming home, he’d told her. Anari sighed. Home was good. Home was a start.

Chapter Four

In the end, Duncan gave in to Anari's wish he not display her so publicly. They stayed in and made love throughout the night. As Anari slept in his arms, Duncan came to the realization that he hadn't wanted to share the sight of her sumptuous body with anyone else. Didn't want other men looking at her, coveting her, making rude comments about her abundant charms. The level of possessiveness he felt toward Anari staggered the mind. Were such a thing possible, he would lock her away in a windowless room where no one could see her but him. She was for his eyes only, which made the cover of her being his sex slave exponentially difficult, because putting her on public display was part and parcel of the plan.

Since when did Duncan Storm give a rat's ass about anyone's feelings, especially an assignment's? And that was all she was, all she could ever be. He did his job and walked away. If he helped someone along the way, that was well and fine, but he didn't get personally involved. Never. She was a means to an end, and that was all there was to it, all there could ever be between them. He'd almost convinced himself of that fact until she uttered a little sigh in her sleep and turned to snuggle against him, a sweet smile curving her lips.

He looked down at the small hand covering his left nipple and closed his eyes. Compared to him, she was a tiny thing, but she had the heart of a lion. She'd stood up to the men who had brutalized her, and even managed to hold her own with him. She was a woman worthy of the love and care of a devoted man. His head told him that man was not him, but his heart? His heart said otherwise. In a matter of a couple of days, she'd managed to tangle his emotions into knots. He'd allowed himself to believe she was really his.

Ah, fuck, who was he trying to kid? Tomorrow they'd be leaving for Quartus Seven and The Web. Whatever it was that had brought the two of them together would be revealed. Anari would be safely ensconced at The Web while he searched for her father. She rolled onto her side and he fit himself against her like a spoon, holding her close. Tomorrow would bring new challenges for them both. Playtime was over.

Duncan woke Anari with a kiss and a hot room service breakfast. There was no time to play. He'd received a message from Vonner early this morning. He should return to The Web with Anari as soon as possible. Something was up, but he didn't know what. He set out a sheer, copper-colored tunic and matching thong for her to wear while she drizzled fresh honey on her porridge.

"You're going to make me wear one of those horrible outfits today?" she asked.

He gave her a smile. "Sorry, princess. It's just until we get to my ship and get the hell off this planet. When we get to The Web, I'll want you to be completely covered." He held up a silver-colored belly chain. "But I bought this for you to wear beneath your clothes."

"May I see it?"

"Of course, it's yours." He brought it to her, dangling it from his index finger. It had taken him some time to find the right design and he hoped she'd be pleased. Crafted of thin titanium links, the chain was highly polished and smooth. An Oriental emblem dangled from one end.

"What does it mean?" she asked, holding it in the palm of her hand.

"It is the symbol for dignity and honor."

"Will you put it on me?" She set aside her dish and rolled to her knees.

Duncan was absurdly pleased when tears welled in her eyes.

"I'm glad you like it. I thought you might protest, as much as you hated the other belt."

He leaned down and fastened the chain around her, standing back to admire the way it draped on her hips.

“The other belt went between my legs and was meant to humiliate.” She held the carved disk in her hand. “With this, I can imagine you really see me in this light.”

He reached out and cupped her chin. “That is the way I see you, Anari. You’ve maintained your dignity throughout a very difficult situation, and you’ve played your part admirably. I could ask for nothing more.”

“Thank you, Duncan.”

He leaned down and brushed a kiss against her lips. “Now finish your breakfast and get dressed. We need to leave soon. And, Anari, there will be IMF soldiers out patrolling the streets. I’ll have to collar you and use the leash until we get to my cruiser.”

She sat back down and took up her breakfast dish. “If you must, then you must. I’ll be good.”

Anari didn’t like the leash but at least they made it to Duncan’s ship without incident. He buckled her in and ran through the flight check. From the quickness of his step as he’d led her to the docking port, to the tense set of his shoulders as he completed his tasks, Anari could tell he was as anxious to leave this place as she. When the retention claw released the cruiser, Duncan nosed the little ship from its slip and eased into the flow of traffic. Once given clearance, he engaged the thrusters and they hurtled through the atmosphere.

Anari decided if she never set foot back on Symetria she’d die a happy woman. Setting that part of her life back in the dark recesses of her mind, she settled back and let Duncan teach her how to read star charts, fascinated by his ability to navigate by simply looking at the stars and nearby planets.

When they were close to Quartus Seven, he pointed to the approaching planet. “There it is, time to take back the controls. And unfortunately, I’m going to have to blindfold you. The location of The Web is a closely guarded secret.”

Her jaw dropped. “Surely you don’t think I’d tell anyone.”

Duncan soothed her ruffled feelings with a smile. “Of course not. At least not voluntarily.”

“I... Oh, all right, if you must.”

Duncan reached into a compartment and pulled out a scarf. “Just until we’re safely inside, then I’ll remove it.” He tied the scarf around her head and proceeded to their destination.

“What is it like on Quartus Seven?” she asked. “I keep forgetting what a sheltered life you’ve led, princess. Quartus Seven is basically one huge city. The entire planet has been developed into one big metropolitan area, even the one quarter over water. There’s no native flora or fauna.”

“I haven’t been that sheltered. I attended some off-world functions with my father, after Mother died, but we never had reason to go to Quartus Seven,” Anari said. “But no animal or plant life at all? What about photosynthesis? How can people breathe if there is no plant life to convert carbon dioxide to oxygen?”

Duncan grinned. “Huge filtering system underground. The various districts employ thousands of workers to maintain them and to make sure the backup generators are always operational, in case of an emergency.”

Anari exhaled the breath she’d been holding. “How frightening. I mean if anything ever happened and those generators weren’t functional...” She shook her head. “I wouldn’t like living

in a place like that, not at all. I couldn't live without plants, without the scent of the dark, rich earth beneath my fingers."

"Don't worry, pet. You shouldn't have to stay there very long. Just until I find your father and bring him back."

"You're leaving me there?"

He maneuvered the little craft smoothly.

"That's unacceptable. I will not allow you to leave me behind."

"You have no choice. I won't endanger your life by taking you with me."

Anari folded her arms across her chest. "We'll see about that. After everything you put me through."

"After everything I put you through? I'm not the one who put you on the block." He reached out to touch her cheek again but she jerked her head away.

"No, but you took what rightly belonged to the man who will someday be my husband. You beat me and fucked me in public. You made me dress like some kind of backstreet trollop, and now you think I'll just stay behind like some helpless little slave girl? I don't think so." She struggled with the harness, finally freeing herself, tearing off the blindfold. "Let me out." When he didn't immediately respond, she shrieked. "Let me out, damn you!"

Her scalp tingled. Her skin suddenly felt too tight for her body and an irrational fear seized her. The hydraulic door opened and Anari scrambled out. Icy fingers of anxiety tripped up her spine as she looked around at the landing bay. She hadn't even known they were inside the building. She climbed out and dropped to the floor.

"Let's go, Vonner's waiting."

Anari nearly screamed. She hadn't heard Duncan's approach. "Serephim's Belt, must you sneak up on me?"

He merely raised an eyebrow when she glared at him and she gritted her teeth.

"Don't raise your eyebrows to me, asswipe. You don't control me anymore."

She didn't struggle when he grasped her upper arm and pulled her down a long corridor. What would be the point? He outweighed her twofold and he had more muscle. "I don't want to go in there, Duncan."

"Oh, so it's Duncan now, hmm? And a minute ago, I was an asswipe."

"You're still an asswipe, you prick." "Keep it up, princess, and I'll show you how much of a prick I can be."

"I believe I've experienced enough to validate that without any further demonstration from you," she said primly, struggling to keep up as he strode down the hall toward the Hub, when he stopped abruptly and spun her against the cold granite wall. She knew she was being unreasonable but she couldn't help herself. He was leaving her.

"You haven't seen shit, princess." His deep voice held a predatory note she hadn't heard before as he leaned down, both hands planted firmly on either side of her body. "You have no idea what I'm capable of."

"Don't I?" Her chin jutted defiantly. "I think I've become quite the expert where you're concerned. I am the one you humiliated while people stood around and watched."

"To maintain your cover!" he shouted.

"You fucked my ass!" She was so angry the words tumbled from her in a furious shriek.

"And you asked me to. In fact, loved it!" he roared. "Don't think for a minute I don't know you loved everything I've done to you. Everything, Anari." He leaned farther, until they were practically nose to nose, his voice turning low and threatening. "And if I was of a mind to

take you here and now, you'd still come screaming my name."

She was about to scream her denial when a voice boomed from the office at the end of the corridor.

"That will be enough. Hammer out your differences when you're off the clock. I'm not paying for your mating dance, Storm. Get in here and bring the senator's daughter with you."

Anari's knees felt like water as Duncan escorted her down the hallway. She tried to keep him from dragging her into the office but her feet found no purchase on the polished floors. As they stepped inside, the door clicked shut behind them. Fight or flight kicked in and Anari had to lock her knees to keep from running. She stood there, heart in her throat, as the man standing in front of a heavily tinted window turned to greet her.

"Welcome to The Web, Miss Fury. I'm Ulric Vonner."

Anari did her best not to quake at the sight of him. Merciful heavens, he was bigger than Duncan, if such a thing were possible. His broad shoulders practically blocked out one of the viewing screens mounted to the wall behind him. His shoulder-length black hair was pulled back and secured at the nape. She fidgeted with her hands as he scrutinized her with coal-black eyes. It felt as if he could see into her soul.

This man was dangerous.

"Why am I here?" Anari met his level gaze with a confidence she didn't feel.

He quirked an eyebrow. "Would you rather be under Ruic E'coyo's protection? I can assure you that your lovely face wouldn't be nearly so pretty when he was finished with you." He glanced at Duncan. "Inspired choice of punishment, by the way. He required an hour in a med unit to repair the damage. I doubt he'll soon forget the experience." Vonner gestured to the seats in front of his desk and took his own. "Of course, he'll be looking for payback."

Duncan sat. "He can look all he wants." He pointed at the chair. "Sit, Anari."

"Fuck you," she said, but she sat anyway, before her knees gave out. Ulric Vonner made her nervous.

Vonner gave her a smile, which she noticed didn't come close to reaching his eyes.

"You're here because we need your help, Miss Fury."

Anari folded her arms over her chest. How could a man like Ulric Vonner need her help? She was a farmer, for heaven's sake, and a teacher, not a soldier.

"A big strapping man like you needs my help? Why do I find that so hard to believe?"

A bark of laughter escaped him and he glanced at Duncan. "I see what you mean. She is feisty." And then, "You'll need all the spirit you can muster, Miss Fury." He pushed a file across his desk. "Open it, read it, and you'll understand why we need your assistance."

Anari opened the file, flipping through the pages until she came to pictures of her father. She gasped. The pictures Duncan had showed her hadn't been this clear. He was bloody and bruised, being led away from the Senate building in the dark of night by two men in black masks.

"What...who is responsible for this?" she demanded.

Vonner leaned back in his chair. "My gut tells me it's the Amalgamation."

Tears welled in her eyes. Her father had often voiced his concern over the Amalgamation's methods, but he'd never been able to prove his suspicions of corruption. On the outside, they seemed too clean. So he worked quietly, behind the scenes, to keep his people safe.

"Why? What could they possibly hope to gain from abducting him? He's always been an ardent supporter of the Intergalactic Security Agency and he chairs the Oversight Committee that controls the Secret Sciences Police. This makes no sense."

“It does if he has something they want.” He glanced at Duncan and back to her. “Tell me about your father’s environmental work.”

Anari gasped. “The Eden Project. But he hasn’t worked on it for years.” She closed her eyes and tried to remember. “He was studying methods for reversing desertification on some of the outlying systems. In fact, if I recall correctly, he had some success on one of the planets.”

Vonner leaned forward. “Which one?”

“I’m not sure. I remember him saying it was four Smith Gates from the Secundus System. I...if I had a star chart, I might be able to pinpoint some possibilities but it’s been a long time since Father and I studied the heavens together.”

“In the conference room.” He checked his timepiece. “Duncan will show you to your quarters and we’ll meet back here in an hour. At that time, I’ll attempt to answer all your questions.”

Anari nodded and rose to accept his handshake. “Very well, Mr. Vonner.” She shot Duncan a venomous look before removing her hand from Ulric’s. “I assume I’m to have separate quarters?”

“If that is your preference.” The corner of his mouth shot up in a grimace Anari assumed was supposed to pass for a smile. “Then by all means, Duncan will make the arrangements and have your belongings delivered there.”

“Do you really think having your own quarters is going to make a difference?” Duncan demanded as they exited Vonner’s office.

Anari straightened her shoulders and snorted derisively. “How can it not? You won’t be there.”

“Perhaps not, but I’ll be here.” His fingertip stroked her temple, prompting a shiver of desire to light up her body. Damn him, despite the fact that he could leave her behind like excess baggage, she still wanted him and he knew it. They crossed The Hub and headed down another corridor. “This is the dormitory wing. Each hunter has his or her own room.” He stopped in front of a room with a red hourglass pattern etched on the center panel and pointed to the design. “This signifies female rooms. The female black widow spider has this design on her belly.”

“*Latrodectus mactans*. I’m aware of the species. Eats the male after mating—nothing like a little postcoital snack, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I had no idea you were such a bloodthirsty little wench.” Duncan removed the keycard from a slot next to the door and opened it, gesturing her inside. “Nothing fancy, as you can see, but the beds are comfortable and there’s a fully equipped bath. We’ll go down to Supply, get you some bedding, introduce you to Con and Sealy. They run Supply Central, and will see to it you have everything you need.”

Leaving the dormitory area, they headed down another corridor lined with doors bearing labels to signify their contents. Duncan pushed through a heavy door at the end of the hallway, holding it open for her. A tall, thickset man with rust-colored hair greeted them with a welcoming smile.

“Another new hunter?” he asked by way of greeting.

Duncan shook his head. “Not today. Constance O’Rourke, meet Anari Fury.”

“Ah, the senator’s daughter.” He offered a sympathetic smile. “Are ye all right, lass?”

Anari felt the embarrassing heat flowing to her cheeks. Did they all know what had happened to her?

“I’m fine, Mr. O’Rourke. Anxious to find my father and sisters so we can all go home.”

“I see,” he said, giving Duncan a meaningful look before smiling down on her once more. “And what brings you to my humble domain?”

“I...bedding, I guess, and whatever else is required for the room I’ve been assigned.”

“And which room would that be, lass?”

Confused, Anari turned to Duncan. “I didn’t see a room designation.”

Duncan grinned. “The one next to mine, Con.”

Anari was fairly certain steam must be shooting out of her ears. He’d put her in the room next to his? Let him stick her in close proximity, the better to torment him with her lack of interest.

“Good enough, I’ll have a droid gather what you’ll need and get your room ready.”

“Thank you, Mr. O’Rourke.” She smiled sweetly at the big man, then giggled as his face flushed. What an adorable teddy bear of a man.

“Call me Con, lass. Everyone does, though I dare say I’d let you get away with calling me Connie—just this once.”

“Thank you again...Con. You’re very kind.” She turned and walked to the door, barely able to hold in a laugh when she heard Duncan grumbling to O’Rourke.

“Connie? What’s with that shit? You don’t even let Zeri call you Connie and you’ve fucked her.” Anari could almost see Duncan’s dark brows narrow to a V. “No way, O’Rourke. Don’t even think about it.”

Duncan pushed through the door and caught up with Anari as she headed down the passageway.

“You’re going in the wrong direction, pet. This way leads to The Abyss.”

“Oh. I...everything looks the same here. How do you ever learn your way around?”

He took a deep breath in an effort to calm himself. He knew Con was just yanking his chain, but Anari might be angry enough to give herself to another man simply to get even. The thought of his princess in another man’s arms drove him wild. He spun her around, lifted her under her arms and pressed her against the cool granite wall.

“There are men who work here,” he growled. “Men who would take what you have to offer at the slightest hint of interest you might show. And they’d take without asking.”

Her face reddened with anger as she dangled before him. Gods, he wanted her.

“What makes you think you’re any different? You took without asking.”

He let a slow smile spread across his face. “Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong, princess. You asked. In fact, as I recall, you begged.”

He lowered her down until his raging erection pressed against the notch of her pussy. She inhaled sharply when he wrapped her legs around him. “Admit it, you begged me to fuck you.” His nostrils flared as her lips parted. He didn’t know if it was in protest to his words or the need for his kiss, but he fitted his mouth against hers and thrust his tongue inside. By the stars, she would acknowledge her desire for him if he had to keep her pinned to this wall all night.

The kiss started out hard and demanding, but at the first stroke of her tongue inside his mouth, he ratcheted back from boiling to simmer. Her arms went around his neck and she rubbed her breasts against his chest. He heard her sigh his name and felt the overpowering need to bury himself deep inside her hot little cunt.

“Duncan...Duncan, stop.”

He didn’t know how he managed to stop, but he wrenched his mouth away and set her on her feet. She skittered away from him, breathing hard, her face flushed with a combination of

fury and desire.

“I don’t understand what this thing is between us,” she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “But I will not allow you to use it against me just to get me into your bed. You don’t get to use me and walk away.”

She spun on her heel and marched away, that shapely ass a sheer torture to watch. He’d been inside that ass, and he intended to go there again. Frequently. She could spout all the nonsense she wanted but the simple truth was, she wanted him. Just as he wanted her. He rubbed his aching cock and took a deep breath, muttering, “Down, boy.” They had a meeting to attend and he couldn’t step into the conference room with the other hunters with his cock poking up over the waist of his breeches.

“Son of a bitch!” he growled, and hit the wall with his fist. Pain exploded through his knuckles.

Well, at least his cock deflated.

* * * * *

Anari took the seat Vonner indicated and folded her hands in her lap. The room was filled with people of endless variety. Here a tall man with a blond buzz cut and tribal tattoos running down the side of his neck to overflow onto massive shoulders and biceps displayed by a shirt with the sleeves ripped off. There a woman with blue hair, dozens of earrings in her pointy ears, and a stretch lace tank top that barely covered her nipples. A short, stocky man with a full beard and eerily yellow-cast eyes winked at her, blowing her a kiss around the toothpick clenched between his teeth.

“That’ll be enough, Grogan,” Vonner said mildly.

The man chuckled and laughed. “Just trying to be friendly, boss.” He grunted when a petite female with stark white hair elbowed him in the ribs.

“She doesn’t look like she wants to be friends, Grogan,” the woman pointed out. “Hell, why would she? You smell like a Lemorian goat. Where the hell have you been?”

Her crack elicited a round of laughter and everyone settled in and gave Vonner their attention.

“This is Anari Fury, daughter to Arthus Fury, the senator from Sa-Ro Five. As you know, Storm was assigned to find her and bring her back here for her own protection. Most of you are also aware that the senator is missing. When I was first informed that Miss Fury and her sisters had been sent to the slave auctions, I thought it was because she’d pissed off someone important, someone with power. Then I discovered the senator had gone missing.

“While the two incidents weren’t connected, I now know that Cartiere is aware that Miss Fury carries knowledge of her father’s work in her head, and he wants her. In fact, he’s asked me to find her. He doesn’t know we already have her, or that we intend to keep her from him.”

At Vonner’s command, the lights blinked off. “Computer, upload star chart.” He turned to Anari. “The floor is yours.”

Anari stood, praying her voice didn’t shake too badly. It had been years since she’d done any public speaking and this crowd was nothing like her schoolchildren.

“Years ago, before my father was elected to the Senate, he was an environmental scientist. His primary goal was to bring life to uninhabitable planets. As I told Mr. Vonner, my father met with some success on one of the outlying planets. As I recall, that planet was located in or near the neutral zones, those outside the reach of Amalgamation forces at the time.” She stood and went to the wall where an image of the galaxy was projected.

“In looking at the star chart, it’s obvious that planet can only be one of a very few.” She

pointed to one to the west of Secundus System. “The Upero System is a possibility. The second planet Destyn is basically a desert planet and as such would be ripe for terraforming. Decimus was a possibility at one time but he abandoned that because researchers had just opened a facility to study the origins of ancient life on Nivra.

“As you’re aware, anything west and north of the Secundus System has to be on constant guard for incursion from Cintealios forces, but that was a chance my father was willing to take. We could consider Yoikee, in the Pyaw System. My father was very close to several of the prominent randwulf families, and I know they discussed using his device on Yoikee. I’m not sure whatever became of the negotiations though.

“He considered the Clauston System, specifically Effros, but when the science team explored the planet they discovered Calonian pirates living underground and he would never consider working on an inhabited planet, no matter how sparse the population.”

“Why is that?” Vonner asked.

Anari took her seat and steepled her fingers. Her memories of the time she’d worked with her father came rushing back. How to explain it without making her father sound like a madman? “The premise is that, similar to Earth, these planets contained the basic building blocks of life—water, carbon and oxygen in the form of carbon dioxide, and nitrogen. A hospitable atmosphere would have to be built and heat would have to be added. Once those tasks were complete, simple life forms would be added—various bacteria able to withstand an extreme environment and eventually, certain types of algae. Greenhouse gases would be introduced to aid in the heating of the planet, which in turn aids the reproduction of the algae.

“That’s a very simplistic explanation, but you get the idea. After some time, the atmosphere would develop enough that complex life forms could exist with relatively few supportive aids. Plants and animals would then be added, all of which assist in the formation of an atmosphere conducive to human habitation.”

When she scanned the room, she realized the hunters were actually listening to her, interested in what she was saying. It felt good to be teaching people again. She took a breath and continued.

“Three generations of Fury men have been working toward the building of this planet. My father discovered a way to accelerate the process, according to his journals.”

“And you believe he did those things?” Grogan asked skeptically.

“He said he did, but then talk turned to the technology’s use as a weapon. He shut it down, destroyed the device and wiped his hard drives. He turned his attention to sustainable agriculture and became a farmer, until he ran for the Senate.”

“Any idea what the composition of those building blocks was or what the formulas are?” Duncan asked.

“He mostly referred to the composition as an evolutionary soup. As for the formulas, they’re in his head...and in mine.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Vonner sit forward in his seat, a vague expression of alarm on his face. “Suffering gods, he developed an accelerated method of terraforming? And he handed it over to the Amalgamation?”

Anari slapped the table and glared at him. “No, he did not. He would never do such a thing. He shut the program down and left the planet to evolve on its own. Look, whichever planet it was, it possessed all the components for at least simple life—and archaeological investigations found fossils indicative of aquatic life in various forms. There was evidence of seismic activities in the strata.

“The planet he chose died eons ago for lack of water. Father introduced greenhouse gasses to melt the vast supply of ice deep below the planet’s crust. Regardless of what you may think of accelerated terraforming, Mr. Vonner, we are a Type III civilization. As populations expand we use all resources at our command to find new star systems and new planets to colonize. When we find them, we need a way to speed up the evolutionary process on some of them. Father claims to have done so. Now, if this technology can be used to bring life back to a dead planet, imagine what it could do to a healthy planet. That’s why he shut down the program and destroyed all evidence of its existence.”

“Holy shit,” Duncan said. “You’re talking about a device that could reduce life on a populated planet back to single-cell organisms. And you have that shit in your head?”

“Yes.”

“Maker’s balls, Anari, you’re in very grave danger.”

“Exactly,” Vonner seconded. He looked around the table at his top hunters. “I want four teams ready to go tomorrow night. Pick your people and let Con know what you need. Miss Fury, you’ll go with Duncan’s team to the Upero System.”

Beside her, Duncan vehemently shook his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, boss. What if there are Amalgamation forces on the planet?”

“And what if her father is there? She’s the only one he has reason to trust. She goes.”

Duncan ground his teeth as they left the conference room. Taking Anari along on this little fishing expedition was a bad idea, but Vonner’s word was law so he had no choice in the matter. The biggest question in his mind was how he was going to keep her safe. There was also the issue of setting up a new cover for her. She’d have to wear a personal hologram device. There would be stops on the way, intel to gather, Smith Gates to pass through and supplies to replenish. If Tur or, gods forbid, the Amalgamation, got so much as a hint of who she really was, they’d stop at nothing to find her.

Duncan spent the next few hours meeting with the other hunters, putting together teams for an expansive search of the outlying star systems. He was of the opinion that Anari was on target about Destyn, but Vonner was nothing if not meticulous. They would explore all possibilities.

Excursions like these were complicated affairs. Arrangements had to be made with the control centers that were in charge of the individual Smith Gates. Supplies had to be calculated so they had what they required when they reached the planets Anari had outlined for them. Each ship would have to carry a portable medi-unit and nursotic unit. Crystolium could be stored but use of jump drives took more power, so how much they could carry would depend on the distances each ship would travel. Then there was always the issue of pirates and mercenaries. The galaxy was a dangerous place if proper precautions weren’t taken, and even then trouble often came out of nowhere.

Duncan finished his preflight plans and hailed Anari’s room comm.

“We’re meeting in the conference room. Your presence is required.” He knew he sounded gruff, but she needed to get used to the idea that he was in command and his word was law on this mission. She stepped out moments later, aggravation evident in her expression.

Even pissed she was a feast for the eyes with her wealth of red-gold hair and whiskey-colored eyes. The lush lips he’d so recently ravaged puckered in a pout, while her hands fisted on her hips. She glared up at him, defiant and obviously in no mood to put up with his overbearing manner. With a superior sniff of her aristocratic nose, she swept past him and

headed for the conference room.

He wanted to laugh, he really did, but doing so would probably earn him a swift kick in the balls. While her submissiveness in the bedroom never failed to kindle his unflagging lust, he had to admit he liked this side of her. She was shedding the shock of the brutality she'd experienced and it was going to be a pleasure to get to know the real Anari Fury. She preceded him into the conference room and they took their seats, giving Vonner their undivided attention.

"All right, people," Vonner said. "We have four teams. Con and Sealy are outfitting your crafts as we speak. They're providing each ship with extra energy cubes so you can make use of orbit wisps on top of your normal intel."

His gaze lasered onto Duncan and Anari. "Duncan will pose as a trader and Anari as his spouse, in the Pyaw tradition."

Duncan maintained his cool when Anari shot to her feet in protest.

"Now wait just a damn minute," she growled, gesturing to Duncan. "I will not walk two steps behind this asshole and let him make a spectacle of me in public."

Vonner's face remained impassive, a technique with which every hunter was familiar. Duncan wondered how long it would take Anari to recognize that look as inflexibility. Not long, evidently, because her words sputtered to a halt and she took her seat.

"May I assume you're done, Miss Fury?"

Anari folded her hands atop the table and nodded.

"Good. Your protest is noted but I'll remind you of the danger you place yourself and Duncan in if you stray from your cover. He is the captain of his ship and team leader for your expedition to Destyn. As such, he is in control and you will do as he commands, you will do whatever is necessary to maintain your cover, but," his pointed look moved to Duncan. "You are a dutiful wife only in public."

Anari shot Duncan a smug smile, and Vonner's eyes pinned her to her seat. "The key words there are 'whatever is necessary', Miss Fury. If you forget your role, I expect Duncan to act accordingly. Is that clear?"

"Crystal."

"Duncan?"

"Understood."

"Good." He slid a small package across the table to Duncan. "Comm-tab for your partner. Get her set up and ready to go. You leave first thing in the morning. Grogan's team tomorrow afternoon, and so on. Be careful out there, people, we don't want to give the IMF any reason to doubt it's not business as usual." He caught Anari's eye again. "Play your role believably, Miss Fury. Don't give me reason to regret helping you."

"Your reasons for helping me are your own, Mr. Vonner," came the cool reply. "I don't recall asking for it."

Duncan didn't miss the tic in Vonner's jaw as the man's eyes narrowed.

"Quite right, however, my goals could have been met without the inconvenience and expense of rescuing you and your sisters. I could have thrown you to the wolves. See to it you remember that."

Chapter Five

“You really are a piece of work, Anari,” Duncan growled, propelling her down the corridor to her room. He snatched the keycard from her hand, deactivated the lock and shoved her inside. When she spun around to glare at him, he poked her in the chest with his finger. “Do not fuck with Ulric Vonner. The man has ice water running through his veins.”

“I will not be treated as though I am nothing more than a hole for some man to sink his dick into.”

The door hissed shut behind them as Duncan stalked her across the room, backing her against a wall. His cock rose thick and hard as her defiant little chin shot up. His hand went to her throat, squeezing gently.

His voice was low, menacing. “Is that right, princess? I seem to recall you like having my cock sink into you.” He kept his touch gentle, skimming down to her chest to cup a breast before leaning in to whisper. “Just as you like having my mouth on you.” He ran a thumb over her rapidly hardening nipple. “Perhaps a little demonstration is in order.”

“Don’t. I don’t want—” Her breath caught, belying her protest. He leaned down and closed his teeth over that taut little nipple, giving it a tug. The answering moan was all the permission he needed to slide his hands into the waistband of her pants and ease them past her hips. As they pooled around her ankles, he lifted her, turned and had her on the bed in two strides.

“Duncan,” she whispered as he tugged her panties off and spread her wide.

“Hush, Anari.”

Arousal glistened at her center and she hissed her approval when he licked her, burrowing between her swollen folds. She wanted him, wanted what he offered. No matter how she protested, this was the one thing about which she could not lie.

“Look at you,” he said, sliding a finger inside her. “Such a beautiful, pink pussy. All wet and needy, hungry for my mouth, for my cock.” He licked again, savoring the taste of her.

Duncan knew he was a bastard for making her admit her need, but he couldn’t help himself. “Do you want me, princess? Shall I fill this hot little pussy with my dick?”

She whimpered. “Yes, yes, take me.”

He smiled and gave her clit a leisurely suck. “How, baby? Do you want me on top of you, slow and easy? Or behind you, hard and deep?”

He thrilled at the shiver that rippled through her. “Oh, behind me, Duncan. Hard and deep.”

Duncan chuckled and suckled her clit once more, relishing the way she squirmed and thrust herself against his mouth. When she was teetering on the brink, he pulled away. “On your hands and knees, pet.”

She scrambled to do his bidding, positioning herself just the way he liked her, chest on the mattress, legs spread wide with that delectable little ass in the air. He leaned forward and gently nipped her butt, garnering another heated gasp before sinking two fingers into her pussy to coat them in her erotic juices.

“I’m going to fuck your ass with my fingers while I pound my cock into this hungry little cunt, princess.” She howled when his fingers sunk into the narrow opening of her anus.

“Oh gods. Fuck me, Duncan.” He plunged deep, impaling her with a single thrust and kept on pumping.

Home. Deep inside her, he felt as though he belonged to someone, to something greater

than just himself, and he knew beyond doubt that she would always be a part of him. Even when the mission was over and her family safely restored to her, a piece of him would remain forever hers. She brought out the best in him, even though she might not recognize it.

Never before had Duncan felt as human as he did when he was with Anari. Loyalty, yes. Honor, certainly. But humanity? Super soldiers were programmed to be loyal to the Amalgamation and no other. The world outside the IMF existed only in terms of how it affected the Amalgamation. Civilians were objects and humanity was a foreign concept. He'd had nothing against which to measure that trait in himself until Vonner had entrusted him with Anari's safety.

His hands gripped her hips as he drove into her, fucking her hard and deep, just the way she liked it. Sometimes he felt as though he could fuck her for hours, it felt that good to be gloved in her snug heat. Words of praise tumbled from her lips as he screwed his cock deep with short, quick jabs, then long, slow strokes, taking her higher and higher. The fingers in her tight little ass kept rhythm with the thrust of his cock and he dearly wanted to bury his cock there too. He spied a small bottle of heated oil on her headboard and reached for it. What had his little minx been up to?

She groaned in protest when his fingers left her ass. "Nooo, put them back."

"I'll put them back, pet," he growled, thrusting deep. "I'm just going to oil them up." He did, and thrust them back into the puckered hole. "What have you been doing with the oil on your headboard, Anari? Did you have the plug up your sweet little ass?"

"Yes," she gasped. "I wanted to stretch myself for you. I wanted you to take me...there."

Her words elicited a dark chuckle. "Say it, princess. Say, 'Duncan, take my ass', and I'll do it."

A shudder washed through her and her cunt contracted around him. "Duncan," she whispered, "take my ass."

He eased out of her and quickly oiled his cock. He spread his hands over her ass, spreading the cheeks and teasing the tiny hole with his thumbs.

"Oh gods," Anari moaned. "You make me...want...so badly, Duncan. Please, please let me have you."

He hadn't thought it was possible to get any harder, to need her any more than he needed her at this moment, but her words drove him beyond rational thought. He pressed the tip of his cock to the opening of her ass and pushed past the muscle. His intent had been to go slow and easy, but his little princess had other thoughts. She met his forward thrust with a backward one, skewering herself on his dick.

"Move," she demanded. "I need you, Duncan."

Her words were his undoing. He grabbed her hips in a viselike grip and gave her what she wanted, drawing back to ram into her again and again. The oil was slick and hot, allowing his cock to shuttle back and forth with ease.

"Touch yourself, Anari," he rasped. "Play with your pussy. Fuck yourself with your fingers while I take your ass. Help me make you come, pet."

Her cries filled the room as her fingers worked in her cunt. His balls slapped against the hand fucking her pussy and he knew he didn't have long. He picked up his pace, hips like the pistons of a powerful engine driving into her, digging deep as her muscles tightened around him.

"Come on, princess, come with me," he shouted, lunging deep one final time. He held her ass against him when his balls contracted and his cock leapt, filling her ass with his seed. His last coherent thought as his bulk impelled her to the mattress was imagining his seed filling her

young, fertile womb to grow a new life, a life they created through their loving.

Anari lay still beneath Duncan's hard body. No matter how hard she fought, her feelings for him continued to grow. How would she ever survive when her life returned to normal and she had to live without him? Not seeing him every day, not feeling the sheer power of him as his body mastered hers? Because he would leave her, of that she was certain. She was just a job to him, an assignment to be completed, but with the added benefit of relieving his physical needs. Any woman would do, any port in a storm. There had been women before her and there would be women after her, but there would be no other men for Anari. She could not give her body so freely to a man she did not love. She swallowed a sob as the realization swamped her.

She was in love with Duncan Storm.

Oh gods, could she have done anything more foolish than fall for a bounty hunter? A genetically enhanced super soldier with no soul? What the hell was wrong with her?

His cock slid from her rear and a moment later she heard water running. The damp warmth of a cloth moved gently between her legs as he cleaned her. When he returned to the bathroom, she curled into a ball, sobbing silently. She'd rather he take her brutally, showing her no tenderness whatsoever. Then, maybe she could learn to hate him.

The mattress dipped as he sat beside her, his hand caressing her back. "Anari, did I hurt you?" His hand moved to her shoulder to roll her onto her back, but she pulled away.

"Don't touch me." She shook as sobs racked her body. How could he not understand what he did to her? "Just leave, Duncan. Please, just leave me alone."

He wouldn't, of course, not her big, bad super soldier. Instead, he stretched out beside her, forcefully uncurling her body to drape her over him. Powerful arms and legs wrapped around her, holding her tight against him as she cried and screamed in frustration. In fear. In desperation. He was burrowing so deeply beneath her skin that she would never be free of him.

Finally, her tears abated and his hands began their tentative stroking again, relaxing tense muscles.

"Tell me what's wrong, princess," he coaxed. "Have I hurt you in some way? Does my touch repel you so much?"

She shook her head.

"Then what is it? I can't help you if you won't tell me."

"You can't help a hopeless fool, Duncan."

"You are anything but a fool, Anari," he said, kissing the top of her head. "Now tell me what I've done to upset you."

She took a deep shuddering breath and rested her cheek on his broad chest. "You've done the worst thing a man like you can do to a woman like me. You've made me love you, and for that, I may never forgive you."

* * * * *

Duncan eased from beneath Anari's sleeping form and slid out of bed. He'd stayed hours longer than he'd intended, holding her, soothing her until at last she slept. Her revelation had amazed and dismayed him. He was not a man given to tender feelings, yet she inspired them.

His life was fraught with dangers to which no woman should be subjected. If IMF authorities ever discovered his true identity, he would be terminated along with any companions, which was why he lived covertly, using any number of false identities. He had no compunctions about risking the lives of the dangerous offenders he hunted. A convict was a convict and he made a good living by seeing to it they were returned to the authorities—one way or the other.

But risk Anari? No, that could never happen.

But what was he supposed to do, just leave her behind like she meant nothing to him? His innate sense of honor rebelled at the idea of lying to her, telling her she was nothing more than an assignment. No more than a convenient receptacle for his overactive sex drive. Surely she would understand if he explained why he could not keep her. He'd told her what would happen if they ever found him. She was an intelligent woman. She would understand and forgive. She had to because they were bound together until mission's end and he could not—would not—leave her thinking their time together meant nothing. Hearing her say those words, he'd finally understood what his own feelings for her meant. For the first time in his thirty-plus years, Duncan was in love. Madly, fiercely, incredulously in love.

Shit.

He grabbed his clothes and boots and slipped out the door naked, trying not to wake her. He had no frame of reference with which to compare his feelings, no context in which to make the appropriate decision. He was completely befuddled by one tiny woman's declaration of love. As a Gen 8 Gamma soldier, a fifty percent increase in brain function should provide him with more than enough cognitive ability to figure out what must be done, but he was clueless. He was completely disgusted with himself.

He deliberately held himself aloof from the other hunters. Not that he thought they would betray him, but to protect them from guilt by association. He couldn't think of one person he could approach with this dilemma.

"It won't help you with this, you know." A sexy female voice floated down the hall toward him. "That big brain of yours."

Zeri. He might have known the little telepath would pick up on his feelings. Of all the hunter staff, she was the one he worked the hardest to avoid. He turned his back to her and hurriedly dressed. "Who asked you?"

Zeri merely laughed. "You were practically shouting your thoughts through the airwaves."

When he turned, she was standing right in front of him, looking up at him with those strange lavender eyes and wealth of platinum hair. His scowl did nothing to intimidate her. She simply took his hand and led him toward the Rec wing.

"Everyone's gone to their rooms for the night, hunter. Come to the kitchen for a bite and some tea. I may tease, but I do know a thing or two about matters of the heart."

Duncan sighed and followed along behind her. Food and drink couldn't hurt. After all, neither he nor Anari had eaten a thing all day. Immediately, he began to worry that she hadn't eaten.

"She ate while you were putting teams together, Storm. She's fine. And much stronger than either of you know. She will survive you, but she will never love again, and there will be no other men for her."

Duncan's heart clenched. "I don't want that for her. I don't want her to be alone, mourning over a lost love for the rest of her life."

Zeri put a huge slab of roast beef on a plate with some steaming vegetables and set it in front of him. "Oh, she won't be mourning over you the rest of her life. There will be other things to occupy her time. She is a strong woman. Already she is struggling to put her feelings for you into perspective. She believes you don't care for her, that you will leave her and she will find a way to go on. But she is determined to close her heart."

Duncan set his fork on his plate. "I don't know what to do. You know what I am, Zeri. I

can't take the chance that she will be hurt because of me, and I can't walk around with a PHD on my wrist twenty-four hours a day."

Zeri pushed a cup of tea at him and slid onto a stool. "Then restore her family to her, let her know you care. Give her what you can for as long as you are able."

Duncan swallowed the bitter tea with a grimace. "How is it you know so much about matters of the heart?"

"An empath picks up on strong feelings, hunter." She gave him a knowing smile. "And love and hate are the two strongest feelings humanoids experience. They are strongly related. I think one cannot exist without the other." When he was done with his food, she took his plate and moved to the sanitizing station, keeping her back to him. "Go back to your woman, hunter. Do not let her wake without you. Your time together draws to a close, do not waste it. Give her some tender memories to sustain her."

Duncan pushed to his feet. "Thank you, Zeri."

The tiny woman shrugged nonchalantly. "No problem, hunter." She cleared her throat. "Do not think this makes us friends or anything. I only did it for the woman."

Since she had her back turned and couldn't see him, he grinned. "Understood." He left the room and headed back to Anari.

Anari woke to find herself stretched out over Duncan "What..." she asked groggily. "Is it time to go?"

He smoothed a hand over her hair. "Not yet. I wanted to talk with you before we got underway."

She stiffened in his arms and tried to roll away from him, but he would not allow it. "I know what's expected of me, Duncan, I don't need another lecture."

"I wanted to talk about what you told me last night."

Oh gods, she'd hoped to forget that humiliating confession. Again, she tried to move away from him but he refused her.

"It was nothing," she protested. She rested her cheek on his chest and squeezed her eyes shut to keep from having to look at him. "I was tired and distraught by what Vonner told me."

His chest rumbled with a chuckle. "You are a terrible liar, Anari, but I understand your need to protect your heart."

He must have felt her tears leaking onto his chest, for he rolled her onto her back and took her face in his hands. "Look at me, princess, and see the man who loves you back."

She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it, shaking her head. "You're just saying that to gain my cooperation."

"I wish that were true," he said with a shake of his head. "Because it would be easier to leave you when the time comes."

"But if you—"

"You know what I am, Anari. If I stayed with you, I could wind up costing you your life, and that I will not do."

Anari sifted her fingers through his wealth of thick, brown hair and pulled his lips a breath away from hers. "I love you, Duncan. Do you imagine I don't know the risks? I would walk through the whole of Cartiere's army to be with you."

"Which is exactly why I cannot stay with you, love."

He kissed her then, with an intensity that spoke of his longing, the depth of his feelings, the tenderness in his heart, and she opened herself to him, letting the love fill her.

“Will you let me love you for as long as possible? Will you give me the memories to sustain me through the days without you? May we not take what we can and hold it close to use on those long nights when the loneliness is upon us?”

Her throat ached with the need to cry, to rage against the fates that conspired to keep them apart. But there was joy, too, because he loved her. “Yes,” she whispered. “Love me, Duncan. Fill my body with your flesh and love me until I know nothing but the feel of you inside me, your strength surrounding me.”

She could see it in his eyes, the way he looked at her. There was a tenderness about him that he’d never shown before. He used all his senses to make love to her. The strange gray eyes she’d grown to appreciate as exotic. The way his nostrils flared, as if the scent of her increased his hunger. The gentleness of his hands as they stroked her aroused flesh, eliciting sighs of contentment. His mouth, that luscious mouth that usually ate at her with a voracious appetite, brushed lightly across her skin as he tasted but didn’t devour.

Anari arched against him as his mouth traced the contours of her breasts. A gentle scrape of his teeth had her nipples aching to be sucked. When he drew each, by turn, into his mouth, she uttered a soft moan. “More, Duncan. I need more.”

He nuzzled her breast. “Soon, my love.” He suckled again, then paused. “So much has passed between us, Anari. I’ve always taken you with the heat we share. Let me show you I can be tender, as well.”

“Yes...” she whispered. Her tummy quivered as his lips glided across her bare flesh. His tongue dipped into her navel, teased and retreated.

“So soft,” he murmured, rubbing his cheek over her lower abdomen. “Like expensive silk.” He nipped at her hipbone then moved to lick the crease of her leg. “Open for me, love. Let me taste you.”

The first sweep of his tongue had her gasping. “Oh, Duncan...so good...so sweet.”

“Mmm, yes,” he rasped, raising his eyes to hers. “Sweet as honey. I could eat you forever.”

Oh, the look on his face, the desire smoldering in his eyes. He quaked with need and still, he took his time. Building a yearning inside her that only he could quench. Her hips rolled beneath his voracious mouth, her breath coming in short bursts as he took her clit between his lips to suck.

“I...oh gods...please.” He’d made her beg before, but it had never been like this—this tender torment, this electrifying assault on her senses. And then he slid two fingers deep into her pussy and pumped twice before retreating to flip her onto her belly. “Dunccaan...” She wailed his name, protesting even as he leaned over her to press a kiss to the side of her neck.

“Not done yet, love.”

Anari shuddered at the sound of his voice, so thick with desire it curled around her like smoke. Calloused fingers stroked her, following the contours of her body. He took her hips in his hands and lifted her to her knees. She opened her legs for him and he moved between them before leaning down to nip her bottom.

“Are you ready for me, love?”

She uttered a strangled cry as he grasped her bottom, parting her cheeks.

“I love your ass, baby.” He traced the swollen folds of her pussy with his thumbs and opened her. “And I love your pretty pink pussy.”

The head of his cock nudged her, seeking entrance. “Yesss...” she hissed her approval as he entered her in a long, slow glide.

“Feel good?” He eased back and thrust again, impaling her slowly.

Feel good? It was better than good. It was nothing short of ecstasy. His cock was long and thick and so very hard, shuttling in and out as though he had all the time in the world to fuck her and he intended to use every minute in the most tantalizing manner possible. He lunged, hard and deep and she sobbed.

“Please, Duncan, I need to come.”

He laughed softly as his hands slid under her arms and lifted her until her back pressed against his chest, his cock buried to the root. “Now you can come, pet. While I fuck you just,” he ground his cock into her pussy, “like,” he cupped her breasts in his big hands, pinching her nipples, “this.”

Oh yes. They were poetry in motion, bodies undulating with an impassioned rhythm that was more instinct than intention.

“Yes, Duncan, yes. Ah gods, it’s too much... I can’t—” And then his hand skimmed down her body and his finger found her clit. Tapped it once. She shuddered.

“Come, princess.” He whispered his demand in her ear, then lightly bit the lobe.

She shattered. There was no other word for it. Her pussy contracted as Duncan drove into her, hard and fast, pumping through the spasms that rocked her body, holding her at a maddening peak that was almost painful in its intensity.

Anari clawed at the strong arms wrapped around her, howling her release as her body bucked and swayed. His own release followed quickly and his seed shot deep into her body. As they fell onto the mattress in a sweaty, satiated heap, she smiled as they drifted off to sleep. He loved her. When the time came, he would make the right choice.

Chapter Six

They left The Web the next morning, just before dawn. This ship was bigger than his little personal craft. They would have regular sleeping quarters and a place to eat their meals. The cargo hold was filled with everything they would possibly need, plus a few extra trade items—expensive cloth, exotic and staple food items, gold and gems—all for the purpose of maintaining Duncan’s cover as a trader. After talking with Anari, Duncan agreed to stop at Pyaw Four to trade with the randwulf. The randwulf were known to raise the best beef cattle in all the surrounding systems and a freezer full of meat from the Pyaw System would only increase in value the farther away they got from civilization—especially on some of the outposts they’d pass on their way to Destyn. Posing as a Pyaw couple was the perfect cover, especially with the PHD to alter his appearance.

And, as luck would have it, Anari was well acquainted with the rand leadership, being the daughter of the senator from Sa-Ro Five. The two planets bartered agricultural products for rand beef. When they passed through the Pyaw Smith Gate, he handed the comm off to Anari, who hailed Garrik Sindar, the owner of one of the largest cattle ranches on the planet.

“Greetings, Garrik, this is Anari Fury, requesting permission to transport.”

“Anari. We had heard...you are well?”

She looked at Duncan and smiled. “I am well, Garrik, and I have much to discuss with you. May we transport?”

“Of course, of course.”

As they headed to the transport room, Anari filled Duncan in on randwulf history and the protocol for interacting with them.

“The randwulf have their origins in Earth, so the men shake hands for a greeting. They no longer shift, but they can still be aggressive if they feel challenged. You can look the men in the eye when trading, but if their women are present, they could take that as a challenge. Never look directly into a randwulf woman’s eyes for longer than it takes to greet her and do not attempt to shake her hand. If Garrik’s mate is there, you refer to her as Mistress Sindar. Only a husband or another female may address a randwulf female by her given name.”

“Right,” Duncan said, punching in the code for the transport room. The door slid open and he hurried to the console to program in the coordinates. “Shake hands with the males, no touching the females, and refer to them as ‘mistress’. Got it.” He activated the voice controls for the transporter and they stepped into the bay. A large, clear tube descended from the ceiling, enclosing them. “Gods, I hate transporting, I’m always worried that—”

Before Duncan could finish his sentence, they were standing in the courtyard of a large, rambling ranch house. “I’ll be missing a vital part when I rematerialize.”

He followed Anari as she stepped forward to greet the enormous randwulf male standing on a sprawling front porch. The woman beside him, equally tall and impressively attractive, had to be Mistress Sindar.

“Garrik. Selena,” Anari exclaimed. “It is wonderful to see you again, my friends.”

“And you, Anari,” Selena Sindar said, gliding down the wide stairs to embrace her. “We heard about what happened with Tur and despaired of ever seeing you again.”

Duncan stiffened when Garrik stepped forward and took Anari’s chin in his hand. “You are well? You were not hurt?”

“I am unhurt, Garrik.” She turned to Duncan. “Allow me to present Duncan Storm. He rescued me from my captors and is helping me look for my father. Duncan, this is Garrik

Sindar.”

The wulf male offered his hand and Duncan shook, though he didn't miss the low growl emanating from the randwulf's throat. “We have great affection for Anari,” Garrik informed him. “We are grateful you rescued her before any harm befell her.” He turned to Anari once more. “I still say you should have accepted Karrik's suit. Had you agreed to mate with him, you would have been safe from the wrath of Tur.” His gaze swiveled back to Duncan. “Will you seek vengeance on her behalf?”

Duncan raised an eyebrow. “There will be...repercussions. Once the senator is safe, my colleagues and I will seek justice for the wrongs done to Anari and her sisters. Once they are safe, Tur will feel the full extent of my wrath.”

Garrik nodded his approval. “A wise choice to be sure. I would not want to be Tur.” He turned to his wife. “We'll have refreshments in my office, my love. Perhaps Anari would like to see the new baby while Duncan and I discuss a few things.”

“I think Anari wishes to be part of the negotiations for trade,” Duncan said.

“And so she shall,” Garrik said. “But first, you and I will talk of more personal things, Duncan Storm.”

Duncan's mouth suddenly felt dry as a desert wind. More personal things? What the hell was that supposed to mean?

Selena Sindar laughed. “Fear not, his bark is worse than his bite.” She took Anari's hand and pulled her toward the stairs. “Come inside and meet the new baby. We named him for your father, for the many kindnesses he has bestowed upon us over the years.”

Duncan and Garrik followed the women inside and made their way to the big randwulf's office, where the big randwulf closed the door and gestured to a comfortable leather chair in front of his desk. Duncan took his seat and waited while Garrik sat down, folding his arms across his massive chest.

“We have known Anari since she was a child,” Garrik informed Duncan. “We had hoped to make a match between her and our oldest son.” His expression was somber, almost threatening. “We would not take it kindly were she to be hurt.”

Duncan had the overwhelming urge to squirm in his seat like some young boy being interviewed by a girl's father.

“I assure you, it is not my intent to cause her harm in any way. Anari and I...it's complicated, but we care deeply for one another. I only desire to restore her family to her, and see to it that she has nothing further to fear from those who would harm her.”

Garrik nodded. “And she was unharmed by the slavers?”

“It was a close thing, but I got to her in time. She endured some humiliation at the hands of the auctioneer and another man. Rest assured, both have paid for what they have done.”

“Good. And your intentions toward her are?”

“As much as I care for her, I can't tell you we have a future together. I am not what I appear to be and my presence in her life, for any extended period of time, would endanger her unnecessarily.” Duncan's words fell like ashes from his lips. “It is my hope that once her family is restored to her, Anari will find love again and have the life she deserves. A life I cannot give her.”

“I see—”

Duncan raised a hand to stop him. “Believe me when I tell you, if I could stay with her, I would. If it's too late, if her father is gone—”

“Of course...she will always be welcome here. Should the worst happen, rest assured, we

will keep her safe.”

Duncan nodded. “Good. That’s good to know.”

Anari gazed fondly at the new babe sleeping soundly in his cradle. “He’s beautiful, Selena. Looks just like his father.”

She followed her friend out of the room and down the stairs. “He has his father’s appetite too,” Selena agreed. She placed her hand on Anari’s arm as they paused outside Garrik’s office. “You really are all right?”

“Yes, I really am.”

“And you love this man. I can see it in your eyes when you speak of him.”

Anari’s eyes filled with tears but she blinked them away. Yes, she loved Duncan, but he meant it when he said they had no future. “Yes, I love him with all my heart.”

“But there is a problem.”

“Yes, one I’m afraid we may not be able to overcome.”

When the older woman embraced her, Anari hugged her back. “Love finds a way, Anari,” Selena whispered. “Have faith.”

Anari nodded and took a step back. She took a deep breath as Selena knocked on her husband’s office door, then opened it. “The refreshments are on their way, my love.” She squeezed Anari’s hand. “Don’t be a stranger.”

“Never,” she said, and stepped inside. The door closed behind her and she gave the two men a brilliant smile. “So, let’s talk some business.”

* * * * *

“You drive a hard bargain,” Duncan complimented when they were back on the ship once more.

Anari smiled. “Garrik is a sly old dog. Our two civilizations have traded for years, so I’m familiar with their way. Plus, I’ve known him all my life.”

“So I learned.” He hesitated a moment before continuing. “I understand he had hoped for a match between you and his firstborn.”

“Yes, he did, but Karrik’s personality was too...forceful for my tastes.”

“Ah, too dominant, was he?” He laughed softly. “And now you find yourself in a similar situation and you enjoy my domineering ways.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Dominance in the bedroom is one thing. Dominance over every aspect of my life is something else entirely.” She turned and headed for the corridor that led to her quarters, pausing at the threshold. “The key word here, as you’ve pointed out, is situation. When this unpleasantness is over, you’ll be leaving, so I won’t have to endure your domineering ways, will I?”

He stood stock-still as she swept from the transport room, her posture straight and regal. Her words had shocked him to the core. Unpleasantness? Endure? Wasn’t this the woman who had screamed his name as she came over and over? The woman who’d begged him to fuck her, to take her in any and every way he wanted? Hell, her sweet cream had practically gushed from her pussy when he spanked her, when he took her ass with powerful thrusts.

Duncan uttered a snort of disgust. She thought he was dominant? She’d better hope she never came up against a Cintealios warrior. Now there was a dominant race. As the largest opposition force against the Amalgamation, they would have the most updated intelligence on any Amalgamation movements in the sector, but he dared not allow Anari within hailing distance of that particular race of people or she would once again face the risk of abduction. He heaved a

sigh and headed for the bridge to input the coordinates for the next jump.

Travel through the Smith Gates had improved over time. The only problem was the occasional traffic snarl, ships lined up waiting to pass through the gate. As luck would have it, there were only a few ships ahead of them, most of them freighters traveling to nearby planets for trade. Duncan was avoiding populated planets close to the various gates where trade was common. His focus would be on outposts and planets in the farther reaches of the sector. Planets not loyal to the Amalgamation, where he would get information about Amalgamation troop strengths the closer they got to Destyn. Plus, there would be more opportunity for profit. Toward that end, they would proceed directly through the Aboo Gate, not daring to stop in that sector at all.

Traditionally, the smaller planets, farther away from well-patrolled areas, were more independent but relied more on private traders who carried trade goods such as they were carrying—farming implements, seeds and the starter plants Anari was growing in the bio lab set up in the cargo bay. They also carried fresh fruit, vegetables and the embryos of randwulf cattle, along with a variety of other farm stock. Since many of the outlying planets were mineral-rich, Duncan expected to make a tidy trade profit on this search and rescues mission, much of which he would put into an account for Anari in order to provide for her future. It was the least he could do.

When they approached the gate, Duncan keyed the comm and linked with the control station at the gate between Pyaw and Zeta.

“Captain Ean Andret of The Vigilant.” His cover name rolled off his tongue automatically.

“Greetings, Captain Andret,” the gate man said. “State your destination and business.”

“We are en route to the northwest sector for purposes of trade.”

“Very good, Captain. Please disengage your subsonic pulse drive and prepare for auto-launch. You may reengage once you’re through the gate.”

“Acknowledged, control.” He cut the connection and opened the ship’s internal communication system.

“Prepare for jump. I repeat, prepare for jump. Anari, report to the bridge.”

Duncan smiled. She wouldn’t like being ordered to report to the bridge, but he wanted to see her reaction to the jump. She’d slept through the ones they’d made to get to The Web. Would the speed and turbulence alarm her, or would it fire her blood as it did his own?

The lift hissed to a stop and the doors opened. Anari stepped out, dressed in a formfitting flight suit. To his surprise, her smile was warm and a hint of excitement glinted in her eyes.

“Yes, Duncan? Did you need me for something?”

He extended his hand. “I’ll always need you, Anari.” He gestured to the copilot’s seat. “But I thought you might enjoy experiencing the jump from the bridge. We’re all dialed in, just awaiting auto-launch.”

“Thank you, Duncan. I’ve never seen an actual jump in progress. I’ve only ever been strapped into a seat in a windowless compartment.” She took the copilot’s seat and buckled herself into the harness. “This is very exciting.”

Duncan reached for her hand, squeezed it. “It can be a bit disorienting. There’s the turbulence, of course, then you’ll see the walls of the wormhole rushing past.” He handed her a pair of goggles. “There will be places where the light inside the tunnel is extremely bright, almost like one of those laser light shows they have on Earth. The goggles will allow you to see everything without damaging your vision.”

The ship lurched forward, caught in the tractor beam. The ship's pulse drive cycled down and an alarm sounded.

"Prepare for auto-launch," the onboard computer chimed. "Auto-launch commencing in five—four—three—two—one... auto-launch engaged."

With those words, the ship catapulted forward into a swirling tunnel that seemed to have a life of its own. It contracted and opened, pulsing as though it possessed a mouth that was trying to swallow the ship whole.

"Hang on to your lunch!" Duncan shouted with glee.

He engaged the pulse drive, kicking them into faster-than-light speed. The ship nosedived into a free fall that rivaled any roller coaster on T-Sdei Delta. Down they went, taking hairpin curves at speeds that the human eye could barely register. Then came the ascent. The craft shot upward with breathtaking speed. There were several more sharp turns and another descent that left both Duncan and Anari giddy. Light pulsed around them as far as the eye could see. Fantastic colored swirls of gas dazzled the eye as the ship shot past, punctuated by bright white specks that sparkled like glitter against a backdrop of impenetrable blackness.

"It's like being inside an artist's paintbox," Anari exclaimed when she turned to look at Duncan. "I never imagined. I thought it would be pitch black with no hint of color at all. Duncan, are there stars in here?"

"The remnants of centuries-old stars, along with the gasses created when the wormhole expanded. It took millennia for astrophysicists to figure out how to harness enough energy to open the wormholes, to keep them open and prevent them from swallowing nearby stars and planets and grinding them to dust. Of course, there are some that can't be controlled and the Amalgamation has built gates with irises capable of closing off the wormholes. This was before the members turned their thoughts toward usurping the freedom of those who chose not to join them." He shook his head and pointed off into the distance. "We're nearly at the end of the tunnel." He throttled back the FTL drive and gave her a wink. "Wouldn't want to get a speeding ticket." The ship slowed as it approached the opening, which contracted imperceptibly then spat them out.

Anari looked out on the vastness of space. Although well-traveled, she'd never been to the northwest sector planets. Sa-Ro Five did not trade with any of the planets in this sector.

The immensity of space stunned her. There were stars, of course, but nothing recognizable as a planet, at least to her untrained eye. "So, where to now?" Anari inquired.

"Straight on to Zeta. There's a good-sized outpost between here and there, so we'll stop and do some business there. I figure we ought to get some fairly good intel from the orbit wisps, and it's a sure bet the Amalgamation commander will want to trade for some fresh food. Purchasing the frozen beef from Garrik was a good idea. The outposts can't support cattle but they can certainly store plenty of frozen meat. They might even be interested in some of the seedlings you have growing down below."

Anari nodded and unbuckled her harness. "Thank you for letting me experience the jump this way." She stood, looking down at her feet, unsure of how to ask him to join her in her quarters later.

"Anari?"

Oh, but his voice was filled with that husky tone he used when he was pleasuring her. It had been days since they'd last joined and she yearned to feel his body thrusting deep within hers. She dragged her gaze to meet his.

“Yes?”

“Shall I come to you later? Do you want me?”

She exhaled, filled with relief. “Yes. Come share your evening meal with me.”

“If I come to you, a meal isn’t all we’ll be sharing.” He gave her a lusty smile and rose from the pilot’s seat. “Autopilot is set. I’ll see to it that the ship is secure and come to you soon. Prepare yourself.”

A shiver ran down Anari’s spine and heat bloomed between her thighs. Her gaze drifted below the belt of his trousers. His arousal was long and thick against the soft material.

Her breath hitched with anticipation of what was to come. She’d told herself she was going to keep to herself onboard ship. She would play the part demanded of her in public, but within this environment, she would be her own woman. But seeing him on the bridge, giddy as a small boy on an amusement park ride, her body ached for the closeness they had shared their last night at The Web. Time was precious now, who knew how much longer she would have him. Foolish to deny herself, really. She licked her lips.

“Yes, Duncan, I’ll be ready.”

* * * * *

Anari took one last look around the room. The bed was made with fresh linens and topped with plump, silk-covered pillows, compliments of Garrik’s wife. A small lamp glowed softly on the center of the dining table, while a larger lamp stood against one wall, flanking the seating arrangement. Curls of exotically scented smoke rose from an incense holder on a nearby table. But seductive bedroom items weren’t all Selena had packed in the bag of tricks she’d insisted Anari accept. She was wearing one of the other items.

A royal blue silk skirt, enhanced with gold sequins and gold wirework, hugged her hips. Tied on the side, it allowed the entire length of her leg to peep through the richly embroidered material. The matching silk top plunged to a V in the front, tying at the neck and bottom to expose her back. Her hair fell to her waist. She wore no ornamentation and her feet were bare.

The intercom chimed as Anari placed a decanted bottle of wine and two glasses on the table.

“Yes?” she called.

“The food you ordered is prepared, Anari Fury.”

“Come.”

The android everyone called RAM entered the room with two serving dishes covered with domed lids.

“The food will keep inside, without deteriorating or cooking further,” he explained. “Simply leave the lids on until you are ready to ingest the contents.”

Anari smiled. “Thank you, RAM, I appreciate you doing this for me.”

The android nodded. “You are most welcome, Anari Fury. Will there be anything else?”

“I think I have everything I need.”

With a nod, the droid turned and left, encountering Duncan when the door hissed open. The two exchanged a brief greeting, then Duncan stepped inside.

Anari bit back a laugh at the confused expression on Duncan’s face. He didn’t know what to make of all her preparations.

“What’s all this?”

He scanned the room, taking in the fancy bedding, the moody lighting, the scent of incense. Then his gaze settled on her and desire replaced any hint of confusion. His voice softened and took on a decidedly husky tone.

“You look beautiful. Is all this for me?”

“It is.” She smiled and walked to him. “I had RAM prepare something special for you. Are you hungry?”

He smiled and her stomach felt as though a flock of butterflies bloomed inside her. Gods, he was gorgeous. She never tired of looking at him, even when she was angry with him.

“I’m hungry, and for more than just food.”

She twined her fingers together, twisting them, fidgeting nervously. Why was she so nervous after all that had passed between them? She exhaled, forcing herself to relax.

“Well, let’s start with dinner, shall we?”

He chuckled. “Dinner is good.”

He reached for her, one arm around her waist as he lifted her off her feet. She uttered a little squeak and wrapped her arms around his neck for support.

“Duncan, dinner will get cold.”

His eyes glinted with humor. “Not in those serving dishes it won’t, and I require a kiss before we dine.”

His mouth was soft against hers, a gentle press of flesh touching flesh. Her eyes drifted shut. His tongue swept her lower lip, seeking entrance. She opened, touching her tongue to his with a sigh. No kiss with him was ever the same. Sometimes masterful, other times tender as the stroke of a feather, always intoxicating.

She felt his cock swell against the notch of her thighs and was about to suggest dinner could wait when he set her back on her feet. Her legs wobbled and he had to hold her up until her head cleared.

“You have the most astounding effect on me,” she told him, embarrassed.

“As you do on me.”

He held her hands, holding her arms away from her body as he looked her over.

“I like this, where did you get it?”

“Selena sent it, along with these other things, since I lost everything when Tur took me.”

He gave her a stricken look and his face flushed red. He looked away, his jaw clenching.

“I should have thought to do this for you.”

Anari laughed softly and urged him toward the supper table.

“Sit.” She pulled her hands from his grasp and lifted the lid on the serving dish. “Steak from the randwulf beef, a beautiful baked sweet potato, and a salad—no onions.”

He was still scowling. “I don’t deserve any of this.”

She knelt beside him. “Duncan, look at me.” He did. “Had you not done what you did, E’coyo would have hurt me badly, would probably have killed me by now.”

He nodded. “But I’ve been so rough with you.”

“A necessary evil when it was almost certain we were being observed. And as you’ve pointed out, the things you’ve done brought me great sexual pleasure. You never really hurt me, Duncan. And you’ve given me your love, for however long we’re able to be together. What greater gift could you provide?”

“I don’t deserve you.”

She smiled, feeling a little sad that it would all end soon. “Perhaps not, but you have me.” She rose to her feet and moved around the table to her seat. “Now eat your dinner. I have plans for you, and you’ll need your strength.”

He uttered a sharp laugh. “Wench.”

“Mmm, yes, so you’ve said.” She pointed at his plate with her fork. “Eat.”

Anari couldn't remember a time when things between them had been so relaxed. They spoke of their lives—his growing up on a military installation, hers on Sa-Ro Five as the daughter of a famed scientist and senator.

"My father is a good man. He did his best by us girls, though we were often alone when his Senate duties took him away. As the oldest, I took on most of my mother's duties and often accompanied him on his travels once the girls were old enough not to burn the house down when left alone. Of course, the neighbors kept an eye out for them."

"So what did you do when you were traveling with your father?"

Anari shrugged. "Mostly made arrangements for the various functions he had to host. Served as hostess for him when he entertained dignitaries. And, early on, I worked with him in the lab." Anari paused, chewing thoughtfully. "How did you come to work for Ulric Vonner?"

Duncan took a drink of wine. "After I went AWOL from the military, I drifted around, taking whatever jobs I could find. Earned a lot of money as a mercenary, fighting other people's battles. Enough to buy the hologram device, get my own ship. I ran into one of his hunters, helped him out of a jam, and he suggested I meet with Vonner. The rest, as they say, is history."

"I don't think I like him very much."

Duncan laughed. "Not many do. He's a hard man to know, secretive, forceful but loyal to the core if you don't cross him. If you do cross him, well, let's just say he doesn't take betrayal kindly."

"No, I don't imagine he would. Dessert?"

She rose to clear the table but he reached for her and pulled her onto his lap.

"Leave it," he growled, but his eyes sparkled with humor. "The only dessert I'm hungry for is sitting on my lap."

She twined an arm around his neck and placed a hand on his cheek as she leaned in to kiss him.

"Then by all means, eat your fill."

Duncan hooked an arm beneath her knees and rose, taking her with him. He couldn't believe she'd gone to all this trouble just for him. No one, woman or man, had ever troubled themselves to treat him as anything more than a science project. That she would do this for him, arrange for a special meal to please him, to set the scene for his seduction, made his heart swell with love. He didn't deserve her, but for as long as she was his, he would do everything in his power to keep her safe, make her happy.

He made it to her bed in a heartbeat. The mattress gave beneath his knee as he gently laid her down. He practically tore the shirt from his body.

"I love you, Anari." The fierceness in his voice surprised him. "No matter how near, no matter how far, my heart will always be yours."

When she rose to her knees and wrapped her arms around his waist, his heart gave a painful clench. How could he ever leave her? And yet, he must if he was to keep her safe.

She pressed a kiss to his belly. "Always," she whispered, as her fingers worked the closures on his trousers. "As my heart will always be yours."

Electric pulses of need tripped down his spine to his cock. Her small hands skimmed his pants down past his hips, then she took him into her mouth. Soft and warm, she encompassed his hard shaft, her tongue dancing around the broad head, sparking a need so wild, he had to force himself not to thrust deeply into her throat.

How did she keep her hands so soft? She was a farmer, used to toiling in the ground, yet

her hands were velvet stroking his buttocks, slipping between his legs to caress his balls.

“Anari,” he choked out her name. “You must stop before—”

She paused, smiling up at him. “Come, Duncan. I want your taste on my tongue.” She gave him a teasing lick. “Besides, we have all night.” Then she took him deep, her hands on his backside urging him to thrust into her hot mouth.

Duncan groaned and buried his fingers in her glorious hair. “Oh gods, your mouth is heaven.”

He thrust gently at first, until she made a little moaning noise and pulled him hard against her mouth, swallowing his cock. Her throat contracted around him and he uttered a surprised shout, but she didn’t stop. Her head bobbed, her tongue teased, and the aching tightness in his balls escalated.

“I’m...ah, gods... I’m going to come.”

He thrust deep, reveling in the heat of her mouth, the tightness of her throat as it closed around him. Two more deep thrusts and his spine stiffened, his balls letting loose.

“Ah, fuck yeah.” He groaned as his cock leapt, semen gushing into the back of her throat. His knees shook with the effort to hold him upright.

“Suffering gods, Anari,” he groaned. “You will be the death of me.”

She released him with an audible pop and smacked her lips. “You’ll die a happy man, my love.”

He chuckled and fell to the bed, dragging her down with him. “Yes, I will. And as soon as I can feel my extremities, I’m going to make you a very happy woman.”

Chapter Seven

Anari woke to the rich, aromatic scent of coffee. She stretched, feeling as though she should purr with contentment. Duncan had kept his promise and made her a very happy woman last night. Throughout most of the night, in fact. The man was, in a word, insatiable.

“Good morning, love,” he said, sitting down beside her. He offered her a cup of coffee. “I took the liberty of programming breakfast. It’s keeping warm in the replicator.”

Anari raised an eyebrow. “Hmm. What are you up to?”

Duncan chuckled and went to get their breakfast. “We’re stopping at the first outpost today,” he said, looking at her over his shoulder. “You’re going to have to...um...get into the character of demure wife.”

“Ah, I see. And you thought I’d be angry.”

“It occurred to me.”

Anari got out of bed and sat at the table, naked. “Have I been so difficult about it?”

Duncan joined her. “You had your moments.”

She took a forkful of scrambled eggs and moaned with delight. She dearly loved eggs.

Duncan followed suit, chewing thoughtfully. “I’ve picked out clothes that will be appropriate.”

“All right.”

It was difficult to be angry with him after the night they’d passed. Then there was the fact that he hadn’t really tried to dominate her since they’d left Quartus Seven. She nearly laughed at the expression of amazement on his handsome face. She decided to let him off the hook.

“Duncan, I understand how important it is that I maintain the cover you’ve set up for me. I’m also aware of the fact that you and Vonner very likely saved my life, and that you’re going to try and save my father. Why would I give you trouble?” She watched the tension drain from his face and added, “I love you. The last thing I want to do is make your job more difficult. Now, show me what you’ve chosen for me to wear.”

He went to her cubby and extracted a silk tunic and matching pants. The dark, amber-colored tunic boasted a mandarin collar. The fitted bodice would button down to just beneath her breasts. A simple floral vine pattern was embroidered on either side of the front placket. The pants bore no embellishments and tied at the waist. Simple yet elegant, the outfit spoke volumes as to the value this particular Master placed on his slave.

“It’s lovely, Duncan.”

Duncan nodded. “I’m glad you like it.” He placed it on the bed, then returned, pulling her to her feet for a lingering kiss. “I’m heading to the bridge. Get dressed and I’ll call you when we’re ready to disembark.”

“I’ll be ready. Is there any special way you’d like me to wear my hair?”

“Down. I love your hair down.” He leaned in and gave her another kiss, then exited.

Anari stepped off the lift behind Duncan, hands behind her back, her gaze cast down.

An officer dressed in full IMF regalia stepped forward to greet Duncan.

“Rear Admiral Donner, at your service, Captain Andret,” the man said, using the alias Duncan had provided.

“Pleasure to meet you, Donner,” Duncan said.

The officer’s gaze swept Anari with appreciation. “And who do we have here, Andret?”
My wife. She is more knowledgeable than I about many of the supplies we have to offer.

As you know, Sa-Ro Five is an agricultural civilization that also trades with the Pyaw System, so she is also familiar with the quality and value of the randwulf beef and the plant-based supplies we carry.”

Anari dared a quick look at the rear admiral. His eyes widened briefly but he composed himself, giving Duncan a nod.

“I see. Good day to you, Mistress Andret,” he said with a polite nod, then he was all business again. “Might I see an inventory of the supplies you carry?”

Duncan handed him a small PDA device that held a list of all the relevant items. The rear admiral read it, keeping his expression composed, but Anari could tell by the way the man’s nostrils flared, he was more than interested.

“I think we can do business, Captain. If you’ll follow me?”

Anari tried to keep her eyes focused on the center of Duncan’s back, but she’d never been inside a space station before. She refused to acknowledge the looks of interest she garnered from the crewmembers they passed along the way, but the station fascinated her. From the outside, it looked much like a giant wheel with dozens of spokes connecting the center hub with the outer tube. Powerful antennae sprouted from the power core, which she assumed would provide long-range communication, though how they would transmit beyond the wormhole was anyone’s guess.

At last, they came to a small room. “Please be seated.”

Donner gestured to the seats around the conference table. The table was made of some exotic, heavily grained wood that gleamed even in the subdued light. The walls were windowless and covered with massive computer screens that monitored every function of the station. Donner switched them off immediately.

Duncan pulled out a chair for Anari. “Your seat, my love.”

Anari nodded. “Thank you, husband.”

She took a seat beside him and folded her hands, waiting for the negotiations to begin. Donner would lowball them, of course. Such tactics were expected.

“How much beef are you carrying, Captain?” Donner began.

Duncan smiled. “How much do you need?”

“I have at least one hundred crewmembers to feed every day, Captain.”

“Anari?” Duncan queried.

“The average slaughter weight for cattle is about 566.990 kilograms. They dress out to between 272.155 to 340.194 kilograms. This is not taking into account bones, waste meat and tallow, some of which is included in our supplies. If each man consumes approximately one half kilogram of beef per day, for a year, the total is equivalent to twenty-four steers. However, one must assume beef will not be on the menu daily, so that figure could reasonably be halved. The equivalent of twelve steers at 294.835 kilograms is approximately 3538.020 kilograms of meat, cut, wrapped and frozen.”

“You can provide that much, Captain?”

“I can.”

“And the cost?”

Duncan looked at Anari again. “What’s the going price of beef these days, pet?”

“Not less than five gold credits a kilogram, husband, which comes to roughly 39,000 credits.”

Anari stifled a smile. The rear admiral was turning a peculiar shade of red.

“That’s...ridiculously expensive.”

Neither Anari nor Duncan spoke as Donner sputtered in outrage.

“You realize I could confiscate your supplies in the name of the Amalgamation?”

“You could try,” Duncan said casually. “You might even succeed. I certainly don’t have the crew to stop you. However, once word got around, there isn’t a trader worth his salt that would supply you. Not to mention the fact that anyone else would charge you at least three credits more a kilogram. So, let’s stop jerking each other around, shall we? Did I mention we also have poultry and pork? Anari?”

“Pigs are slaughtered at an average of 122.469 kilograms, but have a dressed weight of about 90.7184 kilograms. To feed 100 men a meal of pork at a maximum of three times a week, you would need the equivalent of 86 pigs at dressed weight, which comes to 196.405 kilograms, give or take. Multiply that number by 3.5 credits per kilogram and you have 1516 gold credits.”

“And what would you suggest we do, Mistress Andret?”

Anari looked at Duncan, who nodded. “I would suggest you purchase more pork and poultry and restrict your beef intake, sir. I would also suggest you meet my husband’s price, as you’ll find none better this far from the central planets.”

Donner sighed. He obviously knew when he was beaten. The three of them understood he didn’t dare confiscate their supplies or his crew would be living on compressed protein until the next Amalgamation supply ship arrived.

“Fine. I’ll have the credits scanned into your data card as soon as we take possession, Captain.”

Duncan shook his head. “I don’t think so, Donner. Cash or crystolium are the only currency we deal in out here.”

The rear admiral’s lips compressed into a tight line, but he gave Duncan a terse nod and shoved his chair back. He turned to his paymaster. “Get the man his payment and be quick about it. Half in gold credits and half in crystolium work for you, Captain?”

“Indeed, it does.” Duncan turned to her and she could see the pride in his eyes. “Anari will return to the ship and see to the delivery, Rear Admiral. It’s been a pleasure doing business with you. Anari, can you find your way back to the docking station?”

“Not necessary, Captain, my supply officer will escort her. I’ll send a man along to help with the offloading. I assume that is acceptable to you?”

Duncan inclined his head. “Of course. And Donner, see to it my wife is treated with respect. I will not take it kindly if any of your crew disrespects her.”

* * * * *

Anari followed the supply officer and a non-ranked crewman to the lift. She concealed a feeling of dread as the doors closed behind her and the two men turned to her with lust in their eyes.

“I think she’s the prettiest little randwulf I’ve ever seen,” the supply officer told the other man.

“That she is. Only one I ever seen up close was on a pleasure ship. She doesn’t look nearly as used-up as them. I hear they’re ferocious in bed.”

The supply officer took a step toward her. “Is that right, wulfgirl? Are you hot stuff between the sheets? That man of yours take you doggie style? I bet you like that, fuckin’ like a wild animal.”

Anari didn’t speak, refused to look at him, focusing on a point over his shoulder.

Emboldened, the non-ranked man stepped closer. “What’s the matter, bitch, cat got your tongue?”

The two men giggled like children. "You get it? Cats and dogs don't get along."

Anari's only response was to raise an eyebrow and activate her comm-tab. She would not give them the satisfaction of rising to their taunting, but Duncan would be able to hear what was going on in the freight lift.

"Maybe she's trained not to speak unless her Master gives her permission. Is that right, wulfgirl?" The supply officer reached out and squeezed her breast, then pressed himself against her, growling in her ear. "If we stop this lift and fuck you real good, will you howl for us?"

Suffering gods, that was enough. "No, but you will." She slid a hand between the man's legs and latched on to his balls.

He did scream, then he begged. "Please, ma'am, turn me loose. I didn't mean anything by it."

Anari cut a glance in the other man's direction. "Start the lift, set it to nonstop or I swear, this man will have nothing but jelly for testicles by the time we get to The Vigilant's cargo bay."

"Do it, Sharpe!" the supply officer howled. "She's killing me."

The lift jolted into movement once more, but Anari kept a firm grip on the man's balls. If she let him go, they'd be on her in a minute. She just hoped the man could stay on his feet until the lift stopped, otherwise she'd have to fight off the other crewman. She studied the man whose balls she had in a viselike grasp. He was pale and sweaty, his legs trembling as he tried to breathe through the pain.

"You'd better stay on your feet, asswipe, because I won't let go if you pass out. The weight of your falling body might rip your balls right off, and it would be a shame if such a fine specimen as yourself was unable to procreate."

The other man glared, seething in anger. "Let go of him, you fucking dog whore. I'll see you executed for assaulting an Amalgamation officer." He took a step toward her and Anari increased the pressure on her victim's balls.

"Back off, Sharpe!" he howled. "Nobody's going to hurt you, ma'am. I'm sorry we spoke to you like we did. I should never have touched you." He clenched his teeth and moaned. "Oh, I think I'm gonna puke."

"Just be sure you turn your head when you do," Anari said. "You wouldn't want to get puke all over this lovely new outfit my husband bought me, would you?"

"No ma'am," he groaned.

The lift reached its destination and a bell chimed to indicate the door was about to open.

"Ah, we're here. You'd best pray my husband isn't on the other side of that door, gentlemen. He doesn't like to share what's his and by Amalgamation decree, he has every right to kill you for touching me."

"He wouldn't kill someone over a freak of nature, you stupid bitch," the man Sharpe snarled.

The door slid open and Duncan stepped onto the lift, followed by Rear Admiral Donner and two security officers. "That's where you're wrong, you sack of shit. You may release him now, Anari," he said softly. Then he glared at each of the men. "My natural inclination is to take your heads off," he growled. "But the admiral has assured me you will be punished."

The admiral's jaw twitched. "Take them to the brig," he told the security men. "And see to it Seaman Renfro has some ice for his balls. I want him able to function when I put them in my vise."

"Seaman?" former supply officer Renfro croaked.

"That's right, Renfro. You've lost what little rank you'd earned over this." He glanced at

Sharpe. "Both of you. Get them out of my sight." He turned to Anari and offered a contrite smile. "My apologies for my crew's behavior. They know better than to treat women in such a manner."

"Apology accepted, sir," Anari said.

Duncan wrapped an arm around her shoulder and gave her a squeeze. "Go to our quarters, pet. I'll be up to tend to you after the supplies are offloaded."

Anari stepped through the airlock and reached for a pair of Spectra-shades on a nearby shelf. Opening a box of energy cubes, she grabbed a handful and donned the specialized glasses. Immediately, the room lit up with swirling bits of energy.

"What do you seek, human?" one of the wisps asked.

"Information about Amalgamation movement in the northwest sectors." She held up an energy cube. The wisp reached for it but she shook her head. "Give me something first."

"There have been two transport ships in recent times. They stopped here, at the outpost."

Anari handed over the cube. "Do you know their purpose?"

"They had building supplies and food. Twenty men, perhaps. Some were engineers, others were scientists, still others were soldiers."

She handed it another cube. "And the next ship?"

"More men in white jackets, and a man in a medi-tube unit."

Anari's eyes widened. "Who was he? What did he look like?"

"No one saw him," the wisp said, buzzing close to her ear. "We heard he was injured. We cannot penetrate too deeply into the space station or we cannot get out again and we will die. They do not get many visitors this far away from the central planets."

Anari fed the spectral being another energy cube. "They did not mention his name?"

"No, no name that we heard. Only that he was injured and needed the surgeon."

She gave the wisp the last cube as the freight elevator began its descent again, which meant the soldiers from the station would be arriving any minute to pick up their supplies. "Thank you. I must go now."

As soon as the door to her quarters slid shut, Anari struggled out of her clothes. Her right breast still ached from the supply officer's vicious squeeze. Hurrying to the bathroom, she allowed herself the luxury of running a tub. All of the bathing water was scrubbed and re-circulated, so it wasn't as if she'd be wasting water frivolously.

She sank down in the tub and started scrubbing. Their scornful words had gotten to her. Whore. Slut. Although she knew they thought her a randwulf female, the words had hit their mark. She felt dirty. No wonder Garrik never let his wife leave the planet.

When Duncan had first taken her, she'd been in a state of shock. That time on Symetria had been a blur. The humiliation of being dressed so revealingly, the incident in the punishment booth, all of it was now lost in the haze of lust and love Duncan incited. She would do anything, give anything, for the love of him. Never once, during that whole time, had he made her feel dirty, unworthy of respect. Three minutes in the lift with those Amalgamation crewmen and she'd come undone, understanding exactly how the rest of the world would view her when they discovered what had happened to her.

Duncan paced the cargo bay, furious with himself for leaving Anari unguarded with those Amalgamation animals. Furious with himself for not killing them when he had the chance. He punched the control for the lift several times, frustrated that the doors hadn't opened

automatically, that he had to wait even one moment to get to Anari.

The look on her face when the freight lift had opened had nearly driven him wild. He'd wanted nothing more than to maim and kill the two men who had been responsible for the look of desolation on her beautiful face. He was about to hit the button again when the doors finally slid open and he punched in her deck number. What was she doing now? What was she feeling? Did she hate him for putting her at risk as he'd done? The bell chimed, the doors opened and he stepped out into the housing deck. His stomach was in knots as he programmed the code to gain entry into her quarters. He did so automatically, certain she would have locked herself inside.

"Anari?" Her clothes lay in a heap on the floor. Duncan uttered a sigh of relief when he heard a splash of water. She was bathing. He made his way into the bathroom.

Anari lay stretched out in the tub, arms over her chest, head resting on the back, eyes closed. "Are you all right?"

She nodded but didn't open her eyes. He sat on the thin edge of the tub. "Anari, look at me."

Her eyes opened and welled with tears. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't encourage them. I swear, I didn't."

"Hush. Of course you didn't. It never even entered my mind. Did they...hurt you?"

"Not really. It happened so fast, and I...I think I hurt the one who touched me." A faint smile curved her lips. "I'm not sure he'll ever be able to have children."

Duncan snorted. "Then you've done humanity a great service...again." He pulled a towel off a bar. "Come, let's get you dried off. You need some rest."

When she stood, Duncan's jaw clenched. There were deep, finger-shaped bruises on her right breast. He reached out and stroked her injured flesh, a deep flush of anger heating his face.

"You should have told me." He wrapped the towel around her and scooped her up, carrying her into the other room. He put her on the bed and sat down beside her. "Do you want me to send for a nurse?"

"No." She didn't bother to suppress the shudder that ran through her. "Those nursotics give me a serious case of the creeps. Besides, it's not that bad. It just aches is all."

Duncan shot to his feet. "I should go back and kill them both for what they've done."

She reached out and grabbed his hand, pulling him back down. "No, you shouldn't. It's over and done with. They'll be punished. We need to leave here, keep moving and find my father before the Amalgamation gets the formula from him. A wisp told me two transport ships have passed by recently—one carrying building supplies, the other carrying scientists and a few soldiers and an injured person that needed a surgeon. They never saw the injured man, but I'd lay odds it was my father. And as for those men." She ducked her head, refusing to look at him. "They were just doing what any man would do with a whore."

Fury washed over him. "They were not doing what any man would do and you are not a whore."

The tearful desolation in her eyes nearly unmanned him when she asked, "Then what would you call it? People know I was to be sold as a sex slave. When I go home, that's what they'll see when they look at me. A big, dirty whore."

His face hardened in a fierce scowl. "Never. I won't allow it."

Her bitter laugh was like a slap in the face. "And how will you stop it? You have a formidable will, Duncan, but you can't control people's thoughts."

He practically snarled. "Then I'll marry you."

"To go away and leave me alone? No thank you. I'd rather live with people's speculative

glances than have an absentee husband.”

He would have argued with her but she held up her hand. “Please, Duncan. I’m tired and I’d like to be alone.”

He stiffened. “No, not when you’re like this.”

His hands fisted at his sides when she lay down and curled into a ball. Not knowing what else to do, he lay down and curved his body around hers. His chest ached because he knew she was right. It didn’t matter that she’d been abducted and sold at a slave auction. All that mattered was that she’d been sold and used as a sex slave. By him. The why of it didn’t matter. As far as polite society was concerned, Anari was ruined, and it was his fault.

* * * * *

Anari kept to her quarters or the bio lab in the cargo hold, doing her best to avoid Duncan’s concerned scrutiny. She knew she’d hurt him by pointing out that she would be regarded as a fallen woman, no matter that she’d had no other lover but him. But he’d inadvertently hurt her, too, baldly declaring he would marry her simply to keep the gossips at bay. She would have married him in a heartbeat if he’d offered to marry her for love, but to marry her out of a sense of obligation? No. She would rather live alone for the rest of her life than be married to someone who’d tied himself to her out of a sense of duty. So she spent her days in the lab, encouraging her seedlings to grow and writing down everything she could remember about her father’s experiments.

Duncan entered her quarters. “I want you to change into a flight suit and come to the bridge with me.”

“What for? I have duties to attend to in the lab.”

His frustration was apparent on his face. “Anari, tell me what I’ve done to warrant your indifference.”

She sighed. “I’m hardly indifferent, Duncan. Don’t you spend your nights in my bed? Don’t I respond to you as I always have?”

“It’s not an issue of your sexual responsiveness and you damn well know it, princess. You’ve closed yourself off to me and I don’t like it.”

Anari uttered a sharp laugh, the bitterness evident to her own ears. “You don’t like it.” She removed her silk garments and carefully folded them, placing them in her cubby before grabbing a flight suit. “I don’t know what you want from me, Duncan. Do I not obey your orders? Have I not behaved like the proper little wife on all of our stops? What more can I do to please you?” She shook out her flight suit, preparing to pull it on when he grasped her upper arms and gave her a shake.

“I want the woman I love back, Anari. The one who wanted to spend time with me, not the one that feels obligated to do so.” She stumbled when he released her.

The irony of his statement sent her over the edge and a slightly hysterical laugh escaped her. “Oh, that is truly rich, Duncan. You, talking to me about obligation. You, who are willing to sacrifice himself to a marriage of convenience out of some misplaced sense of duty. And for the record, I am still the woman you love, I am merely trying to prepare myself for the inevitable.”

“For the inevitable...” She could see, the moment his eyes widened, that he finally understood. “You think I offered to marry you out of a sense of obligation?” He thrust his fingers through his hair. “Believe me, princess, I’m not that noble. I was angry when I said it, yes, but at the unfairness of the situation. I love you, Anari, and I would spare you any humiliation that might result from what’s happened to you.”

“And you can’t see how that statement sounds like...pity?” She scowled at him as he

closed his eyes and tipped his head back with a sigh.

“Suffering gods, give me patience,” he muttered, then looked at her once more. “So if I’d asked you some other way, you would have said yes?”

Anari stepped into her flight suit and yanked it up her legs. “You didn’t even ask, Duncan. You just shouted it at me.” He rolled his eyes and she waved a finger in his face. “Don’t even give me that eye-rolling shit, Duncan Storm. You have had all the power in this relationship since day one. You do not get to yell at me—‘Then I’ll marry you’—and expect me to fall at your feet like the good little slave girl.”

When Duncan burst out laughing, Anari snatched her hairbrush off her dressing shelf and hurled it at him. He ducked, avoiding the missile.

“Anari, come here.”

“I will not,” she huffed. She picked up her PDA and chucked it at his head. The lout merely caught it and set it on the table.

“Anari—”

He stalked her around the room, avoiding every missile she hurled at him. Damn his genetically enhanced reflexes!

“Just...get back, Duncan. Do not—”

She never got the rest of the words out. He backed her into a corner, pinning her against the wall with his big, oh so sexy body and smiled down at her. “I’m an asshole.”

She gave him a superior sniff and turned her head to the side. “Big surprise.”

He chuckled and leaned down to nibble the curve of her neck. “I’m an insensitive brute.”

Another sniff. “Alert the media.”

Another nibble, this one to her earlobe, followed by a nuzzle behind her ear. “I don’t deserve you.”

Anari scoffed. “Stop the presses.” Then he took her face in his big hands and fit his mouth against hers. She couldn’t help herself, she kissed him back.

His hands got busy, skimming over her shoulders and down her bare arms before returning to unclasp the front closure of her bra. Her breasts spilled out into his palms and he molded them to the shape of his hands.

“I love you, Anari. I should say it more. I should say it every day, I guess, but this is a new emotion for me. If I get it wrong, you need to tell me.”

He went down on one knee and nuzzled her breasts. She gasped. “You got it wrong.”

He chuckled, then latched on to a nipple, tormenting her with tongue and teeth until she moaned.

“Forgive me?” When she didn’t—couldn’t—respond, he tugged her flight suit down and nuzzled her waxed mons.

In an act of sheer prestidigitation, he somehow managed to press her against the wall with both legs wrapped around his shoulders. She didn’t remember stepping out of her flight suit, and she certainly didn’t recall how he’d come to bury his face between her legs but, oh merciful heavens, the man could do things with his tongue that she wasn’t sure were strictly legal.

“Duncan,” she moaned. “I need you inside me.”

“Mmm,” he hummed against her clit, and her whole body rippled with the first waves of orgasm. Until an alarm shrilled through the comm system and the ship shuddered.

* * * * *

Duncan eased Anari’s legs to the floor and they both rose to their feet.

“Duncan?”

There was a distinct quaver to her voice and he pressed a brief kiss to her lips. "Someone's fired a shot across our bow. What you felt was the shields repelling the shot. Get dressed and meet me on the bridge. Hurry." With another quick kiss, he was gone.

He hated to leave her that way but he had no choice. He had to get to the bridge to see what kind of trouble was heading their way. Most of the inhabitants of Zeta were, if not friendly, not known for their aggression. All but the native population of Eli-rei, so Duncan assumed he'd be dealing with a force belonging to one of the four warring brothers of Eli-rei.

The male inhabitants of Eli-rei were alpha to the core and could be contentious, but they generally only made war against one another.

"Hell and damnation," Duncan muttered when he stepped onto the bridge.

"Vigilant, this is the cruiser Atir. Lower your shields and prepare to be boarded."

Duncan lowered himself into the pilot's seat and lit up the communication screen. The face of a young captain appeared before him, the familiar ridge of bone running down the center of his forehead identifying him as an Eli-rei soldier. His skin was the color of cafe au lait and he wore his long black hair in dreadlocks. One eye was dark brown and the other the color of whiskey. Despite his youthful appearance, he projected the air of a man confident in his authority.

"What is your purpose in stopping us, Atir? We are merely passing through Zeta airspace and we have committed no crime."

The fresh-faced captain scowled. "That is a matter of opinion, Vigilant. You are in Eli-rei airspace without permission and that is enough to warrant boarding and confiscation of any valuable cargo you might be carrying."

"We have nothing of real value, Atir," Duncan replied, just as the doors to the bridge whooshed open. "Anari, no!" But it was too late. With the monitor engaged, The Atir's captain saw her as clearly as if he'd been standing next to her.

The captain laughed. "You are mistaken, Vigilant, you have something very valuable. Do you wish her to remain living, you will do as I say." His gaze fastened on Anari. "Come closer, woman, so I can see my prize."

Duncan inwardly cringed. With her kiss-swollen lips and red-gold hair swirling around her hips, Anari was a prize any man would covet, and this one's eyes fairly gleamed with interest.

Anari crossed the room and snuggled herself onto Duncan's lap. "What is your name, sir?"

"I am Captain Gidrun Balkhimar," the man answered. "And your name, woman?"

"I am Anari Andret, wife of Ean Andret, captain of The Vigilant."

Duncan pressed his mouth against her ear, as though kissing her, and whispered, "Nice. Go with it. See if you can sweet-talk him."

"Might I inquire as to why you've fired on a merchant ship which has done you no wrong, Captain Balkhimar?"

The captain of The Atir glared at them both. "Do you always let your woman do your talking, Andret?"

Duncan smiled and held her more closely against his body. "My Anari is a free spirit and I like her that way. It is not my habit to dominate her." He held back a wince when Anari took his earlobe between her teeth and bit down hard, letting him know exactly what she thought of that statement.

"That is most unfortunate for your woman, Andret, for she will not like doing my bidding

when I take her from you.”

Anari launched herself off Duncan’s lap, scowling at the impudent fellow.

“Do you sleep, Captain Balkhimar? Because you will never know a peaceful night’s sleep again if you take me from my husband. You won’t know when and you won’t know how, but when you least expect it, I will end your life in the most painful manner possible.”

Gidrun laughed. “I see what you mean, Andret. She is a fanciful wench. I like it.”

Duncan cocked his head. “I wouldn’t underestimate her, Captain. She comes from a race of ranchers, she knows how to cut the head off a snake.” The opposing captain’s face turned a deep shade of red. “But I will save her the trouble of killing you and take care of the matter myself.”

Balkhimar smiled. “A challenge, then. The Atir will escort you to Rei-san where your beautiful wife will watch you die before I make her mine. Lower your shields and follow us to the city. If you try to run for it, I will grind you to dust.”

Chapter Eight

The Vigilant set down just outside the Center House and was immediately surrounded by several dozen armed men. Anari felt as though she'd once again jumped from the frying pan into the fire as she followed Duncan to his quarters.

"Put these on," he directed, handing her a pair of beautiful silver bracelets with smooth, curved links.

Her eyebrows shot up in confusion. "What are they, fashionable accessories for drab flight suits?"

Duncan uttered a grim laugh and held up a larger one he clasped to his own wrist. "This is a Thiris, my pet, and you must be careful how you use it. Allow me to demonstrate." He flicked his wrist at the bed and a claw-tipped whip shot forward, attaching to the mattress. The beautiful curved links turned into deadly talons. With another flick of the wrist, the silver whip retracted back into the bracelet and the talons reverted to their previous state.

"Wicked," Anari said, stroking one of the bracelets on her wrist.

Duncan arched an eyebrow. "You have a sadistic streak, love. Remind me to have a care when it comes to pissing you off." He wrapped an arm around her waist and lifted her, kissing her soundly before setting her back on her feet. "Now the bracelets have been programmed specifically for you. If anyone other than you touches them before you've disengaged its defenses, it will kill that person." He showed her the sequencing, then explained how to deactivate the defenses.

"What happens if someone else touches it?"

"The talons extend and inject a lethal poison. Apart from that, if you don't deactivate the primary defenses, anyone who touches it could lose their fingers."

Duncan took her hand in his and brushed a light kiss over her knuckles. "Anari, if anything should happen to me—"

"No." She shook her head vehemently. "Nothing will happen to you." She took his face in her hands. "Do you hear me? You will not leave me. You are mine and I am yours. Anything else is unacceptable and I will not have it, is that understood?"

Duncan chuckled. "Aye, love. Understood." He picked her up again and she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Now give me a kiss for luck."

"You won't need luck but I'll kiss you anyway, because it's such an enjoyable activity."

Anari followed close to Duncan, despite the heat. Not a single cloud marred the cobalt blue of the sky and the sun beat down unmercifully. She couldn't imagine living in such a place. Walking from their landing site to the entrance of the city required constant attention to the numerous cacti that flourished everywhere she looked. Some were lovely and delicate with white fluff covering nearly microscopic spikes, while others were barrel-shaped with vicious thorns resembling razor-sharp claws. Still others were tall, vaguely human in appearance, with long arms that reached skyward and provided homes for small birds and rodents.

As they passed by, people at labor stopped what they were doing and followed. Several of the women came close enough to touch Anari's hair and stroke her face. "What are they doing?" she asked, relieved when Duncan wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

Gidrun answered. "They want to see if you are as soft as you look, Mistress. I contacted my leader to say I had captured your ship and found an exotic creature with whom to mate. Most have never seen a woman with skin like milk and honey and hair of spun copper."

“That’s barbaric,” Anari said imperiously. “And you will not win any contest against my husband. What you will do, Captain Balkhimar, is die.”

“We shall see, lady.”

As they approached the walled entrance to the city, armed guards nodded to Gidrun and stepped aside to allow them entry. The area within the walls of the city was well-maintained. The ground was smooth and devoid of dangerous cacti. Some type of crushed stone had been spread and compacted to form walkways. There was no sign of any personal conveyances around.

Ahead of them loomed a huge structure. Made of light-colored stone, it was built to resemble a medieval castle, complete with patrolled battlements and gatehouses. No doubt there would have been a moat, too, had there been any significant water on this gods-forsaken planet, Anari thought peevishly.

The guardhouse gate opened and they walked through, crossing the bailey. Anari sighed in relief. The thick stone walls kept the inside of the dwelling decidedly cooler. Gidrun was greeted by a page of some sort, who promptly ran off to deliver news of their arrival. Anari strained to hear what Gidrun said to several men who hovered nearby but was unable to make out a word. An excited shout emanated from somewhere down a large stone corridor and Anari gripped Duncan’s hand tightly as bootheels clattered, the sound getting closer.

The owner of the determined footsteps was a huge man. He had the same dark hair and cafe au lait skin, plus a full beard that was parted down the center and braided. He was a big, barrel-chested man, dressed in dark leather breeches and a tan tunic over which he wore an intricately embroidered vest.

“Gidrun,” the man bellowed, smiling widely. “You have returned, and I hear you bring guests.” He turned his sharp gaze on Anari and nodded approvingly.

“My lord,” Gidrun said, gesturing to Anari and Duncan. “They are not guests, exactly. He claims to be a trader, Ean Andret, and she his wife, Anari Andret.” He gestured to the leader. “This is Lord Sanford Rei.” He turned back to the big man. “They violated our airspace. I have challenged him for possession of the woman.”

The leader’s eyebrows shot up and he turned to Anari again, studying her at length. “Yes. I can see how she would appeal, but I fear the climate would not be kind to her delicate skin.”

He nodded to a page. “Prepare a chamber for the young woman, and see to it that she’s provided with a bath and a meal. She will require appropriate clothing, as well. Put her in my sisters’ chamber, there should be ample clothing there, as none of them see fit to visit.”

The servant approached, reaching for her, but Anari clung to Duncan. “I do not wish to be separated from my husband.”

The leader looked at her, unmoved. “Your man will bunk with the soldiers, Mistress, but you will see him on the field tomorrow.”

When the servant reached for her again, Anari was readying herself to use the Thiris bracelets on him, but Duncan grasped her wrists and forced them to her side.

“If you will allow me a moment to speak with my wife,” he said politely.

“Of course,” Sanford Rei agreed.

Duncan drew her away and pulled her gently into his embrace. “It’s okay, pet. They won’t harm you. You are an exotic commodity here. Open your comm-tab so I can contact you later. Did you bring a supply of energy cubes?”

“Yes.”

“Good. As soon as you’re alone, open your window and put on your Spectra-shades. If there are any wisps around they’ll be attracted by the energy field of the glasses. See if you can

find out if there's any activity on Destyn that the Eli-rei are concerned about. I'll try and do the same, though it will be difficult without private quarters." He leaned away from her and gave her a reassuring smile. "Now give me a kiss and off you go. Show no fear."

"Right," she muttered, then melted into him when he kissed her. "No fear." She stepped back, straightened her shoulders and nodded to the waiting servant. "I'm ready. Lead the way." He reached out to grasp her arm and Anari stepped away. "If you value that hand, you'll keep it to yourself."

As she climbed the stairs, she heard Gidrun laugh. "You see, my lord. I told you she was made of stern stuff."

"Stern stuff, my ass," she grumbled, stomping up the stairs behind the servants. "He puts a hand on me he'll see exactly what I'm made of." She continued to mumble to herself as she followed the man down a long hallway that led to yet another corridor. Halfway down, her handler stopped and Anari was so caught up in her own thoughts that she bumped into him. "Sorry. I take it this is my cell?"

"Mistress," he said, disapprovingly. "This room belongs to the leader's vaunted sisters. 'Tis one of the best suites in the castle. The captain is His Lordship's right-hand man. Captain Balkhimar must be very taken with you to challenge your man for the right to keep you."

Anari snorted. "As if I'd ever consent to staying with the likes of him. Where I come from, women choose their own husbands, as I have chosen mine. The captain can just find himself some other woman to play house with." She looked around at the richly appointed room and shrugged. "Well, at least it's a comfortable cage."

Anari stood to one side as the servant rooted through a huge wardrobe to find clothes for her to wear. He ran a bath for her, using what had to have been an outrageous amount of water in this arid climate.

"Enjoy your bath, Mistress. Captain Balkhimar will join you later for dinner."

Anari dressed hurriedly after her bath, donning a bark-colored skirt of the softest leather. The garment hugged her form as if it was made for her. Fitted at the waist and hips, it fell in graduated gored panels to a flaring hemline. The shirt, on the other hand, was made of a soft, shimmery fabric she could not identify. It fit snugly and laced tightly up the front to the low-cut, squared neckline. It showed off a scandalous amount of cleavage. Its only saving grace was that it was a beautiful amber color.

Anari was on the edge of her seat until there came a knock at her door. She jumped, startled, and nearly fell off the padded bench on which she'd been sitting.

"I don't know why you bother to knock," she called. "The damn door is locked from the outside."

The door opened and Gidrun stepped inside, followed by more servants. She had to admit, he cut a fine figure in his snug, tan leather breeches and matching leather shirt. It was an odd-looking shirt, the arms laced from shoulder to cuff. He had the sleeves laced tightly to show off toned forearms. The front laced, too, from neck to hem, and this he wore loosely. Anari's eyes narrowed to slits. If he had it unlaced like that to better remove it quickly, he'd better think again. No one would be removing his or her clothes in this bedroom tonight. Did the captain really expect her to fall at his feet, or did he intend to take what he wanted?

"My apologies, lady," Gidrun said. "We lock you in for your own safety. Unclaimed women run the risk of being taken should they be found outside the castle unescorted."

Anari merely rolled her eyes and grumbled, "Right."

He gestured to the balcony where the servant had set up a table. "Please, you must be

hungry by now.”

Anari preceded him to the balcony, nodding politely as he seated her. “Thank you.”

“I hope you like young Bufaloo,” Gidrun commented. “We import it from Zeta-phi. The cook does an exceptional job roasting meat.” He carved off two thick slices and added one to each plate. “Cook prepared the fresh vegetables your man provided, as well.” He looked at them hungrily. “Fresh produce is a treat for those who live in arid climates and is consumed cautiously.” He spared her a glance and cleared his throat. “Your man says you are familiar with raising beef and vegetables? You would know how to grow these vegetables under a variety of situations?”

Anari shrugged. “I suppose you could grow them here, but they would require a great deal of water.”

Gidrun nodded and continued to give her a verbal tour of the evening meal, pouring her a cup of ale. She reached up as if she were smoothing a stray lock of hair behind her ear and activated her comm-tab.

“Tell me, Captain, is my husband eating this well?”

Gidrun uttered a soft growl and set the carving fork on the platter. “He is, lady, although I would have preferred to toss him in a cell with nothing but bread and water.”

“I don’t find that amusing, Captain. I would feel much better knowing my husband was receiving similar treatment.”

Gidrun chuckled at her words. “Then I will be sure to have one of the servants deliver him a pretty nightgown and robe, lady. And perhaps a lovely dress for tomorrow’s festivities.”

Anari shot to her feet, tossing her napkin on the table. “How can you be so cruel as to laugh and call tomorrow’s challenge a festival? You are talking about murdering my husband.”

Her captor cleared his throat. “Sit down, my lady.”

“I will not.” She glared at him, contempt in her voice.

Calmly, he rose and stalked her across the balcony until he had her backed against the stone balustrade. “I am willing to put up with a certain degree of defiance because you are a stranger to our ways and you are frightened of what may happen tomorrow.” Anari struggled not to cry when he took her chin in his hand and forced her gaze to his. “However, if you cannot keep a civil tongue in your head, I will begin to teach you your proper place tonight.”

“You dare much, Captain. Force your attentions on me and Ean will kill you.”

Gidrun laughed. “He is welcome to try.”

Anari frowned uncertainly. “You won’t even consider that he might?”

He shook his head.

“Then you are a fool.”

“Our race’s survival depends on the infusion of new blood, Anari. Tomorrow will tell, but I must admit, no man has ever beaten me.”

Anari shuddered. “And if Ean wins?”

“Then it will not matter, will it? For I will be dead. But I do not believe he will win.”

Anari jerked her chin from his grasp. “So proud, Captain, and it is that pride that will get you killed.”

“If I am to die tomorrow, then I should steal a kiss from my intended tonight.”

“No,” Anari gasped, leaning over the stone banister. But Duncan’s voice whispered to her to yield. “Do not force him to take more than he’s asked for, pet. Give him his kiss and eat your dinner.”

What a strange sensation. No man but Duncan had ever kissed her with such passion. No

other man had gathered her in his arms and molded her body to his with such feeling. As Gidrun lowered his mouth to hers, she closed her eyes. How odd that he would kiss her so tenderly when she'd expected him to devour. His tongue brushed her lower lip, seeking entrance, and she allowed it, secure in the knowledge that she could only ever respond to Duncan's kisses. Yet, as Gidrun's tongue stroked hers, his fingers gently stroking her cheek, she kissed him back.

When he broke the kiss, Anari flushed with shame. How could she respond to the proud captain who was looking at her with a sense of wonder?

"You liked my kiss," he said softly.

"No," she sobbed, shaking her head vehemently. "I closed my eyes and imagined you were my husband."

Gidrun threw back his head and laughed. "Tell yourself that if it makes you feel better, but tomorrow you will be free and then we shall see. And if, during the challenge, you indicate that you will accept me in every way, I will even allow your man to live and depart with his ship and cargo intact."

"How generous," Anari sneered. "And maybe tomorrow, if you admit you cannot defeat Ean, I will ask him not to kill you, so you may live out your life with the knowledge that you could not have the one thing you most want."

"Cruel wench." Gidrun shook his head and smiled fondly. "I can see that this night we will have to agree to disagree." He gestured to the table. "Come, let us finish our supper and I will leave you to your thoughts."

Once the servant returned to clear the food away, Anari was left to herself. As the key clicked in the lock, Anari dragged a heavy chair over and tucked it beneath the door handle. She might not be able to get out, but no one would be able to get in, either. Without that assurance, she knew she'd never be able to sleep.

Anari rummaged through her flight suit and found her Spectra-shades and a handful of energy cubes. This evening had been disconcerting, to say the least, and now she had to go outside and talk to orbit wisps. With a sigh, she pulled on the robe provided her, stuffed the energy cubes in a pocket and went out onto the balcony. She put on the shades, set one cube on the table and sat down to wait. It didn't take long.

"What do you seek, lady?" the blue wisp whispered.

"Information."

"You wish to know of his plans for you?"

Anari snorted. "I think I have that figured out. No, I wish to know if they have any information concerning a neighboring planet."

"You must pay, lady."

Anari nodded at the energy cube on the table. "There is more where that came from."

The wisp touched the cube, absorbing the energy, its blue hue burning brighter. "There are forces at work on the new planet of which you speak. These forces are of grave concern to the guardians of this world."

"Why?" She placed another cube on the table. "Answer first."

"There are men on the planet, soldiers, or so it is assumed. The lord does not know who they are, nor what might be their intentions. The young captain wishes to attack, but the leader is holding back."

Anari fed the wisp another cube. "Why?"

"If they are Amalgamation troops, attacking would bring war down on the people of

Eli-rei.”

“So there may be soldiers on the planet. Who else? Besides the soldiers?”

“Captain Balkhimar told of a man with white hair and green robes.”

Anari’s heart nearly stopped. Her father’s Senate robes were green. She put another treat on the table. “Who is he?”

The wisp snatched another cube, humming happily. “No one knows. He has been seen but a few times. At first he walked with the aid of a cane, but now he stands erect.”

“How long has he been there?”

“Four moons ago, it was, when Gidrun saw him on the ship’s screen. He says they pretend to be scientists, but he does not believe that is their purpose on the planet. He is anxious to take action.”

Anari removed the last three cubes from her pocket and gave them to the wisp. “Thank you. You’ve been of great help to me. If you can, find the man who came here with me. He will have more questions for you.”

* * * * *

Duncan took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He was in for the fight of his life and failure was not an option. Failure meant Anari was doomed to a life as Gidrun’s concubine and, while he felt certain Gidrun would treat her well, he knew that she wanted to return to the home she loved so much. A home she hoped to share with him, but Duncan knew that hope would never come to fruition. He had to get them out of this mess, find her father, and get them both safely back to The Web. Vonner would take it from there, assuring Anari’s safety. A horn sounded and Duncan shook out his tense shoulders. It was time. He pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it aside.

Seating had been set up around the bailey sometime during the night. The place had taken on a carnival feel, with booths set up along the walls. Vendors hawked wares of all kinds. Ale flowed from makeshift bars comprised of barrels and planks. A canopy had been raised to reflect the heat away from the gathering.

Duncan looked for Anari and spied her on the dais, sitting to the left of the leader. She didn’t look happy, but she offered him a brave smile when he nodded in her direction. His heart clenched, thinking of losing her to the young barbarian. He should be happy that she’d been able to respond to another man’s kiss but selfishly, he wasn’t.

A referee gestured to Duncan and Gidrun and the two men met in the middle of the courtyard. He held a set of electro-cuffs to which several meters of lightweight chain had been bonded. He attached the cuffs to each man’s empty hand, binding them together.

“This is a companion challenge,” the gruff man explained. “No holds barred. You fight to the death. Time starts when the horn sounds.”

The man jogged away and Gidrun grinned at Duncan. “I dined with your woman last night, Captain.”

Duncan raised an eyebrow. “Indeed. And did she enjoy the meal?”

“If fact she did, almost as much as she enjoyed my kiss.”

Duncan grinned at the taunt. “Well, if she did, she was imagining it was me kissing her, boy. Anari likes it when I kiss her, no matter where I kiss her. I have to wonder if a pup like you has the knowledge and experience to please a woman of Anari’s...tastes.”

Rage flashed across Gidrun’s face. Duncan suppressed a satisfied smile. He’d hit a nerve. Anger was good, anger was distracting. Men made mistakes when they acted in anger. It didn’t pay to allow yourself to get rattled in a knife duel. In fact, it could get you killed. He relaxed into

his stance, feet about shoulder-width apart and knees slightly bent, the knife gripped tightly in his right hand and held close to his body.

The horn sounded and the young captain charged, just as Duncan knew he would. Leading with his empty hand, his palm crashed into Gidrun's ear, hard, the impact disorienting his opponent. The chain swung up and curled around Gidrun's right forearm, preventing him from striking with his knife hand. Following with his right, Duncan drew first blood, nicking his opponent's left side.

"Shake it off, boy, I could have killed you just now but I want the people to get their money's worth."

Gidrun backed away, shaking his head. His ears had to be ringing like a bell tender calling the faithful to worship. He would be more cautious now, but he still wouldn't win. Not when Anari's happiness was at stake.

Duncan allowed his opponent to circle around him, feinting and striking, the chain limiting the distance between them. It cost him some blood, testing the captain's mettle like this, but he'd spent countless hours training under these conditions. Besides, Gidrun had his share of nicks and slices on his chest and sides, though none of their injuries was life threatening.

Suddenly, the battle began in earnest as Gidrun faked a strike with this right hand and followed with a lightning-fast sweep of his knife. Had he been fighting anyone else, it could have been a debilitating injury, but Duncan was a Gen 8 super soldier and his skin was much tougher and harder to puncture. The blade skittered across his ribs, leaving a thin line of oozing blood and nothing more.

Duncan moved in. Sweat stung his eyes. Time to end this and get Anari the hell off this planet. He swung his right hand, all his enhanced strength behind the punch, and followed it in immediately, knife held low for a disabling, not killing, strike. Gidrun pivoted, showing surprising skill. Duncan's knuckles grazed the captain's shoulder instead of his jaw. Off balance, Duncan stumbled. He recovered almost immediately, but not quickly enough. With a triumphant shout, Gidrun struck. Time seemed to slow. The sun glinted off the long-bladed knife. Savage joy lit his opponent's face as the blade slid between Duncan's ribs with a powerful jab. Pain blazed through him, sharp and bright and he could feel the warmth of his own blood coursing down his side. Maybe the boy had nicked something vital and maybe not, but even if it wasn't a life-threatening wound, pain could dull his reaction time.

Playtime was over.

Duncan threw his elbow up, connecting with Gidrun's nose with a satisfying crunch. The younger man staggered, exposing his left side. Duncan grasped the chain, yanked Gidrun forward, and with a powerful thrust, drove his knife deep into the younger man's abdomen.

"That one went deep, boy. You could bleed out any second if I hit an artery, or your small intestine could be leaking poison into your abdominal cavity. Do you yield?"

Gidrun answered with a head butt that opened a cut over Duncan's left eye. The younger man staggered and uttered a harsh cry when the knife came free. Gidrun dropped to his knees.

"Don't make me kill you, boy," Duncan growled.

Duncan grunted as Gidrun uttered a fierce howl. The knife slashed. The rules of combat flashed into his head. Never leave your opponent an opening if he's still armed. He blamed his sense of honor, he didn't want to kill the kid. Mercy would serve him better in his quest to find and secure Anari's father, but Gidrun would not yield. A quick pivot and he avoided a strike that probably would have severed his femoral artery. He cursed under his breath as Gidrun's blade opened a deep gash on the side of his leg. Shit. He backhanded the injured man.

As Gidrun hit the paved courtyard, Duncan leaned down and plucked the knife from his hand, tossing it away. His side was bleeding heavily now and blood poured from his leg, soaking his boots. He was getting too old for this shit. He had no choice but to finish the fight. Using the chain for leverage, he rolled Gidrun onto his stomach, grasped his hair, and pulled his head back.

“Duncan, no.” He looked up to see Anari on her feet, her arms extended in a plea. He sighed in relief. He didn’t want to kill the boy, but it was his culture’s rules, not Duncan’s, that called for a fight to the death.

“What say you, my lord?” Duncan called to Sanford Rei. “Is it mercy or death? Mercy will require a boon, but your captain’s death will cost you more than it will cost me.”

“Mercy,” Sanford growled. “Whatever the cost, mercy.”

“Very good, my lord,” Duncan said, then dropped to his knees. “I believe we both require a doctor.”

Anari awoke to a tugging on her hand. “What?” she said groggily. Her eyes flew open. “Duncan?”

“Right here, love. Come lie beside me.”

She launched herself out of the uncomfortable bedside chair and nearly levitated onto the bed beside him. “Are you all right?” She stroked his face, tugged the covers away to touch his chest, examined his side, then uncovered his leg. Looking up, she met his eyes, tears welling in hers. “Your wounds are healed.”

“They have a full-body medi-tube unit here. It took the better part of the night, but it is as though the injuries never happened. Now will you stretch out beside me? Better yet...” He pulled her to him until he had her completely draped over him, her chin resting in the hollow of his collarbone. “If we were assured of some privacy, I’d show you exactly how all right I am.”

Anari smiled and kissed him. “Thank the stars. I was so frightened when you went down.”

Duncan raised an eyebrow. “You have so little faith in my abilities?”

“I saw that knife go into you, Duncan.” Her eyes welled again. “I felt it as surely as if it had plunged into me. If he’d killed you—”

He kissed away her tears. “But he didn’t, and I didn’t kill him.”

She rested her cheek in the curve of his neck, inhaled the scent of her man, alive and well. “No, you didn’t. You’re a good man.”

Her cheek rose and fell when he took a deep breath and exhaled. “No, I’m not. I’m a killer, princess. It’s what I was bred for, to do the Amalgamation’s bidding, to kill for them. Now I kill for Ulric Vonner when it’s warranted. I’ll probably have to kill a few more to rescue your father. The fact that I didn’t kill that young pup means nothing.”

“Of course it does,” she said softly. “You did it for me.”

“Yes, I did,” he answered, wrapping her securely in his arms. “There is little I wouldn’t do to see you safe and happy.”

Chapter Nine

Two days after the fight, Anari and Duncan were underway once more, accompanied by Gidrun's ship and a small contingent of fighters. She hadn't been privy to the planning but she knew that Duncan had formed some kind of alliance with the Eli-rei leader and the young captain. In fact, he and Gidrun appeared to have become fast friends. Such was the way of soldiers, she supposed. Once the battle was won, enmity was set aside.

With cloaking devices engaged, they hovered in the skies over Destyn, awaiting the cover of darkness. She joined Duncan on the bridge.

"Come and see what your father's work and fifteen years of accelerated evolution has done, love," he said, gesturing to her. She went to him and he settled her on his lap, engaging the comm screen.

What she saw as the cameras swept the planet astounded her. What had once been sandy deserts and craggy, dun-colored rocks had been transformed into lush valleys and green mountain peaks. Water flowed down from the mountains to feed once dead rivers and lakebeds. Life abounded in every form—birds in flight, fish jumping in streams, grazing animals in meadows amongst jewel-like wildflowers. There were predators too. Wolves, bears, large cats.

"Oh my," she said softly. "It worked, it really worked." She felt foolish as tears leaked from her eyes, but she was so proud of her father. What he'd been able to create would allow for the settlement of more planets. People struggling to survive on depleted planets, living on nothing but compressed protein bars and recycled water, would have the opportunity to build new lives.

"Yes, it worked. In the right hands, your father's technology will make a great difference in the lives of people for generations to come. But in the wrong hands—"

"Yes, in the Amalgamation's hands it is death to any who defy them. Oh, Duncan, how can we possibly fight them?"

"We won't have to." He drew her deeper into his embrace. "Just this bunch, and there aren't so many. The Amalgamation has always kept a very low profile here, using the planet for weapons testing, but Gidrun says even that has stopped in the last several years. So they obviously know the potential of your father's work. We'll get him out of here and take him to The Web. Vonner knows people. Once the Amalgamation's plans are exposed, they won't dare move against your father. Your family will be safe."

"And you'll go back to your life."

Duncan sighed. "Yes. I'll go back to my life and you'll go back to yours."

Anari threw her arms around his neck, her damp cheek against his. "How?" The word tore from her throat on a sob. "How can I go back to my life if you are not a part of it? Take me with you. I'll go wherever you go. I'll become a bounty hunter. You can teach me."

"Anari." The gentle tone he used spoke volumes. He wouldn't consider her desperate words. "Do you think I would allow you to risk your life by becoming a bounty hunter? Do you think, for one second, I would allow you to put yourself in harm's way just to have you by my side?" He drew her arms from around his neck and held her away from him. "Make no mistake, I will miss you when you're gone, but I will live a much happier life knowing you are alive in the world. Give me that, won't you? Go home and live your life. Find a man to love and raise a family. If you love me at all, you will do this for me."

"It's not fair. How can you even want me to love another?" She threw herself from his lap and ran to the door. As it slid open, she looked back over her shoulder, her voice flat with

despair. "You ask too much, Duncan."

As the doors closed behind her, Anari ran sobbing to her room. Of course she'd known he intended to leave her, but everything was happening so fast. They would land on the planet several hours after nightfall and the search for her father would begin. She had no doubt they would find him, that all would go according to whatever plan Duncan had worked out with Gidrun. Her father would be rescued and they would return to The Web where Vonner would pull his puppet-master strings to assure their safety. Life would return to normal, and she would be alone.

The door to her quarters opened and Anari rushed inside, throwing herself down on the bed. She had tried so hard to be brave throughout this whole experience. The gods knew she hadn't meant to fall in love with Duncan but it had happened just the same. How could she go through the rest of her life without the touch of his hand on her cheek, the feel of his body against hers as they made love? No man could ever make her feel all the things this one man made her feel. Even at the beginning, when he'd been training her for her role as sex slave, she'd responded to his touch. Craved his touch. The idea of another man's hands on her was simply too much to contemplate. Sobs tore from her throat as she mourned for all she'd lost, all she would still lose. The idyllic life she'd once led was but a memory. She wept now for the long, lonely years ahead of her until, at last, she slept.

Duncan stood beside Anari's bunk, taking in the sight of her. The sun on the new planet had set hours ago and they were nearly ready to transport to the surface. Together, he and Gidrun had made the decision that Anari would remain on the ship. They were leaving a young recruit to make sure she didn't follow. With a sigh, he sat down beside her. She was going to be pissed, no doubt about that. She would likely see it as a betrayal on his part, an attempt to begin distancing himself from her.

"Anari," he said softly, stroking her bare shoulder. "Wake up, princess."

She woke with a start, rubbing her tear-stained face. "Is it time?"

Duncan nodded. "Yes, it's time." He hesitated. "Anari, I want you to stay onboard The Vigilant."

"No."

Duncan almost grinned. Her lips compressed into a thin line, her eyebrows shot down in a deep V. It was an expression of grim determination, one he'd become familiar with over the weeks they'd been together. But it would get her nowhere.

"Yes." He added a touch of gruffness to his voice to make sure she understood he would brook no disobedience from her. "We don't know what we're going to find down there and I am not taking any chances with your life."

"But my father won't know you. He won't trust you." She was sitting on her heels, ready to argue her case.

Duncan shook his head. "Doesn't matter. He'll come with me if I have to knock him unconscious, but I think once he knows you're here, he'll come peacefully enough."

"You can't make me stay behind. I'll follow you."

"No, you won't. Gidrun is leaving one of his men behind to make sure you stay put."

"Bastard!" she shrieked. "How dare you keep me confined to this ship when my father is down there?"

Duncan grasped her chin and forced her to look at him. "I dare because I can, princess. Don't even think about defying me on this or there will be consequences. Do I make myself

clear?”

“Crystal,” she spat and turned her back on him.

“Now give me a kiss for luck.”

“Go to hell.”

“Probably, but I’ll have my kiss before I go,” he said, reaching for her.

* * * * *

Anari lay on her back, looking up at the ceiling, her breath coming hard. Duncan’s masterful kiss had left her weak with need, damn him. She didn’t know why she’d even attempted to deny him when she knew from experience such a thing was not possible. There was no way to hold back when he was determined to wring a response from her, and he had. Moisture pooled between her thighs. He had touched her there, thrust his fingers into her and she’d nearly come. He’d explained in detail exactly what he would do to her upon his return, then he’d left her. She sat up and swung her feet over the edge of the bed. If he thought she’d sit here like a good little girl, he had another think coming.

When the door to her quarters opened, a young man stood at attention. “I’m sorry, Mistress, but you are not allowed to leave.”

Anari lowered her eyes. “I’m not trying to leave, sir. I have a headache and I wanted to go to sickbay to see the nurse. You’re welcome to accompany me.”

He was young, this guard they’d set at her door. Did they really believe she couldn’t outsmart a boy who wasn’t even old enough to grow facial hair? She smiled when he fell in step beside her, casting sideways glances when he thought she wasn’t looking. This was going to be easier than she thought.

“If you’ll just wait here,” Anari murmured. “I’ll be right out, then perhaps we can go to the kitchen for a bite. I haven’t eaten since this morning. Perhaps that’s why my head hurts.”

The boy nodded and assumed his position next to the door. He obviously took this task seriously. She hoped what she had planned for him wouldn’t get him into trouble.

Once inside, she deactivated the nurstotic unit, searched the medicine cabinets for a sleeping potion and filled a pneumatic syringe, slipping it into her pocket.

“All done,” Anari said, joining her guard once more. “Would you care for something to eat? We have an excellent replicator onboard, or I could cook something for you. I can do wonderful things with a few eggs and some vegetables.”

The young man eyed her suspiciously. “Why would you offer to cook for me when I am here to keep you from leaving the ship?”

Anari sighed as they stepped into the kitchen. “I admit I was angry at being left behind, but I realize my presence would be a distraction. Duncan would be worried about my safety and that could get him killed. I’m perfectly capable of seeing reason once I rein in my emotions.”

Her guard grunted. “In that case, I will have whatever you are having.”

Anari smiled brightly. Had she been dealing with Duncan, he would have known by her smile alone that she was up to something. Fortunately, this boy apparently had little experience with women.

“Lovely, eggs it is, then.” She gestured to a small table. “Please, take a seat, this won’t take long at all.”

Anari hummed as she gathered the ingredients for a meal she had no intention of cooking. Setting everything aside, she took down a skillet and set it on the stove, then opened a cabinet and retrieved a plate and a cup. Leaning across his shoulder, she handed them to him. When his hands were full, she reached into her pocket, extracted the syringe and pressed it against his

neck. "I'm sorry," she whispered, easing the boy's head down to the table.

With the young guard sleeping soundly in the galley, Anari raced to the armory. Duncan had shown her an array of weapons and given her the code to open the door if need be. She threw off her dress, stepped into a clean flight suit and strapped on a utility belt. She grabbed a set of night specs, a laser pistol and a blaster, hooking them on to the belt at her waist, then stuffed a backpack full of ammunition for the laser pistol and the blaster. Not that she really knew what to do with any of those things, but they might come in handy. At the last minute, she tucked a beam knife into a pocket of her flight suit. That she knew how to use. Saying a quick prayer to the powers that be, she raced to the transport room, duplicated the coordinates Duncan had set in the other unit and stepped onto the platform just as the tube was descending. Duncan's words rang in her ears as she alighted on the planet. Don't even think about defying me on this or there will be consequences. Do I make myself clear? She knew exactly what he meant. After all, he'd warmed her backside more than once, hadn't he? Maybe, but this time he'd have to go through her father to do it.

* * * * *

Anari put on the night specs and stepped out of the shadows, thinking how strange it was to see everything looking green. Cautiously, she slipped behind a tree and took a moment to get her bearings. To the south, she spied three low-slung buildings with a perimeter fence built around them. Obviously, that was where they were holding her father. She studied the area for what seemed like a long time before summoning the nerve to move in its direction. There was no sign of activity anywhere, no guards—nothing. Had they been there but been taken out by Duncan and Gidrun? How many men did Gidrun have with him, and would she be able to distinguish them from the men holding her father? The orbit wisp had told her that the people here were trying to look like scientists, so perhaps she would be able to tell the difference before she actually used a weapon on anyone. And she would use one, if she had to. One way or another, she was leaving here with her father. Taking a deep breath, she stepped away from the safety of her hiding place and strode toward the buildings in the distance.

She came across the first guard about ten meters from the perimeter fence, sitting slumped against a tree. She nearly jumped out of her skin until she realized he wasn't moving. Squatting beside him, she placed two fingers on his neck. No pulse. Definitely dead. She shuddered in disgust and wiped her fingers on the leg of her flight suit.

Proceeding cautiously, she ducked inside the open gate and darted to the first building, placing her back against the wall. This cloak-and-dagger business wasn't nearly as exciting as she'd imagined it might be. Following the line of the building, she peeked around the corner. There was no one there. Closing her eyes, Anari offered up another prayer and scurried to the door.

Amazingly, the building was unlocked. Duncan strikes again. Had to be because if the Amalgamation really was behind her father's abduction, they wouldn't be so careless as to leave the facility accessible to anyone who might want to sneak up and take a look around. She shrugged—nothing ventured, nothing gained. She opened the door and went inside.

It was a lab, and a sophisticated one at that. No expense had been spared, by the look of it. She took a few moments to snoop, rifling through the files stacked neatly on the desk. There was nothing unusual as far as she could tell. DNA test results on a variety of flora and fauna. There didn't appear to be any anomalies as the result of the terraforming process. Water tests showed the normal amount of bacteria. The water was safe to drink.

A thorough search of the building turned up nothing. No employees working late into the

night. No scientific experiments gone hideously awry. She cracked the front door and peeked out. Still no one around. She nipped out the door and hurried around to the other side of the building. That was where she found the next dead man. The weird angle of his neck told her there was no need to check for a pulse, but she did anyway. Dead as dead could be. She made her way around to the front of the building, marveling at the fact that there was no one around. Duncan and his merry men were nothing if not efficient.

The second building was also a lab, but this one was much different from the first. Components for weapons were stacked on shelves and a large screen showed parts of equations resembling her father's work. Had they managed to get him to reveal his secrets? Surely not, or the equations wouldn't be missing large strings of information. There were scientists here, all right, and they'd managed to figure out some portion of her father's work, but much of it was based on common biophysics. She was about to leave the building when she heard voices approaching from below. In a panic, she dove under a desk for cover.

A man's voice grumbled, "I don't know why they don't just pump the old bastard full of Acepdac and make him tell us what we need to know. With the little we've been able to learn from studying the life forms here, it will be eons before we can come up with a formula that works."

Another man snorted derisively. "Because that stuff can fry your brain if you use it too often, and the SSP wants what's in his head. They can't get it if he's a drooling idiot," the other man said.

"Well, all I know is I'm ready to get off this rock. We've been here four months and we haven't accomplished a thing. We're out here in the middle of a neutral zone. If the Eli-rei get wind of something going on here, they'll be on us, you mark my words. I don't want to be here if that happens."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than the door flew open. "Too late," a deep voice boomed. Anari gasped at the smell of blood and bodily wastes that filled the room and tried not to gag.

"I know you're in here, Mistress. You can come out now," Gidrún told her, a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Gidrún." She scrambled out from under the desk. "How did you know I was here?"

"You may have little feet, but they still leave an impression on the soft ground. I told him you would not stay where he put you," the big man said with a sigh. "What did you do to my brother?"

"Nothing." She stared down at the floor for a long moment.

"I do not think the answer to my question can be found on your boots, Anari Fury."

Anari's eyes widened and she looked up at him. "He told you?"

"Yes. My brother?"

"I didn't know he was your brother. Um...he's asleep at the galley table. I gave him an injection. Not much. He'll be awake soon, with a dry mouth and a bit of a hangover, but that's all."

Gidrún shook his head and muttered. "Young fool. I told him not to trust you. What did you say to make him let his guard down?"

"I offered to cook for him."

Gidrún chuckled. "The boy is ever thinking of filling his stomach." He jerked his head toward the door. "Come along, Mistress Fury. You can accompany me. We think your father is in the next bunker, down where the crew bunks. Try to behave yourself, and for the love of all

that is holy, do not pull those weapons. I would like to live long enough to court you properly, once this adventure is over.”

Anari followed him out the door. “Um, Gidrun, about that courting thing...” Before she could finish, she was roughly shoved against the wall, Gidrun’s big back pressing against her. She froze, hardly daring to breathe.

“Gidrun, I think we’ve found him but we...” A tall, dark figure stepped around the corner and Anari wished she could make herself disappear.

Gidrun stepped away from her. “Look what I found hiding in the weapons lab.”

“Gods’ balls,” Duncan grumbled menacingly. His big hand closed over the front of her flight suit and he jerked her forward, leaning over her. “You are in so much trouble.”

Anari gulped. “Duncan—I—er.”

“You would do well to keep that pretty mouth shut, pet.”

She looked away. “Yes, Duncan.”

“Too bad you weren’t this obedient when I ordered you to stay on the ship. You remember what I told you?”

A shiver skittered down her spine. Anticipation or fear? She wasn’t sure. “Yes, Duncan.”

He released the front of her flight suit. “Stay between Gidrun and me. Don’t make a sound and don’t touch any of those weapons you’re so casually carrying.” He uttered a snort of disgust and turned away. She fell in step behind him, careful not to make a sound as they proceeded around the back of the last building.

Duncan gestured to Gidrun that there was one guard then disappeared. If she hadn’t been listening for it, Anari never would have heard the guard’s grunt of surprise. A moment later, Duncan carried the limp body around the building and dumped it on the ground. She turned her head, choking back a gag. Would she always remember the scent of blood?

Duncan grabbed her chin and forced her to look at the man. “You signed on for this when you decided to disobey me, so you can damn well look at what it’s going to take to rescue your father.”

Anari smacked his hand away, glaring. “I don’t care if every one of the Amalgamation’s men dies here today,” she said between clenched teeth. “I’ll kill them myself if that’s what it takes, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

Duncan sighed. “I would have spared you the sight of blood on my hands, love.”

Anari nodded. “I understand. Now let’s go get my father.”

* * * * *

Four men died within the space of seconds. One minute they were sitting at a table playing cards, the next they were dead. Duncan and Gidrun opened every door they came to, eliminating any opposition they came across. On they went, traversing the upstairs corridors, checking every room until they had no choice but to head downstairs. Gidrun thrust Anari behind him as they started down, gesturing that she should be quiet.

The stairs opened into a large rec room furnished with couches and chairs, all filled with Amalgamation soldiers. With a shout, chairs and tables overturned as the soldiers reacted. Anari watched in horror while Duncan and Gidrun fired indiscriminately. Men screamed in agony as lasers sliced through limbs. The stench of blood and burning flesh burned her nose. Her eyes watered, her stomach heaved.

One huge man launched himself at Duncan, growling. “I know you, traitor.”

Duncan freed his energy blade and, grinning, separated the man’s head from his body.

Blood spurted in thick fountains as more men swarmed in from the hallway.

Chaos. Screams. Shouts. The thud of bodies crashing together as spent weapons were tossed aside and hand-to-hand combat ensued. Panic clutched Anari as she watched. Her throat closed, terror gripped her. There were so many. Gidrun's men poured into the building from another direction, uttering chilling cries as they waded into the fray, their eyes alight with the fury of battle. A body flew through the air, landing at her feet. The man, barely alive, reached out and grabbed her ankle.

Anari shrieked and kicked at the man. With a gurgle, the soldier died, releasing his grip on her. She looked down at the bloody handprint circling her ankle. "No, no, no." She bolted across the large room, her boots slipping in blood and gore. She didn't know where she was going, only that she had to get away from the carnage.

Anari staggered down a long hallway, trying doors as she went. The rooms were unlocked and empty. Of course they were—all the men were dead or dying in the ongoing struggle in the rec room. She was crying, sobbing between loud cries for her father. He had to be here somewhere. She had to find him. He would know what to do. He would make everything all right again.

The hallway turned to the left and she followed it down to the end. As she thrust open the last door, a cry of joy escaped her. "Father."

"Anari, no," he cried, when she burst into the room. A hand tangled in her hair, jerking her off her feet. The press of a laser pistol to her temple told her all she needed to know.

"Let me go!" she shrieked, scratching at the hand holding the weapon to her head.

"On your knees, bitch," her captor snarled, pressing the gun harder against her temple as he forced her to the floor. "Make one move, old man, and her pretty head explodes." Cold metal bit into her skin. "Unbuckle the belt and toss it away. Do it slowly."

Anari's hands shook as she undid the utility belt and tossed it aside. "Please, don't hurt us."

The hand twisted in Anari's hair and she cried out. "I don't like killing women, so I promise I'll make it quick. Say goodbye to your daughter, old man, because you're next."

"Why? Why would you kill him? The Amalgamation wants him alive."

The man yanked her head back so she could see his face. "Orders. If we're attacked, I'm to kill the old man and blow this facility." He looked at Anari, his gaze roving over her. "Damn waste of good pussy, though." He grinned, then nodded to her father. "If you'd cooperated, none of this would be happening. Your fault, old man. Maybe I should kill you first and take her out of here with me."

Anger washed over her, so feral and savage her body shook with it. After all she'd been through, Tur's betrayal, being ripped from her home, the brutality of the auctioneer—only to lose her life and the life of her father. Not as long as she had breath in her body.

"Please," her father begged. "I'll give you anything you want. Don't kill my daughter."

The soldier raised the laser pistol and pointed it at the senator. Anari used the distraction to slip her hand in her pocket, wrapping her fingers around the beam knife.

"Father, no. You can't give them the formula, you know what they'll do with it."

"Shut the fuck up." The blow came just as Anari knew it would. She fell to the floor, rolling onto her back.

"I'm sick of people telling me to shut up," she screamed at him, then she pressed the button to activate the beam knife. The laser beam shot through the air, slicing a neat vertical line into the soldier's chest. The pistol fell from his grip and he clutched his chest, looking at her in

disbelief. He took a step toward her, then dropped to the floor.

“Oh sweet mercy,” she moaned and crab-walked away from the dead man. Then her father’s loving arms went around her.

“It’s all right, child,” he whispered. He took the knife from her grasp and deactivated it. He rocked her, holding her tight, murmuring softly.

Suddenly, the sounds of battle gave way to Duncan’s panicked voice. “Anari.” She looked up as he staggered to the door, grasping the frame for support. “Oh, thank the gods.”

She leaped to her feet and launched herself at him, sobbing as his strong arms closed around her. “Duncan. You’re alive.”

He kissed her desperately, leaving them both breathless. “We’re all alive, love.”

* * * * *

Duncan’s heart was in his throat as he fought his way through the throng of super soldiers to get to Anari. He’d seen her panic and dart across the room. It was a damn miracle someone hadn’t killed her. He cut down the last man blocking his way and charged down the hall, shouting for her. He was weak with relief when he found her, safe in her father’s arms. When he called her name, she flew to him, leaping into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist. He pivoted, pressed her against the door, and kissed her with a desperation he’d never known before.

“Senator Fury, are you hurt?” he gasped, when they came apart.

Anari’s father climbed wearily to his feet. “I am well. Tell me who you are and why my daughter has herself wrapped around you.”

Duncan was about to speak when Gidrun entered. “I do not wish to break up your reunion, but I think it prudent we leave this place. My men have found explosive devices and we know not if they have been armed.”

Senator Fury looked from Duncan to Gidrun. “An Eli-rei and a man I assume to be a rogue super soldier? Someone will damned well explain this to me as soon as we’re off this planet.”

“Of course, Senator,” Duncan said, gesturing toward the door. “After you.” He shifted Anari in his arms and tucked her close to his body, kissing her brow. “Keep your eyes shut, princess. You’ve seen enough carnage to last you a lifetime.”

“Yes, Duncan,” she sighed. She popped one eye open. “Are you still terribly angry with me?”

“Yes, and we will get to that after we get back to Eli-rei and you’ve had some rest.”

He carried her all the way, only parting with her long enough to expedite the transport back to the ship. Once onboard, he helped her shower and tucked her into her bunk.

“Rest now, Anari.”

She yawned. “Will you stay with me until I fall asleep?”

“Of course.”

Duncan climbed into bed, curving around her, heart clenching in his chest as she snuggled deeper into the warmth of his body. Leaving Anari was going to be the most difficult and painful task he would ever be called upon to perform, but he had no choice. Some of the Amalgamation soldiers had recognized him and, though dead men told no tales, chances were if he settled down in one place, he would one day be recognized. He would not take chances with Anari’s life, no matter how painful the outcome of leaving her might be.

He knew the instant she fell asleep. Careful not to wake her, he eased out of bed. There was still the mess on the planet to clean up. By the time they were done, it would look as if the people there had simply abandoned their posts.

The door to Anari's quarters slid shut behind him and he came face-to-face with Senator Fury.

“As I just saw you sneaking out of my daughter's room, you will explain to me the exact nature of your relationship, and you will do so this instant.”

Chapter Ten

Preparations for a great feast were underway when they returned. Gidrun had contacted Sanford Rei and related the story of their success in destroying the Amalgamation forces in residence on Destyn. The gatehouse doors were open and the inner bailey was crowded with people busy preparing food, setting up booths to sell their wares, tapping kegs of ale. People greeted them happily, most commenting on the heroics of Gidrun and his soldiers. Someone thrust a cup in her hand and Anari took a sip, eyes widening at the stout taste of the ale. Women dressed in their festive best flirted with the men, Duncan included, and she did her best not to be jealous. Some of them were quite beautiful.

In the great hall, Sanford Rei greeted them with kind words and joy at their safe return. "I'm happy to see you again, Mistress Fury." He gestured to the same page who'd cared for her previously. "Quinn will show you to your chamber. I've had him lay out some fresh garments for this evening's festivities." He leaned in and whispered. "You will see my captain at his best tonight, young mistress. It is my belief he is quite taken with you, and I must say I approve."

Anari opened her mouth to speak, then closed it just as quickly. If she'd learned nothing else about Eli-rei males, it was that they were a determined lot. If Gidrun wanted her, then his people would support him.

"I cannot thank you enough for your kindness and generosity. I look forward to seeing you later." She gave him what she hoped was a polite nod and followed Quinn to her rooms.

Hours later, a freshly bathed Anari answered a knock on her chamber door and greeted her smiling father.

"Would you allow an old man to escort you to the celebration?" her father asked. His green Senate robes were cleaned and pressed and his flowing white hair was neatly combed and tied back at the nape of his neck.

"I'd be honored," she said, pulling the door shut behind her. She kissed his cheek and hooked her arm around his. "Handsome as ever, I see. You'll have the women fighting for your attention."

The senator chuckled. "More like the young men will be falling over themselves to catch your eye. I must say you look fetching in that gown, child."

Anari smiled. She had to admit the dress she wore was stunning. Made from a flowing, russet-colored material, the bodice boasted a heavily embroidered princess neckline and long, bell sleeves. The empire waist was trimmed with a wide satiny band embellished with hand-turned russet roses. A dress like this would be extremely costly on Eli-rei because rich clothing had to be imported from so far away.

"What of Sumi and Katri, Father? Have you heard anything?"

Her father nodded. "Your young man tells me they are safe and will be waiting for us when we reach Quartus Seven. They...endured...much the same humiliation on the auction block, as I understand it, only they displayed no spirit to draw the eyes of those who might wish to harm them."

Anari inhaled sharply. "You would scold me for attempting to defend myself?"

The senator sighed. "No, Anari, I merely point out that your temper is not always conducive to the peaceful resolution of a problem. Why didn't you simply give in to Tur? Perhaps he would have gone about his business and never given you another thought."

Anari's eyes welled with tears. It seemed all she'd done was cry these past months. How could her father say these things to her? She lifted her chin, refusing to look at her father. "I

never would have betrayed Keltar.”

“And yet you now love another.”

She nearly stumbled as she descended the stairs. “Yes, I do but he, too, will soon leave me.”

Her father squeezed her arm. “It will be all right, child.”

She looked at him then, her voice quavering as she spoke. “Will it?”

Anari knew a moment of disappointment when she spied Gidrun waiting at the bottom of the stairs. Where was Duncan? Had he left her already? Gidrun must have seen the disappointment on her face, for he took her hand, kissing her knuckles.

“He meets with Lord Sanford Rei, Mistress Fury, and will join you at the table. In the meantime, please allow me to escort you and your father to the festivities.”

“Of course,” she said demurely. “We would be honored.”

“Senator, you are satisfied with the arrangement between Eli-rei and the future colonists of Destyn?” Gidrun asked conversationally.

“Very much, sir. You and your father have been more than generous with offers of aid to those who would settle the planet.”

Anari’s eyebrows rose. “You’re offering aid to those willing to settle Destyn?”

Gidrun laughed softly. “We see the value of neighbors who do not crave Amalgamation control. We will assist new settlers in building homes and farms, and will patrol the sector to prevent enemy incursions. We will also offer training to the men so that they may protect their women.”

“Really, and the women? Will they receive this training, too?”

Gidrun’s gaze burned with desire as he looked upon her. “You, I will train personally should you decide to settle on Destyn.” He led them to a dais and pulled Anari’s chair out, seating her. He leaned down and whispered in her ear. “It is my greatest hope we will become neighbors, Anari.” He straightened and cleared his throat. “If you will excuse me, I must see to the other guests. You will save a dance for me, Mistress Fury?”

Anari’s cheeks heated. “Of course.”

The food was delicious and the ale flowed like a river. Anari discovered she was still capable of feeling lighthearted, despite the trials she’d experienced. Several of Gidrun’s men begged dances, including his younger brother, and she accepted each invitation, laughing at her own clumsiness as she attempted a new style of dance. But her eyes were ever on Duncan, who was deep in conversation with Gidrun and Sanford Rei. Occasionally, he glanced her way, a smile of promise on his lips. Each time their eyes met, she felt giddy and weak with need. He would come to her tonight, and she couldn’t wait.

At last, the intense conversation was over and Gidrun returned to Anari, claiming her for a dance. She laughed when he twirled her into a line of women, joining the men who faced their partners. She clapped her hands. How she loved dancing a reel.

The dancers stepped forward and bowed to one another, returned to their places and met in the center again, hooking elbows together for a right turn, then a left turn, and back to their places before joining hands to spin clockwise. Arms folded over their chests they came forward again, circling one another, and then the fun began. The couple at the head of the line joined hands, skipped to the end of the line and back, before joining elbows for another spin, coming to a stop in front of the next person in line.

Anari was spun by each man in line before returning to Gidrun. The lead couple peeled

off to the right and skipped to the end of the line, forming an arch with their joined hands for the other dancers to skip through. Once everyone had danced through the arch, the whole process began again, until all twenty or so couples had the opportunity to lead the dance.

Breathless and laughing, Gidrun returned Anari to her seat at the table and fetched her a cup of ale. “A drink to quench your thirst, Mistress Fury,” he said, smiling, then offered his arm. “Will you walk with me? I would speak with you.”

Anari glanced in Duncan’s direction but he was deep in conversation with her father. She smiled and took Gidrun’s arm. “A walk would be lovely.”

Darkness had fallen and the moon was on the rise, lighting the way with an ethereal glow. It felt strange, almost mundane, strolling down the quiet path. She’d done this very same thing with Keltar dozens of times over the years.

“What will you do, Anari, now that you are safe once more?”

Anari shrugged. “My safety, and that of my family, is hardly a foregone conclusion, unless Ulric Vonner has the power to convince the Amalgamation otherwise. My father has something they want and I’ve become a personal enemy to a very nasty pirate.” They slowed their steps and Gidrun guided her to a bench. “I believe my best option is to settle Destyn with any who choose to colonize the planet.” She paused, considering the enormity of her decision, then nodded. “There’s nothing left for me on Sa-Ro Five. Keltar is dead and my father will continue his work in the Senate. I can’t bring myself to trust that we’ll be safe there with Father gone, and people will...judge me for what I’ve done.”

Gidrun took her hand, squeezing gently. “You cannot be blamed for the deeds of others.”

Anari shook her head and laughed bitterly. “And yet when they look at me, they won’t see the girl who grew up with them. They’ll see the woman on the auction block, humiliated by brutal men, sold as a sex slave. They’ll wonder what was done to me and if I enjoyed those things. The men will...make assumptions.” She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to rid herself of the images that filled her head. “No, I can’t stay there. I must make a new life on Destyn.”

“Will you allow me to help you?”

Anari sighed. Gidrun Balkhimar was a good man, a handsome man. He would love her. Protect her. Give her the family she longed for. How she wished she could love him.

“I don’t want to give you hope where there is none.”

“He’s going to leave you. You know that.”

“Yes.” Gods’ balls, how she hated the quaver in her voice.

Gidrun rose and helped Anari to her feet, guiding her on to the path. “I am a patient man. One day, the pain will lessen and you will be ready to love again.”

“Oh, how I wish that were true,” she said fervently.

“It is true, Anari, and when that day comes, I will make you mine—with his blessing, and that of your father.”

Her head filled with a roaring white noise. They’d been discussing her future? “I—what? With his blessing and my father’s?”

“Do not be upset—”

Anari gaped at him, fists clenched. “Don’t be—” She spun away from him, hurrying down the path. An unrelenting anger burned deep in her belly and she doubted her ability to control the venom threatening to spill from her lips. Lifting her skirts, she ran from the garden, tears of anger coursing down her cheeks. That they could do such a thing. She wasn’t paying attention when she plunged into the crowd circulating in the inner bailey, and ran straight into the object of her anger.

“Anari, what’s happened?” Duncan asked, cupping her shoulders in her hands.

“You,” she hissed, swiping the tears from her cheeks. She gave him a hard shove and he let her go. “How could you?”

“How could I what?”

“You bastard. You would give me away like I was nothing but an old garment to be tossed aside when it was no longer useful?” When he reached for her, Anari batted his hand away. “Don’t touch me. Don’t ever touch me again.” Whirling away from Duncan and the swarm of people watching them, she raced into the castle. Taking the stairs two at a time, she ran to her rooms and locked herself inside. Her humiliation was complete—Duncan didn’t want her so he was passing her off to another man.

* * * * *

Anari clapped her hands over her ears in an effort to block out the pounding on her chamber door.

“Anari, open this damn door, right now,” Duncan roared. The door shook on its hinges as the pounding continued.

Unable to take any more, she marched to the door and threw it open, just as Duncan was preparing to break it down. With a yelp, Anari jumped out of the way as he flew into the room. He lost his balance, fell, and slid across the highly polished wood, smacking his head on a heavy trunk.

“That’s what you get for being a high-handed ass,” she spat. Squaring her shoulders, she walked out.

“Get back in here, woman.”

“Go to hell!” she shouted. She spared him a moment’s worry when she heard a groan, but that moment passed when she looked over her shoulder and saw him stagger to the door.

“Anari,” he growled, and started toward her.

She ran.

Down the stairs and to the left, toward the inner bailey where she might lose herself in the crowd. He was close behind her now and she grabbed a chair, hurling it into his path, but he kept coming.

“Stay away from me, Duncan, I have nothing to say to you.”

“Well, I have plenty to say to you, wench.”

“So I’m ‘wench’ again, am I?” Anari snatched a cup off a nearby table and hurled it at him. He dodged and kept moving. She rounded a long trestle table and grabbed several pieces of cactus fruit, flinging it at him. He caught each one and gently set it down.

“I apologize,” he politely told the occupants. “She’s irrational. That time of the month.”

The men at the table laughed but the women silently handed her more missiles to throw at him.

“Irrational,” she raged. “I’ll show you irrational.” An old woman handed her a casserole dish filled with something gooey and she flung the entire contents at him. He was close enough by then that the dish hit him square in the chest. Food dripped off him but he continued to pursue her.

A heavysset farmer standing at the end of the table tried to stop her, but she ducked under his outstretched arm and gave him a shove. He crashed into Duncan and they both went down, giving her the precious seconds she needed to escape.

“Ha!” she declared, then ran around another table. Duncan leapt onto the table, apologizing as he went.

“Ha! yourself,” his voice boomed. One of the women grabbed his ankle. Down he went, hitting the ground hard.

“Uh-oh,” she winced. She ducked behind the huge deity statue at the foot of the dais.

“Anari Fury, you will cease at once,” her father bellowed. “A lady does not behave in such a manner.”

She gave him a quick glance and saw Gidrun beside him, shoulders shaking with laughter. Her chin jutted defiantly. “He is no gentleman, therefore, I am under no obligation to behave like a lady.” She sketched a hurried bow to Sanford Rei. “My lord, I do sincerely apologize for...” Duncan was up and coming for her again. “Oh, mother of us all, he really looks angry. I may require your assistance, Gidrun.”

“With pleasure, Mistress Fury,” he said, handing her a wooden trencher filled with creamy potatoes from the ship’s stores. She tossed it at Duncan’s head but he caught it and set it gently on the table.

Next, she snatched Gidrun’s plate. “May I?”

“Of course.”

Her father continued to sputter and Sanford Rei let go a snort of laughter, leaning toward his captain. “She would be a lively addition to the household, did you win her?”

“You have no idea,” he said with a chuckle, and handed Anari a pitcher of ale. “Have at him, Mistress Fury.” She did, tossing the contents at Duncan. The people at the end of the table, her father included, scattered in the nick of time.

Duncan glared at Gidrun. “Thanks, friend.”

Gidrun merely grinned. “Any time, friend.”

Duncan jumped up on the table, adroitly avoiding platters of food. “Pardon me,” he murmured. “Excuse me, ladies.”

Anari watched as Duncan reached the end of the table, waiting to see which way he’d jump. As his muscular thighs bunched, she broke, like an antelope, finally realizing she needed to run or be eaten. She hadn’t made it three steps before he landed lightly in front of her.

“Hello, princess, miss me?” He leaned down and yanked her over his shoulder, then turned and nodded to Gidrun and her father. “If you’ll excuse us? Anari and I have matters of importance to discuss.” He spoke calmly, despite the fact that Anari was screeching like a banshee and pounding her fists on his back.

“Now see here—” her father broke in when Duncan turned to leave. Bless her father, he would save her. But Gidrun interrupted.

“Let it be, Senator. This has been a long time coming, and your daughter needs this. They both do.”

Duncan carried a furious Anari back inside the castle and up the stairs. Once inside her chamber, he slammed the door and locked it before setting her on her feet. As an afterthought, he muscled a heavy bureau in front of the door. Let her try to get away from him now. He turned to face her and stripped off his ruined shirt.

“This is my last clean shirt,” he told her, tossing it on the floor.

“So?”

Duncan sighed. He’d never seen Anari in such a state and he wasn’t sure how to deal with her. “Anari, what’s wrong? What was that scene all about?”

“That was me, pissed off at you.”

He raked his fingers through his hair. Gods’ balls, the woman was frustrating. “Pissed at

me for what?" he shouted. He thought she'd back away from him, she usually did when he raised his voice to her, but she advanced on him, poking his chest with her finger.

"For trying to orchestrate my life, you oaf. You and my father giving Gidrun your blessing to make me his concubine? He told me all about it. That's why you've been ignoring me all night, isn't it? Why you let me stroll in a moonlit garden with your competition?"

Suffering gods, he'd told her? Did Gidrun know nothing of women? "Anari." He took a deep breath and forced himself to remain calm. He didn't want them to part on these terms. "I merely gave him my permission to court you, when you felt you were ready."

"Your permission. He's a grown man, he doesn't need your permission. Nor do I. And to think that you dragged my father into this—this farce."

She stomped across the room and sat down in a slipper chair, unlacing her dainty boots. "The gods know I've put up with your ways, Duncan, but you crossed the line."

Duncan watched as she tossed her boots aside and lifted her skirts, rolling white thigh-high stockings down her legs while her eyes shot daggers at him. Did she have any idea how beautiful she was, even in high dudgeon? She stood and struggled to loosen the buttons on the back of her gown.

"Do you need my help?"

Her head snapped up and she glared. "I think you've done quite enough, thank you."

He sighed and sat on the bed to remove his own boots. The rustle of material caught his attention and he looked up as her dress slid off her shoulders to pool at her feet. She stepped out of it and picked it up, a mournful look on her face.

"I've ruined this lovely dress." She laid it gently over the back of the chair, ignoring him until his boot hit the floor. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm undressing."

"Oh no you are not. You are not touching me, and you certainly are not crawling into that bed with me."

Smiling probably wasn't the best response to her pronouncement, but they both knew she was deluding herself. "Indeed I am, pet. As soon as I get cleaned up, I'm going to touch you in all the places you like to be touched. I'm going to take you in my arms and kiss you breathless, I'm going to suckle your glorious breasts, and when I'm done, I'm going to wrap your splendid legs around my shoulders and eat your pretty little pussy. Then I'm going to fuck you—your tight cunt, your mouth, even your sweet ass. And I'm going to keep on fucking you until the sun comes up, until your voice is hoarse from screaming my name. I know it and you know it, so best you prepare for the inevitable, princess, because I owe you an ass-warming for leaving the ship when I ordered you to stay onboard." He stripped off his filthy breeches, kicked them aside and headed for the bathroom. Before stepping inside, he glanced at her over his shoulder. "I won't be long so if you're smart, you'll be in that bed when I come out."

"Oooh, you arrogant—" She picked up one of her boots and lobbed it at his head.

Duncan laughed. "You just increased your time over my lap, pet. Care to try for more?"

* * * * *

"Be in that bed when I come out," Anari muttered, pacing the floor. "I'll be in that bed, with a dagger for your black heart."

"Brave words for such a dainty woman." Anari jumped when Duncan spoke.

"I'm not dainty, as you well know." He smiled and her stomach fluttered. Damn him, why did he have the power to get a reaction from her when she was so angry all she wanted to do was skin him alive?

“Compared to me, you’re as delicate as spun glass.” He looked pointedly at the bed and back to her. “Did you forget what I told you?”

“I’m not senile, of course I didn’t forget. I simply have no intention of complying.”

A chuckle rumbled deep in his chest and fingers of desire shot straight to her cunt. “Of course you do. We both know it. Why fight it?” He stalked her across the room until her back was against the wall. Nimble fingers plucked jewel-tipped pins from her hair, spreading it around her. “You have the most beautiful hair.”

“Then I’ll be certain to cut it all off tomorrow.”

Duncan laughed and stroked her cheek. “So stubborn. Come on, pet, let’s get your punishment out of the way so I can make love to you.” He didn’t give her time to protest, rather he pulled her to him, wrapped an arm around her waist and lifted her off her feet.

“This is not going to happen, damn you.”

His only reaction was a derisive snort. “Of course it is. Don’t be ridiculous. And I have to admit, I’m looking forward to having your lovely bottom under my hand again. You make the most wonderful noises when I paddle your ass and slide my fingers into your wet pussy.”

“I do not.” She would have objected more if he hadn’t sat on the bed and tipped her over his lap. “Duncan Storm, don’t you dare.”

He responded by tossing her silk slip up. “Very nice. Sanford Rei has good taste in ladies’ undergarments. Too bad these are torn.”

“They are not—” She heard a ripping sound and her bare bottom was exposed. “Torn.”

Duncan’s big hand caressed her bottom. “You have the best ass I’ve ever seen on a woman. Perfectly shaped. Not too big, not too small. Nice and firm.” For just a moment, she thought he might relent, then, Whap. “Just the right size for a man’s hand.” Whap. Whap. Whap. Whap. “That’s for throwing the boot at me.”

“Ow, you son of bitch.” Whap. Whap. Whap. Whap.

“Such language.” Whap. He smoothed his hand over her stinging flesh and Anari bit back a moan. Those wicked fingers wriggled between her cheeks, grazed her anus. “Open for me, love, let me see how wet you are.”

Anari took a shuddering breath and parted her legs. She couldn’t hold back a moan when two thick fingers probed her pussy and slid inside.

“That’s my girl. You like it when I spank you, don’t you, pet?”

His fingers fucked her and Anari panted.

When she didn’t answer, he left her. Whap. Whap. Whap. Whap. “Answer me. You like having your ass warmed, don’t you?” He went deep again.

“Yes,” she wailed. “I like it.”

“Do you want me to fuck you? Hmm? Should I shove my cock in your sweet pussy and fuck you hard and deep, just the way you like it?”

She was panting now, beyond caring about her shameful behavior. “Yes, yes.”

“Mmm, and I will, but first,” he said, withdrawing from her, “I want you on your knees.”

Anari scrambled to do his bidding, positioning herself on her hands and knees.

“Good, now, drop to your elbows, forehead on the mattress, and don’t move.” He spread her cheeks and stroked the tiny pink star of her anus. “I can’t wait to get in here. Don’t move, pet, I think I saw some oil in the bathroom.”

Anari inhaled deeply and let the breath out slowly. She loved it when he fucked her ass, though he hadn’t taken her there in a while. The floor creaked as he crossed the room. She lifted her head and swallowed hard as he leaned down and slid the belt from his breeches. Her pussy

clenched. When he straightened, he caught her looking.

“Still feeling defiant, I see,” he commented, folding the belt over on itself. “I believe I told you to put your head down and not move. What part of that did you not understand?”

“I—I’m sorry.”

The belt whooshed, a stinging lash falling on her already tender buttocks. Whap. “That’s for your behavior tonight.” A streak of heat went straight to her core. Whap. “For making me chase you around the bailey.” Whap. Anari cried out as the leather bit into her. “For making me climb on tables.”

She waited, expecting more, but instead his tongue swiped over her stinging flesh. His hands parted her cheeks. She nearly shouted with joy as his thumbs stroked the swollen folds of her pussy. Thank the gods for opposable thumbs. He teased, caressed her nether lips, finally opening her to thrust his tongue into her heated core. He sucked noisily, greedily, eating at her.

“Duncan, please,” she moaned. “I need you inside me.” He latched on to her clit and teased her unmercifully, sucking and lashing the delicate bundle of nerves until she was grinding her pussy against him in pursuit of an orgasm. But he wasn’t going to let her off that easy. Not Duncan.

“Not quite yet, my pet.”

Anari swallowed an epithet, knowing it would do no good to curse or beg. Duncan was in the mood for raw, dirty sex, and he’d take his sweet time with her.

“Going to fuck you now, princess.” He gave her just the head of his cock, his hips rocking slowly back and forth. “You’re so hot and wet, so ready for my cock. You want it, don’t you?”

“Yes, I want it. All of it, hard, Duncan. So hard and fast”

“And your ass. I can have that, too, can’t I?”

Anari’s voice trembled. “Anything. Anything you want. Gods, just fuck me.”

He laughed softly. “Oh, I’m going to fuck you. I’m going to ride you hard.” He fed her another centimeter of his cock. “Yeah, you love it when I ride you hard. Just like you love it when I take your tight little ass.”

“Oh...oooh,” she keened when a well-oiled finger went up her ass.

“That’s it, that’s what I want to hear.” He added another. “It’s been a while. Have to stretch this ass before I fuck it. Isn’t that right?” He stuffed a third finger up her ass and drove his cock deep.

“Ahh... Oh. My. Gods. Fuck me, fuck me.” She thrust back against him.

“That’s right, pretty baby, fuck yourself on my cock. Feel me fucking your ass.” He pumped harder and faster. “Ah, suffering gods, you’re so tight and hot.”

It felt so good, so right, Duncan deep inside her, driving her harder than he’d ever done, demanding more than he’d ever demanded. “Gonna come, gonna come, gonna come,” Anari chanted harshly as her body tightened.

“Yeah,” Duncan growled. “I’m gonna take your ass now, love. Not sure I can be gentle.”

“Do it,” she panted. He pulled out of her quivering cunt and the head of his cock pressed against her narrow opening. “Ah please, make me come, I need to come.”

Duncan plunged, driving deep. Anari hissed at the bite of pain mixed with the darkly forbidden pleasure she felt whenever he took her like this. “Yes. Hard, Duncan.”

Strong hands gripped her hips as he fucked her, the sound of flesh meeting flesh filled her ears. Her fists clutched the bedding and she began to tremble as tendrils of heat built inside her, turning into a raging fire that would surely consume them both. “Duncan!” she howled as the

intensity of her orgasm broke over her. His harsh shouts followed as he drove into her, once, twice, and hot jets of semen filled her.

In the calm that followed, Duncan picked her up and carried her into the shower. He took his time, washing every centimeter of her, then shampooed her hair. That task complete, they stood inside a drying tube for a few minutes, then he carried her back to bed and climbed in beside her.

Fool that she was, Anari snuggled against him. "I love you," she murmured sleepily. His lips pressed against her temple. "I love you, Anari. Never forget that."

* * * * *

Duncan lay in bed watching Anari sleep. Every now and again, she would reach for him, seeking assurance she was not alone, that he was beside her. He'd never been a man who needed anyone before. He was a super soldier, brought up to follow orders, regardless of what they were. His only allegiance should be to the Amalgamation. Would have been if he'd been a later-generation model. But the things the IMF sanctioned in the name of protecting the Amalgamation had so offended his innate sense of honor and decency he'd simply walked away. After that, he'd had nothing to lose.

He reached over, running his hand down Anari's delicate back, feeling each tiny bump of her spine. She didn't think she was delicate, but she was. One misplaced blow could render her body useless, or worse, kill her. Any hope he'd carried of building a life with her had died in that dormitory on Destyn, when the big Gen 10 fighter had recognized him. The Amalgamation's reach was too great. The only way to assure her safety was to walk away. He closed his eyes and swallowed past the lump in his throat, tears burning behind his eyelids.

Duncan stretched out on his side, propping his head in his hand. Life with Anari would always be interesting. She had a keen mind and an even keener wit. Any man who was lifemate to this woman would be challenged, which was why Gidrun was the perfect mate for her. And the young captain would make her his lifemate. Anari would be no man's concubine. She needed a strong man like Gidrun. He expected she would walk all over a lesser man. Gidrun was smitten, he would indulge her, but his alpha sensibilities would allow her to go only so far. She would toe the line or spend a good deal of time sitting on a soft pillow. He smiled at the thought.

"What are you smiling about?" Anari had rolled onto her back and caught him reminiscing about last night's spanking exercise.

"Just admiring the way your hair curls around your breast." He picked up the wayward strand and lifted it, inhaling the light floral scent. He leaned down, circling one pouting nipple with his tongue until it hardened with interest. Her back arched and she reached up to pull him closer. She was always willing, always wanted him. Did she know what a miracle it was to a man, especially one like him, that his woman was always eager for him? Would she be this eager for Gidrun?

Refusing to go there, Duncan lifted himself over her and settled himself between her legs, his mouth never leaving her breast. "So beautiful," he said softly, moving to give her other breast the attention it deserved. "So responsive." She moved restlessly beneath him, moisture pooling between her thighs. His cock twitched as her essence coated him. "I barely touch you and you're ready for me." He shifted his attention from her nipples, licking the soft underside of her breast, teasing the other with a gentle touch.

"Ah," she sighed, as he kissed his way down to her belly. His tongue dipped into her bellybutton and continued down, nipping the point of her hip.

"Open for me, love," he urged. "I need to taste your sweet pussy." She opened and he ran

his tongue through her slit from anus to clit. “Do you have any idea what it does to me, knowing I make you this wet, this hot?” He licked her again, burrowing between her vaginal lips, sucking them, nipping and tugging gently.

She was moaning now, thrusting her pussy against his mouth, then pulling away when the sensation got too intense. Those little gasps, the soft mewling sounds, had him aching with the need to fill her, to fuck her slowly, deeply, until she begged him to take her hard and fast, his cock pounding into her until she came screaming his name. But not yet.

“Sweet baby,” he murmured as her pussy quivered. His lips closed around her clit, gently nursing the hard little pearl. He gave her a finger, fucking her slowly as her hips moved with the rhythm he set.

“Ah yes,” she whispered. “I need—”

“What do you need, love?”

“More, I need more.” He eased another finger inside and ramped up the pace, flicking his tongue against her clit as he sucked harder still. He felt her inner muscles contract as he moved inside her.

“Not yet, princess. Don’t come yet. Fight it, Anari, make it last.” He pulled back the hood of her clitoris, sucked, and felt himself teetering on the brink when she howled. He went deeper, turning his hand palm up. He stroked her with a come-hither motion and her hips rose off the bed.

“Gaah,” she screamed, coming with a gush.

Duncan rested his cheek against her quivering thigh and gave her the time she needed to come down from the intensity of her orgasm. As her breathing calmed, he hoisted himself up until he was sitting with his back against the headboard, his cock heavy and hard.

“Come to me, Anari, take me inside you.”

“Oh,” she breathed, straddling him. “Yes, that’s what I need.”

Duncan nearly came when she wrapped her fist around him and guided him to her entrance. Hands on her hips, he eased her down until every centimeter of him filled her. Head thrown back, she gripped his shoulders, her nails digging into his skin, and began to grind her pelvis against his.

His mouth found her neck, kissing and nipping as she rose and fell over his cock. Gods, she was glorious in the throes of passion. He caressed her back, urging her closer so he could torment her breasts as she rode him.

“I love you, Anari,” he whispered between nibbles. “Do you believe me?”

“Yes,” she gasped, as he arched his hips, driving his cock deeper.

“Promise me.” Another flick of his hips had her moaning loudly. “Promise that when I’m gone, you will try and find love again.”

“Duncan, I...ooh.” He scraped his teeth across a nipple.

“I want you to find happiness, my love. If I must live a life without you, I need to know you’re happy. Promise me you won’t deny yourself the love of a good man just to keep my memory alive.”

Duncan gritted his teeth, willing himself not to come. She was close again, and he needed to feel her muscles clamp tight around his dick, milking him as she cried out. He needed to hear her promise not to waste her life on a dream that would never be.

“Just promise you’ll try, Anari, for me.” He took her face in his hands and kissed her, long, slow, deep. He begged her with his eyes, and she nodded. “Good girl. I will always love

you, princess. Always.”

He wrapped an arm around her waist and propelled her onto her back, then hooked his arms behind her knees. “Now you’re going to come with me,” he growled. Hands on either side of her head, he drove into her, pumping relentlessly, his cock pounding hard and fast. She was crying and he had to close his eyes against the pain contorting her face. It was better this way. No matter how lonely his life would be without her, knowing she was alive and happy would dull the pain.

He slammed into her one final time as she screamed out his name. His cock gushed as jet after jet of semen filled her. He turned his head, wiped his tears on his shoulder. How would he ever live without her?

Her hands slapped at him, shoved against him and he moved away, covering his eyes with his arm. She rolled away from him, curling into a ball. Her sobs tore at him, and he reached over to caress her shoulder but she shrank from his touch.

“Go, Duncan. If you’re going to leave me, just go now. I can’t bear another few days of hoping you’ll change your mind. Another few days of feeling your body against me, knowing I’ll reach for you in the night and my bed will be empty. Praying that your love for me is stronger than your fear for me.”

“Anari... I don’t know what to do to make this easier.” She stiffened when he touched her, but she allowed it.

“You go, Duncan, while I still have the strength not to beg you to stay.”

Chapter Eleven

Ten months later...

Duncan stood outside the fence surrounding Anari's small, sturdy house. Gidrun had been true to his word, using the funds Duncan had set aside for her to build this house. The yard was large and he'd seen a big garden growing inside the stone fence. The front door was open and he could hear her humming to herself, heard her laugh at something. The breeze sent the smell of roasting meat to him. She was cooking. He opened the gate and started up the flagstone walkway.

Would she still want him? Nearly a year had passed since he'd left her in that big bed in Sanford Rei's castle. It had taken him that long to track down the pirate, Tur and the flesh peddler, Kahlan Hurik, and transport them back to The Web. The men had been Duncan's most challenging bounty to date, and he had the scars to prove it. But he'd delivered the scumbags alive, as Vonner had insisted. That was when he'd decided to undergo eye surgery to have colored lenses implanted that would permanently disguise the iris pigmentation of super soldiers. He'd tossed his bounties into The Abyss and hung around The Web long enough to get the treatment. Then he'd told Vonner he'd see him when he saw him.

He paused outside the open door when he heard a baby squall. Suffering gods, he was too late. She'd married Gidrun and they had a child. He turned to leave when he heard her voice.

"For heaven's sake, Gidrun, pick up your nephew. You're going to have to get used to handling babies sooner or later. Katri's time will be here before you know it."

Duncan's heart stuttered then picked up, beating a rapid tattoo. Nephew? He stepped inside the doorway.

"Anari?"

She dropped the spoon she was holding, swaying unsteadily. "Duncan?" With a sob she ran to him, leaping into his arms. "I thought I'd never see you again." Her arms tightened around his neck.

"I was on a mission. And then I had lenses implanted to cover the color of my eyes."

She leaned back and gasped. "Your eyes, they're green."

He buried his face in her hair, inhaling the sweet, fruity scent he'd missed for so long. "That's what took so long. But I'm here now, princess, if you still want me."

"If I still want...Duncan, I will want you on the day I draw my last breath in this world." He set her on her feet and she took his hand. "Come into the family room. There's someone I want you to meet."

Gidrun stood and handed her a small bundle, leaning down to kiss her cheek. "I will go to find Katri, tell her your man has returned."

Anari nodded. "Tell her to come for supper."

"You are certain?"

Duncan hovered in the space between the kitchen and the family room, nervously eyeing the swaddled bundle Anari held in her arms. "Of course, I'm sure. You're family, who better to celebrate with?" Her gaze lit on Duncan and the warmth of her smile soothed him, as it always had done. "Come in, Duncan, meet your son. This is Levi. Levi, this is your daddy."

Duncan's heart swelled. Daddy. He was a father, and his life would never be the same again. He held out a finger to stroke the child's cheek and would have been content simply to peer down at the delicate little form in Anari's arms, but she would have none of that. "Here, take him, he won't bite." She plopped the baby in his arms. "Just make sure you support his

head. Otherwise he's pretty sturdy." She raised an eyebrow at his skeptical look. "He takes after his father in that respect." She went to the replicator and reached inside for a bottle. "I normally breastfeed, but he'll take a bottle."

Duncan's hand shook as he took the bottle from her. "What do I do?"

Anari's laughter was the most beautiful music he'd heard in the nearly full year since they'd parted. "You put the small end, the one with the nipple, in his mouth and he sucks the milk from the bottle. Then you hold him against your shoulder until he burps."

"Burps, right." He couldn't take his eyes off the tiny child. He was all peaches and cream, with a cap of fuzzy brown hair and pale amber eyes. A little fist flailed in the air as he ate. Duncan touched his son's hand, marveling at the delicate skin, nearly translucent in quality, and then the little fist opened and latched on to his finger, the grip surprisingly strong. He looked at Anari, wide-eyed. "He's strong, and an enthusiastic eater."

"Mmm, gets that from his daddy too." She stood there, just watching, smiling.

"What?" Duncan asked.

Tears welled in her eyes. "It's just you...here...your son in your arms. I never dreamed this day would come." She knelt beside the chair, stroking Levi's fuzzy head. "Do you want us, Duncan? Do you still love me?"

Did he want them? Did he still love her? How could she even wonder such things? He was about to tell her exactly how much he wanted her, when Levi spit out his bottle and grunted, squirming in Duncan's arms.

"What is that?" Duncan asked, grimacing.

Anari laughed. "Your son just filled his pants." She glided to her feet and motioned to one of two small bedrooms. "Come along, you might as well learn how to change him."

Change him? Were there no other options than opening those pants? "Do you not have a droid to do this changing for you?"

"Why would I need a droid to change a diaper? I've got two perfectly good hands. But I do have a very good recycler, so it's not so bad." She reached for the baby and Duncan reluctantly handed him over. Laying the child on the changing table, she removed the diaper.

Duncan gasped. "Suffering gods. Is that normal? Is it supposed to be that..." He leaned forward, certain there must be something seriously wrong with the child.

"Be careful," Anari warned, covering the baby's privates with cloth just a second too late. The child let loose a stream of urine. Baby pee dripped off Duncan's chin and Anari dissolved into laughter. "Sorry, I tried to warn you. That thing's loaded and it usually goes off when it's exposed to air." With one hand on Levi's belly, she reached for a sanicloth and gently wiped Duncan's face. "You'll get the hang of it quickly enough."

Duncan watched, fascinated, as Anari deftly cleaned Levi and put on a fresh diaper. The tiny garment, at first appearing too large for the child, automatically adjusted to fit. She tossed the soiled diaper in the recycler, cleaned her hands, and handed Levi off to him. "I have to see to dinner, so you're in charge. Just sit in the rocker and rock him, he'll fall asleep in a few minutes. He still sleeps most of the time, but he wakes every few hours to be fed and changed."

The rocking chair groaned under his weight as Duncan sat. Instinctively, he shifted the child until his son's head rested against his left shoulder. With a contented sigh, he closed his eyes and began to rock. The little house filled with the sounds and smells of Anari in the kitchen, the creak of the rocker, the sweet baby scent of his firstborn son. Duncan slept, one arm curled protectively around the child's tiny body.

He couldn't say how long he'd slept, but Duncan awoke to the sound of voices in the

kitchen.

“I knew he’d come,” a female voice said. “Are you happy, Anari?”

“More than I deserve to be,” came the reply. “I have everything I ever wanted. A lovely home, a beautiful child and the man I love. What more could I possibly ask for?”

“Some time alone with that man? Would you like us to keep the baby tonight?”

Keep the baby? Not even if there was a gun to his head. Duncan rose, cuddling his son close, and walked into the kitchen, ready to do battle if Anari even suggested letting the child out of their sight. He needn’t have worried. Anari was shaking her head.

“No, things have changed since Levi came into the world. Our lives are different, and Duncan will have to get used to that fact. Babies keep you awake at night, they demand your undivided attention. They pee and poop on you, and throw up in your mouth. We’re not just Duncan and Anari anymore, we’re a family.” She smiled up at him when he entered the room.

“A family. I like the sound of that.” He leaned down and kissed her, the first of many kisses he intended to shower on her. “The throw up in the mouth, not so much, but I’ll get used to it, so long as I have you beside me.” He turned a contented smile on Anari’s sister. “You must be Katri.”

The petite blonde nodded. “And you are Duncan. It’s about time you showed up.”

“Kat,” Gidrun scolded, stepping into the room.

Duncan raised a hand. “No, she’s right. I should never have left. But I’m here now, and I’m not inclined to let either my son or his mother out of my sight for a very long time.”

Katri nodded her approval, then turned a brilliant smile on Gidrun. “Now why don’t you two go catch up while Anari and I get dinner on the table?”

Anari fetched the small cradle from the room she would soon be sharing with Duncan and set it on the floor by the table. Taking their son from Duncan, she gently placed him on the soft covering. She smiled as Duncan immediately took his seat near the cradle, using his foot to set it into a gentle rocking motion.

Dinner was a simple affair, venison stew with potatoes and carrots from her garden. While the men drank wine, both women drank tall glasses of fresh milk. Duncan regaled them with tales of tracking down the pirate Tur, and Kahlan Hurik, the man who’d sold her. He’d even rescued several captives from the devil’s clutches. The bounty he’d received was substantial, as were the rewards for the safe return of the captives.

“I told Vonner I didn’t know when I’d be back, or if I’d be back.” Anari shivered when he caressed her cheek. “It depended on what I found here. I halfway expected you to tell me to get the hell out of your life.”

Gidrun chuckled. “Honestly, I’d hoped she would change her mind about you.” He stopped and squeezed his wife’s hand. “That is, until I met this little bit of fluff. Now I can’t imagine my life any other way.”

“It’s a good thing you found her, my friend, or I would have had to challenge you for Anari... again.”

And so it went between the two men as Anari and Katri cleared the table and put the dishes in the sanitizer. Gidrun filled Duncan in on the progress they’d made on Destyn. Sanford Rei had assigned him to a permanent post on the new planet, helping to keep the peace and make sure they were left to themselves. He could use all the help he could get, he told Duncan, as more and more settlers arrived each week. Homes needed to be built, land cleared, farms established. Anari was working in the bio lab developing plants that would thrive in the dry Destyn climate

and quite a few of the Eli-rei had emigrated to Destyn. He was constantly performing mating ceremonies as the two races joined together.

“Which reminds me,” Duncan said. “We’ll need your services in that respect as well. The sooner the better. That is if Anari will have me.”

Tears welled in her eyes. It seemed all she’d done of late was cry. Postpartum hormones were getting the best of her, but these were happy tears. “Of course, I’ll have you. You promised to love me always, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Yes, I did. And thanks to Vonner’s doctor, my love is no longer a danger to you.”

Anari touched his cheek. “Oh, Duncan, you have so much to learn. Can’t you see, the only danger was to my heart, that I might be forced to live without you?”

He drew her close, nuzzling her ear. “I have much to learn about love and family, pet.” He nibbled her earlobe and Anari shivered.

“Mmm yes, but lucky for you, I’m an excellent teacher.”

Glossary

Aboolan: The natural inhabitants of the Aboo System and its planets who moved on after beings from Earth moved in to mine the planets for their natural resources.

Aboo System: Home of the Aboo mining planets. Crystolium-rich planets located two Smith Gates from Earth.

Aboo Two: Second planet in the Aboo System where Amalgama, the capital city of the Amalgamation of Planets, is located.

Aboolan War of 2112: War that broke out when Earthlings invaded the Aboo System for the planets' natural resources.

Abyss, The: Section of The Web where prisoners are kept until transported to another planet or prison facility.

Amalgama: The capital city and chief headquarters for the Amalgamation of Planets. A large, dome-covered city located on the planet Aboo Two.

Amalgamation of Planets: The primary governing body of the galaxy.

Amaya: Cintealios capital city on the planet of the same name.

Aurelie: The Web's day shift cook.

Azo Eta: Planet very similar to Earth, located in the Secundus System.

Bounty-hunter class: Class of small ships, specially suited to carry and operate with only a small crew. Preferred mode of transportation of the bounty hunters, hence the name.

Bounty Hunters, Inc.: Organization of bounty hunters set up and run by Ulric Vonner. They work for large fees and at their own discretion and are neither good nor bad, though they will break the law when necessary in order to bring in a bounty.

Bulkhead Disrupting Charge: Fired from a normal missile cannon, the charge attaches itself to a target's shields, weakens the shields, opens a hole through the target's defenses and fires a concentrated charge into the target's hull. Inflicts major, concentrated damage to a ship's hull.

Cintealios: The warrior race. These beings are human/humanoid and live to conquer those who are weaker. Largest opposing force to the Amalgamation.

Comm-tabs: Buttonlike communication devices that are pressed to the skin behind the ear.

Constance O'Rourke: Supply handler for The Web.

Control: Small space station situated near the Smith Gate. Controls the energy field that operates the gates and determines where a ship will emerge from the wormhole.

Copper Arrow: Copper balls that expand into shafts of corresponding light; an arrow that explodes on contact.

Devil's Pit: Seedy neighborhood on Quartus Seven where The Web is located. Location chosen specifically for its rough appearance and dangerous atmosphere.

Dexter Smith: "Dex", The Web's computer geek. If it's electronic, he can figure it out.

"Doc": Holographic doctor in The Web's medical wing. He has numerous robotic shells that he can download himself into, to perform various functions.

Executioner: Ulric Vonner's personal bounty-class cruiser.

Gold Arrow: Gold balls that expand into shafts of corresponding light and act as a claw, anchoring target to whatever solid surface is behind it, such as a wall.

Halcion Cartiere: Top commanding officer of the Interplanetary Military Forces.

Hub: The heart of The Web, located at the very center. Also contains the Conference

Room where meetings are held.

Hunter Pack: Small backpack that holds more than it appears to hold.

Icsantheze Dagger: Daggers created on the planet Icsanthia. Sixty-six centimeters total length from tip of the dagger blade to the end of the handle—fifteen-centimeter hilt, fifty-one centimeter blade. The blade is curved like a serpent slithering across a surface, golden in color, with pale green streaks through the blade. Handle is wrapped in emerald leather.

Interplanetary Military Forces (IMF): The military power behind the Amalgamation that works diligently to protect the Amalgamation and everything it stands for.

Intergalactic Security Agency (ISA): The job of the ISA is to explore new worlds and collect critical intelligence on any alien species discovered.

Interplanetary Senate: Body of five hundred representatives from across the galaxy. Most major systems are represented in the Senate—five representatives each—with a few exceptions.

Jacobi Smith (deceased): Discovered wormholes usable for faster travel times. The wormholes became known as Smith Gates in his honor.

Jiborui: Home world of Krys Xan, the Amalgamation of Planets' leader. Exotic planet that is home to humanoid, hermaphrodite beings who are tall and slender, and have very sharp minds. Key in the production of many space travel inventions that have made traveling throughout the galaxy and colonizing new worlds easier.

Jump Drives: Allows the vessel to navigate through nearby wormholes, effectively reducing travel times significantly. (Note: Control must open the gate. Also controls to which neighboring system the gate connects.)

Krys Xan: Hermaphrodite from Jurgia and leader of the Amalgamation of Planets. He presides over the Senate and all its members.

Military Sciences Lab: Based on Earth, its purpose is to create and cultivate the ultimate soldier.

Nursotics: Robotic nurses.

Orbit Wisps: Spectral, universal snitches. They barter information for energy cubes.

PHD: Personal Holographic Device. When activated, it alters the hunter's appearance, aiding in acquiring a bounty.

Plasma Cannons: Can target an enemy ship's deflector shield and will drain the energy from the shield determinant to the size of the charge. If used on a small ship without a shield, it can slowly deteriorate the ship's hull.

Quartus Seven: Planet where The Web is located. Also known as The City Planet. Seventy-five percent of the planet's surface is covered by one continuous metropolitan area. The remaining twenty-five percent of the planet is covered in water. No indigenous life forms or plant life exist here.

Replicators: Basic replication of items such as food and clothing. Complex machinery cannot be replicated, though the replicator can retrieve items from storage compartments.

Sa-Ro Five: Largest agricultural hub in the Secundus System. This planet supplies food rations to many planets, including some from neighboring systems.

Scanners: Allow the ship's crew to scan other ships, space stations or planets for signs of life.

Sealy Garrison: Constance O'Rourke's assistant. If Constance isn't available, Sealy is the man to see.

Secret Sciences Police (SSP): Formed to ensure that no one toys with time travel or biowar sciences, to protect the Amalgamation and its interests.

Secundus System: System to which Quartus Seven belongs. Similar to Earth's system, Secundus possesses nine planets, many of which are uninhabitable due to extreme atmospheric conditions, though the use of atmospheric domes enables limited habitation of some of the planets.

Silver Arrow: Silver balls that expand into shafts of corresponding light and only work as a piercing weapon.

Smith Gate: Device used to access wormholes. It is located near the largest, most advanced planet in the system and significantly cuts down travel times.

Smith Hole: Proper name for the wormholes used by Smith Gates.

Spectra-shades: Special shades used to see Orbit Wisps.

Super Soldiers: Bio-engineered super soldiers, produced on Earth as supreme fighting beings.

The Web: Base of operations for Bounty Hunters, Inc.

Tomozava: A blue fleshy vegetable that is a cross between a tomato and a zava vegetable.

Tranq-ring: Ring that administers a dose of tranquilizer to a bounty/person/being but does not affect the ring's wearer.

T-Sdei Delta: The party planet. Located in the Secundus System, neighboring Quartus Seven.

Ulric Vonner: President and founder of Bounty Hunters, Inc.

Vanquiguard: Wristband that, when activated, creates an energy shield to protect the wearer.

Zava: Blue, tomato-like vegetable that is indigenous to the planet Azo Eta. Also known as tomozava.

Zeri: Night shift cook for The Web.

About the Author

India Masters was born and raised in a small coastal town in Florida, where she learned to love surf fishing, boating, and anything to do with the outdoors and water. She has been happily single since the mid-'90s with no plans to rectify the situation. She has a twenty-two-year-old daughter whom she refers to as the coolest person currently breathing on Earth.

India is a multi-published author and recently finished third in the Great Expectations writing contest in the erotica category. She is a retired social worker who has worked in community mental health, corrections, addictions and child welfare. She has an undergrad degree in Forensic Pathology and recently earned her Master's of Science in Psychology.

India welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.



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