

ELLORA'S CAVE **Aeon**



## **Her Empath**

*Mina Carter*

Even a rogue can be brought to heel by love. And the seduction of a sexy Empath.

Lyssa is feared and wanted by half the admiralty, but no one can control her. She commands one of the most fearsome battleships in the fleet and is friends with the largest mercenary clans in the galaxy. No one dares mess with her.

JJ has been tasked with controlling Lyssa and bringing her back under the authority of the Fleet. Instead of the crabby woman he's expecting, he finds an unforgettable woman who makes him ache with the need to get her in his bed. Between the pressure from the powers that be, a mission gone wrong and Lyssa's discovery of his *real* mission, JJ has his hands full. Can he convince Lyssa that his seduction is genuine and lust is only the beginning?

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Her Empath

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# *HER EMPATH*

Mina Carter

## **Chapter One**

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

The raised female voice filled the expansive office, making the man behind the large desk wince inwardly. Admiral Daniel Reilly knew better than to show such an emotion on his face when dealing with the woman who sat across from him. Any sign of weakness and she’d have him. Shoot from the hip, both barrels – that was her standard operating procedure.

“General Ryland...Lyssa.” Reilly softened his voice as he said her name. It was a concession to their long friendship and the need to butter her up. “When have you ever known me to joke about anything? Much less something as important as the assignment of a telepathic Empath?”

She glared back at him, then let loose a curse that would make a Marine blush. He should know. He’d been one once, way back when. They’d both started in green. Then he’d switched service tracks and now drove a desk, while Lyssa was still out there in the field kicking ass and taking names. To say trouble followed her around was an understatement.

He sighed as he sat back in his chair then looked over his steeped fingers at her. “You should feel honored, not many starship captains are assigned one.”

“Yeah, right. I feel honored all right. Honored that I need a spy on my freaking ship... What is it, Danny? Don’t you trust me anymore?” She grinned suddenly, a flash of white teeth and a mischievous expression that reminded Daniel of the wild young cadet she’d been. “And we were so close too...”

The mischief was still there, but nearly four decades of Fleet service had put steel in the expression behind it. Steel and a reputation no man in his right mind would fuck with.

He snorted. "One abortive one night stand does not a relationship make, Lyssa."

Gods, didn't he wish it did though. He'd kicked himself up and down for years after that night, unable to believe he'd screwed his chances with her so completely over something so small. Back then, he'd been too young and dumb to realize making fun of her scales would not be taken in the affectionate, joking way he'd intended. Even now, decades of service and, for him, twenty years of marriage to the sweetest woman imaginable, he still thought on that "what if" at times.

He'd never mention it to Lyssa, though. A master manipulator, she wasn't above using his weaknesses against him. Just like she'd routed out every last one of his spies on her ship and gotten rid of them.

One she'd abandoned in the pleasure city of Cernas, another had been left to walk across the frozen wastes of Kranous and the last... Daniel winced. He should have known Lyssa would see through the ambassadorial act straightaway. What he hadn't expected was for her to take the damn actors to the trade negotiations at Heranas and actually manage to secure an exclusive deal with the Arachnids.

She sat back in her chair, her eyes hard on his face. Daniel ignored her body language and her deliberate attempt to unsettle him. He was in charge of three battle groups filled to the brim with egos, and a host of squabbling junior admiralty. So her direct, almost acerbic manner, was somewhat of a relief.

She was a striking woman. She was tall, with the fiery hair and amber eyes of her father's race, the Telatians. She didn't look her age. Anyone would be forgiven for taking her to be in her mid-thirties, rather than the fifty-two Daniel knew her to be.

The slender and toned body, courtesy of her Marine training, added to the impression of youth. Her eyes were old though. In his more fanciful moments, he'd thought you could see back through the ages in them...to the first Telatian who had walked the burning sands of their inhospitable planet.

"This is happening, like it or not. Have a paddy and throw all your toys out of the pram if you like, *General Ryland*, but this is going to happen and I expect your full cooperation."

He met her hard look for hard look as he pulled rank. If she thought she was getting to him using that "snake-look", she had another thing coming. Even if she let the humanlike mask drop a little and revealed the scales he knew were just under her skin, he wasn't budging an inch.

She was a pain in his ass, and seemed determined to be one for a lot longer. That was why he was bringing in someone she *couldn't* play. A small grin of triumph spread across his lips. The Combined Fleet's Empaths were the hardest and sharpest minds in the galaxy, capable of discerning truth and lie just from the way a person's eyes flickered. Incorruptible and totally loyal to the fleet, there was no way she'd get through to this one. Finally he'd manage to achieve the goal laid down on him by his superior officers and tame the Rogue of Telat-Moire.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Fucking jumped up, good for nothing, pain in the asssssss... Bloody *wanker!*"

Lyssa stormed out of Reilly's office and through the reception area. Fury surged within her, her normally silent footsteps reduced to stomping she was sure they could hear three decks below. She was so worked up, her speech had slipped and her hiss had come into play. Normally such a lapse would mortify her. Right now, though, Lyssa didn't care.

Sensibly, Daniel's personal assistant kept out her way, but then, there weren't many people who would stand up to Lyssa. Even if they didn't know who she was, her Telatian heritage was easy to spot. Just a hint of red hair and amber eyes was enough to have most scuttling for cover just in case they came face to face with one of the famed snake-nomads.

Her long strides took her out of the door like a small tsunami, the sheer energy of her anger swirling ahead of her. Deep in thought, she wasn't paying attention to where her feet were taking her. As she stepped out of the door, she collided with something warm and solid.

Before she could land on her ass in an undignified heap on the floor, a pair of strong arms wrapped themselves around her. In the next second, she was yanked up against a broad, male chest.

"Hey there, Kitten. Where are you going in such a hurry?"

The voice, like silk over steel, slid over her senses in a sensuous caress. Whether it was the shock of being touched, the fact someone had just called her kitten or the sheer, sexual arousal that hit her at light-speed... Lyssa found herself struck dumb.

On a normal day, she'd have taken his hand off at the wrist for the first two, but the last... Her gaze wandered up from the chest she was currently eye to "eye" with, past a strong throat, and up to caress an equally strong jaw. Hell, he was tall.

Above average in height for a woman, Lyssa had gotten used to being on a level with some men and towering over most. The feeling of being petite and delicate was an entirely new experience for her. One she found with surprise that she liked.

Looking up further, she found bright, blue eyes. A blue as deep as the sacred oceans on her home planet. They drew her in. Mesmerized her as surely as any old Earth snake charmer. Blinking, she snapped out of it and stepped back.

*Human*, her sensitive sense of smell informed her. She bit down on her tongue, the urge to flick it out and taste the air nearly catching her unawares. First she was hissing and now scent-tasting?

"No, that will never do. Thank you for your assistance..." She looked back at his collar again. "Commander. However, I'm more than capable of moving under my own power," she informed him and extricated herself before she could do something stupid. Like kiss along that delectable jaw...

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that evening, Commander Jacob James Meyers, or JJ to the few people he called friend, walked into the lounge on deck forty-seven and headed straight for the bar. The place was full, as was normal for a base on one of the major trade routes. This was a Combined Fleet base with several warships in dock outside, so the atmosphere was restrained.

He strode through the crowd with determination. As normal, people moved out of his way without really understanding why they did so. JJ didn't bother to hide the roguish grin that spread over his lips. One of the many perks of his calling.

"Dakarian vodka, make it a double, on the rocks," he ordered as he slid onto the stool at the end of the bar. This morning he'd slept through his alarm, been late for an important meeting and the day had pretty much gone downhill from there.

Apart from one noticeable exception. The woman who'd all but swept him off his feet outside Reilly's office. He sucked down a large gulp of the drink the bartender slid his way and breathed in sharply through his teeth as it burned all the way down to his gut.

She'd been the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen. JJ had seen more than his fair share of women, clothed or unclothed, and she'd been one he definitely wanted to see unclothed. Heat swirled through his veins and settled in his groin. Scratch that, he didn't just want to see her naked, he wanted to be the guy to peel the clothes off that delectable figure. Slowly...preferably after he'd chained her to his bed.

He shook his head and drained the glass in three long swallows. He was just torturing himself. A woman like that had to be attached...that or have a harem of men willing to cater to her every need. Perhaps Reilly was screwing her, even though JJ knew the admiral was married.

God alone knew why the man would want to cheat. JJ had met the admiral's wife several times and she was a sweet, quiet mouse of a woman who brought the protective instincts out in any man. She didn't have any of the danger that had clung to his kitten

earlier though. None of the “touch me if you dare” challenge he’d felt emanating from her even before she’d landed in his arms. Sheesh, some guys had all the luck. Biting back a growl of jealousy, he thrust the glass back at the bartender. “Another. Make it snappy.”

“You want to be careful on that stuff...I heard it can put a Marine on the floor within three drinks.”

The feminine voice beside him made JJ start a little in surprise. Not at the fact a woman had dared to approach him despite the scowl on his face. Without vanity, JJ knew he looked good. All Empaths did. It was an evolution thing designed to pass the genes on to the next generation.

What surprised him was his immediate physical reaction to her voice. It wrapped around him like a lover’s caress, trailing soft fingers down the centerline of his torso right down to his cock and balls. Within a heartbeat he was solid and ready for action...his erection a savage ache that demanded to be appeased. He slid a glance sideways and felt his jaw drop.

It was her. The woman from earlier.

JJ paused, his hand still outstretched for the return of the glass, and looked at her. Caught like a rabbit in the light of a lamp. The red hair he’d wanted to sink his hands into earlier was pulled back into a classic plait with a few tendrils loose and framing her face. She was dressed casually, in a dark top and pants, but JJ didn’t pay them much attention. They were merely window dressing.

“You’re Telatian,” he blurted out in surprise. Then felt like kicking himself for such a dumb comment. Of course she was Telatian, what else could she be with such amazing eyes and skin that was a cross between pale gold and burnished copper? His fingers itched to reach out and see if it was as soft as it appeared or as scaly as the snakes he’d been fascinated with in his childhood.

She didn't take offense or try to empty her glass over his head. Instead, the corners of her lips quirked a little. "Observant, aren't you? Good thing you're cute, you can get away with a lot the way you look."

She turned her attention to the barman. "Get him another and my usual, please."

JJ couldn't help it. He laughed, intrigued and amused by his companion. Deep inside his male ego preened. He hadn't had to track her down, something he knew he would have attempted after another few drinks. Instead, she'd come looking for him. Okay, so maybe she'd already been in the bar so perhaps she hadn't had far to look. He was male, though, so he took the path of least resistance.

"Usual? Does that mean you're local?" he queried as she slid onto the stool next to him. Her scent, elusive and sensual, wrapped around him. His cock hardened another savage inch. JJ slammed his mental shields up high as his overactive imagination presented several highly erotic scenarios with his lovely companion in the starring role.

Suddenly he was glad he was still wearing the uniform of his last undercover identity, that of Commander Kurtis Mason, counselor aboard the Combined Fleet Ship, the Helios. Telatians were known to be highly suspicious of outsiders in general and Empaths in particular.

His mind flicked back to his new assignment. He was due to report tomorrow to the CFS Arcadia as the ship's Empath. That was the official story. In reality he was there to keep the ship's captain, another Telatian, one with a bad reputation and a habit of defying command, under control.

What were the chances of running into two Telatians on the same day on the same base? Instantly JJ dismissed the idea. General Ryland was in her fifties and apparently married to the service. No doubt some dried-up old nun of a woman, nothing like this mysterious beauty sitting at his side.

"Not exactly. Been here a while, leaving tomorrow." She smiled at him as she lifted her glass.

For a second JJ was lost. Shaking his head to snap himself out of it, he accepted the refilled glass from the barman and centered his attention on the woman at his side. He wanted her and he was going to have her. Before the night was out he'd have her naked under him, screaming his name.

She lifted an eyebrow. "Oh you will, will you? Bit overconfident, aren't you? How do you know I'm not into women?"

Crap. He'd been broadcasting. JJ fought the heat that wanted to crawl across his cheeks and gave her a hard look full of the heat he was feeling.

"You're not into women." His voice was low but firm, assured. Women liked dominant men and he suspected this one more than most. "And you'll come screaming my name as I take you. The only question is how long I make you wait before I let you come."

Whoa. He was good.

Lyssa lifted her glass to her lips as heat and lust raged through her veins. Liquid heat slid from her pussy and dampened her panties at the thoughts his words conjured up. Her heart skipped a couple of beats and compromised her breathing. It had been a long time since any man had roused such a reaction in her. Especially one so young... She studied him from under her lashes. How old was he? Late twenties at most?

Most humans were too soft to give her what she needed and, because she was a half-breed, most Telatian males wouldn't touch her in case they broke her. As fierce as the hard deserts that bred them, Telatian warriors made love as hard as they fought. Even full-blooded females like her aunt were often hurt during the violent courtships of her father's race.

It led to a lonely life and lots of sexual frustration to pour into her job. There was a reason they called her the Snake-bitch of the fleet and other, less flattering names. The name-calling didn't bother Lyssa, but the loneliness did.

He held her gaze as he lifted his glass to his lips. At best, she found most humans passably attractive, but this one was gorgeous. High cheekbones and darkly handsome features were overshadowed by the force of his bright, blue eyes and the call of those sinfully lush lips. Lips that should have looked out of place on a man, but promised a night of pleasure Lyssa desperately wanted to experience.

She downed the contents of her glass in one go. Pure, ice-cold H<sub>2</sub>O. She shivered as it slid down to her stomach and waited for it to kick in. Bizarre, one of the most feared races in the galaxy and they could get falling-down-drunk on the smallest glass of water.

She slid from her stool with a sultry look. "I do hope that's a promise. I'm assuming you have a room on the base?"

His empty glass joined hers on the bar and he stood up. Again Lyssa felt that little frisson of excitement as he towered over her. This time, though, he crowded her against the bar. The hard edge dug into her back, but she didn't care, caught in a web of dark excitement as he placed his hands either side of her.

"I do, but first I want something."

"What?"

His gaze flicked over her face, then dropped to her lips. Lyssa felt that look all the way down to her clit, the shiver calling in on her nipples as it went and turning them into hard beads begging for attention. Begging for *his* attention.

Gods, what was wrong with her? He'd only looked at her, for heaven's sake!

"Kiss me."

Lyssa's eyes flickered shut for a second at the low order. A half-moan, half-whimper tried to escape her chest, but she managed to hold it in. She nodded mutely. Her lips parted as he leaned forward and her whole body tensed in anticipation of the touch of his lips on hers.

"No, kitten, I'm not kissing you. You kiss me."

Lyssa's gaze darted around the crowded bar. Despite her reputation, she was rather a private person, the natural reticence of her father's people reinforced by the prejudice she'd encountered serving in the fleet. Nerves and excitement raced through her as she flicked her tongue out to wet her lower lip.

"What...here?"

He nodded and leaned closer. His lips brushed her ear and he whispered, "Just a little kiss, kitten. Even though I'd like to bend you over the bar and fuck you right here, I'll manage with just a kiss until I can get you someplace private."

Lyssa bit her lip as a deep flush burned across her cheeks and travelled down the length of her body. "Why are you calling me that?"

"What? Kitten?"

She nodded mutely as he drew back to look in her eyes. Again that siren call of blue held her in thrall.

He smiled. The tiniest laughter lines crinkled at the corner of his eyes and reinforced just how much younger than her he was. Lifting his hand, he stroked gentle fingers along her cheek, under her lashes.

"You have eyes like a cat I had once. Mysterious and playful. Therefore...Kitten. Now stop hedging and kiss me. Or I walk away."

Lyssa shivered at the hard edge in his voice. All her command training wanted her to dig her heels in and call his bluff. She wanted to doubt he would walk away, wanted to believe that this was all a power play, but problem was she didn't know for sure.

Lifting on her tiptoes, she pressed her lips against his.

"You wouldn't walk."

Gods, she could kiss. Illicit heat and wild, wanton lust exploded through JJ's system at the first touch of her lips. Her lips were soft and warm, like silk. Not at all like the

scales he'd been expecting. Like her skin, soft and warm to the touch with a hint of moisture...not dry.

She moved, brushing her lips over his softly. More of an exploration than the erotic exchange he yearned for. Still, it was enough to make him burn for her. With a moan, he pulled her into his arms and took over. His hand drove into her hair, scattering pins, so he could hold her head still. Tilting his own, he slanted his lips over hers and pried them apart with one deft, demanding sweep of his tongue.

She started in surprise at the change in his manner. JJ didn't waste the opportunity and deepened the kiss. Sliding his tongue past her lips and into the silken recesses of her mouth, he almost lost it there and then. She tasted of heat and spice, of heaven and erotic temptation all at the same time.

When her tongue flicked against his, the forked tip he'd spied when she'd licked her lips earlier fluttering against his, he was lost. All he could think of was her pretty lips around him and that wickedly erotic tongue playing along his cock. Breaking away, he rested his forehead against hers and controlled his breathing. "Let's find somewhere a little more...private, shall we?"

## **Chapter Two**

JJ all but dragged her through the corridors of the base toward the temporary quarters they'd assigned to him. Such haste was rather unusual for him. He preferred to stalk his conquests, watching and waiting until they were ready to yield to him. Then, he took his time, controlling them and playing them to both parties mutual satisfaction, whether or not he used the "toys" he preferred. It was a rare woman who could handle all he could give, so most of the time he had to make do.

In fact, the last time he'd really been able to slip his leash and really play had been almost a year ago when he'd been assigned with two Altarians, twins, whose appetites were just as lusty as his. When one had worn out, he'd been able to turn his attention to the other one. His kitten, though...JJ slid a glance at the tall woman by his side. She seemed too delicate for some of the more...extreme aspects of his personality, so tonight was likely to be more vanilla than most.

Not that vanilla with her took away one iota of the excitement he felt as they turned the last corner. The doors to his quarters slid open as soon as he waved his hand in front of the access pad, activated by the ID chip embedded in his wrist. He couldn't wait to strip her naked and bury his cock to the hilt in her delectable body. With the level of arousal and lust battering through his veins to energize every cell in his body, he might even forgo the stripping and just fuck her hard and fast against the closed door the first time. Yeah, they could go slowly the second time.

Sweeping her through the door with the sole intention of pushing her back against it and screwing her senseless, JJ was surprised by the firm hand against his chest. She smiled as the doors shut behind them. A little quirk of her lips sent his arousal into the stratosphere and beyond.

"My turn. You had yours in the bar." With those words, so full of erotic promise, she pushed him back against the door and sank to her knees.

JJ sucked in a harsh breath as she made short work of his belt buckle. She wasn't, was she? His fly was next and he swallowed a moan as she pushed his pants down his hips. His cock sprang free, desperate for her touch. JJ knew he was well-built, but the look of greed and admiration on her beautiful face stroked his ego yet further.

"Oh god, yes..." he murmured, trying and failing to swallow back the moan that wanted to break free. All he could think about was her hands around his length, her lips and tongue...oh god, that tongue... His cock jerked, a bead of pre-cum on the tip signaling his arousal, as if the damn thing standing at attention wasn't enough of a clue.

"Impressive."

Then her hands were on him and JJ couldn't think anymore. She encircled him with gentle fingers, exploring the length and breadth of his cock until he thought he was going to explode. He couldn't bear it, but there was no way he was moving. He reached up, arching his back to grab a handhold on the top of the doorway.

She stroked and the world exploded behind JJ's eyelids. White, blue, green, orange, purple...the color of every star went supernova as she gripped him just right and pumped gently. Once, twice... He lost count in the maelstrom of pleasure that surrounded him.

"Hmmm...you like that then. Let's see how you like this."

He forced his eyelids open, pleasure and anticipation warring within him as she leaned forward. Her hot breath across his cock threatened the structural integrity of his knees. Scalding heat spread across his lower back and around, tightening across his balls and the base of his cock. He held his breath, needing the warmth of her mouth around him as much as he dreaded the loss of control that was sure to follow.

Her slender fingers smoothed down to the base of his cock and held him firmly. He was mesmerized as she opened her mouth and flickered the forked tip of her tongue directly across the bulbous, sensitive head of his cock.

Pleasure slammed into him at the same time she pressed hard behind his balls. He felt the climax rush up, gathering in his balls and stiffening his cock. But then it stopped like it had hit a barrier. Helpless groans spilled from his lips as she took her time with her tongue. It swirled and flicked over every inch of him, starting at the head and moving down. It curled around and under the sensitive crown and found all the hotspots on the way to his balls.

Then, when he didn't think he could take it anymore, she started on her way back up to the tip. By the time she reached it, his knees were weak and his breathing was more compromised than a society virgin at an orgy.

She paused, her lips hovering directly over the purple head of his cock, and looked up at him. He groaned at the image she presented, wide amber eyes and her plump, pink lips mere millimeters away from his cock.

"Please," he begged and yelled in release when she slid him deep into her mouth.

Humming in pleasure, Lyssa swallowed every drop of his cum as it poured down her throat. The salty-sweet taste was addictive and she made sure to catch every drop with the tongue he'd seemed to enjoy so much.

With a final lick along his impressive, still hardened cock, she stood up and smiled at him. "I've wanted to do that since the moment I saw you."

It was true, she'd always liked giving head and the feel of his erection as he'd pressed against her in the bar had only whetted her appetite to get his cock in her mouth. She hummed in pleasure again. Using the pads of her fingers, she wiped delicately at the corners of her lips. She looked up, half expecting to see the imprint of his fingers in the doorframe.

"Do you need a little time to recuperate?" she asked as she sashayed into the main living area. Nice quarters, not as large as hers but a good size for a single man. He must be a career officer, labeled as one of the "up and coming". Lyssa grinned to herself, she could certainly attest to both of those.

“Oh no...you don’t get off that easily.”

Lyssa jumped when his voice sounded right behind her. She could count the number of times someone had crept up on her in the last ten years on the fingers of one hand. Yet somehow this young officer had managed it.

His arms captured her in their embrace as he buried his lips against her neck. Closing her eyes, she relaxed back against him and arched her neck to allow him better access. She loved having her neck kissed. In fact, she just loved being touched, period. Breathly moans parted her lips as he moved up and found the sensitive spot below her ear.

“That...was amazing...you have such a clever tongue, kitten. I plan on using it again later.” His hands moved to her shoulders and started a slow at first exploration of her body. Down her arms onto her hips and back up her sides. His fingers skimmed the undersides of her breasts, making her arch her back in automatic response.

“I like your clothing.” He nipped lightly at her ear as his hand slid under the stretchy fabric, then laved the tiny hurt with his tongue. Lyssa tried not to whimper and failed miserably. His hand smoothed upward toward her breasts and he rumbled in approval as he discovered she wore nothing under the fabric.

“Oh yes, very nice. Do you like that?” He cupped her in one large palm, then tweaked her nipple with clever fingers.

“God, yes!”

She didn’t even try to contain the whimper this time as heat drew a line directly from her abused nipple to her clit. Her pussy clenched tightly, aching to be filled by the impressive cock she’d had in her mouth a few minutes ago.

“No, I’m not God, but feel free to call me that.”

His wicked whispers filled her ear as he played with her tits under the dark fabric, plucking and teasing at her nipples until she was ready to scream in need and frustration. She wanted more of his touch, arching her back and thrusting her breasts

into his hands, but she also wanted him to be done with his teasing and fulfill the promise of his heavy cock where it pressed into her back.

He pushed the fabric of her top up, revealing the slight mounds of her breasts to the cooler air in the room. Goose pimples raised instantly across her skin. She shivered. She didn't like even a hint of cold. Any cooler and her scales would kick in to protect her body temperature. Something she was sure would send him screaming from the room.

He seemed to be able to read her thoughts because he pulled her closer into the heat of his body. "Don't worry, Kitten, I'll keep you warm. In fact, let's up the temperature right now, shall we?"

Slow on the uptake, thanks to the pleasure numbing her brain, Lyssa didn't realize what he was hinting at until one of his hands smoothed down over her body. Her pants were made of the same material as her top, but, unlike the top, she was wearing underwear beneath them.

"I'll say again I approve of your clothing." He kissed along her jaw as his hand slid under her waistband to explore. She was caught between shivering and moaning as one hand smoothed over her lace-covered mound and the other tweaked and played with her nipples.

"Lace thong. Nice. Easy access." His whisper was wicked as his fingers teased with the edge of the lace at the junction of her hip. They slid lower. With a deft movement, he hooked them under the lace and brushed his fingertips along her lower lips.

They both moaned. She was slick and wet. The scent of her arousal was strong enough that even a human could detect it. "You're ready for me, Kitten. I had so much planned, but I can't keep a lady waiting, now can I?"

Before Lyssa could answer, he turned them both and bent her over the table in the corner behind them. The heated buds of her nipples brushed erotically against the cold glass. She gasped as he yanked her pants and thong down in one swift movement to expose her to the cool air.

"Part your legs, there's a good kitten." His order was rhetorical. As he spoke, his foot nudged hers apart, one after the other until her ass was in the air and her pussy on show for his approval.

She bit her lip, hardly able to believe what was happening. Was she really spread out over the table for some young human, ready and waiting...eager even...for him to fuck her? She closed her eyes and bowed her head as excitement thrilled through her.

Yes, she admitted. His orders and controlling manner really did it for her. Used to being in control in her day-to-day life, this was one area where she wanted to yield control. But only to a man strong enough.

"Hmmm, slick and wet."

She shuddered as his fingers slid along her pussy lips again, collecting the juice of her arousal and spreading it around her clit in circles. He didn't touch the sensitive nub, though. An omission that made her want to scream and demand he do something about the arousal hanging teasingly just out of reach.

"You're very responsive," he praised as he slid two large fingers inside her without warning.

"Oh! Oh god, yes. More!"

Her moaned demand was met by masculine chuckles. With slow movements he slid his fingers in and out of her heated pussy, fucking her with them. She whimpered and bit her lip, pushing back to get more of the delicious sensation. She needed this, needed him to fuck her. Not just fuck her, but take her hard and fast until all she could think about was him and his cock pounding inside her.

"You'll get more..." He pulled his fingers from her with a wet "pop". "When I'm ready to give you more. Right now, I think I want to see if you taste as good as you feel."

Lyssa squeezed her eyes shut as he slid to his knees behind her. His large hands smoothed over her ass and parted the cheeks a little to allow better access to her pussy. A pussy that clenched tightly at the implication in his words.

"Please..." she begged as he leaned forward and his breath washed over the sensitive flesh of her sex. Her clit ached for the feel of his tongue against it and around it. Ached to be pulled into his mouth and suckled until she came apart screaming. She wanted to feel his tongue thrusting inside her cunt, fucking her as he had done with his strong fingers.

And...oh gods, his fingers. She wanted to feel them inside her again. Wanted to feel them against the sensitive spot hidden behind her pelvis, the one that always made her eyes roll back in her head when she pleased herself.

So caught up in her fantasies of anticipation was she that the first brush of his tongue caught her by surprise. She keened at the brief hint of a warm, wet brush against her swollen lips before he pulled away again.

"No..." she complained. It wasn't enough, she needed more, needed him to take her over the edge and make her come all over his tongue and fingers.

"Patience." He slapped her ass with an open hand. The stinging burn and hard tone caught her by surprise. She gasped, wriggling as the burn on her ass settled into her veins and made her ache even more.

Before it had faded, or she'd had chance to assimilate the surprising discovery she wanted him to spank her again, his lips latched onto her clit. Rather than the slow exploration she'd expected, he parted her pussy lips with his tongue and located her clit in the same movement. Her ability to breathe disappeared as he attacked it like a starving man would a banquet.

He didn't just lick. He nibbled and sucked. He lapped and flicked, then swirled his tongue around the tight little bud of pleasure. He didn't let up there either. Whilst his lips claimed her clit, he thrust his fingers deep into her body again, thrusting in erotic movements that had her writhing and panting on the table.

Her arousal tightened until she could feel the coming climax in every cell. Deftly he played her body until she was begging in soft, wordless moans and whimpers. She needed to come. Needed it more than she needed air or water...

Her hips bucked as she got closer and closer. Until she was almost on the precipice. Just one more lick, one more thrust of his fingers and she would go tumbling over the edge. She moaned deeply in anticipation, waiting for that touch and for the heavy promise in her body to blossom into the wondrous pleasure.

"No. You don't come until I say so."

He pulled away and stood up. Startled and beyond frustrated, Lyssa started to turn over. "What the...no! You can't do this...I need —"

"You need what, little kitten?"

He was already behind her. The thick ridge of his erection fitted perfectly against the groove of her ass as the hard heat of his large body pressed her into the cool glass. He rolled his hips and dipped his knees. His cock rubbed against the slick lips of her pussy and her needy clit.

"You need me to fuck you, hmmm? 'Fraid you're gonna have to beg for it," he whispered against her ear as he reached around her body. Her legs parted on automatic as he found her clit. His clever fingers drew maddening little circles around it. Touches that didn't allow her arousal to abate, but also didn't bring her any closer to the release she so desperately needed.

"What?" Her heart pounded at both the command and the control he had over her. Right now she'd have done just about anything to get his cock inside her. All her attention focused on that spot where their bodies joined and the slight motion of his hips as he slid his engorged member against her.

"Beg, kitten. Beg for my cock and I might give it to you. Beg me to fuck you hard and fast over this table until we both scream in release."

Control games again. Games that heightened her passion until she was almost out of her mind. She nodded, her movements jerky. "All right, fuck me!" she demanded. "I want to feel your cock inside me. I want you to fuck me, hard. Now!"

She felt his grunt of approval, but in the next instant everything else was washed away when he slammed his cock home into her waiting body with a power that literally took her breath away.

Her fingers curled around the edge of the table as she held her breath. She'd known he was big...but hell, she didn't realize quite how big! She closed her eyes and waited for the slight sting to wear off. She felt stuffed. Stretched more than she had been with any other lover...even a member of her own race.

It was as erotic as hell.

Heavy pants from behind her and the rigid set of his body told her that her lover was having some similar difficulties. "Bloody hell," he gasped with his chest pressed against her back. "You're so fucking tight. Hold still or I'm gonna come."

He held her hips in a viselike grip, his cock jerking and pulsing where it was buried deep in the confines of her body. Heat coiled low in her gut. She could feel everything, every tiny movement he made, even the pulse of blood through his turgid shaft. And she wanted more.

The ache in her pussy spread outward to her clit and her nipples. She grabbed his hand and pressed it against her breast. He took the hint and tweaked her nipple. Hard. Lyssa gasped, the sound that escaped more a keen than a moan.

He started to move and she was lost. He slid out of her slowly and then back in until his balls slapped against her aching clit. The slight stimulation made her clench around him. She smiled as he swore and slammed into her again. And again.

Then there was no stopping him, nor the slight whimpers and pleas that fell from her lips.

"You like that, do you, little kitten? You like the feel of a man's cock buried inside you?" He talked as he fucked her, crude words that turned her on more than she would admit. "You're so tight, I could fuck you all night."

He leaned forward, his hand leaving her breast and trailing down her toned stomach. "In fact, I think I *will* fuck you all night. In every way possible. But first, you're going to come for me. What do you think, do you want to come?"

"Please...yes, I want to come. Please let me come." She was begging now, but she didn't care. She needed to come, had to come. Wanted to come all over his cock and feel him come inside her.

His lips branded her neck as he swept his fingers over her clit. His cock pounded into her pussy and his hips slammed against hers. This time he didn't tease her. His clever fingers slid against her clit with a skill she found breathtaking. Within seconds he had her standing on the edge, ready to fall off. Fall off? She was ready to throw herself willingly.

"Want to come, Kitten?" he asked again.

"YES!" she screamed, thrusting back against him as he flicked his fingers over her clit again and sent her spiraling into pleasure.

\* \* \* \* \*

Even though he was tired enough to drop into the dreamless slumber all Empaths yearned for, JJ was still wide-awake in the early hours of the morning. Lying on his back in the center of the bed, he studied the ceiling. Curled trustingly into his side was the woman who, in a few short hours, had rocked his world.

Idly his hand stroked across her shoulders, stopping every now and then to brush the hair from the nape of her neck. He'd discovered that touching that particular spot lulled her into sleep. He did it again and she murmured in her sleep—a sound of contentment and satisfaction. JJ envied her peace.

All he'd wanted from tonight was a quick lay with a willing partner whose every thought and reaction weren't laid out for him on a plate. Someone he couldn't read and who could surprise him.

He'd gotten that and far more besides. The whole encounter had been deeper emotionally and spiritually than he'd expected or, with a new assignment in a couple of short hours, wanted. Now instead of sticking around and getting to know his little kitten, he was off to the arse-end of the galaxy looking after some old battle-axe... He shuddered as he recalled Admiral Reilly's orders...

*The admiral leaned forward, his dark eyes intent on JJ.*

*"Commander Meyers, I trust you understand the mission you are being tasked with here? We need General Ryland under control. Especially with the...issues with the Telatian Council. The last thing Fleet Command wants is a veteran of the General's standing rebelling and standing against us on this. The knowledge and contacts she has amongst the mercenary communities... Well, let's just say if she wanted to field an army against us, she could easily manage it."*

*No answer from him seemed to be required, so JJ merely nodded his head. He was an Empath, one of the fleet's bulldogs, not a politician. He just did what he was told, when he was told.*

*"And when I say we need her under control, that's by any means necessary..." Reilly paused and flicked a glance over JJ. Unconsciously, JJ stiffened, he'd seen that sort of look before. "Up to and including seducing the bloody woman to get her under your sway. Do I make myself clear?"*

*"Yessir." JJ's reply was dry and automatic. It wasn't the first time such a request had been asked and fulfilled. He just hoped the woman wasn't too bad a looker, otherwise he'd be seducing her in the dark. Mind you, if she was that old, perhaps some heavy flirtation would be her limit and all he would need...*

JJ snapped out of it as Kitten moved. He felt sick, knowing he had to leave her bed and, in the same day, seduce General Ryland. He didn't hold out any hope that she'd

hang around and wait for him to get back from his assignment. Someone else would snap her up, take her to bed and give her the pleasure he wanted to give her. Some other guy would romance her and get to spend his lust on the body JJ longed to claim for his and his alone.

Fuck it. Life just wasn't fair.

## **Chapter Three**

Lyssa had been a Marine for nearly three and a half decades and, as such, the morning reveille was firmly entrenched in her body clock. Her eyes snapped open, awake and alert on the stroke of oh-five-hundred. Like most of the fleet, the Arcadia operated on the twenty-six-hour standard day. For a moment she just lay there, trying to work out where she was. Then it all came back to her in a rush of heat and memory.

Last night. Her human lover and the sex...oh gods, the sex. She wasn't a prude, living in barracks for many years had put paid to that. Some of the things they'd done. The things he'd persuaded her to do with him, and to him, the things he'd done to her. It was enough to bring a blush to her cheeks.

Lyssa slid from the bed and stood for a moment looking at him. He was asleep. No doubt worn out from all that exertion, bless him. Her gaze roved over his face and body, committing every feature and line to memory. She wasn't so naïve as to believe that she would see him again. Even if their service to the fleet didn't put them on assignments halfway across the galaxy from each other, then, soon enough, he was going to find out who and what she was.

In her experience, relationships didn't last long after that. Either they were freaked out by her reputation, by the fact she was part Telatian...which he knew, so she discounted that one...or by her rank. All in all, finding out they'd just done the dirty with the Rogue of Telat-Moire was enough to have most guys running for the hills screaming all the way.

Sighing quietly, she gathered her clothes and dressed. He didn't stir even when she laid a gentle kiss on his cheek before heading for the door. It slid open and she paused for a second before stepping out to look back.

Her lips curved into a small smile as she filed the night before away carefully in her memory. The night a young human had taught her what passion was all about. The only night she'd ever allowed anyone to call her "Kitten". Pity she'd never see him again.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later, after she'd taken a shower, Lyssa stepped out of the lift and onto the bridge of her battleship, the USS Arcadia. The soft, fluid clothes of last night were gone, replaced by the same battledress the rest of the bridge crew were wearing. In her case though, the usual green belt was replaced by the black and red stable belt of the ship's commander, and the tactical recognition patches on her arm marked her as a war veteran.

"Colonel Johnson." She nodded as her second-in-command rose from the command station in the middle of the bridge.

Before she could stop him, a wry smile twisted his lips and he barked out, "General on deck!"

The gunshot noise of those present coming to attention filled the bridge. Drawing to a stop next to Johnson, she gave him a dry look. "You know that does my head in."

Johnson shrugged. "Discipline. Does them good and you know it."

"That it does, that it does. Just all that stamping gives me a damn headache." Lyssa wrinkled her nose and looked about. Everything looked to be in good form and she could hear the communications chief in mid-conversation with station command about departure slots. "Got everything in hand here, I see."

"Yeah, we're just about ready for the off. You want the honor of taking her out?" Johnson motioned toward the seat in the center of the command triad. It was the traditional captain's chair and flanked on the right by Johnson's chair. On the left was another chair, one that had never been filled throughout Lyssa's term as a battleship

commanding officer, but would be today. The last place was reserved for the ship's Empath.

"Nope. She's all yours. Is he —"

Johnson followed the direction of her gaze and nodded. "About ten minutes ago. He's in your office."

"Great." Lyssa sighed and turned toward the door at the back of the bridge. Just what she didn't want, a bloody Empath poking around her ship and into her crew's heads. She had to find a way to get rid of him quickly, for all their sakes. Short of resorting to outright murder and venting his quarters to space, she was coming up blank.

The walk along the bridge was one of the longest she'd ever made, yet it was over within seconds. The dark green door slid open to reveal the familiar inside of her office...and a tall male figure standing looking out of the picture window.

Lyssa's lips pressed together in annoyance when she noted the fleet uniform. Didn't this prick know the Arcadia was a Marine boat? She cleared her throat as she walked in and stopped in front of her desk.

"Improperly dressed on the first day is not going to win you any favors, you know..." She paused for a moment and spun the transfer papers on her desk around. "Commander Meyers. Regardless of your abilities or who put you on my ship, I expect you to adhere to the ship dress code."

"Well, I would have researched more last night, but, you see, I went for a drink and met the most beautiful woman this side of the Ceras-tella supernova."

The tall figure at the window turned.

Lyssa's eyes widened as recognition flooded through her.

"Hello, General Ryland..."

She was shocked, that much JJ could tell. Hell, *he* was shocked.

The last person he'd expected to walk through the door wearing the uniform of a Marine Major-General was the woman he'd spent the night with. The woman who'd sneaked out before he'd woken up. The same woman who turned out to be the aging battle-axe of a Marine he was supposed to seduce into cooperation.

Ageing my arse, he scoffed mentally. There was no way she could possibly be the fifty-two her record stated. But then, he had heard that Telatians aged differently from humanity.

"Or should I say Kitten?" he carried on, smoothly falling back on the old Empath mannerisms. Never admit doubt, never show doubt, never show ignorance of anything—even if he had no clue what was going on. Always project superiority.

Yeah, that worked with humanity, but this woman had the blood of the feared snake-nomads running through her veins and three decades of hard service under that belt. The red lines that bisected it marked her years as a battleship commander. JJ tried to work out how many, but lost count. There was more red than black, that was for sure. She'd probably taken command of her first battleship before he was even born.

Gods, he wanted to kiss those lips again. No matter how much they pursed in annoyance. He wanted to pin her against the back of her door and strip that combat uniform from her, kissing her until her anger faded and she was panting his name again.

She got herself under control and the startled look disappeared from her amber eyes. "General Ryland or Ma'am will be sufficient. I'm assuming you're the Empath..." Her eyes spat fire at the very word. "That Reilly's assigned to me."

She looked at his transfer papers again, then pressed her thumb into the carbon seal on the bottom right. The seal glowed for a second as it recorded her imprint. She handed him the papers back, taking care not to touch him. JJ got the feeling she'd prefer not to touch him willingly again.

Just as well some of his plans for her didn't actually involve her consent, not verbal consent anyway. By the time he was finished, she'd be willing and eager for anything he wanted to do to her.

"I am indeed, Ki – Ma'am."

She motioned him out of the way and took her place behind her desk. Even though her thoughts were shielded by her Telatian blood, JJ could read the relief in her body language once the wide expanse of wood was between them.

"I don't play games, so you might as well know now. I do not like Empaths. My crew are all good people, so I do not want you screwing around with their heads. You do that..." Her voice was as cold as steel. "And I *will* find a way to leave you on some isolated planet in the arse-end of beyond. Do we understand each other?"

"Perfectly, Ma'am."

"Excellent, dismissed. In case they didn't teach you that one in the fleet, it's Marine for 'get out of my sight'."

"As you wish...Ma'am."

JJ smothered a smile and headed for the door. His kitten was rattled. Good, it was just how he wanted her. He allowed a sigh to escape as the door slid shut behind him. Ignoring the curious looks of the bridge crew, he walked across to the lift. From dreading this assignment, JJ was ready and eager for anything General Ryland...his Kitten...could throw at him.

\* \* \* \* \*

He had a long wait. Three long and frustrating weeks later, the only contact he'd had with Lyssa was in the morning operational meeting. Since the rest of the senior staff were also present, it wasn't anything he could remotely describe as quality time, either as an Empath or simply as a guy interested in getting the hard-nosed but incredibly beautiful commanding officer into bed.

"So that's decided then. We'll enter the system ahead of time and do a little snooping about before we make our introductions."

Lyssa's voice drew him back to the present as she addressed the group in the briefing room. Comprised of the Arcadia's battle staff, the room was so full of green and hoorah that JJ was sure if he cut any of the occupants in half, they'd have "Combined Fleet Marine" running all the way through them.

"Ryder, you'll be taking bravo team. I want you guys to drop in here...just below this mountain ridge. Got some reports of terrorist activity down there. Find one and get his take on things with the government..." She flicked a glance around the room. "Because as we all know, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. I want to make sure we have all the facts before we start brokering deals that affect them all on the say-so of a minority."

"Aye, Ma'am."

One thing JJ had to admire was the way Lyssa ran her ship. It was tight and slick. Every person had a place. They knew what it was and what was expected of them. To a man, they were all absolutely dedicated to their commanding officer. JJ could see why. The reports he'd read put her down as hard-edged with a backbone of steel and zero compromise when it came to getting the mission done.

What the reports missed out was the fact she was also a good listener and she made the effort to get to know her people. Like the fact she knew that Jenkins, one of the lowliest maintenance techs down in engineering, had a cat called Bob who he'd had to send back home to keep his elderly mother company and that Sally in ops had a thing for Kethan on the tactical squad. How she kept it all straight in her head, he had no clue but she did, talking to most of her people on a daily basis and filing the information away for future reference.

In fact, the only person on the ship she didn't talk to was him. A fact that was getting under his skin more than JJ would have liked to admit.

“Okay, unless there are any questions or objections, that’s the plan— Yes, Commander Meyers?”

Because she rarely looked at him directly, JJ was reduced to raising his hand like some kid in kindergarten.

“Thank you, General. I have a question. You’ve listed the beta team and the ops support teams, but who is leading alpha team?”

The eyes of everyone in the room swiveled to fix on him and JJ suddenly realized what a goldfish must feel like. It was as if everyone in the room already knew something and he’d been gauche enough to ask a dumb question. Then it clicked into place and he knew the answer before she replied.

“I am. If that’s everything, we’re now at T-minus eight hours. Get some rack time...chill out, whatever floats your boat as long as it doesn’t involve drink. Dismissed.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“What the *fuck* do you think you’re playing at?”

The door to the ship’s gym burst inward, almost coming off its hinges as a furious Meyers burst through it. Down here in the bowels of the ship the state of the art electronics gave way to the less technologically complex. For one, it kept down the weight of the ship as a whole. Lyssa didn’t see the point in overly complex solutions to simple problems. Wouldn’t hurt her crew to open a few doors like people had for millennia. Besides, simple door hinges were a lot less expensive to repair when annoyed Empaths stormed through them.

Flat on her back on the weight bench, Lyssa ignored his demand and carried on lifting. Smooth and controlled, in time with her breathing. Like all Marines, she liked to keep in shape, more so as she got older, but she liked to work out alone. She wasn’t sensitive about her body *per se*. She just made an effort to keep slim and toned.

Marine-issued workout gear displayed a lot more of her golden skin than she was comfortable with in mixed company, especially when physical exertion brought through her scales. Her crew all knew that so they all avoided the gym when they knew she was in there. Not so her new Empath, it seemed. Resentment and fury at him sizzled through her veins. Resentment at him being here in the first place and fury that he thought he could just waltz in here willy-nilly and disturb her routines.

“Let me see...” She put the bar back into place on the hooks above her and sat up. “Oh yes, that’s it. I’m doing my *job*. Do you have a problem with that, Commander?”

He stomped around the perimeter of the matted area, a scowl plastered across his handsome features. He was cute when he was mad—Lyssa locked down that thought there and then. He was not cute in any way, shape or form. Nor good in bed.

In fact, as an Empath who’d lied to her, he wasn’t sexy at all. As far as Meyers and sex was concerned, he simply didn’t exist for Lyssa. Or so she’d tried to tell herself over the past three weeks.

“Your job? No, I have no problem with you doing your job, *General*. What I do have a problem with is you taking on a freaking suicide mission!” He stopped in front of her, his blue eyes cutting like lasers as he looked down at her. “You’re the captain. You shouldn’t be leading combat teams. Combined fleet regulations—”

“If you even *think* you can quote fleet regs to me on my own ship, young man, you have another thing coming. ” Lyssa surged to her feet in front of him and jabbed a finger into his chest. “I am in command of this ship, not some jumped up Empath and don’t you bloody well forget it.”

“Not like I’m damn well likely to, is it?”

JJ’s voice verged on a snarl, but he didn’t back down in the face of her anger. Grudgingly, she’d had to admit that impressed her. Even Johnson would have quailed at meeting her head-on like this. Her second would have happily admitted that, when dealing with her, discretion was the better part of valor and found another way around the problem. Which was one reason Johnson was just an officer under her command,

yet she'd give anything she owned to go back and relive that night with JJ all over again.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"You know what I mean. You. Hiding behind that damn uniform all the time."

He flicked a look down in emphasis and paused for a moment. Dark heat flared behind the ocean blue of his eyes. She ignored the tremor of excitement that flared through her at the look. They were way past that, no going back.

"Err, I'm a Marine? Uniform is mandatory."

"Don't give me that bullshit. I've tried to be polite and talk to you, but you shut me down every time I try."

Now she was left to contend with the heat of the blush that tried to crawl over her cheeks and the thrill of excitement at having him so close, close enough that she could feel his body heat against her chilled skin. It, and the man it radiated from, called to everything within her, but she resisted. She would be captain on her own ship.

She *had* been shutting him down. When he walked into a room, she found a reason to be somewhere else. When he tried to talk to her about anything other than work, she had an urgent appointment elsewhere. It was the only way she was managing to keep her sanity about him when all she wanted to do was strip the uniform from his lean body and wrap herself around him.

"There! You're blushing and you have scales!" His voice rang with triumph as he stepped closer. She backed up half a step, but the back of her knees bumped against the weight bench. Trapped. Again.

Forbidden excitement and pure, wanton need echoed through her. Her fingertips flew to her face and, sure enough, she could feel the change in her skin. Her cheeks burned and she looked away. She rarely, if ever, displayed scale these days. She'd learned to control herself long ago.

"Piss off!"

A strong finger hooked under her jaw and pulled her face around so he could look into her eyes. The anger was gone, leaving a slightly puzzled expression on his face.

"You're embarrassed about it. Why?"

She gritted her teeth. Damn the man, why did he have to be so bloody perceptive? "You're the Empath, why don't you tell me? That's what you people do, isn't it? Poke about in people's heads without so much as a by-your-leave?"

"Most people, yeah. You...no."

Lyssa tilted her head in curiosity. "What makes me different?"

He shrugged. "You're not most people. You're part Telatian, something about your blood foils my abilities. I can only get glimpses, but I usually have to be touching you. Since...that night, you haven't let me near enough to touch you, Kitten. I haven't had a chance to read anything. You'll have to tell me, why do your scales embarrass you?"

"Don't call me that." The order was instinctive. If he started calling her Kitten in that warm tone of voice she was going to end up in a puddle at his feet.

"Tell me."

"Screw you."

If he started with the dominant, alpha male routine again she was sunk. Lyssa tried to evade his touch, feeling more of her skin change as he stroked warm fingers over it. Almost like the damn stuff yearned for his touch. Like the rest of her damn traitorous body.

"Tell me, Kitten. I want to know. I want to know everything about you."

She batted his hands away. Desperation hummed through her body. She had to get away from him before she did something stupid. Like invite him back to her quarters or, worse, beg him to take her here in the gym.

"Why? So you can keep me on a leash like Reilly wanted?" Her answer was a cry of frustration and deep hurt. She'd thought she and Daniel were friends, yet he'd set a guard dog on her.

He moved like lightning. His hand snapped out and slid into the hair at the nape of her neck to hold her still. His expression was forbidding and dangerous...and so very exciting.

"No, Kitten, not for Reilly. If I put you on a leash, it'll be for me." His voice dropped low and hoarse, filled with the same desperate need that filled her veins. "I don't give a fuck about Reilly and his agendas. He wants me to seduce you, get you under my sway, yeah...and I'd be lying if I said I didn't want you."

The fingers of his free hand stroked over her scales again. "They're beautiful, just like you. Never be embarrassed about your nature with me."

Then he released her and stepped back, his eyes hard as he looked down at her.

"I want you, Lyssa, but the choice is yours. I've never forced a woman and I don't intend to start with you. If you come to me, it'll be of your own free will."

Darkness and heat fought for dominance, his eyes sparkling as he swept a gaze over her again. She caught her breath on a gasp as her body reacted as though he had touched her. Her belly tightened deep within, her breasts were full and aching for his touch.

"Out here, you're the boss." He indicated the ship around them. "And you can stomp around and issue orders to your heart's content. That's your job, it's who you are. But if you come to me, then it's on my terms. When you come to me, I'm in charge. And yes, I *will* put a leash on you, Kitten. I'll bind you to my bed and love you until you scream. Until you beg me never to stop."

He turned to go, but stopped and looked over his shoulder to where she stood in shock.

"Your call, *General*. I'll be in my quarters."

## Chapter Four

Did she dare do this?

Half an hour later, Lyssa stood naked in front of the double mirror in her quarters, and studied her reflection. She turned this way and that, trying to look at herself from every possible angle. Was she too skinny or too toned? Did her bum sag a little? Was she too old and pathetic to even be considering this?

*When you come to me, I'm in charge...*

She bit her lip as her pussy clenched hard and memories of their night together assailed her. He was a fierce lover, by turns dominant and caring. A surprise to find in a human, especially one so young, it was something she'd expect to find more in a Telatian male...

Her eyes widened a little as she stopped posing in the mirror and grabbed a soft wrap dress from the bed. Off duty she preferred loose, casual clothing. That was it. He was exactly how she expected a male of her own kind to be...and why she reacted so instinctively to him.

Not bothering with shoes for the short walk between her quarters and his, she belted the waist of the dress firmly and checked her expression in the mirror. She pursed her lips critically and fluffed the mass of her hair before admitting that it was a lost cause. The damn stuff did exactly what it wanted, when it wanted.

She took a deep breath and headed for the door. Heaven help her, she couldn't resist him.

\* \* \* \* \*

She wasn't coming.

JJ sat on the low couch in the corner of his quarters, a half full whiskey glass in his hand as he looked out the porthole above him. It was a small window, nothing like the large floor-to-ceiling picture windows he'd been used to on other assignments. In fact, his whole quarters on the *Arcadia* would have fit lock, stock and barrel into his bedroom on his last assignment, the *CFS Magellan*.

That was to be expected though. This was a Marine boat, a full-on battleship. He knew for a fact that, for all her rank, Lyssa's quarters were no bigger. In fact, as she had an office crammed into the living space as well, they were actually slightly smaller.

Lyssa. His amorous thoughts sidetracked him as he thought of the part-Telatian woman. His cock was still at half-mast from their encounter in the gym earlier. Cupping himself, JJ groaned. If she didn't show, he'd need to sort himself out.

If she didn't show... He shook his head, released his cock and downed the drink in one long swallow. If she didn't show, he'd have to think of something else. He wanted her with a ferocity that startled him. All his other lovers he could take or leave, but Lyssa had gotten under his skin.

Take this assignment. He had standing orders to seduce her, get her into his bed and under the powerful sway of an Empath. That was what Reilly wanted. It was what JJ wanted although for entirely different reasons. With any other assignment though, he'd have been looking elsewhere on the ship as well.

While his main mission was underway, namely the seduction of the CO, he'd have also found another outlet for his passion. Perhaps a fresh-faced young ensign he could manipulate easily into silence. On the *Arcadia* that would be easy. He'd noticed some of the female crew giving him interested looks. A few of the men too, but JJ was so not going there. He knew a few Empaths did, sometimes love just didn't care about gender, but it just wasn't for him.

Unlike on other assignments, he ignored them all. None of them interested him in the slightest. The only woman he was interested in aboard the *Arcadia* was the flame-

haired CO with the silky scales he yearned to feel against his skin. Who'd have guessed it? An Empath falling hard in lust with a Telatian? It was like mixing oil and water.

Sighing, he studied his glass. He was too lazy to move. "I don't suppose you'd be a good chap and refill yourself, would you?"

The glass stubbornly refused to answer.

"No, I thought not."

Groaning like an old man, JJ levered his tall form off the couch and padded to the drinks cabinet. He'd shed his uniform shirt and jacket as soon as he'd stepped through the door and his boots were abandoned under the coffee table. He stood for a moment with his refill drink and studied himself in the reflection of the strip window in front of him.

He was tall, well over six foot, and lean. His body was toned, although he had to admit he didn't put much effort into keeping it that way. Empaths had high metabolisms, so eating enough was more of an issue than any weight gain.

He swept a hand down his chest, ruffling the slight line of hair bisecting his pecs then travelling downward to disappear under his waistband. Perhaps he should get a tattoo. Telatian males were supposed to be covered in elaborate tattoos. Maybe ink was the way to Lyssa's heart. The way to get her to love him.

Whoa. Stop. When did he start thinking the "L" word? He never thought the "L" word, it wasn't in his vocabulary. Before he could follow that disturbing train of thought any further, the door chimes rang.

She was here. She'd accepted his terms.

Anticipation, dark desire and something else JJ didn't want to put a name to raged through his veins as he walked across to the door. He didn't bother to grab the shirt across the back of the chair as he went. Lyssa knew what was going to happen when she stepped through the door and he didn't see the point in putting the thing on just to take it off again.

He leaned one shoulder against the edge of the recessed frame as the door slid open. Lyssa stood on the other side and it didn't take a genius to work out she was nervous. Oh she was more self-contained than to show it overtly. After three weeks studying her, though, and one hot night imprinted in his memory forevermore, JJ knew her.

The slight flush on her cheeks, the way her gaze darted around the room behind him rather than look at him and the tense set of her body... Yeah, his kitten was like a cat on a hot tin roof.

"Coming in, or just going to stand there gawking?" He turned to let her pass, motioning for her to enter with a sardonic gesture.

The flush on her cheeks deepened as she nodded and passed him. Her footsteps were light and almost soundless on the carpeted deck. She was barefoot. Dragged from his contemplation of her soft lilac wrap dress, JJ's attention shifted to her slender feet.

Stopping in the middle of the room, she looked about. The expression in her eyes shot JJ through to the core. It was the first time he'd seen the self-assured general hesitant and unsure.

"I-I don't do this sort of thing normally, you know —"

"Sssshhhh."

He was there before she could finish her sentence. His fingers pressed against her lips to stop her talking. He'd more interesting plans for those lips than chatter. "I know, Kitten. Do you think I don't know everything about you?"

She reared back, the look in her eyes sharp and the anger he knew lurked just behind the calm façade sparkling in her amber eyes. "What do you mean, you know everything about me?"

He smiled, stroking his thumb over her cheekbone. He loved that about her. She was easy to rouse to anger or passion, and so delightfully responsive, his cock hardened just thinking about it. If his cock wasn't already at rampant attention.

"I know you're dedicated to your job, you're a good commander and your people worship you. You never leave a man behind or send one out alone. You'd walk across the galaxy to do your duty or keep your people safe."

She relaxed at his words, her body shifting from rigid to pliant under his hands. Something that looked suspiciously like tears sparkled in her eyes for a second before she blinked them away.

"I'm not sure what to say to that."

His hand cupped the side of her neck, then slid into her hair. Still looking down into her face, he tilted her lips up.

"Don't say anything. Tonight's not about talking, it's about this."

He leaned down and took her lips in a kiss so hot it rivaled a scarlet supernova. At the first touch of her soft lips, he groaned, then her sweet taste exploded in his mouth and he was lost. Trying not to be rough and only just managing it, he hauled her into his arms and plundered her mouth.

She didn't fight. Instead she relaxed and let him in, letting him have his way as his tongue swept past her lips to explore and seek out hers. She clung to him, pressing her softer curves against him in such a way the primal male animal inside rumbled in approval. Tomorrow she would go back to being the uberMarine, a killing machine designed for the battlefield. But tonight, tonight she was woman and he was man.

And she was his woman.

Despite all his plans to exert control over her and make her dance to his tune. To hold himself away from her until she was shuddering with need and begging him to take her... JJ couldn't wait. He swept her up in his arms and crossed the room in swift steps.

A soft chuckle whispered against the side of his neck as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "In a bit of a hurry there, Tiger?"

JJ paused in front of the doorway to look at her. Mischief sparkled in her eyes and her slender fingers drew small circles on his bare shoulder.

“Quiet, wench,” he mock-growled. “Before I decide you need a good fucking here and now.”

Her eyebrow raised a little as laughter filled her eyes. “Oh will you now? I dunno... You sure you’re man enough to take on a snake-woman?”

It was the first time she’d actively referred to that part of her nature, which surprised him and added yet more heat to the fire currently raging in his loins. The gentle challenge to his authority did things to his body that should be illegal, as the fire within him turned into a raging inferno.

Fuck the bed, it was too far away.

Sliding her down his body, he walked her backward a few steps. Her back hit the wall at the same time he took her lips again. Pressing her backward into the cool metal, he smoothed his hands down both sides of her neck and across onto her shoulders.

“Scales, Kitten.” He broke the kiss long enough to gasp. “I want to feel them as I mak – as I take you.”

She stiffened at the request, silent as he resumed kissing her. His lips caressed hers again, moving across her jaw and onto her neck. Was she going to surrender and give him what he wanted or would she defy him and give him chance to punish her in a way that would leave them both weak with pleasure?

Either way was good for him, he decided as he pulled the belt of her dress free. The fabric parted and fell from her luscious body. He dragged a hard breath in as he realized she was naked under it. Fuck it, they were never going to make it to the bed.

Surging against her, he pressed her harder into the wall and dragged her leg up over his hip. Burying his face into the curve of her neck, he ground his pelvis against hers, trying to ease the savage ache of his erection. The pressure didn’t help, only made it worse as he realized that only a thin layer of fabric separated him from sinking into her tight pussy.

“Gods, kitten, you’re so fucking sexy.” All his finesse had disappeared as he fumbled with his fly. He had to get his cock free, needed to get inside her now...

The zip gave and his erection leapt into his palm. Holding his breath, JJ dipped his knees and guided the tip to the slick, wet entrance to her pussy. Then, with one hard thrust, he was balls-deep inside her.

The world stopped for JJ. His heart contracted, his lungs refused to process air and the world outside the bedroom ceased to exist. All he could feel was her. The feel of her tight pussy clamped hard around his cock, and her soft breath on the side of his neck. The silken feel of her scales under his hands.

Scales. She’d shifted for him.

The universe returned, slamming back into him in a rush of sound and sensation.

“Hmmm...” he rumbled in approval as he held still and waited for her body to adjust to him.

Sure, he might want it hard and fast against the wall, but that didn’t mean he had to be crass and risk hurting her. He wanted her with a need that bordered on desperation, but the idea of hurting her was complete anathema to him. Just driving into her and going for it would have to wait until he’d at least prepared her a little for the invasion of his body.

It didn’t take long. Within seconds he felt the minute shift of her muscles and knew the burning almost-pain of his penetration had eased. Because of her non-human blood, basic feelings like that were all he could read from her. That suited him fine. He didn’t want to be able to read her. At least one person in his life needed to be a mystery to him. Empaths had been known to go insane otherwise.

As though the small movement was a signal he pulled back, then slammed into her again. His grunt mingled with her feminine gasp.

“Open your eyes, Kitten.”

He teased them with another slow slide out of her slick body, then thrust back into her. The movements were getting faster as his control decayed. Her eyelashes fluttered over her golden cheeks and then she looked up. Her eyes locked with his and JJ was lost. Heat, vulnerability and deep need shone in those amber depths. The need to protect her grew in his chest until it eclipsed all else. In that moment he knew he was in trouble. Serious trouble.

“You like this? Tell me how much, tell me what you want.”

His demand was a way of trying to re-establish control over his wayward emotions. An attempt that was blown out of the sky when she met him look for hot look.

“Just shut up and fuck me, that’s what I want.”

“Aye, Ma’am!”

Speech was forgotten as he gathered her leg higher against his hip. Her body opened completely to him, he set up a hard and fast rhythm. Any other woman, he’d have been worried about the powerful way he slammed into her, but not Lyssa. Despite her haunting air of fragility, the luscious body under his hands was strong and resilient. And those scales...

One hand against the wall for balance, he pressed her against it as he fucked her. He’d never felt this before. He’d never been so aware of his partner, even when he had a full mental link with them and could read their every thought. Perhaps that was it, with Lyssa he had to concentrate and pick up on the tiny physical clues she gave him.

Soft moans and gasps filled the room, a feminine counterpoint to his groans. Impaling her on his cock again, he stopped and swiveled his hips. The whimpered plea that escaped her lips delighted him so much he did it again. In response, she rippled her internal muscles around him.

White-hot need raced down his spine like a group of illegal solar racers with tricked-out flyers. A band of sheer lust tightened around his cock and balls. His cock was hard to the point of pain. He could feel his climax building, quicker and harder than he’d ever known before.

The teasing fell away as he drove into her again. There were no tricks anymore, no teasing movements or kisses. He just held on and fucked her. She seemed to sense the change in him, leaning her head back against the wall with a look of rapture on her face.

“Yes...oh yes, like that. Harder.”

He gritted his teeth and obeyed. Their coupling turned from sex to almost brutal lovemaking, the trust on both sides increasing with each second. On hers that he wouldn't hurt her and on his that she would tell him if he'd gone too far.

The tightness in his cock and balls spread outward, gaining momentum as he took her. More heavy thrusts and he was there, balancing on the edge, as if it was a cliff and the swirling sea below was a maelstrom of pleasure he ached to dive into.

“Kitten, I can't... I'm gonna come,” he gasped out, desperate to hold on until she'd reached her pleasure. Nice guys and Empaths wanting to claim their mates finished last. He held onto that thought as he waited for her eyes to open. He wanted her to climax with him...

“Come with me, I want to feel you come all over my cock.”

He felt the heat sweep her scales. A physical sign of her climax as it raced over her body. He pushed into her again as it reached her core. A simple, single thrust that stroked every nerve ending between their joined bodies, sending them both over the edge with a scream.

\* \* \* \* \*

JJ woke just as the alarm started its raucous call. Reaching out, he clicked it off before it could awaken the sleeping Lyssa nestled against his side. They had a long day ahead of them, but he could afford to let her sleep an extra five minutes or so before they had to get up, shower and head their different ways.

Five selfish minutes where he could hold her and forget about everything else. Forget that she was his boss and that her boss had ordered him to seduce her. He knew that Reilly expected him to report any day that he'd gotten Lyssa under control.

Lying on his back, he studied the ceiling and blanked his mind. As ceilings went, it was a rather nice example. Plush fabric covered the ceiling panels, which, considering the Arcadia was a Marine vessel, was an unexpected level of luxury.

It no doubt had something to do with the fact the ship's CO held a senior rank. Although he *had* noted that the rest of the ship was rather Spartan and utilitarian, even Lyssa's quarters and office. Unlike other senior officers, she didn't have the expensive carpeting or valuable paintings Fleet often used to soothe bruised egos. That was the softly-softly approach. First it was bribes, then, when a commander became too much of a problem, they sent in an Empath like JJ to deal with it.

Not so with Lyssa. They hadn't even tried the bribe route by the looks of it, just sent him straight in. Having been aboard the Arcadia for a while, he realized that fleet command literally didn't have the tools or the mindset to deal with her. She was a puzzle wrapped in an enigma, wrapped in the most deliciously responsive woman he'd ever met.

And he loved her.

Used to examining emotions—both his own and other peoples—JJ didn't shy away from the feeling. Looking back over his actions in the last three weeks, it was obvious he'd been smitten with her from the start. He just hadn't wanted to admit it.

He dropped a gentle kiss on her soft hair and closed his eyes. Just five more minutes with her all to himself, and he'd be ready to face the day.

## **Chapter Five**

At five o'clock the ship was a hive of activity. They'd entered the system in stealth mode and were holding position away from the main space lanes. Nestled into the lee side of an uninhabited moon and with the cloak engaged, they were completely hidden.

He strode through the corridors on Lyssa's heels as the ship readied for action. The cloak was, of course, highly illegal and one of the many things JJ was now noticing about the Arcadia. Like the fact the Marines assembled in the main transport bay were more heavily armed and armored than was usual.

"Are they carrying the KZ307?"

JJ's eyes widened in surprise. The KZ series was new and the 307 in particular was so new that, for most of the fleet, it was just a technical drawing. Then it all made sense. Lyssa had been bribed just like the rest of the senior staff.

Her price wasn't expensive carpeting and valuable knick-knacks; it was cutting edge technology and weaponry that would keep her crew alive. All of which made the Arcadia one of the most fearsome battle cruisers in the fleet. No wonder Reilly wanted her leashed. With the Arcadia and the contacts she had, she was damn dangerous.

"Ten-hut! General on deck!"

Boot heels hammered against the deck in one decisive blow as the Marines in the room came to attention at the same time. The sound was like a blow, one JJ could feel right in the center of his chest. A lot of the fleet ridiculed the Marines for their endless and strict drill. The fancy uniforms reminiscent of an earlier age were nothing like the sleek space-age versions sported by the rest of the fleet, but the Marine Corps clung to them with a passion. It had gained them a reputation as dinosaurs, an archaic service some were trying to cull from the CFS.

"As you were."

Lyssa waved her hand and strode through the group, totally at ease in the middle of all the testosterone-driven aggression just waiting to happen. As she walked, two tall Marines fell into step next to her. One handed her a tactical rig and the other a rifle.

JJ was already wearing his, but it was nothing like the one Lyssa slid on with ease. His was drawn from stock and so new it squeaked when he moved, whereas hers was well worn and mended. His was the standard configuration of pockets, most of which he hadn't a clue what they were for. Lyssa's was stripped down, the pockets and loops moved around her slender, toned figure in a different setup. No doubt she could find her way around it in her sleep.

"Sitrep, Commander Ryder. We need to be ready to move in thirty." She slung the rifle, another KZ307, over her shoulder as she spoke, her attention on the men around her. Jealousy stabbed through JJ's gut. The other men reacted to her presence like flowers to the sun. He could understand why, her very presence was warming and addictive, but he wanted to be the one basking in her attention and no one else.

"Yes, Ma'am. Shuttles are ready to leave. We're just waiting on your say-so to board...?"

She nodded sharply and turned to JJ. As her amber eyes wandered over him, he caught a flare of heat in their depths. Her lips pursed in disapproval, the heat quashed. She hadn't wanted him to come on the operation. They'd had their first real lovers' tiff this morning over it. JJ had won, mainly by placating her with kisses and soft promises for tonight. He didn't care. Where this woman was concerned, he had no pride whatsoever.

"Come on then, let's make sure you don't get yourself killed. Reilly would be pissed as hell if that happened." Her tone was acerbic, but JJ caught the flash of something warmer in her eyes as she turned away and strode toward the combat shuttle.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Who-who-who!”

The joyful call echoed through the cabin as the shuttle plummeted through the atmosphere. JJ clung to his harness and tried not to be sick. He’d heard about the Marine drop-shuttles of course. He knew that they worked by literally freefalling through the atmosphere and trusting in the massive braking shields to stop them before they hit the ground. If the shields failed, then the shuttle would do a good impression of a jam jar as it shattered on the floor.

That thought didn’t ease his nerves one iota.

“T-minus three.” Lyssa pressed the com-unit looped over her ear and yelled orders. “Lock and load!”

Around him rifles were checked in brisk, professional movements. How they could focus JJ had no idea. His stomach fought for space with his tonsils and the rush of blood to his brain made him dizzy.

*Calm down, he told himself, you’ve done combat simulations before and you listened to the briefing. You know what’s going to happen and what you need to do.*

Yeah, academically he knew all that. As he was rapidly finding out though, looking knowledgeable and experienced in a briefing room was one thing. Heading into the real thing with only seven combat simulations under his belt was a completely different matter. They weren’t heading into a hostile zone either...they were slipping in under the radar.

“T-minus two.”

Where had the last minute gone? JJ hardly had time to think before Lyssa yelled another warning, “Braking in three seconds.”

Around him the Marines folded themselves back into their seats. Arms wrapped around whatever weaponry they were carrying, they drew their knees up and dropped their heads. JJ was too busy watching them to move. What were they doing? He’d never seen this in the simulations...

The next second everything happened at once. A slender but strong hand forced his head down as the brake shields activated. The metal of the shuttle around them screamed as the different stresses threatened to tear it apart.

Something slammed into the shuttle with a deafening bang. JJ clung to his harness. This was it, they'd hit the ground. They were all going to be squashed as the shuttle around them drove into the unforgiving surface. His stomach took a nosedive to his feet and bounced back up again. He couldn't think. He was going to be sick.

"Breathe, it'll go off." Lyssa let go of the back of his head. She was already out of her seat, navigating the crowded center of the shuttle with an ease JJ envied.

"T-minus one, people," she bellowed over the din. "Up and out, ready to de-bus on my mark!"

The de-bus went smoother than Lyssa expected with JJ accompanying them. He'd surprised and irritated her with his insistence on accompanying them. She squashed her annoyance. Didn't Reilly trust her to run even a simple intel gathering op anymore?

That was what she feared the most—being side-lined because of her age. Most from her cadet year were either retired or running desks now. Not Lyssa. She lived for the action in the field. Pull her out of it and stick her behind a desk and she'd wither and die like a plant without water.

Pulling her rifle tight into her shoulder, she kept her eyes on her assigned firing arc. Down here she wasn't Major General Ryland, a senior officer swanning around giving orders and letting others run around while she put her feet up. No, dirt-side she was alpha team leader and she pulled her weight like the rest.

The last of the teams de-bussed and took their places like the parts of a well-oiled machine. Apart from JJ. The Empath half staggered, half fell from the shuttle, then tried to orient himself. She watched him out of the corner of her eye. It was almost laughable. His tac-rig was so fresh off the rack she could smell the "new" on it and he held his 307 as though it might turn and bite.

Great, another combat-certified fleetie who'd never seen actual combat. The disdain of a career soldier who'd done her basic training in the middle of a war filled her. As far as she was concerned, the combat simulation training the fleeties gave their people was about as useful as a chocolate fireguard. All it did was teach them to line up nicely so the enemy could shoot them down like ducks in a row.

"Down." She grabbed the shoulder of his tac-rig and pulled him down next to her. "Stay behind me, do what I do and try not to get yourself killed. Okay?"

He nodded mutely, skin still a little green under his camo paint. For an instant she felt sorry for him. Combat drops were rough until you got used to them. Even she'd thrown up her first couple, so he was well ahead of her. No way would she tell him that, though.

The shuttle lifted off behind them, disappearing into the cloud cover above. Instantly, Lyssa was all business. With a series of quick-fire hand gestures, she had her section up and moving. They had a fair bit of ground to cover through hostile territory and they couldn't afford to waste any time.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was quiet, too quiet. Half an hour into their patrol, Lyssa's instincts were screaming at her. She'd done thousands of patrols during her career and everything about this one was wrong. It was too quiet, the land around them as sleepy as the English countryside she'd been forced to live in for six months as a child. Even in high summer the place had been too damn cold for her. Suppressing a shiver, she turned again, her sharp eyes on the fields and trees around them.

There were no animals, no sounds. Regardless of what planet, there was always some kind of natural movement, even if that movement was from the carnivorous plant-life like on Selinas Four. Not here though, not now.

Lyssa dropped to one knee, her body humming with awareness and purpose. Instantly, the section behind her did the same. Even JJ. She was pleased with how fast the Empath was picking things up. They'd make a soldier of him yet.

Pressing the com-unit against her ear to activate it, she murmured, "Too quiet, keep your eyes and ear —" She didn't finish her sentence. Gunfire and grenades erupted from the sleepy landscape around them.

"TAKE COVER!"

Grabbing JJ's tac-rig, she dived for cover, shoving him into the smallest hollow between a bush and a fence. Little more than a scrape in the ground, it was all there was. Operating on pure instinct, she slid into position next to him. Before she'd stopped sliding, Lyssa was firing back at the enemy.

Emotion and fear drained away as she selected her targets and fired in the same movement, JJ doing the same beside her. Most officers of her level were into the braid and glory of their rank. They spent more time at swanky functions than on the training range. Not Lyssa. She couldn't remember the last time she'd worn her dress uniform and her scores on the range were amongst the highest on the Arcadia, if not in the corps.

Something, not fear and not anger, coursed through her. Despite best efforts, the section had been spilt up with surgical precision. Another grenade thudded into the ground nearby. Lyssa threw her arm over her head as soil sprayed the two of them.

"Who the fuck are these people? They've got FK-Threesssss." She didn't bother to contain the slight hiss of her forked tongue this time. This was combat and she'd have happily paraded around naked if it got the job done.

"Are you trying to distract me?" JJ's wry comment took her by surprise. She slid him a quick glance as she reloaded. He wasn't a bad shot at all and now that they were in the thick of it, he was handling his rifle like a pro. "No flicking that tongue about when people are trying to kill us. It's very distracting."

Grenades peppered the ground about them. They had to move, but Lyssa just looked at the man by her side. He was an Empath, one of the fleet's bulldogs. Normally they didn't go anywhere without a protective retinue and seventeen layers of cotton wool. She'd never heard of one putting themselves in danger. Most screamed and bitched if they got so much as a splinter.

Yet her Empath was on the front line with her, trading shots with an enemy they hadn't expected, and still found time to flirt with her.

"Does Reilly know you're operational?" she asked suddenly, ignoring the fire fight around them.

"Huh, what? Fuck no. He'd have kittens. Why?"

His answer was somewhat distracted as he took out a small group who were trying to flank them on the left. Something warm blossomed behind her breastbone at his words, but she didn't have time to dwell on them. Rolling up onto a knee, she put down a vicious volley to cover their movement. "Come on, we gotta move..."

"BUG OUT, RETREAT!"

She gave the order to the rest of the section to disengage and hotfoot it out of there. Sometimes winning was about picking your battles and there was no way they were winning this one. Whoever this was had superior numbers and the same level of technology as the Arcadian group, despite the fact this planet was only had a grade-five tech level.

"Trees on the left, make for the gap." She nodded with her head toward the nearest tree line. "Run like hell until you reach it, then lay down cover fire for me. On my mark, three...two...mark!"

JJ was on his feet and running without needing to be prompted. Even though she'd have liked to admire the fine ass showcased in his combat pants, she had to keep her mind on the job.

"Ohh no you don't."

Coldly she cut down any of the enemy who were stupid enough to try to take a shot at the running Empath. No one was shooting at her man...not while she had breath left in her body. He reached the tree line, sliding into cover with a move very like the one he'd seen her use earlier. A second later his rifle spat out deadly bursts, spraying the area the enemy had taken cover in with a blanket of bullets.

She didn't waste time thinking. Taking to her feet, she sprinted across the open ground. There was always a chance someone would manage to roll out of cover long enough to get a shot off at her. Once that happened... Well, no one could outrun a bullet.

Lyssa thundered toward the tree line, neatly hopping over JJ as she went. Heading deeper into the forest would put their enemy off following them in. Two people were more mobile and easier to hide than a full section.

"Move your ass!" she yelled over her shoulder, but a quick glance revealed she didn't need to worry. JJ rolled to his feet with the grace of a leopard and was running almost before she'd finished shouting. They dodged and weaved through the woodland, not slowing their pace even when the trees got denser. Gunfire followed them, bullets slamming into bark around them as they rebounded off the tree trunks.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ten minutes later, they both leant against the trunk of a large tree, breathing heavily after a hard chase through the woods.

"You think they're gone?"

Lyssa tried to be ladylike as she gulped air and failed miserably. Gods, she was getting slower. Either that or their pursuers had been cyborgs. They just hadn't let up. They'd hounded the two Arcadian crewmembers, trying to herd them toward god knew what.

Leaning her head back, she listened hard. She closed her eyes and let everything else fall away. There was no one who did stillness like a Telatian. It was the snake

influence. Originally human colonists, no one...not even the Telatians themselves, knew how their DNA had been altered. It was as if the planet itself had changed them so they could survive.

She dropped through layers of consciousness, opening the senses that weren't human. Hearing bolstered something else and her mind expanded. She felt the tree they were leaning against, the ground under her feet and the man next to her.

A small rumble of pleasure rolled through her as her instincts wanted her to linger on him. Who was she kidding? All she wanted to do was wrap herself around the warmth of his body and stay there forever.

With determination, she pushed on, moved her thoughts away from him and started searching. Perhaps because her race—no longer considered human because of the DNA shift they'd suffered—came from an arid, desert planet, her abilities were all focused around finding water. Not much help in a leafy, green, well-watered forest...except most humanoids were ninety-percent water.

Her mind wandered outward. She ignored the cluster of small animals under a bush a couple of trees to the left and the trickle of a stream just beyond them. She wasn't looking for cool water or the small concentrations the mother animal and her young created. She was after something bigger. Hotter.

Her mind collided with a source of water and she stilled. Waving her hand, she warned JJ to be quiet. She probed the source carefully. Humanoid, it was a couple of hundred meters or so away, just sitting there. Like it was watching them. Waiting.

"What?" JJ's voice breathed across her neck. She shook her lips a little, her eyes still closed as she tried to work out more about what they were dealing with. It was no good. There was nothing for it. She was going to have to probe the water within it. Taking a deep breath, she reached out mentally and slid past the being's skin and into the blood.

A second later she re-emerged, gasping and feeling like she was burning up. "Cyborg!"

“Crap.”

JJ stiffened at the mere mention of the inhuman killers. Originally a super-soldier project, some of them had escaped, liberated the others and since then they’d harassed civilization. They were a right royal pain in the fleet’s ass.

“Back there, two hundred meters.” Lyssa whispered back, her skin pale under her cam paint. “It’s just sitting there. Not moving. Not sure it’s even breathing.”

He shook his head. “Doesn’t have to be. They’ve got expanded functions for hostile environments. Show me where?”

Holding his hand out, he waited for her to take it with baited breath. As tests went, this was the big one. Talking increased the likelihood the thing would hear them and realize they were onto it, so it made sense for him to pick the information directly from her mind. Because she was part-Telatian though, she would have to drop all her mental shields and actively allow him in. Once those guards were down he could rifle through her mind at will.

She looked at him. For a second JJ saw the battle raging, reflected in the turmoil in her amber eyes. She nodded and slid her fingers into his. Relief shot through him and he released a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. If she’d refused, even with so much at stake, then he would have known there was no point harboring any hopes for their ongoing relationship. Even now he worried the only reason she was letting him in was because of the mission.

Putting that aside, he smiled his thanks and slipped past her lowered guards and into her mind. He’d never linked with even a part-Telatian before and the difference between Lyssa’s mind and a pure-blooded human mind was marked. Where in a human there was fuzziness and random chaos chasing over the surface level, Lyssa’s mind was calm and focused.

Fascinated, JJ took a second to look about, telling himself that he had to be comfortable with how her mind was set up before he started to probe her memories. Her primary thoughts were concentrated on the cyborg watching them and getting back

to the ship in one piece. Just under them, in separate little areas but all running concurrently, were more thoughts. Concerns about her team, suspicions about the cyborg team that had attacked them and thoughts of her growing feelings for him.

*She had feelings for him!* Even though he desperately wanted to, JJ respected her privacy and the trust she'd placed in him by allowing him unfettered access to her mind. Pulling back, he concentrated on the main thought thread and picked up the memories of her last couple of minutes.

Fascinating. She seemed to be able to seek out any source of water, including that contained in any vessel, such as a body. The fleet had long tried to work out how the Telatian abilities worked, but had never been able to get one to cooperate on this level. It would make a fascinating paper and might just secure his name in the... JJ cut off that thought and concentrated.

He watched as she tested the creature's blood, feeling the fire and tasting the metallic tang just as she did. Cyborg, definitely cyborg. What class though, he wasn't sure. Hopefully something like a Leo or a Sagittarius. Even though they were bigger and more violent, they didn't have the sophisticated mental firewalls of the smaller Cancer class. A supercomputer on legs, there was no way he could take one down.

Marshalling his thoughts, he projected a plan to Lyssa, feeding it directly into her mind. Her eyes widened. Obviously it was the first time she'd received any information telepathically. An absurd sense of male triumph filled JJ. She was older than he was, so he hadn't been her first lover. At least he could be her first in this. The first to initiate her into mental contact. Her mind was certainly set up for direct communication...so neat and controlled.

The thought of bedding her while linked hit him. Of course, influencing a human during sex by feeding information into their chaotic brains was a common method employed by Empaths. But a true link was a meld of both minds, with both partners feeding equally to the other.

It was a practice whispered about in the Empath halls...something almost forbidden. JJ had only experienced it twice, with others of his kind. He hadn't found a non-Empath capable of the link. Until now.

"When you're ready, Kitten," he breathed, brushing a kiss against her forehead and levering himself to his feet without a sound. Either this was going to be the most foolhardy thing he'd ever done and would get him killed or he'd be hailed as a hero. He really, really hoped it was going to be the latter.

## Chapter Six

He was nuts. Cute, but fucking nuts. Lyssa shook her head as JJ slid from behind the tree and disappeared into the undergrowth. Only an insane Empath would come up with a plan to take on a rogue cyborg. Usually the only plan that worked against a cyborg was running like hell.

Deliberately she took deep breaths and slowed her breathing. If she was going to pull this off and give JJ the chance he needed, then she had to be calm and centered. *Calm and centered?* her inner voice mocked. *You're going up against a homicidal part-man, part-machine designed to kill and you want calm and centered? Get real, girl!*

Lyssa gritted her teeth and put those thoughts out of her head. She was a Marine. Marines always got the job done, no matter what it was. So she was taking orders from a commander, if that's even what JJ actually was, but it made no difference. There was no way they were getting back to the ship with that thing on their tail, which meant the new mission was getting rid of their little cyborg friend.

Body humming with determination and her mind on nothing but what she had to do, Lyssa slipped from cover with less than her usual finesse. Every third footstep was a little heavier than normal and she cracked a couple of twigs for good measure as she circled the opposite way to JJ.

She felt, rather than saw, the thing's attention shift onto her. An itch developed between her shoulder blades as she crept forward and all her instincts screamed at her to run, get out of there. She hadn't survived so many years in the field by being stupid, and this plan was so bloody stupid, it was insane.

*You distract its attention long enough for me to get close. I'll put it out mentally.*

She shook her head to herself again and padded closer. Flitting from cover to cover, she worked her way toward the cyborg as though she didn't know it was there. In

truth, if she didn't have the extra abilities of her father's race, then she wouldn't have. And if she didn't have the backup of an insane Empath who was about to fry the cyborg's brain, she wouldn't have gotten even this close.

She moved another couple of meters closer and her heart rate doubled. Stopping as though she'd heard something, Lyssa concentrated on calming it. She didn't need the fight or flight reaction to kick in too soon. Too early and her non-human physiology would purge the adrenalin from her system just as she needed it.

Twenty meters out she stopped. Her legs felt like jelly and her breath escaped her lips on short pants. In the war she'd fought both with and against cyborgs. Pisces classes usually, as they were the foot soldiers of the cyborg divisions. The other classes were more specialist; heavy-troopers right through to tactical supercomputers designed to coordinate the battle efforts of hundreds of the things through direct link.

*Come on JJ, do your thing*, she urged mentally as she scanned the area around her with her rifle in high aim. Slightly out of cover, she was in the cyborg's line of sight. It hadn't taken a shot at her yet, but then she hadn't expected it to. For some reason it seemed to be trying to take her and JJ alive.

And she intended to find out why.

Lyssa was doing a bang up job. JJ smiled and slipped out of cover behind the cyborg. It was a Leo class. That was both good and bad. Good because it wouldn't have the sophisticated mental and bio-cybernetic firewalls of the Cancer class. Bad because, if it came down to a physical tussle, the thing could easily snap JJ in two.

His shields locked down tight, JJ padded toward his prey. People often thought that an Empath's abilities were all about getting into other people's brains and messing with their thoughts and feelings. That wasn't true, not always anyway.

Empaths had other abilities, ones they didn't like to talk about and that were different from one to another. JJ's was the ability to conceal everything about himself so completely that he could stand on the crowded civilian deck of any station or ship and

be completely unnoticed. People would walk around him, look through him, everything but realize he was right there in front of them. It was as if their brains didn't recognize him as there, even though their eyes could see him plainly.

His eyes trained on the broad expanse of the cyborg's back, JJ moved closer. He was attuned to any hint of movement. As long as it kept looking toward Lyssa he had a chance. If it turned around...the non-organic computer buried in its brain couldn't be fooled by his mental trick and would raise all kinds of alarms. If that happened, then he was screwed unless Lyssa could get to him in time.

Another step closer and JJ broke out in a cold sweat. He'd never trusted someone as much as he trusted Lyssa in this instant. The realization floored him. An Empath's life was often a lonely one filled with political manipulation and trying to play your superiors to get the assignments you wanted. A game he used to relish, but now, abruptly, wanted no part of.

He took the last step and reached out. His hand latched onto the side of the cyborg's neck and he drove his probe into its mind like a steel spike. Quick and deadly. Jumping in surprise, it started to turn, but JJ had already fed the universal deactivation code directly into its on-board implant. It shut down as though the plug had been pulled, falling into a heap...a rather large heap...at his feet.

Breathing heavily, he looked up as Lyssa crashed through the undergrowth to his side. Her amber gaze swept over the unconscious cyborg for an instant and back to him. Something inside him grew and blossomed as she swept a concerned look over him as though checking he was okay. She cared, she really cared. All of a sudden, the future looked bright.

"He's out. It'll take his on-board at least an hour to reboot after that shutdown code. You want to call the Arcadia to come and get us or should I?"

Even as he spoke, JJ sat down heavily and leaned back against the nearest tree trunk in exhaustion. Driving through a mind like that to deliver information rather than tweak memories and emotions that were already there was draining.

"I'll try. Comms were down..." Lyssa nodded and tapped the com-unit in her ear, then paused as she got an open signal. "That's odd, they were down. Arcadia...this is Ryland. Three for immediate pick-up at my location. Bring class four restraints. We have a guest."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You got one? Excellent, we'll send the CFS Valkyrie in to pick it up for onward transport to the medical test facility at Bornas. It's been a while since we got hold of a Leo, I want to see what kind of mods they've been making. Good work, Commander."

On the screen in front of JJ, Admiral Reilly's face was wreathed in smiles. JJ didn't blame him. They'd bagged a Leo class cyborg, one the medical team on the Arcadia had already established was a gen-one. Which meant it had extensively hacked and modified its base systems. The Combined Fleet medical staff had never figured out how they'd managed it and, thanks to him and Lyssa, they had some evidence to pick apart and test to find out how.

His expression didn't alter and he inclined his head in acknowledgement of the admiral's praise. It never did to let the powers that be know how you were feeling. About anything. There was a pause, then Reilly spoke again.

"And your other assignment? General Ryland..." He trailed off at the expressionless look JJ gave him. If he didn't know better, he'd say the admiral actually winced.

"The General is a hard woman and, as you know, part Telatian." JJ's voice was flat and hard. Despite his orders and his loyalty to the fleet there was no way he was handing anyone control over the woman he loved. JJ took a moment to savor that realization again, hugging the feeling to his heart and basking in the warmth it produced. "I'm an Empath, not a miracle worker."

"You haven't been able to seduce her. I figured as much. She's an odd one." Reilly nodded and sighed heavily. "Okay, you're released from assignment. I understand you

put in for a month's leave recently, so I've approved that. Report to star-base seventeen when your leave is up. Reilly out."

"Understood. Thank you, sir." JJ nodded again, but the scene in front of him was already blank. Levering himself out of his chair, he walked through into the bedroom. He needed to pack, but instead he started to strip en-route to the shower. Perhaps under the influence of the warm water, he'd figure out a way to stay on the Arcadia.

He wanted to. There was no doubt in his mind about that. Even if he had to give up his commission and stay aboard the ship as a civilian, he would. He wasn't proud. He'd do anything to stay close to Lyssa. Provided she wanted him of course.

He groaned as he stripped off his fouled-up combat uniform. He hadn't managed to change since the transport shuttle picked them and their new "guest" up from the surface. There had been an hour of debrief, as Lyssa went through what had gone wrong down on the surface, and yet another hour as they tried to get answers out of the stubbornly silent cyborg.

As JJ had suspected, as soon as the Leo class realized that there was an Empath aboard, he'd gone into info-blackout mode. A full-on systems shutdown that locked his implant memory cells down and isolated him from his combat team network. They wouldn't be able to get anything useful out of him until they could isolate the unlock sequence that would unlock his system. A dynamic sequence code, it was usually generated by the supercomputer in the team, who at this moment could be anywhere in the galaxy.

Needing to make his call to Admiral Reilly, he'd left them to it. Truth be told, no matter how skilled the Arcadia's hackers were, it would be quicker to track down the cyborg's teammate and get the sequence that way.

Lyssa was still there as far as he knew. JJ turned on the shower and shucked his underwear at the same time. After last night and her decision to allow him access to her mind, JJ knew her better than she knew herself. She wouldn't rest until she had the

answers she needed. The fact that she'd lost people down on the surface in what should have been a routine mission would only add to her determination.

He stepped under the warm water and groaned in relief. Water assaulted his skin in a red-hot, needle sharp torrent. Reaching out, he twisted the controls and set it to muscle massage. He ached, literally ached from head to foot, and that was after just a couple of hours in the field. And Lyssa did this for a job? He needed a week's vacation, a full body massage and a hot woman in his bed. Correction, he needed Lyssa in his bed.

Thoughts of red hair over golden skin filled his mind and JJ groaned again. Not in pain or relief this time, but in remembered pleasure. His blood heated and surged, filling his cock and bringing him to half-mast. What was it about the woman that just a thought of her could have him ready and eager within seconds?

He closed his eyes and leaned back against the cool tiled wall of the shower. Wrapping a fist around his cock, he accessed his memories. Pulling one off wasn't as satisfying as Lyssa actually being here with him, but with some mental stimulation, it was the next best thing...

\* \* \* \* \*

It had been a long, long day. Lyssa rubbed tiredly at the back of her neck and looked at the console screen on the desk in front of her. The green squiggles on the screen stubbornly refused to resolve into words. She squinted and tried again, then wished she hadn't.

*Message from Admiral Reilly, D to Mj.General Ryland, L. Recall of Empath, Meyers J, to command. Convey Empath to location of choice for onward travel. Reilly out.*

JJ was leaving? The air rushed out of her lungs as though she'd been hit by a small shuttle at faster-than-light speed. Stunned, she flopped back in her chair and just stared at the screen as the Fleet logo rotated slowly. He couldn't leave. Not so soon. He'd only been on the Arcadia three weeks!

*And for most of that you've ignored him,* the snide little voice in her head reminded her. She wouldn't blame him if he wanted off the ship at the next stop. She had to talk to him. Before he got the message from Reilly he was being released from his assignment on the Arcadia.

In one movement she was up and out of her chair. Need and panic filled her as she all but rebounded off the doorframe on her way through it. She rushed through the corridors of the ship at a near run. In the sections that were empty she did break into a trot. She had to get to JJ, had to convince him he couldn't leave the ship. Couldn't leave her.

It took her less than two minutes to reach his quarters. A couple of meters away she slowed and gulped air to calm her ragged breathing. She must have set a new company record for the hundred-meter dash there.

She waved her hand in front of the access pad at the side of the door without much hope that it would open and let her in. To do that he'd have had to add her name to his access codes. Normally no one did that unless they were in a committed relationship.

They'd had sex twice. It wasn't like they had anything nearing a basis for any sort of relationship. Tears threatened, pricking hot at the back of Lyssa's throat. Telatians never cried, but here she was, nearly in floods of tears. The access panel bleeped, turned green and then the door slid open. Dizzy with relief, Lyssa stepped through before her luck ran out and it slid shut in her face.

The room was empty. Lyssa turned slowly, noting the clothing strewn across the floor. There was no evidence of packing. She'd noticed that one thing about him between the bed and the door this morning. He had more personal belongings than she did.

"JJ?" she called softly, padding toward the bedroom on silent feet. He hadn't left already, had he? He couldn't have. She hadn't told him. Lyssa swallowed as she faced her own feelings. She hadn't told him that she thought she loved him. Cocky, arrogant and so dominant it made her shiver just thinking about it, she'd finally met her match.

And she never wanted to let him go.

"JJ? Are you in here?" she asked as she reached the door to the bedroom. Nothing. The made bed looked back at her in silence. The splash of water from the bathroom was the only answer she got.

He was in the shower.

Taking a shuddering breath, she headed that way.

"JJ, it's me." She marshaled her courage and pushed at the closed door. It opened a crack and billowed steam from the shower through the small opening. "Can I come in?"

A deep, masculine groan answered her. What was he doing? Was he in pain? She pushed the door open further and stopped, stunned.

"Oh." Her lips dropped open and she stared, wide-eyed, at the sight on display in front of her.

JJ was leaning against the wall of the shower, totally naked. Water cascaded down his hard, toned body and for a moment she was lost in admiration of the naked form of the man she wanted to take as mate. Only for a moment though. He moved and groaned again, his head thrown back and his eyes closed as he pumped his cock with one large hand.

An illicit thrill shot through Lyssa as she stepped further into the room and closed the door behind her with a small snick. She couldn't take her eyes off his hand. The wide, swollen head of his cock appeared and disappeared as he pumped in a fast rhythm. His thighs were braced to support him and his free hand splayed over the wall for balance.

Lyssa licked her lips and leaned back against the door to enjoy the show. He was delicious. Simply delicious.

Another moan tumbled from his lips as he moved and cupped his balls with his free hand. A finger on the other swept over the head of his cock and he moaned again.

"Lyssa..."

"Yes, love?"

JJ's eyes shot open and his head jerked up as his hand stilled on his cock. The musk of sex and need filled the room, swirling around them both. She had to give it to him. Despite being surprised, he didn't squeal or try to cover up in embarrassment.

"Lyssa?" His voice was full of curiosity and a little surprise. Almost as though he wasn't sure she was really there.

"Yes, love... This conversation is getting a little circular, don't you think?" she asked, tilting her head with a wicked smile on her lips. "Why don't you carry on with what you were doing and we can talk later?"

The surprise drained out of his eyes to be replaced by a blistering heat that rivaled the sands where she'd been born. He leaned back against the tiles and started to stroke his cock again. Lyssa shivered as images of the two of them together filled her mind. Image after image. Wicked and sexy acts that made her cheeks burn and stole her breath. Wait... She paused at the last image. She'd never done that in her life. He was in her head again!

"JJ!"

"What? Don't you want to try it?" He grinned, his expression unrepentant.

He dropped his hand from his cock and beckoned. She stepped forward, trying not to betray her eagerness, to the edge of the shower. Close but not so close she got wet from the spray of the shower.

"Is that even possible?"

"Oh more than possible." His whisper was a wicked promise. "I want you, Lyssa. In that and every other way. I want to take you to bed and take you until you scream my name."

Her body and heart sang at his words. He wanted her. Then she sobered up. Wanting and fucking weren't the same as love. It wasn't the same as a quick affair whilst she waited for him to get bored and leave her for someone younger. Because he

would. She'd seen how these things went. Older female officer took a younger lover with an eye on his career and —

"I'll resign."

"What?"

Now he had all her attention. An impressive feat considering he was still stroking that magnificent cock in lazy strokes. His eyes were hooded and filled with darkness as he pleased himself right in front of her but with his attention focused on her.

"What do you mean, you'll resign?"

Deliberately she kept her attention away from what was happening below his waistline and looked into his face instead. A bead of water trailed from the tight, wet curls on the top of his head and down. She followed its progress down his neck and over the toned muscles of his chest.

"Exactly what I said. If you're worried I only want you for what you can do for my career, then I'll resign."

Wonder filled her. Her voice was entirely too breathy and girlish as she replied, but she ignored it. "You'd do that? For me? Why?"

"Uh-huh." He nodded, sending yet more water drops on their journey down his gorgeous body. "Because I think you're the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen."

Stepping forward suddenly, he pulled her into his arms. Feeling water soaking through her uniform, she squeaked and tried to struggle free. His grip was like iron and her struggles lasted a nano-second before his lips claimed hers in a soft kiss that made her heart ache.

"Beautiful inside and out, you're the woman I want to spent the rest of my life with. It might be shorter than yours, but I promise you won't regret a second of it."

"I'm wet," she complained, her lips a mere hairsbreadth from his. Her mind appeared to have gone AWOL, leaving her lips issuing words on automatic.

“Oh I intend to make sure of it, Kitten.” His promise was a whisper against her lips as he pulled her under the full spray of the shower and started to divest her of her uniform. “Or do I have to prove it before you’ll ask me to stay aboard?”

The warmth in Lyssa’s heart was eclipsed by the heat in her loins as he stripped her combat shirt and dropped the sodden cloth on the floor behind her. Her bra went the same way a moment later, leaving her breasts open to his hands and lips.

She drove her hands into the tight curls of his hair and held him to her as he sucked a nipple into the warmth of his mouth and suckled. Love and desire wrapped around her heart as she smiled and closed her eyes.

“Oh I think you need to prove it to me again...and again...and again...”

## About the Author

Multi-published author Mina Carter was born and raised in Middle Earth (otherwise known as the Midlands, England). After a slew of careers ranging from logistics to land-surveying, she can now be found in the wilds of Leicestershire with her real-life hero and their young daughter...the true boss of the family.

Suffering the curse of eternal curiosity, Mina never tires of learning new skills, which has led to aromatherapy, corsetry, chain-mail making, welding, canoeing, shooting, and pole-dancing, to name but a few.

She juggles being a mum, working full time and writing, tossing another ball in the air for her cover artwork. For Mina, writing time is the wee hours of the morning before anyone wakes up and starts making demands or any spare minute that can be begged, bought or conned.

Her first stories were penned at age 11, when she used a stationery set meant for Christmas thank you letters to write stories instead. More recently, she wrote for her own amusement and to save on outrageous monthly book bills. Now she's totally addicted and needs her daily writing fix or heads roll!

Mina welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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