



NIMA
CRAFT

TIGER OF
TALMAIRE

FRONTIERS OF LOVE
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Tiger of Talmare
A Frontiers of Love Themed Story

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TIGER OF TALMARE

By Nina Croft

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PROLOGUE

Year: 2365

Intergalactic Agency Space Liner: The Orion

“What the hell just happened?”

Mel picked herself up off the floor and put her hand to her head. It came away wet. She stared at the blood on her fingers before glancing round the cell. Leila was sitting up; she appeared dazed but otherwise unharmed. Darla was already on her feet.

Mel crossed the room and crouched down in front of Leila. She reached out and brushed away a strand of pale blond hair. “Hey, sweetheart, are you alright?”

“I’m fine, I think.” She blinked a couple of times, rubbing her forehead. “I felt something strange. There was someone....” She frowned. “No, they’re gone. What happened?”

Mel cocked her head, listening. Silence, where before the ship had hummed with life. “I’m

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not sure,” she said, “but a wild guess is we’ve crashed.”

Darla came to stand beside them “I’ve never heard of an Agency Space Liner crashing before.”

Mel shrugged. She stood up and peered out of the window in the cell door. “One of the guards is down, the other gone.” She turned to Darla. “Can you do something with the locks?”

Darla grinned. “I’ve been itching for the chance.”

It took her only minutes. Once the door slid open, Mel glanced around. Nothing moved, and she stepped over to the fallen guard and took his blaster.

“Okay, let’s see if we can find a way off this thing.”

Mel let Darla lead the way as she was the only one who had travelled on one of the huge Space Liners before and knew the layout. Leila followed with Mel close behind. The main power was down, the emergency lights cast only a sullen red glow and the faint tang of burning metal hung in the air. Mel’s heart pounded in her

chest, her whole body tense, ready to run. But they encountered no one. The liner appeared deserted, eerily silent.

Darla finally brought them out onto the cavernous freight deck. Mel came to a sudden standstill, her eyes widening. A battleship stood on the deck; black, sleek and beautiful, her name written on her side in gold: *The Valiant*. It was love at first sight, and Mel coveted her with every bone in her body. They could be free with a ship like that. Go anywhere in the Universe.

She nudged Darla. "Over there," she said. "That's the one we want. If we get her, can you fly her?"

"Either that or I'll die trying."

Mel looked at her curiously. "Where did you learn all this tech stuff?" she asked.

"My dad had a ship. He taught me everything I know. How to keep them running, short cuts when the money was low, how to steal them." She grinned. "My dad wasn't exactly legit."

"What was he, some sort of smuggler?"

"He preferred to call himself a pirate."

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Mel smiled. "Hmm, pirates," she mused, "I like the sound of that myself."

"There's someone on board," Leila murmured.

They all ducked behind cover and watched as a man emerged from the open hatchway; tall, broad at the shoulder, lean at the hips with short hair, streaked black and gold to match his ship. He wore the uniform of an army captain, fitted to his figure like skin.

"Who is he?" Mel asked.

Leila closed her eyes. "His name's Captain Zachary Knight. *The Valiant* is his ship."

"No," Mel said, "actually, she's our ship."

"Can we kill him?" Leila asked.

Mel shook her head. "At least not yet. I've got a plan."

A few minutes later, she stood back and inspected Leila. "Okay," she said, "make it realistic."

Leila grinned. Then the grin faded and pain etched her features. "Like this?" she asked.

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“Hmm, just one thing.” Mel leant across and tore Leila’s shift baring one shoulder and the curve of her breast. “There,” she said, “a perfect damsel in distress. Off you go.”

Leila limped across the freight deck. She seemed small, helpless, even younger than her sixteen years, her fine blond hair loose around her shoulders. The soldier glanced up, caught sight of Leila and came running towards her. Mel smiled.

“Help me,” Leila whimpered. She stumbled and collapsed at his feet. Limpid blue eyes blinked up at him. He crouched down beside her, his expression still wary. “Please, Zachary, help me.”

Leila’s voice was like liquid honey, and Mel watched as his face softened. Then he frowned. “How did you know my name?”

“A good guess?” Mel said, stepping up behind him. She placed the blaster against the back of his neck. “Stand up slowly.”

He stood and turned to face her, towering over her, and Mel forced herself not to step back. She stood firm and stared up into his face, straight

into the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen. They were a clear greeny-gold, slanted like a cat's as they flicked from her to Leila and back again. "What do you want?" he asked.

Mel smiled. "Your ship."

His eyes narrowed on her. "You're joking, right?"

"Believe me, I have absolutely no sense of humor."

He shrugged. "You'll never get her off the ground."

"Darla, what do we need?"

"The access codes would be good. They're an eight digit sequence. I might manage without them but they would make things easier."

Leila closed her eyes. When she opened them she was smiling. "Got them," she said. "Can we kill him now?"

Mel hesitated.

"He'll come after us," Leila said. "And he won't stop until he catches up."

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Mel stared into his eyes. He stared back unwavering. “She’s right,” he murmured.

Mel had killed before. She knew it was the sensible thing to do now. But somehow she couldn’t make herself pull the trigger. She switched the blaster to stun and shot him. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Mel stroked her hand down the sleek side of her ship. “I’m going to rename her *The Revenge*,” she said, grinning. For the first time in her twenty-one years, the future did not look bleak. “Hey, you two, we’re going to be pirates.”

Darla grinned back. “Rob from the rich and...”

“Keep it ourselves.”

“Yeah!”

“Do we get to kill people?” Leila asked.

“Yes,” Mel replied, “but only if we don’t like them.”

CHAPTER ONE

10 years later

Mel dodged a blaster beam and dived for cover.

She peered out into the main room. The fighting was over. The crew of the transport ship were either down or huddled in the corner trying to avoid being hit by the random shots that still bounced off the walls. Another blast nearly took her head off, and she ducked.

“Goddamnit,” she yelled, “they’ve surrendered! Stop shooting.”

She was going to be seriously pissed if she got shot by one of her own trigger happy crew. It took a few more minutes but finally the room fell silent. “Thank you,” she muttered.

Mel stood up, brushed herself off, then glanced down at the large solid object she had taken refuge behind. “Shit!”

She swung round to stare at her crew. “Okay, which one of you morons shot the goddamn

cryotube?” No one answered. “Did I not make myself very, very clear? Did I not say - do not shoot the cryotube?”

“Sorry Mel,” someone muttered.

Leila swaggered across the room, holstering her pistol. She came to a halt in front of Mel and looked down at the coffin shaped container. Wisps of liquid nitrogen were already seeping from the broken seals, and the glass front was covered by a film of ice crystals. “Is it a problem?” she asked.

Mel rolled her eyes. “Read my mind. Of course it’s a goddamn problem. The client’s orders stipulated one intact cryotube plus contents, untouched and definitely not shot to bits.”

Leila shrugged. “I still don’t see that there’s a real problem.” She nodded at the cryotube. “You know Sanderson wants him dead. We just did that part for him.”

“Yeah, right,” Mel replied, making no attempt to hide her sarcasm, “perhaps you should ask him for a bonus. The problem is, I think he wants to do the killing himself.”

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“Well, I can understand that. All the same, he still gets what he wants.”

“But not what he paid for. I have a reputation to think about you know.”

“Actually, Mel, your reputation sucks.”

Leila had a point. Mel always prided herself on completing her missions, but lately things seemed to be going a little haywire. Not her fault, merely a run of bad luck. Which she should have broken with this job.

But maybe all wasn't lost. Maybe this wasn't him. Maybe there was another, unbroken cryotube hiding somewhere. The one she really wanted.

“Are we sure it's him?” Leila asked, echoing her own thoughts.

Mel moved closer and used the sleeve of her jacket to wipe the frosting from the glass. For a moment, she could see nothing but the swirl of white mist. Then it cleared slightly, and a face appeared. She stared at it, then stepped back and gestured to Leila to look. She peered in. “Oh yeah, it's him.” She grinned. “Who would have

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thought it? Captain Zachary Knight, aka ‘The Tiger of Talmare’. How the mighty have fallen.”

“Well, he’s going to be the dead Tiger of Talmare if we don’t revive him fast. Come on, let’s get him back to *The Revenge* and wake him up.”

Leila didn’t move. “You know we’re stuck with him once he’s awake. The Cryo unit of *The Revenge* is broken. Again. And Darla doesn’t have the stuff to fix it.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Mel muttered.

“Anyway, my point is, wouldn’t it be much easier to let him freeze? We could always pretend we didn’t notice.”

Mel glanced at the blaster burns that crisscrossed the cryotube. “Somehow I don’t think that’s an option.”

She forced herself to think rationally about Leila’s suggestion. Should they do nothing, let him die in the tube? She nibbled on her lower lip. She needed to get this right; she couldn’t afford not to get paid for this job. But what would Sanderson prefer? A dead and definitely

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unconscious Tiger of Talmare, or an alive and wide awake one? The mist shifted again, revealing his face, and she made up her mind. “No, we’ll take him back to *The Revenge*, and wake him up.”

Leila didn’t budge. “Remember, he’s dangerous, and he doesn’t like you.”

“I’m sure he would if he knew me better.”

“I’m not.”

“Well, we’ll just have to put him in restraints then. Look,” she snapped when Leila still looked dubious, “who’s captain here?”

Leila shrugged. “You’re the captain, Mel. But I still think you’ll live to regret this. So, if we can’t kill The Tiger, can we shoot them?” She nodded in the direction of the transporter crew who were still huddled under the watchful eyes of Angie and Grace.

“No, we can’t shoot them.” Mel shook her head; it was a source of constant amazement to her how someone as sweet and innocent appearing as Leila could have such homicidal tendencies.

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Leila pouted. "You never let us have any fun."

"Okay, you can stun them then, but only for a few hours. We need a head start. Not that I think they'll come after us. He's," she nodded in the direction of the cryotube, "such an embarrassment to the administration, they'll probably welcome his disappearance."



The Revenge was equipped with a cell, even if it had never held a prisoner. At the moment, it was used as extra storage space for anything they couldn't offload. Plunder, Mel called it, rubbish according to everyone else. It took a few moments to kick stuff aside and make enough space for them to put the cryotube down and still be able to close the door.

"Can you send Darla down?" she asked Leila, as she left. "The intercom's not working."

"What is on this pile of junk?" Leila muttered.

Mel cleared some more things from the small cot, sat down and waited. She didn't dare touch

the tube herself; tech stuff wasn't her strong point. She heard the rumble as *The Revenge's* engines fired up and held her breath, but they made the jump smoothly, and a few minutes later, Darla appeared. She stood in the doorway wiping her hands on a piece of rag. "I heard it didn't go exactly as planned."

"When does it ever?" Mel grumbled. She nodded at the tube. "Can you wake him?"

"Probably, but you know, Leila might be right. Maybe you should just let him die."

"Leila's a bloodthirsty bitch."

"Yes, but that doesn't necessarily make her wrong. She thinks you won't because of who he is."

"Who he is?"

"She thinks you've got a soft spot for him. You're not thinking straight."

"Soft spot? You've got to be joking! The man's been a pain in my butt for the last ten years. So I humiliated him. I stole his ship. It wasn't as though it was personal." She thought

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for a moment. "And what do you mean – 'Leila thinks?' She hasn't been reading me, has she?"

"No, you know she promised not to, but she can't help but get a sense of what you're thinking."

"Well, this time her 'sense' is all screwed up. I feel absolutely nothing for Tiger over there, except glad that he's finally off my back. I'd kill him just like that." She snapped her fingers. "But it just so happens, that I've carefully considered what's best for the client. And what's best is we hand him over alive."

"Of course you have."

Mel stared at her with narrowed eyes. Why did she get the impression that she hadn't convinced Darla? "Just wake him up," she growled.

"Let's have a quick look first. Maybe we can fix it." Darla stood over the tube. She twiddled a few knobs. "And then again, maybe we can't."

Mel scowled. "If they'd been aiming for it they couldn't have done a better job."

"Don't worry, I'll wake him up," Darla said.

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She pressed a few buttons, banged the side with her fist. "There, done."

"How long will it take?"

"I'm not sure, could be a few minutes, could be hours. It affects people differently. But he's a big one, so probably more rather than less. Here-" She dug into the pocket of her overalls. "You might want to get these on him before he wakes."

She handed a couple of bracelets to Mel.

"Restraints?" Mel asked.

Darla nodded. "Better to be safe. You've heard the stories coming out of Talmare. He massacred hundreds, mostly women and children. Some say he ate their flesh."

"Of course he did. Was that before or after he raped them all, then made necklaces out of their eyeballs? You know, you really shouldn't believe everything you see on the waves."

"Okay, maybe not. But he is dangerous. There's no point in taking risks."

Mel sighed. "You're right. How do these things work?"

“Here’s the activator.” She handed a small box to Mel. “Slip the cuffs on his wrists. When you want him restrained, press the green button. It affects the nervous system, instant paralysis from the neck down. Press the red button and he’s released. Okay?”

Mel nodded. She stuffed the bracelets into her pocket and put the activator on the small table by the cot.

“Well, then,” Darla said, “I’d better get back to nursing my engine, otherwise we’ll never make the rendezvous point. You know,” she added, “perhaps you might consider buying me a few spare parts if you actually get paid for this job.”

“Sure,” Mel said absently. “Spares – they’re top of my shopping list.” She was looking at the cryotube. The mist of liquid nitrogen was draining away, the ice crystals melting, revealing the body inside.

Darla shook her head and left the room.

Mel waited until the door was shut behind her then moved to stand over the tube. She depressed the door button and the top slid open. Cold air

flooded out of the container, and she shivered. It took a few minutes to clear.

“Oh my,” she murmured.

He was naked. And he was huge. Everywhere.

Even unconscious he radiated power, and a ripple of apprehension ran through her. She picked up his wrist. His flesh was icy cold as she slipped one of the bracelets over his hand, snapping it in place. She repeated with the other arm and breathed a sigh of relief once the restraints were in place.

Her eyes flicked up to his face, but he was still deep under, and she allowed herself to examine him. This man had been part of her life for the last ten years, never present, but still shaping her every action with his constant pursuit. Now he would never pursue her again.

She knew Sanderson meant to kill him. And he deserved to die if half the stories coming out of Talmare were true. Even so, she felt a strange sense of regret, as though something was coming to an end.

He was a hybrid, part of the Soldier Guild's breeding program. A program she knew had

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been discontinued when the results turned out to be too dangerous and too hard to control. It was ironic that Zachary Knight had been their one success story. Their poster boy, proof that the breeding program did work. She reckoned the Guild must have been really pissed when he lost it and ended up massacring half of Talmare.

She'd never seen a hybrid close up. In fact he was the only one she had ever seen at all, and ten years ago, fully clothed, his mixed heritage had not been so apparent. Now she could clearly see the signs.

The skin of his arms and legs was marked with a faint black tiger stripe. The stripes could also be seen curling around from his back, fading into the creamy gold of his flat belly.

She picked up his hand again. It was huge but otherwise appeared normal, until she pressed the pad of one finger and a vicious claw emerged. Retractable claws, how cool was that? For a few moments she played, fascinated as the claws emerged and disappeared. She touched one; it drew a bead of blood from her fingertip. She put it to her mouth and sucked it clean.

What else. His thick hair was down to his

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shoulders, a tangled medley of black interwoven with gold, but there were no stripes on his face. It was a striking face with a hard masculine beauty that even she couldn't deny. Above his high cheekbones his eyes were closed, but she remembered them perfectly; greeny-gold, cat's eyes. His lips were full, and with a sense of daring she touched her finger to his upper lip. It was cold, and she lightly pulled open his mouth revealing long, elongated incisors. His lips were icy, but his breath was warm. She snatched her finger away as she realized he was breathing again.

She allowed her eyes to move lower. His body was heavily muscled but sleek, like a jungle animal. His belly was hard and flat, lightly furred, the silky blond hair running down to his groin. She whistled.

She'd seen a few men in her time in the space brothel, and by any account Zachary Knight was pretty impressive. If you were the type of person to be impressed by that sort of thing. Which obviously, she wasn't.

She forced herself to look away, her eyes moving up. She thought she saw a flicker of

movement, and she reached out and put a hand on his chest. His skin was cool but no longer icy, and beneath her palm, she could feel the slight thud of his heart. Not long now.

She made to straighten up, but suddenly he moved. One of those huge hands snaked behind the back of her neck and pulled her down towards him. For a moment, he held her, and Mel couldn't seem to move. Their eyes met, his slightly unfocused, the pupils huge and dilated, but the clear green-gold of her memory. His lips curled slightly. He pulled her forward. Then he kissed her.

It was so unexpected that, for a moment, she was transfixed in place.

His lips were cool and firm against hers. Her hands came up; she pushed them flat against his chest to shove him away, but instead, they slid over his satin skin. She opened her mouth to protest, but before she could get a word out, his warm tongue pushed inside. It filled her mouth. She waited for the revulsion, but it never came, and surprise held her for minutes longer as he kissed her almost languidly, filling her senses with the slow, erotic thrust of his tongue. The hand at

her neck slid down, pulling her even closer, until she pressed against him. The coolness of his skin brought her to her senses.

This was so not happening.

She pulled free and took a step back. Her heart was beating hard and fast, and she took long, slow breaths, keeping both eyes on the huge naked man that had just kissed her.

He shook his head then pushed himself up, swinging his legs over the side of the cryotube. The action seemed to exhaust him, and he sat, eyes closed, breathing deeply. After a few minutes he opened his eyes and looked at her, a puzzled frown on his face as he searched her features.

She saw the exact moment when the recognition flared in his eyes. Followed quickly by disbelief.

“Shit,” he growled. “Melissa Stark. What the hell are you doing here?” He frowned, his eyes flicking from her face to their surroundings. “For that matter, where exactly is here?”

Mel licked her lips and forced herself to hold her ground. Show no fear. “You’re on *The Revenge*,” she said.

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"*The Revenge?*" His eyes narrowed. "Don't you mean *The Valiant?*"

"No," she snapped, "I mean *The Revenge.*"

He ran a hand through his thick hair. Mel could see a slight tremble in his fingers; he wasn't fully recovered from the cryo yet. Still, she watched him warily, her eyes straying to where the activator panel for his restraints lay on the table. She inched towards it.

"So, I'm a prisoner on my own ship," he said.

"It's my ship."

"You stole it from me."

Mel rolled her eyes. "Oh, get a life," she muttered. "That was ten years ago. Get over it, move on." Then she smiled. "Oh, I forgot, that's not really an option for you anymore, is it Tiger?"

He was watching her, and his eyes held a wary expression. "So are you going to tell me what I'm doing here?"

Mel took a final step to the table, reached out and picked up the activator. She could feel her muscles relax once it was safely in her hands.

She glanced back up and shrugged. "I don't see why not. Your friend Sanderson employed me to hijack the transporter taking you back to Earth. For some reason he thinks you might have wrangled your way out of the death penalty and avoided getting what you deserve."

"So, you're taking me to Sanderson?"

Mel nodded.

He sat, head thrown back, obviously processing what she had told him. "I bet he told you not to wake me up."

She shrugged again. "He might have done."

"So why am I awake?"

"Your cryotube was damaged in the attack. It was wake you up or let you freeze to death."

"So why not let me freeze to death?"

"Believe me," she said, "that would have been my choice. But Sanderson paid for you alive. He obviously wants the pleasure of killing you himself." She paused. "I can see his point."

He glanced at her then, his eyes wandering over her features. "Is that why you kissed me?"

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A wave of irritation ran through her. "Actually," she snapped, "*you* kissed me."

"Yeah, well, I woke up to find some strange woman pawing my body, it was an automatic response. And anyway, you kissed me back."

Mel scowled. "Did not!"

"Did."

"Fuck off."

"Very intelligent reply."

They were silent for a moment.

"You're not really going to hand me over to Sanderson are you?"

She frowned. "Of course I am. He's paid me. I'm honour bound to hand you over."

"Honour? You?" Mel felt her muscles go rigid at the ridicule in his voice. "You're a thief," he continued. "What the hell has honour got to do with this?"

"I'm not a thief. I'm a pirate. We have a code."

"You're a Pirate? Jesus, save me," he muttered. She could see his eyes looking her over, taking in

her 'pirate' outfit - the tight pants, the long boots and the red scarf tied at her waist. He shook his head. "So how about I pay you more."

"You can't, it's against the code. Besides, all your possessions were confiscated when you were arrested. You don't have anything to pay me with."

"They'll give everything back once I've cleared my name."

"Cleared your name," she scoffed. "You're not actually going to try and get me to believe you're innocent. Very funny. Ha, ha ha."

She knew she'd scored a point when his expression tightened.

"Why do you think Sanderson wants to stop me getting to trial? Why do you think he made sure I was in Cryo for the trip? So I can't talk to anybody. That's why."

"Oh, really, this is so pathetic. So now you're innocent."

"Yeah, I'm innocent. And you're a thief and a convicted murderer."

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Mel frowned. "Have you been investigating me?"

"Did you think I wouldn't check up on the woman that stole my ship? I saw your records. You murdered an innocent woman."

"Yeah, well, at least I didn't eat her flesh afterwards."

Mel could almost hear the grinding of his teeth. Another point to her.

"I did not eat anybody's flesh."

She shrugged. "That's not what the waves say. The Tiger of Talmare, they're calling you. From hero to monster. Not that I ever considered you a hero, of course."

"Ever heard of 'innocent until proven guilty'?" he snarled.

"Ever heard of 'no smoke without fire'?" she countered.

He ignored the comment. "You, on the other hand, were proved very guilty."

Mel shrugged as if bored. "So," she said, "perhaps I'm a psychopathic killer, in which case it's probably best if you don't wind me up."

“Am I winding you up?”

“You’re mildly irritating me. But that can easily be solved.”

She turned from him and took a step to the door.

“Hey, where the hell are you going?” She took another step. “Get the hell back here. We need to talk about this.”

“What is there to talk about?” She glanced back over her shoulder, one eyebrow raised in query. “I’m going to set off for the rendezvous with Sanderson now. We don’t want to be late.”

He jumped to his feet. She paused and watched as, almost in slow motion, his knees buckled. He managed one shaky step towards her, reached out to grasp her shoulder. For a moment, they swayed together, then his legs gave out completely, and he tumbled to the floor dragging her with him. Mel ended up on the bottom, and the breath left her in a whoosh as his full and considerable weight landed on top of her. She couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe. She finally managed to draw some air into her lungs. “Get off me, you lump.”

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She wriggled her hand between them and pushed. He didn't move, just raised his head and stared down at her, his expression blank.

"Make me," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

Zachary Knight stared down into the wide open eyes of the woman beneath him. They were amazing eyes, dark yellow, rimmed with black, fierce like a hawk's and holding just about as much warmth.

He could feel her hand between them pushing at him, and he almost smiled. Almost. Not quite. There really was nothing to smile about here. Hadn't been much to smile about in a long time.

"Get. Off. Me," she snarled.

She wriggled some more, and Zach pressed down against her, holding her still. He wasn't ready to get up just yet, and besides, he liked it here. He liked having her beneath him, unable to free herself, unable to move. At his mercy.

She blinked up at him. Her thick black lashes fluttered closed, when they opened the yellow eyes were soft, filled with pain. "Please," she gasped, "I can't breathe."

Zach started to rise automatically, then he caught sight of the glint of satisfaction in her eyes, and he dropped back down letting his full weight fall on her. He heard the whoosh as the air left her lungs a second time. He wasn't falling for the damsel in distress routine again. That was how they'd stolen his ship in the first place. Been there, done that already. Besides, he really didn't know if he had the strength to stand up. He felt as weak as a cub.

She did look as though she could do with a little air, though. He raised himself up on his elbows. It brought the lower half of his body snugly against her, and he flexed his hips a couple of times against her firm belly.

She really wasn't his type, he liked feminine women, sweet, soft ones, the sort a man could lose himself in. All the same it felt pretty damn good. He could feel his body responding to her closeness.

"Better?" he murmured, and this time he had to smile. She was almost spitting, she was so mad. His smile seemed to send her into a frenzy. She squirmed beneath him, hammering her fist against his chest. After a few minutes of futile

wriggling she went still beneath him, stared up with hard, cold eyes.

"If you don't get up, you'll be sorry."

"Really?"

"Yes," she hissed.

"Make me," he repeated his earlier words.

Suddenly her eyes narrowed on him. "You think I can't?"

He grinned. "I'm sure you can't."

"Ha," she said. "You know, I really didn't want to do this."

He felt a flicker of unease. "Do what?"

"No, actually," she said, "that's a lie. I do want to do this, after all. In fact I'm really, really looking forward to it."

"Do what?" he repeated.

She raised her free hand, the one she wasn't beating him with, and waved it in front of his face. She held a small box, very simple, just two buttons. "This," she said pressing the green one.

The effect was instantaneous, as if ice water had been poured down his spine. For a moment

he didn't realize what had happened, then he tried to move.

"What the hell have you done?" At least he could still speak.

"Paralysis from the neck down." She stared up at him and frowned. "I wonder if they make one that includes the head."

"Fucking let me go, you malicious bitch."

"Maybe later, if you're a good little kitty." She patted his cheek, and Zach snarled.

He could do absolutely nothing as she wriggled out from under him. Almost free she rested her booted foot against his chest and pushed hard. He rolled onto the floor on his back and lay staring up at the ceiling. She scrambled to her feet, brushing the dust from her clothes and then came to stand over him.

"Oh," she said, staring at his body. Zach rolled his eyes down. He had the most enormous erection, and she was studying it as though it were some strange anomaly. For a moment, he was sure she was going to reach down and touch it and he felt himself twitch, despite the paralysis.

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“Do you think it’s stuck like that until I let you go?” she asked. “My, such interesting possibilities.”

Zach didn’t answer, just glared his fury at her.

“No, look, it’s wilting already.” She sighed. “What a pity.”

He ground his teeth.

“Right then, I’ll be off. Got a rendezvous to make, you know.”

She stood in the doorway for a moment, waggled her fingers, and then she was gone.

“Come back here, you bitch. Let me go!”



Zach lay on the floor, staring at the closed door. There wasn’t a lot else he could do. He tried to tell himself that she wouldn’t leave him like this. After all, she’d kissed him. Well, she’d kissed him back, at any rate. A woman didn’t kiss a man and then do something like this. No, she was simply making a point, flexing her muscles. She would be back in a few minutes. He closed his eyes and waited.

Nothing happened.

He opened his eyes and tried to move, but apart from raising his head a few inches from the floor he was totally paralyzed. "Bitch," he muttered.

He supposed he couldn't blame her entirely for the mess his life was in. But he could try. His whole existence had taken a downward turn after she stole his ship. From hero to village idiot, in one quick move. Who the hell lost a spaceship? He'd clawed his way back up, eventually people had forgotten and then Talmare had happened. From hero to monster!

At the thought of Talmare, the familiar rage flooded his mind. Damn Pieter Sanderson. Pieter had pretended to be his friend. Would probably still be pretending if Zach hadn't found out what he was up to. He could still scarcely believe it. He also couldn't believe he had been stupid enough to go to Pieter with what he had found out. Try to reason with him, but back then he hadn't seen the whole of his plans.

The man was a megalomaniac who would turn the whole civilized world into chaos in his ego trip for power. But he'd set Zach up well and

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true. Zach knew what they were calling him, ‘The Tiger of Talmare’. Knew what he was accused of. He remembered Mel’s words, ‘eating flesh’, she’d said. Christ did people really believe that? Did she believe it?

It was just as well that there had been a delegation from the Intergalactic Agency on Talmare at the time, or Zach was sure he would have ended up dead. He’d surrendered himself, and even Pieter wasn’t stupid enough to challenge the Agency. Yet. Though Zach knew the time was fast approaching.

Still, it looked as though Pieter was going to get his chance to finish him off after all.

Would the little pirate really hand him over to be killed? Probably. Was she really going to leave him here, like this, for the whole journey? It seemed likely.

Though ‘little’ wasn’t a good word to describe her, except compared to him. She was tall for a woman, and very striking, unforgettable really. He’d recognised her immediately; her blue-black hair might be short now but those eyes were unmistakable.

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He remembered the feel of her under him. No, she wasn't his type, but it had felt pretty damn good all the same. She might not be soft, but she was definitely all woman. And her lips had been soft when she kissed him. Well, kissed him back. That had felt pretty damn good as well.

He glanced down his body and realized that while his nerves might be paralyzed it was doing nothing to stop the blood flow.

A shadow passed the cell door and paused. He could see a face peering in. He swore softly. He'd never been a particularly modest man, but the idea of lying here, stark naked, with a stiffy, completely unable to move, was not his idea of fun. He forced his thoughts on to something unpleasant, anything to get his body under control. Pieter Sanderson, the governor of Talmare, that should do it. Pieter and his maniac plot to take over the Universe.

The face disappeared, but over the next couple of hours it was replaced by a series of faces, all female, all peering in at him like he was some sort of zoo specimen. One even wagged her fingers at him through the glass and grinned. He was sure he recognised the same faces over and

over again, at least one of them was green and that was hard to miss.

The first couple of times, he shouted. They took no notice, and after that he did his best to ignore them.

Finally, what seemed like a long time later, he heard the door click open. He rolled his eyes in that direction; ready to tell her exactly what he thought of her and her ship and her crew and anything else he could think of. But it wasn't her. It was another woman, a redhead, with bright green eyes and freckles across her nose. Zach remembered her; she had been with Melissa Stark when she stole his ship. She entered the room warily, as if expecting him to leap on her. Chance would be a fine fucking thing. She was carrying a bundle that she placed on the bed, and then she turned to go.

"Hey, wait."

She paused, and turned back slowly. She looked down at him, her eyes skimming his body before returning to his face. A slight smile lifted the corners of her lips. "Yes?"

"Is she going to keep me like this forever?"

“Mel?”

“Yes, Mel. Is she going to leave me here?”

She raised a small box she held in her palm.
“Actually, she left it up to me.”

“Really?”

Zach had never had any problem getting women. He was aware that some of them were just attracted to the exotic and even more were attracted to the danger they associated with him. But whatever the reason, he knew they found him attractive. He tried his best smile, the slightly lopsided one that normally had them falling for him in droves. She didn't seem impressed. He sighed. “So, are you going to let me go?”

“I might.”

He closed his eyes. The fact was, he was stuck on a ship, his ship, with the biggest bunch of bitches in the known universe. Why him? What had he done to deserve this? He supposed he could try begging. He opened his eyes again. “Please.” The word nearly stuck in his throat, but he managed to choke it out.

She smiled, but turned and left him. The

door clicked shut behind her, and Zach cursed loudly.

But a moment later, he felt the icy grip that held him in place released. His head fell back to the floor, and for a minute, he lay there. He sat up slowly. Everything seemed to be working okay, but he still felt weak. That was the cryo. He'd never been in cryo before, but he'd heard other people say it could knock you out. And he was starving.

He tugged at the bracelets on his wrist, but they were locked in place. Which meant they could paralyze him again anytime they liked. The thought was not a happy one.

He needed to get out of here.

He got to his feet. He was still unsteady, but he could feel his strength returning. He tottered first to the door, it was locked, as expected. He tried pressing his palm to the panel, but nothing happened. He went next to the cot. He sank down and investigated the bundle. It contained a pair of sweat pants and a t shirt, both black. He pulled on the pants and felt immediately better. He'd never understood the psychological impact of nakedness on a prisoner before. Now he did.

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The t-shirt was an impossibility, no way was it going to stretch over his shoulders. He shrugged. He could live with that.

Once decently covered he turned his attention to his surroundings. The room wasn't small, but it was filled with stuff. He sifted through some of the nearest. "Crap," he muttered, tossing an obsolete wave reader onto the floor. After ten minutes he gave up, pushed the rest of the rubbish from the cot, and stretched out.

He needed to take stock. He wasn't dead yet

But he wouldn't last for long once Pieter got hold of him. He wondered why he had even kept him alive this long. Why not have him killed straight away? The only reason he could come up with was Pieter wanted to make sure that he hadn't shared his discovery with anyone else. He wished he had.

So a plan. First get the little pirate to let him go, inform the authorities what Pieter was up to, get his life back. No, he decided, what he needed to do was get the little pirate to take him where he needed to go, or even better, get her to give him his ship back.

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He was sure he could persuade her, after all, she was a woman, and she'd kissed him. A little sweet talk, a little seduction, she'd be eating out of his hands.

He felt much better once he had a plan. The feeling didn't last for long. Just long enough for him to realize what a load of crap his 'plan' was, and that he was very likely a dead man.

Still it was the only plan he had. The problem was, in order for it to be implemented, he needed her here, and so far, hers hadn't been one of the faces peering in through the window. But she'd come. She wouldn't be able to resist coming.

In the meantime, it wouldn't hurt to get the crew on his side. The next time a face appeared at the window, he gave them his best boyish smile.

CHAPTER THREE

Bloody Zachary Knight. He'd only been on her ship for two days and he was already causing havoc.

Mel glared at her crew in disgust. "Where the hell are your hardcore mercenary sensibilities?" she asked. "You're supposed to be tough guys, well, tough girls. You're not supposed to be pushovers for the first man that comes along."

"But Mel," Angie said, "he only wants to talk to you."

"He wants to help you," Grace added.

"Help me? Help me how, for God's sake?"

"He says he has really important information. He says the Agency will get you a pardon if you give it to them."

"I don't want a pardon, I like being a pirate."

"And he can get us a new space ship."

"I like this one."

“He says he knows where Sanderson’s money is hidden.”

Mel raised her hands and clapped. “Enough, enough already. We’re taking him to the rendezvous, were collecting our money and that’s it.”

“But Mel, he fixed the intercom in the cell,” Darla said. “If we let him out, he says he can fix a lot of other things as well.”

“I don’t believe this,” Mel muttered. He was subverting her crew. Her crew of confirmed man-haters. “Where has – ‘All men are bastards,’ gone?” She turned to Darla. “And have you forgotten he’s dangerous and he eats babies?”

“Don’t be silly, Mel. That’s just propaganda. Besides, he told me I had beautiful eyes.”

“And he told us we have beautiful hair,” Angie added.

Mel looked at her in amazement. “It’s green,” she said.

“So?”

Mel couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She

took a mouthful of food and scowled. "What is this shit?" she asked.

"Raspberry Jello.

"I hate Jello," she muttered.

"I bet it's Zachary's favourite, though," Leila murmured from beside her. Leila was the only one who hadn't been taken in by the charming act.

Mel slammed her plate down on the table. Everyone stopped eating and looked at her warily.

"Do any of you know what happens if we don't get paid for this job?"

Darla shifted in her seat. "I do."

"And would you like to explain it for the benefit of the rest of them that haven't quite managed to grasp it?"

Darla sighed. "If we don't get some spare parts soon, *The Revenge* will literally fall apart. She's held together with bits of string."

"Okay," Mel said, "so does that make things clear?"

“But...”

“No ‘buts’. We are going to the rendezvous, we’re handing him over and we’re getting paid. I don’t have an option, which means neither do you. So from now on, you lot just stay out of his way.”

“But Mel, he needs to eat.”

“Does he?” she answered darkly. “If that’s the case, Leila can take his meals.”

“She’d probably poison him.”

Mel grinned. “Yup.” She put down her fork and stood up. “Have you got the activator for his restraints?” she asked Darla.

Darla pulled the box out of her pocket and handed it to Mel. “Here,” she said, “but I really don’t think you’ll need it. He’s docile as a lamb.”

Mel rolled her eyes. This was truly unbelievable. She snatched the activator from Darla’s hand and stalked out of the room.

She slowed down as soon as she was alone. She’d been half way to his cell so many times over the last couple of days, it was embarrassing. Or would be, if anyone knew.

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There was no need for her to see him. That's what had stopped her completing the journey so far. They were another two days out from the rendezvous point; she should shut him out of her mind, get there, hand him over and forget he ever existed.

She'd told the truth, they did need the money, desperately. So she had to do this. She was responsible for all their lives; they had made her responsible when they made her captain.

On top of that, she was being haunted by that goddamn kiss. She could still feel him, taste him on her lips. And she needed to prove to herself that it didn't matter. That's why she was going to see him. To prove he meant absolutely nothing to her. Nothing at all.

She paused outside the cell door, slipped the activator into her pants pocket and pressed her palm to the lock. The door slid open.

He was half sitting, half lying on the cot, a reader in his hands. He was wearing black pants but was naked from the waist up. She scowled. Hadn't she told Darla to get him some clothes? Instead he was sitting round half-naked, flaunting his bare chest in front of her crew. He looked

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up, wariness entering his cat's eyes as he saw her loitering in the doorway.

She stepped into the cell, and the door slid shut behind her.

He put the reader down. "We need to talk," he said.

"We do? Well, talk then."

He thought for a moment. "Sanderson is evil."

Mel shrugged and put on her best cold eyed killer expression. "So am I."

"Of course you are, sweetheart."

His words really pissed her off. It didn't help that they were accompanied by a smile, a sort of lopsided, boyish smile. The smile she knew was turning the rest of her crew to mush. But not her. She was tougher than that.

She slipped her hand into her pocket and pressed the green button.

He went instantly still, his eyes glaring murder. "You bitch."

She grinned. "See, evil." She pressed the red

button. He glowered at her, and then slowly uncoiled his body from the cot. He was so big, nearly a head taller than she was. She forced herself not to step back. "Actually," she said, "I dropped in to tell you that from now on Leila will be bringing your food."

He scowled. "Don't let that bloodthirsty little bitch near me."

Mel grinned again. "She likes you as well."

"So what's this for? Your crew giving you trouble? Don't they like the idea of handing an innocent man over to a psychopathic maniac?"

She shrugged. "Purely a safety precaution. The poor things haven't seen a man in a long time, and desperate woman stop being choosy after a while."

"Not you though?"

"No, so don't bother trying any of that charming shit on me. It won't work."

"Charming shit?" he asked in a voice like warm honey. It was a beautiful voice, it made her ears tingle, and it pissed her off all over again. She fingered the activator in her pocket.

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“Yeah, charming shit,” she snapped. “You know the sort of thing I mean – ‘Oh Darla, you have got beautiful eyes,’” she mimicked.

Zach grinned. “She has.”

“Well, I haven’t,” Mel snarled. “So don’t waste your breath.”

He tilted his head to one side and regarded her thoughtfully. “No they’re not beautiful,” he said after a minute of uncomfortable silence. “The first time I saw you I thought they were hawk’s eyes, fierce, predatory.”

“Yeah, well, that’s me, fierce and predatory, so don’t forget it.”

“But you do have a beautiful mouth.”

“What?” The word was out before she could stop it, and she saw the satisfaction glint in his eyes.

“It’s full and soft and tastes of raspberries.”

“Okay, stop right there.”

He ignored her warning. “And...”

She pressed the green button. His body went rigid. Shock and anger flashed in his eyes, but

it definitely shut him up. She pressed the red button.

“Sorry,” she murmured, “my finger slipped.”

He glared at her but recovered quickly. “So why are you really here?” he asked. “I don’t believe you came just to tell me Leila was bringing my food from now on.”

She shrugged. “I decided that it was only fair to let you know that this whole thing is not personal.” At his look of complete disbelief, she continued. “It occurred to me that you might be laboring under the misapprehension that it was, personal, I mean. You know, because of the unfair way you persecuted me...”

“Unfair! You stole my ship.”

She ignored the comment, “...in the past. But I want to assure you that it isn’t. It’s purely business. You’re simply a commodity that someone is willing to pay for.”

He was looking at her in amazement. “Are you totally without morals?”

She nodded. “Yup.”

"I don't believe you. You're feeling guilty, that's why you're here."

She shrugged.

"You don't really want to hand me over to Sanderson."

"Oh, yes, I do. Besides," she continued, "It really doesn't matter. As I've just been explaining to the rest of the crew. I have no choice. I need the money." She didn't know why she told him that, but maybe it would prove that she was serious, and he would stop bugging her.

"I told you, I can get money."

"But I need the money, now."

"Mercenary bitch."

She stared up at him. He was looming over her, arms folded across his bare chest, legs apart, looking down at her from his considerable height. Superior bastard. Yeah, she was mercenary, but she had to be, she had responsibilities. He was starting to piss her off. Again. It was amazing, but some people never learnt. She gave in to the urge and pressed the green button.

She saw the instant shock on his face as the

paralysis took effect. Saw the flare of fury that turned his eyes to pure, molten gold. Then he toppled over. The cot was behind him, and he landed quite safely, still locked in position, legs spread, arms folded. It didn't look quite so superior horizontal, and Mel couldn't suppress her grin. God, she liked those cuffs.

She moved to stand over him. "Just to let you know," she said, "that time, I did it on purpose."

He emitted a low growl, sounding pure animal. "Let me go," he ground out.

"Hmm," she pondered. "What to do? I tell you what, I'll let you go if you promise to sit over there and be a good boy. I'll even give you five minutes of my valuable time to tell me what it is that's so important."

She watched as he fought to get his anger under control. She had to admit, he did a much better job that she would have done under similar circumstances. Finally, he nodded, and almost reluctantly, Mel pressed the red button.

His eyes still promised retribution if ever their positions were reversed, but he sat up slowly. "You'll listen?"

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Mel nodded. "That's what I said, isn't it?"

"Pieter Sanderson needs to be stopped."

"Stopped from what?"

"He's going to challenge the Intergalactic Agency."

"So, why should I even care? What's the Agency ever done for me? Fuck all. That's what."

"The Agency is all that keeps the universe from chaos."

"I like chaos. More pickings for the likes of me."

"There'll be no pickings for the likes of you if the space liners stop running. No planet hopping, no long distance travel, whole worlds will be cut off, isolated."

That did sound bad, but she couldn't see how Sanderson could do it, or even why he would want to. She said as much.

"He's breeding telepaths," Zach said.

A ripple of shock ran through her. "What? What have telepaths got to do with anything?"

"You do know how the space liners work?"

"Not really," she admitted.

He shook his head as if he couldn't quite believe anyone could be so ignorant. Why was it, she wondered, that the man couldn't seem to go five minutes without irritating her with his superior attitude. Didn't he realize he was in big trouble here? Didn't he realize that a little humility was sensible for someone in his position? Obviously not.

"Well, the space liners are piloted by genetically modified telepaths, specially bred by the Agency. They literally think their way through space."

Mel was getting a bad feeling about this. Something prodding at the back of her mind.

"Without these telepaths the liners don't move and we're stranded. The breeding of telepaths is carefully controlled by the Agency and off limits to everyone else.

"Why?" She was pretty sure she wasn't going to like the answer.

"Because they can interfere with the piloting of the liners, they can cause the pilots to crash.

And you know what that's like. You've been on one space liner that crashed."

Oh yes, she'd been on a space liner that crashed. So had Leila, who also happened to be a telepath. The vague feeling of unease that had been prodding her suddenly crystallized into a hard lump that couldn't be ignored. She really hoped she was wrong about this, she'd know, once she had spoken to Leila.

"I've got to go," she said.

"What? Haven't you been listening to a word I've said? We need to stop Sanderson."

He got to his feet. Mel took a step back, pulled the activator from her pocket and waved it at him. He stopped mid-stride. His hands were clenched at his side, his teeth gritted, his eyes spitting sparks, but he stayed where he was.

Mel felt behind her for the door panel. She didn't take her eyes off him as she pressed her palm to the controls. The door slid open, and she backed out, releasing her breath as it closed behind her.



She found Leila in her cabin, working on something at the table, her hands protected by rubber gloves.

“What are you doing?” Mel asked.

Leila glanced up. “Mixing poison.”

“Hmm, nice hobby.”

“Yeah, it’s great. You know, this stuff is sooo powerful; you’re dead if it so much as touches your skin. Now all I have to do is think of a way to get it on the subject without killing myself at the same time.”

“I suppose that would be a bit of a disadvantage.”

“What I really need is someone to practice on.”

Mel decided not to answer that. Instead, she came into the room, shutting the door behind her. She wasn’t quite sure how to broach her subject; Leila was such a private person. She decided on the direct approach. “Leila?”

“Yes?”

“Do you come from Talmare?”

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Leila put down her poison and peeled off her rubber gloves before answering. "Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Leila shrugged. "I didn't think it mattered. We said 'no past' remember, 'only the future'."

"But when we got involved with Sanderson, didn't you think it was relevant?"

Leila shrugged again. "Not really, I've never even seen Governor Sanderson. We didn't exactly move in the same circles."

Mel sat down on the bed and examined Leila. She seemed unperturbed by the questions. But then she'd never found anything that affected the girl. Well, apart from killing, that always seemed to cheer her up. "Leila, what happened to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"How did you end up in the space brothel?"

Leila frowned. "What's going on?"

"I just need to get something straightened out in my head. Something Zach said."

"Zach? Since when have you been on first name terms with the Tiger?"

“Please, Leila. Just tell me.”

She saw a flash of annoyance flicker in Leila’s eyes, then it was gone.

“I grew up in a camp on Talmare,” she said, her voice completely without emotion, as though she were telling a story about someone else. “There were about twenty women altogether. I don’t know where they all came from, some were off-worlders. Some, like my mother, came from Talmare. Anyway, many of the children showed signs of telepathy, normally at puberty. They were taken away. I had a brother, Darren, he was a year older than me. They took him when he was thirteen, and we never saw him again. So when I started showing signs, my mother told me to hide it, to pretend I was normal. It worked for a couple of years, and then something must have happened. The whole camp was taken apart. My mother was killed. I saw her die. I guess I was supposed to die as well, but the guys in charge must have seen a way of making some extra cash and sold me on to the brothel.”

She fell silent. Mel got up and crossed the room, wrapped Leila in a tight hug. “I’m sorry,” she said.

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“You know, I still wonder if Darren’s alive somewhere.”

Mel released her and took a step back. She stood thinking over the story, trying to tie it in to what Zach had told her. “Leila, you remember when we were on the space liner?”

“Yes.”

“Did you do anything?”

“What do you mean ‘anything’?”

“Did you have any mind contact with anyone?”

Leila nodded. “Just before we crashed.”

“You mean you read someone?”

“Not really. It was different. They were reading me as much as anything. I sent out a probe, but we crashed soon after. And when I came to after the crash, they were gone. What’s this all about Mel?”

Mel stared at her for a moment. Could Leila really have been responsible for the crash of an entire Intergalactic space liner? It seemed inconceivable, and she really didn’t want to lay that on her until she was absolutely convinced

she was right. "I'm not sure. I have to go back, talk to Zach."

"Do you want me to come and read him?"

"Not just yet. Let me talk to him first. I don't believe a word of what he says, but there's something funny going on with Sanderson. Zach says he's dangerous, and maybe he's right."

"It won't make a difference though. You're still going to hand him over?"

"Of course I am. I just need to be prepared in case we run into any trouble at the rendezvous."

CHAPTER FOUR

Zach was deep in a daydream, and as daydreams go it was pretty damn good. The 'plan' was going perfectly. He was right in the middle of the seducing part, and Mel had that soft, sweet mouth wrapped around his cock. She was sucking him hard, while her hands were stroking his balls, nice and soft. He groaned. That woman might not know it, but she was hot, hot and ready and eager to give him everything he wanted. He rolled onto his front, and his hand slipped down his pants, just to check everything was okay. It was fine, coming along nicely.

The door opened behind him, and he went still, his hand still gripping his hardening cock. He slowly let himself go, pulled his hand out of his pants and rolled onto his back.

She was staring at him, a frown on her face. "What are you doing?" she asked.

Zach glanced down; his erection was subsiding but still pretty obvious. "What does it look like

I'm doing," he growled. "I'm passing the time. Any problem with that?"

Mel frowned at his vehemence. She appeared distracted, and it occurred to Zach that she probably hadn't noticed what he was doing. Which meant he had another chance to get the plan back on track. It hadn't gone too well so far, but things were about to improve. He was sure she liked him, underneath. Well, maybe a long way underneath, he admitted, studying her tense figure in the doorway.

Her mouth was held in a tight line, her hands thrust into the pockets of her pants where he could see the telltale bulge of the activator. His body flinched at the memory. He decided he wasn't getting up this time. If she was going to zap him with that thing again, he was better off where he was. "Come on in," he said.

She frowned again but took a step into the room, and the door slid shut behind her. "We need to talk about Sanderson," she said.

It was Zach's turn to frown. "Isn't that my line?"

"Tell me about these telepaths he's breeding."

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Zach forced his attention away from his cock. He needed to be convincing here. This was important. He sat up. "Pieter runs breeding camps on Talmare," he said. "He takes women with known psychic abilities and has them impregnated. There's also some sort of genetic modification program, but I'm not sure what."

"What happens to the camps, to the people?"

"As far as I can tell, they're destroyed, and everyone in them. Except for the telepaths, they're taken somewhere else, I couldn't find where. The people I was supposed to have killed, my 'massacre', that was one of the camps. Pieter was just being efficient, he managed to destroy the camp and blame me at the same time."

She looked skeptical. "You mean you didn't kill anyone?"

He felt a flicker of irritation. "I know it doesn't fit in with your cozy plans to hand me over to Pieter, but no, I didn't kill anyone. Well, not then, anyway. And before you ask, I did not, and never have, eaten human flesh."

He couldn't tell whether she believed him or not.

“Okay,” she said, “so he breeds telepaths. And then what?”

“I told you, he can use them to stop the space liner traffic. And probably run his own fleet.”

“But what is it he *wants*?”

Zach shrugged. “Who knows? Best case scenario - he wants money, and it’s a simple blackmail job. But I don’t think so, there’s too much time and too much planning gone into this. I think he’s after power.”

“Power to do what?”

“Whoever controls interstellar travel controls everything. They can hold the universe to ransom. Look,” he said, “even if you do hand me over, you can still take this information and warn the Agency.”

“The Agency will never listen to someone like me.”

“No, probably not, but you might worry them enough to at least keep an eye on Sanderson.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said. “So, how do they stop the liners?”

“The pilots are vulnerable when they’re flying.

Their minds wide open to attack. Another telepath can get in there and cause irreparable damage.”

“Anything like the liner we were on? The one that crashed?”

He frowned at the question, but nodded. “Exactly like that, I suppose. I never did find out what caused that crash, but it would be similar.”

“Oh.” She was quiet for a moment. Then she turned around, and he realized, with a start, that she was leaving again. She couldn’t go now; he needed more time to implement the plan. But it was more than that. With a stab of surprise he recognised that he wanted her to stay. He wanted to kiss her again, wanted to feel those long legs wrapped around him, his cock inside her and just lose himself. Forget Pieter, forget the plan, forget everything for a while. He rolled onto his feet. “Hey, wait!”



Mel needed to get away, to think about what he had told her. Decide whether to tell Leila, that in all likelihood, she was responsible for the

crash of an entire space liner. The thing was, with Leila, would she even be upset? Tickled pink, more likely. Still, she wasn't looking forward to the meeting.

She heard Zach call out, and she turned back. He was standing by the cot. "What?" she asked.

"Before you go, there's something that's been bothering me about you."

"Really?"

"Hmm, I've seen your records. You were sentenced to life in the asteroid mines for that murder, so what were you doing on that space liner three years later?"

She shrugged. Why not tell him, it was no secret, and she certainly wasn't ashamed of something she had had no control over. "I never got to the mines. I was sold to one of the space brothels."

"Brothels are illegal."

"Wow, you don't say. Then I guess there are some unscrupulous people about. Besides, don't tell me you've never paid for it."

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"I've never paid for it." He grinned. "Never had to."

No, Mel thought, the smooth bastard probably didn't need to. She bet he had women falling over themselves to get a piece. Why did that piss her off?

"So what happened?" he asked.

"To what?"

"To you? How did you end up on the liner?"

"Oh. Well, I think they decided I was more trouble than I was worth."

"That figures."

She ignored the comment. "I spent three years chained up like an animal while any man who had the money to pay could have me. I was kept drugged most of the time, after all, I was a convicted murderer. But they got careless one day, the drugs wore off and I killed two of their best customers." She smiled. "So you see, that woman wasn't the only innocent I've murdered."

"I hardly think innocent is the word to describe them." He thought for a moment. "What about your friend Leila?"

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"She was fifteen when she was sold to the brothel. She doesn't like men."

"No, I guess it could do that to you. Did she kill off the customers as well?"

Mel grinned. "No, but she did have a way of making them uncomfortable."

"I bet she did." He looked at her, his eyes assessing. "So," he said, "do you like men?"

"Let's just say, ten years ago, I was of the opinion that if I ever saw another dick again, I'd slice it off."

He winced. "That was ten years ago, what about now?"

"The memory's faded somewhat." She shrugged. "All the same, I still might find myself tempted if there was something sharp to hand." She smiled, let her eyes roam down over the front of his pants, linger on the bulge she could see there. "Why, you want to risk it?"

She found herself holding her breath as she waited for his answer. What was going on here, was he flirting with her? Was she flirting back?

"You're taking me to Pieter," he said. "He's

going to kill me. You know that. But probably only after a few very long and painful conversations.”

“You think he plans to torture you?”

“I know he’s going to torture me. The only reason I can come up with why he wanted me alive is he thinks I might have passed on the information I have on him. And he wants to know who I’ve told. He’s not going to let me die without finding that out.”

Mel frowned. “You’ve told me.”

“Well, I’ll try to keep that from him, but I have to warn you, I’ve heard Pieter can be very creative where torturing a man is concerned. So, if I was you, I’d get away from that rendezvous point pretty fast. If he lets you leave at all.”

“You’re just trying to scare me into not going.”

“No,” he said, “I’m giving you a warning.”

“Why? And why are you telling me this?”

“I’m just pointing out that the risk of you cutting off my dick doesn’t rate too high on my worry scale right now. And a man condemned to

die has to get his fun where he can. So yeah, I'm willing to risk it. Are you?"

For a long time even the thought of a man had caused Mel to shudder with revulsion. But she didn't feel that way about Zach. Maybe it was because he was her prisoner, at her mercy. She almost smiled at the thought. Or maybe it was because she knew she could put a stop to it at any time. She fingered the activator in her pocket and saw his eyes follow the movement.

But feeling no revulsion was hardly a reason to have sex with a man. On the other hand, she wasn't walking out of here so there must be something else. She looked at him. He was big, and he was beautiful.

His hair was pulled back into a ponytail, emphasizing the high cheekbones and the slant of his eyes. Today they were more green than gold. His bare chest was broad, the muscles well defined. One thumb was hooked casually in his waistband and the pants hung low on his hips, showing off his lean belly with its light covering of creamy blond fur. It looked soft and silky, and she had a sudden urge to run her fingers through

it. Her eyes moved lower, and she licked her lips.

“You want to see what you do to me?” he murmured.

She started in shock at his words. She didn’t think, just nodded and watched as he pushed the pants down over his hips and stepped out of them.

Her mouth went dry, and the air was sucked from her lungs. He’d looked huge when she had seen him the day he awoke. Now, semi-aroused, he was even bigger. Thick and long, his cock pulsed under her gaze, growing before her eyes. While she watched, he slowly wrapped his hand around himself, and squeezed.

Heat flooded her belly, and she suddenly knew what he’d been doing when she came in. It made her feel hot and shivery all at the same time. He seemed to know what she was thinking.

“I was lying there, imagining fucking you.” He smiled. Then he shrugged. “Actually, that’s a lie, you were sucking me off. But you were enjoying yourself. We both were.”

She couldn’t seem to take her eyes from his

cock. It was fully erect now, and his long fingers barely met around the width. What would it taste like? What would it feel like inside her? She was hot and swollen between her thighs, her body readying itself for him. The sensation was new, but then she'd never met a man she wanted. Before now. And with that thought she finally acknowledged that she did want him.

But how could she let a man make love to her then calmly hand him over to someone who would undoubtedly torture and kill him. It didn't seem right.

"You're thinking too much," he said. "Forget Pieter."

When she still didn't move he took a step towards her. "Come on, sweetheart," he murmured. "Give us what we both want. Let the condemned man have one final fuck."

She nodded. Just once, but it was enough.

"Thank God," he muttered. He let go of himself and took a step towards her. Then he paused. "Would you mind taking your hand out of your pocket?" he asked.

She frowned. "What?"

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“It makes me feel a little vulnerable, knowing your finger is on the button, as it were. I can’t promise my best performance if I think you’re going to zap me with that thing at any moment.”

She smiled at the thought but withdrew her hand, and he took the last step towards her, close enough to touch. It occurred to her then, that she was the vulnerable one. He could easily overpower her. But strangely enough, she trusted him.

He reached out a hand. Mel held her breath as he plucked open the top button of her shirt.

“It seems a little unfair, me naked, you fully dressed,” he said as he opened the second button. A minute later the shirt was unfastened, and he parted the sides to stare at her. Her breasts were small, but his eyes seemed to feast on them, and she could feel her nipples engorged and oh so sensitive under his heated gaze. He reached out with a finger, the claw extended, and scraped over one swollen tip. She felt the touch as a spasm in her belly, and she swayed towards him.

“You are so beautiful, small and perfect,” he murmured as he stroked the other, then cupped

both breasts with his large hands, rasping the pad of his thumbs against her nipples over and over again. His head bent to her, and he licked first one then the next until they glistened with moisture and were so sensitive she thought she would explode.

It was the most wonderful sensation she had ever felt, and liquid heat welled up between her thighs. She clenched them tight together.

She almost protested as his hands left her to move down between their bodies. He took hold of one of hers where it lay clenched at her side and gently prized open her fingers. He pressed her open palm down over his belly. The fur was as soft as she had imagined, and she curled her fingers into it. But he didn't allow her to linger, gently nudging her downwards. She knew what he wanted, and her hand wrapped around his erection. It was hot, and hard, she squeezed it ever so gently and heard him groan.



Oh God, Zach couldn't believe this was really happening. It was a long time since he'd been

with a woman, and it felt so goddamned good. Just let him have this one thing, he prayed, and he would accept whatever shit the Universe threw at him next.

He closed his eyes as her slender fingers fluttered up the length of his cock, felt himself throb and jerk against her hand as she gently explored the swollen head.

Her hand went still against him. "Don't stop," he muttered.

When she didn't respond, he opened his eyes. Mel was staring at something over his shoulder. He twisted his head, followed her gaze and swore softly. Leila was standing in the open doorway, her blue eyes wide with shock. He felt himself wilt. "Shit," he muttered.

Mel took a step back from him obviously not realizing she still had hold of his cock. She looked down in surprise and dropped it.

Zach groaned. "You couldn't just order her to go, could you? You are the captain, after all."

Mel didn't answer, just shook her head and took another step back. She started to fasten her shirt with trembling fingers.

Zach glanced back at Leila; it didn't look as though she was going anywhere. He didn't know what she was doing here, but he had a bad feeling. Oh, well, he had known all along his plan was flawed.

Leila stepped further into the room, and the door slid shut behind her. All his senses went onto immediate alert. He didn't know what it was about her, but she made his skin crawl. He remembered Mel saying that she had made the customers in the brothel uncomfortable. He could well believe it, he just didn't know why. She was still staring at him; the shock was gone to be replaced by an almost cold, feral hatred. And she was armed.

He glanced around for his pants; if this went bad, he wanted to have his pants on. They were lying crumpled on the floor a few feet away. Keeping a wary eye on both of them he sidled across, reached down and picked them up. He pulled them on then turned back to the women.

Mel cleared her throat and spoke at last. "What are you doing here, Leila?"

Leila took her eyes from him at last. "I got to thinking, after you left."

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“Yeah?”

“He,” she jerked a finger in Zach’s direction, “was accused of massacring a camp on Talmare.”

“So?”

“A camp like I grew up in.”

Zach had been watching Mel, now his eyes swung round to Leila. What was she saying? That she came from Talmare? That she was brought up in one of the camps? The bad feeling was getting worse.

“He couldn’t have been responsible for that Leila, he wasn’t even on Talmare at the time.”

“Maybe not, but someone just like him was.”

“I’m not sure he even did it,” Mel said. “I think he might have been set up.”

Zach couldn’t believe how good those words made him feel. She believed him, believed his story. He almost smiled.

Leila eyes flicked from Mel to him. His expression seemed to enrage her. Her eyes narrowed, then she closed them for a brief moment. When she opened them she was

smiling. It wasn't a pleasant smile, and it didn't make him feel any better at all.

She turned to Mel. "You know, he thinks he's got you right where he wants you."

Mel's eyes widened. "What?"

"Ask him about his plan, why don't you?"

Mel turned to face Zach, her eyes had gone cold. "What plan?"

Zach frowned, he wasn't sure what was going on here, but all he could do was brazen it out. Leila couldn't really know about the plan. But what worried him was Mel appeared to be listening to her. He shrugged. "I have no plan."

"He's lying. Though I have to admit, it is a pretty crappy plan. I wouldn't own up to it."

"Come on, Leila," Mel said. "Spit it out."

"Oh, it's quite simple really, he's going to seduce you. And once he's had you, he reckons you'll be eating out of his hands." She turned to Mel. "His words, not mine. He reckons a little bit of sex, and you're obviously desperate for it by the way, and you'll do anything he wants."

“And what exactly is it, he wants?” Mel said in a voice devoid of all expression.

Leila closed her eyes once more. When she opened them she was smiling. “Well, at the moment, to strangle me.” She grinned at Zach. “Don’t worry, I get that a lot. But from you he wants your ship.”

“My ship,” Zach growled almost automatically. His head was whirling. How could she know all this, but even through the panic it was coming together. She’d been born on Talmare, in one of Pieter’s breeding camps. “Jesus,” he muttered. “She’s a telepath.”

“Quick, isn’t he?” Leila responded.

Zach frantically tried to get things straight in his head. The liner, ten years ago, had she been responsible for the crash? He stared at her, how could someone so small, so delicate bring down a whole space liner. As the thought settled in his mind he saw Leila’s eyes widen in shock.

“Well?” Mel broke into his thoughts, and he turned reluctantly from Leila. Mel was staring at him coldly, her eyes fierce, her mouth a grim line.

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“Well what?”

“Is it true?”

“Is what true?” He asked, trying to keep his tone innocent.

“Do you believe you only have to fuck me, and I’ll do anything you want?”

“Of course not.”

He heard Leila’s snort of disbelief from beside him.

Mel shook her head but didn’t say anything further. Zach knew she didn’t believe him which wasn’t surprising, but he was amazed by how bad that made him feel. He held himself tense, waiting for her to press that button and the paralysis to set in. But she didn’t, she just turned, slammed her palm to the door panel and stalked out of the room.

Leila smirked then swung round and followed her. The door slid shut behind them.

“Shit,” Zach muttered. He was a dead man.

CHAPTER FIVE

It occurred to Mel, as she stood waiting for Sanderson that she was just about to make the biggest mistake of her entire life. And it was way too late to do anything about it.

She had picked the rendezvous point carefully. They were on one of the moons orbiting Talmare. It was a bare, barren place, but it had a gravity and atmosphere similar to Earth, which meant they didn't have to be inside and weren't hampered by breathing equipment. The meeting place was a circular clearing formed by towering ochre rocks that at least provided some cover while they waited.

Leila stood beside her. Zach was behind them, and she could feel his eyes boring holes into her back. She'd avoided thinking about him for the past two days. She'd walked away from him not furious, as she'd expected, but hurt. And she really hated that.

The thing was she couldn't blame him. His life was at stake and much more than that if what he

had told her was true. And she suspected it was. She would have done the same, used anything and anyone at hand to help her get away.

Still, she hadn't been able to face him, and she'd handed his care over to Leila. Then she spoilt the gesture by ordering Darla to keep an eye on them. Just in case Leila was tempted to try out her new poison.

She wouldn't put it past her; Leila was a genuine man-hater. But then, the time in the space brothel had been hard for Leila, much harder than for Mel. Mel had spent the three years in a drug induced haze. But Leila had been fifteen, small, not considered a threat, which just went to show how misleading appearances could be. But it had meant there were no comforting drugs to soften the reality for her.

Not that Mel didn't hate most men. From what she had seen of the world the majority of them deserved to die screaming. But she wasn't particular; she also hated plenty of women as well. After all, it was because of a woman that she had ended up in the brothel in the first place. Though, thinking about it, if it hadn't been for

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that particular woman she supposed she wouldn't have existed at all.

Beside her, Leila shifted restlessly. "Mel?"

Mel glanced at her. "Yes?"

"He didn't do the massacre on Talmare."

"What?"

"Tiger, he didn't do it. I read him."

Mel frowned. "And you waited till now to tell me?"

Leila nodded. "And Mel..."

"What?"

"He likes you."

A jolt of shock hit her hard. "I don't believe you."

"It's true. Oh, I wasn't lying about the plan, but it wasn't the only reason. He wanted you. He likes you."

Mel gritted her teeth and turned to face Leila. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you're not happy. You're my friend, you kept me sane. Well, sanish," she

acknowledged, with a slight smile. "And however much I'd like to see him die, I know you'll never forgive yourself if you go ahead with this and he dies because of you."

"But why leave it this late? Sanderson will be here soon. I try to stop this now and chances are we all die."

The smile left Leila's face. "I wanted to meet Sanderson and this was the only way I could think of. I need to know if he's responsible. I need to find out if Darren is still alive."

Mel shook her head. In some strange way she could understand Leila's reasoning, but she had risked all their lives. She glanced round to where Zach stood in the shadows behind them, and suddenly she knew whatever the risk, there was no way she was handing him over to Sanderson. "How long have we got before Sanderson gets here?" she asked.

"Minutes," Leila replied.

She thought for a moment. "Call Darla, make sure the ship is ready to go, and send Angie and Grace down here, tell them to hang back but be ready for trouble."

“Already done, they’re somewhere behind us.”

Mel walked towards Zach. She’d told Leila to make sure he didn’t give her any earache. Leila had taken her literally, and he wore a metal gag. Above it his eyes were expressionless. She reached behind him and clicked open the gag, removed it from his mouth. He turned and spat.

“Turn around,” she said.

He turned and she unlocked the clip that held the cuffs fastened together, but left them in place. When she looked back his expression was puzzled but not quite trusting.

“Why?” he asked.

“We’re getting out of here.”

“I take it you have a plan.”

“We’re going to tell Sanderson we’ve changed our minds. That we’ll return his deposit, when we have it, and we all go home.”

He gave her a look. “Good joke,” he said. “Now tell me the plan.”

Mel scowled. “Okay, there is no plan. This is sort of spur of the moment stuff.”

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"Great, just great," he muttered. "God preserve me from working with women."

"Don't be so negative. You never know -- Sanderson might be reasonable."

"No, he won't. He'll kill you both and he'll torture me. Then he'll kill me as well. We're all going to die."

"Oh shut up. I need to think."

"Bit late for that. Have you got a weapon for me?"

Mel turned to Leila. "Do you have a spare blaster?"

"Never go anywhere without one." She pulled a blaster from where it was tucked into her belt and handed it to Mel. She took it and shoved it down the back of Zach's pants.

"Mel." He stopped her as she made to step away.

"Yes?"

He glanced at Leila then shrugged. "I just wanted to say, I did want you. I'm not denying about the plan, but I still wanted you."

"I know."

"You do?"

She nodded. "Leila told me."

Zach glanced over to where Leila stood, tapping her foot impatiently. "Good, but tell her to keep out of my head from now on."

Leila glanced up and shrugged. "As if I'd want to go in there again. It's a cesspit."

"She also told me you had nothing to do with the massacre," Mel said. "But I think I already knew."

"So you've decided I'm not the type to feast on dead babies?"

"Maybe."

"Hey, you're not going to go all soft on me are you, just because we're about to die."

"We're not going to die," she said, scowling.

"Hmm, I like your optimism even if it is totally misguided. But, if we do get out of here, the first thing we're going to do is finish what we started."

"We are?"

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"It's a promise." He paused. "Not that I think we have a hope in hell of getting out of here, of course."

"God, you are so bloody negative."

He smiled. "Come here."

She took a step towards him, and he leaned down and kissed her softly on the lips. They touched nowhere else but Mel felt the now familiar heat steal through her body.

She heard Leila making retching noises from behind her and smiled against his lips, then kissed him some more. He tasted good.

"Mel, they're coming," Leila muttered.

She took a reluctant step back.

"Mel."

She was about to turn away when Zach spoke her name. "What?"

"Just be careful out there. Don't underestimate him."

"I won't."

"And don't say anything smart. He'll come across as all smarmy, he always does, but he hates

smart women. Doesn't like stupid ones much, either."

Mel peered out from the rocks where they were waiting. She felt Zach come up beside her. Two men were crossing the open space. The one in front must be Sanderson, the one at his shoulder some sort of body guard.

"There are only two of them," she said.

"He'll have others somewhere."

"No, we agreed only two."

"Are you totally naive?" Zach said, and she glanced at him. He was looking at her in amazement, shaking his head. "How the hell have you survived this long without me? He'll have at least three others."

"Why should he? This was a business deal. He's a politician, not some sort of warlord."

"Yeah, but he's a politician who's planning to take over the Universe. He happens to have an army of ten thousand trained killers on Talmare. And he'll have another three with him because he always does. He never goes anywhere without at least four bodyguards." He stared out over the

barren, rock strewn landscape. "They'll be over there," he said, "using those rocks for cover."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm a soldier. It's what I do."

They were close enough to see clearly now, and she looked at Sanderson, trying to see him as a megalomaniac killer intent on ruling the Universe. He looked so ordinary. Quite nice actually. Around medium height, slender, his blond hair immaculate, brushed back from his forehead. His face was pale, and so were his eyes. The man beside him was much taller, broad at the shoulder and walked with his hand on his blaster, his eyes constantly flickering all around them. Definitely a bodyguard. "Sanderson's quite handsome, isn't he?" she said.

"He's a slimy, bastard," Zach growled, and she smiled.

"Okay," she said, "this is it. You two stay out of sight until I call for you. And Leila, find out what you can. We need to know what Sanderson's intentions are."

"I told you what his intentions are," Zach muttered.

“Yes, but you’re not always right are you?”

Without waiting for an answer, Mel stepped forward into the clearing. She watched as the two men approached. She tried her best to look calm and unworried as they came to a halt only a meter from her. She was as tall as Sanderson, and she looked him straight in the eyes, they were blue and cold. He frowned slightly, then smiled, his eyes instantly warming.

“Captain, may I say what a pleasure it is to meet you at last.”

Mel nodded. “You may.”

He glanced around. “And now the pleasantries are over, where’s my cryotube?”

When he turned to the side, Mel saw that his face was scarred with four parallel stripes, as though he’d been scratched by a very large and unfriendly cat. She almost smiled. “Where’s my money?” she countered.

Sanderson held out his hand to the bodyguard, who placed a small bag in it. Sanderson flicked it open and showed her the contents. It was full of coins, gold coins. Mel reached in and touched one reverently with her fingertip before the

bag was snatched away and handed back to the bodyguard. She watched as he slipped it into an inside pocket, and made a mental note to keep an eye on that pocket when the going got rough.

“Now,” Sanderson said, “my cryotube.”

“Er, there might be a small problem with that,” Mel said. She felt a shiver run through her as those blue eyes went instantly cold. “Absolutely nothing to worry about,” she added quickly.



Zach stood in the shadows, watching her. He found he was flexing his claws. He'd seen Mel's avaricious little fingers running over the gold, and he wondered whether those fingers would ever run over him in the same manner.

God, how he wanted that. He was going to get out of this if it killed him. No, perhaps that wasn't quite right. He shook his head and turned to Leila. She was concentrating hard, her eyes closed, a frown on her face.

“What's he thinking?” Zach asked.

She opened her eyes. “I don't know.”

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"What do you mean, 'you don't know'?"

"I'm not getting anything. It's like I'm hitting a wall."

"Well, try harder."

She shot him a look of intense dislike but closed her eyes again. After a moment, she opened them and he could see her frustration.

"Nothing," she muttered.

Zach thought for a moment. "Maybe he's had something done, some sort of surgery or implant or something. I've never heard of anything like that, but it would make sense if he was in contact with telepaths. He would hardly want them to be able to see into his mind. Try the other guy. At least we might find out what they're planning.

Leila turned her attention to the bodyguard. She smiled in relief. "Got him," she said. "Though there's not a lot going on in there at the moment." She frowned.

"Anything?" Zach asked.

"Yeah, trouble. Big trouble."

"God, I hate it when I'm right. Can you tell how many others there are?"

“Three.”

“Right again,” Zach muttered. Why didn’t it give him any pleasure? At least they were equal in numbers though he was expecting to have to do all the fighting himself. He just hoped the women would stay out of his way.

“Not a chance in hell,” Leila muttered from beside him.

He glanced at her; she’d been reading him again. “Don’t do that,” he snarled.

She just smiled, and he sighed. He’d always had a problem controlling what he said, there was no way he could have any control over what he was thinking. “Why don’t you contact your people, tell them what’s happening and to be ready.”

Leila nodded, and spoke briefly into her communicator.

“Right,” Zach said, “I think we’re on.”

“Leila,” Mel called, “bring the prisoner.”

Leila took hold of his arm, she only came up to his shoulder. It occurred to Zach that she was only twenty six and was probably going to

die here. It didn't seem fair. It was different for him, he was a soldier. He had always expected to come to a violent end. "If this goes bad, no hard feelings, huh?"

Leila stared at him as if he were crazy. "You've got to be joking."

He shook his head. "Just let us know what he's thinking, okay? Tell me when they're going to make their move."

She nodded and pushed him forward into the clearing. A flicker of surprise flashed across Pieter's face as he saw them walking towards him, and his hand lifted almost automatically to stroke the scratches on his face. Zach smiled. Leila tugged him to a halt beside Mel, and he stared across at his old friend.

"Pieter," he murmured, "so nice to see you again. What an unanticipated pleasure."

Pieter smiled. "I don't see why, I did tell you we would meet again. And I think pleasure might not be quite the word you were looking for. At least not on your side anyway. I, on the other hand, am looking forward to our little chat." He turned to Mel. "I thought my instructions were

very clear. He was to be delivered in cryo. What's he doing awake?"

"Yeah, well, we had a little accident with the cryotube." She shrugged. "It was either wake him or let him freeze to death. We figured, since you'd asked for him alive, you'd prefer us to keep him that way."

Pieter looked about to say something, then he shrugged himself. "No matter, it makes no difference."

Zach knew that Pieter's plan all along would have been to dispose of Mel and Leila and probably go after the rest of the crew as well. Pieter didn't like witnesses. His disposal of the breeding camps showed that.

"I take it you've shared your delusions with your captors," Pieter said.

"I've told them nothing."

"Hmm, now why don't I believe you?" He turned to Mel. "Just give me a minute, we need to change our plans a little as our friend here is awake. I need to sort out transport, preferably get him back in cryo."

He took a step back and spoke quietly to the man at his side.



Mel turned to Leila. “Okay, so what’s their plan?”

“They’re going to kill us, and then they’re going to torture Zach.” She smiled and nodded in the direction of the bodyguard. “He’s really looking forward to that by the way.”

Mel frowned. “That’s it? That’s their plan?”

“Well, they honestly don’t think it’s going to be that difficult.” She shrugged. “I told you, your reputation sucks.”

Mel pursed her lips but decided not to comment. “There must be something else you can tell us.”

“Basically, when Sanderson gives the signal, the others will come out and overpower us.” She paused. “Oh, and he’s hoping that Sanderson will let them rape us before they kill us. He thinks he probably will. He usually does.”

“Great,” Mel muttered, glancing at the huge

hulk of the bodyguard as he stood whispering with Sanderson. A shiver of revulsion ran through her at the thought. No way was that happening. "Okay, when we move, I'll take the big ugly one. Zach goes after Sanderson, and Leila just shoot anything else that moves. Hopefully Angie and Grace will back you up."

"Great plan," Zach muttered.

"Can you think of anything better?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"Well, shut up then."

Sanderson had obviously finished his conversation and turned back towards them. "Right," Mel said, "it looks like something is happening. Are you ready?" No-one answered and she turned to face them. "Are you ready?"

Leila shrugged. Zach scowled. "Not a lot of choice. What a fucking mess. Why...?" She glared at him, and luckily he bit off what he was going to say.

Mel looked back at Sanderson. If she hadn't been expecting it she would have missed the slight gesture he made with his left hand.

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Unfortunately, she couldn't have missed the three men who slid out of the cover of the rocks and arrayed themselves around Sanderson. They were all armed, and their blasters were out and pointing at her.

"I hate to say I told you so," Zach muttered from beside her.

"Don't then," she snapped. She caught sight of Leila's expression. "What is it Leila?"

The girl was staring at the man on the far right. Her eyes were narrowed, gleaming, ice cold, almost glazed.

"Leila!"

She finally glanced away. She turned to Mel. "I know him," she said.

"Who? How?"

"From Talmare. He was the man in charge of the camp. He's the man who killed my mother, then raped me and sold me to that place." She took a step forward.

"Leila, wait!"

Mel reached out; put a hand on her arm. The muscles were rigid with tension beneath her

fingers, and for a moment, she was sure that Leila would shrug off her touch. But instead she went still.

“I want him.”

“You can have him,” Mel promised. “He’s yours. Just wait till we make our move.”

Leila nodded sharply.

Mel took a deep breath, then went to stand in front of Sanderson. Hands on her hips, she looked him slowly up and down. She could feel the adrenaline coursing through her veins, her fingers itching with the need to draw her weapon.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “We agreed only one man each.”

“Well,” Sanderson said, “there’s been a small change of plans. You really should have followed my orders, you know.”

“What are you saying?”

I’m afraid, I’m saying that you and your friend here are going to have to die. A pity,” he murmured, shrugging, “but there it is. I have to

be sure.” He turned to Zach and smiled. “More deaths on your conscience, Zach.”

“Smug bastard,” Zach said. “I just want you to know that I never liked you.” He turned his head and stared at Mel. She nodded. In the next second, Zach kicked out almost faster than she could follow, ramming his foot into Sanderson’s crotch. Sanderson screamed and fell to the ground, hugging himself.

Mel drew her weapon at the same time Zach did, and they both blasted the bodyguard closest to Sanderson. The shots hit him directly in the face, and he crumpled to the ground.

“Mel look out!”

Zach leapt across the space between them and shoved her to the ground. The beam of a blaster zapped past only millimeters from where she lay. The air left her lungs, and for a moment, she lay breathless. She would be dead if he hadn’t pushed her. She looked across at him but had no time to think further as he grabbed her arm and pulled her to the cover of the rocks. Blaster beams firing in all directions.

She peered out into the clearing “Shit!”

"What?"

"Sanderson's gone."

"Right, stay here," Zach said.

"Why? Where are you going?"

"I'm going after him."



Zach made his way around the edge of the clearing, keeping under cover of the rocks, his eyes glued to the spot he had last seen Sanderson. The slimy bastard had done a disappearing act at the first shot, but he couldn't have got far.

He was halfway round the edge of the clearing when something caught his eye. He glanced across to where he'd left Mel safely tucked away. "Shit," he muttered.

What the hell was she up to and why couldn't she follow orders? She'd left the shelter of the rocks and was creeping across the open ground towards the fallen bodyguard. She reached him and fumbled inside his jacket. She retrieved whatever it was she was looking for, stuffed it inside her shirt and started to creep backwards.

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As she straightened up a dark crimson circle appeared on her chest. Zach glanced quickly around for the shooter but couldn't see where the target was coming from. "Mel!"

She obviously couldn't hear, and Zach swore softly. He had to make a fast decision. He took a quick, careful aim. And shot her.

CHAPTER SIX

The shot took her across the backside, knocking her to the ground. The red dot vanished but then appeared again sweeping across the rocks behind her. Zach swore, loudly this time, and sprinted across the open ground. Mel was pulling herself up. She appeared dazed, and he grabbed her arm and dragged her into the cover of the rocks.

“Which part of ‘stay put’ did you not understand?”

Mel wobbled as he let her go. She put an arm out to steady herself. Then frowned. “Someone shot me,” she said.

“I fucking shot you,” he snarled through gritted teeth.

That seemed to bring her around. “You what?”

“I shot you in the arse, so someone else wouldn’t get the chance of shooting you in the goddamn head.” He realized he was shouting

and took a deep breath. "What the hell were you doing out there?"

She didn't answer, just twisted her head around and tried to evaluate the damage.

"Let me look," he muttered. He took her arm and turned her. It was a clean burn, a single stripe across her bottom. "It's not serious," he said. He stared for a moment longer. She really had a great bottom, it was a pity to shoot it, but needs must. Maybe she'd listen to him next time.

"Not serious! I can't believe you shot me."

"I saved your stupid life. What were you after anyway?"

"The payment money. Sanderson's bodyguard had it."

He shook his head in amazement. "You risked your life for money?"

"Yeah. It's what I do. You might be a goddamn hero, risking your life to save the world. I do it for money. Anyway it's mine. The payment was for bringing you here. Nothing else. I earned that money."

He ran a hand through his hair. It had come

loose in the dash across the clearing, and he raked it back from his face. He realized his hand was trembling.

“You shot me in the arse,” she muttered.

She sounded as though she still couldn’t quite believe it. “Get over it,” he said. “I saved your life. Twice. In fact, it’s a total mystery to me how you’ve survived this long on your own. You need some serious looking after.”

“Do not.”

“Do.”

“Oh, shut up. Anyway, I thought you were going after Sanderson?”

“I got sidetracked.” He sighed. “He’ll be long gone now.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, that about covers it.”

He realized that the shooting had stopped. It was quiet. He sighed again, the tension oozing out of him. They were still alive, and he hadn’t expected that outcome. Suddenly, he felt amazingly happy. He’d really thought that this time he was a dead man. He reached out, grabbed

Mel by the shoulders and kissed her. It took her by surprise, and, for a few moments, she relaxed against him. God, it felt good. Then she stiffened in his arms, and he reluctantly raised his head.

“Get your paws off me,” she said. “I don’t want you doing any more damage.”

He dropped his hands and stepped back.



For a moment, when he kissed her, she had quite forgotten the pain in her backside. Now it flooded back, and she regarded him through narrowed eyes.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll let you go for now. But you and me have some unfinished business, sweetheart.”

He was giving her that lopsided smile, and, despite the burn in her arse, she could feel herself melting inside. Christ, she was turning into another Tiger groupie. “Well, don’t expect me to be lying on my back for you anytime soon,” she snapped. “You’ve definitely put a stop to that.”

He shrugged. “On your back, on your knees.

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I'm not particularly fussy about the position. Just be aware it's going to happen."

"In your dreams," she muttered. But she could feel her body reacting in all sorts of ways to his words, and a graphic image appeared in her mind. Her, on her hands and knees, Tiger poised behind her. She felt quite weak and shivery.

"Like that idea, do you?" His question was purred.

She glanced up and found he was watching her. His eyes were almost sleepy, heavy-lidded, a greeny-gold gleam from behind his thick lashes. An expression of extreme masculine satisfaction, settled on his face.

She scowled. "Totally indifferent! Now are we going to get out of here?" She forced herself to look away from him. "Where's Leila?" she asked.

"Here," Leila spoke from the rocks above them. "I was just waiting for you to finish your little love scene." Mel didn't deign to answer, and Leila continued. "Sanderson's gone. I think the others are dead."

Mel shook herself and forced her brain to

function. "Did you get your man?" she asked Leila.

"Oh yeah, he's definitely dead."

Mel looked at her closely, and realized her clothes were stained with blood. You didn't get that much blood from killing someone with a blaster. "What did you do?" she asked.

Leila smiled, her eyes glittering with residual excitement. "I sliced..."

"Stop right there," Mel said. "I've changed my mind. I don't want to know. Are Angie and Grace okay?"

"Yeah, they've gone back to *The Revenge*."

"Good. Let's go then." She took a step and groaned.

Leila jumped down, and came towards her. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"I was shot. By Tiger here."

"Really?"

"Actually, I saved her life. Twice."

"Good, I think." Leila paused, looked from one of them to the other. "Right then, I'm

heading back to the ship. I'll see you there." She moved off, and Mel went to follow. As she moved the burn flared into life and red hot pain shot through her.

"Ouch, that hurts."

Each movement sent a shaft of pure agony up her spine. Zach took a step towards her, and she put up a hand to stop him. "No closer."

"I was just going to help."

"I'm not sure I can take any more of your help," she muttered.

"Don't be such a sissy."

He stood looking at her for a while, head cocked on one side, considering his options. "There's only one way to do this," he said eventually.

He reached out, his hands went to her waist, and he picked her up, effortlessly tossing her over his shoulder. She hung there helpless as he adjusted her position.

"Let me down," she snarled.

"Stop wriggling," he replied. One large hand clamped her in place with an iron grip around

her thigh, careful not to touch the tender skin where the blaster had hit. She could feel his thumb digging into the soft flesh. "Hey, watch the claws," she muttered.

He loosened his grip slightly, and she forced herself to breathe out and relax.

"Thank you," he said and set off after Leila.

Hanging upside down, it seemed like a long journey. Her cheek pressed against his lower back, her arms dangled down below his buttocks. She could feel the heat from his body, could smell the hot sweat mixed with Zach's own particular musky, almost feral scent. She breathed in deeply.

Her breasts, squashed against the rock solid hardness of his back, felt swollen, the sensitive peaks rubbing against the soft material of his t-shirt as he moved. His hand was moving against her leg. She thought about complaining but it was doing too good a job of taking her mind off her injuries. He held her steady while his thumb rubbed small circles on her inner thigh. It was having a curious effect on her insides, which seemed to be turning molten and threatening to slide from her body.

The sensation was completely new and not unpleasant, and she wondered what it would feel like if his thumb moved a little bit higher. She shifted restlessly and felt his hand slide up to the juncture of her thighs, his fingers curling inside, pressing upward, and she groaned.

She heard him chuckle, a very self-satisfied masculine chuckle that had her bristling.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked.

“Taking your mind off the pain.” He flexed his fingers, and she shuddered against him. “Is it working?” he asked.

She opened her mouth to answer, but at that moment he came to a standstill. She raised her head from where it rested against his broad back. They were back at *The Revenge*. Darla was standing in the open hatchway. Her mouth open. She caught Mel’s eye. Mel glared, and Darla shut her mouth. Then she shook her head. “Are you okay?” she asked. “Leila said you’d been shot.”

“Obviously I’m not okay,” Mel said. “If I was okay I would be walking and not being carted round like so much luggage.”

"Actually, she said you'd been shot by Zach."

"I was saving her life," Zach muttered, "why does no one ever mention that bit?"

Mel thumped his back.

"Oomph!" he said. "What was that for?"

"I think you can let me down now. I can make it to the sick bay, and if I need anything I'm sure Darla can help."

"I'm not letting you out of my sight until I get my reward for saving your life," he said and strode past Darla through the open hatch.

"Wait!"

He paused. "What now? This is not open to negotiations."

"Just a sec." She pulled the money bag from inside her shirt and tossed it to Darla. "Spare parts money," she said.

Zach didn't falter as he made his way through the ship. She wanted to ask how he knew his way, then realized it was a stupid question. After all, it had been his ship once. A long time ago.

As they reached the sickbay Mel felt the

engines fire up and *The Revenge* take off. She sighed with relief; she wanted to get as far away from Sanderson as possible. Zach lowered her gently to the floor. Once down, and on her own feet, she realized just how much she hurt. Heat radiated out from the blaster burn, a deep throbbing pain, and she could feel the sweat beading on her forehead. She bit her lip to stop the whimper from leaving her mouth and swayed. Zach reached out to steady her.

“Here,” he said, “lean on the bed.” He turned her gently, placing her hands on the bed.

She felt him crouch down beside her, take hold of her ankle. “Lift,” he ordered.

“Why?”

“Can you never do anything without an argument? I need to take your boot off.”

She raised her foot and winced as he tugged off the boot. He repeated it with the other foot.

He straightened up, his hands moving to her waist. He untied the red sash and tossed it to the floor. Before she could even think, he was unfastening her pants, and she put a hand over his.

“What are you doing?”

He ignored the question, and she slapped weakly at his hand.

“Hey stop that,” he muttered. “How do you expect me to treat you if I don’t take your pants off? Besides, do you seriously think there’s anything there I’m not going to see in the very near future?”

She dropped her hand to her side and didn’t object when he unclipped the fastener and started to tug them over her hips.

Someone coughed from the doorway. Mal glanced over her shoulders. It was Darla. “I just came to see if you need any help,” she said.

“No, we don’t, thank you,” Zach replied.

Darla looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Are you all right with this, Mel?”

Was she? When she hesitated Zach leaned across and kissed her neck. She felt the tip of his tongue, hot and moist, against her skin. He nipped at the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulders, then breathed in her ear. “Get rid of her.”

Ripples of pleasure were shivering their way down her spine. She forced herself to concentrate. “Er, I’m fine,” she said, “Zach’s just going to...”

“Make you feel better,” he whispered in her ear.

“Make me feel better,” she repeated almost automatically.

Darla gave her a disgusted look. “Who’s forgotten the bit about eating babies now?” she muttered.

Mel felt Zach go rigid behind her. “One last time,” he said very slowly. “I did not eat any babies. I did not eat anybody. Okay?”

Darla nodded then shrugged. “If you say so. Right, I’ll be off then.”

“Actually,” Zach said, “there is one thing you can do.”

“Yes?”

He held up his wrists. “Take these fucking cuffs off!”

Darla glanced at Mel.

“Spoilsport,” Mel muttered. “I had big plans for those cuffs”

Zach gave her a look, and she shrugged. “Oh, take them off him. He’ll only moan otherwise.”

Darla came into the room. She took the activator from her pocket and a small silver key from the key ring on her belt. The key slipped into a small hole on the side and she twisted. The cuffs sprang open. He removed them and handed them to Darla.

“Now, if you don’t mind, I have a patient to treat.”

She left the room. Zach followed her to the door and closed it behind her. He turned back to Mel. “Now, where were we?” He crossed the room slowly. “Turn around,” he said. His voice was low, husky, delicious. Mel did what she was told.

She felt his hands on her hips. He slipped his fingers into the waistband. They felt cool against her burning skin. The material stuck slightly to the wound, and he tugged until they came free. Finally they were down and pooled around her ankles. She was naked from the waist down.

“Now isn’t that pretty,” Zach purred from behind her.

She started to turn, but he held her in place. “No,” he said. “Rest your hands on the bed and lean over.”

She wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that. Or maybe she liked it too much. She was feeling a little confused, which wasn’t like her at all. It must be the injury. It was affecting her brain. Maybe she’d better do as she was told.

She rested with her eyes closed. Didn’t move as she felt Zach’s fingers stroke gently across her heated flesh. The lightest of touches. “I’ve marked you,” he murmured.

“Well, don’t sound so pleased about it.”

He didn’t respond, but she felt him move away. He was rummaging in one of the cabinets. He came back. “Now, hold still,” he said. “I’m going to spray on some local, and I don’t want to numb more than I have to. I’d hate to cut off all feeling to the area.”

“Just hurry up and do it,” she said. “I’m in agony here.”

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“Shh,” he crooned, “Tiger will make the pain go away.”

“I should bloody think so since he caused it in the first place.” Leila spoke from the doorway, and Zach went still behind her. Mel heard him swear. “I’m sure I locked that door.”

“Yeah, well, there’s no locked doors on this ship. Right Mel?”

Mel thought for a moment; here she was, pants round her ankles, arse on fire. She swiveled her head around so she could look Leila in the face. “Actually, wrong,” she said. “Bugger off and lock the door behind you.”

Leila shrugged. “Just wanted to check you’re okay. Darla said she wasn’t sure.”

“Darla’s a troublemaker,” she muttered.

“Actually, she’s jealous. I’ll be off then. I just wanted to be sure.” She paused in the doorway. “Just be careful,” she said to Mel. “Because, I tell you, there’s some pretty kinky stuff going on inside his head.”

“Will you stay out of my fucking head?” Zach snarled.

Leila ignored him. "And whatever you do, don't let him get his hands on those cuffs." She shook her head, blond hair swinging. "Seriously kinky."

Mel heard a low growl from beside her.

Leila just smiled, waggled her fingers and left. The door slid closed behind her. Mel sighed. "How kinky?" she asked.

"Wait and see. Now hold still."

Mel held still. The effect was instantaneous; the cool spray taking the pain away.

"Ooh, that's lovely," she sighed.

"And I haven't even started yet."

Next came some sort of cream, Zach stroked it over the burns, but she couldn't feel a thing. It was bliss.

"I'm not going to put a dressing on as this stuff works best if the wounds left open. There's less chance of it leaving a scar."

She turned to look at him. "You sound like you've a lot of experience with this sort of thing."

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"I was in the army, it happens. There, that's done." He wiped his hands on a towel. "How does it feel?"

Mel straightened up slowly, expecting to feel the sting of pain, but there was nothing. "Definitely an improvement," she said. "Though I really wouldn't want to sit on it for a while."

Her pants were still tangled around her ankles, and she kicked them off. Her white shirt hung to the top of her thighs. She was almost decent.

Zach washed his hands. He splashed cold water on his face then turned to look at her. His eyes made a leisurely trip from head to toe. He smiled. "You should lie down for a while. You might not feel it right now but being shot by a blaster is a shock to the system."

"Perhaps you should have thought of that before you shot me," she replied.

"I didn't have time to do much thinking. Would you rather be dead?"

At his words, a tremor of shock ran through her body. Suddenly, it came to her that he had saved her life, and what that meant. She could be dead now, would have been if not for Zach. "No,

I wouldn't rather be dead." She paused. Could she do it? She took a deep breath. "Thank you."

He grinned. "Was that so hard?"

"Close on impossible. You know, I think I will have that lie down now, after all."

She made to clamber onto the high bed but Zach stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Take off your shirt first."

"What?"

"Your shirt," he repeated, "Take it off, you're not going to need it."

She glanced up into his face. His eyes had that sleepy, half-lidded look that sent a shiver rippling through her body. She shook herself.

"You're not seriously suggesting we have sex just after I've been shot?"

"Oh, yes I am. I've been as hard as a rock for the last two days, ever since you had your pretty little hands around me." He looked at her for a moment, before continuing. "Do you know how long it is since I had a woman?"

"Now how the hell would I know that?"

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“Well, it’s been a bloody long time, and I’m not waiting any longer.”

“You’re taking rather a lot for granted.”

“Am I?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Zach thought she was going to turn him down. He held his breath as he waited, trying to ignore the fact that his cock was painfully hard and his balls ached viciously. If he didn't get inside his little pirate soon he was going to go seriously insane.

She was obviously thinking about it carefully, staring at the floor, chewing on her luscious lower lip.

"Come on Mel..." he groaned.

She raised her head and looked at him then her hand went to the top button of her shirt and slowly released it.

A wild flare of excitement roared through his body. "Oh, thank you, God," he muttered.

Her fingers fumbled with the next button, and he reached out and placed his hand over hers. "Let me," he murmured. He closed his fingers around her hand. "Hey, you're trembling. Not scared of a little bit of sex are you?"

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It occurred to him as he spoke that she very well might be scared of sex. Who knew what she'd had to endure in three years in a brothel.

"Of course not."

He searched her face, but could read nothing from her expression.

He finished unfastening the shirt. When it was done he slid his hands inside, parted the material, and his hands glided up over her rib cage to cup her small pointed breasts. He was pleased to see her nipples were already tight buds. They hardened further, turning a deep, dark red as he stroked them with the pad of his thumb.

He moved his hands up to her shoulders and slid the shirt from her, tossed it on the floor. "You're beautiful," he said.

"No, I'm not."

"Don't argue."

She was lean, no spare fat, with long, clean lines and small pert breasts. There was nothing 'soft' about her, but his body reacted fiercely to the sight. He couldn't resist stroking one finger

over her tight little nipples, watching the way her skin puckered under his touch.

“Zach?”

He tore his eyes from her breasts, to her face. She still seemed nervous and he frowned. “Hmm?”

“I haven’t done this in a while.”

“How long is a while?”

She hesitated. “Ten years.”

He did the math. “So the last time was in the brothel and that doesn’t count. How about before that?”

She shook her head.

“What, nobody? You were a virgin? Then that makes this your first time.”

“Hardly,” Mel muttered.

Zach felt a wave of hatred rip through him at the thought of the men who had put her in that place. And for the men who had paid and used her. He was glad she had killed some of them. He’d like to hunt down the rest and cut off their damn dicks himself. He smiled at the thought.

“What?” she asked.

“Just think I might be catching something from you, that’s all. Never mind,” he continued as she gave him a blank look. “Up you get.”



Mel climbed up on the bed and lay flat on her stomach, head to the side, cheek lying against the pillow and watched as he stripped for action. First, he peeled off the t-shirt. He had a superb chest, ridged with muscle and huge, powerful shoulders. She didn’t have time to appreciate the sight fully because he was ripping off his pants. Her breath caught in her throat; he hadn’t been lying. He was rock hard; thick and long, almost vertical against his lean belly, the head purple and swollen.

He glanced across and caught her staring at him. He grinned. “Told you so.”

He moved to stand beside her. Her lashes fluttered closed as she felt his large hand stroke down the length of her back, grazing lightly over her buttocks, then pushing gently between her

closed thighs. She heard his sigh of satisfaction as he found her already hot and wet for him.

At that first touch her whole body clenched in anticipation and his other hand came round to stroke her back, massage the tense muscles. "Relax kitten," he murmured. "Just let me do this for you."

Then his hand moved between her legs, probing the saturated folds of her sex. One long finger slid inside, and she felt her muscles clamp around it. He withdrew then glided higher, making lazy circles, avoiding the most sensitive spot, until she thought she would go mad for his touch. She raised herself up, opening her thighs wider, not even the sound of his masculine chuckle could stop the instinctive movement.

She turned her head to glare at him. His eyes caught hers and their gazes locked and he touched her there, right where she needed it. Her whole world exploded. She collapsed onto the pillow, eyes tight shut, her breath coming in short sharp pants. Still, his fingers moved against her, and she came again, shuddering and jerking.

"Stop," she moaned.

Finally his fingers went still. She lay unmoving, only the occasional ripple of pleasure shivering through her. At last, when the shudders died down to quiet tremors, she opened her eyes. He was so close, and he leaned down and kissed her on the mouth. A long, slow kiss of possession, his tongue gliding against hers.

He straightened and took a step back. He was grinning. "That was easy," he said.

He climbed onto the bed and placed himself behind her, between her spread thighs. She felt his hands on her hips, raising her up onto her knees, and she struggled feebly. "Can't," she mumbled, "I've no bones left, everything's turned to Jello."

"Come on kitten," he urged, "my turn now."

His hands were insistent, and she allowed him to position her as he wanted. She was on her hands and knees in front of him, just as she had imagined. She should have felt vulnerable, but with a start of surprise, she realized that she trusted Zach. The thought made her turn her head and look at him over her shoulder.

He was poised behind her, his expression

intent, one hand on his cock. He saw her watching him and smiled. "Ready?" he asked.

She nodded. Then turned away. A moment later she felt the head of his cock probing the opening to her body, and then, with one fluid move, he filled her. She gasped, and he went still, waiting for her to grow accustomed to him.

"Jesus, that feels sooo good," he murmured.

It did, and she bucked against him, wanting more. One hand held her hip steady as he started to move; slowly at first, pulling out of her almost completely only to push back in. The sensation of his cock dragging against her sensitive flesh was exquisite, and she moaned softly.

She could feel the tension radiating from him as he ruthlessly controlled his movements, and she pressed back against him. His other hand came round to touch her between the legs, lightly stroking over the tight little bud. She was still so sensitive that she came immediately, and she screamed.

"Shh," he muttered, "or we'll have Leila coming in here to rescue you."

She bit her lip, muffled her groans in the

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pillow as he picked up speed. Both hands were on her hips now as he slammed into her harder and faster sending shock waves of pleasure shooting through her until she felt his final thrust as he spilled himself inside her. For a moment he was still. "Okay," he said, "that was a pretty good start. No doubt we'll get better with practice."

"Can't do it again," Mel said. "I've died."

He eased out of her with a groan and collapsed on to the bed beside her.

A long time later, Mel lay on her side, her body aching. Zach was beside her, lying on his stomach, head resting on his folded arms, eyes closed. She had managed to stir herself enough to do it again. And again. Now it was Zach who was exhausted.

She reached out and trailed her fingers along his back, tracing the pattern of black and gold tiger stripes. They were beautiful. She looked back at his face to find his eyes open. He was watching her.

"Does it bother you, that I'm not classified as human?" he asked.

“No, why should it?” she replied. “With the exception of Darla, no-one on *The Revenge* is.”

“Well, I know about Leila, and Angie and Grace are pretty obvious.”

Mel grinned. “Yeah, we rescued them from an experimental space station. They’re some sort of plant hybrid, they can even photosynthesis. It’s cool.”

He was looking at her curiously. Obviously trying to work out just what it was that made her ‘not human’. “So what about you?” he asked.

“You mean it wasn’t in ‘my records’?”

“I never picked it up.”

She twisted to show him the scar on her left shoulder where she had carved away the tattoo.

His eyes widened. “You’re a clone?”

She nodded. “Born and bred in a lab.”

“So what happened?”

“I got out.”

He raised an eyebrow in query, clearly not satisfied with her answer. She shrugged. Why not tell him, he already knew the worst bits. “One day

we had a visit from my Primary, that's what they called them in the lab, the originals who paid for us to be created. We weren't supposed to know what we were but I overheard them talking, she was asking when could they do the operation, and I got curious. They were pretty lax about security in that place so when she left I sneaked out and looked at the records. I was eighteen. I wasn't ready to let my brain be discarded so some rich bitch could have my body.

"Anyway, I waited until I had the opportunity and I ran. Then I hunted her down and killed her. The problem was, I'd never been outside the lab before, so of course they caught me pretty much straight away."

"Was it worth it?"

"At the time, I thought so." She grinned. "I made sure that bitch's brain was mush. No way was she putting that brain into any other body."

"And now?"

"Looking back, I guess I'm glad I did it. But ten years ago, chained to a cot in the space brothel, well, then I wasn't quite so sure. Maybe I shouldn't have killed her. Maybe I should have

just run. But I wasn't the first of her clones, and I wouldn't have been the last. I felt I had to stop her."

"I'd have done the same."

They were silent for a moment. "So what happens now?" Zach asked.

"With regards to what?"

"With regards to what the hell we are going to do next. We need to go to the Agency, tell them about Sanderson."

"I'm not going anywhere near the Agency."

"Then we need to go after Sanderson ourselves."

"You mean go to Talmare." She paused. "Er, what did you say he's got there, an army of over ten thousand, all trained killers? Let me think about this plan for a moment. No, I don't even need a moment. Are you completely insane?"

"Right then, so what do you think we should do?"

"We should get the hell out of here and as far away from Sanderson as we possibly can."

“And what about his plan to take over The Agency? They might not be perfect, but you’ve seen what Sanderson is like, the man’s a psychopathic killer.”

She shrugged. “We could send them a message.”

“They won’t listen.”

A flash of rage shot through her. “That’s their fault then.” She glared at him. “Look, get it through your thick head, I am not going there.” She breathed in deeply, trying to calm her fury. Maybe he deserved an explanation. “Up until ten years ago, I spent my whole life locked up, and I’m never giving anyone the chance to lock me up again. Okay?”

He looked as though he was going to argue, then the tension went out of his shoulders, and he relaxed. “Okay, we’ll think of something. But the other thing we need to talk about is Leila.”

“I know.”

“But first, I need food. I’ll go to the Galley and bring us some back. You stay here.”

“Okay, so long as it’s not raspberry Jello.”

“I like raspberry Jello.”

Mel didn't bother getting up as he left. She felt totally drained and her arse was beginning to smart as the local anesthetic wore off. She'd ask Zach to give her another zap when he got back.

But when the door slid open, ten minutes later, Zach wasn't alone, and she knew straight away that something was wrong.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Zach's appearance was grim. Darla stood beside him, her face streaked with tears. Angie and Grace crowded in behind, their expressions identical masks of anguish.

Mel swallowed. It was obvious something bad had happened, but what? Leila wasn't with them. "Where's Leila?" she forced herself to ask.

It was Darla who answered. "She's gone."

Mel sat up quickly, biting back a cry of pain as she sat on the burns. She winced, then slowly stood up, dragging the sheet with her. "Gone where? When?"

"She left a note."

Darla handed Mel a crumpled piece of paper. Mel scanned it.

Don't come after me.

Leila

TIGER OF TALMARE

“Very informative,” she muttered. “How did she go?”

“Took one of the pods.”

“Do we know when?”

“Yeah, the pod was launched four hours ago. She’s got a good head start.”

“And we’ve been going in opposite direction all that time.”

Darla frowned. “How do you know which way she’s gone?”

“Because she’s gone after Sanderson,” Zach said.

Darla looked mystified, and Mel realized that they hadn’t told the rest of the crew of Leila’s connection with Talmare.

“I’ll explain later,” she said. “But Zach’s right, she must have gone after Sanderson. Christ! What a mess.” She ran a hand through her hair.

“We only realized she wasn’t here when Zach appeared and asked where she was. We were all in the galley, having a celebration drink. We hadn’t even thought about Leila. I found the note in her room.”

"We have to go after her," Mel said.

Zach frowned. "You realize she'll have reached Talmare by now?" Mel nodded. "So what do you think she plans to do?" he asked.

"Well, that's the interesting thing about Leila, she doesn't plan and she doesn't think, she just jumps right in." She turned to Darla. "Have you tried to contact her?"

"She left her comm unit in her room and I haven't been able to get an answer from the pod."

"Well, try again. And get *The Revenge* turned around. We're heading for Talmare."

She watched as Darla trailed out followed by Angie and Grace leaving her alone with Zach. "I should have guessed Leila would do this," she said.

"Hey, she's the telepathic one."

"She's my friend. If I'd thought about it at all I'd have known she wouldn't let Sanderson go. But I was too busy with you to think about anything else."

Zach came across to her. He put his arms

around her and pulled her to him. Her head nestled in the curve of his neck, and she breathed in the now familiar scent.

“She’s a grown woman,” he said. “You’re not responsible.”

For a moment, she relaxed against him, then she shrugged him off and stepped back though his arms still held her loosely. “You don’t understand. You never saw her when she first arrived at the brothel. She was only fifteen, so small and sweet and obviously terrified, but you could still sense the goodness in her. The thing was, she always seemed to attract a certain sort of man, and I don’t mean the protective type. The telepathy didn’t help, she knew what they were thinking, and they slowly broke her down. After a year in that place all that was left was hatred.” Mel blinked back a tear. “We have to get her back, Zach.”

“We will,” he said, leaning across and kissing her on the forehead.

She sighed. “Yeah, maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Now,” Zach said, “turn around.”

“Why?”

“Don’t look so suspicious,” he said. “I was just going to give you another blast of local. You must be feeling it by now.”

She’d forgotten all about the pain, now it flooded back. She turned, felt Zach tug aside the sheet and then the cooling spray.

“You should rest,” Zach said.

“I don’t think I could.”

“Well, we’ll go to your room, you can lie down and we can try and come up with a plan.”

“A plan?”

“I know it’s something of a novel approach for you, but maybe you should give it a go.”

She scowled. “Too much planning stifles your natural reflexes.”

“And none at all gets you killed.”

“I’m still here.”

“I know, and I marvel at that every moment of the day.”

“Ha ha. I’m going to my room.”

She wrapped the sheet around her and stalked off with as much dignity as she could manage.

“Go ahead,” Zach called after her. “I’ll get that food and meet you there.”



They were in Mel’s room. Mel was lying face down on the bed. Zach was sitting on the floor, close by, long legs stretched out, feeding her from a plate balanced on his lap.

“Right then, this plan,” she said.

“I know Sanderson’s set-up on Talmare, I can at least minimize our chances of being blown out of the sky before we even land.”

“That would be an excellent start.”

He frowned. “Has anyone ever told you sarcasm is not a desired trait in a woman?”

She shrugged. Was about to reply when she saw Darla peering in through the open doorway. She rolled onto her side.

“Did you manage to get hold of the pod?”

Darla shook her head. She stood shifting from one foot to the other, gnawing on her lower lip. Obviously there was more bad news.

“What is it?” Mel asked.

“We’ve received a communication from Sanderson. He’s got Leila.”

A ripple of fear washed over her. She’d hoped they could get to Leila before she reached Sanderson. “And?” she asked.

“He’s going to contact you in thirty minutes.”



Sanderson’s face appeared on the screen. He didn’t bother with any pleasantries this time. “By now, I assume you’re aware I have your friend.”

Mel nodded.

“I’m willing to swap her for Zach. Bring him to me and I’ll let you both go.”

“Duh! Do I look like a gullible fool?”

Sanderson raised an eyebrow. She heard Zach snort behind her and shot him a black look.

“I think you’ll find that you don’t have any choice. Bring Zach or I will kill her slowly, and I’ll send you a wave of me doing it.”

The screen shifted from Sanderson to show Leila being held by a man. Mel's breath caught in her throat. Leila looked tiny and fragile, her face bruised, lips swollen and her shirt spotted with blood. She looked terrified, Mel had never seen her show that much emotion before. What had they done to her?

Zach came to stand behind her, his hands gripped her shoulders. "Don't let him see how much she means to you," he whispered in her ear.

Mel tried to keep her expression blank but knew she had failed when Sanderson came back on the screen, his face a mask of smug satisfaction. "She's a delicate little thing," he said. "We should have a lot of fun with her."

Mel frowned. 'Delicate little thing'? The words didn't quite ring true. Leila might look delicate, but it didn't take people long to realize that she was anything but. Unless, of course, Leila didn't want them to realize that. Was she acting out some plan? God, Mel hoped so. She really couldn't see any way out of this. They were going to have to go and just pray for miracles. But she wasn't going to Talmare. She knew once

in Sanderson's stronghold, their chances of ever getting out were zero.

"I'm not coming to Talmare," she said.

Sanderson shrugged. "Pity, I would love to show you our hospitality, but no matter. We can meet on the moon where we had the original rendezvous. You have six hours."

The screen went blank, and Mel sagged. Zach's hands tightened on her shoulders. "You could always hand me over," he said.

"Of course I could."

"That way there's at least a chance. The other way there's none, and you know it. We can't fight Sanderson he's too big."

"We beat him once."

"Only because he underestimated you. He won't do it again."

"I'm not handing you over, he'll kill you."

"I'm dead either way. And I'm not suggesting you hand me over. I go alone. You stay here, out of the way, and I'll send Leila back."

Mel pulled out of his grip and turned to face

him. "I stay out of the way?" She smiled, it didn't reach her eyes. "You're a very amusing man, you know that."

Zach scowled. "I'm not being funny. You're not going anywhere near Talmare."

She put her hands on her hips. "Oh yeah! And who's going to stop me."

"Me," he growled, taking a step towards her, standing so close they were almost touching. His arms were folded across his chest, he was huge, towering over her, but Mel refused to be intimidated. She tilted her chin so she could stare him in the eye.

"For God's sake, you two, stop it!" Darla spoke from behind them. "This isn't helping."

She came round and glared at them both. Mel could see the worry in her eyes, and she forced herself to relax. Zach remained tense and Darla turned to him, her blue eyes narrowed. "Drop the stance, macho man, it really doesn't impress us." Zach didn't budge, and she sighed. "I know what you're doing, you're trying to protect Mel, but it's not going to work. You know as well as we do that there's no way Sanderson will just

calmly let Leila go once he's got you. It will never happen."

"But he might not think it's worth coming after *The Revenge*, you'll be safe."

She shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. I'd lean towards, not. Sanderson doesn't seem the sort of man to leave loose ends."

"But..."

"No buts! You're missing the point here. Whether Sanderson comes after us or not is irrelevant because there's no way we're leaving Leila. She's our friend and we're going to get her out of there, or die trying."

Mel took a step towards Darla and hugged her. She could feel her shaking. "Thank you," she murmured. She turned to look at Zach. He was watching them both. For a moment he remained tense then he relaxed, and she could see the resignation in his eyes.

"Okay, so what do we do?" he asked.

"We fight."

"Great," he muttered. "Just great."

"The thing that worries me though," Darla

said, “is - what’s Leila up to? You said you’d explain it to me.”

Mel filled her in on Leila’s background. At the end Darla was frowning. “Did you think there was anything strange about her Mel? Just now, with Sanderson?”

Mel thought back and nodded. “She looked terrified.”

“Yeah, I noticed that, it was weird.”

Zach shook his head. “What was weird? The poor girl was about to be tortured and killed, God knows what they’ve done to her already. Of course she was bloody terrified.”

Darla looked at him pityingly. “Leila doesn’t do terrified.”

“No,” Mel agreed, “she’s definitely up to something, but what?”

“Hey,” Zach said, “maybe she’s got a plan. Maybe we should get one as well.”

Mel shrugged, purely to wind him up. “What’s to plan?” she said nonchalantly. “We go in there, we kill Sanderson and everybody with him, and we rescue Leila.”

"Sounds a good plan to me," Darla said. Zach shook his head in disgust.



"Okay so that's it then," Zach said, some time later. "We go down in the pod with Angie and Grace. Darla stays with *The Revenge*. If this goes bad, you get out of here, and you go straight to the Agency. You tell them what Sanderson is up to, and you don't leave until they listen."

"Okay, but just be clear on one thing, I'm not leaving until you're all dead."

Zach thought about arguing, but what was the point. "Fine."

"Hey," Mel said, "did you know, you just called my ship *The Revenge* and not *The Valiant*?"

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did," Darla said.

"No..." he began, then scowled. "Oh, shut up."

There was no way this was going to work. As a plan, Zach decided, it was pretty much on a par

with his last one, i.e. absolute crap. He couldn't understand why Mel and Darla seemed almost cheerful. Didn't they realize they were all going to die down there? Didn't they care?

It was strange. He'd been in so many battles and he'd never been scared of dying before, never even thought about it. He'd always relished a good fight. Now he realized he didn't want to die. What had changed? He glanced again at Mel. She turned slightly and caught his eye, smiled. She looked exhausted. It probably didn't help that she couldn't sit down. She needed to sleep. He was going to take her to bed. There was nothing more they could do now.

At the thought of bed, his cock twitched, and he lowered his eyes and ran them down her body, lingering at the slight swell of her breasts beneath her t-shirt. Back up to her face, she was still watching him, a slight flush staining her cheekbones.

She yawned. "God, I'm tired," she muttered, staring at him through half-closed eyes.

He stood up slowly and crossed the room to where she was leaning against the console. "You should go to bed," he murmured. "If you're

going to fight you need a clear head and all your energy.”

“So do you,” Mel replied. “Perhaps you should go to bed as well.”

He reached out and stroked a finger down her cheek. “Perhaps we could go together?”

“Oh for God’s sake, get out of here,” Darla muttered. “The pair of you are making me feel ill.”

“You should get some sleep yourself,” Zach said.

“I couldn’t. Besides, I’m fine. I’m going to make sure the pod’s okay, then check the weapons over.”

“Right then,” Zach said. Without asking he reached forward and swept Mel off her feet, tossing her over his shoulder. This time she didn’t protest as he carried her from the bridge.

“Bloody caveman,” he heard Darla mutter behind them and grinned.



Mel watched as he stripped off his clothes, ripping off his t-shirt and dropping his pants in one smooth action. He sat down on the bed, legs stretched out, his head resting on the pillows bunched behind him and regarded her through heavy lidded eyes.

He was already hard, and Mel stared down at him. "Are you always like that?" she asked, nodding in the direction of his truly impressive erection. It twitched with a life of its own under her watchful gaze.

He grinned. "Pretty much, when you're around."

"So, what happened to one last fuck? This must be number four."

"Complaining?"

She smiled and untied the belt of her robe. She slipped it from her shoulders and let it drop to the floor. Her body started to melt as Zach watched her hungrily.

He patted the edge of the bed next to him. "Come here," he murmured.

She knelt beside him. Zach clasped her waist

in his strong hands and lifted her effortlessly so she straddled his lean hips. He released his hold and lay back, his arms clasped behind his head. "I'm all yours, honey," he said.

She could feel his cock nudging at the hot, slick entrance to her body. She was already slippery with desire, and she widened her legs and felt the tip slide inside. She groaned softly as she slowly impaled herself on the length of him. Her hands resting on his broad shoulders as she lowered herself.

Her nails dug in to his skin as he filled her completely. For a moment, she stayed still, eyes closed, reveling in the sensation of that huge cock buried deep inside her.

She opened her eyes to find him watching her through narrowed eyes that gleamed out at her through their thick fringe of black lashes. For once there was no humor in his expression, just red hot desire. She leaned over and kissed him on the mouth as she started to rock gently against him.

Her eyes drifted closed again as she made deliciously slow love to him, worshipping his body with her own, loving the drag of him

against her as she raised and lowered herself, the friction against her most sensitive parts as she ground herself down into his lap.

His arms came around her, pulling her against him, holding her close as she kept up the slow, relentless, grinding rhythm. She could hear the heavy thud of his heart, feel the slickness of his sweat gilded skin, smell the feral heat of his arousal. There was nothing else, only the two of them, closed together in a world of their own making.

The pleasure was building inside them. Rising to a crescendo. So close now. Zach's breath was coming hard and fast, but still she didn't hurry until, at last, she tipped them over the edge, and her body went up in flames. She felt Zach go with her, and their arms tightened around each other as she continued to move, continued to ride them even higher, straining the last drops of pleasure from their exhausted bodies. Finally, she had to stop, and she felt his hands loosen their grip. For long minutes he held her gently as shudders ran through them both. Then he lifted her from his spent body, lay her down on top of him and brushed her short hair from her

face. She gazed up at him sleepily. "I never knew it could be like this," she murmured. Her eyes fluttered closed and she felt sleep tugging at her consciousness.

"Go to sleep," he said.

And she did.



Zach lay for a long time, watching her sleeping. Her body sprawled over his, his arms wrapped around her slender back. He didn't want to let her go. He never wanted to let her go. But he knew he had no choice.

It was a suicide mission they were planning. There was no way they could get out of there alive. But maybe they didn't all have to die.

He stroked down the long line of her back once then slipped out from beneath her. She moaned in her sleep but didn't wake, and he stood gazing down at her.

If he managed this she was going to be seriously pissed. But then he was going to be dead, so it

wasn't really his problem. He went in search of Darla.



Something pulled Mel from her sleep. She came to consciousness slowly. She was no longer lying on Zach but on the soft sheets, and she was alone in the bed. She dragged herself up on one elbow and peered around the room. Zach was standing a meter away. Watching her. She knew instantly that something was wrong, and a jolt of fear ran through her.

"What is it?" she asked.

He didn't answer immediately, and she looked down from his face to his hands. He was holding something, and she recognised the activator from the restraints they had used on him. At first she thought it must be some game, but his grim expression suggested no games. She glanced at her own hands and was unsurprised when she saw the silver cuffs circling her wrists.

She nibbled on her lips trying to think this through. It didn't occur to her that he was double-crossing them in any way. Oh, no, she

knew exactly what he was doing. Trying to be a bloody hero. Again!

“I love you,” he said.

At the words she looked up quickly, searching his face.

“You know, I’ve never said that to anyone before,” he continued.

“Don’t do this, Zach.”

He shook his head. “I’ve thought it through, and I’ve got a plan. I figure I can get Leila out safely and kill Sanderson.”

“We can do it together,” she said.

“Well, you see there’s a slight problem with the plan. It doesn’t include me getting out of there. And while that’s an option I’m willing to contemplate for myself there’s no way I’m taking you with me on a suicide mission.”

He was toying with the small box as he spoke.

She watched him, her whole body tensing in anticipation. “I mean it Zach, don’t you dare press that button. Look, you may think you’re doing this for me. But you are so wrong.”

His face remained expressionless, and she could feel the helpless fury welling up inside her. How dare he even consider leaving her behind? “You arrogant bastard,” she yelled. “Why should you be the only one that gets to play hero? Leila’s my friend. My responsibility. It’s my job to rescue her. Get your bloody finger off that bloody button.”

Zach pressed it. For a moment she felt icily cold, then nothing.

He came to stand over her, and she forced herself to calm down, think rationally.

“Darla’s asleep,” he said. “I sent her off, told her I’d take over the watch.”

“And she trusted you? Stupid cow!”

“She’ll release you when she wakes up. I’ll leave the box here. But I’ve altered the ship’s course. By the time you get free there’ll be no point in coming after me.”

“Please, Zach, take me with you.” She squeezed out a tear, and he smiled. It didn’t reach his eyes.

“Nice try, but not a chance.” He leaned over her and kissed her briefly on the lips. “Goodbye,”

he said, "It's been a pleasure to finally get to know you after all these years. Be good."

He stepped back, then turned and walked away without looking back.

"Goddamn fucking bastard. Get back here. Don't you dare leave me like this!"

But it was obvious he wasn't coming back. The moment that truth sank in, Mel wished desperately that she could just have one minute more. One minute to tell him she loved him. She couldn't bear the thought of him dying without knowing that.

"Darla! Darla!" She shouted until her voice was gone and she could shout no more. She twisted her head and buried her face in the pillow and realized she was crying. She never cried. Not since she was eighteen and had discovered what life had in store for her. Now she sobbed. He was going to die, and she couldn't even move. With that thought she started to get angry again. Whose fucking fault was it that she couldn't move? He deserved to die.

She didn't hear Darla enter the room, just looked up and there she was, standing beside the

bed. She looked at Mel, saw the cuffs and her eyes widened.

“Get these fucking things off me,” Mel snarled.

“I need the box,” Darla said, glancing around the room. “So, he’s run away then? Didn’t like the odds? You know, I never really trusted him. I mean, how can you trust someone who eats people?”

“He does not eat people,” Mel ground out. “And he’s gone to get Leila and kill Sanderson.”

“Oh.” Darla was looking round the room. “I can’t see the activator. Maybe he’s taken it with him.”

“No, he wouldn’t do that. Look harder.” She tried to raise her head but, apart from a slight lift, failed miserably. She let it drop back to the pillow. What the hell was Darla up to?

“Ah, here it is.”

“At bloody last,” she muttered. “Well, press the bloody button then.”

“No need to get ratty.”

“Darla...”

She felt a flood of relief as the life returned to her body. She swung her legs round then shot up as she sat on her blaster behind. Zach had left the anesthetic spray on the table by the bed, and she picked it up and handed it to Darla. "Would you?" She turned and felt the cooling spray relieve the pain.

"Right," she said, pulling on a pair of pants and a t-shirt. "Can we catch him up?" She glanced at Darla, "How come you're here anyway, Zach said you'd gone off to get some rest?"

"I couldn't sleep. Then I remembered I hadn't warned Zach about the tertiary engine - she needs a lot of babying or she cuts out, so I went back to the bridge. He wasn't there, and I noticed the second pod had been launched. So, I came here."

"Thank God! I think I was about to spontaneously combust, I was so pissed off."

"He's only been gone an hour, we might just catch him before he gets to the rendezvous point."

"Right then, let's go. But there's something we

need to do first. Even if we all die, Sanderson is not getting away with this.”

“So what do we do?”

“Get a wave through to the Intergalactic Agency. I need to talk to them. If they ask what it’s about, tell them telepaths. Tell them we know what happened to the space liner that crashed ten years ago, and we know who did it.”

“Do we?”

“Actually, yes -- It was Leila. But don’t tell them that. We’re going to give them Sanderson.”

“And what is it you’re expecting them to do?”

Mel shrugged. “You never know, maybe they’ll believe us and maybe they’ll have some personnel in the area and maybe they’ll decide to help us.”

“That’s an awful lot of maybe’s.”

CHAPTER NINE

Zach watched *The Revenge* land with a feeling of inevitability. Here was yet another plan doomed to failure. He was losing his touch. Actually, he might have already lost it.

Still, he couldn't get over the sense of anticipation as the hatch slid open and Mel emerged into the dim light. Darla was behind her, but he hardly noticed her presence, his eyes focused solely on Mel. She was back in tight, black pants and long boots, a gun strapped to one thigh, a knife to the other. Her fingers hooked in her belt as she swaggered towards him.

He almost smiled. He'd honestly never expected to fall in love. It was crazy. But crazy, nice. Or would be if they weren't all about to die.

That made the anger start its slow burn inside him. Why couldn't she stay put?

She came to a halt in front of him. Her eyes

were narrowed, yellow and cold. “Bastard,” she muttered.

Zach grinned. Then his smile faded. God, it was good to see her, but he wished she hadn’t come. He’d thought he was reconciled to this. Now seeing her again, he was filled with an urge to pick her up, carry her back onto *The Revenge* and fly as far away from this mess as he could. He knew it wasn’t going to happen like that. Still, he could try.

“Why don’t you two ladies just turn around and get yourselves back on *The Revenge* where it’s safe, and let me do my job.”

“Patronizing bastard.”

“He shook his head. “We’ve been over this. There’s no point in us all going down here.”

“Actually,” Mel said, “we’ve got a plan.”

“Well, I suppose there’s a first time for everything.”

“God, I hate sarcasm in a man. Just listen, will you.”

Zach listened as she spoke quickly, outlining what was supposed to happen. He was impressed.

It wasn't perfect, but there was a chance, a very small chance, it would work. It really depended on them persuading Sanderson that they had no interest in coming after him. And Sanderson knew Zach too well to believe that. Still it didn't look like he had a lot of choice in the matter. He thought it over some more and frowned. "There're an awful lot of maybes."

"So, what were you planning to do that was so much better?" Mel snapped.

Zach lifted his t-shirt. Four grenades were strapped around his waist. "I was going to threaten to blow us all up unless he let Leila go. Then once she was away I was going to -" he paused and shrugged, "- blow us all up, I guess."

"Super plan. But I think mine's better."

He sighed. "From a personal point of view, I'd have to agree with you. Right then, Darla, you'd better get back to *The Revenge*."

Both women stared at him.

"Bossy, isn't he?" Darla muttered.

"What is it about a man," Mel said, "that thinks he's got to be in charge?" She turned to

Darla. "Right then, Darla, you'd better get back to *The Revenge*."

Darla turned to go, and Mel smiled at Zach. "I guess some people have it and some don't."

Zach just rolled his eyes.



They watched as Darla walked away. Mel waited until she saw *The Revenge* lift off then turned to Zach. He was eating her up with his eyes. "I didn't think I'd see you again," he said.

"Well, whose stupid fault is that? You know, I still can't believe you did that thing with the cuffs. If we get out of this I'm going to slap them on you for a month."

"Oh yeah, you and whose army?"

"You think I couldn't?"

"I know you couldn't."

"We'll see."

He moved so fast she hardly saw him. One moment he was a meter away. The next he was right in front of her, her wrists clasped in his

huge hands. He pushed her hands behind her back, transferring them both into one of his. Then he plastered her body against him. His free hand slid up her back and into her hair, he forced her head up, and he kissed her. At the first thrust of his tongue all thoughts of fighting back vanished, and she melted, kissing him back hungrily. After a minute, he raised his head and stared down into her eyes. "See," he murmured, "easy."

"You took me by surprise. It won't happen again."

"Only because we're probably not going to live that long."

She shook her head. "You're being negative again."

He leant forward and kissed her again, hard and fast, then released her. "Sanderson's here," he said.

She glanced up and saw a pod coming in to land. It circled then came to rest just outside the clearing.

The hatch opened and Sanderson came out followed by three men. Leila was with them,

and Mel looked at her carefully. She appeared unharmed other than the bruising on her face. She lifted her head and stared at Mel, but her eyes held no expression.

Sanderson came to a halt a few meters away. One of the guards remained close to him. The other two moved to the side where they had a clear view of Mel and Zach.

“Let me do the talking,” Mel muttered, then stepped forward before he could argue.

“Look,” Mel said to Sanderson, “I’m a pirate, I don’t care who runs the Universe. You, the Intergalactic Agency, I really don’t give a shit. So why don’t you just let us go on our way and we won’t disclose what we know about you to the Agency.”

Sanderson didn’t answer; instead he turned his head to look at Leila. “Leila, tell me what they are up to.”

Leila walked past him and came to stand in front of Mel and Zach. She stared at them, her eyes cold and blank. Mel shivered. Something was very wrong here.

“It’s really quite simple,” Leila murmured.

TIGER OF TALMARE

“Tiger there, is a genuine hero, he’s here to save me. How sweet.” She leaned forward and patted his cheek. “But really, I don’t need saving.” Mel noticed she was wearing leather gloves and that Zach flinched back from her touch. “And Mel’s here to save Tiger. She loves him. How very odd.”

Mel’s eyes narrowed. “Leila, what’s going on?”

“I told you not to come,” she said. “You should have listened to me.”

“We’re going to get you out of here, Leila. We have a plan.”

Leila turned to Sanderson. “She’s going to tell you that they have a communication set up with the Agency and that it will be sent unless we all get off here alive.” She paused for a moment then looked back at Mel. “She’s lying. There’s nothing set up.”

Mel had been watching Sanderson, now she swung round to stare at Leila. What was going on? Leila was working with Sanderson, but why? Mel waited for her to continue, to tell Sanderson that the Agency already knew everything, that

they were on their way to Talmare, but Leila said nothing further.

“What’s going on,” Zach whispered from beside her.

Mel shrugged. “How the fuck should I know?”

“I could still blow us up.”

“Don’t you dare!” She turned to Leila. “Why?”

“All my adult life, I’ve been a freak. Now I have a chance to be with people of my own kind, to do what I was born to do. Besides, he’s promised to tell me where my brother is.” She turned to Sanderson. “You promised you would tell me if I got them here. Where is he?”

Sanderson shrugged. “No reason why not. After all, your friends won’t be leaving here alive. Your brother is in a compound beneath the garrison on Talmare.” He turned to Zach and smiled. “Right beneath your feet all that time.”

“So what about that little chat you promised me?” Zach asked. “I was looking forward to it.”

“Well, you see, Leila here has told me that the

information has gone no further, so I'm afraid we're going to forgo our little chat. I was rather looking forward to it as well, but you do seem to have a rather inconsiderate habit of wriggling out of entanglements. So this time we're just going to get it over with. Leila, come away now. Leave your friends." He held out a hand.

Mel knew something was up; this wasn't going down as Sanderson planned whatever he thought. She just had no clue how it was going down. But whatever was going to happen, it had better happen fast because their two guards were drawing their weapons, aiming them. She could see their fingers tightening on the triggers.

Zach took hold of her hand and squeezed. She glanced at him. He was staring at Leila.

"Bitch," he muttered.

"Shh," Mel whispered. "Just be ready."

"Ready for what? To die?"

"Ready for anything." She turned back to concentrate on Leila.

Leila took a step towards Sanderson. She was tugging off the leather gloves. She glanced back

over her shoulder and smiled at Mel as she took Sanderson's outstretched hand. It was a smile of such malicious pleasure that Mel suddenly had an inkling of what was going to happen. It seemed to occur in slow motion. She stared at their joined hands then up at Sanderson's face. Saw the moment the pain hit his system. His eyes widened, he pulled away from Leila, stared down at his hand in horror. He started to scream.

At the sound, the two guards covering them swung round.

"Now!" Mel yelled at Zach.

They moved together. She leaped forward towards the man closest, kicking the weapon from his hand. She whirled and kicked again, this time hitting him in the throat. He fell to the ground and Mel lunged for the blaster, picked it up and shot him through the heart. She straightened up, looked around. Beside her Zach had taken out his guard.

Sanderson was still screaming, frantically rubbing his hand against his clothing. "What have you done?"

Leila shrugged. "Poisoned you, of course. Don't

bother trying to get it off. You're already dead." She turned away from him. The remaining guard had been looking on bemused, now he grabbed at Leila, and she turned and gripped his bare arm. "That was pretty stupid," she murmured. A moment later he started to scream.

Sanderson writhed on the ground, blood erupted from his eyes and nose, blossomed into open sores across his skin. Then the screams stopped, and low animal moans trickled from his throat. Mel came to stand over him. Leila joined her.

"Shouldn't we shoot him or something?" Mel asked.

"No, I want to see how the poison works. It's supposed to literally boil the blood."

"Ouch," Mel murmured.

"Quick though." Sanderson had gone still; Leila nudged him with her toe. "Dead." Behind them the guard also stopped moving. "About a minute, I reckon, I thought it would be quicker."

Zach came up beside her. "Does someone want to explain what the hell just happened?"

Leila cast him a disinterested look. "Not particularly." She nodded at the bodies. "But hey, if you're feeling hungry, Tiger, go ahead, help yourself."

Zach scowled. Mel touched him on the arm. "I think Leila had a better plan than we did."

Leila grinned. "Too bloody right I did. Though, honestly that was never going to be much of a challenge was it?"

Mel glanced at Sanderson. "So, how did you do it?"

"Well, as I told you, the problem was getting the poison on the subject without touching it yourself." She raised her right hand and waggled her fingers. Mel had to force herself not to step back. "Lend me your knife," Leila said.

Mel passed her the knife and watched as she seemingly pushed the blade under the skin of her palm. A clear, thin membrane dislodged itself and she peeled it off and held it up on the tip. "Impermeable membrane," she said, "impregnated with poison. How cool is that?"

"Really cool," Zach muttered. "Get rid of that thing."

Leila scuffed a hole in the sand with her boot, dropped the membrane and covered it over.

Across the clearing, the engines of Sanderson's pod fired up. They all looked up at the sound. "That's the rest of Sanderson's bodyguards deciding there's nothing left to guard," Zach said.

"Do we let them go?"

He shrugged. "Why not?"

Mel watched as the pod took off and disappeared. It occurred to her then that they were all still alive. She'd honestly expected to die here. She grinned.

"What?" Zach asked.

"We're alive and Sanderson's dead." She took a deep breath. "There's something I wished I'd told you, when you left me back there on *The Revenge*."

"Hmm?"

Oh God, could she do this? She swallowed, licked her dry lips. "I..."

"Oh for pity's sake," Leila snapped. "There's no nice way to do this, just tell him!"

Mel glared at her. "This isn't easy you know."

Leila rolled her eyes, and Mel turned back to Zach.

"Mel?" He was frowning, but God he was gorgeous.

"What I was trying to say is that I love you, Okay."

He grinned. "Wow."

"Yeah well, I might never say it again, so make the most of it."

He took a step towards her, his arms came round her and he pulled her roughly towards him.

"Ow," Mel yelped, "get your hands off my arse, it's bloody sore."

His hands slid up her back and he kissed her, and not even the sound of Leila retching in the background could dim the fierce delight that flooded her body.

EPilogue

“Right then,” Darla said as the engines fired up. “So where are we heading, Captain?”

“To Talmare, of course.”

Darla stopped what she was doing and stared. “That’s crazy, any moment now it’ll be crawling with people from the Agency.”

“I know, but we’ve promised to find Leila’s brother.”

“She does realize that he’s going to be a man, doesn’t she?” Zach said. “She will be able to hold back from killing him.”

“I haven’t killed you yet, have I?” Leila said, strolling onto the bridge. She took the seat next to Mel and put her booted feet up on the console. “But don’t hold your breath,” she added in an undertone.

Zach ignored the comment. “I say we contact the Agency, work with them.”

Mel shook her head. “No way.”

“It’s the sensible thing to do, I can clear my name, and we get access to Talmare.”

“Yeah, well, you might not have noticed, but ‘sensible’ isn’t exactly my strong point. Besides, what would they do to Leila if they find out she’s a telepath?”

“Why should they find out?”

“They might, and it’s not worth the risk. And what are they going to do to the telepaths on Talmare that Sanderson bred, the others like Leila’s bother. You reckon they’re going to offer them jobs? I don’t think so.”

“What about clearing my name?”

Mel shrugged. “We can drop you off somewhere if you like?”

She held her breath as Zach turned to stare at her, his eyes narrowed.

“I’m not leaving you alone,” he said at last. “God knows how long you’d last without me looking out for you.”

Mel felt something tight within her relax at his words. But she wasn’t about to let him see

that. “Well, just so long as you remember, it’s my ship.”

“It was mine first.”

Mel sighed. “You know, you can’t have two captains on one ship.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Zach said. “And I think Admiral Zachary Knight has a good ring to it.”

“In your dreams, lover.”

“If you and Admiral Knight would stop bickering for a moment and actually decide what we’re going to do, it would be great.”

“Well, it just so happens,” Mel said, “that I feel a plan coming on.”

“God help us all.” Zach muttered.

End

About the Author

Nina Croft was born in the north of England but headed south at the age of 18. She studied marine biology at London University before training to be a chartered accountant.

Having worked for a number of years in London, the urge to head south hit again. This time it took her to Zambia, on the shores of the beautiful Lake Kariba, where she spent four years working as a volunteer. It left her with a love of the sun and a dislike of nine to five employment. Since then, Nina has spent a number of years mixing travel, whenever possible, with work, whenever necessary.

After traveling extensively in India, South East Asia and Africa, Nina has now settled down to a life of writing and almond picking on a remote farm in southern Spain, between the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. She shares the farm with her husband, three dogs, a horse, two goats, four cats and a handful of chickens.

Nina has loved reading all her life and fell in love with vampires after discovering Anne Rice at an early age. She likes to mix romance with

About the Author

elements of the paranormal and science fiction in her writing.

The Tiger of Talmare is Nina's first published novella, and she has a further novella coming out in 2010, which goes back to her first love – vampires. Nina is currently working on a full length paranormal romance.

Book Excerpts

Following are some excerpts of other hot erotic titles from Shadowfire Press.

If you enjoyed *Frontiers of Love: Tiger of Talmare* by Nina Croft you might also like *Apocalypse Dance* by Michael Barnette.

For Nikki salvation is just a Dragon away.

With the world population decimated by a mutated strain of Ebola civilization as we know it has gone down in ruin. Warlords rampage across what was once the United States of America, killing, raping and adding to the misery and horror that has swept the once proud nation.

Nikki, once on her way to becoming a brilliant doctor, is being sought as a concubine by Roderik, self-styled King of the Lone Star Empire.

Here is a short excerpt from *Apocalypse Dance* by Michael Barnette

Book Excerpts

Her breath caught, and she shuddered under the onslaught of sensation. Her nipples peaked so tightly it looked like it should hurt. He drew the tip of his tongue around the areola, one hand pressed at the small of her back, holding her still for his exploration.

She tensed slightly and he eased his hold, sensitive to her reactions, both positive and negative, learning what she liked and what sent a dampening of desire through her on the wings of fear. He didn't want her to be afraid of him. He wanted her to know nothing but pleasure from his every touch, his every whispered breath across the silken expanse of her flawless skin.

"Bells...." She almost screamed his name as he closed his mouth around the stiffened nub, sucking, teasing it with the edges of his teeth. His cock throbbed with want for her, his own desire heightened by her cry. She wanted him, and even if it came down to nothing but the heat of the moment, her need for comfort, he didn't care. He'd take this, savor it, use it as a balm to the nightmare memories that haunted him in the small hours of the night.

Pulling away, he met her gaze. Awakened

Book Excerpts

passion warmed her sable eyes. "Do you want this from me?"

"Yes!" There was no reservation or hesitation in her reply, nor in the way she kissed him afterward, her entire being seeking what he offered with the same intensity he had sought her. Her answer was as immediate as her need, and just as heated as his own.

you might also enjoy *Be My Naughty Valentine: Joy's Creation* by Arlene Webb.

*Dr. Cu helps people discover what they need.
But who will help Dr. Cu find what he needs?*

It's all in a day's work for Dr. Cu to help emotionally challenged people find what they need in life. But who's going to help Dr. Cu find what he needs? Certainly not his mother or father. His mother is much too busy with her own life of lust and the endless parade of perfect men who move in and out of her circle. And

Book Excerpts

his dad spends his time making war, and being jealous of his mother's men.

Forced to attend yet another of his mother's Valentine's Day parties, Cu is thoroughly fed up with the entire thing, until he stumbles across a sultry beauty that's too much for even him to resist.

Here is a short excerpt of *Be My Naughty Valentine: Joy's Creation*.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. My last confession was five...make that six kills ago."

A deep sigh fell from Cu's lips. "Cut the crap, Deputy...." He glanced at the angry letters scrawled across the box marked NAME in the standard questionnaire the woman had filled out in his waiting room. "Deputy You. Perhaps I should use your first name. It does define you well, my dear Fuck. A common name that I've heard many times."

Cu looked across his desk through the one-way mirrored division. Seated in front of him, unable

Book Excerpts

to see him, the lanky blonde crossed lovely legs, her skirt hitched above her knees. Large hazel eyes flashed with anger and he sighed again. She wasn't happy to be here. Well, neither was he, and he had better things he could be doing than counsel a trigger-happy nutjob.

"Whatever," she said. "My nickname is Bite Me. Up Yours works too."

He drummed his fingers on his desktop. "Until you put aside your low self-esteem and authority issues, and we get to why you've been suspended pending my signature, I'll call you Miss Boring. Think you're the first officer to resent that seat?"

Cu had a PhD in Psychology, Human Sexuality, Bio-Chemistry and Advanced Medicine. He had the honor of eventually getting to know every officer in the metropolis of San Francisco who overused their firearm, supported a hardwood beam instead of a chip on their shoulder, and resisted looking inward for the reason the power trip had spiraled out of control.

He clicked online and began scanning—Elizabeth Peter's—official paperwork. Less than one year off highway patrol and desk duty, this particular officer had racked up four shootouts.

Book Excerpts

Seven months ago she dropped an unarmed, suspected drug dealer. The teenager didn't get up. The latest discharge of her weapon would be the reason why she'd been forced to report to him, the contracted shrink. Three days past, the brother of the suspected dealer plugged her partner before her hail of bullets tattooed his chest and marked him to join his brother.

"Your partner gonna make it?" he asked.

"ICU, lung collapsed. Yeah, he should pull through." She snorted. "Sorry I killed his assailant. Can I go now?"

"You're twenty-eight and unmarried. This officer you work with, he the reason you shot the perp seven times?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I love rescuing married cops into doughnuts and coaching little league." She reached a slender finger to tap the screen between them. "Very weird. Phantom of the opera? Or are you just a freak who gets off watching in the shadows. God knows what you're doing with your hands right now."

Book Excerpts

Or you might enjoy *Supernatural Alliance 1: FE959* by Michael Barnette.

Can a former vampire regain his dignity and find love?

Frontier Explorer 959 is out at the edge of known space when he receives a distress call that will change his miserable existence forever.

Korrine Dubouis is the last of her kind with no hope of finding her truemate. Or so she thinks until she meets the handsome creature known as FE959.

Here is a short excerpt from *Supernatural Alliance 1: FE959* by Michael Barnette

He couldn't help himself. He paused to take in the beauty of her naked form, his gaze moving over her the way an art lover would regard a masterpiece of sculpture. Soft and feminine with breasts that drew his gaze and a Mont of Venus that made him wish for the days when such things would have stirred his flesh to desire.

Book Excerpts

But the alterations performed on him, the long decades of his confinement in the ship had left him with an appreciation of the female form, but no ability and little actual desire to sample it.

He went back for the last two survivors, braving the savagery of the inferno to save them, the flames searing into his naked flesh. He felt the pain, and ignored it. Hurting and exhausted from the ordeal, he safely delivered them to the medical area with the others. Tired, FE959 sat down beside the beautiful female, shoulders slumped, head bowed in exhaustion, every nerve in his body screaming from the burns that covered his skin.

Burns that were already healing, the charred bits falling away to reveal new skin beneath.

“You’re one of them, aren’t you?” Her expression was wary, uncertain.

And it was fully understandable given what he knew about the colonists. Those green eyes were regarding him in a way that let him know beyond any doubt she knew exactly what she looked at, exactly what he had once been.

Book Excerpts

But probably not what he had become.

“That would depend on what you mean when you say ‘one of them’ don’t you think?”

“A vampire.”

“Yes. Once I would have been called that.” He gave her a wry smile, showing his fangs to her. She showed no sign of fear. But why would she fear me? She was in the company of an entire vampire family. Or at least the remnants of one.

So many dead. If I’d known I wouldn’t have hesitated so long.

But in the end it hardly mattered. He’d saved those he could, and the rest would reside in the embrace of the Dark Lady for all of eternity.

Eternity.

Such a damn long time. Long and lonely.

“From what I’ve seen though, I don’t think you’re going to tell me to leave, or try to kill me.”

“How many died?” she asked finally, worried, filled with a desolation he could smell in the air surrounding her.

Book Excerpts

“From the impact, I don’t know. I can’t get into some areas of the ship because of the fires, and other sections were completely destroyed in the crash.”

Her shoulders sagged, bright tears welling in her eyes, dulling the brilliant green.

Like summer leaves, or the most perfect of gems.

“This was supposed to save them. In the end it will destroy them,” she whispered, covering her face with both hands.

He moved closer to her. The way a bee sought flowers he found himself pulled closer by her very presence. He dropped to his knees in front of the distraught female, reached up to stroke the soft waves of her hair. *How strange. Why do I feel an attraction to her?* he mused as he said, “Don’t say that, your family isn’t dead.”

“They aren’t my family. All of my family perished on old Earth. These people, this family took me in out of kindness. And now they’re going to die too,” she said, tone full of bitter helplessness.

His eyes were drawn to the motion of her full lips. The line of her jaw, the graceful form of her

Book Excerpts

lovely throat. Saliva filled his mouth and his fangs ached; dull pang of need, a faint remembrance of what he'd been rising up to torment him.

So beautiful. No, more than just beautiful, she is perfect.

A tumult of hair, dark as the space between the stars, and eyes a vibrant green unlike anything he'd ever seen. FE959 wanted to take her into his arms and tell her it would be all right, that he'd get help, that her adopted family would be safe. But help was a long way off and he didn't dare make a promise he couldn't keep. Not when the very stability of the ruined ship was in question.

Not when his own masters would put an end to every life on this ship if they had the chance.

He couldn't give them that opportunity.

"What's your name?"

"Korrine Dubouis," she replied through her tears.

He shook his head, dared to touch one mahogany dark cheek and brush away the tears, the dampness tingling on his fingertip like something alive. His breath caught, her eyes

Book Excerpts

widened and they both drew away from one another as if stung.

He looked at his fingers. Wiggled them. But the tingling vibration that reached to his very soul—if such as he had one—didn't fade. It continued to resonate through his flesh.

You can buy *Apocalypse Dance* by Michael Barnette, *Be My Naughty Valentine* by Arlene Webb or *Supernatural Alliance 1: FE959* by Michael Barnette along with other fine erotic romance and erotica and titles from:

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