



THE ORION SERIES

DEEP INDIGO

CATHRYN CADE



When icy control meets loose laser cannon, the rules go up in flames.

Orion, Book 4

Commander Daron Navos. Renowned Indigon intuit, respected leader...a man running from half of himself. He can control the mind of any creature in the galaxy, even lock his dark, human sexual needs behind a wall of icy self control. Until he meets a woman who tempts him into using his powers for seduction—the lovely, innocent Nelah Cobalt.

As Nelah's star rose with her burgeoning Indigon powers at university, she leapt at the chance to intern under Navos. But the hero of her fantasies fears her human half is too volatile to be trusted with the coveted position.

When they are forced to combine powers to stop a sabotage attempt, their incredibly intimate mind-meld turns a simple case of post-battle attraction into a night of passion neither thought possible. And, as Navos teaches her to use her powers to heighten sensual pleasure, he finds she isn't the only Indigon with much to learn.

Except it's clear someone is remotely using psychic powers to endanger the ship. Nelah may be the key, and Navos faces his greatest challenge ever—loving the woman who may have to sacrifice herself to save *The Orion*

Warning: Spock-like hero who gives into temptation and uses intuitive powers for sexual satisfaction, heroine who is more than happy to submit to his sensual control, and ship full of space voyagers enjoying the waves of passion emanating from the powerful couple. Voyeurism shockingly included.

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Deep Indigo

The Orion: Book 4

Cathryn Cade

Dedication

To my sisters, Vicki and Karen, for being there to laugh and cry with through the years.

Chapter One

Although he carried no visible weapons, the Mauritanian radiated malevolence. He swaggered in the open doors of the huge space port terminal, past hurrying travelers and loaded baggage hovies. His hide was nearly obscured beneath swirling ink; his visage shimmered with stripes and dots. Through the paint, his yellow eyes glowed with a feverish intensity.

Passengers and space crew alike gave him a wide berth beneath the elevated hover-walkways. He bared his jagged brown teeth at an Argonautian and even this huge being shuffled to one side.

Lt. Commander Steve Craig turned to watch warily as the Mau passed. As a veteran of the Solar Wars, he recognized war paint when he saw it. Mauritania had sided with the Quark Ogre'n in the wars and was now a conquered planet, governed by Space Forces troops. Evidently there were still pockets of resistance.

Stopping in the shadow of a pillar, he lifted one hand to activate the com-link on his collar.

"How may we assist you, traveler?" asked a smooth voice.

"You've got a problem at the south entrance," Craig murmured. "Might want to send a few port guards."

Nervousness rippled like wind through the throngs of embarking and disembarking space travelers passing around Craig. Those on the hoverwalkways gawked as they passed overhead.

"Your report has been noted," the voice said serenely. "Guards activated. Will there be anything else, sir?"

"I'll let you know," Craig said drily.

Other beings were sidling away, pulling children and baggage with them, leaving the Mauritanian alone in a rapidly widening space. Through their hushed murmurs, Craig heard the unmistakable whine of hovie-cycles. Good, the port guards. He hoped to hell they were veterans who would recognize an imminent threat.

The armor-suited guards zipped into view over the crowd and circled above the Mau, their search lamps trapping him in brilliant light.

"You are disturbing the peace of this space port," one of the guards stated, voice magnified. "Assume a prone position on the floor, limbs spread."

The Mauritanian threw back his head. With a ululating war cry, he tore open his short cape. A cry of shock and fear ricocheted through the crowd. The guards froze. So did Craig. It was far worse than he'd feared. This being wasn't just looking for a single foe, he was out to do as much destruction as possible.

Under his cape, the Mau carried a barrage of multiple-barreled laser weapons. Not the refined, pinpoint pistols carried by guards or officers. These were blunt-force weapons. Formidable enough to kill or maim many of the surrounding beings in this end of the space port.

"I kill you!" he cried in heavily accented Galactic, the universal dialect. "I kill you all!"

The crowd wavered and in another instant would have stampeded for the exits. Craig braced himself to hold his position, reaching for his weapon. It wasn't on his belt, of course, as he was off duty. Even if he'd been armed, it would do little good. The Mau had claw-like hands on his weapons. If shot, he would likely fire back as he went down.

Craig's gut filled with ice as he looked around at the terrified faces of families and civilians. He'd stared death in the face many times in the last several years. Not these folks—they were the ones he'd been fighting to protect from moments like this.

He eyed the Mau again, options racing through his mind. If the guards could get close enough, maybe, just maybe, they could drop a containment over him and protect the biggest part of the crowd—reduce casualties. His eyes narrowed with satisfaction as he saw two of them inching closer.

The Mau snarled at them, his claws clutching the weapons. The guards froze in midair.

The edge of the crowd across from Craig wavered, and then opened. Craig was astonished and dismayed to see a lone figure stride through to face the Mauritanian. Tall and lean, he wore a silver-grey flight suit with the insignia of rank. Although young, he had the cold, composed face of an ascetic under his short, black hair. In the bright lights his eyes were a deep, compelling blue. Who the seven hells was this guy? Some kind of preacher or positive thinker trying to reason with a terrorist?

The crowd wavered, still on the verge of flight. But amazingly they calmed as the young man raised one hand. Craig blinked. Damn, he felt it, too. As if he'd just downed a shot of really good Earth II scotch.

"Wait for a moment," the newcomer said. His deep, cool voice flowed through Craig like ripples on a pond. "Wait..."

The humanoid shook his head, raising his weapons. "I kill! Kill all—destroy."

"No. That was before. Now you realize that there is no need for violence." The man's gaze, fathomless as a night sea, enwrapped them all.

The onlookers sighed, relaxing their grips on each other, on children. Craig grinned, unable to recall why he'd been so worried. Things were fine.

The Mau groaned again in wordless protest, but his muscles relaxed. Very slowly, like a felled tree, he swayed to one side, then the other, and thudded to the floor, enthralled.

A sigh of relief whispered through the crowd. Their rescuer beckoned to the hovering guards, who zipped down, swarming the would-be terrorist. In seconds he was disarmed and sealed in the folds of a containment bag.

The remaining guards saluted the lone man.

“Thank you, Commander. Damn glad to have an Indigon passing through today.”

“Nice work, sir. If you hadn’t been here...”

“An Indigon!” exclaimed someone behind Craig. “They have powers, you know. Mental powers.”

“Did you see? He stopped that monster right in his tracks.”

The crowds began to flow again. The search lamps winked out as the guards carried the loaded containment bag off between their hovie-cycles. Soon it was as if nothing had happened to disturb the bustling space port.

The Indigon stood still, face even paler than before. Travelers gave him a respectful berth as they hurried by. He seemed not to notice them.

Craig shook his head, stepping away from the pillar. He felt sober again. Had this guy just hypnotized him and everyone else in the area? He’d heard of Indigon powers, but this was the first time he’d ever been on the receiving end himself. Un-quarking-believable.

The experience didn’t seem to have hurt him. He felt fine. Great in fact. Damn glad to be in one piece, instead of scattered over the surrounding space port in smoking bits of rubble.

Their rescuer looked the worse for wear, though. Craig walked over to him. “I was just about to have a drink. Care to join me?”

The Indigon did not acknowledge him, but swayed slightly. Craig suppressed a grin and took the other man’s arm.

“That’s what I thought. Come on, pal. You need some time to regroup.”

He half-carried the Indigon into one of the open bars along the concourse and pushed him gently into an empty booth.

“We’ll have a couple of local ales,” he told a passing waitress. She smiled at him, batting her purple eyelashes, and hurried off.

“I...must thank you,” the Indigon managed. He leaned back in the booth, eyes closed. “I hadn’t...realized.”

“First time you’ve ever done that mind-control thing on such a big scale?” Craig guessed.

“Yes.”

“Thought it might be. You looked nearly as shell-shocked as that damned Mau.”

The Indigon opened his eyes and raised one dark, arching brow. “I trust...not. One of the most...retro individuals I’ve had the misfortune to intuit.”

Craig gave a crack of laughter, and stuck out his hand. “You’re light-years ahead of him, buddy. Name’s Steve Craig, Lt. Commander, InterGalactic Space Forces.”

The Indigon looked at his outstretched hand and then slowly took it. “I’m Daron Navos.”

“Nice to meet you, Navos. Thanks for saving all our asses. I’d heard about Indigon powers. Never experienced it before, though.”

Craig accepted their ales from the waitress with an appreciative smile and held out his link for her to read his credit status. She bent over so he could enjoy her cleavage while she scanned the link, smiling at him and then Navos.

“I saw what you did,” she purred to Navos. “Heroic. And I see this one is decorated for valor too.” She stroked one hand over Craig’s epaulets, pressing her breasts against his arm. “Heroes deserve special thanks. How would both of you like to join me upstairs, in my apartment?”

The Indigon froze, his mug halfway to his lips.

“That’s quite an offer,” Craig said. “But I’ve got a transport to catch and my friend here has just been through a harrowing experience. Maybe another time?”

She shrugged and sauntered away, hips swaying.

Craig watched her go, not without regret. “Damn. I bet she can really heat it up.”

Navos set his mug down carefully. “I…sensed her sexual interest, but I thought she was after you alone.”

Craig grinned and, after a moment, the Indigon returned it. They both began to laugh. The Indigon’s was rough, as though rarely used.

“Folks all thought you were just standing there enjoying the moment,” chuckled Craig.

“I was contemplating whether I could make it to the nearest seat without falling flat on my face,” Navos admitted wryly.

Craig nodded. “Reminds me of my first fighter mission. Got back to the base—couldn’t climb out of the cockpit. Deck sergeant had to peel me out.”

“You’re traveling on leave from the Space Forces?” the Indigon asked, taking a sip of his ale. Lowering his mug, he looked into it with surprise, then took a longer drink.

“Yup. Been to visit my mother back home on Earth II. Now, I’m looking for a job. My service term is finished and I’m not re-upping. How about you?”

“I’ve just accepted a position as tactician on a cruise and transport ship. LodeStar Corporation.”

Craig’s eyes focused in keen interest. “Oh, yeah? They need any more officers?”

“They’re interviewing for several positions. I’ll introduce you, if you like.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

Chapter Two

Several years later...

Daron Navos stood at the porthole of his office on the command deck of the *Orion*, gazing at the incredible view flung out before him. Against the blackness of space, the planet Porphyry glowed a hazy blue and green, its moons scattered about like silver balls dropped by a celestial juggler. Beyond it streamed the edge of the galaxy, a gauzy stole flung down by the same careless hand.

The Indigon was only peripherally aware of this beauty. His gaze turned inward as he reviewed the last few hours.

It was his task to do a routine telepathic examination of the passengers about to board the *Orion*. Under the command of Captain Steve Craig, she was bound for Frontiera, by way of Cirrius and the Ballarian system, on her fourth voyage. One her crew commanders hoped would be without suspense or violence of any kind. The first three voyages had each been fraught with tension, as the doughty crew repelled vicious clandestine attacks on their ship.

The *Cassiopeia*, *Orion*'s sister ship, had just embarked on her third voyage, so there was the added tension of knowing the *Orion*'s mysterious attackers might choose to strike at *Cassiopeia* as well.

With all this in mind, Navos had done an intense perusal of the passengers. No saboteur would slip aboard on his watch, not if he could stop them.

He was certain all beings aboard had intentions that were, if not exactly noble, at least not deadly. The passenger roster revealed mostly tourists and business travelers, intent on the profit and pleasure that drove most galactic voyagers.

He turned away from the porthole and sank into his chair, distracted from his thoughts by new images bombarding his senses. He was tired from his mental exertion, or he wouldn't be so open.

These new stimuli were pleasant. Very pleasant. A female had just boarded the *Orion*. A fellow Indigon, she was sending as strongly as he was receiving.

The other passengers were busy, eating and drinking, bustling about to explore the great cruise ship. Some were hoping to sight a royal personage. After all, the magnificent Prince Azuran and his retinue had been on the last voyage. He'd even held some kind of wild, licentious party in the ballroom, sending smoke and loud music billowing out.

None were thinking of the *Orion*'s second-in-command. Except for this female. She was focused on him to the exclusion of all else. He was bombarded with her tangled thoughts: hope, yearning and even,

unbelievably, hero worship. Her effervescent emotions burst into his consciousness like bubbles in moon-ring champagne.

His own anticipation swelled. Although he held himself still with practiced discipline, his eyes narrowed with interest. A female empath this strong had to be an Indigon. It was most unusual to find a mature Indigon who would allow emotions such free rein. He looked forward to meeting her in person.

Navos was startled by his own response. He lived a life founded on the principles of intellectual control for which Indigons were well-known. Many called his father's people cold, emotionless. His mother had been among them.

This bothered Navos not at all, for he looked with contempt at beings who chose to live in constant tempests. He was extremely fortunate, as only a half-Indigon, to wield such strong telepathy. But it came with a price. He could not afford to wallow in human emotion. That way led to misuse of power. He must remain above petty drama, using his gifts judiciously.

Certainly he had sexual urges—strong ones. He was a male in his prime and in the peak of physical condition. He assuaged his needs with paid sex companions. There was a certain resort on Serpentina that specialized in beautiful, skilled females of all species. And if he occasionally felt these encounters lacked something, that was no one's business but his own.

Although the crew of the *Orion* contained many attractive women, including the lovely, lethal Serpentine guards, most of whom would leap at the chance to try the *Orion*'s second-in-command as a sex partner, he did not consort with the crew. He was an officer of the ship. If anything were to happen to Captain Craig, he would be the acting captain. With power came responsibility.

A similar bias kept him from consorting with passengers. He shuddered at the thought of pouting looks in the mess hall or passageways.

An Indigon lady would of course be different, with the superb control of their race. Although this female was unique in her effervescence. He viewed the warm, happy tangle of her aura as an inner portrait, unique as a retinal scan. He was certain he didn't know her, but he wanted to, at least for the space of this voyage. He'd have to be careful, of course, to remain detached. That should be no problem—his mental discipline was superb.

This lady knew him, or at least knew of him. Perhaps they had met at a gathering on Indigon, or she might have been a passenger on one of the first three voyages of the *Orion*. Bemused, he shook his head. She was as eager to meet him as a fan meeting Chaz Jaguari, the galactic singing star.

She was outside his door now. Rising, he walked around his desk. He was expecting an intern from the Indigon University to arrive shortly, but the young man could wait for a bit while his commander met this fascinating woman.

He heard a soft tap on the door.

"Enter," he invited.

She was much younger than he'd expected. This thought flitted across Navos's mind. But his foremost reaction was the solid jolt when their eyes met. Her gaze hit him square in the chest, rocked him back on his heels and sent heat flooding through him, arrowing straight down into his loins.

Deep, deep blue, her eyes held a glow of anticipation that was echoed in the mauve flush high on her cheeks. Her piquant, oval face was framed by dark hair cut in a short, feathery cap that bared her delicate ears and emphasized her lithe slenderness. She was lovely.

The flush on her cheeks deepened. As if Navos needed another sign—he was awash in the warm flood of her emotions. Now that they were face-to-face, a new current surged to the forefront. A sexual glow of attraction joined the other emotions in her aura.

Male triumph swelled in him. Here was an antidote to the ennui plaguing him lately. He would allow himself to enjoy her. She was a passenger on his ship, but she was unique. This was going to be a very interesting voyage.

"You are Commander Navos?" she asked in a husky voice that shivered over his skin like a caress.

"I am."

A smile quivered at the corners of her soft lips, the hue of Pangaean roses. Her eyes widened.

"Oh, sir. It is such an honor."

Without taking his eyes from hers, he stepped closer. She gazed up at him uncertainly, her soft lips parted, small breasts rising and falling with her quick breaths. Her scent was as delicate as she.

"We need no such formality," he said. "I'm very pleased that you're here."

Her eyes widened. "You are?"

"Of course. It's not often that I'm visited by a lady of my own race, especially one with such...power."

She fairly glowed. "Oh, Commander. You don't know how much that means to me. I—I have wished to meet you for so long."

"And now you have." He allowed some of his own arousal and anticipation to flow outward.

Her response was immediate. Shock was followed swiftly by a feminine flowering both physical and psychic.

Navos lifted his hands to her slender shoulders and pulled her closer.

"It's all right," he murmured. "We'll go slowly."

Savoring the anticipation, he bent his head to her. She smelled of fresh, warm woman and some faint flowery perfume, an intoxicating blend. Her breath hitched as she tipped her head back, her lips parting moistly. Her lashes fluttered and sank in feminine surrender.

He was about to take her soft mouth with his own and pull her hard against him, hell, perhaps even take her right here on his desk, so powerful was the need swirling between them. Soon the sensual whirlpool would sweep them both down into its depths.

Uncertainty speared like a shard of ice through her arousal. He froze, a hairsbreadth from kissing her, then slowly forced himself to straighten.

“Who are you?”

As he waited for her answer, the heat that roared within him congealed into cold, hard anger. For along with the uncertainty in the indigo depths of her eyes, he sensed trepidation, chagrin.

“I—I’m Nelah Cobalt,” she faltered. “Your—your new intern...sir.”

Nelah shivered—if a cryogenic blast had roared silently through the small office, it could have been no more effective than her admission. The current of powerful, leashed sexual heat that had flowed between them only a moment before was gone, shattered like ice.

If only the elegant flooring would open up and swallow her whole. Nelah had never been so embarrassed, or so angry with herself. She’d practically thrown herself at him. She might as well have—she realized too late she’d placed no guard on her emotions. She must have been sending like a holo-vid unit as she approached.

She’d entered his office brimming with such excitement and joy she half expected to float up off the floor like a moon-weed pod. Finally she would meet her hero, the man whom she’d admired and studied for years. And not just meet him; she was to be his apprentice. Under his tutelage, she would hone her skills as an Indigon intuitive and empath in the practical world.

Commander Daron Navos, Honored Fellow of the Indigon University. One of the most successful graduates ever, renowned throughout the galaxy for his daring rescue of an entire space port from a Mauritanian terrorist. A legend to students who followed him through the university.

That he now led a life of adventure in deep space, second-in-command of the LodeStar Corporation’s flagship, the *Orion*, only added to his cachet.

When he spoke, the thrill had intensified. The deep, cool voice was just as she remembered from his holo-vid lectures and the galactic news broadcasts she’d gleaned from the archives. But hearing it in person was electrifying. This would be the best lunar month of her life.

Daron Navos wasn’t precisely handsome, but his deep blue eyes were utterly compelling under arching black brows and a high forehead capped with ruthlessly short black hair. He had a thin, elegantly curved mouth and a hawk nose. He carried himself like a seer, or ruler, the silver flight suit elegant on his tall, lean frame.

Now she gazed at him helplessly, caught by the deep, burning cold of his gaze. Commander Navos was even more fascinating in person than she could have dreamed, and a great deal more formidable.

And if she was angry with herself, it didn’t take an Indigon empath to know he was furious. Slashes of color burned on his high cheekbones.

If only she'd spoken as she stepped into his office. "Intern Cobalt, reporting for duty," she should have said. Then perhaps her hero, the man she'd waited so long to meet, wouldn't be gazing at her as if she were some cheap sex companion who had just propositioned him.

"Your name is Nelah?" he echoed sharply. "Your application said Nelo. A male name."

Nelah shook her head. "A—a mistake," she managed.

His eyes narrowed dangerously. "Who sent you here?"

"The university, sir. I applied for an internship and—"

"Who. Sent. You?"

She swallowed against the sick feeling that rose inside her. Oh, no. He would believe it was nepotism, that she did not deserve the internship. If he only knew that she was more astonished than anyone by the help she'd received to snag this coveted post.

"My stepfather," she admitted past the lump in her throat. "Professor Cyan."

His anger shot out at her, forcing her back a step. She reeled, grabbing the nearby chair for support. He leashed his emotion instantly, but his mouth twisted in a sneer.

"Cyan! I should've known. This is just the kind of scheme he would formulate. You will catch the next shuttle back to Indigon. You won't be staying on board the *Orion*."

Aghast, Nelah held onto the back of the chair, her fingers biting into the soft skrog leather. The memory of her stepfather's sly smile flashed through her mind. She'd been suspicious of his fulsome offer to get her this coveted internship, but so excited that she'd accepted without further question.

This was why he'd been so eager to help, she realized, the sickness intensifying. Because he knew Commander Navos wouldn't want a female, or a relative of his. Loftan Cyan must have alienated Navos the way he had so many others in the university. But she'd come too far to give up now.

"Please, sir," she managed. "I—I'm qualified, I assure you."

He raised one arching black brow and looked her up and down.

"Qualified for a sexual liaison?" he asked silkily. "Yes, indeed. And more than ready, I perceive. But not, I think, qualified to be my intern."

That shaft sank deep. She lifted her chin proudly.

"With all due respect, Commander, I am qualified to be your intern. I graduated second in my class, with high honors in intuition and—"

He slashed the air impatiently with one hand. "I'm sure you did. The daughter of a professor is not to be given low marks, even at the university. What you need to understand, Miss Cyan, is that I don't care. I don't have to take whomever the university sends me and I will not take you."

She absorbed this blow, dimly surprised that she was still standing.

"It's not Cyan," she mumbled. "My name is Cobalt."

He looked at her strangely.

“He’s my stepfather.”

He bowed with mocking irony and fury flooded her. She shook with the effort of maintaining her self-control, her hands clenching into fists at her side. Her human emotions took hold just when she least wished to experience them. He was obviously having no such struggle—Indigon to his cool, logical, intellectual core.

“It was...an honor to meet you, Commander,” she said through stiff lips. “I apologize for any inconvenience I’ve caused you.”

Nelah would have liked him to look astonished, even admiring, at her courage. But he merely watched coldly as she turned and hurried out.

In her stateroom, she stood for a moment, gazing blankly. Then she collapsed onto the narrow bed. She closed her eyes, but through the hot tears that seeped under her lashes she could still see the wreckage of her dreams.

Chapter Three

Nelah didn't know how long she'd been asleep when she woke with a great gasp, jerking upright in the bed. The lights came on at her movement and she gazed fearfully around the small stateroom. All was as it should be, the room empty, save for her luggage sitting neatly in the open storage compartment.

But something was terribly wrong. A second cry of torment ripped through her mind like jagged claws. Someone on the ship was in agony, filled with such fear and rage that she knew something was going to happen. Something horrible. And several hundred beings were sealed up with him or her in a ship hurtling through space.

She was on her feet and out in the passageway almost before she could think. There was only one man on board the *Orion* who could help—Commander Navos.

Two lithe, lean figures in distinctive golden-yellow flight suits stood by the elevator—ships guards. They turned, hands on the weapons at their belts as Nelah ran toward them.

"Please," Nelah cried. "Help me! I must find Commander Navos."

She staggered, one hand to her head as the voice screamed, protesting some terrible fate.

The guards watched her suspiciously. Of course—they couldn't hear the voice.

"What is it?" demanded the female, a slender blonde. "What's wrong?"

"I'm Indigon," Nelah managed, leaning against the wall. "I'm an empath/intuit. Someone on this ship is going mad."

The two guards exchanged a swift look.

"Get Navos," the woman said. She slid her arm under Nelah's, holding her up.

"Commander Navos," said the male guard sharply into his com-link. "Commander Navos—we need you in the medical unit. Immediately, sir."

He swung Nelah up into his arms and carried her into the waiting elevator. The female guard followed.

"I'm not—ill," Nelah said faintly. "I just need...Navos." But she shuddered, a moan forcing its way from her throat as the screams ripped through her again. Her head fell back on the guard's shoulder, her strength sapped.

The elevator opened. They emerged into a bright white space full of beings, all talking over her as she was laid down and whisked into a smaller space.

She twisted on the gurney, her eyes closing as another cry tore at her. When she opened them, she thought she was hallucinating, for three eyes on stalks regarded her gravely. She blinked and a round, wrinkled face moved into sight, attached to the eyes.

"I'm Doctor Tentaclar. Now, young Indigon, tell us what is happening with you," he said. His voice cracked with age, but it was full of compassion.

"Someone is—in agony," she managed. "I—can feel him—in my mind. It—hurts."

"Ah." A warm hand patted her shoulder. Then gentle fingers touched her head, pausing as she flinched. "What is it? You are in physical pain?"

"It's nothing," she said, "Just a sore spot where I had stitches. I fell several days ago, and cut myself."

"Hmm." He carefully parted the thick, short waves over her ear. "I see. Any headaches?"

"No, no."

The whole thing had been more of an embarrassment than anything else. She'd tripped on the steps outside the university library and awakened to find herself in a bed at a local clinic. She'd taken analgesics for a few days and then stopped.

She couldn't believe the physician was worried about an injury that had been treated when someone was going mad—and transmitting the results into her mind!

A deep, cold voice cut through the murmuring voices around her.

"Let me through"

It was Navos. Relief flooding her, Nelah reached out to him. He gripped her arms with painful force. As she gazed up into his eyes, the others in the room receded.

He was angry again, she saw with faint surprise. But not at her this time.

"You'll do exactly as I tell you," he ordered, his dark gaze boring into her own. "Exactly, do you understand?"

She nodded. She could withstand anything now, as long as he was with her.

"Everyone stay back," he ordered. "Guards—be ready to move."

"You believe there really is someone in distress, sir?" asked one of the guards.

"Oh, yes," said Navos grimly. "There is someone."

"But...why didn't you hear them, sir?"

"I did. I was about to summon help, but I felt her distress as well. I had to get to her. Two Indigons together are much more powerful than one. Now quiet, all of you."

He looked down into Nelah's eyes, his own fathomless pools of indigo.

"Take my hand." His voice was deep and quiet as the rush of an Indigon waterfall. The soothing ripples spread outward in her mind, lapping at the jagged rawness left by the screams. His hand closed around hers, engulfing hers in elegant strength.

This time the scream echoed with desperation. It seared across Nelah's mind. But a powerful force surged out to meet it, like a great searchlight across her senses. It was Navos. He leaned over her, his hand tightening, his eyes looking into hers.

Nelah gripped his hand as if it held her back from the edge of a cliff, her other fisted in the sleek fabric of his flight suit. She bit back the cry that battled up her throat and concentrated all her being on maintaining control.

Navos's free hand cupped the side of her head, his long fingers pressing into her skull.

"No, don't fight it. You must let go," he commanded. "Nelah—let me in."

Fear, this time her own, choked a cry from her lips. She searched his eyes frantically. She knew she could trust him—he was honorable. But all her natural instincts urged her to fight.

"Nelah." He leaned closer so she saw only him. "Let go. Give yourself over to me. You know I'll keep you safe. Together we'll prevail."

She hung on the edge of the abyss, her breath coming in quick gasps. He was so powerful—but could even he save her from falling? Or would he send her flying over the edge, weighted by the madness of the other?

"Yes, I'm very strong," he murmured soothingly. "But you are strong enough to hold me, Nelah Cobalt. I won't harm you."

With a broken sigh, she surrendered to him.

His face tightened with satisfaction, as if he were a seer scrying a savage spell in a crystal orb. She gasped, her body twisting in sync with her mind as he poured psychic power into her, through her. She'd never had any other Indigon try to meld empathic forces with her this way—had heard of it being done, but...

It was frightening, like being the vessel of a powerful force, wild as an Indigon wind rushing down from the high peaks. Except his energy was warm, instead of cold. It was also, she was vaguely astonished to find, extremely pleasurable. Instead of falling, she felt as if the two of them had soared out and up, riding the winds. She wanted him to stay, to go on pouring his power through her until—

Another cry from the mad soul, this one of savage intention, as if it accompanied a mighty physical effort. Nelah arched in Navos's grasp. He held her easily and she felt his triumph as if it were her own as, melding with her power, he locked on to the man. Together they followed the avalanche of his torment and found him in the ship.

"We have him," he said aloud. "He's outside the core reactor."

"The reactor!" The guards rapped orders, information, into their com-links.

"Don't worry," Navos said. "He won't get in."

He looked deep into Nelah's eyes, sending a powerful message. One she heard so clearly, it was as if he was speaking inside her head. *"Help me. Work with me."*

A cold niggles of fear wormed through the growing heat of their empathic bond. She scarcely had time to be surprised at having him speak in her head.

"Wh-what will we do to him?" she asked him.

He scowled, his eyes so intense they burned into hers. *"Did you...just speak to me? Silently?"*

"Yes," she replied. She saw her shock reflected in his face.

He shook his head slightly. *"We will deal with that later. No time now. We cannot save him, Nelah. He's completely mad."*

Nelah shuddered, but his implacability convinced her. If he said it, then so it must be.

This time she added her own power to his—raggedly at first, but with gathering confidence. She felt their currents curl around and within each other, surging with more and more force, until Navos sent them crashing outward and the tormented mind snapped like a broken twig and was gone, winked out.

Navos took a deep, shaken breath and relaxed, leaning his forehead on their clasped hands. She felt his grief and anger as if it were her own. Then he slipped away.

Nelah watched him dazedly through heavy eyes. Alone in her mind again, without his heat and power, she felt as fragile and shaky as a newly opened blossom.

"Did we...?" she whispered.

Without opening his eyes, he nodded.

Her eyes filled with quick, hot tears. She knew it'd been necessary—the horror of that poor, twisted mind. But if she knew anything, it was that if he could have been saved, Navos would have done so, even at a terrible cost to himself.

Then he opened his eyes and looked down into hers again. And, with a jolt of shock, she realized something more. He'd swept into her mind, but left the rest of her untouched. And somehow now her body yearned desperately to be taken as well.

With one searing look, he acknowledged her galaxy-shifting self-awareness and let her see that, even more devastatingly, he felt the same powerful desire.

Then, leaving her plucked and waiting, he straightened, turning to the others.

"You'll find him outside the core reactor."

"Is he armed, Commander?"

"No. But in any case, he's dead."

"Dead?" asked the doctor. He sounded disappointed.

"Yes," Navos said coldly. *"I was forced to execute him. He'd...gone insane."*

"There's been an attack?" asked a deep voice, ringing with authority.

Nelah sat up shakily and swung her legs to the floor, peering around Navos. A man stood in the doorway, with epaulets on the shoulders of his silver-grey flight suit and a fierce scowl on his handsome face.

“Damn it, Daron, not another saboteur. There’s no chance you’re wrong?”

“I fear not, Captain.”

Without looking down at Nelah, Navos placed one hand on her thigh, holding her there.

“Captain, Izard and Commander Halix are with the body,” said one of the guards. “They’re waiting for you.”

“Outside the core reactor?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Damn it to the seven hells!” the captain swore, scrubbing one hand over his short, silver-blond hair. “We’re not rid of these quarking terrorists yet, are we?”

“I’ll accompany you,” Navos said.

The captain shot one look from Navos’s face to hers and shook his head. “The two of you need rest—anyone can see that. We’ll handle it from here.”

The guards followed him from the room.

“Yes, rest,” said the old doctor, waving his eye stalks gently. “Unless either of you needs any help from me?”

“No, thank you, Doctor,” Navos said. He looked down at Nelah and held out his hand. She put her own in it and rose. She was so aware of him that the doctor and the medical techs gathered around seemed unsubstantial.

Clinging to Navos, she followed him out of the infirmary and into an elevator. As the door shut behind them with a quiet swoosh, they stood in silence, her hand still enclosed in his. She held very still, afraid if she moved he would let go. And she wanted desperately to go on touching him, even in such a platonic way.

“We—we killed him.” Saying the words aloud sent a deep shudder through her. This wasn’t what she’d envisioned, working with him. She’d imagined them perhaps divining a passenger had a weapon and sending him off the ship, the crew cheering. Or even forcing a wrong-doer to his knees, helpless against the strength of the two Indigons, guardians of right.

She looked up into his face. In his fathomless gaze she saw the terrible truth—that this was not the first time he’d been forced to take a life to save others. She closed her eyes, clinging tightly to his hand. She didn’t know if she could do it. She didn’t know if she could ever make such a choice again, knowing someone could die by the power of her mind.

“Situations such as this are very rare,” he said. She nodded, but she did not open her eyes, not yet.

Finally he spoke again, in a voice so controlled it was nearly cold. “You may choose a different path.”

She knew what he meant. Even through this harrowing conversation, another had been going on. The intense communion of minds they’d just experienced had super-charged their bodies with desire for another kind of melding—a sexual one. A kind of bewildered guilt besieged her, but it was not strong enough to

douse the flames licking at her. She must choose whether to continue on her original path—and if she did, she should certainly not desire him.

But it was really no choice at all. Since the beginning of the voyage, the *Orion* had been hurtling through space, and she toward this moment. The elevator stopped, and the door slid open. He stood waiting.

Nelah looked up into his deep blue eyes, surrendering herself to this enigmatic, fascinating man.

“I choose...to be with you.”

Chapter Four

Navos led her into his stateroom, only his years of training controlling the desire flaming inside him. He knew that after a battle, soldiers often found themselves in the grip of lust, the less honorable among them committing rape.

He and Nelah had just won a deadly battle, although fought with empathic power. And now this slender, naïve young woman had him ready to shove her up against the nearest wall and take her there.

He'd nearly done so in the elevator—he had the access codes to shut it down and blank all surveillance. And knowing she wouldn't stop him inflamed him. However, he was damned if he'd behave as a mere human male.

He'd a thousand years of Indigon evolution in at least half of him and he meant to make sure that half remained uppermost, even in what promised to be a heady liaison. He might be throwing his rules about sex with passengers out the escape hatch, but he was still Indigon.

As the hatch slid shut behind them, he led her across the few steps to the large bed waiting in the shadows and turned her toward him. He wanted nothing more than to unwrap her like a gift and enjoy her tender body with slow care, but he had little time.

They both needed sleep. She would have it. He must go and aid in the investigation now beginning. Whoever the dead man was, whoever had been controlling him, he'd been acting as a terrorist. The *Orion* was obviously not rid of her tormentors.

But before Navos did the work at which he was so skilled, divining the patterns and motivations in a crisis situation, he desperately needed an outlet for the sexual flames fanned by their mind meld.

He sent his power twining about her, silently urging her close to him. She shivered visibly, her plum-like breasts rising and falling quickly as she fought for breath. Her eyes rose as far as his mouth, then her own lips parted on a shuddering sigh of surrender and she swayed toward him like a lovely, slender reed.

Triumph surged through him. She was so attuned to him. He spoke to her silently once more. Would she hear him, or had their earlier communication been a fluke, forged in the fire of urgency?

“Touch me.”

Her hands settled like birds' wings on his chest, slipping up over the sleek fabric of his flight suit. She found the fastening at his throat, baring a long vee of flesh.

His hands curved around her tiny waist, urging, guiding. She swayed closer, first her moist breath and then her soft lips brushing against the column of his throat.

Every cell in his body thrilled.

“More!” He had to feel that torturously delicate exploration move up his throat, then down, across the smooth hardness of his chest, her eager hands pushing his flight suit back until her fingertips found his nipples. A hard shudder arrowed through him as she traced them.

She was trembling in his hands, a fact that filled him with savage delight. He wanted her shaking, wanted her desperate for him.

He pushed his loins against hers, rocking his erection into the juncture of her thighs as she tasted his skin with the tip of her silky little tongue. He hung on the feathered edge of orgasm. His nostrils flared, jaw clenched, as he fought the urge to let go just from the graze of her mons on his straining phallus.

But no, he wanted every bit of her, wanted to be deep inside her before he put them both out of this delicious agony.

He traced just the fingertips of one hand, so large against her delicate frame, up the sleek front of her flight suit, over one pebble-hard nipple thrusting underneath, up under her chin, tipping her face toward his. Her eyes were heavy-lidded, dazed. Good.

He nipped at her lower lip—hard. *“Open your suit to me.”*

She fumbled with the fastening under her chin, her eyes drowning in his. It parted under his waiting fingertips. He slid his fingers down with hers, so under his tutelage she unfastened the garment clear to her belly. Her skin was unbelievably silken, shivering at his touch.

His mouth hovering against hers, he stroked the suit open farther, until his fingertips found the firm mound of her mons. Ah, like a velvet peach and a few inches farther, the luscious juicy center of the fruit, the sleek folds of her vulva. Indigons had only the faintest traces of hair around their sex. It gave the women a delicate, vulnerable beauty.

She whimpered some incoherent plea against his lips, her hips tilting forward to meet his touch.

“Yes,” he breathed into her mouth. *“Give yourself to me.”*

“I already—have.”

Some strange, tender warmth swelled in his chest. He swept the flight suit from her shoulders, down her body, and gathered her close to him, enclosing her fragile nudity in his arms as he bore her to his bed.

Her head fell back across his arm, presenting the lovely long arch of her throat. She cried out when he raked his open mouth along its length. He found the tender juncture of her shoulder and sucked hard, then laved it with his tongue, exulting in the press of her slender hands in his hair, holding him to her.

She was lissome in his arms, soft under his hardness, trembling against his strength. The scent of her skin, heated woman and those elusive flowers, drove him on, down her body. Her small breasts, peaked with tender buds of pale mauve, fit perfectly in his hands, and she moaned when he squeezed them, pinching the nipples up between his thumb and forefinger for his tongue. He suckled her hard, ravenous for

the velvety texture on his tongue. She bucked underneath him and he pushed harder with his mind, urging her fiercely to let him deeper inside.

Nelah was drowning in pleasure. He'd given her no quarter, no respite, no hiding place during their work together. He demanded all of her now, as if to devour her sensually. She could conceive of no sweeter fate. She wanted to be consumed, she wanted to forget the terrible events of the evening.

And Navos was clearly the man to help her. He knew his way around a woman's body—where and how to use his hands and his mouth, pulling rapaciously at her nipples in turn, sending sensation shooting through her until she had to cry out her pleasure to the night.

And then he enticed her to let him deeper into her mind, as well. She resisted at first, realizing even as she did it was but a token effort and he knew it as well as she. For when she gave in and dropped her mental barriers, allowing him inside to feel every nuance of her pleasure, it was the most delicious surrender of all.

With a deep sound of approval, he invaded her mind with swift, steady surges of power, sampling her gasp of near pain as he used his teeth on her nipple and then her pleasure as he laved it tenderly with his tongue. He rewarded her with the same treatment on the other. When she held his head to her breast, he turned his face into her cradling hand and bit the pad of her thumb, then stroked it with his tongue.

His hands worked between them. Dragging open her heavy eyes, she watched him part his flight suit clear to his groin. She wanted him to pull it all the way off, she wanted to see his long, lean body and touch him all over.

"You may touch me the next time, as you are imagining." He palmed the length of his penis, so she caught only a glimpse of it, stiffly erect and of a startling size. "Now, open to me."

Embarrassment scalded her cheeks, but at the same time her pussy clenched and melted. She wanted to open to him, wanted his eyes on her. And he knew, so there was little point in hesitating. She parted her legs, drawing up her knees so she lay in a pose of wanton surrender. And as his dark, hot eyes traveled down over her naked body, he stroked himself. Heat pooled in her pussy as if she were melting under his gaze. It was utterly delicious.

"You enjoy my eyes on you," he approved. "You'll enjoy it when I put my mouth and hands on you, and my cock in you, won't you?"

Desire swelled inside her. She fisted her hands in the soft bedcover, arching her back, offering herself to him helplessly. "Yes—oh, please," she pleaded. "Commander!"

"Say my name."

"*Daron...*" His name sighed through her mind like the stroke of a silken feather. Then she whimpered it as he stroked his fingers into her sleek labia and deep into her pussy. It burned a little and she felt his large finger every centimeter of the way. And loved it.

“My gods, you’re tight. Nelah—you are a virgin?”

She gazed up at him, unable to form a coherent answer while he was stroking her with such complete intimacy. She supposed she was—the only thing that had penetrated her before his touch was her slim vibrator.

She’d begun to experience sexual needs in her late teens, but Indigons were fastidious by nature and she hadn’t been sufficiently attracted to any of the young men she knew to want more than kisses. Taking the advice of an older girl, she’d purchased a vibrator. She certainly hadn’t enjoyed all the uses suggested on the package, but it took the edge off of the needs that left her tossing restlessly in her bed at night. Needs that had a face and form—his.

Realizing by the look in his eyes he’d read this jumble of sensory memory, Nelah gave a squeak of complete embarrassment, covering her face with her hands, as a hot blush scalded its way from her face down her throat, even over her chest.

“Ah,” he breathed. She sensed his surprised pleasure. She was an idiot, hiding her face from him when he was able to intuit her so deeply, but she kept her hands there anyway.

He stroked her again and this time his thumb found the tiny swollen bud of her clitoris. She gasped, her body tightening at the touch on this most sensitive part of her body. And she discovered no device could ever approach the knowing caress of this man. The one man she wished to touch her.

“Nelah, look at me.”

Slowly, she obeyed, letting her hands slip back on the pillow beside her head, and looked into his eyes as he caressed her, a light, slippery touch as he moistened her with her own arousal. Her toes curled into the mattress and her hips tilted up helplessly toward his touch. She felt suddenly frantic lest he should stop, heat flushing under her skin.

“I won’t stop,” he assured her. “Come for me. The next time I’ll have you with my mouth, but I can’t wait that long this time.”

He stroked up inside her, finding that special pad of nerves and pressing deep. She cried out, a soft feminine sound as the pleasure burst, surging outward through her in deep shivering waves. Through it all, he was with her.

Relaxing at last, she forced her heavy eyes open. A smile curved her mouth as satisfaction reverberated through her body.

“Gods, you’re lovely.” He slid his strong hands under her, lifting her up to him.

She found herself astride his lap as he knelt on the bed. Startled, she clutched at him, his body hard and powerful, his flight suit sleek under her as she slid her arms about his shoulders. His penis, that brash male weapon, brushed against her belly as he held her there with one hand on her bare bottom, the other under her chin.

He turned her face up to his. His eyes glittered with need and passion, nearly black. His face was beautiful in its male demand and her body flowered in response.

“Now,” he echoed her thoughts. “Take me inside your body, Nelah. Share your pleasure with me.”

“Yes,” she sighed in spite of the fear that sprang out of the shadows at her. She knew this was going to hurt—he was much bigger than her vibrator.

He cocked his head and kissed her. She forgot to be afraid as the narrow lips that could tighten in such regal disdain, now met hers. Oh, how the man could kiss. He demanded everything—first the caress of her lips under his, then that they should part and let him in, let him learn every inner curve and trembling sigh, before his tongue met hers and she leaned into him, deepening the kiss hungrily, her tongue tangling with his.

Her breasts pressed against his chest. She wound her arms about his neck, rubbing herself against his penis, a silent invitation. His hand tightened on her bottom and he shuddered deeply.

Still kissing her, he urged her to lift up, his hand brushing her inner thigh as he guided the head of his penis into the wet petals of her labia. He looked into her eyes as he pressed into her, guiding her with his hands to rock her hips, stroking him a little deeper up into her each time. She was in control of her own deflowering.

That it was he cleaving her untried body made it a shattering experience. She was giving her body to the man whom she’d long dreamed of meeting, but only in her innermost heart had she every dared to dream they might be lovers.

His penis was like a hot brand forging up inside her. She knew logically the burning was caused by the stretching of her untried flesh, but emotionally it seemed he caused the pain. He was both beguiler and punisher.

He kissed her, stroking her back. “Sshh,” he soothed. “*Only this first time.*”

At last he was seated deep within her. She looked into his eyes as he urged her silently.

“*Now, ride me. Take me.*”

Slowly, uncertainly at first, she rose so his shaft slid part way out of her, then sank down again. It burned. The intimacy was nearly unbearable. She’d allowed this man deep into her body—he was inside not only her most private place physically, but psychically.

She wanted to cry out, she wanted to move faster—so she did both. Another creature seemed to be emerging inside her—a wanton female whose soft cries of need drove both of them until she was riding him like a wild thing and he was thrusting up to meet her. The tight friction of his penis inside her was the only thing that mattered.

When the burning became pleasure and the pleasure began to tighten and tighten, she clutched at him, digging her nails into his broad shoulders. Finally it burst, and she screamed with delight.

He stiffened in her arms and threw back his head, shuddering mightily.

Nelah collapsed against him, head on his shoulder. She was dazed by the force of the sensations that had swept through her—she felt as if she'd been at the epicenter of a cataclysm, contained within her body and caused by the man who held her in his powerful arms, his hands stroking her bare back, still moving inside her in slow, shallow strokes, prolonging his pleasure. The caress made her purr. She moved her head just enough to kiss the long angle of his throat. He tasted a little salty, his masculine scent intoxicating.

He leaned forward, holding her carefully, and laid her back in the bed. Then he slid slowly out of her, a gush of heat following his withdrawal. She grimaced at the wetness, but then yawned mightily. Sudden, overwhelming exhaustion pulled at her, weighing her into the soft bed beneath her.

"Wet," she thought fretfully.

"It is natural. Rest, now." He produced a soft cloth and wiped most of the wetness from her inner thighs.

She curled onto her side and let her heavy eyes fall shut. She would open them in just a moment and then...

Chapter Five

Navos looked down at her as he used the cloth on himself and then fastened his flight suit again. She'd already relaxed into the boneless sleep of utter exhaustion. Her thick, dark lashes fluttered slightly as he reached to pull the comforter over her slender, bare body, but she didn't stir. She probably wouldn't wake for hours. She'd had a harrowing experience with the madman and then his mind meld with her to destroy the fellow. Not to mention losing her virginity.

His refusal to take her on as an intern had been difficult for her too. She was an emotional little thing. Ah, well, that would pass with maturity. It must—for she was also a powerful empath/intuit. If she was habitually prone to emotion, her ability to read other beings' drama might well break her. He could help her with that—there was no harm in a bit of tutoring during the voyage. Especially when it could be combined with the intense pleasure of sex.

He sat for another moment, watching her sleep. His body still thrummed with the deep satisfaction that came only with a fine orgasm, his mind with having been allowed to enter hers and having pleased his lover to the extent that she screamed with ecstasy.

Paid sex companions carefully controlled their own responses and his only mistress had been quiet, as befitted an Indigon lady. This one was so open to him, so incredibly responsive. He well knew she'd been a little frightened, shocked and then finally astonished by their intercourse and her own orgasm.

Part of him had wanted to shout his own triumph tonight. This realization jarred, a discordant note in the symphony of satiation. He had the uneasy suspicion it stemmed from the deep empathic connection they seemed to share. And, he forced himself to admit, from learning he was the stuff of her sexual fantasies. When she'd lain back, open to him in lovely submission, inviting him to be the first to have her, he'd had the insane urge to broadcast his triumph to the stars.

He surged to his feet. Great God beyond, that was so retro it was practically Earth I mentality. He was no primitive bridegroom, he was a male in his prime, embarking on a sensual liaison with a female. One that wouldn't be allowed to overflow into his work, he'd see to that. Teaching Nelah the delights of sex would be a sweet diversion on a voyage that now promised to be otherwise fraught with as much danger and difficulty as the first three.

He strode into his small but luxurious bathroom to wash his face and hands. He could use a shower-dry, but he had no more time. It was as the warm water splashed over his face that he was struck by an

additional realization—he, who had always been so scrupulous in his use of his power, had used it on a naïve young woman, not just to vanquish an unseen enemy, but then in search of greater sexual satisfaction.

He lowered the drying towel and stared at himself in the mirror. He'd enjoyed every moment of it too. Had known a savage delight in coaxing her to submit, to allow him to explore the hot, confused but delighted currents of her response. Had indeed, found his own pleasure increased twofold by her trusting surrender. And the realization she'd enjoyed it every bit as much as he.

Just as he'd reveled in their unspoken communication. He'd never dreamed such explicit conversation was possible. How strange the two of them should be so attuned.

He wanted to explore their ability to communicate on all levels. And he wanted more of it—much more.

He turned away from the mirror and its uncomfortable truth. Casting one brooding look at the woman sleeping in his bed, he strode from the room.

In the corridor, he activated his com-link.

“Captain, Navos here. I'm on my way.”

The body still lay there, outside the core reactor. And to Navos's shock, it was a young Indigon who stared sightlessly into the bright lights. Of course—who else but another Indigon could have been broadcasting in such a manner to both him and Nelah?

Navos stared back into the pale face, blue eyes flat with death. The dull knife of angry sorrow twisted deep in his gut. He'd been forced to kill one of his own people. It was all he could do to pull calm around him like a cloak.

“Who is he?”

Craig cast him a quick look of sympathy.

“His name is Elan Bluet. One of a group of students on break from your university. Bound for the beaches on Aquarius.”

“I remember him now,” Navos said, as the name clicked into a mental slot in the passenger list. “His profile—it was completely normal.”

“Look at this,” said Halix, who knelt by the body, a small device blinking in his hand. “He has some sort of a tiny chip implanted behind his ear.”

He pulled the youth's uppermost ear forward and pointed to a tiny incision. “It shows up clearly on the reader. I believe it's the type that is used on petty criminals to control their actions.”

“He had no criminal record,” Navos said, uneasiness stirring in him. “Have Dr. Tentaclar autopsy him as soon as possible.”

Craig nodded. “Yes. Call the med techs to come and get the body, will you, Iazard?”

He scowled at the alarms on the wall above them, still blinking silently.

“Why did he want into the reactor area? Enough to keep at it even after he set off the sirens? They went off just as you found him, Daron.”

“Not to mention after he did that.” Izard, a lean Serpentine with a shock of improbable green-gold hair who was acting guard commander, nodded grimly at the hatch leading into the reactor.

The white cerametal was spattered and streaked with blood. Looking at the body, it was easy to see the source. His hands were torn and bloody, as was his forehead. Blood stained his clothing and the floor on which he lay.

“Used himself like a human battering ram,” Craig muttered. “Damn it, it just doesn’t make sense! No one could break in there with their bare hands—why even try?”

“He’d gone insane,” Navos said wearily. “Why, I can’t say.”

Craig scowled fiercely, looking every inch the warrior he was.

“Well, we’ll get to the bottom of this. It doesn’t make sense, but after our last three voyages, we’re not taking any damned chances. Slyde and Sirena are on a fast shuttle right now. They should reach us soon. We’ll meet at 0800 hours in the command center.”

He gestured to the techs who waited in the background, a stretcher at the ready. “All right, guys, take the body to Tentaclar.”

Then he turned to Navos. “Commander,” he said. “Go get some rest. I don’t want to see you again until you’ve slept, understood?”

Navos acquiesced with a curt nod. He knew Craig was right—in his current state of weariness, compounded by shock, he was useless to his ship. He would rest and eat. Then he would divine what had caused an apparently normal young Indigon to go mad.

Nelah woke slowly, luxuriating in the warmth and softness of the big bed in which she was cradled. So silky against her bare skin, so springy underneath her. It smelled heavenly, of clean male and the faint scent of some Pangaeian herb, elusive and tantalizing.

Slithering onto her back, she stretched from her toes clear to her outstretched fingertips and then relaxed, a smile curving up the corners of her mouth.

She started violently as she opened her eyes and looked into those of the man leaning on his elbow beside her, shoulders and chest bared by the blanket he’d shoved down. His lean face was relaxed, those enigmatic eyes still heavy with sleep. His short dark hair was tousled as if he’d just run his fingers through it.

Navos.

Oh great God beyond, she’d slept with Commander Navos! Really slept with him. And before that—she flinched away from memories of their terrible task.

His hooded gaze met hers.

“You sleep soundly,” he murmured. “But I see memory returns.”

She might have answered, but he stroked one long-fingered hand up her bare thigh and over the quivering plain of her abdomen, to her breast. He fondled it, watching her with those heavy-lidded eyes. An exquisite weakness flooded her. It was a good thing she was lying down, or she would have slid to the floor like an Aquarian jellyfish.

He pinched her nipple slowly, twisting it between his thumb and forefinger. She arched into his touch, her legs drawing up, parting. She bit her lip and then touched the corner with her tongue as he moved on to the other breast, the nipple already drawn up tight with eagerness for his touch.

“Ah,” he murmured. “Now you are awake, are you not?”

“Yes.” Heat flushed her cheeks as she heard the sensuous tone in the single word.

And those knowing eyes saw her blush as he moved over her, his legs levering between hers, making a place for himself there as he came down on top of her.

“Good,” he said. “Then you won’t miss anything.”

He kissed her, taking his time about it and sampling every shaken breath, every quiver of her mouth as he pressed her into the bed with his lean masculine weight, rubbing himself slowly against her. Every cell in her body sang with delight.

She wanted to hold him too. She lifted her arms from the pillow and slipped them up around his neck. His shoulders were like silk-covered marble—no, not that hard, but so very firm, the muscles shifting under his skin. Last night had been so hard and fast, she hadn’t had time to discover the texture of his skin, the way he felt under her hands. Now she wanted to revel in every nuance of touch and scent and taste.

Nelah lifted her head to kiss him harder, taste him a little more. Her legs tightened on his lean hips as he rubbed his hard penis directly up the furrow of her labia, sleeked by her arousal. His hot flesh raked her clitoris and her teeth closed on his lip as sensation shot through her.

“Ah!” He lifted his head, licking the place she’d bitten and rubbed against her again. “I had better satisfy you, hmm?”

She blushed hotly. “Sorry.”

“Do not apologize for your passion.” He continued to move against her, watching her as she bit her own lip this time, pleasure and need throbbing in her pussy. “Tell me what you want.”

“Y-you,” she whispered. “Inside me again.”

He gave her a swift kiss and reached over her head, into a compartment in the headboard. “There is nowhere I would rather be. May I offer you an analgesic? I believe a woman can be somewhat tender after her first coitus.”

At her hesitant nod, he flipped open a small unguent jar and took a dollop of clear jelly on his fingers. Then he reached between them, parted her swollen labia with two fingers and stroked the jelly into her pussy.

She gasped at the soreness of his invading touch, but a soothing warmth spread deep within her channel and she sighed, reassured. He deepened his touch, two fingers probing within her softness, then retreating to stroke the unguent over her labia and clitoris. He was watching closely as he did so too, his eyes heavy, glittering. At first she thought it was that which sent heat twining through her pussy, swelling her clitoris even as it soothed.

“Ah,” he approved. “The unguent is somewhat of a stimulant too, then.”

He touched her clitoris again and she whimpered and grabbed his hand with her own, holding it there so he wouldn’t stop touching her. Transcending all shame was the intense need he wrought with his hard fingertips on the swollen nerves.

He stroked her with tender ruthlessness. Nelah gazed into his deep, deep blue eyes as pleasure suffused her.

He came down into her arms, his face taut with need, and thrust into her in the same movement, driving her into the pillows. She gasped his name as he drove deep into swollen, still needy flesh.

He froze, his nostrils flared white. “Am I hurting you?”

“No!” she clutched at him, desperate for more. “No, don’t stop. Oh, please don’t stop!”

“Wrap your legs around me, then. And hang on.”

He thrust into her again, until the bed rocked under them. Nelah’s world narrowed down and down and down to the man in her arms and his penis working inside her. Just when she thought she would faint from the pleasure, it burst inside her, so hard and so long she screamed.

He gave a muffled shout of pleasure and stiffened in her arms, their joining seeping heat and fluid as he gradually slowed. He moved to lift off of her, but she held on to keep him inside her. He relaxed, weighing her into the bed, and she turned her face into the side of his head, inhaling his scent.

She knew if a meteor struck the ship and killed them all in that instant, she would die in perfect happiness.

It lasted just until he lifted up on his elbows and spoke, his eyes running possessively over her face and bare breasts.

“You’d better move in here with me for the rest of the voyage. I believe all the staterooms are full and we’ll need yours for my new intern.”

“Your...what?” she managed.

He withdrew from her and leaned up on his elbow beside her, one hand on her belly. “My new intern. I shall have to choose another.”

Nelah jerked away from his hand and out of the bed with ferocious swiftness. Seeing her clothing hanging neatly over the arm of an easy chair, she marched over to it and began to pull them on. Ignoring her tiny lace cami and panties, she yanked on her tights, shoved her arms into her soft jacket and slapped the adhesive fasteners together anyhow. Painful heat roared inside her, so it was hard to breathe and harder still to hold back the swelling behind her eyes and in her throat.

Her under-things in her hand, she turned with a snap toward the door, then stopped short. A naked Navos stood in front of it, his eyes boring into hers.

“You’re upset. Remember, you chose.”

Her eyes narrowed. How dare he feel pity for her?

“Yes, I chose to ma—to have sexual relations with you. I don’t recall saying I didn’t wish to study with you,” she snapped.

He closed his eyes briefly. “I cannot have an affair with an intern.”

She raised her brows. “Oh, really? Tell me, did you intend we’d have an affair while you taught someone else?”

His nostrils flared. “Yes.”

She widened her eyes ingenuously. “Why, Commander, how ever did you think you’d manage both teaching and maintaining a sexual relationship at the same time?”

Ah, that one had hit home. Now he was angry. Well, good. So was she and she never wanted to see his stubborn, fascinating, gorgeous, hateful face again!

“I meant it would not be ethical,” he said through his teeth. “Not that I could not manage the two. Moreover, I am not sure you could. I’m experienced in using my power and in controlling my emotions. You are not.”

At first, when he began to make love to her this time, she’d been secretly regretful he did not urge her to let him into her mind as well. But now, she was glad, because she’d blast with him with the reactor-hot force of her anger.

“Kindly step out of my way,” she gritted.

“Certainly,” he said, stepping aside. “Although you may wish to step into your shoes.”

Without looking back, he walked into the bathroom. The hatch slid shut behind him.

Nelah looked down at her feet and her toes curled into the carpet in sheer humiliation. She had indeed forgotten her shoes.

Chapter Six

In his shower-dry, Daron Navos leaned his head under the hot spray of water and cursed himself silently and at length. He'd known better. He'd known better and he'd done it anyway. He'd allowed the peculiar desolation of having taken a life and the deep intimacy of melding minds to suborn his own code. He'd had sex with a young, impressionable woman. She might be an Indigon, but Nelah Cobalt was as impulsive and temperamental as an Earth human.

Indigons had learned not to mingle with humans. His own father had married one, allowing passion to overcome logic. The marriage had been a disaster, finally resulting in his death.

Descended from Earth I space explorers who had settled on Indigo thousands of years ago, Indigons had evolved into a race with eyes the deep blue of an Indigon ocean and temperaments to match. They were cool, calm and thoughtful, prizing intellect over passion.

Excellent at planning and designing, they created beautiful cities out of the white stone on their small planet. They built schools and a university. New studies emerged as another unique trait became apparent. Some Indigons, nearly always males, had developed intuitive and empathic abilities. Only rarely did a young woman exhibit the gift.

Nelah Cobalt had an exceptional amount of power, but she'd have to study with someone else to develop it. Despite her biting sarcasm, he had strong principles, which precluded having sex with one of his interns.

And that slip, the way she'd nearly said "making love". He shook his head. She was simply too emotional. He was relieved, now, that he hadn't penetrated her mind as well as her body again this morning. What a mess that would have turned out to be. He hoped to the seven hells she wasn't going to turn out to be his worst mistake.

Because just now he needed to bring his intellect to bear on much more important things—like this latest bizarre attack on the *Orion*.

Navos strode onto the command deck. The sleek command console framed a breathtaking view of deep black space, dotted with twinkling stars. Silhouetted against it, the tall-backed chairs around the command console held the crew commanders. They all wore the silver grey of the *Orion*, with commander epaulets over the symbols of their specialties.

However, gone was their usual bonhomie and good-natured ribbing. Even had Navos not been able to intuit the mood of his co-commanders, their faces and their silence would've told the story. He looked around the circle of chairs.

Halix, head of operations, his round lavender face solemn; Ogg, chief mechanic, his weathered human face furrowed with a scowl; Dr. Tentaclar, head medical officer, his eye stalks waving slowly; Panthar, the Tygean navigator, hunting-cat eyes narrowed dangerously; Mra, the Pangaeon chief interpreter, her green corn-silk hair wrapped tightly about her throat in worry.

Standing with his hands braced on the console, face grim, Captain Craig looked up as Navos entered.

"Ah, Daron," he said. "And here are Sirena and Slyde."

Navos stopped by his chair as two stunningly attractive warriors glided in. Both wore golden-yellow guard uniforms, commander epaulets on their shoulders. Slyde Dragolin towered head and shoulders over his bride, but she moved with the utter self-confidence of one who wasn't just lovely, but lethal.

Sirena smiled briefly at everyone, slipping into the chair Slyde held for her.

"Welcome back," Craig said. "Sorry we had to interrupt your honeymoon."

"You know we'd never stay away at a time like this," Sirena reproved him.

"The Serpentine mountains will still be there after we have stopped these attacks once and for all," her huge husband agreed in his deep, smoky voice. "If that's what this was."

"Yes," the navigator agreed, leaning forward with his powerful fists clenched on the console. "This time we'll find who's behind these cowardly attacks. And I'll personally rip them to shreds." He flexed one big hand as if it sported the lethal claws that appeared in his Tyger mating shift.

Craig acknowledged their support with a nod. "You all know Commander Navos and his young colleague discovered and averted an attack. Unfortunately, they were forced to kill the attacker. Daron?"

"It was obvious the boy was under some great duress," Navos told them. "He screamed in pain and despair even as he continued to bodily assault the reactor hatch."

"Was he insane?" Sirena asked.

"He exhibited a normal profile at the time of boarding," Navos answered. "But during the time of the attack—yes, he exhibited clear signs of manic hysteria." He looked at the old physician. "Dr. Tentaclar? Mr. Halix found an implant of some sort on the body. What more did you discover during your autopsy?"

Tentaclar blinked several of his eyes. "A clever device, indeed. After considering the location in the brain, I consulted with colleagues at the Indigon University. My suspicions were correct. The device is one that can be attached to the cerebrum and used to control certain behaviors."

"The boy had behavior problems?" Slyde asked.

"None that were logged with the InterGalactic Space Forces," Halix assured them.

"Could he have been of, ah, a wealthy family that kept it quiet?"

“They could certainly have tried,” Halix said, “but I don’t think they could have succeeded to such an extent.”

“Hmm. I’m not so sure,” Sirena said, with a wry glance at her husband. “Some families have managed to keep secrets for centuries.”

Slyde Dragolin’s golden eyes gleamed. “There are ways to hide information,” he agreed.

Panthar rolled his eyes. “Yeah, if your family could manage to hide your little habit of shape-shifting into fire-breathing dragons, I reckon this boy’s family could hide a little mental shakiness.”

“But not from me,” cut in Navos, impatient with their byplay. They all turned to look at him. “Not from me. I repeat—the boy’s mind scan was normal when he boarded.”

Craig nodded decisively. “If you say so, Daron. So, if the boy wasn’t insane, what caused him to act as he did? He was out of control, to the point he caused himself serious injury battering at the hatch into the reactor. Why?”

“Perhaps he was not out of control,” said Tentaclar.

Navos froze as the doctor’s meaning thrust home like an icy spear. “You mean the device?”

Tentaclar nodded, blinking his several eyes. “I do. The device is meant to control and the boy behaved in a manner incongruent with his nature, therefore...”

“Therefore someone else was controlling him.” Anger and realization rolled up through him like a great physical force. Before he knew it, Navos was on his feet.

The command team gaped at him as one, apparently dumbfounded by his display of emotion. He stared into a vision that only he could see as his chair thudded against the bulkhead behind him. He saw faceless beings hovering behind the boy and they had one thing in common.

“Daron? What is it?” Captain Craig demanded.

Navos focused on his captain, the inner image burning in his mind. “The only beings in our galaxy capable of forcing that boy to behave in such a manner are...Indigons.”

“Great God beyond,” Craig said, obviously shaken. “You’re right. But...who?”

“There are other Indigons on the *Orion*,” Sirena said. “The girl—we’ll arrest her at once.”

Navos shook his head, waving away the suggestion. “No. It couldn’t have been the girl. She sensed the attack—was a conduit for the boy’s distress. I myself entered her mind—worked with her to stop him. If she’d caused it, I would have known.”

“Then who?” Sirena demanded. “Are we being shadowed by another ship?”

Craig shook his head, turning to stare out at the blackness of space. “We would’ve picked up another ship shadowing us. If we were hovering for takeoff or landing it could be done easily, but we’re traveling at star speed out here. We have other ships on our sat-com, but they’re all at normal traffic distance.”

“It’s the implanted device,” Navos said, his mind racing. “It has to be. Perhaps it was programmed in some way.”

"I will study it further." Halix leaned forward, face grave under his dark bowl of hair. "Commander, I fear you're right about the intent of the device. In studying the boy's records, we discovered the surgery to implant it took place on Indigo."

Navos stared at him, ice spreading through his chest until he was numb. "My home planet. So the conspiracy to destroy the *Orion* has spread even there."

Craig surged out of his chair to face him across the command console. "You think this is the same group that has been targeting us?"

Sirena uncoiled from her chair as well, her lovely eyes narrowed. "Yesss! It follows the same pattern, using a dupe or a paid saboteur."

"The most dangerous weapon of all is that which doesn't know it is a weapon," Craig murmured.

Navos looked sharply at him. Craig nodded. "Yes, Daron, you said that. Little did you know you were predicting the quarking future."

"Wait a minute," snarled Panthar, rising as well. "Why bother with this surgery? Can't you Indigons mess with other beings just with your minds?"

Navos bowed ironically. "As you say, but we must be within a fairly small radius. You might compare it to being within sight, or hearing distance. Whoever did this used the technology developed by psych-techs for the InterGalactic Space Forces. It's commonly used on petty criminals to monitor and if necessary, modify their behavior."

Panthar growled low in his throat. "Seven hells, that ruffles my fur the wrong way! They shouldn't be able to do that to a guy."

Sirena cast him a fiery look. "It's intended for rapists and child molesters. They deserve whatever means are necessary. Commander Navos, you're saying someone used this psych-tech implant to force the boy to attack a locked cerametal hatch with his bare hands? With his body?"

Cold rage coalescing in his gut at the memory of the boy's torn hands and face, Navos nodded shortly.

"That is truly evil!" Mra's green hair waved about her throat, radiating distress instead of her usual serenity.

"So was the last plot against the *Orion*," said Slyde, his golden eyes molten with remembered rage as he stood behind his wife. "When deadly serpents were loosed among us."

"And the voyage before that, when two of our own were paid to sabotage us," Sirena hissed.

"And our maiden voyage, when one of my countrymen smuggled a bio-bomb aboard," Mra added sadly. "Captain, how much longer can we go on under siege?"

"We can't," their captain said starkly. He looked around at all of them. "We have to stop them now. It's only a matter of time before they manage to do some real damage. Or until the news media get hold of the whole story. Many of the crew know. We can't keep that many people quiet."

"What do we know?" asked Slyde. "Anything new?"

“That is an interesting question,” chirped a new voice. The others looked at the doctor in surprise. Tentaclar aimed an eye at each of them, blinking solemnly. “What I know is this,” he said. “The Indigon boy had an implant in his brain. What interests me is—*what I know*.”

“What do you mean?” asked Craig impatiently.

“I mean, Captain, that I could have done that surgery. So could any competent surgeon on any number of planets. And, it could have been used on many races of beings. So why not?” He looked around at them all expectantly.

Navos stared at him, realization of the old doctor’s meaning streaking through him like an electric shock. “Why do the implant on an Indigon?” he echoed. “Why choose one of my race? Other beings are as susceptible to mind control, just not able to use it.”

Sirena drew in her breath in a hiss. “Yesss. Whoever did this must know you are on board the *Orion*. And how powerful you are at divining any threat. Why do they dare to do this here?”

Panthar let out a low mrrrowl of realization. “Yeah, they must know how angry it would make you for an Indigon to be victimized. Seven hells, if they messed with a Tyger cub, I’d never rest until I ripped their throat out.”

Mra winced fastidiously, but the others nodded.

Craig turned to Halix. “Mr. Halix, is Lt. Qwerx on duty this rotation at the InterGalactic Bureau of Investigation?”

Halix nodded, his round face alight. “He will be arriving in a few hours on a shuttle from bureau headquarters. Do you wish him to come directly to you?”

Craig nodded. “Ask him if he will meet here at 1100 hours. Daron, Sirena and Slyde, I want you to work directly with Qwerx to pinpoint just where the surgery took place on Indigo. If you can find the where, you can find who. And then we will very politely inquire, ‘Why?’”

As waves of passionate, focused anger crashed around him like storm waves on a beach, Navos nodded, appreciating Craig’s irony. When the *Orion*’s tormentor was discovered, it would be a no-holds-barred fight to see which of them got to annihilate the bastard. He meant to make sure it was him. Not content with threatening his ship, now the galactic slime was threatening his own people.

As he walked away from the command deck, he was thinking hard. Why had the attackers chosen an Indigon this time? And why under his very eyes?

Chapter Seven

Professor Loftan Cyan was feeling very pleased with himself. He allowed a small smile to curve his lips upward as he turned to his new employer. But the Pangaeon across his desk didn't return the smile. Instead his corn-silk hair writhed about his throat, a clear sign of anger.

They'd just finished observing as the Indigon youth threw himself again and again at the impenetrable metal of the *Orion*'s reactor hatch, using his own body as a battering ram until he was bruised and bloody. The only real sound had been the sickening smack of his flesh and bone against the iridium hatch, but his screams of mental anguish echoed deliciously in Cyan's mind.

He'd enjoyed not only listening to the young fool suffer, but knowing he alone was able to enjoy that particular nuance. His new employer was from a race not endowed with intuitive or empathic powers. If the fellow weren't a fabulously wealthy galactic shipping magnate, Cyan would feel quite contemptuous of him. But currency spoke clearly in any language and Rra had plenty of it. So, greater intellects must overlook his faults.

Cyan sat back in the graceful chair behind the swirl of Indigon glass that was his desk.

"You weren't quite as successful as you claimed," the Pangaeon said coldly, his pale green face taut. "Navos was able to subvert your energy and kill the boy."

Cyan hid his anger at the criticism. He gazed coolly at the businessman, Rra—or at least the holographic image of him that sat opposite. A lovely Pangaeon woman was curled by his side, but Cyan ignored her. Judging by her scanty, provocative lii silk gown, she was merely Rra's mistress. Eye candy, certainly, but unimportant.

"On the contrary, all went according to plan," he said. "Now I know more about my opponent. I've also established his weak spots. Daron Navos is as big a noble fool as ever—and he's attracted to my stepdaughter."

"You can control her?" Rra asked.

Cyan smiled unpleasantly. "Malleable as Pangaeon clay."

"That's good," the businessman sneered. "Because Commander Navos is clearly not."

"I can handle him," Cyan said, his dark blue eyes burning. "The boy was just an experiment, to test the currents. I have a much more powerful tool waiting in the wings for the actual event."

"How much of your share are you paying this one?" Rra asked.

Cyan began to laugh at his naïveté. “Not a single credit! Why should I when I can have the help for free?”

“Just see to it that it works. I don’t reward failure.”

Their holo-vid image winked out. Cyan rose from his chair with a quick, jerky movement. His hands clenched in impotent rage.

That patronizing bastard.

When this was over and his money safely stowed in an outer-galaxy account, he just might pay Rra a visit—and make him sorry he was ever born. Perhaps arrange a little accident. He would enjoy watching the skinny vegan writhe with the agony of a few broken bones, perhaps some internal injuries. He’d done it before.

“Your visitor is gone?” asked a voice. Cyan turned to see a woman standing in the open door to the balcony. In her slim column of white lily silk, a silken stole wound gracefully about her head and shoulders, she was regal as a lily.

“My dear,” he said, his heartbeat quickening as it always did when he saw her. She was so lovely, so...essentially unobtainable. Even when she allowed him to make love to her, he had the sense that he didn’t really hold her.

This excited him, as did the notion that perhaps his newest scheme would impress her enough to warm those perfect pale cheeks, those cool blue eyes.

“Yes, the fool only wanted to witness our little experiment,” he said.

She turned and he followed her out onto the balcony that overlooked the university fountains.

“Did it go as you’d planned?” she asked.

He leaned on the railing beside her, looking down into the cascading layers of water sparkling in the lights.

“It went just as I planned. She responded to the boy’s distress, as I knew she would. Navos now knows she wields an inordinate amount of power for a female.”

“And did they work together, to stop the boy?” His mistress’s voice was soft, musical as always, but her slender hand gripped the railing tightly.

“Yes. It was quite fascinating, really. They—”

“I don’t wish to hear the details.” Her voice sliced through his words. “Do you think he’s attracted to her?”

Cyan smiled to himself. “They’re no doubt engaged in sexual congress right now. Combining powers can have that effect, and she’s already infatuated with him. She had his holo-vid on her bureau, as if he was that Chaz Jaguari creature all the girls sigh over.”

Her hands tightened even more on the railing and his eyes narrowed. It was as he’d suspected. She had more than profit behind her desire to bring down Navos and his ship.

“You used and discarded him when he was young and naïve,” he said casually. “Perhaps he will do the same with her.”

“Don’t try to be ingenuous,” she said coldly. “It doesn’t suit you. I used him, but I was not...quite through with him yet.”

“Ah, he was supposed to remain with you.” Amusement tickled the back of his throat and he swallowed a laugh which he knew she wouldn’t appreciate. “As your consort.”

“Yes, but now I have you, haven’t I?” she murmured. She turned to him, one elegant hand lifting to touch his face. “And you won’t fail me...will you, Loftan?”

He straightened. Such lovely eyes, with so much danger lurking in their icy depths. “No. I won’t.”

Her lips curved up. “You want to destroy your stepdaughter as much as I want to destroy Daron Navos, don’t you?”

“Certainly,” he agreed readily. “All that lovely money. Her mother should’ve left it all to me. Then I wouldn’t have to kill her daughter to get it.”

She began to laugh and he joined her. He kissed her long throat, breathing deeply of her exotic perfume.

“Tell me how they’ll die,” she demanded, sliding her arms around his neck.

He bent to lift her into his arms and carried her back into his office. The elegant leather sofa made a delightful place for sex.

“If you insist,” he replied. As he laid her on the pale leather and lifted her skirts, he murmured his plan into her ear.

It excited both of them.

On Pangaea, Rra sprang up from the elegant divan in his penthouse sitting room and began to pace back and forth before the huge, floor-to-ceiling windows. Lly sat perfectly still, her eyes never leaving him. She did her best to appear relaxed, a little smile playing about her tinted lips, hoping he wouldn’t notice her silky green hair was wrapped tightly about her slender throat.

“This had better work,” he said. “I’m out of patience. I’ve tried everything—an enviro-terror group, a paid saboteur in their own guard, even those damned serpents! If these Indigons cannot deliver that ship to me as they have promised, I’ll take a weapon and go after her myself!

“The *Orion*,” he sneered. “The shining hope, the flagship of Logan Stark’s space cruise and transport enterprise. Ha! He’ll lose his arrogance and position as the darling of investors soon enough, when I’ve destroyed his ship and his reputation. Then PanRra Air will arise as the premier shipping line in the galaxy. And I’ll be the vaunted one, not that upstart bastard!”

A chime sounded and he whirled, a look of rage on his narrow face at the interruption to his tirade. Then he smiled slowly as he turned to Lly. Fear trickled icily down her spine. It was not a pleasant smile.

“Ah,” he said smoothly as if his rage had never occurred. “Our guests are here, or should I say, our entertainment for the evening.”

“You invited entertainers?” She tried to look pleased.

He gave her a gloating look. “Oh, yes. I must have a respite from this constant stress. And you’ll be joining them, my dear.”

She rose in a flutter of yellow lili silk. “What do you mean?”

He chuckled softly as behind him a small group of beings appeared. A lovely Serpentine woman swathed in a long golden cape was followed by two tall, muscular human males clad only in tight snakeskin pants. One of them carried a covered cage.

“I mean, my dear, you’ll be part of the show.”

While Lly stood like a statue, too frozen with shock to move, he threw himself back onto the divan and picked up his drink, gesturing expansively at the Serpentine and her companions.

“Get on with it,” he ordered.

The Serpentine woman threw back her cape, revealing that under it she wore only a few bands of snakeskin. She smiled enticingly at Rra, darting her forked tongue at him as she dropped the length of gold fabric over the long hassock before the divan.

One of the men drew the cover off of the cage. Lly caught her breath in revulsion as she saw it contained a large snake, its head swaying back and forth, tongue flicking the air.

The other man sauntered over to Lly and, before she could defend herself, he grasped her delicate gown in his hands and ripped it open from top to bottom.

She cried out in horror. He grinned down at her, his gaze crawling lasciviously over her slender, naked body. “Don’t worry, sugar,” he drawled. “We’re gonna show you a real good time.”

Lly reached out entreatingly to her lover. “Rra—please!”

But he merely smiled, his eyes alight with a cruel pleasure. “Entertain me. That is why I keep you in silk and jewels, isn’t it?”

Chapter Eight

Nelah Cobalt had suffered injustice before in her life, but none had ever angered her as much as having Daron Navos first enter her mind, then her body, only to inform her that, after all that, she was not to be his intern.

It didn't matter in the slightest that he'd offered her a clear choice and then stuck to his word. What mattered in her heart was that he'd given her a taste of the heavens and then yanked it away. Even after they'd been through such a harrowing experience, sharing the communion of fellow combatants. The deep bond between them hadn't been just sexual—it hadn't!

She scrubbed herself in the shower-dry unit until all traces of their sexual union were obliterated, dressed in fresh clothing and sank down cross-legged to calm herself with meditation. All this soothing exercise did was give her a headache.

When it was accompanied by a hollow rumbling from her stomach, she realized she was desperately hungry. In fact, she couldn't remember her last meal. She thought it had been an attempted snack in the space terminal café, though she'd been anxious and excited about boarding the *Orion* and meeting Navos.

Well, she'd gotten over that, at least. She used her com-link to order breakfast from the ship's service and fell on it ravenously, eating the entire dish of artfully arranged Pangaeon fruits before pouring herself a cup of steaming tea, which she enjoyed between bites of fragrant spice bread and eggs.

With her hunger satisfied, her head was clearer. She'd truly been operating without fuel. Settling back in the comfortable armchair with her tea, Nelah held it close to absorb the warmth, and stared unseeingly into the steam gently wafting from the cup. What should she do now?

Her eyes narrowed. It must be something suitably defiant. She was sure of one thing—she wasn't going to slink quietly away for Daron Navos's convenience. She wanted to inconvenience him—as much as possible.

And meanwhile, since she was no longer employed, nor a student, she supposed she was a tourist. On a huge, state-of-the-art cruise ship, equipped with a gym, a spa and even shops. Her lips curled up with satisfaction.

Her parents had left her rather well-off. Her mother had been a wealthy woman when she married Loftan Cyan. After her death, he spent his portion of the inheritance and sold the lovely house in the mountains. But, thanks to her mother's financial advisors, he'd been unable to access the money left to

Nelah. He'd tried to get his revenge by sending her to a post where she was not welcome. By building her a bubble and then popping it.

She'd known something was wrong when he bid her goodbye before this journey—he'd had such a peculiar gloating look in his eyes, as if he were trying not to chuckle. Now she understood why.

Realizing she was likely to end up in tears again if she allowed herself to dwell on the past, Nelah rose, her small chin set firmly. She was going have a good physical workout, avail herself of the technicians in the spa and then go shopping.

Wandering the passageways of the huge ship, she stopped to look at a map of locations on her com-link. Finding a chapel just ahead, she slipped quietly into the quiet, softly lit room and sank down on one of the small seats. Bowing her head, she said a silent prayer for the poor mad soul who had died and asked forgiveness for her part in his death.

When she left, she felt steadier. Better able to accept that her life was indelibly changed. For the first time she had a visceral sense of the great responsibility she and other Indigons of power carried. Her professors had lectured her about the subject and she'd listened, but now—now it was real.

She also, reluctantly, understood more clearly why Daron Navos was so...so quarking controlled. He was extremely powerful, psychically speaking. He also held a position of great responsibility on this ship. If anything happened to the captain, Navos would assume leadership.

If she were honest, Navos was the epitome of Indigon chill, as she and her friends had said in school. It was partly that which had attracted her to him. His deep blue eyes, his very demeanor, promised calm and competence.

He was the polar opposite of her father. Poor Dad, she thought with a wry smile. He'd been a brilliant inventor. But he was also a perennial child, with all the bursting enthusiasm and essential unreliability. He'd been her favorite person when she was little—always sharing some new toy or idea for fun. As she grew older, she realized her mother was the one who held the family together, who struggled to find equilibrium for herself and her daughter between the cycles of wealth and poverty, as her father created new inventions and then failed to care for the financial end of his business.

Fortunately, Nelah's mother had found a good lawyer to help her patent his last invention, lawn-care robotics. They were an instant hit on Indigo, Pangaea and Earth II. When he died in the horrible accident with a malfunctioning robot, the family was solvent. Their small fortune had grown steadily, at least until Loftan Cyan got his hands in the coffers.

Nelah grimaced, wishing she could stop thinking of him. Here was the gymnasium, with what looked like a class in flexion. She needed to move. Both her mind and her healthy young body were restless. She accepted a brief singlet from the attendant and changed quickly in the locker room. In moments she was perched on a series of mats between a slender, pale green Pangaeian and a red-speckled Hobian, watching the class instructor, a graceful, silver-haired Aquarian with a serene smile.

As she flowed smoothly through the moves of her flexion routine, Nelah let her mind run free along the path of revenge. She might understand why Daron Navos behaved as he did, but she still wanted to get even, in a purely feminine way.

Navos had called for another intern to be brought out to the ship. He wouldn't train her, even with her talent, which she'd been told was extraordinary for a woman. He was ready to accept her only on his terms, as a sexual partner. Very well, she would throw herself into the part of seductress—only she would choose another lover, right in front of him. After she arrayed herself for battle.

The *Orion's* spa was a small gem, a place of gentle corals and creams, with golden light that made every being glow. It was like being inside a huge seashell, Nelah thought as she settled in an exquisitely comfortable air-pillowed chair in front of the mirrors. The attendant, a graceful male with lavender skin and hair spiked up like a jet-and-purple thistle, wrapped her in warm towels, smeared thick goop over her face and throat and then set a steaming drink by her elbow before drifting away.

"Hi," said a soft, friendly voice. A lovely young woman smiled at her from the next chair. Her red-gold hair was sleeked back from her face, wet, and she had green goo smeared on her hands and feet. "Enjoying your voyage?"

"It certainly has been interesting, so far," Nelah said carefully.

The other woman's eyes sharpened and she made a face. "Oh, dear. I just realized who you are. You're Indigon. You must be Nelah. I'm so sorry about what happened."

"Thank you," Nelah said faintly.

The other woman's cheeks flushed. "Sorry," she said again. "I'm Tessa Craig. Captain Craig's wife. I'm not usually so gauche—I think."

Nelah had to smile at her then. Tessa's self-deprecating candor was charming.

"I'm Nelah Cobalt. Thank you for your concern. It was indeed horrible, what happened to that poor man."

"Yes. I'm glad to see you're doing therapy," Tessa said. "The spa is very soothing. Makes me feel like a new woman." She waggled her hands. "I'm in the ship's guard and we train constantly. My hands and feet are always developing new calluses."

"You work on the ship, even though you are married to the captain?" Nelah asked.

"Oh, yes. Steven knows I'd go crazy just sitting around. I didn't train so hard for nothing."

"Indeed," Nelah agreed. Neither had she. Her anger at Daron Navos flamed again. His captain was apparently enlightened, even if he was not.

Her attendant returned and she said goodbye to Tessa Craig before she was escorted off to a bath before her cosmetics session.

That evening Navos sat at the head table in the mess hall with a sense of relief. He planned to have a glass or two of blue wine with his dinner, relax and then go to his room early—alone.

He looked around the big dining room—it was nearly full this evening, abuzz with conversation as passengers met each other and crew chatted about what they had done on their break. A group of Barillians wended their stately way through the tables, humming to each other through the tall pipes protruding from their lavender skulls. Joined by a pair of Mauritians, showing their large sharp teeth, a family of small, slender Pangaeans rose en masse, their green corn-silk hair wagging in alarm, and scurried to another table.

Navos watched with a minimum of interest. The Serpentine guards were everywhere, some on duty around the perimeter, some at dinner. If it became necessary, he knew they would spring into action to remove any problem swiftly and efficiently.

Two young Indigons sat at a table just below his own. He saw with approval that they were visiting quietly, watching the other passengers. He'd spoken by holo-vid with the vice regent at the Indigon University that morning. He was immediately assured two candidates would arrive today by shuttle. It seemed his services as a mentor were in great demand and the regent was not going to pass up a chance to place new graduates. Navos had been invited to interview both young men and choose one or both as interns.

The vice regent had asked politely about his problem with Ms. Cobalt. Navos merely said that although psychically talented, she wasn't suitable. He hadn't mentioned the death of the Indigon boy—it would come out soon enough in the galactic news.

Navos had just been served his dinner when awareness riffled across his mind like a sudden warm breeze. The two young Indigons sat up, staring raptly at the main entrance to the hall. As were many other males present, including the male Serpentine guards, always looking for a new conquest. Following their gaze, Navos froze with his wineglass at his lips.

A lovely, exotic young woman stood in the arching entryway, poised as lightly as a butterfly on a bloom. She wore a slim fall of silvery blue lili leaf silk, slender arms and shoulders bare. Her only adornments were a heavy silver bangle on one wrist and two long streaks of silver dangling from her earlobes. The short feathery cap of her black hair was a foil for her lovely face, and delicate cosmetics rendered her blue eyes huge and smoky, her lips like orchid petals.

He felt a now-familiar jolt in his gut.

The Indigon beauty was none other than the woman he'd last seen flushed and tousled from his embrace. *Nelah*—her name whispered through his mind like a warm caress.

She looked toward him and he saw her lips curve up in a tiny smile. Ignoring the many eyes riveted on her, she walked gracefully toward him across the room. He realized belatedly he was staring like a fool.

He took a long drink of his wine and set his glass down carefully, ready to rise courteously when she neared him.

A carefully shielded part of him rejoiced with fierce male triumph. This beautiful female was his—he'd taken her, body and mind, made her cry out with ecstasy. The memory of her impossibly tight, silken depths receiving him sent heat glowing in his loins, spreading up through him in a liquid tide.

But there was something in her swaying, sensual walk, something in the mystery of that little smile that sent an icy trickle of foreboding down his spine. He took another careful drink of wine and then watched over his glass as she stopped, not before his table, but before the two younger Indigons.

Rising so quickly they resembled automatons springing from a box, one pulled out a chair for her, the other bowing. Then the two of them sat and leaned toward her, their eyes riveted on her face.

Their exuberant attraction buffeted Navos. He slammed his mental shields into place, shutting out their youthful lust.

For one awful moment he wondered if she'd deliberately seduced him and was moving on to new prey. Then his common sense took over. He recalled her naïveté, her inability to control the power of her attraction to him. No, he'd been the instigator.

His eyes narrowed. This, if he was not mistaken, was her feminine revenge. She was playing the youths, in a clear attempt to play him. By the great God beyond, she wouldn't succeed. Still, cold rage filled his gut with ice as she ignored him completely, turning with pretty grace between the two younger Indigons, who were plainly enthralled.

As any man would be. Her delicate breasts were ready to fall out of that ridiculous excuse for a gown. As she sank into her chair, he glimpsed the dimples at the base of her bare back. Any Indigon lady of wealth and breeding might wear such a gown, but on her—Navos wanted to yank off the nearest tablecloth and throw it around her, covering that pale skin from any eyes other than his own.

He drained his wineglass and signaled for another. Then he turned with determination to his own table. As he did so, his eyes met Craig's. That ice blue gaze held mingled commiseration and a glint of humor. Navos froze as he realized that to his old friend, if no one else, his jealousy was apparent.

That was unacceptable. He was Indigon, possessed of more mental power than most of those in this huge room combined. No slip of a girl would make a mockery of his superior intellect.

Dinner was an ordeal. In the periphery of his vision an incandescent Nelah flirted and laughed with the Indigons. At his table, he was surrounded by couples. Happy couples. Couples glowing with unions both sensual and spiritual. The Dragolins, the Craigs, even Halix and his lover, Lt. Qwerx of the InterGalactic Police. Their happiness was nauseating.

He wished nothing more than to shove back his chair with a crash, grab the carafe of wine from the center of the table and stalk out of the room. Pride alone kept him from doing so. Dinner was a delicately prepared concoction of Aquarian sole and Pangaeian rice and vegetables. He ate with mechanical precision,

barely tasting it. He chatted politely with his co-commanders and their mates. He drank more wine than usual.

At last dinner was over and he could rise and walk with Halix and Qwerx to one of the quieter lounges for a game of holo-dice.

As they passed the other Indigons, he heard Nelah ask, a laugh in her voice, if the two younger men had ever danced the samba-lea, a sensual dance performed not with one partner, but in a group. There was a band on board that specialized in this dance from the tropics of Earth II. The thought of her gyrating with these two impressionable young fools made him long to grasp her slender arm and haul her away with him where she could dance for no one but him. He stiffened his spine and his inner control. Clearly the excess wine hadn't been a good idea.

Navos played one game of holo-dice and then left the other two squabbling happily over who had won the first match. He started at first for his quarters, but then found his footsteps wending toward the ship's arboretum. The owners of the space transport companies had found crew members, especially those from the verdant planets, remained in much better spirits and thus more productive on the long voyages into the cold outer reaches of space if they had a shipboard retreat that simulated nature.

The small jungle on the top level of the ship had windows overhead so that a panoply of moons and stars were visible through the arching fronds of lush vegetation. Paths wound around the pond and bathrooms were hidden in one of the faux rocks.

Self-supporting, with temperature and humidity control, and recirculating water, it resembled a Pangaean rainforest. Warm breezes rustled in the trees. An occasional birdcall rang over the waterfall splashing into the pond.

It was a place of sensual delights. A place that teased the senses, made one long for a partner to share it. More than one couple was doing so tonight. Navos winced in distaste as he sensed a pair of Serpentians coupling in the underbrush nearby, at least three human couples embracing torridly and even a pair of Barillians at the far end of the place.

His bad humor finally getting the better of him, he sent out a strong wave of empathic power, suggesting to all the couples they really wished to continue their liaisons in their staterooms. Widening his circle of power, he sent the same command to a young couple just entering the doors behind him.

There was a flurry of rustling, smothered laughter and a few growls from impatient males, but at last the footsteps died away and he was alone. And why the seven hells should he always be alone, when others seemed to find it so easy to couple, both physically and emotionally?

And when the woman he wanted was only a few steps away. Flirting with other males. By the great God beyond, he would stand for it no longer. Stopping on the soft moss before the pool, he gazed down into the depths of the warm, clear water and focused his mind.

Chapter Nine

Nelah stood before the restroom mirrors, a tube of plum lip color in her hand. Outside, the infectious beat of a samba-lea throbbed, calling dancers to the floor. Her eyes sparkled a deep blue in her glowing face. She knew she looked her best, holding her own among the other pretty females in the bar. She was having a grand time, dancing and flirting. The two Indigons' admiration was balm to her wounded soul.

She stilled, her tiny bag forgotten in her hand. Suddenly, she wanted nothing more than to be alone. Somewhere...moist and green. Somewhere quiet. The arboretum.

Thrusting the lip color into her bag, she slipped out of the restroom and around the back edge of the dance floor, ducking behind two hulking Ceruleans as she saw the Indigons watching for her. They were nice, but they were boys, really.

The arboretum was quiet, hushed, the moist, flower-scented dimness beckoning her in. In its encircling shrubbery the pool glowed, enticing her to its warm, clear depths. Raising her hands to the back of her neck, Nelah unfastened her gown. It fell to her feet in a slither of silk, leaving her clad only in her jewelry and tiny evening sandals. She smiled at the caress of the warm, soft air on her bare curves, feeling deliciously wanton as she unfastened the earrings and bangle and dropped them on the gown.

Kicking off her shoes, she stepped forward into the shallow water. Crooned a low sound of pleasure as it lapped at her ankles. Touched herself, cupping her hands over her breasts. They tightened in response and an answering pleasure throbbed between her thighs. Slowly she slid her hands down over her body, enjoying the slender curves, the play of muscle beneath her skin.

Reaching her mons, she cupped it with one hand and slipped one finger into the silky lips of her labia. Slowly, savoring the rising tension in her pussy, she drew her arousal up over the tiny knot of nerves at the apex. Her clitoris was already swollen and one touch sent a deep shudder through her. With just a few more strokes, she would come.

"Nelah."

She started violently as her eyes flew open, revealing the man in the shadows of the tropical trees. Navos stood there and she knew with a flash of clarity that he'd watched her performance. She'd never felt so vulnerable, so *naked* in every way.

"Oh! You bastard," she choked out, feeling a scalding blush flood her face, race down over her throat and breasts. "You called me here."

“Yes.” She felt his answer in her very core, and shivered as pleasure and need held her on the cusp. His eyes burned across the small space that separated them, hot as molten sapphire, scorching a path down over her naked curves. She swore she could feel the heat on her taut nipples and she gasped as her own touch suddenly seemed hotter, more tantalizing.

He was a shadow in the warm, moist jungle, watching her, ready to devour every nuance of her helpless response. Because she could help herself no longer. She had to have the orgasm waiting for her in her own touch.

“Yes,” he urged gently. “Now, Nelah. I’m watching you.”

With a wild little cry, she began to stroke herself, her wet fingers circling her clitoris hard and swift. Naughty delight suffused her pussy and burst outward. His gaze, his presence in her mind, even her embarrassment made it all the more delicious.

When the small cataclysm was over, she forced herself to open her eyes and lift her chin proudly as she looked back at him.

“You don’t play fair,” she accused. She wanted to slap him, she wanted—

“Neither do you, lovely one. You dressed to tease in that gown and it worked. You may leave if you wish. I won’t hold you against your will.”

Her eyes narrowed as he tugged at her psychically, gently enough she could choose to turn and walk away, or go to him. She took a step toward him and then another, out onto the soft mossy bank, quaking deep inside with need for more of what she’d just experienced. The memory of holding him deep in her vulnerable core made her melt. She could feel the moisture of her arousal on her inner thighs.

“You do have your uses, Commander.”

She inhaled deeply as she stepped into his arms, drawing his male fragrance in, heady and intoxicating. His heat called to her, urging her to press her own bare curves against him, shivering with delight at the hardness of his larger, clothed frame against her own smaller, softer one.

She smiled with secret delight as she measured their differences. He was the alpha creature here, more powerful in both the physical and the psychic realms. And he was hers to pleasure and be pleased in return.

She opened her mouth on his throat, tasting him as she rubbed herself against him. His arms tightened and through his snug flight suit she felt his erection against her belly. She moaned softly, her fingers digging into his back. She wanted him inside her, now.

“Have me.”

“Oh, I most certainly shall.”

Before her next breath, Nelah found herself flipped around and set on her hands and knees in the soft moss. She was shocked, but apparently he found this position satisfactory, for he dropped to his knees between hers so her bare bottom was displayed for him to look at and touch.

She opened her mouth to protest, but then his large fingers stroked her from stem to stern and she dug her fingers into the moss, biting back a soft cry. He did it again, and she moved helplessly, offering herself to him, arching her back.

“Do you want me?”

“Yes!” she cried. Beyond shame, she waited only for the broad head of his penis to replace his fingers. He inserted two fingers into her pussy and drew them apart so that she was open, waiting. When he paused, she knew he required more before he would give her what she wanted, needed. She opened her mind and let him in, all the way.

With dark, male satisfaction, he surged into her mind even as he thrust into her waiting pussy. She gave a soft, feminine cry of surrender and joy. It was swallowed by the moist darkness as he withdrew and thrust back into her sleek heat.

She’d forgotten, how could she have forgotten, how big he was? It was all her body could do to contain him and yet being stretched to the hilt was perfect, was exactly what she craved.

He held her firmly with one hand under her belly, taking her harder and harder. She felt their bodies slapping together, heard the succulent wetness of their union.

They were in the open, so anyone might see them. This thought glanced through her mind like a stray butterfly, followed quickly by the realization that even that wouldn’t make her want him to stop. She wanted him to go on having her even if the clearing filled with beings.

“I could arrange that. Voyeurism is very popular in certain circles.”

“I didn’t mean it—oh, perhaps I did. I’m coming—I’m coming!”

The pleasure seized her, even as the image of how they looked filled her mind’s eye. She saw herself from his point of view, the lovely curve of her bare back, the round swell of her bottom, his penis moving in and out of her. She saw them as others would. A slender, graceful young woman, crouched completely nude before a tall, lean, fully clothed man, her face suffused with ecstasy as he took her hard and fast.

“Yes! Oh, Daron.” Her pussy imploded with pleasure that tightened and tightened before it flooded outward, through her entire body. And still he thrust.

“Again!” And incredibly she felt it happen again. This time he was with her.

Outside the arboretum, strange things began to happen as the mingled power of the two Indigons seeped into the corridors, past the barriers of walls, of flesh and bone.

Mandy and Luke Jones were dressing for dinner with their backs to each other, a pout on her face and a scowl on his. She’d arranged this cruise hoping they could regain the magic in their marriage. He’d come with the steely resolve that if things didn’t get better between them, he was gone. There were plenty of other pretty women in the galaxy who didn’t argue with everything he said.

Suddenly, they stopped, turned, looked at each other and remembered exactly why they had wed so swiftly. She dropped her gown, and he tossed his jacket on top of it and opened his arms. Their lips met and clung as he turned and fell back onto the bed with her on top of him.

“Oh, Luke,” she gasped. “Oh, I love you.”

“Mandy,” he groaned. “Oh, baby. You’re the one I want.”

Jarra Bak had just met Jak Cree in the elevator. He’d noticed her the first day of the cruise and watched her longingly. The two Hobians smiled shyly at each other and then looked away, blushing. She thought him handsome with his red-speckled hide. He thought her pretty as a blossom with her peach-dappled curves.

Now she turned and looked up at him with a sultry invitation in her eye and his own narrowed with new purpose.

“Come to my room,” he invited. “I will have dinner sent up.”

“I’m hungry,” she said daringly. “For you.”

They barely made it in the door of his stateroom before they were wrapped in each other’s tentacles.

“I know little of coupling,” he admitted. “But when I hold you close to me, I do not care.”

“Nor do I. We will figure it out—together.”

The two young Indigons had finally given up on Nelah. At loose ends, they left the lounge and wandered back toward their stateroom. Then they forgot her.

A Serpentine guard was strolling toward them and they both stared at the way her golden-yellow uniform set off her lovely body. She smiled at them both and stopped, striking a pose.

“Hello, boys. Why don’t you invite me in?”

Incoherent with lust, they nearly fell over each other to get their door open.

Captain Steve Craig was on the command deck, frowning over a holo-vid review of the recent attack. A vision assailed him of his lovely bride all alone in the big bed in their quarters at the top of the ship. His crystal blue eyes narrowed and he smiled slowly. He’d been meaning to show her a little move he’d learned as a wild bachelor cruising the space ports. He flipped off the holo-vid and strode purposefully to the elevator.

Prince Dragolin and his bride were already engaged in sensual activities. They merely accepted the waves of pleasure as a consequence of what he was doing to her at the moment. She cried out in ecstasy and he joined her with a dragon-like roar.

Chapter Ten

When Navos finally withdrew, Nelah could not move for a moment. She collapsed on the soft, cool moss and lay there, panting. She was still pulsing with aftershocks of pleasure, damp and hot.

She opened her eyes just enough to watch him strip off his clothing. He looked down at her.

“Come for a swim.”

She managed to lift her head. “Can we?”

He raised a haughty brow. “Certainly.”

She let her head drop back. “In a moment. I don’t know if my legs will hold me up.”

“Let me assist you.”

Nelah let out a squeak as he lifted her high. But she curled her arms about his neck as he carried her into the warm water. When he held her she felt delicate and feminine, and she loved it.

She let her head fall onto his shoulder as he sank down into the water. Oh, no. She wished she hadn’t voiced the word love, even in the privacy of her own thoughts. What if, next time he had her, he divined her infatuation for him? What if he thought her in love with him? She wasn’t, of course. It was just that he was so...so very...

Navos tipped her chin up with his hand and kissed her. She sank into the heat and power of his kiss, the truth bursting inside her with sweet pain. She was in love with him. And he just as certainly was not in love with her.

Navos, if she’d only known it, was nearly as shaken and uneasy as she that he needed her so powerfully he’d called her to him. He was used to being a lone pillar of intellect, the one who always remained a little apart. He had few close friendships—Steve Craig and a couple of old friends on Indigon, both still at the university. He was on good terms with the other crew commanders, but he did not seek them out to socialize. He’d certainly never used his power to beckon any of them.

He intended to draw back, but her mouth was so sweet, so fresh and eager. The kiss went on as he held her, light and buoyant, slipping against him under the water.

He cupped her round bottom in his hands, enjoying the resilience of the soft curves when he squeezed. The feel of her breasts sliding against his chest. The lithe strength of her legs as she wound them around his waist and her heat against his groin.

Slowly he relaxed his mind-block on the doors of the arboretum. It seemed much less important than the way she felt in his arms and the magic of her mouth. His body responded, arousal tightening his penis once again. How could it not, when it was cradled in the soft, hot furrow of her sex? And she, so perfectly attuned to him, responded with yearning in her kiss, in her embrace.

They were both startled by voices on the path. Nelah jerked in his arms and he waded swiftly into the deep shadows under the hanging branches so they were enclosed in a shadowed grotto. Only what light could reach through the branches dappled the water.

“Let me go,” she whispered urgently. “Someone’s coming. They’ll see us.”

“Be still.”

“You be still.” She arched in his grip as one of his hands slid lower, into the crevice of her bottom. “Oh! Stop that.”

“Be quiet,” he reminded, his long fingers continuing their intimate exploration. “You don’t want them to hear you.”

No, she most certainly did not. But she wasn’t as sure how she felt about what he was doing. She listened to a small group of tourists stop on the very banks of the pond, exclaiming at the reality of the grotto, the pretty flowers blooming by the waterfall. Even as her heart thumped at the danger of their being discovered, he was stroking her, tickling and probing her under the water in her most private places. And her traitorous body was responding with secret tremors, her pussy beginning to clench with longing.

She clung to his tall, powerful body, suddenly guiltily glad she could do nothing to free herself. Any splashing or sudden movements would alert the visitors to their hiding spot. All she could do, all she wanted to do was stay in his arms.

His penis, hard again, nudged her labia as he rocked his hips against hers. Swallowing a cry, she bit at the column of his throat and arched her back so the tip of his penis could find entrance into her. She waited for him to thrust into her, but he was still.

“You’re right,” he murmured. “We should stop.”

“Daron!” She dug her nails into his shoulders.

“No, no, I was wrong to coax you. We’re only a few meters away from them. Imagine if they should see you having me, here in the water.”

At this, Nelah couldn’t bite back her moan of need. She rocked against him, impaling herself on his penis, taking him into her.

“Don’t you dare stop now!” Fiercely she wriggled to take him deeper, feeling every single centimeter in her sensitized channel. His arms tightened and he thrust hard into her pussy, seating himself to the hilt and setting off a small cataclysm of pleasure.

“You want me?”

“Yes!” She dug her nails into his back, already starting to come again.

He rocked slowly but steadily against her. “Shh. Be very quiet or they’ll hear you. They’ll know what we’re doing.”

She came so hard she nearly screamed. He locked his open mouth over hers, swallowing her cry, and drove his hips into her in sharp movements. Water lapped around them in wavelets.

Nelah sank against him, her face tucked in the curve of his throat. Her legs slackened, so only his arms held her up.

She was exhausted, blissfully sated, but a small part of her mind whirled with mingled outrage and astonishment.

Daron Navos, who rarely smiled, who placed himself above the emotions of those around him, haughty as any prince, was a tease! He’d toyed with her unmercifully while he pretended detachment.

“You are a naughty man,” she told him sternly.

“You’re angry with yourself, because the idea of voyeurism excites you. Every being has particular sexual triggers.”

It was maddening to argue with a man who could analyze her emotional processes while he still rested inside her, especially when she really didn’t want him to withdraw. She loved having him there, loved being joined in this most intimate of ways.

“I would never really want anyone to watch us...I don’t think.”

“Hm-mm. What about hearing you in your passion?”

She lifted her head and peered past him in alarm as voices penetrated the rush of the waterfall. Through the swaying branches that shielded them, Nelah could see a pair of humans on the pond’s edge. They stood over her gown, the discarded length of silk bright silver against the green moss.

“Looks like some young lady is enjoying the romantic atmosphere of this place. She went for a swim,” said the man, amusement clear in his voice.

Nelah’s face flamed as the woman answered, smiling. “I think she’s doing a little more than that. I heard some very happy girl noises just now.”

“Ah, and her partner’s one of the crew. Here’s a uniform.”

“Oh, my. Quite a mood this place creates.” The woman slid her arm around the man’s waist. “Let’s see where this path leads. This place is so sensual.”

“Mm-hm. And when we get back to our room, we’ll take advantage of the mood.”

“Oh, Narm. I knew this cruise was a good idea.”

When they had gone, Navos loosed the woman in his arms, letting her slide down into the water.

“We’d better get out of here, before others come along. I cannot keep shielding the locks, or the guards will come to see what’s wrong,” he said. “I’ll get your gown and shoes. You can dress in the lavatory.”

She hesitated, then nodded before ducking under the low-hanging branches to swim toward the far bank.

He followed her, reflecting on the flash of uncertainty in her lovely eyes before she’d turned away. The next few moments were going to be important. She’d been furious with him. Could he, should he, convince her to continue their liaison?

He seemed to crave her, like an addictive substance. Uneasiness ran over his skin in a chill ripple, but as he waded out onto the bank, he shook it off, assuring himself he was in control. He bent to pick up her gown and sandals. The swathe of lii silk seemed to caress his hand, drifting on some unseen current of air. Her perfume wafted up, intensified by the damp sweetness of the air. He inhaled slowly, reveling in the deep satisfaction of having enjoyed her on all levels, yet again.

He scooped up his own clothing in his other hand. Walking across the mossy bank, he enjoyed the sight of his lover, hovering just inside the open hatch of the lavatory, which was disguised in a large faux rock. She was as shy as a doe, one slender arm across her breasts, the other shielding her mons, her eyes darting about the open area behind him before returning to his face.

She frowned up at him. “You called me here for sex.”

Giving in to a sudden urge, he bent and tasted those kiss-swollen lips one last time. “Yes and you came, didn’t you? Three times, I believe.”

Her eyes widened as she drew in an outraged gasp and he shut the hatch gently in her face. A tiny smile curled up the corners of his mouth.

Nelah drew her dress on with quick, irritated movements, stabbed her feet into her sandals and stalked out of the lavatory. Daron Navos always seemed to get the better of her in an argument.

Already dressed, Navos turned to her, but he looked preoccupied, a deep line between his arching brows.

“What is it?” she asked, her anger forgotten.

He gestured for her to follow him to the hatch. “I’ve just had a message from Commander Dragolin. I must go and meet with him.”

“Can I help?” she asked eagerly, hurrying beside him out into the passageway. “I could—”

He shook his head, obviously impatient to be away. “No. This is a private matter, for the command team. I will speak with you later.”

Hurt flooded her as he strode away, disappearing into an elevator. A matter for the *Orion* command team, of which she might have been an associate, had he not refused her.

Her hands clenched into fists at her sides. She'd been the one to intuit that poor demented soul the night before. But just because she was a female, he considered her suitable only for a lover, not an intern. Not a valued teammate.

She could choose to use her powers to spy on him and his all-important meeting, but she had more pride than that.

She stalked into her room, fixed her makeup and her hair until she was once again the lovely creature that had captured male interest in the dining hall. In fact, she was bemused to see she looked even prettier now, with her lips swollen from kisses and her eyes heavy with remembered pleasure.

But the man for whom she'd dressed this way had just left her without an apology. She lifted a haughty brow at her reflection. So they'd used each other for pleasure. She'd heard such things occurred on space cruises. That was fine, then. She might not be as sophisticated as he, but she'd learn. Tossing her head, she sauntered back to the lido lounge, where music still pulsed. With a graceful shimmy, she joined the laughing dancers thronging the floor.

Chapter Eleven

Lt. Qwerx and Slyde Dragolin were waiting for Navos on the command deck. The Dragolin's handsome face was grave.

"Sorry to disturb you, Navos. You've had little enough free time the past few days. But we've found the clinic where the surgery was done."

"Where?"

"At the Mazarin Intel Clinic. It is in Indigo City, near your University."

"Yes, I know of it. It is run by an old...acquaintance."

His skin tightened as a beautiful, haughty face appeared in his mind. Beryl Mazarin, one of the coldest, most calculating women he'd ever met. At one time, battling to subjugate his emerging male needs, which seemed to him to stem from the human half of his nature, she had seemed to him the ideal woman. Only after she'd seduced him, and inveigled him into revealing confidential information from his work at the university, had he realized he was caught in the web of a predator with about as much real passion for him as a female spider for her mate.

He'd escaped, but with his pride shattered. The project on which he'd been collaborating was scrapped. Mazarin took the information and used it to open her own clinic. His collaborator, an elderly professor, had forgiven him, but it had taken years for Navos to accept his own naiveté and forgive himself.

Intellectually, Navos knew exactly what had drawn him to the icy beauty. His mother had been the opposite sort of woman. A human at the mercy of her emotions, which spilled over on her husband and son, keeping them all awash in constant drama. Beryl Mazarin had seemed the perfect female, the epitome of Indigon dignity and grace, with only the most subtle of emotions allowed to tint her beautiful face.

Even those had been false.

"The clinic owner is completely unscrupulous," he said. "She manages to operate within the bounds of InterGalactic law, but I would never allow anyone in my care to set foot in the place. Most of her clients are from off-planet."

"They go there for some kind of psychic care?" Slyde asked.

"Yes, help with insomnia, addiction, that sort of thing."

Qwerx's usually cheerful black eyes sharpened. "But you believe she uses questionable methods?"

"I'm sure of it. I wouldn't be surprised to learn some of her patients aren't entirely willing. And with this information, I would hope you can open a full investigation."

“We most certainly will. And if this surgery was done at her clinic, perhaps it may even lead us to the source of the attacks on your *Orion*.”

Navos put in a holo-vid call to the IBI and within moments he, Lt. Qwerx and Slyde were face-to-face with the holo-images of the top operatives on Indigo. They looked grave, even for Indigons. The female he recognized as a former student. She’d been intelligent and a hard worker, although not highly intuitive. She introduced herself as Agent Skye and the man as Lt. Gentian. They both greeted Qwerx respectfully.

“As it happens, Commander Navos,” Gentian said, obviously uncomfortable, “we’ve just received another request for an investigation. Sir, the Bluet family is demanding you yourself be arrested.”

Navos stared at him, shock blanking his mind. Beside him, Slyde Dragolin leaned forward.

“And why do they make this demand?” Slyde asked. His voice was quiet, but the two Indigons eyed him warily. Navos’s own skin prickled, a sharp reminder the man beside him was a dangerous predator. He was glad the Dragolin was on his side.

“I believe I can answer that,” he said. “They must think I had a hand in the boy’s death.”

“Why in the seven hells would they believe that?” Captain Steve Craig strode onto the command deck. He was scowling at the IBI operatives. “Someone’s been feeding them a load of skrog manure! Daron Navos is above suspicion.”

“As guard commander of the *Orion*, I will corroborate that,” Slyde said.

“Co-commander of the guard,” said his bride, sauntering forward to stand behind him. “And I will add my voice to theirs. Commander Navos is known throughout the galaxy for his high moral character.”

Navos sat dumbly. A strange emotion coursed through him—gratitude. He’d neither desired nor needed anyone to come to his defense in some time. It felt...good.

“Yes, Captain and commanders,” said Agent Skye. Her dark blue eyes were distressed. “We know this. I myself wish to prove these charges untrue. But you understand—”

“We must pursue our investigation,” her male partner finished for her.

“Yes, of course you must,” Navos said. “And I will cooperate fully.” He would indeed, but now that he’d discovered the real villainess—or one of them—he feared he was in for an ugly battle.

“As will everyone on the *Orion*,” Craig said. “Let’s get to work.” He and Sirena sat at the command console.

“Have you discovered why the boy was admitted to the clinic?” Qwerx asked the two other investigators.

“Diagnosed with depression. He received several weeks of psychic treatment. This cruise was suggested to, ah, cheer him. The family had the monitoring device placed because they were worried about him and wished to be able to check in on him.”

The *Orion* crew commanders gazed at each other, the grim realization written on their faces of just how awry the family’s plan had gone.

“So he was mentally fragile.” Navos struggled to maintain his usual detachment. “And something occurred last night that completely unbalanced him.”

“This monitoring device,” Craig said. “We discussed it just hours ago. Commander Navos believes it may have been subverted somehow, to cause the boy to act in a deranged fashion. I’d like to understand it better. You said it can be used to monitor, say, a rapist. But what happens when he acts out? How do they stop him?”

“The device can be used not only to receive, but to send a signal,” Gentian said. “It acts on the impulse center of the brain, to thwart the subject’s own suggestion and implant a new one. For example, if a rapist is about to take a new victim, the impulse would be triggered by his, er, excitement. It would immediately send an alternate signal. He would instead stand still and begin to recite his name, address and criminal record, over and over.”

“Thus warning possible victims away,” Sirena finished with relish. “He wouldn’t be able to help himself. Talk about the perfect deterrent.”

Craig nodded. “So there’s no need for law enforcement to arrive at star speed. They can take their time. Great idea, whoever thought of it.”

“It was the outcome of research at the university on Indigon,” Skye said proudly. “Commander Navos was one of the founders of the project, were you not, sir?”

Craig, Slyde and Sirena looked at him, all equally surprised. As he’d known they would be.

“Only in the beginning,” Navos said curtly. He’d been one of the founders of the project, until his research had been stolen by his lover and used to open the very clinic where the boy had had the device implanted.

All of which left him with the intuition that the ice spider had woven another web, one in which she intended to catch not only him, but the *Orion*.

He met Craig’s eyes across the command console. “Commander Blaze is correct—this project has indeed been used to thwart many a criminal instinct. But now...unless I’m mistaken, it is being used for evil.”

“How do you mean?” Craig looked preoccupied, as if he were still considering the new revelations about his second-in-command.

“If I didn’t send that boy to his death,” Navos said, “someone else did. And I believe Dr. Tentaclar was correct when he surmised the device was used to do it.”

Slyde nodded, his eyes narrowed.

“Someone may have been controlling him from as far away as a planet, or even a nearby space station. They could’ve subverted the signal somehow—suggested to him he wanted to break into the core reactor. That he had to, or die trying.”

Sirena gave a hiss of disgust and the IBI ops looked sharply at each other, then back at Navos.

“Commander Navos, do you believe this?” the woman asked, her eyes wide.

He nodded grimly. “I’m afraid so. I surmise someone in the Mazarin Clinic has been doing a great deal more research on the device, in secret. They’ve chosen now to unveil it.”

“And aboard the *Orion*,” Craig said with grim disgust. “This must be connected with the other attacks. It has to be!”

“Yes, it doesn’t seem coincidental,” Slyde agreed. “And I’m afraid it means we must be on the alert for another attack.”

“Which could happen at any time,” his wife added. “And if there are others on board with these devices implanted, there’ll be no warning, will there?”

“Which means we’d better be ready for anything, anytime,” Craig finished. He shook his head, scrubbing one hand over his short, silver-blond hair. “Damn. This is just like the good old days of the Solar Wars. And I didn’t miss ’em one quarking bit.”

The two IBI ops signed off after Navos assured them they had his sworn oath to stay on the *Orion* and await further contact. When the holo-vid had winked out, he waited quietly.

Steve Craig sat with his hands steepled before his face for a moment. Finally he dropped them and sighed. “Tell me about your involvement in this implant project, Daron.”

Unemotionally, Navos recited the sordid facts—how he’d conceived the idea for the implant and received funding and support from his mentor at the university. How Beryl Mazarin had seduced him and stolen his research to open her own clinic. How he’d forged ahead with another version of the project, after she’d quickly produced the implant now used by law enforcement.

“So your work has done much good in the galaxy,” Sirena said approvingly. “Even if that bitch got the credit for some of it.”

“She also made a fortune, if I’m not mistaken,” her husband said drily.

“Yes,” Navos said, “which should have gone to the university to fund research. However, I’ve been able to collaborate on other projects, which have replaced most of the loss.”

Craig was still frowning. “But it still leaves you on the hook, as far as the Bluet family is concerned. You’re the inventor of the device, you’re on board with the boy when he goes insane and dies. Ergo, you’re the perpetrator.”

“I imagine they had some help arriving at that theory,” Navos said. “She’s...most convincing.”

“Well, this time she’s gone too far,” hissed Sirena. She slapped one hand on the command console. “What colossal arrogance! Thinking she can take the *Orion* down and you with it.”

“Could she be the one behind all of the attacks?” Craig asked.

Navos shook his head slowly. “No. I don’t believe so—the other attacks do not fit the same profile. But...I suppose we can’t rule out the possibility.”

Qwerx, who had been listening quietly, now spoke up. His dark eyes held steely purpose. “Commander Halix thinks very highly of you, as do your colleagues, Commander Navos. Rest assured, the IBI will do all we can to find the real perpetrators and clear your name. I myself am aboard at the request of Mr. Stark.”

“Should he be in on the investigation?” asked Sirena. The founder and owner of LodeStar was known for letting his captains run their ships as they saw fit.

“I spoke to him, along with Lt. Halix,” Craig put in, shaking his head. “He’s on Pangaea at present. Said he had an idea about an old rival who might possibly be behind the attacks on us.”

“An entrepreneur as successful as Stark must have many old rivals,” Sirena said drily, but her emerald eyes were sharp. “Who is this one?”

“The IBI prefers not to mention any names as yet,” Qwerx said firmly.

Sirena sighed. “Your agency is going to try and stop us from taking care of the slime when we find them, aren’t you? I never get to have any fun.”

Craig bit back a grin. He stretched mightily and then pushed himself out of his chair.

“I need sleep. Get some rest, all of you. Command team meeting after breakfast.”

He stopped before Navos and held out his hand to him. “Daron, I know you for a man of honor. We’ll see to it the rest of the galaxy knows it once again, as well.”

Navos took the strong hand held out to him and gripped it.

The Dragolins shook his hand as well and then glided off toward the gym. Navos turned toward his own quarters. Thoughts and emotion churned inside him.

Could Beryl Mazarin be the mastermind behind the series of attacks on the *Orion*? Surely not. He knew she hadn’t been ready to let him go when he’d left her, but surely she wouldn’t have gone to such elaborate, deadly lengths as waiting years to sabotage the cruise ship on which he was second-in-command!

That she’d somehow become involved with the real perpetrators, he could believe. She was unscrupulous enough to enjoy collaborating on a scheme this evil.

His reflection stared back at him from the mirrored wall of the elevator, a pale, grim man with burning eyes, deep lines etched beside his mouth. He forced himself to blink and unlock his jaw. He must relax, must find a way to put this terrible problem out of his mind long enough to rest. Bereft of his usual soul-deep calm, he felt off-kilter. It wouldn’t take much to destroy his fragile equilibrium.

Chapter Twelve

Navos stepped out of the elevator on the upper level, but in the passageway his footsteps slowed and then stopped.

Nelah. She filled his mind's eye, lovely and tempting as a low-hanging fruit. Lust swamped him, surging through him like a wave, arrowing straight to his loins so his balls tightened and lifted in painful anticipation and his penis stiffened hard and questing as a divining rod.

He turned toward his quarters, his eyes narrowing as he pictured her there. Yes, she was waiting. Ripe and succulent as a plumquod, waiting for him to fill her with his passion. A cure as old as time for the danger and turmoil surrounding him.

He strode for his door, already unfastening his flight suit, heat rolling up through him.

He ignored a trio of tourists in evening wear who stepped quickly aside to let him pass. Disregarded the trio of Serpentine guards watching wide-eyed as he approached.

"Commander?" one of them said uncertainly. "Sir?"

Navos ignored them. Tossing his jacket aside, he put one hand on the fastening of his snug pants. *Nearly there*—she was so close he could almost feel her yielding to him as he thrust into her. In her arms he could forget, for a blessed time.

"Commander Navos." Izard, the oldest of the guards, stepped into his path, his usually twinkling eyes narrowed with concern under his shock of green-gold hair.

"Izard," Navos snarled. "You've fucked your way across the galaxy and back again. Now get out of my way, so I can do the same."

The Serpentine's mouth fell open like a sunning lizard. Behind them, a tourist gasped loudly.

The door to Navos's quarters opened before him and he hove through it like a spacecraft through the last of a meteor shower. It slid shut behind him, closing out the gaping guards, staring tourists.

A soft giggle fell on his ears, rising above the music. Soft and throbbing, the melody and the laughter enticed him into the shadowed room, while her scent beckoned him—delicate perfume and aroused woman.

She lay in his bed, an offering of wanton grace. Her eyes gleamed with mischief as she drew one leg up and then slowly let it fall to the side, so she lay displayed to him, her nipples tight as buds, her bare pussy a blossom waiting to be plucked.

“You...” he growled, anger warring with the heat fogging his brain, realizing she’d played him like an untried youth. “You called me here!”

“Yes, Commander,” she agreed, curling a finger at him. “I called you here...for sex. Now, what are you going to do about it?”

To the rhythmic beating of a drum, he ripped off his pants and launched himself onto the bed.

Her eyes widened as he poised above her on his outstretched arms. He eyed her, then let his gaze drift down over her bare body.

“I’m going to take what you offer,” he said. “Every way I can think of.”

She lifted one small hand to touch his chest, a gentle, placating gesture. “Commander—”

“Oh, no,” he interrupted with one searing look back up into her eyes. “There’s no going back now, sweet flower. You’ve called the bee, now give up your honey.”

He lowered himself, her scent rising about him, warm and heady. Woman overlaid with delicate perfume and the healthy glow of exercise. Burying his face in her throat, he breathed deeply and opened his mouth to taste her, sliding his hands under her back to pull her up against him. Pliant in his grasp, she shivered with delicious reaction, her hand cupping the nape of his neck, the other sliding up over his back.

He raked his open mouth down over the silken plain of her breast to one nipple and drew it into his mouth, hard, suckling firmly, reveling in the texture and the way she cried out softly, clutching him more tightly. Oh, yes, she enjoyed that even more when he shifted to the other. But only briefly, for he’d a more luscious target in mind. One he’d been waiting to taste.

Her belly was a delight, a curving plain of satin with a tiny indentation. It quivered under his mouth. Below it waited the hill of her mons, beckoning him to the sweetest crevasse in the galaxy. Moist and heady with the scent of her arousal, feathered with the lightest of down, opening to the touch of his fingers with trembling eagerness, even as her hands clutched nervously at his shoulders.

“Daron?” Nelah’s voice rose uncertainly as he stroked his fingertips into the moist mauve folds of her labia. “What are you...oh!” she squeaked as he bent his head to her and tasted—finally—of her female essence.

She was quivering and tender under his mouth, sleek and delicate under his tongue. He thrust it into her as deep as he could and then licked up to her clitoris. Her cries turned to joy and as he swirled his tongue around the swollen knot of nerves she came undone. He felt her first orgasm take her.

Her response only made him want more. Drunk on her scent and taste, he wanted to go on and on. He thrust two of his fingers inside her to enjoy the feel of her pussy clenching rhythmically around them. He curled them slightly, pressing hard against the nerves he knew were there and renewed his tender attack on her clitoris. This time she cried out with deliciously ascending levels of shock, until finally she screamed his name.

He levered himself up over her and kissed her, deeply, letting her taste her own essence on his tongue. She slid her arms up around him and kissed him back with an abandon that incited him even further.

“Will you take me in your mouth?” he asked her, lifting his head just enough to look down into her sleepy eyes. She blinked, then put out her tongue to touch the corner of her mouth in an innocent gesture that made his penis stiffen with unbearable eagerness.

“Yes,” she whispered. “If you show me.”

He threw back his head to take a steadying breath as the vision of those petal soft lips encircling his rigid penis drove him a little mad.

“Later,” he groaned. “I cannot wait a nanosecond longer.” Reaching between them, he guided his quivering cock into the silken folds of her labia, tensed his buttocks and thrust into tight, hot heaven.

He was lost in pleasure, in the dark waves of heat that pounded in his veins, driving into her with a force he knew dimly was perhaps ungentlemanly, but he could not have stopped if the *Orion* blew apart around him. The music throbbed around him as he thrust in rhythmic joy.

He came so hard he reared up in her arms, arched like a bow for one endless, ecstatic moment. Then he hung on his elbows, trembling, until she gently urged him down into her arms. He relaxed into her silky embrace and felt her touch his hair as he fell fathoms deep into sleep.

Out in the corridor, Izard gone, the remaining two Serpentine guards paced slowly on their rounds. They looked at each other, a new interest smoldering in both their golden eyes. As they neared a supply closet, the male reached out and deftly opened the hatch. Then he looked down at his female companion.

“I’ll wager I can have you screaming my name in a nanosecond,” he said, flicking his forked tongue at her.

The slender female narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re on.”

“Oh, I will be,” he promised as he followed her into the closet.

In the lido lounge, Panthar looked down at the woman in his arms. Damn, he was so horny he almost felt as if his mating moons were in ascendance, although he knew that wouldn’t happen for weeks. And the woman in his arms was no Tyger-kitten, just a bored Earth II tourist. Still, she was gorgeous, even if her beauty was surgically enhanced.

He pulled her closer as they danced, reveling in the feel of her breasts against his chest, her legs tangling with his. She gave him a slow smile, her eyes heavy.

“Why don’t we finish this dance in my stateroom?” she murmured. “I’ve always wanted to ride a Tyger.”

"Mrrrow," he snarled cheerfully and swept her from the dance floor, his powerful arm tight around her waist.

Nelah lay holding Navos as he slept. Her toes curling with embarrassed delight, she smiled to herself in the shadows. So that was what it was like to be kissed there. A man's mouth was truly a delightful love instrument. And when he used his fingers, too...heaven.

Like a siren of old she'd used her wiles to call this powerful man, and it had worked. She hadn't bargained for the force she'd called up. The blue fire in his hooded eyes had made it clear she'd summoned a titan and must deal with him. He'd taken her hard and fast, slamming into her tender body. It had frightened her a little. And she'd loved every second of it, knowing she was the one who had taken him to the edge of control.

Weighted into the bed by his hard male heat, sticky and sore, still embarrassed by the intimacy of what he'd done to her, female triumph curled up the corners of her mouth even as her eyes slipped shut.

She woke to the astonishing sensation of a hot, silken shaft gently nudging at her lips. She breathed in the musky scent of their shared passion and his maleness. Her eyes fluttered open to find him lying beside her in the bed, her head nearly in his lap. The room was in deep shadow, only a shaft of lamplight falling over them, limning their bare bodies in gold.

He stroked the head of his penis over her lips again, this time urging her mouth open.

"I'm ready to show you how to reciprocate," he murmured.

Her body and mind woke with a thrill of sheer arousal. Without a word, she opened her mouth and took the broad head of his penis between her parted lips. She felt like a concubine being wakened to pleasure her master.

"Let me inside your mind, as well." There was a dark edge to his command. He'd had time to consider her actions. She felt indeed like a concubine, at the mercy of a master with a will much stronger than hers. Well, she'd called him and she wanted him, no matter the consequences.

With a sigh she surrendered, letting him invade her thoughts, her sensations, even as he thrust himself deeper into her mouth. Let him feel her nervousness at wishing to divine his mood, to placate him. Let him feel how delicious it was to pleasure him as he guided, his strong hands in her hair, showing her how to lean over and take him, first as deep as she could, then sucking firmly as she let him slide back out again.

"Do I please you, Commander?" He was all demanding male, a little frightening in his urgency, but when he withdrew she wanted him back, wanted more. The sheets were silky under her bare skin, his thighs hard and hot under her palms.

"Oh, yes. You'll please me even more if you put your clever hand here." He guided her fingers to stroke the two tight sacs of his scrotum and then to probe deep between his taut buttocks. She discovered when she stroked the tiny opening there he sucked in a deep breath, jerking in her mouth.

"Gently, just inside." Ah, he liked that even more, his hands tightening in her hair, urging her to take him with quick movements of her head. *"Nelah...so good, little flower."*

"I want to taste your passion." She was embarrassed at her daring, but she was his concubine. She would do whatever her commander desired. At this notion, her pussy gave an answering throb of excitement.

"Oh, you shall," he promised. He groaned deeply and then went rigid in her grasp even as he began to pulse into her mouth. Shocked, yet delighted, she swallowed until he withdrew sharply. Fluid spurted hot and silky onto her throat and breasts.

Nelah thought a little wildly that a sophisticated woman would know what to do, but she did not, so she lay very still. Warmth trickled slowly down her chest. She licked her lips, tasting the musky saltiness of his come.

The man beside her gave a deep sigh and stirred languidly.

"Mm-m. Thank you, little flower. That was very satisfying." He stroked his fingertips through her hair.

"I'm not your little flower."

"Ah, but a concubine has such a title, didn't you know?"

His warm hand stroked down over her throat, slid over the curve of her breast, slippery with his come, drawing the wetness down her abdomen. She caught her breath, taken aback at his nonchalance.

"This...is normal love-play?"

"Oh, yes. Quite usual." He was teasing her again, she was sure of it. But as his wet fingertips reached her mons and he delved between her thighs to cup her warmly, intimately in his palm, she stopped caring. Heat surged up through her at the possessiveness of his grasp. It said more clearly than any words that he was laying claim to what he held.

He did something wicked and clever with his fingers and she gasped, the soft sound loud in the quiet shadows.

"Yes. Tell me of your pleasure. Open your lovely petals only for me and bloom in the darkness."

"Daron!" His poetic words combined with the shocking intimacy of having taken him in her mouth, of wearing his male essence like a brand on her skin sent pleasure imploding through her pussy. She clutched at his hard thigh, digging her nails into him as she arched her back, opening herself for more of his touch.

"You're going to come for me, aren't you?"

"Yes—yes! Commander!"

She came around his fingers, crying out her pleasure to him and the night.

He waited only until she'd relaxed and then swept her up in his arms and bore her into the spacious shower-dry. Nelah leaned against him, letting his powerful arm hold her up as the hot water jets pulsed to life around them. She was disoriented, dazed. She'd called up a storm and she was in the center of it.

She summoned enough energy to take a handful of the soft gel soap, but she was fascinated with watching him wash himself, the water and soap coursing down his long, powerful frame. She traced a stream of bubbles dreamily with her fingertips as it coursed into the hollow of his flank. He was slick and hard under her fingertips.

He took another handful of the soap and began to wash her as well.

"Wilting, little flower?" he asked, an edge to his voice.

She blinked up at him through the water and blushed under the dark intensity of his gaze. He was angry with her. She'd called this intensely proud man to her and he'd come—to the edge of control. Her stomach clenched as she realized what she must do.

"I'm sorry," she said into the hush as the water stopped. "I know it was wrong of me to...to call you to me, when you carry such responsibility here on your ship."

Nelah quailed before the look in his eyes, stepping back against the cerametal of the shower-dry stall. He grasped her shoulders, holding her before him.

"You must never do such a thing again," he grated. "Another man, with less control than I, might have raped you. Do you understand?"

She shook her head, denial in every fiber of her being. "I wouldn't call another man that way." Her cheeks burned as she realized she'd nearly admitted her love for him. Again.

She was saved by the sudden rush of warm air that began to blow. Turning her back to him, Nelah busied herself combing her fingers through her hair. She could feel him behind her as clearly as if he still held her.

"You may think so now," he said quietly over the whoosh of air. "But one day that will change."

Chapter Thirteen

Navos reached around Nelah, opening the shower-dry hatch and she stepped out, moving aside. He walked out into the other room, the lights brightening at his passage. She followed him, watching as he walked over to pick up his clothing from the floor. Nelah's eyes widened at the splendid view of his lean ass. She watched, fascinated as he turned back toward her. His penis was still a formidable sight, even lying relaxed against his scrotum. And she wished she'd had time to explore the tiny indentation of his navel and the ridged plain of his abdomen.

Belatedly she realized he was standing still, holding his clothing in one hand and letting her look her fill of him. She lifted her chin, refusing to acknowledge the hot blush that flooded her face as she held out her hand for her clothing. She realized with a rush of heat that now, whenever she looked at him, the acts in which they had just engaged would always be there, between them like a secret current.

"I should...go to my own stateroom," she said.

He picked up her gown, but instead of handing it to her, he stepped forward.

"Oh, no. You and I aren't finished talking."

"Aren't we?" she said with a flash of spirit, grasping at the trailing silk of the gown. "Perhaps I haven't time to chat."

He used her grip on the silk to tug her toward him. "You have time. And so do I." He looked down into her eyes, his face implacable. "Nelah, you have stronger powers than I at first realized. Too strong to use without care."

She flushed, her cheeks burning. "I told you I received top marks in my class."

"Yes, I remember," he said. "But without proper control, you're as dangerous as a loose laser-cannon."

Stung by this accusation, she fired back. "You speak as if I go about using my power on every man I meet. But I haven't, only with you. And I've done nothing you haven't! You called me to the arboretum—"

He placed one finger firmly across her lips. "Nelah. Allow me to finish. I've altered my decision. I will train you."

Her heart skipped a beat and then began to race. She searched his gaze, hardly able to believe what she heard. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes. I mean it."

“Oh, thank you. Thank you, thank you...” Throwing her arms around his neck, she pressed exuberant kisses over his chin, his throat. Then, leaning against him, she closed her eyes and smiled against his skin. “May we begin now?”

But instead of holding her, Navos put his hands on her shoulders and set her away from him. A chill ran through her, for he looked every inch the commander, not a man with whom to trifle.

“Nelah, listen to me. I’ll work you with more rigor than you have ever worked before. Don’t expect any quarter because of our sexual relations, because I promise you, you won’t receive it.”

Stung by his assumption she wanted or needed such treatment, Nelah tugged her gown from his hands, covering her nakedness. Pride lifted her chin again and stiffened her spine.

“Don’t worry, Commander,” she said. “You...obviously know I—I have feelings for you, but as you say, I’m inexperienced. I’m sure with your help, I can learn to feel no emotion toward you. Then all will be as you wish.”

His eyes narrowed like blue lasers. Good—let him be angry. Let him be cruel to her, if that was what it took for her foolish heart to harden. It must, or she very much feared he would crush it. Not because he meant to. No, he was too honorable for that. But because the mighty commander seemed to have no room in his makeup for love.

Navos found himself squeezing his fists as Nelah turned her back on him with a jerk and began to tug at her gown. Augh! He wanted to grab her and shake her until she rattled. How dare she rail at him for insisting, just as he should, that their passion could not be allowed to influence any work they did? Trust a woman not to see the two must never become entangled.

He forced himself to relax. Damned if he would be tied into knots by a slip of a girl who was only trying out her fledgling powers. She believed herself in love with him, but that would pass. He knew it was normal for infatuation to follow losing one’s virginity.

A surge of amusement tempered his anger, twitching up the corners of his lips. His temptress was having difficulty with her gown. The delicate fabric had evidently become tangled. She jerked at it with increasing agitation.

He pulled on his pants and fastened them and then enjoyed the show. She had pretty legs and an extremely fine bottom, round like two halves of a perfect pear. The rest of her was slender and delicate, especially the nape of her neck, so tender, just feathered by dark silky tendrils of hair. Her curls were nearly dancing now with her swift, agitated movements.

“Having trouble?” he asked.

She turned on him with flashing eyes. “You know perfectly well I am. And don’t you dare laugh at me.”

Turning her back on him again, she bent to her task with even more force, muttering furiously as she shook the tangled fabric. He allowed himself one last moment of enjoyment and then stepped over to pull the gown from her hands. Following the deepest drape, he quickly found the hidden fastening and twitched it open. He held it out to her with ironic courtesy.

“Your gown.”

She lifted her head as regally as a queen. “Thank you.”

He bowed, then watched with regret as her nudity disappeared in ice blue silk. She grabbed her little bag, stomped into her slippers and headed for his door.

“Nelah,” he said, as she reached for the button to slide open the hatch. “Be in my office at 0700 hours.”

“Yes, sir!”

He sighed.

As the hatch slid shut behind her, he stood for a moment, sensing her passage along the corridor toward the passenger quarters. The little minx—she wouldn’t get the better of him again. He meant to demonstrate very thoroughly the responsibilities that came with wielding psychic power.

She’d used her powers recklessly tonight and caused him to behave completely out of character, with lewd behavior and language in public. Chagrin burned his cheeks at the memory. Seven hells, he’d begun to undress in the passageway, before not only his crew, but passengers!

He knew with humiliating certainty this wouldn’t go unremarked upon by the crew. Great God beyond, what was it he’d said to Izard? Never mind, he was sure the Serpentine would take keen pleasure in reminding him. The long-time guard had a mischievous streak. He’d once gone so far as to send Captain Steve Craig a lovely guard cadet as a gift! Surprisingly, that had ended well—the spirited, lovely young woman was now Mrs. Craig.

However, his own liaison with Nelah Cobalt certainly wouldn’t end that way. She was not for him. Too young, too emotional. She needed his firm hand on her training and then he would send her on her way to another post somewhere.

Navos ignored the hollow feeling that followed this image. He’d been—no—he was content with his life. He’d advanced to his present station through hard work and the application of his formidable intellect, which he knew to be superior to most of his galactic fellows. He took no special pride in this. It was fact. The ancient adage “he to whom much had been given, of him much would be expected” was quite true.

He’d had sexual liaisons, certainly. However, since the disaster of Beryl Mazarin his affairs had been the satisfying of a purely physical urge, no more. Her effect on his personal relations was lasting. He engaged in sexual acts only with women who wished as little as he to become emotionally involved.

Curious, though, never had he felt the overwhelming need to meld himself with a female as he had tonight. He'd wanted to engulf Nelah, to overpower her so she belonged to him, body and mind, so she needed him as much or more than he needed her.

By the Great Being, he sounded like an emotional female, he thought with the horror of an intellectual who finds himself confronted with human weakness. He sounded like...his mother.

All his life, he'd striven to be like his father. Nalon Navos had been a professor at the university, the epitome of Indigon intellect and calm. One of his students, a young Earth II emigrant, had become infatuated with him. A passionate, intelligent girl, she pursued the quiet intellectual relentlessly until he married her.

They had been happy for a time. Daron had memories of a lovely woman, incandescent with joy and laughter, who had enchanted both her husband and son. But she'd had a darker side, as well. Her moods swung wildly. Her husband, unable to deal with her jealousy, temper tantrums and moods of black despair, spent more and more time away from her. Much of Navos's childhood had been in the quiet dignified environs of the university.

His mother had deteriorated further. One night, apparently maddened by her husband's pity, she lost all control and shoved him against the balcony railing of their home. As Daron watched in horror, they fell to the lawn far below. He could still see their crumpled bodies lying on the grass.

For years Daron believed his mother had murdered his father. Finally when he was a young man, he read the death certificate. His mother had been suffering from manic depressive illness, his father from a weak heart. He'd had a heart attack, or neither of them would have fallen.

Logically, Navos knew his parents' deaths had been accidental. But what their son remembered, what he had trouble even now shaking off, was the notion that excess emotion had killed both his mother and father.

Nelah Cobalt was a young, emotional creature. Perhaps it would be prudent to look into her history. He sat before the computer in one corner and called up the holo-vid display.

"Research Nelah Cobalt," he said quietly. "Family background."

Within seconds he was watching a series of holo-vids accompanied by an emotionless narration. There were her parents holding a tiny girl with huge eyes and an enchanting smile. There she was as a sylph-like adolescent, dancing a gymnastic routine. There she beamed, incandescent with pride and joy as she received her diploma from a row of professors at the university.

"Nelah Cobalt. Age 22. Graduate of Indigon University. Born, Indigon City. Parents, Maura Cobalt and John Smith."

"Background on John Smith," Navos interrupted, caught by the name.

Within seconds, his fears were confirmed. Nelah's father was human. Born on Earth II, he'd emigrated to Indigo as a young man and started a lawn- and garden-care business. He met Maura Cobalt

when he came to take care of the grounds of her parents' home in the mountains outside the city. Nelah was born soon after their marriage.

Her father had become a successful inventor, but then died in a work accident when one of his lawn-care robots malfunctioned. His widow later remarried—to Professor Loftan Cyan. A few years afterward, she herself died of a virus brought from off-planet.

Noting that Nelah had soon left her family home and applied for custody of the remaining family assets, Navos nodded to himself. She might be an impulsive young woman, but she was not a fool. She'd obviously seen Cyan for what he was—a scheming weasel-cat.

Cyan had won the family home and a substantial amount of money, but Nelah was still a wealthy young woman.

A half-human woman, with all the warmth and impulsivity of a human. Did she also carry the darker characteristics? He remembered her anger, how her blue eyes had flashed at him and how she'd turned the tables on him, calling him to her even as he had called her. A half-human woman with the skills of an Indigon empath/intuit.

Despite the warmth of the room, he felt chilled to the bone.

Chapter Fourteen

The next morning, Navos was relieved to note it was a quiet, formal Nelah who presented herself at his office. She wore a neat suit similar to his own, dark blue with a high collar. She had used none of the cosmetics that had adorned her face the night before. Not that she was any less lovely without them. He eyed her across his desk. Her expression was shuttered, as if she were masked. Good. That was good. They could not work together if her eyes were soft and glowing with the expression she wore when he—

He slammed a door on the sensual memories that suddenly threatened to swamp him. Great God beyond, what was the matter with him? As if he didn't know what, or rather who. She was seated primly across the desk from him. This wouldn't do. He must remind himself, and her, that he was in charge and she was a volatile creature who must be taught to control her powers.

"We will begin your training with a simple exercise," he said. "I'm reviewing the passenger rosters not only for aberrant thought patterns—those of blatant malice toward the *Orion*, but to determine if any of them may have a certain type of device implanted."

He set a tiny cerametal capsule on the desk. She leaned forward to peer at it carefully. Looking inquiringly at him for permission, she waited until he nodded before picking it up.

"What is it for?" she asked.

"It was removed from the Indigon boy who died."

"Euww!" She dropped it with a clatter. "And you believe it had something to do with his crazed behavior?"

Navos explained their theory on the implant. Nelah eyed it as if it was a dangerous insect.

"You think there may be others with these implants?"

"I mean to be absolutely certain there are no others."

She straightened her shoulders. "Very well, Commander. How can I help?"

He gestured to a hatch leading from the side of his office to a cubicle fitted with a desk and chair. "You'll work here. Your job is to go through the passenger roster."

"The entire roster?" Her eyes were wide and startled.

He raised an eyebrow. "You wish to change your mind?"

She flushed. "No, of course not." Lifting her chin, she turned to the small desk. "Please demonstrate the procedure."

"Very well. I must enter your mind to do so."

A faint mauve flushed her cheekbones. “Yes, sir.”

Navos suppressed an inward groan. He found himself at once reluctant to meld minds with her and fighting a base eagerness to do so. He’d thrust deep into her mind at the same time he’d thrust into her body. But this was not a sensual exercise—it was work. Crucial work. They must discover if anyone else on the *Orion* had one of the implants.

Of course, what he hadn’t told her was the two male interns had already been studying the passenger roster, were nearly finished and had found nothing. It had been exhausting for the pair of them. He estimated that, alone, it would take her at least a week. But at least it would keep her occupied and out of trouble while he and the other crew commanders strove to discover who was trying to destroy the *Orion*.

Nelah was relieved that when Navos entered her mind this time he maintained a narrow focus. He demonstrated briefly how he would search her thoughts and intentions, noting any large emotional vagaries, as well as any anomalies in the physical structure which bound thoughts and emotions. Then he drew back, leaving her shaken, yet relieved that she’d managed to keep her thoughts focused on what he was teaching.

“Now you will do the same with one of the passengers,” he said, so coldly Nelah knew with sickening certainty he felt no emotion at all. She took a breath, fighting to maintain calm. She could learn to be as cool as he—and she would.

She managed the first scan with creditable aplomb. Navos said nothing, simply observed as she worked. As she began the second, he nodded shortly and left, closing the door behind him.

Hours passed. Nelah was not sure how many. She left the room only to take care of bodily needs. Use the toilet across the passageway, get a drink of water, a snack and then return to her task. Her world narrowed down to the beings passing before her on the holo-vid display. Look at the holo-vid, note the pertinent statistics. Study them in ever-closer layers of detail, first their outer appearance, then take a deep breath and open her mind to search out and find the being somewhere on the *Orion*.

It was painstaking, fascinating and utterly exhausting. She discovered some beings, particularly Aquarians, were more sensitive than others to being intuited. She nearly giggled nervously the first time an Aquarian male startled when she probed into his mind. Delicately, she skated around along the necessary paths of exploration and then slipped out of his consciousness. She thought she sensed a trace of amusement and found herself blushing. Heavens.

Nearly all, however, had no idea she was there. She was by turns fascinated, appalled, disgusted and horrified by the urges that filled the minds of the *Orion*’s travelers. This was an education of a different sort for a well-brought-up Indigon young lady. Perhaps she should be taking notes for a scholarly paper, she thought wildly at one point. Random behavior patterns within planetary races.

Some were awful. She really didn't want to know what Mauritanian males wanted from potential sexual mates—ugh! Or the avarice that drove some businessmen. Or the twisted sexual relationship between at least one couple aboard the ship. She had to get up and walk the passageways for a time after that one, wondering if she should speak to someone in authority. Finally she decided what went on in their stateroom was their business, as long as they were both consensual adults.

But she wouldn't give up. She wouldn't quit. She would show Commander Daron Navos she could do anything his male interns could do. Perhaps she would be the one to find another implant. If Navos and the captain were concerned for the *Orion*, she meant to help them. And she had to go faster, or she wouldn't finish in time.

Hours later, however, she discovered with each successive intuitive search, she felt weaker. Physically, her head ached, her stomach was tight. This she accepted as the tension of learning and accomplishing a new and important task. She'd felt such symptoms during examination week at the university.

Psychically, however, it was much worse. She felt somehow raw and sore, as if delicate tissues were being repeatedly scraped with a fine grit. Intuiting the mind of a spiteful Pangaeon woman harboring cruelty for her beleaguered daughter-in-law, Nelah winced. She must rest. After she meddled just a tiny bit. She ignored the niggle of guilt. Navos hadn't actually said she was not to influence any of the passengers. Although she knew he would have, had he considered it necessary.

Very carefully, as she was not sure how much power was necessary, Nelah flowed further into the Pangaeon's mind. She found the center of emotions. And then she sent a flow of positive energy.

She blinked in delighted astonishment. She could actually feel the older woman changing stances, emoting kindness toward the younger woman next to her.

Pushing a little harder, a tiny, catlike smile curling up her lips, Nelah urged the woman to offer her daughter-in-law a spa treatment.

Heady with triumph, Nelah urged the idea of a financial gift as well. As she intuited a response of astonishment, Nelah winced. Perhaps that had been a bit much—but she had a sense of wealth and ease, so it couldn't hurt. She retreated very slowly, taking care to leave the new impulses seated in the woman's mind. Of course she could not be sure they would stay, but it had been worth the effort to at least try.

Then she collapsed with a groan, letting her head fall onto her folded arms. She wondered vaguely what torture Navos had devised for the male interns. Seconds later, she was asleep.

Nelah woke up with a start and looked around her groggily, unable at first to recall where she was and what she was doing. Then realization returned. She yawned mightily, scrubbed her hands over her face and rolled her stiff shoulders.

She looked at the holo-vid display, the image of a squat Bartian scowling at the holo-cam. A whimper forced its way up her throat. How much longer could she keep this up?

Then Navos's face floated before her mind's eye. She pictured him raising one brow in that eloquent, disdainful way. Determination surged through her and she straightened, scowling back at the Bartian.

She wouldn't quit!

"Ah, Daron, there you are. And your young interns as well."

Navos looked up from his breakfast as Steve Craig pulled out his chair across the table from him. Breakfast was an informal affair, the crew commanders mingling with crew and passengers. The captain was brimming with his usual morning vigor, his lean cheeks still flushed, silver blue eyes bright. Navos knew he would have just come from a stringent workout with the ship's guard.

Navos himself hadn't slept well. It was that which put him in a cranky mood, he told himself. Not because each time he awakened, he'd found himself looking for a tousled dark head on the next pillow.

He was still watching for her now, which irritated him even more intensely. As did Tessa Craig's comment as she joined them a moment later.

"Hello, Commander Navos. Gentlemen." She smiled sunnily at him and both of the young Indigons, who bowed with identical courtesy before going back to their breakfast. She slipped into the chair next to her husband and smiled at him before turning back to Navos. "I was hoping Nelah might be with you this morning. I met her yesterday in the spa."

Navos inclined his head politely. "I'm sorry, I have not seen her this morning."

"Perhaps she's sleeping in," Tessa said cheerfully. "I find it's the best thing to do on a long voyage—for a passenger, that is." She made a rueful face at her husband, for she was not a passenger, but a member of the ship's guard. She wore the golden-yellow uniform proudly.

Navos busied himself with his steaming coffee. His personal nemesis had better not be sleeping. He intended to work her rigorously. She must learn to exert perfect control of her talents. And, if his training had the added effect of discouraging her from wishing to work as an empath/intuit, that was all to the good. Then he wouldn't have to worry about what havoc she was wreaking.

He rose abruptly and the two interns bounced out of their chairs as well, though they were not finished eating. He waved them back. "Finish your breakfast. You may review your notes from our session. I will see you both in my office in an hour."

He strode off to the nearest elevator, skirting groups of passengers making their way to breakfast. As he rode up to the command deck, he summoned Nelah on his com-link. When she did not immediately answer, he opened the link anyway. This went against shipboard etiquette, but he didn't give a damn for rules just now. A distant warning sounded in his mind at this, but he ignored it.

She lay in her narrow bunk in a boneless sprawl, her bare arms and one small foot protruding from the coverlet. Her face was soft, her lashes a dark fan on her cheeks. Just the way she'd looked in his bed, before he awakened her by slipping his hand under the covers. If he did so now, she would stir and then open her eyes and smile at him, a sleepy, inviting smile.

He watched her for a long moment, until the elevator stopped, jolting him out of his reverie.

"Ms. Cobalt," he said clearly. "You are late."

She started, her eyes opening to a blank blue stare. Then she frowned and lifted one hand to her head, as if it hurt. "Time izzit?" she mumbled.

"The work day has begun."

She sat up slowly, her hand still to her head, her eyes heavy. The coverlet fell to her waist, revealing the tiny lace camisole that barely covered her breasts. He could see the shadow of her nipples through the lace, somehow more enticing than nudity.

Then she grabbed the blanket and jerked it up to her chin, staring at him—or his holo-vid image. She scrubbed one hand over her eyes, as if unable to believe she was awake.

"Daron?" she asked, her voice still husky with sleep. "What is it? What's wrong? Has something happened?"

"No, although you'd have slept through it if anything had, wouldn't you?" he asked.

"Oh!" she burst out. "Unfair! For your information, Commander, I was up most of the night shift, working. I only got to sleep a few hours ago."

She threw back the covers and leapt out of bed, her face stormy. The last thing he saw was her hand covering the holo-cam. The image winked out, but not before he heard her mutter something uncomplimentary. It seemed to focus on his lineage, or lack thereof. He was surprised into a chuckle.

He strode down the passageway to his office, his bad mood gone. Up most of the night? Hah!

In the cubicle he'd assigned her, he brought up the roster. He would be calm but firm, of course, demonstrating how an Indigon mastered emotions, even when dealing with a lover.

When he saw where she'd left off, he frowned. Surely this could not be right. Anger tightened his jaw. To get this far in one session, she'd clearly raced along, doing only the most slipshod sort of work.

He used his powers to review what she'd done on the last passenger examined. He was surprised to find she'd done quite a decent job. Of course, she must have skipped around, trying to get away with doing a sampling.

She hadn't.

Chapter Fifteen

Nelah hurried into Navos's office, finger-combing her damp hair. Simmering with a strong sense of injustice at being wakened after so little sleep, she'd nevertheless leapt into the shower-dry, wriggled into the first clothing she saw and jogged to the elevator.

On the way up, she used her com-link to order breakfast delivered to his office. She was not eating any more of the dried food particles from the snack machine. Since she was paying for it, she wanted fresh food and real coffee.

Navos stood before her workstation. Heat curled through her at the sight of his lean body, the focused stance. She was baffled by her response—how could she be aroused by his concentration on a holo-vid display?

As the dark intensity of his gaze turned on her, her heart sank. "I...have not done as you expected?" she managed around the lump in her throat.

He straightened, with an ironic twist of his head. "As usual, no. You have done...much, much more."

As she gazed at him, taken aback by his strange look, he gestured to the holo-vid display. "Nelah, you've accomplished in one night what took—ah, would take others nearly two days."

"Oh." Delight dawned, but she eyed him doubtfully. "You do not seem pleased by this."

"That is unimportant," he said coolly. "Your speed is further evidence of your need for discipline. Great talent requires great control."

Heat roared through her again, but this time it was anger. She could feel her cheeks burning.

"I will learn control, Commander."

"We'll see, won't we?" He bowed ironically and turned to the door.

She scowled after him. "Don't do that!"

"Do what?" He turned back, looking down his hawk nose at her.

She waved her arms. "You don't...respect me," she said. "You didn't believe me when I told you I had strong powers. Now that you know I do, you still..." She struggled for words. "It seems no matter what you learn about me, you find me lacking."

She felt her cheeks burn as he stared down at her, his eyes narrowed. But then he astonished her by nodding shortly.

"I apologize. I have not explained myself well." He paced over to the porthole and looked out at the stars for a moment, then turned back to her.

At that moment, the hatch opened and a large covered tray floated into the room, followed by a smiling crew member.

“Morning, Commander, Miss,” she said. “Breakfast is served.”

“Thank you,” Nelah said. “Please place a credit on your account for your service.”

“Yes, Miss. Thank you.”

Nelah turned to Navos, who looked taken aback. Well, let him. She had certain standards. “Have you eaten?” she asked politely.

“Yes, thank you.”

She pushed the button to open the tray cover and picked up the carafe of coffee.

“Well, I’m starving. Please, have a cup of coffee with me.”

He took a steaming mug from her and she sat, pulling the tray toward her. Picking up a large muffin, she took a dainty bite.

“Now,” she said. “You were saying?”

He stared down at her. Slowly, his mouth curved up at the corners. He sat in the other chair and leaned back.

“I was explaining myself to you,” he said drily.

“Not a common experience?” she asked innocently, before taking another bite. The muffin was delicious.

His eyes narrowed. “Do not push your luck.”

“No, sir.”

She listened and ate as he began to speak. It was more of a lecture, really. She felt as if she were back in class at the university, listening to one of his holo-vids. Men, she reflected as she ate and listened, nodding when appropriate, really did like to hammer a point home. Fortunately, she just loved the sound of his deep voice.

She leaned over to refill his cup and sat back with her own, ready to listen to further embellishments on Why Indigons Must Maintain Control of Their Powers at All Times.

Navos was interrupted, after his second cup of excellent coffee, by his com-link. It was just as well, because he’d made his point and was beginning to entertain thoughts of perhaps communicating with his audience on a much more basic level. She looked so damned lovely sitting there listening to him attentively across the breakfast table, just like a wife.

With a bachelor’s relief, he escaped this shocking idea and reported to the command deck to find Halix and Qwerx already there. Their round lavender faces were grave as they bowed politely in greeting.

“You have further information,” Navos said flatly, foreboding filling him.

The two looked at each other. Halix nodded and Qwerx turned back to Navos.

“Yes, Commander. Our investigation of the Mazarin Clinic has uncovered there is still a connection between the clinic and your university. Two years ago, a research project on the effects of inhaled moonweed dust on the mind was abandoned. The head of the project said it failed to perform as he’d posited. He was very puzzled by this, as the research did not seem to add up. Shortly afterward, the Mazarin Clinic debuted a nearly identical product. It has been hugely successful as a non-addictive calming agent.”

“Mazarin has found another dupe in the university.”

“I think perhaps a willing compatriot this time,” Qwerx said. “The research professor had no contact with the clinic, nor did any of his graduate assistants.”

“So it must be someone else,” Navos finished. “Someone with access to project information.”

Qwerx nodded.

“You’ll find him—or her.”

“Yes, Commander. Perhaps you have advice for where we might look next?”

Cyan’s smirking face flashed into Navos’s mind. Reluctantly, he shook his head. The man might wish to irritate him, but no evidence suggested more than that.

“Look at all the other research that has been done, is being done. Compare it to Mazarin products marketed.” He frowned, remembering a recent rumor he’d heard from a friend still teaching. The two of them had shared a fairly scathing amusement at the notion. “Also...it is far-fetched and yet, I feel I ought to mention it.”

“Yes, sir?” Qwerx leaned forward, black eyes alert.

“Ah...there have been rumors that a technique may have been discovered to create a brain implant, such as the one used on the Bluet boy. Only now from biotic material. Surely improbable, I know, but...”

Halix and Qwerx stared at him, then at each other. Halix was known as an inventor himself and had patented several ingenious gadgets. He and Navos had devised the mind-scan unit crew members had to go through before each voyage. It was a longer process than the one passengers went through.

“Do you believe it is possible, Commander?” Halix asked.

“It is...possible,” Navos said reluctantly. “There are ways to grow cell tissue in patterns, which can then be manipulated, much like the mechanical implants. But, really, I find it unlikely. I certainly have not heard of anyone having success with it...yet.”

“A biotic implant,” Qwerx said. “Diabolical. How would one discover such a thing?”

The three of them gazed at each other, the same grim foreboding on each face.

On the *Orion*’s maiden voyage, a terrorist had sabotaged the great ship with a bio-bomb in her auto-navigation system. He’d rendered her, for several terrifying hours, a useless, floating hulk, until the Tyger navigator had used his cunning and skill to rescue her.

But a bio-bomb was actually a simple, inert mix of chemically enhanced biotic organisms. When triggered, they exploded into exponentially enhanced growth. The resulting mass of foaming slime gave off acids which destroyed any electronic or computerized equipment they contacted.

A biotic brain implant could be minute. Nearly impossible to discover.

Nelah was exhausted. Her head ached, her body ached and her mind...her mind felt as if it had been scraped raw by some fiendish force.

She slumped over the desk, her head pillowed on her arms, eyes closed. It had been a long, grueling shift, but she was finished with the passenger roster. And she'd found nothing. Oh, there were miscreants, perverts and crooks aboard the *Orion*, but none who were intent on harm while en voyage.

Something bothered her. In her work, she'd slowly realized at least some of the minds she'd intuited already bore traces of Indigon power. A fine spoor of wielded intuition had dusted them. Navos must have done a cursory search, a random sampling. Probably standard procedure. And he was trusting her to do the detailed search. Yes, that must be it. She would rest and then ask.

Stumbling to her feet, she stretched mightily. She needed a meal, a shower-dry and then a long, long sleep. And she was turning her com-link off this time, so he could not wake her until she was ready to wake.

Sometime later, Nelah threw back the coverlet and slipped out of her bed. She staggered, so tired she could barely find the control plate on the hatch. But she had to go to Navos...had to. There was no rest, for even in her dreams he pursued her. She'd tossed and turned, writhing in invitation as he stood over her, only to have him beckon her to follow him and then disappear.

She trailed across the passageway to the elevator and rode it up to the next level, then made her way along to the officers' quarters.

She turned the bend in the passageway to his room and then stopped, leaning against the wall, her head falling against the smooth surface. Scrubbing a fretful hand across her face, she gazed at his door.

What was she doing here? Chasing after a man who had been nothing but honest with her from the beginning—any relationship other than sex was unlikely between them.

If only she wasn't so tired, she could consider why this was a very bad idea. But she couldn't think—could only feel. Her psyche was raw and exposed and only he could soothe it.

And then the hatch slid open and he stepped out. Clad only in lii silk pants of dark blue, he was a creature of moonlight and dreams, his lean, pale body gleaming in the soft light.

His eyes burned a path down over her body, inadequately covered by her lii silk nightie.

"I dream of you," she accused, her voice husky with sleep. "I can't...rest."

“And I of you,” he mused. “And do you know what you said to me, in my dream?”

She shook her head without lifting it. His words jolted through her in a hot, dark current. He’d dreamed of her too?

“You said, ‘Let it be as you wish, Commander.’”

Her breath caught, at the memory of when she’d last said those words to him. It had been after their night of uninhibited lovemaking.

“And do you know what I said to you?” he went on, in that same dark, intimate tone. “‘Then come to me, little flower.’”

She turned her face against the wall, a vain attempt to hide from hearing the sexual endearment uttered aloud. She was not his ‘little flower’, his concubine, she was an independent woman. Why then, did she continue to lean against the wall, instead of turning away from him?

“I just want to sleep.” But even she heard the lack of conviction in her voice. Her eyes drifted down his body, stopping at the beguiling sight of his penis clearly outlined in his snug lilac silk pajama pants.

“So do I,” he said, a wry note entering his voice. “But it seems neither of us can, when we’re within psychic range.”

“Not my fault,” she said. “It’s because you—you insisted on...coming inside my mind, as you did my body.” Her voice dropped to a whisper, as the heated memories arced across the few feet between them, kindling an indigo fire in his eyes. Her nipples pearled and her pussy tightened, then seemed to melt, along with her already unsteady legs.

“Perhaps it’s because you enjoyed it so very much.” He was giving her that hooded look that excited her beyond reason, knowing it meant he was considering just what he wanted to do with her.

“In any case, we called each other this time,” he said. “And I came. So did you. And I’m going to make you come again...and again.”

With suffocating excitement she watched him saunter toward her. But the look of arrogant certainty in his eyes sparked defiance.

“Perhaps I will make you come again and again, Commander.”

“I fervently hope so.” He bent and swept her up into his arms and carried her into his room.

He kissed her, thoroughly, as the hatch hissed shut behind them. Her hand lifted to his cheek. She kissed him back, surrendering to the magic even as a small sob caught somewhere in her breast. If this was all she could have of him, so be it.

He bore her down into the bed, his warmth and scent rising to enfold her. Nelah cupped his head in her hands, her fingers slipping luxuriously through his short hair. He stroked her cheek with a sweep of his thumb, his hand cupped around the side of her head.

“*So delicate,*” he whispered inside her mind. In her sleepy, aroused state, she wasn’t even surprised to find him there. But she flinched at the psychic touch on raw, overexposed nerves. She felt his pause and

then his anger. “No wonder you are so exhausted. You’ve seriously overextended yourself,” he snapped aloud.

She would have answered, but she was distracted by his kisses. Then a smooth current of power poured across her psyche. It was delicious, warm and soothing. It lapped at the rawness, in a rhythmic pattern, like the surging of waves on the sea, so when he pushed up her nightgown with a gentle sweep of his warm palm and thrust carefully inside her, she was lost in pleasure.

“Daron...”

“Shhhh,” he murmured tenderly. “Just feel.”

Since he was so big and hard inside her, raking delicate tissues made for his touch, she could do nothing else. Soft cries forced their way up her throat and she let them. He shuddered, galvanized by her pleasure, and took her harder, until she was lost in that dark magic place where all that existed were their two bodies and minds, locked together in ecstasy.

She came, her body clasping his in secret shivers of delight.

With a deep groan, he rolled, still inside her, onto his back. He tugged at the nightie and she lifted her arms to let him pull it off.

“Again,” he demanded. “I want to feel your surrender again, little flower.”

“Yes.” She rose up and slid down on his rigid penis as he guided her, his hands on her hips. She looked down at him, feeling as if she were riding a dangerous male creature that might as easily overpower her as allow her to pleasure herself on him.

His gaze slid down over her, tracing every inch of her as she rose and fell on him. Her breath caught in her throat as she watched him watching his penis slide in and out of her pussy. His eyes were heavy, his nostrils flared, his face a mask of passion.

“So lovely. So soft and delicate and yet made for my penetration.”

He took her hand and guided her fingers to her clitoris. “Touch yourself. Pleasure yourself while you take me.”

Shocked, but excited by his watching her do so, Nelah stroked her swollen clitoris with her fingertips as she rode him. Both his gaze and her touch were delicious, combining with his increasingly hard thrusts as he neared his peak to send her up along with him.

And having him feel every nuance of her delight at submitting to his wishes made her come harder than she had before, pleasure suffusing her slender body so she arched above him, throwing back her head as she cried out to the stars.

He stiffened beneath her, his hands digging into her hips as his come flooded her in swift, hot pulses.

She swayed and would have fallen had he not caught her, drawing her down onto the bed beside him.

Chapter Sixteen

Navos woke sometime later and turned his head, half expecting to find an empty pillow next to him. But short dark curls and a slender, pale shoulder protruded from the coverlet. Lazy satisfaction stirred at the sight, then with it, arousal. The memory of being deep inside her as she lost herself in her pleasure, made his penis stir and harden. He flexed his hips, enjoying the tease of the smooth fabric on his sensitive shaft, then palmed it, stroking the turgid length.

Rolling onto his side, he reached out under the covers for her. She sighed and nestled back against him with a little wriggle of her bare bottom that sent sensation rocketing through his loins, his penis suddenly a rigid, questing spear of male need.

He reached over her hip to slide his hand down and cup her mons. Ah, such a handful of feminine treasure. Slowly, enjoying teasing himself, he slid one long finger between the velvet lips and into her sleek heat.

She stirred and he pressed a kiss to her shoulder, even as he pulled her upper leg gently back up and over his and slid his own into the gap. Now she was open to his touch and he slid two fingers into her pussy, drawing the wetness out with skilled strokes until her labia was sleek and ready.

“Daron?” she murmured sleepily.

“Shh. Just let me have you, flower.”

“Yes, but—don’t we have to—?”

With a smile against her silky shoulder and a slow thrust of his penis between her sweet, soft bottom cheeks, he showed her she didn’t have to move at all. With his hand cupping her mons, his fingers playing around their joining, he seated his penis deep within her.

“You like this?” he asked, although it was clear to both of them she did. “And this?”

He stroked her clitoris as he thrust harder and faster.

She moaned, a soft sweet sound. He smiled to himself. Held this way, she could not move, could do nothing but feel. Teasing her, making her wait a little made him even more aroused.

“Harder,” she pleaded. She pressed her fingers over his as he teased her with a butterfly-light touch on her clitoris. “Oh, please, Daron. Have me...harder.”

“Oh, I’m having you, little flower. And I will again. If you ask me very nicely, perhaps where others can watch how lovely you are as you take me deep inside you.”

He felt her shock, her secret delight at this notion jolt through him and then groaned as her tight little pussy began to squeeze him with her orgasm. Ah, she was his, his, his!

He thrust one last time and let his orgasm overtake him, jetting deep within her heat.

She relaxed with a sigh as he withdrew. He felt her little curl of embarrassment at having been so excited once again by the thought of voyeurism and smiled to himself as he dropped a kiss to her silky head. Such an innocent. And so right, cradled in his arms, damp from their loving.

“Sleep, flower.”

Navos himself needed very little sleep. He was startled to wake after a few more hours and find himself holding a sleeping woman. She was actually draped over the top of him. After biting back his natural caustic reaction to such an imposition, he found himself surprisingly content with the situation. She was lissome and light, a living blanket of lovely female.

She lay with her head tucked in the curve of his neck, her soft breath against his throat. Her arm was looped over his shoulder, her legs entangled with his own.

His long arms lay naturally about her, one of his hands cupping the silky curve of her ass, the other absently stroking her back. When had he ever held another being thus, sleeping in his arms with such complete and utter trust?

Not his onetime mistress, certainly, he thought with a bitter twist of his mouth. He was not surprised to recall, looking back, the bitch had remained cool and watchful even as he lost himself in her body.

And not the courtesans he’d frequented for the last several years. They had all been lovely, enticing women, but delicately reticent in their attentions, even when he’d requested two at a time. They gave only as much as a client wished, careful not to encroach.

With one notable exception—his eyes gleamed in the darkness as he recalled a certain young half-Indigon, half-Aquarian woman who had taken the place of one of his chosen courtesans, offering herself unreservedly in exchange for a favor. That had been a strange, haunting interlude. He’d shown her just how to fulfill a male’s deepest fantasies and then said goodbye forever. He hoped the man for whom she’d been preparing herself had been able to perceive his good fortune.

No courtesan would have thrown themselves into his arms as Nelah had when he offered to tutor her. He’d been startled by her joy—for that was what it had been. He was sure there was no calculation in her response to him.

Only desire and...infatuation, he told himself. She was not in love with him. This was simply an affair and when it was over, he would find a way to release her without hurting her. He would never wish to hurt her. Indeed, he wished he could protect her from the disappointments that would inevitably occur as she went through life.

With another man at her side. Another man enjoying her rapt attention...the way her smile lit up her lovely eyes so she was nearly incandescent...the way she surrendered so completely, enjoying that part of the sexual union as much as the physical pleasure. Another man would revel in being allowed into her psyche. Even, perhaps, in being used for a pillow.

And he would go back to visiting courtesans, who would never dream of falling asleep on top of a man. Of trusting him to teach them new ways of enjoying their blooming sensuality, as she did.

He recoiled at the sudden bitter bleakness of these thoughts.

Or, perhaps...just perhaps, she really did love him. She certainly believed so. He'd divined it quite clearly from his forays into her psyche.

And perhaps he felt something for her that would outlast this voyage. He certainly craved her sexually. Little did she know, he thought wryly, she needed no power to summon him. All she had to do was exist. He'd wanted her the first moment he saw her. Since then, he seemed to spend every moment either reliving their last sexual union, or craving the next.

He was jealous at the thought of another man enjoying her smiles and her conversation. He could even picture her in the home he'd had built of white Indigon stone on the hillside above the university. Could picture them conversing over a glass of blue wine, or playing at balloits on the lawn, or discussing the latest research at the university. He could definitely picture her in his huge bed, learning new ways to please him and be pleased.

He closed his eyes and savored the feel of her in his arms for a few more moments. When this was over and they caught once and for all the villains menacing the *Orion*, he would invite her to go away with him. She would like that.

Moving her to the side, gently, for he hoped she would sleep much longer, he sat up and slid out of bed. He had important work to do. Moon-dreams wouldn't keep the *Orion* safe, or clear his good name.

He looked down at her sleeping face one last time and tucked the coverlet around her bare shoulder. She always seemed to find a way to lose some of the bedcovers.

After a quick shower-dry, he went directly to the command deck. Qwerx and Halix were there, their dark heads together over a holo-vid display. Both round faces were grave.

"You have new information?" he asked, as he paused to punch a button on the gleaming machine on a side counter. It hummed busily, snorted and then produced a large cerametal cup, emanating steam with the unique fragrance of Pangaeian coffee.

Qwerx nodded. "Yes. We have been following connections between the Mazarin Intel Clinic and your Indigon University. We have found one. A professor."

"Really." Navos took a drink of the hot coffee, barely tasting it. "What is his—or her—name?"

"Cyan. Loftan Cyan."

Navos's mug shook in his hand. Rage seared through him, colder than the dry ice.

"That slime," he bit out. "I should have known."

"You are not surprised," Qwerx murmured.

"No. He has long been a rival; for funding, for research quarters."

"He's an enemy?"

"It appears so," Navos said coldly. "What is his involvement with the Mazarin woman?"

Halix and Qwerx exchanged a quick look. "According to sources at the university, they're lovers."

"Well, there you have the source of the leaked research." Navos took another drink of coffee. It burned a trail down to his belly, where it failed to heat the ice in his gut.

Because he'd just remembered something else. He sat abruptly in his chair, the cup landing askew on the table before him. It rocked violently before he stilled it automatically, without looking.

Instead of the command deck, he saw Nelah's face as she admitted reluctantly, "He's my stepfather."

Nelah woke slowly, feeling better than she had in days. She smiled to herself as she stretched luxuriously under the smooth coverlet. Her body still hummed with pleasure and her mind was once again free of the terrible rawness caused by her intense labors on the passenger rosters. Daron had done that. He'd used his powers to soothe her, even as he pleased her.

Opening her eyes, she looked around his stateroom. It was quietly luxurious, with the finest fabrics and a few objects d'art, including a very fine piece of Serpentine fire glass in a recess.

She rose and padded barefoot across the room to admire it, caressing the sleek sculpture with her fingertips. It was a deep, clear blue, with a center so dark it was almost black. The shade of his eyes when he was aroused, she thought with a shiver of pleasure.

She used his shower-dry and then went back to her own room to change her clothing, humming to herself. Realizing she was starving, she rode the elevator down to the dining hall. She'd just finished a delicious breakfast and settled back with her coffee to watch her fellow passengers, when Navos's interns strolled into the room.

One of them saw her and nudged the other. Smiling, they came to sit with her.

"How are you enjoying your internship?" Nelah asked politely.

They preened themselves visibly, obviously proud of working with Navos. Nelah eyed them, smiling behind her coffee cup, until one of them, Chad, spoke.

"We've finished a very important task," he said.

"Yes," agreed Hugh.

"Oh, really? What?"

After a quick look around, he leaned closer. “We have examined the entire roster of passengers on the ship.”

“Looking for behavioral anomalies, you understand,” finished Chad, with a conspiratorial smile.

Nelah felt as if she’d been punched. Her empty mug landed on her plate with a little crash. She barely noticed. All her work, all the pain and exhaustion, all for...for nothing!

She hadn’t been doing real work at all. She’d been set a make-work task, following the two male interns like a puppy chasing after the hounds.

At the moment, she would have cheerfully done harm to Daron Navos and his two precious interns. How could he treat her with such disdain?

She wanted to weep, she wanted to scream, she wanted to hit something.

Flying out of her chair without a word to the two startled Indigons, she hurried out of the dining hall. She needed to vent the rage boiling inside her.

She hurried to the gym, changed into the singlet the attendant handed her and strode over to a sparring robot. She set the speed to high. With a growl of ferociousness that clearly startled another passenger working out nearby, she attacked.

Her breakfast sat like lead in her stomach. Finally, perspiring and nauseous, she had to stop.

She staggered into the locker room and into a cool shower-dry. The water streaming down around her unleashed the hurt that had been lying in wait behind her anger. Leaning her head against the cerametal, she let the hot tears fall.

A long time later she emerged. She gazed at her flushed reflection in the mirrors. She wanted to be a million miles away from this ship and from Navos. She wanted to go home.

But, first, she was going to tell Daron Navos exactly what she thought of him. She sent intuitive power zinging through the ship.

There he was, on the command deck. Realizing just in time he was engaged in an important discussion, she stopped before she confronted him psychically.

Jealously, she found herself searching for the two interns. What important task did he have them working on now? If he meant to hand it to her for a repeat, she would tell him where to shove it.

They were relaxing in the spa, having massages. The pampered twits.

If she hadn’t been so angry, she would never have done it. An Indigon did not probe another Indigon. But, almost without realizing it, she was inside the mind of one of them. Hugh was nearly asleep, relaxed by the strong hands of the masseuse. He was contentedly reliving losing his virginity in the sexual ménage he and the other, Chad, had enjoyed with a Serpentine guard.

She withdrew with a grimace and thrust into his friend’s mind. It was, she discovered, in a vastly different frame than Hugh’s. Chad woke suddenly when she probed his mind and she felt his shock at the

intrusion. Her irritation still intense, Nelah gave him the empathic equivalent of a thump on the head and began to withdraw.

Instead, she found herself frozen in shock. Some other kind of presence lurked here. Her hands clutched on the edge of the desk for support in the physical realm, Nelah forced herself to go on. It was the psychic equivalent of forcing herself to walk farther into a dark, frightening place.

Before she could flee, she forced herself to stay calm, to search out impressions of each lobe of his brain. And there, next to the cerebral cortex, she found it. A thing, forged of tissue and cells, but not his own. It nestled secretively, waiting. And as she recoiled in horror, it pulsed with life.

Nelah screamed.

Chapter Seventeen

Navos sat at the command console when brilliant red lights began to flash and an alarm cut sharply through the quiet. He sprang to his feet and whirled to stare at the always-ready holo-vid image of the ship.

A bright light pulsed—the auto-navigation deck, just across the passageway.

No! It couldn't be—not again.

"Guards in the forward port quadrant, report to the auto-navigation deck," said a computerized voice. "Crew commanders, to the command deck."

Craig shot into the deck, Slyde and Sirena at his heels.

"Holo-vid, magnify auto-nav!" Craig ordered, his eyes riveted to the space above the command console.

Navos stared, unable to believe his eyes, as the holo-vid tilted and flexed to magnify the auto-nav. Chad stood before the auto-nav console.

"That's one of your boys. How the hell did he get in there?" demanded Craig.

"And more importantly, what is he doing there?" Sirena asked.

Navos shook his head. "I...don't understand this." The boy couldn't have hidden any evil intentions from him. It wasn't possible.

"He's locked the doors," Slyde reported grimly. "I can't override it from here."

"Get that little slimeball out of my auto-nav," snarled a deep voice, "or I'll break open the doors and rip his throat out!" It was Panthar, the big Tyger navigator, filling the doorway with murder in his golden eyes.

"No," Craig rapped. "By the time we force our way in there, he could do a lot of damage. We might not survive another session without it."

"You'd better believe it," Panthar answered. "Even I can't get us past Cirrius and her moons. All their gravitational pulls are programmed into that system."

"Gas him," Slyde said. "He'll drop in a moment and we can go in with masks."

"Hell," Craig swore. "Look—he's putting one on right now. Somehow he knew about the gas. How does he know all this?"

"You can't come in here!" a Serpentine guard barked at the open hatch.

"But I must speak to Commander Navos!" It was Nelah, pale and distraught.

"Stay back." The guard gave her a push.

“Commander Navos!” she called. “Daron! You must listen to me! It’s Chad. He—”

“We know about him,” Navos snapped. He waved impatiently at the guard. “Release her.”

He turned back to the others. “I’ll take care of him. It’s the only way.”

Craig nodded. “All right. Let’s go.”

Navos strode out of the command deck, the others following. Serpentine guards stood at the ready outside the auto-nav. Inside, limned against the gleaming lights and blinking signals, Chad stood over the console, already reaching out to one of the controls.

“No!” snarled Panthar. “Not the override! Get him before he sends us all hurtling to perdition.”

“Quiet!” Navos’s cold voice sliced like a knife through those around him. “I cannot work if anyone speaks.”

He braced his hands on the edge of the hatch and closed his eyes. He sent a current of psychic power surging into the auto-nav. He was sent reeling back by a wave of malevolent power. It was not the boy’s.

Snapping back to his own mind, he stared into the auto-nav, where Chad was touching first one, then another control, as if trying to decide which to use. He was nodding, then shaking his head as if someone were giving him orders.

Someone powerful. Someone very angry. Someone who had to be on the ship.

There was only one being on the ship besides himself capable of this. An icy sickness rose up in him. Mazarin had done the implant. Mazarin and Cyan were involved. Cyan had sent Nelah to the *Orion*. She was talented enough, and the temptation of wielding great power had been the ruin of more than one Indigon.

He whirled. Yes, she was there, at the fringes of the small crowd. Watching the boy intently.

“*You*,” he accused. Her lovely eyes widened as they met his. “Cyan talked you into this, didn’t he? Or coerced you,” he guessed as she shook her head, hurt and horror written on her face. “But never mind that. How are you doing it? Damn you, how?”

Blindsided by the shock of having the man she loved, admired, turn on her, Nelah could feel her mouth working, but nothing would come out of her throat. Like a small flutter-moth she was pinioned by his icy gaze.

She noticed with ridiculous detail how the two guard captains moved to place themselves on either side of her. Perhaps they thought she was capable of doing bodily harm. Or was it so she could not escape? As if there were anywhere she could go. She swallowed a hysterical giggle.

With a greater effort of will than she’d ever summoned, she forced herself to speak. She supposed she should thank Navos for that—she’d learned more about self-control from him than anyone she’d ever met—as well as more about losing it.

“He has—an implant,” she managed. “It is made of biotic materials.”

“What? How did you discover this?”

“I—I was angry.” Unable to bear the contempt in his gaze, she spoke to the emblem on his chest. “I intuited him. At once, I sensed there was another presence. I don’t think he was aware of it. But it was awake, somehow. It sensed me.” She shuddered at the memory.

She dragged her gaze up to his. “If you wish, I will remove myself to a sealed portion of the ship. Or—or you may have me incapacitated. But I would like to stay and help.”

“Think you could hurry it up back there?” Panthar snarled. “He’s got his paws on my manual drive.”

Without warning, Navos sent his power slamming into her mind. Nelah reeled back against the wall behind her. Every instinct screamed to defend herself from this sudden invasion. But she left herself defenseless, letting him blast through every corner of her mind. It burned, but the pain was more than psychic, it was her heart shattering.

This was no beguiling lover, but a cold, impersonal Navos, intent only on discovering whether she spoke the truth. Whether she was a calculating manipulator, or merely a foolish blunderer who had awakened a sleeping viper.

He was ruthless and thorough. And then he was finished, leaving her trembling.

“I perceive I was mistaken,” he said curtly, even as he turned back to the window into the auto-nav. “In which cortex did you find the device?”

She forced back the moan of pain that tried to push out of her throat. Shoving herself away from the wall with an effort, she started to follow him, only to find two golden-clad arms holding her firmly.

“The cerebral.” She winced as she was shoved back against the wall again.

Navos whirled. “Release her. She’s not part of it.”

“You are certain?” the huge guard captain asked.

“Yes. I was mistaken. Now all of you step back and stay quiet. Nelah, come. We haven’t much time.”

Panthar snarled wordlessly as, inside the auto-nav, Chad seized a large control and began to pull it toward him.

“Follow me,” Navos ordered. “It will take both of us to do this. I don’t know how the device works.”

“Who could be doing this?” she asked as she moved to stand beside him at the window.

“Cyan.” He spat the name contemptuously and Nelah jerked with shock. “But we’re going to stop him. Just follow me and say nothing.”

She took a deep breath and opened her mind to him. He was there instantly, already flowing forward, into the auto-nav, carrying her with him. It was like riding the crest of a great rushing wave. She could only struggle to keep her balance. She’d never used her intuitive power so swiftly, or with such force. If she hadn’t just experienced it, she wouldn’t have believed it possible.

And then they were face-to-face with malignance. It was indeed her step-father. To what depths had Cyan sunk, to be involved in this?

"So, you're back," he gloated. "Thought you'd never have the guts to return and face me. The great Daron Navos, bested by a first-year intern with a little implant. Tsk, tsk."

Nelah hovered in the background. Cyan seemed not to have noticed her. Well, she thought a little hysterically, it was a bit crowded—four Indigons in one psyche.

"Why are you doing this, Cyan?"

Nelah could feel Navos searching for a way to gain control. Cyan's power seemed limitless, completely overpowering the boy's.

"Why?" Cyan answered. "Why? Because I can, you idealistic fool. Now that I have Mazarin's money backing me, I'm unstoppable. And you and your great hulk of a space cruise ship are going to be my debut. The boy is mine—he'll die if I ask him. And I will. Once I've destroyed the great Commander Navos, every crime lord in the galaxy will be vying to hire me! Ha, ha, ha!"

Nelah listened with horror. She'd learned Cyan hid malevolence behind his smiling charm, but she'd had no idea he was capable of such evil.

"How did you get so much information about the Orion?" Navos demanded.

"Ah, I wondered if you'd notice," Cyan purred. "Chad's been a busy boy, gathering intel from various crew members for me."

Nelah jolted mentally, nearly falling off the wave of power. And then she realized with a little shock that Navos was nudging her. He wanted her to do something—but what?

"You've left only one factor out of your equation, Loftan," Navos said. "I'm stronger than you. Always have been, always will be."

"Really," Cyan purred. "Let's see how fast you are then, Commander." He sent out a great surge of power.

Chad pulled with all his might on the control stick and Nelah reeled as the ship tilted alarmingly. Panthar roared with rage and Craig shouted something. Their voices were merely wordless rumbles to her.

Navos's arm closed around her, holding her close to his side. In her mind, she felt him turn and face Cyan. At the same time, while holding her physically, he threw her off the wave of his psychic power.

For an instant she was free-falling, lost and bewildered. And then she understood. He would face Cyan alone. Her task was to handle Chad.

It was like being in a pit with two raging leviathans. Terrifying and fascinating. But meanwhile the ship shuddered again, jerking her attention back to the boy at the controls.

Swiftly Nelah turned. Ignoring the battle surging back and forth around her, she swooped toward the device pulsing with obscene power around Chad's cerebral cortex. How could she hope to stop it? Perhaps by surrounding it.

With a swift prayer, she sent tendrils of power out and began to wrap them around the thing, until she surrounded it entirely. It fought back, sending painful charges zinging through her mind, but she hung on. Finally, it collapsed.

So did Chad. He swayed and fell backward like a felled tree onto the floor of the auto-nav. The passageway ceased to shake and the great ship sailed smoothly.

With a last snarl of rage, Cyan retreated. But strangely, the last thing they sensed was his vicious laughter, fading away. Navos and Nelah were alone.

Suddenly exhausted, she fell against him, her head on his chest. He held her tightly, but she could feel his arm trembling as well. Beneath her ear, his heart thundered.

Navos could not believe it was over. It had seemed...too easy, somehow. Why had Cyan laughed at the end? Madness?

He shook off his strange unease. He was simply reacting to the horrific experience they'd just been through. The rumors were true. Biotic implants had been perfected. And they were in the hands of two of the most ruthless, unscrupulous Indigons possible.

The slender girl in his arms was shaking. He tightened his hold on her, overwhelmed with a sudden rush of gratitude that she was safe and alive. And she hadn't been involved, after all. She was innocent. His lovely, bright flower was innocent.

"You did it," Craig cried. He slapped Navos on the back, buffeting him. Meeting his eyes, Navos nodded.

"It's over," said Sirena, sounding surprised.

"Not until I check the controls," Panthar replied, as the hatch to the auto-nav hissed smoothly open. "Get him out of here, would you?"

"Be gentle with him," Navos said over Nelah's head. Weariness washed over him in a wave. "He's an innocent dupe."

"What made him do this?" Craig demanded. "Was it a bio-implant, as Ms. Cobalt thought?"

Navos nodded. "Yes. No doubt placed there by Mazarin. Although the boy was being controlled by Loftan Cyan, professor at the university."

"We will take the boy to Tentaclar," Slyde assured him. "I'm guessing he'll be doing some emergency surgery."

Sirena nodded, her emerald gaze fiery. "We'll alert the IBI to pick up this professor and Mazarin."

"I will be with you shortly," Navos said. "I'm taking Ms. Cobalt to the infirmary."

Nelah lifted her head from his chest and pushed at him. "No, I'm fine," she said.

He looked down at her. She looked pale and fragile. His heart squeezed as if a great fist had reached into his chest.

"No, you aren't," he said. "You need rest. I'll take you to your room." His arm about her, he swept her into the nearby elevator.

Once inside, she stood quietly. He looked down at the top of her head.

"Nelah," he said carefully. "You do understand the safety of the *Orion* must come first. On board, I'm not just a man—I'm a commander—and my first duty must lie with the ship."

"Yes, of course."

He stroked the small of her back with his thumb. "Good. That's good. I...I also owe you my deepest apologies. Nelah, forgive me for doubting you, even for an instant. It seemed impossible someone not on board could be controlling the boy."

The elevator stopped and the hatch hissed open. They stepped out and she turned to him.

The bottom fell out of his gut. Her lovely eyes held an infinite sadness.

"Yes, of course," she repeated. "I understand completely, Commander. Your first duty will always be to your ship."

And she turned and walked away.

He started to go after her, to follow her into her room and take her in his arms and kiss her and talk to her, persuade her of his sincerity until she was warm and responsive and alive again—screaming and raging at him if she must, anything but this pale, withdrawn holo-image.

But his com-link beeped and Craig's voice cut through the quiet passageway.

"Daron? We need you up here."

Nelah paused in her open doorway, looking back at him. Frustration burned as he fought the urge to go to her. Arms at his sides, Navos bowed deeply, honoring her with his profound respect in the Indigon way.

Her soft mouth trembled and a sheen of tears filled her eyes, but she turned away, disappearing into her room.

He stood there alone. For the first time in his years aboard the great ship, it felt wrong. And he knew, as surely as if he were in the room with her, she was weeping. He reeled, her pain washing over him.

But he set his jaw and answered as he must.

"I'm on my way, Captain."

Chapter Eighteen

Loftan Cyan received the request for a holo-vid conference just as he was about to leave his office at the Indigon University. All the others in his department had already gone home. Outside, dusk cast blue-violet shadows across the white stone of the campus, muting the splash of the fountains and the sleepy calls of birds settling to roost. Seeing the message was from a certain party on Pangaea, he opened the link with relish.

To his surprise, the slender, pale green figure facing him was a woman. Rra's little mistress. She was a pretty thing, if you liked the weedy sort. He smiled to himself at his own joke, for everyone knew Pangaeans' greenish glow was the result of living on the chlorophyll-rich plants of their home planet.

"What do you want?" He eyed her carefully. She was different, somehow, than she'd been in the earlier holo-vid. Tense as a drawn bow, with a hard, bitter light in her green eyes.

"I have a business proposition for you," she said. "One I think you'll find attractive."

"I'm already doing business with your...patron."

She smiled tightly and his senses sprang to alert.

"How would you like to earn twice that much? Whatever he's paying you, I will double."

Cyan smiled back, showing all his teeth. "I'm listening."

Rra sauntered into the main room of his condo. The huge area was softly lit and equally soft music played. A tray with his favorite drink sat waiting on the long sweep of bar. The doors to the balcony were thrown open and his mistress's slender form was silhouetted against the lights of the city below, framed between two huge planters trailing delicate blossoms.

He picked up the single goblet waiting and took a long swig. Ah, just as he liked it. He smirked as he looked at the woman on the balcony. She knew how he liked his creature comforts. And she'd learned he would have what he wanted.

His cock hardened as he remembered the two sex performers, muscular bodies gleaming as they thrust into her from both ends, the snake slithering over all of them, while the Serpentine woman sucked his cock. Ah, what a night that had been. He'd come so hard he'd shouted aloud.

He would call that particular service again, very soon. He required a little more stimulation to receive pleasure lately.

Lly had crept off to her room, whimpering and moaning, but she'd recovered by the next day. She'd better, as much as it cost him to keep her. So what if she eyed him like a frightened bunny? It simply reminded him of the power he held over her. He'd plucked her out of the secretarial pool and he could throw her back anytime he chose. Or further.

Strolling out onto the balcony, he joined his mistress at the stone balustrade.

"A fine night," he said expansively. "Look at the city. Flung out like a great jeweled cape, fit for a king. For me! I tell you, when I'm rid of that quarking Logan Stark and his great white hopes, the *Orion* and the *Cassiopeia*, I will virtually own it all!"

He chuckled richly and reached for Lly, but she sidled away, out of his reach. The moon was down and her eyes were dark shadows in her pale face, her mouth a taut line.

"What's the matter, little bunny?" he mocked. "Afraid I'll throw you over?"

He chuckled again and drained his glass. Ebullient power flowed through him like the strongest drink. Turning, he ran lightly up the steps at the end of the balustrade and stood on the edge of the stone, throwing back his head to enjoy the evening breeze on his face.

"You see?" he cried. "Nothing to be afraid of. Not for me, anyway. I'm master of all I survey!"

She stared up at him, frozen. Obviously fascinated by his daring, his magnificence.

He lunged at her and grasped her arm to pull her up with him. "Come, share the moment with me!"

She screamed and writhed desperately in his grasp. "No! No! Let go of me!"

Twisting her head as he hauled her up onto the parapet, she sank her teeth into his wrist and bit him savagely.

"Augh!" Pain shot through his arm as her sharp teeth sank through skin and flesh. "Little bitch! I'll kill you for this!"

He wrested his arm free of her mouth and backhanded her, sending her tumbling against a huge planter. Straightening, he stepped back, ready to tell the useless little whore exactly what he would do to her.

His foot sank into open air and, with a jolt of terror, he felt himself begin to fall. His last sight was of his gorgeous condo, the lights gleaming in every room and his mistress watching him, his blood smeared dark green across her face, her eyes wide.

He screamed as he plummeted off the balcony, toward the city far below.

Loftan Cyan stepped out from the shadows of the far planter and leaned over to look down off of the balustrade.

"Tsk, tsks," he said mildly. "Our host seems to have fallen. You'd better call the authorities." He smiled gently at the slender woman shivering against the other planter. "And do remember—I was never here."

She wiped her face with the back of her hand and pulled herself upright. Like a young queen, he thought with amused approval.

“I won’t forget. And the currency will be in your account in the morning.”

He bowed. “I don’t doubt it.”

They both knew he could just as easily come back and make her jump off this same balcony. Really, he didn’t know why more Indigons didn’t choose this route. They could rule the universe.

As he stepped into the PanRra hovie waiting for him, he frowned, rubbing his forehead. Damn, his head ached. Ah, well, he’d take an analgesic as soon as he was back on the Mazarin cruiser. And then he must rest.

Tomorrow was going to be a busy day.

He would destroy Daron Navos and his quarking step-daughter at the same time. Oh, he didn’t need the Cobalt money anymore. It was a piddling amount compared to the fortune he and Beryl Mazarin were amassing. But Nelah was an annoyance to him. Made him nervous to think of her raw power allied with Navos’s.

All that power on the side of right—what a waste.

Chapter Nineteen

Cyan was no longer on Indigo. Nor was Beryl Mazarin, as far as the IBI agents could ascertain. They'd escaped only that night, aboard her new cruiser, according to the Indigon City space port holo-records.

The agents were even now scouring the clinic, and Cyan's office at the university, for records left behind that might give clues to the co-conspirators and their destination.

Chad was in the infirmary, sedated and unconscious. Tentaclar had studied the implant on the body-scan unit and decided the surgery to remove it was too delicate for him to undertake. As soon as they landed on Cirrius, the boy would be put on a fast cruiser for Indigo and surgery at the university hospital, at LodeStar's expense.

Hugh would go with him. Navos spoke with him, explaining as much as he could, promising full details after the whole affair was over. Hugh brimmed with excitement that he and his friend were involved in a highly secret criminal investigation. He was also relieved after being reexamined in minute detail for an implant and found to be clear.

"But, sir," he asked in a hushed voice, his eyes wide. "Can you tell me which professor? I can't believe any of them would—you know, become involved with criminals."

Navos eyed him. The boy wouldn't be able to keep all this to himself, but in any case Chad's family would demand information. Cyan had exposed himself. Navos would let Hugh do more. Even if Cyan somehow evaded the IBI, he would never work at the university again, or on Indigo.

"It is Professor Cyan," he said deliberately. "Former professor, that is. He will of course be terminated. He's a wanted man."

Hugh was properly horrified and repulsed. "I can scarcely believe it. Why, I had research lab with him just last semester."

The *Orion* landed on Cirrius in the golden light of early morning, settling down on the expanse of baked earth beside the huge space port terminal. Later on the small planet's sky would brighten to orange, her brown vegetation unfurling for the day.

The tall, furry natives disembarked from the ship with happy yips, glad to be home. They were followed by a group of tourists, wearing goggles and protective clothing and several hunters carrying long weapon bags. Cirrius was famous for its herds of tall deerbbits, wily and evasive.

Navos watched it all without interest. He was chilled by the realization he might have ripped the bond between himself and his beguiling lady so asunder it could never be repaired. And the thought of living without her, of never again holding her in his arms, of never seeing that glowing smile, of never coaxing her into some new sensual act was, he now discovered, more than he could bear.

She wouldn't see him when he asked, later that day. Nor the next morning. She was stubborn, he knew that. She'd proven it over and over, refusing to go away when he wouldn't take her as an intern, triumphing in the tasks he'd given her and arguing with him endlessly when they talked.

He respected her for it. He had no idea how to break through it. And the idea of calling her to him empathically filled him with self-disgust.

He was sitting in his office, gazing unseeingly at Cirrius fading in the distance, when the door hissed open. Steve Craig stood in the opening.

Navos looked up wearily, raising his brows in silent question.

Craig walked in and sat in the chair across the desk. "Daron," he said. "We've known each other for a while. We're friends."

"Yes," Navos agreed, nonplussed at the remark. "We are. Do you need something—"

Craig shook his head. "No, no. I, uh..." He cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable but determined. "Daron, I know you are a very private man. I don't like to intrude, but damn it, if even a soldier like me can see something like this, it's pretty clear."

Navos stared at him, unwillingly fascinated. "And that would be...?"

Craig's lean cheeks reddened, but he spoke doggedly. "Love. You and Ms. Cobalt. Nelah."

Navos could not have been more shocked if Steve Craig had struck him across the face. He stared at his captain, feeling heat rise in his cheeks. He had the strong desire to laugh, or curse.

"Love? A maudlin emotion and, while I understand it afflicts most of the planetary beings in the galaxy at one time or another, it is not a state for which I have ever wished."

Craig eyed him wisely. "Uh-huh," he said. "You're not exempt, you know. You may be Indigon and cool as ice, but when the right female comes along, even the mightiest of us fall."

"That is lust, surely, and ingrained for the procreation of species."

"Oh, sure. But so much more." His silvery eyes softened and a smile kicked up the corner of his mouth. "It's when just the sight of her punches you right in the gut and you get that great big swell of pride in your chest, because she's yours. Out of all the fools in the galaxy, she picked you."

His gaze hardened and he looked like the warrior he was. "It's when you'd gladly die to protect her, when you'd give up anything to keep her safe and happy."

His brows drew together thoughtfully as he considered Navos.

"And for men like me and you, it's when her happiness is more important than your own stiff-necked male pride."

Navos absorbed all of this. He stared down at his hands on the desk.

"I would do...anything to make her happy again," he whispered, forcing the words out. "But, I—I have no idea what that is. She won't...speak with me."

To his shock, Craig chuckled, a richly satisfied sound. "Ah. That bad, huh? Well, then. If you're in that deep, my friend, you'll figure it out."

He clapped one hand on Navos's shoulder and then left. Navos could have sworn he heard whistling fading in the distance.

Navos's next visitor was Sirena. He sensed her before she arrived, of course. The fiery Serpentine had an aura so strong the air around her simmered.

He rose politely as she sauntered into his office, expecting to discuss the investigation. But having seated herself with languid grace in the chair opposite his desk, she studied him with a look that sent suspicion skating over his shoulders. He lifted his brows at her in inquiry.

When she straightened in her chair, he tensed. She was up to something.

She smiled faintly. "You look as wary as a man watching a serpent coil to strike, Commander. Don't worry, I'm here to help you."

"With the investigation? Your assistance has been invaluable," he said politely.

She dismissed the life-threatening situation with a wave of her hand. "No, no. With something equally as important. But which I fear you are ill-equipped to handle."

He gripped the arms of his chair. Oh, seven hells, no. Not again! "Madame, if you are here to offer your advice on a personal matter, I beg of you, save us both the embarrassment."

She raised an eyebrow in delicate astonishment. "I'm not embarrassed. And you shouldn't be, although I see by the look of princely haughtiness on your face that you are."

She shook her head. "And save the no-doubt killing retort trembling on your lips. I will make this short and then I'll never speak to you so again. Daron, you are an exceptional man. As tactician and second-in-command of this ship, there is no one any of us would rather have at our sides. But you are a man." Her sultry smile reminded him she was a renowned expert on his sex.

"And you are a man of deep feelings. Don't think you can go through your life and ignore them. You and I have more in common than you realize," she said, rising to pace over to the porthole and gaze out at black space. "I thought I could go through life without opening my heart to anyone—without making myself vulnerable."

She turned on him, her lovely eyes haunted. "I shudder to think what would have become of me—a pathetic, lonely old woman, comforting myself with memories of my conquests, if my splendid Dragolin hadn't broken through my defenses."

“And such will be your fate, if you don’t reach out and take this lovely young woman who is so obviously your equal in talent and intellect. And who looks at you, I might add, with such banked passion in her eyes I’m surprised your flight suit does not burst into flames.”

Navos held up his hands, unable to bear any more. “All right,” he said. “All right. Thank you, Sirena.”

She was silent and he let his hands fall to his desk. Unwelcome or not, this proud woman had opened her heart to him, made herself vulnerable. “I...I do hear you,” he said. “I do.”

She nodded slowly. “I see that you do,” she answered softly. “Then the rest is simple, Commander. Do what you must.”

She glided out of the room.

Navos rose to stalk over to the window. As unwelcome as their outspoken advice had been, Craig and Sirena were both right. He could not lose her.

When the door opened yet again, he whirled to see Ogg’s short, wiry figure in the doorway.

Navos scowled at him. “Ogg, I warn you. If you are here to offer romantic advice, turn around and go away.”

The mechanic’s weathered face screwed up in a grimace. “Romantic advice,” he repeated as if it were a phrase in a new language. “Who in the seven hells do I look like? Dr. Lovejoy?”

He shook his head as he ambled to the empty chair. “Naw, I tell ya, this ship is freaky enough as it is lately. It’s like I was tellin’ Commander Mra. The *Orion* oughta be renamed the Love Boat, with all the couples gettin’ cozy.”

He nodded wisely at Navos. “That’s one o’ them ancient Earth I stories from the galactic archives. Fascinatin’ things in there. They even got what they used to call books,” he said, gesturing. “Made out of paper, from trees.”

“I’m aware of books,” Navos said, dropping into his chair. The absurdity of the situation finally overcame him and he started to laugh.

Ogg snorted. “Yeah, an’ are you aware of the amour I’m talkin’ about? I was in the arboretum a few days ago and there was couples right in the underbrush! A guy can’t even go for a stroll after supper.” He shook his head.

Navos laughed harder, his head tipping back as he let humor overtake him. Ogg began to chuckle as well.

“A most disturbing experience for you,” Navos managed, as he regained control of his voice. He gave a last snort of laughter as he imagined what the mechanic would say if he knew Navos himself had been among the lovers en flagrante.

Ogg shuddered elaborately. “Yeah, but that ain’t why I’m here. Don’t know how the hell we got goin’ on that, anyway.”

He sobered. “I’m worried. All this stuff that’s happened—the serious stuff, I mean. What if they get into my reactor? What are we gonna do then?”

Navos straightened. “We will see to it they do not.”

The two men looked at each other. They both knew what would happen if they failed—the ship would be blown into bits so infinitesimal there would be nothing to reclaim.

Chapter Twenty

Nelah sat in her small stateroom, staring at the bouquet of flowers on the small table. Lovely blossoms spilled over the lip of the clear Serpentine glass vase, in shades from cream to deep mauve, lilies nodding amongst the fragile tracery of star-breath. There had been no note, but the message was clear. Each time she looked at them, she remembered Daron whispering to her in the night, calling her his flower.

She wiped her wet face again and dropped the sodden tissue in the waste bin, already overflowing. Damn him. How dare he remind her of such tender moments? She'd tried to warn him, to help him and instead he'd turned on her. He hadn't trusted her.

Tears welling up yet again, she fell back on the narrow bed. She curled onto her side and the flowers blurred into wavering streams of color.

Her com-link chimed again. She ignored it, as she had all day. It was him again. She knew he wanted her forgiveness and she'd given it to him, but she wasn't sure she'd really meant it. He'd hurt her too deeply.

She closed her eyes against the pain and finally slept. And dreamed.

She awoke and turned her head and he lay beside her, his dark head on the pillow, his long body slack with sleep. The power of those deep indigo eyes covered.

It would be so easy to extinguish that power for good. She smiled to herself. He'd let her into his room and she'd let him use her body for his pleasure. Now, he was at her mercy.

There, in the recessed shelf nearby sat the Serpentine glass sculpture. Small, but heavy. He would feel nothing until it was too late.

Just pick it up and hit him with it. And if the first blow wasn't enough, strike him again and again, smashing it into his hard skull until the dark blood flowed down and Daron Navos was nothing but a lifeless cipher.

Never to hurt her again or look down that arrogant nose of his, lording it over those around him, so sure he was the best! Never, never, never—

Nelah woke with a great gasp, sitting up and scuttling back against the wall in terror. With frantic motions, she gathered up the comforter and held it in front of her, hunching her body around it. Oh God, ohgodohgod, what was happening to her? She stared at the walls of her tiny room, her breath coming in quick shuddering gasps, her heart pounding.

“No!” she choked aloud, denying the horrible images that had somehow come from her own subconscious. “No, no!”

The sound of her voice steadied her a little and she tipped her head back against the wall and drew a deep breath. It was all right. She was awake now—really awake. She was not in Navos’s bed, about to kill him. She was alone in her own stateroom.

It had only been a nightmare. The worst one of her life. She pressed her hands to her forehead, wishing desperately she could reach inside and rip out the hideous images.

Was it possible her subconscious really held such obscene rage? She was angry at him, yes, and more deeply hurt than she could ever recall, but the thought of physically hurting him, of striking that proud, beloved head, made her moan with anguish.

Nelah shook her head vehemently. She could never hurt him. She pushed aside the now-soggy coverlet and clambered off the bed. Her legs were wobbly, her head light. Well, no wonder, holed up in this room for a day and a night. She had to get out of here.

Stripping off her nightie, Nelah stepped into the tiny shower-dry. She stayed in it a long time, the hot water streaming over her in a kind of absolution.

Dressed and dry-eyed, if still shaky, she set off for breakfast, for food, but mostly to be with other living beings. To find some kind of normality.

Tessa Craig was in the dining hall and she waved Nelah over to her table with a friendly smile. But as Nelah sat, the look became concern and she laid a warm hand on Nelah’s arm.

“How are you? Steven told me what happened. I don’t know a great deal about your powers, but it must have been very difficult, subduing that man.”

Nelah looked at her carefully, but there was no subterfuge in the warm golden gaze. Captain Craig had evidently not shared the more embarrassing details, such as the way Navos had turned on her, accusing her of being the culprit.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Tired.”

She imagined herself saying, “Oh and in a dream I just murdered the man I love.” A cold shiver racked her.

“Have some coffee.” Tessa Craig reached for the carafe and poured the rich, dark liquid into Nelah’s cup. “It always wakes me up.”

Nelah took the proffered cup and drank. Just holding the steaming brew in her hands warmed her. With an effort, she smiled back at the other woman.

“You’re right. It does help.”

“The *Orion* serves only the finest coffee,” Tessa said proudly. “And the food is to die for.”

Perhaps she should die for it. Imagine being so proud of a tacky cruise ship. Great floating hulk of commercialism. All that money—they didn't deserve to have it all. It should flow to the beings with the real power. Indigons were the ones who should be in control, not these human fools.

Nelah set her mug down with a little crash and pressed one hand to her middle, coffee churning in her stomach. She blinked and focused on Tessa, who was looking at her strangely.

"I'm sorry," she managed. "I—I don't feel well. Will you excuse me?"

Without waiting for an answer, she bolted for the door. Her mind whirled. Where had those horrible thoughts come from? She liked Tessa Craig—even wished that they could be friends.

This was backlash from the horrific experience of the evening before. It must be. Navos was right—she wasn't strong enough to manage her empathic powers. She walked down the passageway, dodging groups of tourists and crew headed for the dining hall.

Navos! This was all his fault. All of it. Without him, everything would be wonderful. A life of ease, of doing exactly as she wished, using her powers to gain everything she could ever desire.

And all she had to do was go to him. It would be so easy. He would let her in and believe her when she slipped into his arms. Then she would wait until he turned his back, or fell asleep, and smash! With him out of the way, she could proceed with ease. And make it look as if that which followed was all his fault.

"No!" Nelah didn't realize she'd spoken aloud until a portly Barillian passing the other way turned and stared at her, blowing an offended note out of the tall pipes on his purple skull.

She bowed quickly in apology and hurried on, directionless, wishing desperately she could outrun the strange thoughts bombarding her. Her heart was pounding, her breath quick and shallow.

She must go to him. She must!

"No. No, no, no." She struggled to take a deep breath through her clenched teeth. She would go to the gym; that was it. A deep yoga workout would calm her and relax her body. Then things would return to normal.

But it grew worse. By mid-morning, Nelah was barely hanging on. She hadn't eaten since the day before, had forced down only a few sips of water. She could not sit for longer than a few moments and, wandering the passageways, she found herself nudged insistently toward a quadrant of the ship she knew nothing about. She approached a sealed hatch with a pair of Serpentine guards standing in front of it. Through it, she could see crew members working before large instrument panels, machinery blinking.

"This is a restricted area," said one of the guards, stepping forward. "I must ask you to return to the passenger area."

Nelah stared at him. *The fool. With one little surge of power, she could bring him and his friend to their knees, begging for mercy. Then she would be in through those doors. She would command the crew members to obey her. How she would laugh as they steered the ship toward disaster. Perhaps a nice little collision with another ship? Or a nearby meteor shower might be fun.*

“Ms. Cobalt?” The guard was frowning at her now. Of course—he’d accessed her ID and had her name and passenger profile instantly.

The sound of her name snapped her out of her trance. “Yes, thank you,” she managed, forcing the words past her dry lips. “I—I’m sorry. Lost, I guess.”

She turned and forced her legs to carry her back down the passageway. Perspiration broke out on her face, but she was shivering, cold and reeling. She’d just contemplated forcing a crew member to do something.

Something was wrong with her—horribly wrong. She could no longer delude herself that it was the result of her experiences.

She needed Navos.

She ran for the nearest elevator, but she could not escape the soft, taunting laughter echoing in her mind.

The receptionist at PanRra Corporation offices looked up with a professional smile as a tall, lean human walked up to the sleek console which enclosed her. Then she remembered she was supposed to be in mourning and sobered, settling her hair decorously around her throat.

“Good morning, sir,” she said with a melancholy tinge to her smooth voice. “How may I help you?”

She blinked as he turned the force of his silver gaze on her. Oh, my. This was a dangerous man. She wondered if he was one of the IBI investigators and as quickly cast that notion aside. He held himself as if he were accustomed to being in charge of the space around him.

“I’m Logan Stark,” he said in a deep, quiet voice that nevertheless held steel. “I’m here to see whoever is in charge, now that your boss is dead.”

Sifting alternatives, she nodded respectfully. “Yes, sir. Please, come with me.”

Logan Stark! Why, everyone in this office knew who he was—the head of the huge LodeStar Corporation and Rra’s most hated rival.

She would take him directly up to the executive floor. They would know what to do with him.

She ushered him upstairs in the lightning-fast executive elevator and left him with Rra’s personal assistant, whose green face was wan and pale.

The receptionist couldn’t believe the twit was actually mourning his dead boss. She certainly wasn’t and she knew most of the other corporate employees weren’t either. Rra had ruled the company like a cruel despot. Lately there’d been talk he was off his plant-stand.

As she rode back down, she sighed. She might be of a different race and happily married besides, but she knew an attractive man when she saw one. Logan Stark not only exuded power, but sexual appeal.

Lly eyed the man seated across the huge desk, just as he was eyeing her. She carefully schooled herself to calmness. She'd come this far, she wouldn't fail now. No one knew she'd been anything but an innocent bystander to Rra's death, a near victim of the megalomaniac madness that had lately afflicted him.

"So you're acting in command of the company," said Logan Stark. "Until the heir shows up."

"Yes," she politely. "I was Rra's executive assistant until recently, so I know all that is necessary to carry the company through this difficult time, until his nephew arrives." Fortunately Rra hadn't troubled himself with such niceties as a board of directors, so there'd been no one to step in her way.

"The heir's a school boy, isn't he?" Stark asked.

She nodded. "In his last year at university."

One of his bold eyebrows arched ever so slightly. "He'll no doubt need guidance for a time, until he assumes control."

She raised a brow back at him and nodded.

His eyes hardened and she felt a thrill of palpable danger. "You and I had better come to an understanding, then, Ms. Lly. I don't know what happened on your boss's balcony and I don't care to."

His implication struck home. If he did care to probe, he could cause her a great deal of trouble.

"What I do care about is my company and my ships," he went on. "Which lately have been the target of one attack after another. The IBI and my people have been investigating and the tail of the comet seems to point straight to this office—to PanRra."

Lly clenched her hands tightly together on the desk. He could prove nothing and even if he could, Rra had been in charge, not her.

"I'm distressed to hear this," she said. She let her gaze fall to her hands and then lifted her eyes to meet his again. "I—I scarcely know how to say this, Mr. Stark, but...Rra had changed. He was not the man I once knew. I believe he suffered from a disorder of the brain, which caused him to undertake certain...unwise actions."

She lifted her chin proudly. "I can assure you, however, such things will no longer occur. The PanRra Corporation will once again operate as the honorable company it once was."

He gazed at her for a long moment, in which she felt as if she were being stripped bare. Then he nodded once.

"It had better," he said. "Because if I have so much as another hint of trouble, I will personally see to it this company is dismantled down to the smallest hovie."

She bowed. "Understood."

He rose and she rose with him.

"There is...one more thing," she said hesitantly. Her heart was pounding and her hair enwrapped her throat so tightly she could hardly breathe.

He turned back to her, his face hard. She crossed the room to him quickly before she could lose her courage.

“I...cannot guarantee,” she murmured, “that Rra hadn’t already hired someone who is even now conspiring to harm one of your ships. Someone of unusual powers. An Indigon, perhaps.”

She was really frightened now and she knew those silver eyes missed nothing. Part of her could not believe she was daring to reveal so much. But she knew Loftan Cyan’s kind. If he was not dealt with, he would return until the coffers of PanRra were drained.

Logan Stark looked down at her and then nodded. Message received.

“Thank you,” he said aloud. “I’ll look into it.”

And he was gone. She made it the few steps to a nearby chair and sat abruptly, burying her face in her hands. Her hair fluttered about her like grasses in the wind.

Chapter Twenty-One

Navos rose from his chair at the command console and turned toward the hatch that led to the elevators. Craig was speaking, but Navos no longer heard the words. Something was wrong.

Nelah. For hours, worry about her had been niggling at him, distracting him. He'd calmed himself by locating her in the ship. Finding her going about normal shipboard activities, the mess hall, the gym, even a yoga class, he'd forced the unease to the back of his mind. Now he could ignore it no longer.

"Daron?" Craig said, "are you with me?"

Navos did not answer. *She was coming.*

One of the elevators opened and she emerged. The guards on duty turned toward her.

"Daron?"

Something was very wrong. She was pale, wavering as if she barely had the strength to remain on her feet. She saw him through the floor-to-ceiling windows that surrounded the command deck and reached out one hand to him. Her face contorted and she lifted her other hand to her head as if it hurt.

One of the guards reached for her.

"Leave her!" Navos commanded, already striding out of the hatch toward her.

He crossed the passageway to her, reaching for her shoulders. "Nelah—what is it?"

"Come to me." Without warning she was in his mind, her voice seductive as a courtesan. *"Come, I need you. Take me somewhere where we can be alone."*

Grabbing her head in her hands, Nelah pressed at the sides of her skull. She shook her head in violent denial.

"Nelah, what is it? You must tell me."

"No!" She screamed the word with both her voice and all her psychic power. Repelled by the force of her defense, Navos reeled back a step and stared down at her, horror dawning.

"Daron," said Sirena, at his elbow. "She's behaving very strangely. Is she another—?"

Denial surged through Navos in a great fiery wave.

"She can't be," he snarled without taking his eyes off of Nelah. "Nelah—"

"Help me!" Nelah cried out to him. "Daron, help me. I—I'm going mad!"

"We must know," the Serpentine insisted.

Navos looked into Nelah's eyes, a cold fist gripping his gut. "Nelah. Let me help you."

"No," she pleaded. "Don't try to come into my mind. You—you'll hate me."

Her legs crumpled under her and he swung her up into his arms. She seemed impossibly light.

"I'll help you," he promised, with steely resolve. "Whatever it is—I won't fail you."

"The infirmary?" It was more of a demand than a suggestion from Slyde.

"Yes," Sirena agreed. "We'd better begin with a mild sedative. She appears to be going into shock."

Shivering convulsively, Nelah lay quiescent. Navos looked down at her. "No sedative," he said harshly. "I'll calm her."

Carefully, he sent his power slipping into her mind. He nearly crumpled to the floor with her in his arms at what he found there. Her mind was a morass of confused emotions—fear, confusion and rage swirled, battering at her.

His heart broke. Was it as he feared? Was her feminine psyche too fragile to contain her powers? Had the events of the past days been too much for her?

Summoning every sliver of his self-control, he cradled her close, sending gentle waves of soothing into her mind. He could afford no more intrusion just now. She might also be physically ill. Perhaps her immunity was compromised in some way by her mental fragility. She wasn't—couldn't be—another one of Cyan's dupes. He wouldn't allow it.

Tentaclar was waiting in an exam cubicle when they arrived.

"Ah, our young Indigon female," he said as Navos laid her on the gurney. He put one hand on Nelah's arm, patting it gently. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"She collapsed," Navos told him. "I'm not certain if it is psychic or physical."

"I see." The doctor bent over Nelah, his eye stalks waving gently. "Nelah, can you hear me?"

She opened her eyes and tried to smile. It was a pitiful attempt, as her eyes were dark with terror. Navos tightened his grip on her hand.

Tentaclar parted the dark hair over her ear. "Is your head injury troubling you?"

"What injury?" Navos demanded. "Nelah, you've hurt yourself? Why was I not told?"

Tentaclar regarded him with interest even as he continued to examine Nelah's skull.

"It's nothing," she mumbled, her eyes drifting shut. "I fell...weeks ago. A few days after graduation. Had stitches, that's all."

"Knocked unconscious, though," Tentaclar said. "She may be having repercussions."

A terrible foreboding began to creep through Navos like a dark, looming shadow. "Nelah—where did you go to have these stitches?"

She opened her eyes with an obvious effort and gazed trustingly into his. "Cyan took me—someone called him when I fell. He was...actually kind to me that day."

He touched her face gently, cradling her cheek. "Flower, where did he take you?"

She frowned with effort. "It—it was the...the Mazarin Clinic. Right up the hill from the university."

Navos heard a gasp. Tentaclar's eyes swung in sharp unison to meet his. The Mazarin clinic. Nelah had been unconscious and at the mercy of Beryl Mazarin. And now she was in psychic turmoil.

He looked down into the eyes of the woman he loved and wanted to scream his rage to the stars. Nelah might be another victim of Cyan and Mazarin.

"Nelah," he said softly. "The doctor must examine you. I'm afraid there may be repercussions from your...surgery."

She clutched at his hand. "You examine me," she pleaded.

He lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to her silky skin. It was damp and cool, too cool. "No, I...can't. But I will be right here."

If she had an implant, he dare not probe too deeply into her mind, or he would find himself enmeshed in a struggle with both her and Cyan. For he'd little doubt now who was tormenting her.

The bastard had probably arranged for her injury in the first place, either with a psychic nudge to her balance on the stairs, or by forcing another student to push her. There were always people about the campus, even during session breaks.

"All right. If you want me to," Nelah said.

"She's dehydrated and her blood sugars are much too low," said Tentaclar. "We'll start an intravenous first. She's evidently not eaten or drunk anything for quite some time."

Tentaclar gave her a sedative with the IV. Navos watched as her long lashes drooped over her tormented eyes. As soon as she was asleep, two med-techs carefully passed the molecular scan unit over her skull. The results were displayed on a large holo-vid over her head.

At first Navos hoped all was normal. The incision site and the nearly dissolved stitches showed clearly, but as the scan slowly moved under the skin, his heart plummeted, free-falling into an icy void. There was a small slit in her skull.

"Yes, you see?" murmured Tentaclar, pointing to an area under the skull, between the brain lobes. "There it is."

The thing was nestled secretively between the lobes of her brain and out from it snaked tendrils connecting it to the cerebral cortex. As they watched, it pulsed rhythmically.

Navos felt a warm hand clasp his shoulder, but it did nothing to combat the ice spreading in his chest. Why, why had he not seen this thing? How could he have missed it?

"We can help her, Daron," said Craig. "We'll fly her to Indigon on a fast shuttle. She'll have surgery immediately."

The others were silent and Navos stood there, staring blankly at the holo-vid.

He was going to find Mazarin and Cyan and kill them. Slowly, so they twisted in agony and begged for death. And then he would give it to them.

If he was punished for it, that was only what he deserved. For if he'd confided in her, had brought her into the investigation as she'd begged, she would have mentioned this surgery and its location days ago. He could have saved her this torment. She'd only wanted to help.

"She's the fail-safe," he muttered. "The final subject. This is why Cyan gave way so easily when I battled him for control of the boy. He was only testing me."

He rose and turned to the others, unable to bear the sight of the thing in her brain any longer. "From the tangle of her thoughts, I must now conclude that she was...supposed to get me alone, seduce me. And then in an unguarded moment—kill me."

"Great Serpents," Sirena hissed. "And she alone would've been blamed for it."

"But what would be the point of that?" Slyde asked, his heavy brows furrowed. "I know you and Cyan are rivals, but how would that destroy the *Orion*? For surely that's the reason for this whole thing?"

"That would be next," Craig said shrewdly, watching Navos. "If she's as strong as Daron, she could have forced any crew member to do anything she commanded—run the ship into a meteor shower, or right into the nearest moon, for that matter."

"But that didn't happen," Sirena said. "Navos has—"

"Navos has condemned her to hours of torment and now a life-threatening surgery," Navos cut in, his voice icy with self-disgust. "My arrogance has cost her dearly. If I had listened to her when she asked to help with the investigation, we would have known all this long ago."

"Never mind that," Craig said sharply. "The question now is—how in the seven hells are we going to catch this guy and stop him, once and for all?"

"Perhaps we can lay a trap," Slyde said thoughtfully.

"Out here?" Craig asked, one brow shooting up. "How would that work?"

Sirena exchanged a look with her husband. "I think Slyde has more of a long-distance trap in mind."

He nodded and their eyes swung to Navos.

"No," he said icily.

"Did I miss something?" Craig asked quizzically.

Navos turned to him. "The guard commanders wish to use Nelah as bait for a trap. But I will not allow it."

"We could wait until she wakes and ask her," Sirena said. "Of course, that might be too late...for the *Orion* and for her."

Craig's brows shot together. He turned to Tentaclar. "How long before she wakes up?"

"At least an hour," said the old doctor. "She's exhausted."

Craig nodded. "We'll speak with her then. Call us when she wakes, will you?"

"My answer will not change," Navos said without turning away from her.

No one argued. After a moment, the others stepped quietly out.

Navos had plenty of time to think while he sat and watched over Nelah. The doctor sat with them for a while, but a Barillian child was carried in with a large vegetable wedged into the pipe protruding from the top of his skull, both his parents trumpeting their distress. They were soon closeted in another cubicle with the doctor.

Navos scarcely noticed the commotion. He watched Nelah sleep. He'd never been one for useless imaginings, preferring to deal with reality. But now he found himself wishing desperately he could whisk her away from all of this, take her somewhere safe where none of this could touch her—where Cyan and Mazarin could never reach her.

Only he wasn't sure such a place existed. He didn't know how far Mazarin's evil device could reach, but if it were even partly as efficient as the mechanical ones, the range was probably large.

He was also certain Cyan would never stop tormenting them. He wanted Nelah's money and Navos's life. He'd also evidently been paid to target the *Orion* and LodeStar.

Even if they could get Nelah to safety and get the device removed in time, would she ever really be safe? And if they were not in time, how many beings would die, possibly at her hand?

He bowed his head, feeling as if he was being slowly ripped in two. He had no choice. To save her and the *Orion*, he was going to have to risk her life, her sanity. And even if they succeeded, he was not sure she would ever forgive him, or if he could forgive himself.

Nelah stirred slowly, frowning fretfully at having one arm strapped to the gurney. Navos stilled her with a touch and then stroked her petal-soft cheek until her eyes fluttered open. She gazed drowsily up at him and then smiled, a little hum of satisfaction in her throat at his touch.

"Daron," she whispered. Then she frowned. "I had such terrible dreams."

He said nothing, clenching his jaw against a swell of emotion. His hand tightened on her cheek and she opened her eyes again. "Daron? What's wrong?"

He drew her free hand up to his lips and pressed a kiss to it. He continued to stroke her face.

"Flower...it wasn't a dream."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Navos hated the dawning horror in Nelah's lovely eyes as she realized her very brain now harbored an obscene parasite.

"Help me," she pleaded, clutching at him. "Daron, get it out! Please, don't let it overtake me again. I—I remember now. I was going to do something terrible! And you know I could—I have the power to make someone do something—to wreck the ship, even."

Her eyes filled with tears and she pulled his hand to her face. "I was going to h-hurt you," she wept. "You have to drug me—make me so I can't hurt anyone."

He leaned over her, cradling her in his arms for a few precious moments. Then, bracing himself, he laid her carefully back in the air pillows.

"Nelah," he said. "You must listen to me. We have to stop Cyan now, or he will go on tormenting you and all of us. He's too dangerous to be free."

"I know," she said. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. He'll make me hurt you—together, he and I are too powerful, even for you, Daron. You don't know what he's like!"

"What if you knew he could not hurt me?" he said carefully. "What if there was a way to protect me and still vanquish him?"

She eyed him doubtfully and his heart clenched. She was worried about him, not herself. When this was over, he swore fiercely, he was going to carry her around on a silk cushion and never let harm come to one sweet hair on her head. If he survived, that is.

First, though, he must suborn every principal of his Indigon training. He must lie. He doubted very much that he really would survive a combined attack from her and Cyan. Especially if he was going to save her. But he had to make her believe he could. He was willing to die to save her and the *Orion*, but she would never go for it.

"What the commander means," said a deep smoky voice at the door. "Is that the two of you are not alone in this. I'm here. Dragolins are immune to your psychic powers."

Navos turned sharply. Slyde Dragolin walked into the room, his shoulders nearly filling the small space beside the gurney.

"You are immune to our powers of suggestion?" Nelah asked, hope in her voice.

He nodded majestically. "In our shifted state we're impervious to suggestion, as well as being physically powerful. And able to breathe fire," he added nonchalantly.

“Then you could protect Commander Navos?”

“Yes. And the ship.”

“And you won’t let me do anything...terrible?”

He shook his head silently. Navos glared at him. The great, quixotic fool. Had he forgotten that none, even an armor-plated dragon could stand against the power of Indigon mind control? He himself had used his powers on Slyde on the last voyage, to help him get off the ship before he shifted into his Dragolin form. He was lying, just as Navos had.

Nelah gazed at him, hope in her eyes. “Then...I’ll do it.”

“I’ll summon the others,” Slyde murmured. He turned his golden gaze on Navos and then very slowly, winked at him and was gone. Navos stared after him. Was it possible the Dragolin believed he could indeed withstand Indigon power in his shift? He hoped they would not have to find out. Better he himself should die.

Nelah touched his face, bringing his gaze back to her. She tried to smile up at him, but her mouth trembled. “Daron, whatever happens, I want you to know one thing. I love you.”

He stared at her, frozen. He could not speak, could not sort the vast emotions warring in him—the rage, the fear, the great swelling of tenderness in his chest. He heard footsteps behind them and bent swiftly to press his mouth to hers in a kiss. Her mouth was soft under his and wet with tears.

Nelah opened her eyes with a gasp and her eyes darted around the bright space. She was in the infirmary. She lifted a hand to her head, wincing at the bright light.

“Ah, you are awake,” said a cracked voice, and familiar eye stalks turned her way as a brown, wrinkled face appeared over her head.

She sat up and swung her legs off the air bed, turning to the doctor. Tentaclar, that was his name.

“What am I doing here?” she asked him distrustfully. Fear flicked at the edges of her mind. Something had happened...some bad thing. Hadn’t it?

“Hmm, I was hoping you could tell me that,” he said. “You fainted in the passageway, outside the command center. Apparently you have been under some stress.”

She rubbed the back of her hand, which had a tender bruise on a vein. “I don’t...remember.”

“We gave you some fluids and some nutrition. Don’t forget to eat this time. You must take care of yourself.”

“Thank you,” she said politely, sliding off the gurney.

Outside in the hallway, Nelah stopped and looked both ways. She felt lost, alone.

Two guards walked by. She watched them suspiciously. There was something in the way they looked at her. And that little surveillance holo-cam, why was it hovering so near her?

As if aware of her alarm, the tiny winged ball turned and zinged off down the passageway. Nelah shook her head at herself. She was imagining things. She would go and... She should go to...

It slammed into her without warning, an urge so powerful and driving her head went up, her body straightening with purpose.

Navos. Where was he? Find him, now. It was time, it was past time, to finish him. No more delaying, no more indecision. Send power singing through the ship, searching for him.

There—coming out of the command center. What was he up to? Secret Orion business, no doubt.

Never mind, it was nearby and he was alone. That was good. They were running out of time, they would land on Frontiera—tonight and then they'd have to wait for the quarking ship to take off again. Better to make sure it never landed at all. And that it was all his fault.

She glided along the passageways as if in a dream. Crew passed her, several guards in pairs or trios, their voices echoing from a great distance. *They were unimportant. She would flick them away like insects if they dared to approach her.* Her eyes were fixed on her goal and filled with deadly purpose.

But wait—the guards were useful, after all. Turning to fix her eyes on a young Serpentine, she beckoned him with a wave of power. He paled and walked to her like a puppet on a string.

She looked him up and down. Her eyes fastened on the laser weapon on his belt. Perfect.

“Give me your weapon.”

Slowly, the Serpentine unfastened the weapon from his belt and handed it to her.

She took it and examined it with interest.

“Thank you. Now go away.”

The guard turned away without a backward look. She tucked the slim weapon under her jacket and turned her attention back to searching for Navos.

There he is. Pacing an empty passageway, hands behind his back. Deep in contemplation, as usual. Probably dreaming up some new feat to place himself in higher glory. The great Daron Navos, hero of the galaxy. Until he died, screaming in the grip of power far, far greater than he could ever summon.

“Daron,” she purred, strolling toward him. “Just the man for whom I’ve been looking.”

He turned to her and she blinked as his eyes met hers. They were so deep a blue, so beautiful. In their depths she saw something... The ghost of a memory fluttered just out of reach.

“Ms. Cobalt. You wanted something?”

His indifference hurt. She faltered.

There, see? He doesn’t care a spent asteroid for you. He’s just been using you for sex. He’ll never change, never love you and never want more than your body. He doesn’t respect you, not for your power. Now is your chance to pay him back.

The power rolled up through her in a great heady surge, so swiftly she flew up onto her tiptoes as she sent it slashing toward him. Navos paled and staggered back, then braced himself visibly, and with his eyes fixed on hers, so deep with power they were nearly black, he sent an answering wave to meet it.

She cried out, reeling as if she'd been buffeted by a great wind. Then power jolted through her again and she straightened, heady with triumph as she met his power and equaled it.

He backed away, into an open hatch. His stateroom.

She laughed. *Fool! He couldn't escape her with walls. Her power was greater than any physical wall. Perhaps he thought he could hide under his bed.*

Smiling, she followed him. The hatch slid shut behind her.

"All guards are in place, Captain," said Sirena crisply.

"We have Navos's quarters surrounded," agreed Slyde. "And Panthar is sealed in the auto-nav, so no one can enter. Ogg has guards with him in the reactor. They're also standing guard outside here."

Steve Craig looked at her and Tessa, who stood quietly at her side, then back at the holo-vid of Navos's stateroom and the slender young woman walking into it.

He nodded shortly. "All right. This had better work."

Sirena opened her mouth to reply, when her com-link beeped. "Yes?"

"Commander, we've got problems," said Iazard's voice, unusually tense. "Two Mauritians are fighting in the mess hall. Quark, they're big! I need to pull some guards before they wreck the whole place."

"I've got a domestic disturbance in the forward passenger lounge," said a female voice, equally tense. "A young Chal trying to strangle her mother-in-law. I need backup, now!"

"Commander, one of Ogg's engine crew just tried to knock another one out with a gamma-gauge," said Raile. "He's a big one—requesting backup."

"Commander," shouted another guard. "Problem in the arboretum! Passengers fighting—two males knocked each other into the pond, their wives jumped in after them—I can't really see what's going on, there's so much splashing."

"What in the seven hells is going on?" Craig demanded, turning to Sirena.

They stared at each other as the babble of Serpentine voices increased, along with a loud crash from outside the command center. Sirena looked at the holo-vid of Nelah and Navos, her emerald eyes narrowed dangerously.

"I wonder if it's coming from her?"

Craig stared at the holo-vid. "You think she's sending some sort of aggressive broadcast?"

Sirena shook her head. "I can think of no other explanation for this sudden increase in violence."

“Well, we’d better do something, or the whole ship is going to be in riot!” Craig turned to the holo-vid. “Daron, you’ve got to move fast. Apparently she and this guy are so strong he’s using her to send to the whole ship.”

“I could go, Steven.” Tessa stepped forward, her lovely face determined. “It sounds as if they need all of us out there.”

He shook his head, implacable. “No. I want you in here, where I can keep an eye on you. And you know why, so don’t argue.”

He put his hand on her still-flat belly and she laid her hand over his.

“You’re right,” she said. “I will do what I can here, then.”

“You’ll help me by staying safe,” he said.

“I say we shoot the Indigon woman now and be done with it!” Sirena hissed, reaching for her weapon.

Craig put one hand out in a warning gesture. “Not so fast, Commander. I think the Indigon effect is getting to you too.”

She scowled, but loosed her weapon. “You’re right. But I can do nothing here. If I can’t shoot anyone, at least drop-kicking some of the troublemakers on board will be nice.”

“Sirena, stay there,” Slyde growled over the com-link. “You could kill someone with one kick and I’ll be visiting you on Deep Six.”

She hissed with displeasure, but stayed where she was.

Craig rolled his eyes to himself. Serpentians made splendid guards, but they were fiery creatures.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Navos looked around his quiet, softly lit stateroom. An odd battlefield. But here, no passenger could see the conflict raging on board their ship, or be harmed, at least not directly.

He turned, planting his feet and squaring his shoulders. He steeled himself against the unfamiliar fear and dread churning inside him.

Nelah was already so powerful—so much raw, untrained power. Combined with Cyan, would she be too much for him? Would he be able to save her and *Orion*, or would routing Cyan destroy them all? Would her life and the *Orion* be the price of ridding the galaxy of a conscienceless scoundrel?

“I’m in position, Daron,” said Slyde’s deep voice in his ear.

“We’re ready as well,” said Sirena. “Although you’ve only two other guards left. The others were needed to break up these fights all over the ship.”

Navos merely nodded, knowing they could see him. Slyde and the guards were ready to storm his room if necessary, to save him and Nelah.

He himself would die without hesitation, to save her. He knew that now, with a soul-deep certainty. The fear and dread he felt were for her—that he wouldn’t be adequate to the task. If he was not, the guards would be forced to kill them both.

“She’s taken a laser weapon from Tarle,” Sirena said sharply. “Commander, should we abort? We can shoot her.”

“No!” Navos rapped. “You will leave her to me.”

His hatch opened again and Nelah sauntered in. Oddly enough, the sight of the weapon in her hand calmed him, steadied him. If Cyan thought he might need a laser to win, then he must not believe he was strong enough to take Navos, even with Nelah’s help. Good, perhaps he could be intimidated, instead of holding the upper hand as he had so far.

“You need such primitive weapons?” he asked, raising a cool brow at her.

“Don’t goad an armed assailant!” Sirena hissed.

Nelah raised a brow back at him, casually pointed the laser gun at him and fired. He reeled sideways as heat sliced across his shoulder, followed by a searing agony.

Clenching his jaw against the cry of pain that rose in his throat, Navos forced himself to straighten, facing her. Something trickled down his hand, dripping onto the floor. He clamped his other hand to the wound to staunch the bleeding. It was only a flesh wound, across the outside of his biceps.

The woman he loved stood watching him, her face pale as ice, eyes dark as space.

"What can I say, Commander? I cheat. Anything to gain an edge, you know." The voice was hers and yet not hers. Cyan!

"I agree," he answered. *"So you won't mind if I use the weapon I have, will you?"*

"Nelah," he said aloud, his voice raw with pain. "Help me. I'm injured."

She blinked, as if awaking. The weapon dropped to the floor with a thunk.

"Daron!" She ran to him, hands outstretched to his injured arm.

"No! Fool, I see what you're up to. You won't play me."

She glared at him and dug her fingers into the shallow wound across his upper bicep.

"Augh!" He let out a hoarse cry as pain lanced through him again. He staggered, his knees nearly buckling. Gritting his teeth, he manacled her hands in his good one and jerked her toward him, so their lower bodies met.

She was panting, her horrified gaze on their hands. His blood smeared them, bright against their pale skin. She shook her head, her lips drawing back in a silent cry of denial.

Then her lips curved upward, in a horrible parody of a smile and she leaned against him, rubbing herself on him like a cat, her body lissome.

"So sorry, Commander. Just couldn't resist toying with you a bit more, before we begin the final contest. Really, you're so gullible. As if the mere sound of your voice could vanquish my power."

"You'll destroy her," Navos raged. *"Is that what you want?"*

"Of course. But you first. Never say I'm not a gentleman."

A great wave of power began to build. He could feel the pressure building, like ozone before a huge thunderstorm. When it rushed over them, Navos was afraid it would drown both of them. He could not fight it head-on, he perceived now. Cyan's power combined with Nelah's was too powerful. He might battle them both back, might even win, but she would be trampled in the process. He fought back the despair that threatened.

"I won't let you have her," Navos vowed fiercely. He kissed her.

Her mouth was sweet and soft under his, but he didn't linger. Instead, he forced his injured arm up, about her waist, and held her hands against his chest as he pressed a line of kisses to her ear. His face pressed against her cheek, he began to speak—aloud.

For the first time in a very long time, he had no idea what he was doing. He knew only that he had to reach her somehow, had to reach the real Nelah.

Instinct drove him—he who never behaved according to such base impulses. Human impulses.

"Nelah, listen to me," he murmured. "You love me. I understand now. You'd never let yourself go the way you have in my arms, unless you loved. Never let me into your mind, let me experience every part of

our lovemaking with you. Never let me share how my every touch, every kiss, every inch of me felt inside you.”

Her hands stilled in his. She was listening. He pressed a kiss to the shell of her ear and went on. At any nanosecond, the huge, dark wave Cyan was building would crash over them.

“Remember how we are together,” he said fiercely. “Like no two Indigons ever before, or again. I’ve never known such passion before, flower. Didn’t know it existed.”

She caught her breath, lifting her gaze to his. Her eyes were blue again, full of emotion.

“Daron,” she managed.

He kissed her again, hard, her soft mouth opening beneath his, giving way to his with sweet surrender. She kissed him back then and for one heady instant it was as if Cyan, the crew commanders and the guards were gone, leaving only the two of them.

She tugged at her hands again and he let her go, to feel one of her arms slip up about his neck.

“Fools!” Cyan sneered. “*Enjoy the last kiss either of you will ever know.*”

“Don’t let me go,” Nelah pleaded against Navos’s lips. “Don’t let him use me.”

“I won’t,” he swore fervently.

Dare he hope, just a little? Absurd as it sounded, it seemed to him their physical contact, this reminder of their passion, was having an effect no amount of psychic defense could ever have. For the first time she was looking at him with her eyes, not those of a vessel.

“Daron, for God’s sake,” said Craig urgently on his link, jolting him back to the room, as well as the fact they were the cynosure of other eyes. “This is not the time for sweet nothings! Everyone’s going crazy out here! You’ve got to do something...”

His voice was lost as a psychic wave of power the likes of which Navos had never experienced crashed around and in him and Nelah. She cried out, arching in his arms and he felt the same power race through him, building, building, building... Cyan’s maniacal laughter echoed through their minds, drowning Craig’s voice, drowning everything, rising in a suffocating wave of heat and power and darkness.

Ah, great God, it was too much. He was powerless, they were going to die. She and Cyan together were too powerful.

Nelah dove at him, but instead of attacking him, she kissed him. Her teeth cut into his lip, her clever tongue whipped into his mouth, her arm tightened about his neck even as she yanked fiercely at his jacket with her other hand.

Strangely, over all the thunder crashing around them, he could hear the soft sobbing of her breath, could feel her heart beating against his own. Feel her communicating with him, not on a psychic level, but on a very human one.

A thin strand of hope threaded its way through the crushing blackness. Twining about his senses, tickling and teasing, leaving a faint musky perfume...hers.

Nelah, female, warm and soft and alive, in his arms.

Kiss her back, taste her sweet, wet mouth, feel her response to him alone. His. His to hold and protect. To mate.

To mate...yes, that was it. They were mates, not only in intellect, but on a deep, visceral level. A passionate level.

Cyan's voice screamed at them, pressing the suffocating darkness harder around them. Navos staggered, the room rocking under his feet as something thunked against the bulkhead outside. Nelah in his arms, soft and pliant, yet demanding as she lifted her legs to wrap them about his waist, pressing her softness against his groin, rubbing and rubbing until everything in him rushed to his loins, in a blazing, surging demand for more, more, more.

He reached between them to rip open his jacket, felt her hands on his skin with shuddering relief. Broke away from her mouth only long enough to strip her top off with one yank, then dove back into the kiss, hanging on like a lifeline, her breasts against his chest, silky skin under his arms, suckling at her tongue as if it were life-giving nectar, giving her back reassurance and breath.

He bucked in her hand as she found his penis, rigid and straining at his soft pants. *Ah, love, yes.* Clasp hand, sweet squeezing fingers, but not enough.

He found the waistband of her tights and ripped them savagely, so she was naked save for the tights hanging in tatters from her legs, knowing he left bruises on her soft skin. *Sorry, sorry, love...must feel your sweet, flowing heat in my hands, ah there!*

His, his, his...he lifted her with her sweet ass in his palms and drove into her pussy in one mighty thrust. Ah, great God beyond, such driving need, such hot, wet bliss surrounding him, her whimpers of need and joy echoing in his ears as he turned them so her back was against the wall and began to thrust in her with battering swiftness.

Opening his eyes, he looked into hers, aching sweetness flooding him as he saw the love and passion in those gentian blue eyes, so lovely, so vulnerable. Let her see the love in his own, the passion blazing for her alone, lighting up the darkness, driving it back, back, back...away from her, away from the *Orion* with every powerful thrust of his body, his penis inside her tight, clinging heat. Ah, so good, so perfect to have her thus.

"No! This isn't possible, you can't do this to me, I'm Indigon, I have powers, I have her, not you not you not you..."

She stiffened, shaking her head, a whimper of fear in her throat. He had to distract her, bring her back to him, to this.

"Everyone...sees you, flower," Navos whispered to her, feeling his balls draw up so tight he knew he was going to explode in nanoseconds. "They're all watching you. They see how beautiful you are, filled with me."

Her eyes widened with shock, with excitement. He smiled, savage with triumph as he felt her orgasm begin. “Now they’re going to watch you come, my lovely flower.”

She moaned, a high sweet paeon, her eyes losing focus as she imploded around him, her pussy milking him rhythmically.

“No! I’ll break you, both of you—”

“Go to the seven hells, Cyan!”

He slammed into her one last time and light exploded outward in a supernova of ecstasy as he came, pumping his life-giving fluid into her feminine depths.

He cried out, a deep shout of masculine triumph, and she again with him. For one moment, their voices drowned out their tormentor’s cries.

Navos sagged into Nelah’s embrace, his forehead on the wall behind her. They were both trembling, exhausted, awash in perspiration, his come and, he very much feared, his blood.

Even filled with the physical, mental bliss of the most powerful orgasm of his life, he could feel the laser wound throbbing, burning. Only locking his knees kept him upright.

“One last...thing,” he said hoarsely. “Flower...we must send...power back to him.”

She moved her head groggily, turning her face against his. “All right,” she muttered. “Put me down.”

He shook his head slightly. “Can’t...move. Just...let me...”

“You can’t...do it,” Cyan raged, although his voice was ragged now, as if he were slipping the tether of coherence. *“It’ll take more than a cheap sex performance to best me, you fools.”*

Summoning every reserve of his will, Navos gathered his psychic power and slipped into her mind. In through her thoughts, sweet, bewilderingly feminine territory. Further, spanning the proportions of her brain, humming with bliss, the remnants of terror and there—there, wrapped around her cerebral stem, like a horrid weed growing in a lovely garden, the device.

With one swift lunge, he surrounded it, enwrapped it so thickly that Cyan had no time to move and then gathering every bit of his will, he began to send power into it.

“Yes!” Her power curling around his, buoying him up, entwining with his like new branches in a mighty tree, growing and growing to wrap inward and crush the dark canker in their midst. *“Yes, love. I’m with you.”*

Navos caught his breath as sheer exhilaration rushed through him, a chorus wild and sweet singing in his psyche. And she was there, the sweetest song of all, light and life and joy, urging him onward. And unbelievably, he felt physical arousal surge through him again as well, felt his penis harden inside her, his balls tight and aching again for release.

“Daron!” Her pussy squeezed him as she tightened her legs around him, her nails digging into his back. *“Again?”*

“Oh, yes,” he replied, even as he kissed her, locking his mouth with hers as he began to thrust again, her pussy sleek and hot with his come. “*Wouldn’t want...to disappoint...our audience.*”

“*Omigod, they’re watching us. Omigod, oh yes, oh, Daron, I want the whole galaxy to see you loving me, you’re mine, I love you!*”

“Yes,” he agreed and felt her pussy begin to milk him rhythmically. As she came, her psychic power spiked, wrapping around his as surely as her arms enfolded him.

“*Yes, love, now!*” Together they destroyed the thing that had been planted in her brain, sending the dark power rushing back from whence it had come.

They heard their tormentor scream. It made this second climax even sweeter than their first.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Beryl Mazarin looked contemptuously at the gibbering wreck of her lover, huddled in the lounge area of her luxurious space cruiser before the holo-vid display of a tall, lean man and his slender, lovely mate, still locked in coitus. So much for their plan to destroy Daron Navos.

She watched for a moment, her face tight, as the holo-vid Navos lifted one hand to the Cobalt woman's face and touched it with infinite gentleness. Then he straightened, staggered and slid slowly to the floor. His silver uniform was saturated with blood, oozing from the wound on his shoulder.

The girl tried to catch him, of course, and then knelt over him, not even caring she was nude, save for the ridiculous scraps of fabric hanging from her limbs.

She put her hands over the wound on his shoulder and pressed hard, babbling something to the holo-cam, her face white and frightened.

Turning away with a sharp movement of her draping garments, Beryl Mazarin activated her com-link. "Send someone back to the lounge at once," she commanded. "We've garbage to jettison."

Craig, Slyde, Sirena and Tessa stood in silence for a moment as the holo-vid of Navos's stateroom filled with medics and guards who quickly ascertained Navos's wound was, while bloody, easily treatable, loaded him on a gurney and trundled him off to the infirmary. Nelah, wrapped in a coverlet, followed on another.

"Hah," managed Craig finally. He sounded as if his throat was full of sand. "Great God beyond. Did they just...vanquish Cyan and his implant by—?"

"By fucking?" Sirena asked. She blinked slowly, as if coming back to herself. "Why, yes, I believe they did."

Tessa's eyes were wide and dazed, her cheeks flushed. "Oh, my," she breathed. "I always wondered...all that intensity and control." She fanned herself with one hand.

"Mmm, yes," Sirena agreed. She and Tessa exchanged a look.

"First time a war has ever been won on that particular battlefield," Craig muttered. He ran one hand over his flushed face, as if to wipe away the shock of witnessing his long-time friend and second-in-command in a prolonged incident of complete intimacy. But then his eyes met his wife's and heated. He held out one hand to her and she went to him.

As Sirena's huge husband rose, she met his eyes and smiled. "Not really the first time," she murmured, going to him.

Slyde pulled her into his arms. "True. And I won that war."

"We both won," she chided him.

Craig kissed his wife, thoroughly. He whispered something in her ear that made her blush. Then he straightened, once again the captain of the *Orion*.

"Are things returning to normal on the ship?" he asked.

Slyde nodded. "According to Izard and the others, we have some bewildered passengers and crew, who can't remember quite how they got assorted bumps and bruises."

"I suggest free drinks all around," Sirena said. "That'll help them forget completely."

Craig nodded. "Great idea. Halix? Ogg? Panthar? Everything okay out there?"

"Navigation systems safe and operational," Panthar replied.

"Engines and reactor all okay," Ogg said. "How'd it go on your end?"

"Ah." Craig exchanged a quick glance with his guard commanders. One that instantly agreed nothing they had witnessed would ever leave the command deck. "Commander Navos received a flesh wound, but the medics assure us he'll be fine after a transfusion and some glue-stitch."

"*Orion* back to normal, Captain," said Halix cheerfully.

Craig rose, grim satisfaction on his face. "Good. I'm going to speak with Stark and the IBI. Maybe we can get rid of these bastards, once and for all."

"Do we know where this Cyan and the Mazarin woman are?" Sirena asked.

"They've escaped us, for the moment. But the IBI will find them," Halix said. "They are on her ship."

"Or we will," Slyde said. He and his wife exchanged a smile that made a shiver run over Halix's lavender skin. He was extremely glad that the two beautiful predators would never hunt him.

Nelah hung over Navos's air-bed in the infirmary until he woke. The greatest relief of her life flooded her when he stirred and frowned.

"*Are you there?*" he asked, without opening his eyes.

"*I'm here.*"

The corners of his mouth turned up slightly and he reached for her hand with his good arm.

She slipped her hand into his. Then, very carefully, she leaned over and laid her cheek atop their clasped hands, on his chest. She sent a prayer of thanks winging silently to the stars. He was safe, that was all that mattered.

"*I'll be right beside you, as well,*" he promised.

She smiled mistily, feeling the strength of the words and the man, solid as white Indigon stone. She'd have to undergo surgery to remove what was left of the biotic implant, they both knew that. But it was inert

now. She still felt a shuddering distaste for having it inside her skull, but she no longer feared it, or the conniving monster that had placed it there.

"I know you will."

"When it's over, we'll be married."

Nelah lifted her head, shocked. He opened his eyes, amusement in their indigo depths.

"We'll speak of that...later." She tugged at her hand and he winced, sucking in a sharp breath.

"Oh, Daron! Does it hurt you? Don't move anymore," she babbled, guilt flooding her.

He smiled bravely, still holding her hand. "Very well, love. I won't."

A twinge of suspicion moderated her guilt. She eyed him, frowning. Daron Navos was perfectly capable of playing others to get what he wanted, although she suspected she was the only being alive who knew this about him.

He lifted her hand to his lips, gazing limpidly at her as he pressed a warm kiss to her skin.

"But perhaps this time we'll limit the spectators to just the ceremony," he said. "And not our nuptial embraces."

With a squeak of utter embarrassment, Nelah hid her flaming face on his chest. She'd hoped that, by some miracle, neither he nor any of their audience would ever refer to the episode again.

His chest quivered and he made a strange choking noise.

"Do not laugh at me!"

"Never, flower. Never."

She groaned silently. It was a good thing she loved him so much, or she would have to suffocate him with one of the air pillows.

"You will marry me," he said with trademark insistence. Although it was nicely tempered with more than a hint of need. She smiled to herself, unable to believe this incredible man, whom she'd hero-worshipped for so long, wished to marry her. And yet...

"Are you certain you wish to marry?" she asked wistfully. "Will your work always come first with you? You've lived for it for so long."

"Flower, I put the *Orion* first only once. And I immediately realized my grievous error. You said you had forgiven me."

"I have, but I...Daron, I simply don't wish to be someone you remember between voyages. I couldn't bear to live that way."

"How can you suggest my feelings are so shallow? I love you. I have said so. I wish to marry you."

"Can't we...wait and see how things go?" Part of her could not believe she was putting him off. Part of her was screaming, "Say yes, say yes, you fool!"

His hand tightened on hers and his eyes deepened in color and intensity, as if he would bend her to his will by the sheer force of his gaze. Nelah felt her heart melting, felt herself ready to submit and agree to anything he asked. Suddenly she realized the feeling was being enhanced.

“Stop that,” she said indignantly.

His brows shot together, but the urge slipped away.

He looked away, fidgeted under the covers and then sighed, as if much put-upon.

“Very well,” he said. “I perceive you will accept nothing less than total surrender. Holo-vid, on.”

He nudged her upright, as a small holo-vid sprang up in the air before them. Nelah watched in wonder. There she lay, pale and still on the gurney, an image of her brain revolving above her while Navos held her hand and Craig, Tentaclar and the guard commanders watched. They all looked grim.

“Daron, she agreed to help,” Sirena insisted.

“And she’s our only hope of catching this Cyan before he destroys anyone else,” Slyde added. “With these new implants, virtually undetectable, he’s a rogue in the galaxy. Governments could be toppled, security compromised anywhere someone pays him.”

Craig stepped closer to his friend and laid a hand on his shoulder. “I understand how you feel, Daron,” he said quietly. “But she did agree. You know we must stop him now.”

“You don’t understand,” Navos said, as if forcing the words out past his pride, looking down at her. “You can’t. I have spent my life living up to the standards of my father’s people. Barricading myself behind intellect and psychic power. Convincing myself this was the way I was meant to live—that passion was for other beings, those less endowed than I. Until she boarded this ship and tore all my carefully constructed control away, like so much tissue in her hands.”

Nelah’s eyes filled with tears, which spilled unheeded down her cheeks as she listened in wonder.

“I can’t lose her,” Navos said rawly. “I will have nothing to live for.”

The others were silent, gazing at him.

Finally, Sirena stepped forward. She picked up Nelah’s free hand, limp on the coverlet and held it in her own, in a physical pledge.

“All of us here will gladly die to protect each other and our ship,” she said quietly. “Daron, now you must respect her wish to do the same. She’s young, but she’s a woman of honor, just as you are a man of honor.”

Navos bowed his head. He gave a deep, shuddering sigh. Then he straightened, his eyes dark.

“If anything happens to her, I will spend the rest of my days making them pay,” he vowed. “Everyone who’s had a hand in this.”

“As I will,” Craig swore.

“And I too,” Slyde agreed.

The holo-vid winked out. Nelah sat for a moment, utterly stunned. Then she turned to Navos and gazed at him wonderingly.

“You do love me,” she whispered. “Oh, Daron, have I really had such an effect on you?”

“You have shifted my entire galaxy on its axis,” he muttered, his high cheekbones flushing.

She giggled through her tears, but sobered quickly. “If anything had happened to you, I would not have wished to live, either.”

“Then you forgive me for placing you in such danger?” His gaze searched hers.

“Daron! As if I would have let you stop me. I was frightened, of course. But I knew that with you beside me, I could do ... anything.”

“And you did, flower. You were magnificent.” He lifted her hand to his lips.

“Marry me,” he said. “Let me spend the rest of my life putting you above all others.”

With a little cry, she flung herself at him, her hands clasping his beloved face. His good arm closed around her, hard and strong.

Their lips met and clung.

“Yes,” she promised. “And you will be above all others for me, as well.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Beryl Mazarin's ship had taken off from Indigo with no flight plan, but she and Cyan were now on the galaxy's list of most wanted criminals. Both holo-images, and that of her ship, played in every space port waiting area and bar and while their crime stirred avarice in some galactic beings, it caused utter repugnance in many more.

Mazarin was spotted on Frontiera, courtesy of a new sat-com surveillance system in which Logan Stark was one of the chief investors. Her conspirator, Cyan, was nowhere to be seen.

Sirena and Slyde took off on his sleek star-cruiser the hour they heard her location. The Dragolin promised his bride that they would outrun the IBI to get to her.

They did.

The *Orion* landed on Frontiera later that day, at the new space port outside of Frontiera City. The planet's largest city had been built on a south coast of the sea and had a mild climate and long, sandy beaches.

After the passengers disembarked and the crew was preparing enthusiastically for their layover on the frontier planet, the command team gathered for their post-flight briefing. Navos and Nelah would be flying home to Indigo as soon as the meeting ended, for her surgery and recuperation. Craig and Tessa would stay on Frontiera for a vacation trip into the wilds.

Halix walked onto the command deck, a little late, looking perplexed.

"What is it?" asked Craig.

"I have just had a request from an elderly Earth II couple," Halix said. "They wish to know when we will do another of these 'sex cruises'. Said it was like a second honeymoon for them."

Craig's mouth fell open. He turned to Navos. That bastion of Indigon dignity and restraint merely arched one dark brow at him.

"Perhaps we should raise our rates."

Craig and the other crew commanders howled with helpless laughter. Navos watched them with outward calm, but his dark eyes gleamed.

The new owner of PanRra was awed by the scope of the corporation his uncle had left him. He was nearly as dazzled by his new executive assistant. Such a beautiful, sophisticated creature. He blushed each time Lly bent her sensual smile on him. He'd intended to spend his life in academia, but with her help he was taking the reins of the huge corporation with relative ease. He thought he might quite like this new lifestyle. The company employees treated him with ego-bolstering deference and his offices, his personal cruiser, were the stuff of dreams.

He'd moved his mother into Rra's penthouse with him. She had her own suite of apartments and was very much enjoying having a maid to do the housework and the cooking.

He was puzzled, but polite when one of the receptionists announced that a party from off-planet had arrived to see him. He noticed Lly went pale when the receptionist mentioned they were from LodeStar Corporation, her hair wrapping around her lovely throat.

Nna frowned. He would allow no one to bully this wonderful woman.

"Shall I tell them to wait?" he asked her. "We need not allow them in."

"No," she said, trying to smile at him. "You—you must give them an audience. I'm sorry. I should have explained certain things to you...before this."

It was a formidable group of beings who strode into the huge office. Tall, commanding, every one of them. The man who was clearly their leader, a dark-haired human with fierce brows and piercing light eyes, wore impeccable business attire.

Three wore the silver-grey uniforms of LodeStar, PanRra Air's chief competitor. He noted captain's bars on the shoulders of the blond human—a warrior if he'd ever seen one. Beside him was an Indigon with eyes so deep and icy a blue Nna felt as if he'd been flayed by ice crystals. Next came a Tyger, with the fierce golden leonine look of his race and finally two warriors in golden-yellow uniforms that highlighted their deadly beauty to a frightening degree. Nna shivered again as he met two implacable pairs of Serpentine eyes. Ack, they looked at him and Lly like two serpents watching bunnies.

Standing as tall as he could, Nna gestured them to the comfortable grouping of seats by the windows.

Lly perched at his elbow on a settee. "This is Mr. Stark," she murmured, as the leader nodded coolly.

"You're Rra's heir," he began without preamble. His voice was deep and cold.

Nna nodded stiffly. "I am."

Stark looked between him and Lly. "Has she told you what your late uncle was up to? Or perhaps I should ask if you were in it with him?"

"He was not involved," Lly said quickly, her hand on Nna's. "He knows nothing."

Nna looked at her. "I know nothing of what?" he asked politely.

She withdrew her hand quickly. "I will explain," she whispered.

She did. What she failed to elucidate, Stark and his crew commanders filled in.

Finally, Nna sat back in the cloud-soft settee and stared blindly before him. The others were silent, watching him. He lifted his head, looking Logan Stark in the eye.

“My mother kept me away from my uncle,” he said. “She would accept no credit, no help from him. I always wondered why she distrusted him, even seemed to fear him. Now I understand. Mr. Stark and crew of the *Orion*, you have my solemn oath that from this day forward, PanRra Corporation will compete with you in only the most honorable way.”

Logan Stark nodded slowly. “You know, I believe you. Your uncle was a vicious, murdering bastard, but you seem to have been grown in different soil.”

“What about her?” asked the Indigon with icy quiet. “She was involved.”

Beside him, Lly straightened, but Nna could feel her trembling. She did not reach for his hand again, but clutched the settee cushions so hard her hand turned pale green-white.

“Yes, I was,” she whispered. “In the beginning, it seemed...like a game. Like besting an opponent, by trickery if needed. Then, beings began to die. And I wanted out. Rra...told me what he would do to me and to anyone who helped me, if I tried to run. So I stayed.”

Sick, Nna laid his hand over hers. She was so brave, so tragic.

Clutching at his hand, she turned to the Indigon. “You may work your power on me, if you don’t believe me,” she offered.

He raised one arching brow. “Oh, I already have, madam. Fortunately for you, I find that although a trifle ruthless for my taste, you are...nearly as much a victim as you claim.

“In the beginning,” he went on with quiet precision. “You didn’t care that his dupes died, only that your silk-lined nest remain comfortable. But slowly, you began to see what a monster you took into your arms each night. By then it was too late, wasn’t it? He’d already begun to torment you, as he did so many others. And no one would help you escape, because they all feared him so much. Until you met the man called Cyan. An Indigon like myself. He saw financial success in his foul schemes. You saw a way to get rid of your tormentor.”

“No!” she cried out, breaking. “Don’t go on. I’ll tell it!” she shot to her feet and stood trembling, staring wildly at all of them. “I’m not sorry for how it ended, do you hear? He was insane. He would have gone on killing and killing—”

The Indigon rose, implacable. “So you contacted Cyan again. And Rra—”

“He fell,” cut in a hard voice. It was Stark, rising to face them both. “He fell from his balcony, in a terrible accident. And that’s an end to it. No good will come of pursuing it any further.”

Nna watched in terrible fascination as the two powerful men faced each other.

“She gave up Cyan,” Stark said. “Turned out it wasn’t in time, but she didn’t know that.”

Slowly, the Indigon bowed. “Very well. That is an end to it,” he agreed.

Stark returned the bow in mutual respect. He turned back to Nna.

“And now,” he said. “We’ll get it, as they used to say on Earth I, in writing.”

Nna nodded. Lly collapsed back onto the settee, weeping quietly. They all ignored her.

In a short time, they had forged a legally binding agreement that the IBI would, for a period of time, keep a close oversight on PanRra Corporation. If, during this time, nothing of suspicious nature in their business dealings was uncovered, they would once again be back to being a normal, privately held corporation.

Nna saw his visitors out with numb courtesy. The Indigon paused before leaving, looking back at Lly.

“You may wish to know,” he said, “that the Indigon, Cyan, will never trouble you again.”

“What happened to him?” Nna asked. Cyan had, after all, apparently killed his uncle.

“He threatened the woman I love,” the Indigon said softly. “So I destroyed his powers. We believe his conspirator finished him.”

Nna swallowed. “I see. It was...the right thing for you to do, I’m sure.”

“Oh, yes. It was.” The Indigon strode out.

The Tyger and the Serpentians eyed Nna and Lly with the wistful regret of large predators restrained from juicy prey. Nna shuddered with atavistic relief as the huge doors closed behind them. He hoped fervently never to meet any of them again.

He sighed at the lovely creature weeping on his settee. His awe of her had disappeared, he realized. She was still beautiful, but she was only Pangaeon.

Slowly, he crossed the room to her. He reached down to touch her shoulder.

“I still have much to learn about this business,” he said.

She peeped at him uncertainly and then swiped at her wet face with her fingers, hope lighting her lovely eyes. “I...I can teach you,” she offered.

He nodded. “Yes. You can.”

They looked away from each other, suddenly awkward.

“I...would invite you to dinner with my mother,” he said. “But, perhaps it would be best to wait until after I have found a new residence. I don’t suppose you wish to go back there.”

“No,” she said, with a shudder. “No, never.”

He nodded briskly. “Then we will go forward. A new era has begun at PanRra Air.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

The wedding of Daron Navos to Nelah Cobalt was a splendid, formal affair. Slow, dreamy music played as blue, creamy-white and mauve flowers nodded in their vases. The university fountains splashed behind the altar, water gleaming in the warm sun and reflecting off the white stone columns that soared around the huge garden.

The bride wore blue diamonds and a pale lii silk gown, the groom a dark blue lii silk suit. As she paced slowly up the aisle to him, their faces were calm, as befitted Indigons, but their eyes glowed with secret, indigo fire. The guests shifted in their seats, the balmy air full of some sensual electricity.

All the *Orion* crew commanders were there with their partners. Tessa Craig wore a lovely yellow gown, one that showed off her newly rounded belly. Captain Steven Craig sat with one arm around her shoulders, his handsome face full of contentment.

Beside them, Slyde Dragolin's face held the same look of male smugness, for although her figure looked no different yet in a stunning gown of red spider lace, Sirena now bore his child, as well.

Nearby sat Tryon Jag and his wife, Calla. She wore amber lii silk, cut to highlight her lovely jeweled marriage collar. He held their sleeping son in his arms, lazy and proud as a big cat watching over his pride.

Halix and Qwerx beamed beside them and Tentaclar, Ogg and Mra smiled as they watched the Indigon University chaplain lead the bride and groom in their vows.

The other guests, mainly Indigons, regarded these fascinating visitors with caution, tempered with awe. All had heard of the exploits of the ship *Orion*.

And the tall, enigmatic human in the front row, watching the proceedings with an air of polite distance—was that not the owner of the ship, Logan Stark? He had an aura of admirable control, but at the same time his dark eyes and those fierce brows hinted at smoldering passions that made the Indigon guests shudder a bit. Best to leave him alone and concentrate on more civilized beings, such as the bride and groom. Although one had to wonder about the pair of them, as well. Just look how they were embracing, now that their vows had been said. Why, the air was quite warm around them.

After the ceremony everyone followed the bride and groom to the nearby open pavilion, where a feast of food and drink awaited. When the blue-jacketed waiters had circulated with glasses of moon-ring champagne or sparkling water, Logan Stark stepped forward to lead a toast to the happy couple.

"To Commander and Mrs. Navos," he said. "May they live long, happy and prosperous lives."

Everyone drank. Stark smiled slightly. “And may the two of them always use their powers only for good.”

The Indigon guests stared as the *Orion* guests laughed heartily, lifting their glasses high to Daron and Nelah before drinking.

Later, Navos leaned on the balustrade, watching Nelah with the other *Orion* wives, cooing over the Tyger baby, who had awakened and was gurgling happily in his mother’s arms. Steve Craig joined him.

“Stark has a point, you know,” said Craig wryly. “If you ever decided to take over the galaxy, you might just be able to do it. I’m glad you’re too honorable to control those around you.”

Navos raised one elegant brow. “How do you know I have not?”

Craig grinned, lifting his glass. Then he paused with the champagne flute at his lip as he suddenly recalled the extra day on Aquarius he’d authorized on their last voyage. He’d struggled a bit, explaining to Stark why they’d varied from their flight plan. He remembered Navos had said something about how nice it would be to have an extra day on the cool, oceanic planet.

He stared at the Indigon.

Navos simply shrugged. But there was a glint of humor in the depths of his dark blue eyes as he strolled away to claim his wife for a dance.

Steve Craig stared after him, wondering. But then Tessa caught his arm, her eyes sparkling.

“Care to dance with me, Captain?”

He smiled down at her. “Yes, I would, Mrs. Craig.”

They joined the other dancers circling the floor, joining in the joy of the occasion and being together with their friends, safe from menace.

Nelah Navos strolled out through the gracefully stirring draperies, onto the balcony of the remote resort. She joined her husband at the balcony rail to admire the view down the tumbling mountainside. A narrow strip of beach was visible below, at the edge of the deep indigo sea.

They had swum there several times and done more than that, as well, in a tented beach pavilion full of cushions. She blushed as she remembered discovering, during a heated interlude, they were not alone on the beach. Fascinated eyes watched through the open hangings stirring in the warm breezes.

Her husband had not ceased what he was doing to her, however. He’d even widened his stance, so their joining was clearly visible to onlookers. As he described to her silently, in detail, just what they could see and shared every nuance of her excitement, she’d come deliciously.

As had the other couple. When he moved off of her, she’d peeped through the draperies to see two young humans coupling in the surf. Daron had lain over her, watching as well and then parted her legs and thrust into her again, taking her with long, slow movements as she watched the others.

It was not the only time they had participated in such an interlude, either. She'd been shocked to realize the resort catered to wealthy young couples who enjoyed voyeurism, in a tasteful way. However, she'd seen nothing but couples enjoying each other with respect and it fulfilled secret fantasies she would never have suspected she harbored, had it not been for her husband and lover.

Going down to dinner, meeting the eyes of other sun- and sex-flushed vacationers and realizing from the gleam in their eyes they had watched her husband teaching her some new sensual delight, made her blush with embarrassment even as her pussy dampened yet again.

Now she turned her gaze upward to one of her favorite views, that of her husband's noble profile. She hugged his nearest arm and smiled up at him.

"What do you want to do today, husband?" she asked, for the pleasure of hearing the word.

He cast her a hooded glance.

"Read my mind."

She was laughing delightedly as he swept her up in his arms.

About the Author

In real life, Cathryn Cade is an elementary school librarian—a lovely job, if she must work. She's married to her sweetheart, has two tall, extremely handsome sons and a golden retriever. She loves reading, writing, golf, boating and shopping.

In her secret life, she drives a sleek space cruiser—often pursued by dangerous men in extremely well-fitted space uniforms. To take her place, read her books. *Deep Indigo* is her fourth published title.

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Prince of Dragons

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Orion, Book 3

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

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

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

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

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

Enjoy the following excerpt for Prince of Dragons:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tonight, he'd overridden a prime rule of courtesy on board ship and opened a com-link between them. He bitterly regretted his decision. Because now he had to do more than imagine the things she allowed her lovers to do to her—the things he dreamed of doing to her, with her, himself.

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

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

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

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

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

She raised an arching brow at him.

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

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

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

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

“Commander Stone. You forget yourself.”

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

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

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

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

“It will wait,” he bit out.

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

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

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

On the edge of freedom lies a dangerous love.

Thief

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Nothing has ever come easy for Jace Lawless, captain of the salvage vessel *Mutiny*. Forced into thievery after a virus unleashed by the InnerWorld Government killed his family, only one ambition burns at the back of his mind. Kill the next IWOOG officer he has at his mercy.

Bargaining over goods with a middleman isn't exactly his strong suit. But who in his right mind spends an entire salvage job's profits on a woman, even if she has a body built for sin and eyes so fathomless a man could lose himself in them? He must be getting soft.

Once Kraft realizes Jace expects only the "cook" part of their cook-whore contract, she sets out to change his antiquated ideas about women. A challenge she relishes, especially if it earns her the freedom and money to get her own ship. Her big mistake is letting down her guard.

Shameless flirting only intensifies the itch to ride Jace hard and put him away wet—several times. It's an itch it would be dangerous to scratch. Exposing her heart could reveal her secret, one that the still-grieving Jace must never know...or showing her mercy will be the last thing on his mind.

Warning: Contains a celibate ship captain who can't abide swearing, a kick-ass woman with a marshmallow heart, a motley crew of misfits, interstellar battles, thwarted groping, sensual seduction, and a total bastard who owns his own planet.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Thief:

Kraft willingly cooked, willingly fought, and claimed she would willingly whore. By her own honor, she offered the full of herself up to him, but Jace sensed that she expected him to restrain himself by his own dictates of honor. Asking her to cook and fight was one thing, but asking her to whore? Well, that was an entirely different matter.

When she saw him approach, Kraft stood at full attention with her face demurely lowered. All at once he felt a foot taller than her when he wasn't.

He'd ordered her to his bunk as a spur-of-the-moment way to get her to stop defying his authority. He never thought Kraft would actually obey. Now that she had, he wasn't sure what to do with her. Feeling awkward and shy, he thought the first thing he should do was explain and apologize.

Embarrassment at her having saved him and his crew fueled his need to remind her and himself that he was in charge. As he drew close to her, he longed to reach out and touch her face. On a rush of emotion, he wanted to confess he didn't always know what to do, or how to proceed, and sometimes acted rashly, fueled more by his heart than his head.

As a captain, Jace wanted to ask for her help and make her his partner in crime. Perversely, he felt he shouldn't need her help and should make her his partner in bed. As a man, Jace wanted to possess the full of Kraft. He wanted to protect her even though he knew he couldn't. Worse, he knew he didn't have to coddle Kraft, which only increased his longing to claim her as his bedwarmer. Beyond that corral of confusion, Jace knew Kraft shouldn't have to protect him.

Instead of saying anything, he unlocked his bunk with a slap of his hand to the wall com. The metal catch released with a soft snick that vibrated the floor below their feet.

Her braless breasts jiggled against the worn yellow fabric of his secondhand shirt. The enticing movement caught his attention, and he forgot what he intended to say. Instead, he found himself imagining what she would look like topless.

"If you'd like, I could put the harem outfit on."

His gaze went from her chest to her mouth.

Lifting her lowered face a fraction, Kraft met his gaze, and whispered, "Someone placed the costume in my closet." She flashed him that slow, lazy and sexy smile.

Jace had no idea who put the outfit in her closet, but he wouldn't mind seeing her in that getup again. Fluffpink clinging and exposing the full promise of her undeniably strong and sexy body was certainly worth a second look. After seeing her in the revealing outfit, he knew her nipples were large and toffee-dark against her skin. He remembered the snug slit of her innie bellybutton drawing his gaze down to the wide pleasure of her hips. Between her lush thighs, he would find another snug—

"Should I fetch that costume, Captain?"

Her seductive, superior attitude dispelled all his thoughts of apologizing. Kraft didn't worry one bit about him taking charge, because she assumed she had the upper hand. His blushing and backing off made her think she could say or do anything, and he'd just turn away. Normally he would have, but not this time.

Slipping a finger under her chin, he lifted her face until she met his gaze. Fathomless black eyes held a smirk that he wanted to quash in a sudden rush. For the first time, she didn't flinch away from his touch. She melted to him as he stroked his finger across her full, sensuous lips. More than anything in the Void, he wanted to kiss her. He wanted to taste every bit of her luscious mouth. Kraft had a body built for sin, but she had a mouth destined for seduction.

Jace lowered his voice as his mouth descended on hers. "Seems like a waste of time for you to put on all those complicated clothes when I'm just going to make you take them off."

Her eyes widened.

Placing his mouth to her ear, he whispered, "Or did you want to dress up and then strip for me?"

She tensed and swallowed with an audible click.

He pressed closer. "I've never had a whore in my bed. If you're familiar with the concept, maybe you could walk me through it."

Kraft pulled back and narrowed her gaze. “After ten years of celibacy, I think a walk is all it would take.”

“Is that so?” Refusing to back down, Jace traced his finger along her ear to her neck. “Since it’s been a decade for me, I’m thinking you won’t be able to walk by the time I’m satisfied.”

Her jaw damn near hit the floor.

Jace took a perverse delight in shocking her, and her dismay made him even more determined to make her back down this time. Even if he had to say the most vulgar things in the Void, he would force her retreat.

“I can’t believe you’re surprised.” He stroked her lips with a forceful fingertip. “You can read me so well, right?”

She darted her gaze to the floor. “I told you, I can’t read you like that. I can read—”

Plush lips gave way below the thrust of his silencing finger. When her hungry eyes met his, he said, “Don’t try to distract me. I don’t care what you can read. You don’t have to read me. I’ll tell you what I want.”

Lowering his mouth to her neck, he nipped lightly. “I want you.” After pulling her mocha skin, marking her, he lifted his mouth to her ear. “I want you writhing and panting and sweating below my thrusting body.”

She placed her large hands on his chest, pushed him back and looked him right in the eye. The depths of her black gaze swarmed with heat, smoky and slightly unfocused. “You want me by force?”

He heard the catch in her voice and sensed her desperation. He smiled at her as he answered her question with one of his own. “How can I force you when sex is part of your contract, my lovely cook-whore?”

Kraft withdrew with a startled step back. She pressed against the metal door of his bunk and flattened her palms against the smooth durosteel to steady herself.

Closing in on her, he took a half-step forward and placed his palms on the door, encasing her with his arms. In a tingling rush, a fleeting ripple washed over his body, and he wondered if he could actually feel Kraft trying to read him through the door. He forced himself to contain the rush by focusing his mind and constricting his body to a tense stance.

Kraft stood taller. Confusion and fear darted across her expressive face. He wondered if the darkness in him caused her reaction, or if he’d succeeded in preventing her from reading him. Either way, he sensed his advantage.

Pressing his mouth to her ear, he whispered, “What’s wrong, sugar-britches? I thought you were all for this kind of dance between us, especially after what you said in the cargo bay.”

With her back to his bunk door, she lifted her face and the whole of her body until she met his gaze with level intensity. Since she couldn't force him to retreat verbally, she now tried to force his retreat with the fierceness of her gaze, and it almost worked.

He fought down the urge to step back by moving closer. She radiated the scents of cooking, but below, he found that enticing hint of her musky perfume. Her scent was rich, intoxicating and alluring. He wanted to find the source of her fragrance and lose himself in it.

"Just give me the order, Captain Lawless, and I'll ride you until we both collapse."

One fleeting vision of her proudly riding astride him caused him to blush and turn away. The triumphant look on her face clarified she thought such a command a distinct impossibility.

She seemed pleased that she'd finally forced him to back down. He watched Kraft's pulse jump below the smooth skin of her neck when he closed in on her and said, "That's an order I'm not likely to give."

Her lips parted in surprise. She lowered her face but not her gaze.

"I wouldn't order you to ride me because I like to be on top."

He forced her chin up so their lips came close without touching. "Stop giving me that submissive face when you've got nothing behind it but arrogance."

Kraft stood tall. "I thought you preferred submissive women?"

"As a matter of fact I do." Tracing his finger along the open V of her shirt, he smoothed the fabric against the curve of her breasts and popped open one of the small wooden buttons. "Do you like submissive men?"

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, but it caught in her throat. When he looked down, he discovered her nipples were pressed tight against the soft yellow fabric of his old shirt.

He chuckled and stroked the barest brush of his fingertip over the swell of her nipple. "Obviously not."



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