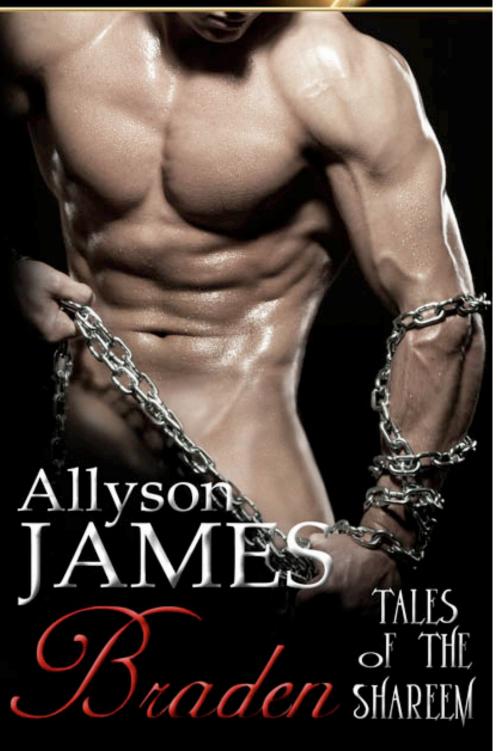
Ellora's Cave FEEN



Braden

Allyson James

Book Six, Tales of the Shareem

A level-three Shareem, created solely to give sexual pleasure through dominance, Braden is also on a mission. A mission to help get all Shareem off Bor Narga. The highborn women who rule the desert planet enforce cruel restrictions on the Shareem, deeming them less than human. Creatures incapable of feeling.

But Braden feels—especially for Elisa, the librarian who aided him while researching his mission. Elisa is a celibate; Braden can be terminated for merely touching her. And touch her, he does. Teaching Elisa what it means to feel, to want, to revel in pleasures of the flesh.

When their forbidden trysts result in new restrictions, Braden realizes he's put his fellow Shareem, his mission and, most importantly, Elisa in danger. To save her, he must leave her; only pain and hardship come from loving a Shareem. But his precious librarian has other ideas...

Ellora's Cave Publishing



Braden

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Edited by Kelli Collins Cover art by Dar Albert

Electronic book publication March 2011

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BRADEN

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Chapter One

A Shareem walks into a library...

Braden's friends had called him crazy when he volunteered to go to the Serestine Quarter library for the information. Libraries had only recently started allowing Shareem in, because seven-foot-tall men who radiated sexuality were way too dangerous to be around normal people.

"Be careful in there," Ky had growled. "All those dead subjects will shrivel your cock. And a Shareem without a cock isn't good for shit."

Shareem were genetically enhanced males, tall and hard-muscled, built for sex and sensual pleasure. They could scent a woman's pheromones and know when a woman wanted them, like the cute one Braden saw behind the desk at the end of the walkway.

Braden followed the path through the three-story atrium with galleries of terminals, a trickling waterfall, a peaceful hush. The librarian pretended not to notice him, but her awareness screamed itself to Braden's finely tuned senses. He saw her eyes flicker though she kept them on the screen before her, felt the slight rise in her body temperature. She'd noticed him all right.

She looked so efficient tapping on her terminal with slender, sure fingers, her veil looped to reveal a smooth face and wide brown eyes. Her nose was a little crooked, and she hadn't had it fixed, which meant she wasn't self-conscious. Probably didn't even know she was lovely. Robes that announced her as single and celibate clung to a body that made Braden long to teach her celibacy wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Ky was an idiot. The library wasn't shriveling Braden's cock—it was making it grow.

Braden reached the counter and stretched his arms along its edge. The librarian's gaze shot to the black chain on his biceps before she made herself look into his eyes.

"May I help you?"

Oh, you may darling, you may.

Do me a favor, Braden, Rees had said to him. Be subtle.

Hey, I got this.

Rees had rolled his eyes. *Just get them to let you use the terminal*.

Braden answered the librarian's question with a smile. "Depends."

"I mean, what do you need?"

Her soft and whispery voice made his hard-on grow. *You, sweet darling.* "I want to look up singing spheres."

"Ah."

Did she look disappointed? Braden hoped she looked disappointed. He could take her out to the heat-shielded garden behind the library and help her shimmy off those celibate's robes. He'd get terminated for it, but damn, wouldn't they have fun before the end?

"A friend of mine makes singing spheres," Braden said. "I thought I'd look them up."

Her brown eyes had flecks of green in them. He'd bet she had an off-planet ancestor somewhere in her makeup. All pure Bor Nargan women's eyes were brown.

"Why not ask your friend about them?" she asked.

Logical. Why'd she have to be so logical? She was supposed to shiver and smile and let Braden do anything he wanted.

"Because Shareem have never been allowed into libraries before," he said, trying to sound offhand. "Looking up singing spheres is a good excuse."

She smelled fine too. Braden inhaled a mixture of soap and female, no perfume, thank the gods. Nothing to get in the way of her.

His skin tingled with the pheromones she gave off. Her robes were thick, but he imagined her nipples pearling behind them. All he had to do was corner her and cup his hand over her breast, and he'd find her nice and firm, nipples hard as little pebbles.

The librarian cleared her throat and Braden popped his eyes open, realizing he'd drifted to fantasy land.

"Any of the terminals on this floor will tell you about singing spheres."

Her voice was prim, but the dusky tone of it already had him hard. If Braden were kind, he'd go to the terminal, look up his stuff and leave her alone.

But Braden wasn't kind, and he'd been sent here on a mission. Rees' instructions had been very specific.

Braden slid his hands farther apart on the desk, leaning down to her eye level. "Those terminals will tell me a little. But I want to know *everything*. Details on mining, geology, the artists, impact on the planet's economy, stuff like that."

The librarian blinked, surprised. She'd probably been told Shareem couldn't understand complex concepts like geology and economic impact, let alone *spell* "economic impact". To most, Shareem were little better than animals, considered nonhuman. Walking hormones bred for a lady's pleasure.

At least, pleasure had been the original intent of the Shareem program. These days Shareem were taboo, barely tolerated in a society that had decided sex was bad for physical and mental health.

The information Rees needed wasn't entirely restricted, but the terminal Braden would need to use to get it was. The library's public terminals accessed information from every *public* source on this planet plus from nearby planets and space stations. But Braden needed to look into the databases of Bor Narga's own ministries, which were not open to the public. Much trickier.

The librarian cleared her throat. "Let me check something."

"You take your time, sweetheart."

Her fingers skimmed rapidly over her screens and her keyboard, her touch featherlight. Braden imagined those fingers doing their dance over his body, and he shifted, his cock rock-hard in his leggings. Everything she did was a turn-on.

The librarian apparently found nothing on her screens that said Shareem couldn't use the restricted terminal. Braden knew she wouldn't, because Rees had already checked.

The new regulations let Shareem use libraries and library materials without limitation, provided they were supervised by a high-ranking librarian. This lady was head of the reference department. Her holopic and name—Elisa n'Arell—were listed on the library's information site and posted by the front door as well.

The fact that Braden wanted to peel back those robes and lick her body while he lay on top of her was just a bonus.

The librarian clicked off her terminal with a decided touch. "Very well. Please come with me."

Her robes floated as she came around the desk, showing a flash of slender ankles and sensible shoes. *Sensible shoes. Be still my beating heart.*

But unfortunately she was a celibate, from one of those Way of the...Whatever...orders. She'd already taken the robes and declared herself. Completely off limits to all males, not to mention Shareem.

"Sit here," she said.

Braden plopped into the chair, enjoying the sensation of a sweetheart commanding him instead of the other way around. Braden was a level three, which meant the lady did what *he* said, obeyed his every word.

The cubicle with the terminal had sound-muffling – perfect.

"What's your name, love?" Braden asked.

"Shh."

"OK, that's unusual, but I can go with it."

She frowned. "Be quiet."

Braden pointed to the wavy glass. "There's sound-muffling."

"Which is not the same as soundproofing. We mustn't disturb the others."

Mustn't. Damn, Braden had met a woman who used *mustn't* in casual conversation.

Did she say other sexy words, like *shan't*? How about something big, like *wherewithal*?

Braden, I shan't resist your commands, and I have the wherewithal to ride your cock all night.

And Ky thought libraries were boring?

The librarian leaned forward, silk robes carrying her womanly musk, and pulled a small touchpad toward him. "We keep a record of who uses this terminal," she said. "I need your thumbprint."

Braden held up his thumb and smiled. "Mine's too big."

True. Braden's hands were large, the touchpad designed for slim female hands. Bor Narga discriminated like that, which, today, worked to Braden's advantage.

Rees had looked this up too. A thumbprint was needed to access the terminal, but the thumbprint of the authorizing librarian was just as good. Better, even.

It's perfectly fine for a librarian to look at what I need you to find, Rees had said. No suspicions raised.

The librarian's impatient breath huffed warmth on Braden's skin. Her breath was minty, and her mouth would taste good.

She pressed her thumbprint to the pad only after a moment's hesitation and started typing on the keyboard.

Braden felt a twinge of guilt as he smiled his thanks. This little sweetheart deserved to be kissed, stroked, pleasured, teased...not used for her Ministry clearance.

The librarian touched the screen and a picture of a multicolored crystal floated out of it. "There you are. A singing sphere."

"Beautiful," Braden said, looking at her.

Singing spheres, made from crystals mined in the desert mountains, radiated exquisite music when touched. The spheres were rare, prized and hideously expensive. A Shareem Braden knew, Rylan, lived out in the middle of nowhere with Maia his lifemate, and crafted them.

"I've always wanted one," the librarian said, her voice wistful. She was looking at the screen, eyes soft.

Braden suddenly pictured himself giving her a singing sphere as a gift. He envisioned her surprise and delight, her warm smile, the light in her eyes. He'd kiss her as she cooed her thanks, tasting her mouth, her lips hot and slick.

Braden sensed a liveliness in her that living behind veils and celibacy hadn't dampened. This lady was not a wilting flower of highborn womanhood, and Braden wanted to find out how *un*-wilting she really was.

Hell.

The librarian's scent brushed him as she touched labels on the screen. "This is the economic database, and this one is the export database."

"Thank you, love. I appreciate it."

Braden couldn't technically touch her without permission, but he managed to "accidentally" slide his fingers down the backs of hers.

Her eyes darkened, pupils widening. Lovely, lovely eyes. Her eyelashes were black as night, and Braden wanted to kiss them. Better still, have them fluttering on his cock.

Her eyes had a darker brown ring around the irises, another indication of an offworld ancestor. Braden could study her eyes for hours.

He'd like it best in his bed, her arching to his thrusts. He'd ride her slowly, then faster, fists planted on either side of her body, watching those eyes as he took her to climax.

The librarian blushed, pulled her hand away and said quickly, "I'll leave you to it."

Braden could tell that she tried not to touch him as she left him, but the silk of her robes brushed his bare calf. The whisper of fabric licked erotic currents through his body and made his unruly cock stiffer than ever.

Braden sat still for a long time after she left, trying to convince his cock, balls and imagination to behave. He wanted sex, and he wanted to fuck his librarian in all ways invented, and then he wanted to invent some more just for her. But it wasn't meant to be.

Braden drew a long breath. *She's celibate, and I'm here to do a job.*

Fuck, fuck, fucking hell.

Braden pressed his palms to the table and closed his eyes, drawing deep breaths. Fighting his genetic programming was a serious bitch, but he had to do it. He had to get the info for Rees.

It took a while for the white-hot pressure to go down, but at last Braden opened his eyes and made himself get on with it. He sat with his back to a wall, the terminal cubical opaque for privacy. All to the good.

As soon as he could see straight, Braden ditched the singing spheres, brought up cargo shipping schedules and started tapping information into the handheld that he'd hidden in his pocket.

* * * * *

"There." Braden tossed the handheld across the table to Rees. "Hope it's helpful."

Rees, a tall Shareem with blond hair and a stern look that could dissolve quickly into a grin, especially when he was around his lady, took up the handheld.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked Braden.

Braden shrugged and planted himself on a stool. "Nothing's wrong. I got the info you wanted. It was all there, just like you said."

Flight information on every cargo ship on and off Bor Narga for the last six months. Routes, lines, scheduled and unscheduled, official or unofficial.

"The librarian's thumbprint, not yours?" Rees asked.

"Yeah, yeah. And she doesn't know my name."

"You futzed the time stamp?"

"Just like you showed me. There'll be no record of Shareem on that terminal, and records of that search will make it look like it happened before I showed up."

Rees was good at figuring out shit like that. While Braden was level three, Rees was no level anyone understood. Rees had been an experiment, a Shareem made of all three levels combined. His creators at DNAmo never should have made him, had gone one step too far—or so said the stuck-up bitches who ran the planet of Bor Narga.

The scientists had fucked themselves when they'd created Rees. Rees had been so good, so smart and so resourceful that he'd escaped, and that escape had been the catalyst that brought down DNAmo. The Shareem had found themselves free of the labs, free of being sold to the highest bidder. Free, period.

The Bor Nargan government had then wanted to hunt down and slaughter all Shareem. That decision had been voted down as a bit too cruel. Barely. So Shareem were as restricted as hell and not considered human, with few rights. But allowed to live.

Rees didn't officially exist. No Shareem called Rees appeared on any records and in any databases. Even patrollers seemed to not notice him when they got hot to check the ident card of every Shareem who passed. He was that good.

The nonexistent Shareem now frowned across the tall table at Braden and signaled Judith to bring them drinks.

"So what's wrong?" Rees asked him.

Braden thanked Judith for the ale she thunked in front of him and she turned away, too busy at the moment to talk or flirt.

"Nothing," Braden said. "I didn't like using her, that's all."

Rees started to grin. "Let me guess..."

Chapter Two

"Guess what?" Braden wasn't in the mood.

Rees kept grinning. "She was pretty."

"Damn straight she was." *Too fucking pretty to be stuck in celibate robes behind a desk.* "And she was nice to me. No, wait—not nice. Fair. She didn't like a Shareem in her library but she wanted to honor the new rules and help me."

"You liked her."

"I don't like thinking about her taking flack for any shit that comes from this. It's not her fault she was behind the desk when I walked in."

Rees took a sip of ale. "How about if I point out that it's highborn women like her who put us in this situation in the first place?"

"Doesn't help. Besides, you're talking out your ass, because your lady Talan is one of the highest of the highborns."

Rees laughed. Talan d'Urvey was in love with the shithead, would do anything for him. "Yeah, that's true. Tell you what. Once things cool down, you can go back and repay her. Give your librarian a night she'll never forget. Be her lifelong guilty secret. Better still, do it in the library after it's closed."

"I can't," Braden growled, gripping his ale. "She's a celibate."

"In training?"

"No. She's already jumped off that cliff. I saw her robes. The Way of the Something-or-Other. Fully initiated."

"Now I understand why you're so tetchy. My advice—go to the pools, forget Lady Celibate and hook up with a Shareem groupie. Sate yourself, make your brain stop boiling. You'll be fine."

"Fuck you," Braden said, but in a calmer voice.

Rees was such a hypocrite. If Braden suggested to Rees that he forget about Talan and get over her by sating himself on a woman who chased Shareem, Rees would come apart with rage.

Rees was partly right, though. Braden couldn't have his librarian. She was celibate, off limits. End of story. He needed to get over it.

But there was a difference between physical satiation and being with a lady you wanted to be with.

Braden still wanted to compensate her, though, for what he'd done. Shareem had been bred in vats by cold-hearted geneticists for other people's use. Braden had been

experimented on, operated on, stuck full of shots every time he turned around. He knew what it felt like to be used for other people's schemes.

Braden had caused a lot of trouble at DNAmo. He'd resisted taking his inoculations—which included sedatives and other creative drugs. If a woman they threw to him for sexual experiments was too afraid of him, Braden would refuse to touch her. This resulted in punishment—to Braden—but like hell he'd hurt the lady in question.

The stupid researchers never understood that level three wasn't about obedience and pain—it was about care, protection and trust. The researchers expected to watch Braden put the woman in her place, but it didn't work that way. If the lady had real fear, Braden refused to exploit it.

The handlers beat him with shock rods and gave him more inoculations when he didn't cooperate, but so be it. Braden was strong enough to withstand the punishment, but some of the ladies who'd signed up for the experiments weren't strong enough to take Braden, and he'd known that.

Shareem were supposed to be docile and do what they were told, until time to perform whatever sexual acts their clients wanted. Then they were to be the ultimate sex toy—until playtime was over. Then it was back to their rooms, sated and obedient.

Yeah, that had worked.

Braden had been created for other people's use, and the fact that he had used the pretty librarian left a bad taste in his mouth.

He finished his ale, left the table and made his way across the room to the little hallway that held Judith's public terminal. Braden put a call through to Rylan and asked him to pretty please make him a signing sphere. A very special one.

* * * * *

Two weeks later, Elisa returned home from her shift at the library to find an opaque white box sitting on the table in her foyer.

"What's this?" she asked Alonda, her housekeeper, as the woman walked briskly through the hall.

Alonda stopped and peered at the crate. "I believe it's a box, m'lady."

"Very funny. Where did it come from?"

"Delivered by mail. Before that, I have no idea." Alonda turned away and continued toward her domain in the back of the house, leaving Elisa alone.

Well, there was only one way to find out. Elisa set down her bag, slid off her sunblocking robes, and hung them and her breath mask in the closet. She touched her thumb to the pad on the crate to indicate that she, the designated recipient, accepted the package. Air hissed, and the sides of the crate slid back. Elisa's mouth dropped open as she stared at a globe of pure crystal shot through with myriad colors. A faint hum, a beautiful note, rippled from it.

A singing sphere.

By all that was holy, a singing sphere.

It was larger than those she'd seen for sale for stupendous prices in Serestine Quarter galleries. A white light pulsed at the center of the globe, as though the heart of the sphere whispered to her.

The crystal had been mounted on a natural stone base, beautiful sandstone from the desert mountains. Etched into the stone were the words, *For Elisa n'Arell*, *with thanks*.

She remembered the deep, velvety voice of the Shareem in her library, the Shareem she'd thought about every minute of every day since she'd met him.

My friend makes them, he'd said in an offhanded way about the singing spheres, his blue eyes mesmerizing. And Elisa had said, I've always wanted one.

Elisa hadn't told the Shareem her name. But the information wouldn't have been difficult for him to discover. She was listed at the front door of the library as well as on the library's fact site as head of reference, and she'd been sitting at the reference desk.

How the Shareem had discovered her name wasn't a mystery. Why he'd sent the sphere was.

Elisa reached out and touched the crystal.

The sphere whispered with sound, growing more musical by the second. Ripples filled the air like a sweet chime. Beautiful.

This was an exquisite work of art, and worth a fortune. The Shareem had simply given it to her.

Alonda hurried back into the room. "M'lady, what—" She stopped. "Oh, how lovely. The Way of the Sky let you buy this? How nice of them."

"No, it's a gift. To me. For something I did for someone at the library."

Alonda looked impressed. "Generous. It will look nice in that nook." She pointed to a bare niche across from the front door. "Always thought that wall was too blank."

"I shouldn't keep it." But it would break Elisa's heart to let it go.

Part of taking the robes in the Way of the Sky meant living simply—for Bor Nargan women, this meant a house smaller than a mansion and a staff of only two or three. The women of the Way were to meet basic needs comfortably but without ostentation. Elisa was fine with the restrictions, liking her small house with its clean design and empty spaces. It was peaceful.

Singing spheres were considered luxuries. They were hideously expensive and entirely impractical. But so beautiful.

Alonda lifted the sphere in its base, carried it to the niche and set it inside. "There. That looks nice." She dusted off her hands then took up the empty crate and carried it away.

Elisa studied the sphere as the waves of music sweetened the room. An amazing gift.

She walked down the hall to her study and sat at her terminal. Typing in her personal code, she gained clearance to the Ministry of Non-Human Life Forms' database, and called up the files on Shareem.

* * * * *

"Braden's House of Sex," Braden rumbled as he keyed on his terminal. "I know all your desires and how to make them real — Well, shit."

He was staring into the brown eyes of Elisa n'Arell, the pretty librarian who'd filled Braden's dreams for the last two weeks with the dirtiest fantasies he'd ever conceived.

His mouth went dry. "Hey there, sweetheart. You found me."

Elisa wet her lips, making him want to reach through the terminal and wet them for her. "You sent me the singing sphere."

"Guilty."

"Why?"

Braden made himself shrug. "You said you wanted one and I can get them, easy."

"But you shouldn't have."

Elisa didn't say that in the pleased way a woman tittered over a bauble—*Oh, you shouldn't have!* Elisa really meant that Braden shouldn't have done it.

"If you refuse it you'll offend Rylan," Braden said. "He made it especially for you. Plus, you'll offend *me*, who bribed him into doing it. I might have to spank you, darlin'."

He could feel her sweet ass under his palm already. Firm little buttocks, oh, so good. She'd squirm and squeal, and her skin would turn so prettily pink.

Elisa did the lip-wetting thing again. "I want to meet you."

Hell yes.

Except - celibate. Forbidden. "Come on, sweet baby, don't tease your Shareem."

"I meant that I want to talk to you. Where can we meet?"

In my bedroom, in an alley, in a garden. Wherever you want, honey. "Your library's a good place."

"No," she said quickly. "And not my house, either. Someplace neutral."

Nothing was neutral when a Shareem was involved.

Having the librarian come to Pas City where Braden lived was a bad idea. Not only might the slums scare a sweetie like her away, Rees wouldn't be happy. The last two

weeks had been quiet—no patrollers questioning why Braden had been to an uptown library, no one connecting the information Braden had snagged from the library terminal to Shareem. But still, Rees wanted to be careful. Which made sense, because their lives were on the line. All Shareem lives.

Rees, damn you, the things I do for you.

"Tell you what, darlin'," Braden said. "I'll grab a train and head up the hill to Serestine Station B and wait for you there. The last train back down leaves at midnight—if I don't see you by then, I get on the train and go home, no questions asked. All right?"

They'd be in public so she wouldn't worry about him ravishing her. Shareem couldn't touch a lady until she gave him permission—programming again—but not everyone believed that.

The station was also a place where Elisa could remain robed and veiled, anonymous. If she got cold feet and wanted to back out, Braden would simply go home. Nothing lost.

Except a chance to see her again.

Elisa nodded, looking almost pleased. "An excellent idea. I will see you there."

She signed off, leaving Braden to gaze at a blank screen.

His dirty fantasies reared their ugly heads again. Sex in a public place was fucking exciting, the possibility of being caught adding to the fun. Serestine Station B had nooks and crannies everywhere.

Elisa was celibate, sure, but that didn't mean Braden couldn't dream about being with her. He'd get her in a corner, hidden from the platform, and slide her robes off. Next her dress or whatever she wore underneath, until she stood naked against the painted wall. Her nipples would be dark and tight against creamy skin, her pussy already wet, moisture on her curls.

She'd smile at him with her pretty mouth while Braden commanded her to get on her knees. She'd do it, and then he'd order her to put that mouth on his cock.

He'd stand with his back to the station, screening her from view while she closed silken lips around him. She's suck, lick, nibble, her hands stealing up to cup his ass.

Braden would stroke her hair, gently move his hips back and forth, back and forth. He'd watch her eyes close, her lips move on his cock, her tongue swipe around the tip. It would feel so fucking good, her mouth wet and hot, the suckling making him want to come and come.

She'd open her eyes and smile up at him, cock still full in her mouth. Braden would loosen her hair until it spread over her bare back, sinking his fingers into its softness. Elisa's fingers would bite into his ass, and then she'd snake one finger to his anus, sliding it inside just enough to make him wild.

Fucking good.

Too good. Braden's man was standing tall, pissed off at him for thinking about what he couldn't have.

Jerking off would release him, but Braden's hand was becoming boring company. It never laughed at his jokes or made good conversation. He could find another female—Judith, maybe, who was always willing to help a Shareem release—but Braden didn't like to think about one woman when he was with another. Unfair to all members of the equation.

Braden stripped off his tunic and loincloth, took up the bottle of lube always kept handy and squirted some onto his cock.

"Elisa," he whispered as he smoothed the lube onto his erection. His fingers soothed him slightly, but not enough. They'd never be enough.

Braden moved his closed hand up to his tip, tickling the slit with his thumb before sliding back down. He got off the chair, put one foot up on the table and glided his hand down to his balls, which were hard and tight, hot.

He patted his balls a little, trying to comfort himself, but nothing was working. He ran the heel of his hand up his cock again, closing his fist around it when he reached the top.

Back down, up again. More lube. Stroke, pull, squeeze. Stroke, pull, squeeze.

"Elisa." Gods, what a beautiful name. Just saying it made him want her.

"I have your mouth all over me, sucking and licking, making me come. My come is all over your face, and you're laughing. I bend you over and spank your ass for laughing at me. It's so red. It feels so good, your tight, sweet ass under my hand.

"I'm shoving you against the wall and you're still smiling at me. Your pussy is so wet, your come trickling over your legs. I stick my cock right into that wetness, going up into your pussy until you stop laughing. You tell me how big I am as I wedge into your tightness. You don't know if you can take me.

"But you do take me, more and more. You're so hot and wet that you open for me, and take my twelve-inch Shareem cock as far as it will go.

"Then you start moaning, making all those beautiful noises you'd make when you're fucked. My whole body presses against you, your breasts hard on my chest, your nipples scraping me. Your nails rake down my back, your feet press my ass as you hang on.

"I'm fucking you, fucking you so hard, so good, and you are so damn tight. So damn, damn tight, my Elisa..."

Words faded as Braden's mind went blank to all sensation but friction on cock. His body knew it wasn't Elisa, so it was nowhere near as good. But hell, right now this was all he had.

Braden's cock got tighter, harder, his body hotter than hell—or Bor Narga, whichever was worse. He felt the come, the jerking pulses, the need to squirt all over Elisa and inside her.

"Damn, woman, I want your pussy," he moaned.

Then he screamed, "Elisa!" And came all over the place.

Braden braced himself on the wall, nearly sobbing with the relief of his orgasm. Ropes of come circled his fingers, the cream of a man who was dying for a woman. He was breathing hard, fast, panting. Braden threw his head back, his hips moving faster.

Fuck, fuck. Fuck!

And then it was over. Braden fell against the wall, panting in release.

He felt a tiny bit better but it wasn't as good, not nearly as good, as being inside Elisa. Elisa would be perfection.

Once Braden could walk again he staggered into his bathroom. A towel beckoned from the rack and he grabbed it, wrapping it around his too-sensitive cock.

Braden groaned. He daydreamed of Elisa's slim fingers, so efficient on the library terminal. What would they feel like gently cleaning him off with the towel?

Aw, damn it.

His cock was rising again. Braden slammed on his water shower, stepped under the hot stream and let his hand have its wicked way with him again.

* * * * *

Braden checked the time readout on the train platform for the zillionth time. A quarter of an hour to midnight, and Elisa still hadn't shown.

She wasn't going to—Braden had figured that by now. He'd have to go home again, back to his fantasies, back to another shower and another bottle of lube. He'd jerked off so many times his hand was going to start demanding candy and jewelry.

The last train left at midnight, and if Braden didn't get on it, the two female patrollers who wandered the platform would arrest him. Maybe stun-gunning him just for fun.

Patrollers were trained to resist the calming effect of Shareem pheromones, some patrollers better at it than others. Rees, the master, rendered their resistance training useless—Rees could make the patrollers not take notice of him or forget what they were about to ask him. They always neglected to demand his ident card, the shit. When another Shareem was with Rees, he could extend that fuzzy forgetfulness to both of them, but Braden was on his own tonight.

These patrollers had been eyeing Braden since he'd arrived, watching him lounge on a bench drinking coffee as hovertrain after hovertrain went back to Pas City without him.

They moved toward Braden now, ready to be pains in his ass.

"You've been here a long time, Shareem," one said.

She spoke in the sneering, condescending tone that all patrollers used. They must take seminars in sneering.

"Yeah?" Braden said. "So have you."

"It's our job to be here," the second said. Yep, same seminar.

"Must be rough having nothing to do but follow a man around a train station," Braden said.

"You're not a man," the second one said.

Suck me, woman.

The first one held out her hand. "Let me see your ident card."

"Why? You can look me up in the database. My picture's in there. Not my best shot, but you get the idea."

"Ident card."

Fuckers. A Shareem refusing to give a patroller an ident card would be immediately arrested. If Braden got hauled off to the nearest patrol station he'd miss Elisa, who still had ten minutes.

Braden tugged a piece of plastic from the belt that also housed his breath mask and slapped the card into the woman's hand. Without thanking him, she tucked the card into her handheld and frowned at the readout.

"You're the one called Braden."

"So glad you can read."

"Looks like you're due for your inoculations soon. Why haven't you gotten them?"

Because Braden hated his six-month inoculations and put them off until the last possible minute. Back at DNAmo he'd never known exactly what they were going to shoot into him, and sometimes they'd had to hold him down to do it.

The only medic he went to now was Katarina, his best friend's lover and a friend in her own right. Katarina mixed the concoction herself and told Braden exactly what was in it, and he trusted her. But Braden's old fears died hard.

The inoculations were redundant, because every known disease had been programmed out of Shareem genetics from the get-go. *All* diseases, not just sexually transmitted ones.

The shots also kept the Shareem from reproducing, which, to Braden, showed a big flaw in the "Shareem aren't human" idea. If Shareem weren't human, why were humans so worried about Shareem making babies? Even if a Shareem managed to make a child, then logically—if Shareem weren't human—that child would be sterile. Like mules. Automatic end of problem.

But the Ministry of Non-Human Life Forms was inflexible. Sterility drugs it was.

The patroller handed Braden back his card. "You know that if you miss your shots, it's instant termination."

Braden let his eyes widen. "It is? Damn, I'm so glad you told me."

"Here comes your train," the patroller said. "Get on it."

The train was early. Braden glanced at the clock, noting the librarian had seven whole minutes left to get there.

The hovertrain slid smoothly into the station, sending displaced air over Braden and the patrollers. The damn women were going to stand there until he boarded.

The train doors opened but not many people got on. Few highborn wanted to go to the gritty part of the metropolis this late, and most had private transportation anyway. Workers from Pas City who had jobs up here had departed hours ago.

"On," the first patroller said. Both had hands on their weapons.

Braden gave them a wave and a grin. "It's been sweet chatting with you. Ta-ta."

Ignoring their ugly looks, Braden stepped onto the train, walked down the mostly empty car and took a seat alone. No one gave him a second glance—Pas City people were used to Shareem.

The doors slammed. Braden saw no flutter of robes from a highborn woman running to catch the last train, no feminine voice shouting his name, nothing.

The few men and women around him closed their eyes as the train jerked forward. The train paused, hovered silently for about a minute then jerked like hell again as it left the station. Stupid hovertrains.

The train picked up speed and dove down the hill, starting its journey back to the lower city and the slums.

It didn't matter, Braden thought as he looked out the window at splashes of lights in the darkness. He'd go to Judith's bar. His friends would be there. He could get very drunk and forget all about meeting a librarian with brown, lively eyes flecked with green.

* * * * *

The train lurched forward barely a second after the doors closed behind Elisa. She'd dashed into the station just as the train had started away, and the train's conductor, seeing a highborn lady in expensive robes, had ordered the train to halt.

Elisa pressed a tip into the conductor's hand as she leapt breathlessly onto the last car. "Thank you."

"At your service, my lady," the conductor said. "May I find you a seat?"

The car was empty so the offer was a bit silly, but Elisa thanked him again. "No, I'll be fine."

The conductor retreated into his rear compartment and Elisa walked unsteadily down the train to the next car.

What if Braden weren't on the train at all? This was the last train down and Elisa was pretty certain that none would be coming back up tonight.

She'd be in Pas City, alone, without escort, her robes marking her as way out of place. Elisa could call a taxi, of course, but then she'd have to wait for it. Alone. In Pas City.

She opened the door of the third car along and stopped.

Braden lounged in a seat at the end of the car, his arm stretched across its back, his head against the window, his eyes closed.

When Braden had first walked into her library, Elisa's tongue had stuck to the roof of her mouth and stayed there. Seven feet tall, black hair bound at his nape, Braden had worn a sleeveless tunic that bared his massive shoulders and tight, muscular arms. The black chain on his right biceps announced what he was—all Shareem wore them.

His face was handsome but stopped shy of perfection, giving him a hard strength that most Bor Nargan men lacked. His eyes were blue, a color no other native Bor Nargan had, a color that mesmerized her and drew her in.

With his eyes closed now, Braden looked almost harmless.

Almost. His long legs stretched out into the aisle, his body barely fitting on the seat, giving him the look of a wild beast at rest. A desert lion from the hills, maybe, sprawled in seeming quietness but ready to pounce.

Elisa pictured Braden stretched out like that in bed, smiling and warm, waiting for his lady. She shivered.

She also noticed one more thing about him. Braden looked lonely.

Elisa wasn't sure where that impression came from—maybe from the fact that he sat alone, that no one else was near him or even wanted to look at him. But a Shareem lonely was a strange idea.

She walked toward him before she could talk herself out of it. Gathering her robes around her, she sat down in the small amount of room he'd left in the seat.

Braden's eyes popped open in surprise. Then he smiled. That smile was all for her, his blue irises expanding as his focus switched to Elisa and Elisa alone.

Being the object of his Shareem gaze made her feel strange—beautiful, sensual, wanted—all the things that no man had ever made Elisa n'Arell feel.

"My librarian," Braden said, his voice warming her to her toes. "Damn, but it's nice to see you."

Chapter Three

"I'm sorry I'm late." Elisa should have caught her breath by now, but for some reason it lodged in her throat. "I had to—"

"No." Braden's fingers touched her lips. "No explanations. Leave it like this. That was one hell of an entrance."

His fingers were warmer than any human's, the same as when he'd brushed the back of her hand in the library. The touch was soft but strong, mastering.

Elisa was happy not to talk about how her boss had called her to an unscheduled meeting to discuss an event the library was putting on with the art museum. The minutiae of making certain members of the ruling family were seated in the correct order, without snubbing the heads of the library or the art board, had made her insane. The details had taken several hours and Elisa had been lucky to get away at all.

Braden moved his fingertip across her lower lip, wetting it with moisture from her own mouth. "What are you thinking behind those beautiful eyes, my librarian?"

That she was bold and sensual, no longer a good celibate in the Way of the Sky. "Questions I want to ask you," she said.

"Questions about you, me and whipped cream? You know we're headed for Pas City, right?"

"Yes." Elisa glanced out the window but could see little beyond her own reflection. Though she'd lived in the metropolis all her life, she'd never been to Pas City. "A new world for me."

"A shitty world." Braden took his finger from her lips, to her disappointment. "I'll show you my world if you want me to, sweetheart. But not with you in those robes."

Elisa looked down at herself. Her fashionable robes both blocked the harsh Bor Nargan sun and proclaimed her status and rank.

Braden put his lips to her ear, his breath making her hot all over. "Take them off." "What?"

"You don't need sun protection at night. Besides, if a woman in celibate robes is running around with a Shareem, people will talk. They might tell the patrollers I abducted you."

An amused twinkle lit his eyes, but Elisa sensed his tension. He was right to worry—Shareem didn't have many rights. The slightest transgression could mean incarceration, interrogation, termination.

Elisa unfastened the fabric lock at the back of her neck and drew the robes off over her head. She wore a sleeveless silk sheath underneath, body-hugging but not too tight, comfortable in the night air.

Braden's eyes went bluer as he looked her over. "Nice."

Elisa tried to fold her robes, but the train was swaying like crazy as they barreled into the inner city. Braden took the robes and folded them in competent hands, hiding the symbols that proclaimed her celibate. He held the robes on his lap, not giving them back to her.

The train halted at its last stop in a series of hard jerks. People muttered and snarled as they grabbed onto handholds, their belongings falling to the floor. A child sat down hard and started to cry.

"No smooth stops for the slum dwellers." Braden stood up as the doors opened, and helped Elisa to her feet with a firm hand. "Not when assholes run the trains."

Braden kept hold of Elisa's hand as he steered her out of the station and into a different world.

The sights, sounds and smells of Pas City smacked Elisa with the force of a sandstorm. Grills belched pungent cooking smoke, coupled with the smell of spices and vegetables. Street vendors called out to passersby, selling everything from robot parts to flowers to sticky pastries. It was after midnight, but with the days so hot and sunshielding expensive, this place came alive at night.

Most of the women wore coveralls instead of robes, and their men worked right alongside them. This last surprised Elisa, but she realized that few women in this part of town could afford the luxury of a kept husband. The men here sold the merchandise or worked the grills, their wives talking to customers and tucking away credit strips. The equality of it was strange but somehow appealing.

No one looked twice at Braden, but these people would have grown used to Shareem. Shareem weren't allowed to live in any other part of the city.

Braden led Elisa though the mazelike and colorful streets, sending greetings to those who called out to him. Elisa's quick mind soaked it up, this odd and wonderful place not an hour away from where she'd spent her entire life.

"Where are we going?" She had to raise her voice to be heard.

Braden sent her a smile that nearly melted her. "A goodly tavern I know. Thought you might like to stay in public for now."

He turned down a narrow street that teemed with people and ducked under faded awnings into a bar.

The place was dim and cool but full of noise. The floor just inside the door held grit from the last sandstorm, but the rest of the bar looked clean.

There were other Shareem in here. Elisa counted three as Braden led her across the room to a table in the corner.

One Shareem was blond and had been face-sculpted—a beautiful man, a work of art. He was smiling at a woman standing next to him, and as Elisa watched, his large hand slid to cover the woman's buttocks. She looked up and shot him a warm and happy smile.

On the woman's other side stood a dark-haired brute of a man with broad shoulders and darker blue eyes. To Elisa's amazement, he too slid his hand to the woman's buttocks, and she switched the smile to *him*. When the dark-haired Shareem encountered the blond's hand on her backside, he didn't pull away but wound his fingers through the other man's hand.

"That's Aiden and Ky," Braden said. "Aiden's the beauty, Ky's the beast. The lady they're both pawing is Brianne d'Aroth."

Elisa stared in astonishment. The d'Aroths were Bor Narga's ruling family, Brianne the granddaughter of the lady who ran the entire planet.

Brianne had scandalized Bor Narga not long ago by jilting her fiancé and moving to Pas City. She'd proclaimed her intention of looking into the mistreatment of Shareem and started working hard at it. Because of Brianne d'Aroth, Braden had been allowed to enter Elisa's library.

The third Shareem she saw was taller than the others and had a face that looked as though it had been sculpted, then ruined, then repaired again. The result was a face similar to Ky's—raw handsomeness with a touch of brutality.

This third Shareem also had a lady with him, but she wore a work coverall rather than robes. The two sat together at a tall table, and the woman, like Brianne, was being quietly fondled by her Shareem.

"This is Calder," Braden said, leading Elisa to the table. "The Shareem who passes for my best friend. And his lady, Katarina."

"The medic," Elisa realized. "Katarina d'Arnal."

"That's me." The woman smiled. "The sacrificing woman who came to the slums to treat Shareem."

"As long as the only Shareem you *treat* is me," Calder rumbled. "Unless it's with my permission."

Elisa wasn't sure what to make of the exchange, but Katarina winked at Braden even as she blushed.

"Introduce us before she thinks you're rude, Braden," Katarina said.

Braden helped Elisa to a chair, piled her robes on an empty stool and sat down next to her. Very close, his thigh and shoulder touching Elisa's.

"This is Elisa," Braden said. He grinned. "She's a librarian."

He said it as proudly as a man would proclaim that his lady was on the ruling council.

Calder's Shareem gaze flickered, which he covered by seizing the glass of foaming ale a red-haired woman deposited in front of him. The server's loose coverall was unfastened to her waist, so that her breasts tantalized from the shadows.

"Let her have a drink, Braden," the woman said, plopping another glass of ale in front of Elisa. "It's hot, if you hadn't noticed, and she's probably thirsty. She'll need all the fortification she can get to deal with you."

Braden accepted his ale and winked at the woman. "Judith, love, I haven't heard you insult me all day. Don't scare my librarian away."

"I don't have to," Judith said. "You can do that all by yourself." She sauntered away, putting an extra wiggle in her hips.

"She loves me," Braden said. He rested his arm across the back of Elisa's chair. "My friends, Elisa so nicely helped me out at the library a couple weeks ago. Showed this Shareem how to work computers."

"Poor woman," Calder grated. "Did she lose a bet?"

Braden's arm was a band of warmth against Elisa's spine. The feeling made her giddy, bold. "I thought you said he was your friend," she said to Braden.

Braden grinned. "You see? My lady is appalled at your lack of manners."

Calder shot Elisa a speculative look that was absent of all banter. Assessing her.

A Shareem sizing up a highborn lady? Shouldn't it be the other way around?

Shareem were supposed to do as they were told, nothing more. In spite of their radiant sexuality, they couldn't instigate sex unless the lady gave them permission—it was in their genetic programming. That was one reason Elisa had not been terrified to allow Braden to lead her through Pas City. Even if he'd cornered her inside his own apartment, he couldn't touch her unless Elisa let him.

Braden had already touched her, yes, but not in an intimate way. Only her hand and back, and the sensation alone made her want to melt into a puddle. Elisa sipped ale to wet her dry mouth and found it surprisingly good.

The second reason she'd not been afraid was because Braden intrigued her. She wanted to talk to him, to learn about him, to get to know him. What was he behind his melting smiles, and why had he chosen her and her library?

"You said you wanted to ask me questions," Braden said. "What do you want to know?"

Calder and Katarina watched sharply while pretending not to. Calder was better at it than Katarina.

Elisa had many questions, but she decided to stick to harmless ones while Calder sat there, radiating menace.

"Your eyes." She leaned closer to Braden, looking into them. "I've never seen eyes that color, except on off-worlders. And your irises widen. That can't have any sight benefit, can it?"

Braden didn't have any fucking idea, and he didn't care. He only cared that Elisa's breath touched his skin as she looked him over. His irises were widening even now.

"Women want the Shareem to want them back," Calder answered for him. "So our creators made our eyes change when we're aroused. That way the lady knows when we're hot for her, even from across the room."

"Only if your dick's too small." Aiden stepped way too close to Braden, the heat of his body blanketing Braden's side. He slid a firm arm around Braden's shoulders. "My lovers don't need to look at my *eyes* to know how much I want them."

Aiden caressed Braden's shoulder a little, fingers skilled, and Braden felt himself reacting. A level one, Aiden could bring off a woman just by touching her hand. A level one was all about sensuality and softer pleasures, scented oils and massage. Slow, beautiful sex.

Aiden was also the lover of Ky, a level three. A match made in...well, who the hell knew, but it worked for them. Their lady Brianne, the sweetheart, brought them together and made the three of them whole.

Now Aiden was plying his sinful pheromones over Braden. Firm fingers toyed with the chain on Braden's biceps, and Aiden's perspiration moistened Braden's skin.

Braden lifted the caressing hand away. "I don't care who you're fucking, Aiden, as long as it's not me."

"I care," Brianne said, coming to stand at the high table next to Elisa. "I'm the jealous type."

"Yeah, and that turns me on, sweet baby." Aiden abandoned Braden for her so fast that Braden laughed.

Aiden curled his arm around Brianne and pulled her up for a kiss. Not a friendly peck, a long, tongue-filled, mouth-slanting kiss. When he came up for air, Aiden's eyes were fully blue.

"Hey," Ky said. "If he gets some, so do I." Ky put his arm around Brianne from her other side and pulled her into an equally sensual kiss.

Elisa watched them with a surprised expression but her look was intrigued, not disgusted. Her knuckles whitened as she gripped the table, but she faced the unusual situation without a word. Braden's liking for her rose several notches.

Judith set another tray on the table, put down fresh glasses and started picking up the empties. "Keep it calm," she said to Ky. "I don't want to get shut down. Besides, there's no one for me tonight and that's not fair."

Judith glanced speculatively at Braden and then at Elisa. Judith had been known to dabble with a female—hell, with anything humanoid and sentient. Judith wasn't picky. She'd go double with a woman on a Shareem and even play a little with the lady while the Shareem watched.

But she must have sensed that Elisa had no interest in female play, because Judith gave a regretful shake of her head, picked up her tray and walked off again.

"Poor Judith," Aiden said. "Surrounded by hard-cocked Shareem and no one to scratch her itch."

"She'll be fine," Calder said.

He was right. Judith rarely lacked for sexual company. Judith had been with Calder once, only once. Before he'd met Katarina, Calder had never let a lady be with him a second time. Back then, he'd been scarred, the Beast, not the mellow, healed Shareem sitting before them.

That is, Calder was *somewhat* mellowed. He could still be unpredictable.

Like now. Calder stood, pulling Katarina up beside him, and started to leave without a word.

Katarina smiled as she looked back. "Nice to meet you, Elisa." She waved before Calder more or less dragged her out of the bar and into the night.

"Don't mind Calder," Braden said to Elisa. "He was a lab experiment gone wrong. Makes him touchy."

Elisa's brows drew together in that cute, puzzled look. "What does that mean, 'a lab experiment gone wrong'?"

"It means he spent an awful lot of time alone," Braden said, his humor fading. "Way too damn much time, until Katarina came along. I love her for what she's done for Calder, I truly do. But Calder's still not much for etiquette. Or crowds."

"Speaking of crowds." Ky wrapped his arm around Brianne again. "Let's get the fuck out of this one."

Ky's eyes were still blue from that spectacular kiss with Brianne. Ky wanted to go home and fuck, with both Brianne and Aiden.

Braden didn't really understand that threesome, but it made them happy so Braden lived with it. Besides, a happy Ky was a hell of a lot easier to put up with than Ky pissed off and lonely.

There were a few more Shareem-human couples. Rio and Nella lived now on Ariel, a planet much more forward-thinking than Bor Narga, that was for sure. Nella had sneaked Rio off with her, risking arrest, because while Ariel had no problem with Shareem, it was still illegal to take them off Bor Narga.

Braden guessed the Bor Nargans feared some other planet might propagate a Shareem army or something stupid like that. Bor Narga was ruled by paranoid, frigid bitches. How Brianne managed to be so loving coming from that family, Braden didn't know.

Rees and Talan kept to themselves a lot, for which Braden didn't blame Rees. Talan was gorgeous and willing to experiment with Rees. Research was never so good.

Rylan and Maia lived in the back of beyond, out in the mountains beyond the sand sea, where Rylan made singing spheres. They hid out there because Maia was Shareem—the only female ever created. Rylan didn't want to risk her getting caught,

and Braden was good with that. DNAmo had given Maia a rough time, and then there was her whole twenty years in suspended animation to get over.

Eland and Jeanne—they'd met right after DNAmo had fallen, and had been partying together ever since. Fun kids.

Aiden and Ky left, both with arms around Brianne. Heading home for some satisfying heat. Good luck to them.

This left Elisa alone with Braden. A damn good situation.

Elisa trained her brown gaze directly on Braden. "Now that everyone's gone and we can speak freely," she began in her soft librarian voice. "Please tell me, Braden—why were you looking up details on cargo transports on my library computer?"

Chapter Four

Braden didn't move. Even his eyes didn't flicker, but Elisa sensed she'd thrown a question at him on which he hadn't been instructed how to answer.

Did he think she hadn't paid attention? Elisa knew every single thing that went on in her library, who looked up what and when and for how long. Braden had come in there for more than research on his friend's singing spheres, and she wanted to know what.

Patron privacy was one thing, but she refused to let her library be a hub for someone else's schemes. Shareem weren't supposed to be able to break the law. They were docile, tame, nonviolent. Unable to commit crimes or break rules.

But she was learning they would bend the hell out of the rules when they wanted to.

Braden's shoulder brushed hers as he shrugged. "You pulled up the data for me, remember? It was about singing spheres."

True, and the answer worked around the lie.

Elisa turned her glass on the table. "I had a call last week, from the Ministry of Transport. They told me they'd found indication that someone had accessed a large amount of data on cargo flights, and that the transaction had come from my library's restricted-access computer. The log showed the activity at midmorning, the day you were there."

"I wasn't there until midafternoon," Braden said, eyes steady. "So why do you think it was me?"

"My logs show no one on the restricted computer at the time they stated. And, strangely enough, no one at all at the time *you* were on it that afternoon. No record of anyone, or any searches."

"Huh." Braden was the picture of innocence. "Isn't that interesting?"

"My terminals are all secure. Very little chance that someone hacked their way in from outside the library." She took a small sip of ale and set the glass back down. "So, I told the woman from the Ministry of Transport that I'd been doing data analysis on trends in Bor Nargan imports and exports. For a class I teach."

The innocent look didn't waver. "You teach?"

"Once a week. Library systems and information science for the university."

Braden slanted her a smile. "I love it when you use big words."

"Most people think the class is boring," Elisa said. "But it's necessary for the library science degree. I often do arbitrary searches to provide examples for the class."

"That's lucky."

"Yes, isn't it?"

Braden traced the rim of his ale glass. Elisa knew good and well that he'd accessed the information, and Braden knew she knew. But if he didn't acknowledge or answer her straight out, he wouldn't have to lie. Thus not violating his programming.

Why he'd accessed the information, Elisa couldn't understand. It seemed a fairly harmless search—she couldn't see how it endangered the people of Bor Narga or anywhere else. But if the woman from the Ministry knew a *Shareem* had been digging, then who knew what the Ministry might do? To Braden and to Elisa.

"I found it interesting that you made certain only my thumbprint provided access to the databases," Elisa said.

"Yeah?"

"And interesting that you wanted to use the only terminal capable of doing indepth searches into select government agencies."

Another smile and a glance that made her blood heat. "Shareem can be very curious."

"Also interesting that the time stamp happened when the computer wasn't in use at all. Only two people used that terminal that day – you and me."

"Funny how these things happen," Braden said.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"You want to know what I find interesting?" Braden's eyes were quiet, calm and filled with something she didn't understand. "That you didn't tell the nice lady at the Ministry that a Shareem had been using the terminal that day. At any time. Why not?"

Elisa gave him an indignant look. "Because what my patrons read or look up is none of anyone else's business."

"But I'm not your usual kind of patron," Braden said.

"Yes, you are," Elisa said, her anger rising. "By the rules, you are. And so I protect your right to information, just as I would for any other patron."

Braden went silent. Elisa found herself the full focus of his blue gaze, which locked her in place. She should be afraid of such a large, strong man who could do anything, but she wasn't afraid. His concentration warmed her, made her feel somehow protected. Cushioned against the world and any bad thing that might happen to her.

She cleared her throat. "You sent me the singing sphere as a gift because I let you use the terminal."

The quiet in Braden's eyes fled, and his wicked smile blossomed. "No, sweetheart. I sent it to you because I thought you'd like it. Because I wanted to imagine your face when you opened the box."

His voice wrapped warmth around her. The damp place between her thighs grew even wetter and her nipples tightened against her silk sheath. Braden's gaze flicked to her breasts and his irises widened, blue filling the white.

"Damn, I wish I could have been there to see you open the package," he said.

Elisa wished he could have been there too. He'd have watched her as intently as he did now, and she'd have gasped in pleasure and flung her arms around him in thanks. She imagined landing against his hard body, right into his strong arms. He'd be warm and protective, and maybe he'd press a kiss to her hair, accepting her thanks.

As though he read her thoughts, Braden reached out and touched her cheek. The caress was light, feather-soft, but it made her blood sing.

I should tell him to stop. I should demand to know why he thinks he can put his hands on me without my permission.

But the touch wasn't sexual. Was it? Elisa's mother sometimes touched her face. Close friends did as well, and so did her spiritual advisor. What difference did it make?

The difference was that Braden was male, he was Shareem, and he made Elisa's body heat in delicious and forbidden ways.

His touch made her feel good, not dirty, not wrong—but this was *all* wrong. He should *stop*.

Elisa didn't want him to stop.

"Pretty librarian," Braden said in his dark voice. "I need to ask *you* a question. Since you've already asked so many of me."

She supposed that was fair. "Very well."

His sensual tone fled as he chuckled. "Very well. Damn, I love how you talk."

"How I talk?"

"Very well. Mustn't. Library systems and information science. It turns me on, sweetheart."

"Why on earth should it?"

"If you don't know, I can't explain." Braden's voice became the seductive drawl again. "Tell me, Elisa n'Arell. Why are you celibate? You're not a cold woman—your body has responded to mine since the moment I met you. So why the hell did you throw away your beautiful sensuality to meditate on rocks? I want to know why, pretty lady."

Goddess, he was melting her. She wanted to lay her head on his shoulder and confess, *I don't know*. *Teach me about what I've lost. Please, before I die.*

"It's an honor to be welcomed into the Way of the Sky," she said, her standard answer. "Being an official celibate is the highest achievement a woman on Bor Narga can reach."

"Uh-huh. Sure." Braden sensed the lie just as Elisa had sensed his unspoken lie about the library terminal.

He leaned toward her, his arm across the back of her chair again, the warmth and scent of him so good. "All my secrets are in a database somewhere, for all the world to see. But I can't look up yours, Elisa, so you have to tell me. Pretend you're my lady, pretty librarian, and tell your Shareem why you don't want his touch."

* * * * *

On the opposite side of the hill from Pas City lay a flat plain, and on that lay Bor Narga's main spaceport. The landing area for shuttles that took passengers up to the liners was far enough from the Serestine Quarter to not bother the highborn with noise, but close enough for their convenience. The freight docks were farther from the passenger terminals, out of sight of the rich in the Serestine Quarter and the nouveauriche on the lower hill called the Vistara.

At the spaceport, a stranger stepped off a shuttle that had come down from one of the cheaper passenger liners. He was nearly seven feet tall, had pulled his rich brown hair into a single braid and had blue eyes. He wore a simple tunic and leggings and carried one bag slung over his shoulder.

Inside the stadium-sized port building, he approached one of the many vendors and bought sun-blocking robes and a breath mask, apparatus he hadn't needed for twenty-five years. The lush greenery of Sirius III had never seen a sandstorm, although the mountain ranges in the southern hemisphere could get pretty dry. But the part of Sirius where he'd lived had been soft, sweet and quiet.

"Ident card."

A narrow-eyed patroller stopped him. Stun gun at her waist, handheld ready, the tall woman looked pissed off about something. Patrollers always did.

The stranger took his ident card from his pocket and handed it over. The woman shoved the strip into her handheld, touched the screen and scowled. "Justin? That's your name?"

"Ever since they hauled my baby ass out of the vat."

"It says here that you were shipped off planet twenty-five years ago."

"I know that. No law that a Shareem can't come back to Bor Narga, is there? I checked."

She gave him a suspicious stare. "Why did you come back?"

Justin shrugged. "I have my reasons." None of which I'm telling you.

The patroller punched a few things into her handheld before it spit out the ident card again. "I'm calling this in," she said, handing the strip to him. "A Shareem returning to Bor Narga on purpose can't be up to any good."

"You just keep on believing that, sweetheart."

Justin tucked his ident card into his pocket, swirled his sun-blocking robes over his shoulders and strode away.

Fucking patrollers. They hadn't changed a bit.

Just as Justin stepped out of the spaceport, the sandstorm alert went off. He and everyone else turned around and went right back into the building.

Heavy steel doors slammed behind them and, a few seconds later, the spaceport shook with screaming wind. Sand hit the doors and the shielded ceiling with hurricane force.

Justin breathed a sigh as he leaned against a wall to wait it out.

Home, sweet home.

* * * * *

Judith's bar had mostly emptied before the sandstorm hit, leaving Elisa, Braden and Judith alone. Judith locked down the storm doors and went upstairs to make sure everything was secure up there.

Elisa watched a tiny wave of sand seep in under the door, but other than that, the building seemed sturdy. She had her breath mask just in case, but a sandstorm could strip the flesh from a person's body within seconds.

"Are you sure this place is airtight?" Elisa asked.

"As airtight as any bar in the slums can be," Braden said. "Don't fret, love. Judith keeps her place up to code. She knows people."

The wind pounded at the walls and sand slapped at the storm shielding over the tiny windows.

Braden's arm still lay across the back of her chair. "Consider this quiet time to answer my question about your celibacy. No one here but us. Judith is giving us space."

"It's personal," Elisa said.

"Damn right it's personal. Tell you what. If you answer a personal question for me, I'll answer one for you."

"One that's not in a database?"

He considered. "Sure."

Elisa let out her breath and nodded. "Then that sounds equitable."

"Equitable." Braden laughed, the sound grating like the sand. "Oh, baby, I love the way you talk. Do you ever say wherewithal?"

"Sometimes."

"I knew it." Braden took another swallow of ale and pushed the glass aside. "Now tell me. Why celibacy?"

Elisa had her pat answer ready. Because I believe in the Way. I believe in ridding the intellect of the anchor of bodily pleasures.

But for some reason, she wanted to tell Braden, if no one else in her life, the truth.

"To get out of a bad marriage," she said.

Braden blinked. "What? No shit."

"No." She gave him a little smile. "I wasn't married yet. Engaged. Officially. It was an arranged marriage. I was fine with it, because I wanted to do my duty and provide an heir for the family."

It was every highborn woman's lot to provide an heir to take over the family wealth. Morgan had been the perfect male for the job—right lineage, right social circle, right friends, right everything.

"So what happened?" Braden asked.

"He was pleasant enough during the courtship and the contract meetings. Escorted me to society functions, helped my mother, made himself agreeable to my friends. Everyone liked him."

"But..."

Elisa laughed a little. "Once all the contracts were signed he turned into the most self-centered and vainglorious idiot I'd ever met. He didn't want to do anything with me any longer and became nasty to my friends and family. He was a mean, petty little monster. He was already spending my money on off-world courtesans and in gambling hells. I could have closed my eyes to it and lived a separate life—many married couples do—but I decided I didn't want to waste my life and my marriage on him."

Braden's look turned approving. "Good for you. What a fuckwad."

His anger on her behalf filled Elisa with warmth. Everyone else—her mother and friends, even those Morgan had treated like dirt—had wondered why Elisa had minded. As long as Morgan provided her with an heir, who cared?

"My mother was furious," she said. "His parents were furious. His family is pretty powerful, and we'd already signed all the agreements. They threatened to sue me for breach of contract."

"So, a fuckwad, son of fuckwads."

"After much pondering, I decided to tell everyone the Way of the Sky had called me. I'd chosen to give up marriage altogether to follow the path. Once I declared myself, and a spiritual advisor approved me, I was untouchable. Celibacy is the highest calling for a Bor Nargan woman, and no one dares interfere with it."

Braden looked at her with quiet respect. "It was a hell of a decision to make."

"Not really. I was a virgin and celibate anyway—my fiancé had no interest in touching me, nor I him. Taking the robes just made it official."

"No." Braden's eyes saw too much. "It was a sacrifice. It's in you, Elisa...that need for passion."

Elisa sat still, absorbing his words and thinking about what she had denied herself. It hadn't seemed a sacrifice when she'd taken the robes, a relief, rather. No one could ever use her for her money and family; no man could expect her to support him while he pursued his disgusting sexual games.

Before she'd met Braden, that's what sex was – disgusting.

But Braden, sitting beside her, flesh and bone, was anything but. Sex to him was joy, pleasure, warmth.

Slowly, Elisa moved her hand from her ale glass and rested it over his.

Braden didn't move, didn't speak. Elisa brushed her fingers across his hand, feeling firm bones and sinew.

"You think it was sacrifice because you are Shareem," she said. "I read that your metabolisms are faster than a human's, and so you must have intercourse in order to burn off the excess adrenaline. You can't *not*."

"That's true. We fuck or die."

"So it's not wrong for you. It's natural."

Braden hooked one of his fingers around her forefinger, capturing it. "It's not wrong for you either," he said. "You can make yourself believe that, but it's not."

Take it, his gaze said. Touch me, take what you want and I'll teach you what you need.

Elisa imagined letting her fingers drift all the way up his arm and across his chest. She'd dip into the V of his tunic, touching the heat of his body. She imagined Braden skimming off his tunic to let her better explore him. Then, daringly, she'd lean down and lick his skin.

It would taste a bit salty, damp with sweat. She'd touch his nipple with her tongue...

And there her imagination failed, because she had no idea what he would feel or taste like. Heady, that was for certain.

Even headier to move her fingers down between his legs, to explore what she'd only read about, a penis rigid under her hand. How would *that* feel?

She knew she shouldn't be having these feelings, questions and ideas, not while she was a declared celibate in the Way of the Sky. But they poured over her, one after another.

Braden watched, eyes fully blue, as though he read her thoughts. Shareem could sense pheromones and knew when a woman wanted them. And all women wanted Shareem, all the time.

Elisa drew a quick breath. "My turn for a question."

"Suit yourself, babe. What?"

She swallowed, reaching for a question that had nothing to do with sensuality. "What was it like to not have parents?"

His eyes flickered and the blue receded a little. "You go for the gut, don't you, sugar? Honest answer. I don't know. I never knew anything but DNAmo. Mommy and Daddy were test tubes and a vat. Best human DNA in the universe, all mixed up to make *us*."

"Including Bor Nargan DNA, is that right?" Yes, this was much safer than sexual topics.

He smiled and her libido spiraled again. "Watch it, love. You've already used up your question."

"It's part two of the question."

"Little minx. I'll answer, but I'll make you pay. Yes. Bor Nargan DNA is in me, and doesn't that make the ruling family squeamish? My turn."

She heated, sensing danger. They were right back to sensuality before he'd even spoken.

"All right," Elisa made herself say.

"I don't so much want to ask a question as tell you something." Braden rested his arm across the back of her chair again. "It's a fantasy. One I've been having about you since I met you."

Chapter Five

She couldn't let him. She'd die right here if Braden voiced thoughts that matched her own.

But part of Elisa's training for celibacy had been meditation, learning to control not only her body but every thought in her head. She could let him speak and not listen to the words.

Elisa laid her hands flat on the table and directed her gaze on the golden ale inside her glass. She let her awareness sink into the glass, to the color of the liquid, to the little white bubbles hurrying to the surface.

"Ready?" Braden asked.

Elisa nodded. She wasn't, but she was determined to get through it.

Braden's voice lowered. "You're in the library."

The library? Gods help her.

"Up on the balcony," he said. "I'm below, looking up at you. While I watch, you suddenly want to take off your clothes. You can't resist. You slide your robes to the floor, and you start unclasping your dress." His finger brushed the catch of her sheath.

"Presumably, the library is closed," Elisa said, determinedly studying the ale.

"It is. We're the only ones there. The only ones in the world, it seems like. You're looking at me, into my eyes."

The pictures swarmed into her head in spite of Elisa's efforts. Braden standing tall and strong below her, arms folded, eyes so blue. He'd run his tongue slowly across his lower lip, making it moist and enticing. She'd feel her heart beating faster, her fingers itching to take off her dress, to show him what she looked like underneath.

"You unclasp the dress and let it open," Braden said. "It slides to your hips, and your breasts are exposed. The air feels cool on them, and your nipples draw into little points."

They were drawing into little points now. Tight ones.

"I'm watching you, excited, because you're so beautiful. You cup your breasts in your hands, lift them to show me. My cock is getting hard—you see it rising—but I make myself wait. You rub your thumbs over your nipples and it's like fire going through you."

Elisa made a noise in her throat. Yes, fire.

"You're wet between your legs. Your come is hot, and you love it. You spread your legs a little and feel the liquid trickle down the inside of your thigh."

Like it's doing now. Elisa tried to draw another breath, tried to stop the heat, but it wouldn't go away.

"I watch you, and I want to run up there and be with you, want to feel that heat all over me. You moan and your come keeps flowing. I love watching you, and I want you so much."

"Yes," Elisa whispered, her eyes closing. So much for her focus on the ale.

"You peel off the rest of your dress. You're naked now, standing on the balcony above me. You move forward and rub yourself on the railing. It presses your clit, feels so damn good, that cold bar against your hot pussy. You keep rubbing. You're getting the railing all wet."

"No," Elisa moaned. "Celibate."

"I haven't touched you. You haven't touched me. Nothing but that railing. But it's not enough. You put her hand between your legs, and it's so wet there. You feel yourself, soaked with wetness, your clit a hard little nub. You want to rub it, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You rub your clit for me. You stroke your fingers into your vagina, deeper, deeper. You need to go so deep, so hard to make yourself feel better. One finger isn't enough, neither is two. Three is just right. You feel your own walls squeezing you as you rock on your hand. You tease your clit with your thumb. You pinch your sweet nipples, one after the other, then again, all the while you press into yourself and rub that wanting clit."

Goddess, make it stop! Elisa rocked on the stool, eyes closed, while the clit in question burned. But she couldn't put her hand there to ease the ache. That wasn't allowed.

"I'm standing below, still watching you," Braden said, his voice like velvet in her ear. "My cock is so hard now, and so long. You see how much I want you, and you want me to fuck you. But I can't go to you. All I can do is stroke myself, while you stroke your own pussy. You pretend it's me inside you, not your fingers."

Elisa's cleft clenched, moisture flowing. She gripped the table.

Braden leaned so close that his lips touched her ear as he spoke. "That's it, little darlin'. You think of my tongue on you, hot and wet. I want to taste your skin, swallow your come, rub my tongue all over your pussy. You want my tongue going in and out of you, lapping you up."

"Stop," she whispered.

"No, baby. You keep rubbing yourself, and I'm aching for you, dying for you. I stroke my cock, my fist hard on it. I start to come, crying your name. *Elisa*. Then my come spreads all over my hand. You see that, my wanting for you, and then *you* come."

"Yes."

"You press your clit, you feel it burning you." Braden's breath scalded her. "You squeeze, and squeeze, and squeeze."

"Yes!" Elisa shouted the word. She pressed her thighs together, rocking on the stool while waves of darkness drowned her. She was dizzy, her cries incoherent, and her clit was hot.

Braden cradled her, his big arm around her, his voice soothing. "That's it. That's good, love."

Elisa pressed her legs together, more, more, loving the fiery sensation and the loss of control. This was wrong, this was forbidden, and it felt so *good*.

"You're all right," Braden said. "Hush now."

He was so warm, smelled fine. He gathered her to him as she rode out the climax, nuzzling her cheek and kissing her hair.

Elisa curled against him, tears on her face as her body shuddered.

Outside, the brutal sand slapped the worn metal doors, desperate to get in. But inside, snug in Braden's arms, Elisa had never felt so safe and cared for in all her life.

Braden told Elisa that she was all right, but *he* wasn't. He'd brought her off with words alone, something only level ones did, but Braden was heating up, needing release. That would involve hands or tongues or devices or...

Shut the fuck up.

Elisa's head rested on his shoulder, her hair soft beneath his lips. "You shouldn't have been able to get through my meditation," she said.

"Your meditation got you all relaxed, and your mind and body took you where you wanted to go."

Maybe. His explanation sounded good, but right now Braden didn't give a flying fuck how it had happened. He only cared that it *had* happened and that she'd looked so beautiful with her eyes closed, face soft with pleasure, moaning as she rocked on the stool.

"You didn't even touch me," she said.

Nope. They'd done all that without skin meeting skin.

But now Braden's cock was tighter than any cock should be, and his level-three instincts were swiftly rising. He wanted to take her to the library right now, spread her against the railing and tie her there, and then spank her sweet ass. With his hand, with a paddle. He'd pleasure her with a vibrator for a while, then he'd slide his desperate cock inside her hot, wet pussy, and it would be so, so, good.

Too bad the lady he was fantasizing about was a declared celibate. He smothered a groan. The world was a shitty place.

Elisa raised her head. "Are you all right?"

"Sure. Fine. I'll live."

Another fantasy reared its head—Elisa and him in the train car in which they'd ridden down here, her kneeling in front of him to take his cock in her mouth.

Oh gods.

"You don't look all right," Elisa said, still holding onto the table. "I know Shareem aren't allowed to touch a lady in a sexual way without permission. It triggers your pain sensors. Is that what's happening? Even though you didn't touch me?"

"I don't know. Maybe." *Or maybe I'm just dying for you.*

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Anything you do will just hurt more, sweet baby. You fingering the table has me about to explode. I'm imagining those fingers on my cock, sweet and warm."

She stilled. "You are?"

"Yes, baby. You're torturing me."

Elisa let go of the table. "How does this torture you? I'm not touching you."

"You got that right. Now, if you touch me, you might ease the pain."

"How?"

Braden was sweating. "Just touch my face. Don't be afraid. Please."

Her eyes flickered at his plea. Would she help him or turn frigid and flee?

What he'd done a moment ago—brought her off, even with fantasy alone—was a legitimate reason for her to run to the patrollers. Braden would spend his last hours locked in a cell with transparent walls, unable to release, which would probably kill him faster than the patrollers could.

Elisa lifted her hand. Soft fingertips touched his cheek and Braden closed his eyes. "Thank you."

"That helps?"

"A little."

Elisa traced his cheekbone, her touch cool on his hot skin.

"I still want you," he said in a low voice. "And I know I can't have you. So now I want to spank your pretty ass for teasing me."

Elisa jerked her hand away. "Spank?"

Braden opened his eyes, which he knew must be molten blue. "I'm level three, love. It's what we do. A little discipline never hurt anyone."

"Discipline?" She looked startled but not afraid. Curious, instead.

"I'd love to teach you. And instruct you how to touch me. Spank you when you get it wrong." Braden was sweating, breathing ragged.

"I'm hurting you again," she said in concern.

"A little, sweetheart. But it's a good hurt."

Which would get worse until he released. We fuck or die.

Braden wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed when Judith came noisily in through the door that led to her private stairs. "Sandstorm's over," she said.

The gritty slaps on the door had ceased, and Braden hadn't even noticed.

Judith noticed Braden and Elisa sitting so close, the flush on Elisa's face. "Damn it, what did I miss? I step away for ten minutes..."

Elisa abruptly got to her feet. "Nothing at all. What do I owe you?"

"It's on the house. I never charge during a sandstorm." Judith switched her gaze to Braden. "Don't tell me 'nothing', Braden. You look sated and yearning at the same time."

Braden adjusted his leggings, stifling a groan at the brief friction of cloth on cock. "I was telling Elisa a little fantasy I had about her."

"Fantasy. That can be fun." Judith smiled. Judith considered fucking four Shareem at once fun, too.

"It's late," Elisa said. "Can you call a taxi for me?"

"Taxi?" Judith laughed. "In this neighborhood, this late, after a sandstorm?" She swept up their empty ale cups, still laughing, and went to open the storm doors.

"Trains don't start running until dawn," Braden said. "Don't you have your own car and driver?"

"I gave them up as part of the Way of the Sky. We live simply."

"Hey, if you like simple, you'd love my apartment. But don't worry, love. I have friends, and they have transport."

* * * * *

Elisa wasn't certain she wanted to leave. She knew she should—she had to be at the library when it opened, and her servants would grow alarmed if she didn't return tonight. The overly protective Alonda might even call the patrollers, and then the world would know that Elisa n'Arell had gone to Pas City with a Shareem.

But to be stuck down here with Braden, in this strange world, would be exciting. She'd have to think hard about what he'd made happen to her, but she didn't regret it.

"I'd be grateful," she said to Braden. "And I'll pay them."

"Sweetie, I don't think Brianne d'Aroth needs your money." He rose, skimming his fingers across her shoulders as he left the table.

"Brianne?" Gods, he was going to ask the granddaughter of the ruler of Bor Narga to give Elisa a ride home. The woman who was living with two Shareem—who'd just gone home with those two Shareem. "Won't she be...busy?"

Braden laughed. "Of course she will, and I'll enjoy the hell out of interrupting them." He disappeared into the back hall, where Elisa saw him leaning over a console.

Judith returned to wipe off the table. "You're a celibate?" she asked, sounding interested.

Elisa picked up her robes from the stool and folded them over her arm. "I took the vows."

Judith sent her a dark look. "Do me a favor, sweetie. Don't tease him. Shareem aren't like us. If Braden can't have you, don't hurt him pretending that maybe he can. Cut it off and let him go."

Elisa regarded her in surprise. "I had no intention of hurting him." How could she, anyway?

Judith's eyes softened. "The Shareem can be enticing, I know. But the garbage about them not having emotions is just that — garbage. So don't mess with them, all right?"

She sounded so protective that Elisa wondered. "Are you and Braden...?" She glanced toward the back room, where they could hear Braden laughing. The sound of that laughter warmed Elisa.

"Lovers?" Judith finished. She grinned. "No, not in the 'love' sense of the word. He's a friend. A good friend. I don't like seeing him hurt."

Such an odd night Elisa was having—visiting Pas City for the first time, with a Shareem no less, having her first-ever orgasm, and now a barmaid looking her in the eye and championing that Shareem.

"I assure you that I have no power to hurt him," Elisa said. "I believe Braden is teasing *me*. I'll go home and he'll be finished with this game." Why did something inside her just die a little?

Judith gave the table a final swipe. "I don't think so, honey. You've been bitten, and you'll want more. I kind of envy you, your first time with a Shareem, but then I kind of don't." She straightened up, folding her cloth. "It's going to be rough."

Before Elisa could ask what she meant, Judith walked away and Braden returned. "All set, baby. Brianne's driver's on his way." He slid his arm around Elisa's waist. "Aiden says hello, but what Ky said was unrepeatable."

His arm was strong, both protective and sensual. How wonderful it would be to have Braden's arm around her every day of her life, for Elisa to be so casually intimate with him. She'd never had such thoughts about a man before — not about anyone before. Only Braden.

It was still hot when they emerged from the bar, though the night wind was clean, the sandstorm gone. A hovercar moved down the street toward them.

Braden's voice was low in her ear. "Kiss me goodbye?"

"I can't." But Elisa wanted to; oh, did she want to. "It's against the rules."

"The kiss of a friend. On the cheek. Let me do that."

That was allowed. Being celibate meant eschewing sex and sexuality but not affection.

As the lights of the hovercar swept over them, Braden leaned down to Elisa and kissed her.

His mouth landed half on her cheek, half on the corner of her lips. His lips were hot, strong, sensual. Braden let the kiss linger, fingers tracing circles on her back.

He eased his mouth away. His breath touched the moisture his kiss had left before Braden brushed the moisture away with his thumb.

"Goodbye, Elisa," he said, voice low. "My beautiful librarian."

His eyes were still very blue, the look in them empty.

Elisa touched his hand. "Thank you, Braden. For everything."

As she stepped away to enter the car, which a chauffeur very properly opened for her, she remembered Judith's warning. *It's going to be rough*.

It would be, Elisa thought as the car slid away. She looked through the rear window at the solid upright that was Braden, and something tightened inside her. The road ahead was going to be very rough indeed.

* * * * *

Braden watched the hovercar turn the corner, out of sight, and he felt a hole burn into his chest.

Damn it. Damn it all to hell.

He wanted her. And Braden couldn't have her. He'd likely never see her again.

This was different from the usual might-have-been sexual encounter, not that Braden's life had contained many of those. Usually he got whatever woman he wanted, because they wanted *him* – wanted Shareem – even before they met him.

This was Elisa, who was fair-minded, sweet, smart and celibate. Off limits. Fantasy was the closest he could ever come.

Not having her was going to hurt for a long, long time.

While Braden stood eating the dust of the hovercar, a human man walked past him and into the bar. The bar was closed for the night, but the guy walked on in like he knew he'd be welcome.

His name was Mitch, and he was an off-world pilot who stopped by to see Judith whenever he landed on Bor Narga. Braden wasn't sure from which world Mitch hailed, and Mitch never enlightened them. He was tall with light brown hair and amazing green eyes, which made him stand out, even from the exotic Shareem.

Braden and his friends liked Mitch, though, because he didn't view Shareem as animals or less than human or any of that shit. Mitch regarded them as rivals for Judith's attention, which was true.

"Well, look what the sandstorm blew in," Judith said, hand on one hip. "Sorry, darling, there's no more ale. I've shut down the pumps for the night."

"Not what I came for." Mitch caught Judith as she walked by and pulled her to him for a long kiss.

A nice kiss. Braden leaned on the doorframe and watched, feeling a tug of envy. Everyone was pairing off tonight...or tripling-off, in the case of Aiden, Ky and Brianne.

Was tripling-off even a word? His librarian would know.

Judith came up for air and smiled at Mitch in a way she'd never smiled at any of the Shareem. "Nice to see you, babe," she said. "Braden, you're still here?"

"Waiting to offer my services as a third."

Mitch gave Braden a smile, not an unfriendly one. "Sorry, Braden. I fly solo. Come back tomorrow and we'll catch up."

"Right. You two kids have fun." Braden patted the doorframe, shoved himself off and walked away.

Alone.

Damn it.

No, not quite alone. Someone dogged his tracks through the now-busy streets, and wasn't being very subtle about it.

Patroller? It was past Shareem curfew—not that Shareem cared, but getting caught meant spending the rest of the night in a cell. A transparent-walled cell full of cameras, and watching patrollers meant no hope of jerking off. Shareem had *some* pride.

Braden stepped silently into the shadow of the next doorway. Whoever it was walked too heavily to be a female patroller, but sometimes they employed males for routine duty.

A man stopped alongside the shadowed doorway, but it wasn't a patroller. He was seven feet tall and heavily muscled — a Shareem — but Braden had no idea who he was.

That couldn't be right. Braden knew every Shareem on the planet.

"Braden, right?" a voice grated. "Thought I recognized you."

The Shareem stepped fully into the light. He wore off-world clothes but Braden finally recognized him—he'd known the man twenty-five years ago but hadn't seen him since.

"Justin?" Braden said. "What the fuck?"

Chapter Six

"I thought Rio lived here," Justin said as he pulled off his robes in Braden's apartment.

Beneath the robes Justin wore a sleeveless, translucent blue tunic that showed off his muscles. It and his leggings didn't hide much of him, which made Braden realize he hadn't gotten the clothes on Bor Narga.

Braden, still sweating from his encounter with Elisa and the hot walk home, stripped down to his loincloth. Justin didn't appear to notice. For Shareem, naked was natural.

"Rio did live here," Braden said. "When he left for Ariel, he gave the apartment to me."

"Rio went to Ariel?" Justin asked, surprised. "How did he get permission for that?"

Braden grabbed some ale from the kitchen, handed Justin a bottle and collapsed onto the shallow couch. At least Justin's out-of-nowhere arrival helped deflate Braden's cock a little.

A *little*. The damn thing was still killing him.

"Rio didn't get permission," Braden said. "He fell in love with a sweetie from Ariel and she smuggled him off planet."

"In love?"

"Shareem can fall in love, my friend, no matter how much the scientists at dear DNAmo tried to pound into us that we couldn't."

"I know that." Justin sat on the other chair, but on the edge, as though unable to relax. "I was just surprised it happened to Rio."

"You say 'I know that' like you have personal experience."

"Maybe I do."

Braden took a long drink from his bottle of ale. "Justin, why the *hell* did you come back to Bor Narga? You were away, free, gone. Don't tell me that where they sent you was worse."

Justin shook his head, looking sad. "No, it was great. The original purchaser of my services was forced to let me go after the authorities on Sirius III pointed out that human trafficking, not to mention sex trafficking, was highly illegal on Sirius. She was pissed as hell and out a pile of cash."

"So what did you do? Wander the streets selling your services?"

He grinned. "Gods, your mind's in the gutter. No, I got a job. A real one. Working cargo on the docks at first—I'm strong. Worked my way up through the ranks and then started my own offloading company. Made good money."

Sounded like paradise. "And you gave all this up, why? What, you were homesick for Bor Narga?"

Justin's smile faded. "I sold the business when my lover died. She and I had gone into it together." He drew a breath. "We were together fifteen years."

The quiet way he said it told Braden that Justin knew all about falling in love. "Damn. Justin, I'm sorry."

"She'd been sick for a while. When she was gone, I didn't have the heart for the business anymore." Justin dug fingers and thumb into the corners of his eyes, and they were moist when he looked up again. "That was two years ago, and still I miss her. I've been kind of kicking around ever since."

Braden hadn't known Justin well at DNAmo—Justin and Rio had been close—but they'd all shared the DNAmo experience. Justin had gotten away, lived and loved and lost like a normal human. It must have been wonderful.

"Still doesn't explain why you came back here," Braden said. "Can't have been for the weather."

"Yeah, that was a bitch of a storm we just had."

"Does your return have anything to do with Rees?" Braden asked cautiously.

Justin looked puzzled. "Who's Rees?"

"Ah." Braden drank more ale. Maybe if he got drunk enough, he'd forget all about Elisa. Yeah, right. "Never mind."

Braden wasn't certain he could trust Justin with the knowledge that Rees had once been the experiment called R294E8S. Some secrets were just too risky. He'd have to find out more about Justin first, and alert Rees before *he* spilled all to Justin.

"Nope, I didn't come back for Rees, whoever that is. Or Rio."

"No? You said you were looking for Rio."

Justin shrugged. "I looked up Rio because I need crash space."

Braden gestured with his ale. "My crash space is your crash space. I have a spare bedroom—well, it's more like a closet with a bed in it—but you're welcome to it. Had a pretty lady medic living in it for a while, but then Calder took her away."

"Calder? Wasn't he burned or something?"

"Yep. Fixed by the pretty lady medic. Damn lucky asshole."

"Man, I need to catch up."

"You do. Rylan moved way the hell out into the mountains, and Aiden is fucking Ky."

"Shit." Justin took a deep drink of ale. "I leave for twenty-five years and look what happens. I remember Rylan, always sneaking in to be with Maia, poor guy."

"Yeah, that's him." The existence of Maia was also a pretty deep secret.

"And Aiden and Ky? Hmm."

"Together with a lady of the d'Aroth family, believe it or not. She loves them to pieces. You don't seem too freaked out about Aiden and Ky."

Justin shook his head. "I got used to life on Sirius, where sex between consenting adults isn't considered taboo. In fact, they think it's healthy. Men and women share equal status, some men pair up with men, some women with women. Couples, threesomes, foursomes—whatever melts your butter as long as it's consensual and no one gets hurt."

Braden sighed. "Sounds like paradise."

"It was normal to me. Isn't much else to do there except watch trees grow."

"Hey, I wouldn't mind having a shitload of sex while I watched trees grow. But you still haven't answered me. Why the fuck did you come back to the hellhole that spawned you?"

Justin drank again and gave Braden a little smile. "To find someone."

"Someone. Not a Shareem?"

"Nope."

"A woman?"

"None of your damn business."

"Shit. A man?"

Justin laughed. "No, not a man. Don't worry. Your ass is safe from me."

"Good." Braden drank again. "I don't mind a threesome, or a foursome, or a moresome, but not without a lady in the equation."

"Me either."

"Friend." Braden clicked his ale bottle to Justin's. "And now that you've made me think about it, I had an encounter tonight I couldn't finish and if I don't yank I'm going to die."

"Don't let me stop you."

Braden got off the couch, his cock killing him. "Bedroom's behind the door next to the kitchen, clean linen and towels in the cupboard. 'Night."

Justin nodded, half in amusement, half in sympathy, as Braden rushed through the doorway into his bedroom. His loincloth came away before the door even closed, and then followed lube and reliable hand on cock.

He stroked, pulled, massaged, rubbed—fucked his own hand every which way—and still he couldn't ease the torture of not being with his librarian tonight.

* * * * *

Elisa's spiritual advisor was eighty-two and a beautiful woman. Sixty years of serenity rested on her face, which bore few lines. Her sleek silver hair was covered with a translucent veil, and her movements were soft and gentle.

"My dear, it is perfectly natural for you to have responded to him," Lady t'Lenka said. "You are a young woman, and the Shareem were bred—rather imprudently—to satisfy a taste for the forbidden."

Elisa rested her hands on her knees, her legs cramping a little from the kneeling position. The private garden was large, spare and beautiful, the air cool under the wooden pavilion. Wind chimes whispered, a fountain trickled nearby and the cushion beneath her knees was covered with the softest silk.

Elisa knew that the entire garden was protected from Bor Narga's sun and sand by a force field, and that the natural beauty of the place wasn't natural at all. It was cultivated, crafted, perfected, like most things on Bor Narga, including Shareem.

"I wish I could make myself believe that," Elisa said in answer. "A natural reaction, never to occur again. A chance encounter and now it's over." She clenched her hands. "But I want to see him again."

Not only for the sexual feelings Braden had awakened in her. Elisa wanted to talk to him again, to simply hear his voice.

"Are you asking for my permission for another encounter?"

"I don't know," Elisa answered.

Lady t'Lenka gave her a sympathetic smile. "My dear, I know that choosing the Way of the Sky was difficult for you. I even know that you made the decision in order to avoid an unpleasant marriage, not because you craved the life of a celibate. I believe you will do well in the Way of the Sky, but it must be a choice made for the right reasons."

Elisa sighed. "Meaning I should embrace the Way only because I believe in it."

"Child, I will tell you a secret. I haven't always been eighty-odd years old."

Elisa returned her smile. "I know that, my lady. I've seen the holopics of you when you first entered the order."

"Yes, but before that, when I was in my twenties, I was quite a wild young woman. Sensual pleasure wasn't as taboo on Bor Narga as it is now. This was well before DNAmo developed Shareem. The creation of Shareem, unfortunately, only fed the underlying paranoia the ruling women have about becoming slaves to men in all but name, as our ancestors were. But when I was a girl, there was more freedom, and I definitely did some wicked things."

Elisa found it difficult to imagine this woman with her quiet, graceful movements going to wild parties and chasing men.

"I see that you doubt," Lady t'Lenka said. "But I had too much money and I loved excitement—the rawer the better. If we'd had Shareem then, I'd have taken up with them in a heartbeat. I tried every kind of liquor and pleasure-seeking drug I could find,

and I loved off-world men who were so much more aggressive and sexual than our own males. I was shameless with them."

Elisa still found it difficult to imagine, but the sparkle in the elderly woman's eye told her that her words were true.

"Why did you decide to follow the Way, then?" Elisa asked.

"Because I woke up one morning, sprawled in someone's shower, having no idea where I was or what I'd done for the past three days—or with whom, man or woman. I realized that I'd been striving for happiness with recklessness. Recklessness, I realized, was killing me. I did much soul searching and decided to look into one of the Ways. I didn't make the final choice to follow the path for a year or two. I wanted to be certain."

"Are you saying that I'm not certain?"

"I'm saying you didn't have time to be. You hadn't any intention of pursuing the ascetic life before your fiancé upset you, had you?"

Elisa dropped her gaze. "To be honest, no."

"I knew that when I approved your application. But I understood that you were the sort of young woman who would try very hard, and I hoped for the best." Lady t'Lenka unfolded herself from her cushion and came to Elisa. She rested her hand comfortingly on Elisa's head. "I want you to see this Shareem, to follow your temptations, and then to make your choice."

Elisa looked up in astonishment. "You want me to seek him?"

"It's what you came here to ask me, my dear, wasn't it? For a dispensation?"

Yes, she had, though she hadn't said so. Elisa had wanted to talk around it with her, to assess how Lady t'Lenka would react before Elisa asked. Wise Lady t'Lenka had seen right through her.

"I grant you the dispensation," Lady t'Lenka said. "For one month. Go and see your Shareem, and do what you must. You will not be allowed to wear the robes, or enter the order's house, or in any way associate with the Way until you have chosen one path or the other. That decision will be final, no turning back. Do you understand?"

Lady t'Lenka pulled Elisa to her feet as she spoke. Elisa looked into her shrewd eyes. "Yes, m'lady. I understand. It's what I need to do."

Formality over, Lady t'Lenka pulled Elisa into a sandalwood-scented embrace. "Go with the goddess's blessing, my dear." She smiled at Elisa, eyes twinkling. "And for heaven's sake, enjoy yourself."

Elisa kissed her cheek, bowed as she'd been taught and turned away, her heart beating hard with excitement.

* * * * *

Braden

"Lady of my dreams," Braden said when he answered his terminal a day later. "Did you call to torture me some more? Have pity on your poor Shareem. I'm running out of lube."

"No." On the other side of the blurry screen, Elisa n'Arell drew a breath. "I called to hire you."

Chapter Seven

Braden came alert, his adrenaline spiking off the scale. "Like I said, sweetheart. You're torturing me."

"I want you to do whatever it is you do. With me. Teach me. Please."

The little *please* made his cock jump. "Darlin', I have a huge hard-on, and I might have to make you relieve it." Braden forced his voice to be careless, but he cared. Damn did he care. "You're a celibate. Certified, registered — whatever it is you do."

"I've gotten a dispensation."

Oh, hell. "You know you're killing me, love."

"I'm not teasing." Elisa watched him intently, the bad console distorting her lovely features. "Is there some kind of contract we need to negotiate?"

"What?" Braden dragged his mind back from his fantasies. "No, no. This is just between us, sweet baby."

"All right, then what do I do? Meet you at Judith's bar?" Elisa blushed. "I beg your pardon. I'm new at this. I'm not sure how to approach you."

I beg your pardon. Gods above, he was going to die.

Braden drew a breath and suppressed every hormone screaming at him. This couldn't be real. He had to be asleep. This was a dream—a cock-hardening, comeinducing dream. But no, there she was, on his crappy console, wide-eyed and asking him to be Shareem with her.

Every muscle fought him as he reached toward the keypad. "Sorry, sweetheart," he heard himself say. "I'm going to be busy for a while."

His finger didn't want to press the disconnect button. Braden almost had to force it with his other hand, his finger shaking like crazy.

Elisa gave him a shocked look, and then the screen went black.

Braden's groan turned into a cry of anguish. His hand went to his cock, but it ached so much that touching brought more pain.

Elisa would call back. That was the game. Braden was level three. He had to make her beg for him. It was procedure.

Besides, he couldn't really believe that a celibate, a declared one, had decided to throw off her robes and go for him. It had to be a trick, some way to lure Braden into committing the ultimate crime—touching a celibate. The patrollers wouldn't be able to terminate him fast enough, and maybe they'd terminate a few other Shareem with him just to prove a point.

Justin came out of his bedroom, a look of concern on his face. "You all right? I heard you bellowing like a hurt elephant."

Braden wasn't sure what an elephant was—some kind of creature from Sirius III probably—but if it sounded anything like Braden in anguish, he pitied it.

"Lady. Trying to hire me."

"And this hurts you?"

"I want her," Braden said. "I want her so bad."

"And she obviously wants you if she asked to hire you. What's the problem?"

"You've been off planet a long time. Shareem don't get to have any woman they want. And if you're level three, making *them* want *you* is what you do."

Justin stared. "Damn, I'm glad I'm level two."

"Yeah, but this is Bor Narga. Even if the lady says yes, you walk the risk. And right now is a bad time to risk."

"Why?"

Justin didn't know Rees' plans. Rees knew that Justin had come to town—he'd known even before Braden told him—but Braden had no idea how Rees saw Justin fitting in.

"Just trust me," Braden said.

"You want this woman, right?"

"Yes." The word was tight.

"So go for it. Screw being level three, screw Bor Nargan rules. Clock out and enjoy yourself."

"You make it sound so easy."

"It is easy. I broke my programming – well, most of it. You can too, brother."

Break his programming. Just as Elisa was trying to break hers. They could be program-breakers together, act like an ordinary male and female and enjoy each other.

Yeah, right.

"She'll call back," Braden said. "They always call back. It's a level-three thing."

Justin pointed both hands at him. "You, my friend, are fucked-up crazy." He grabbed his robes and breath mask and banged out the door.

Braden stared at the black terminal a little longer. Elisa would call. She had to.

She never did. Braden waited for an hour, then another, then he went into the bathroom and took a freezing cold shower.

* * * * *

After twenty-four hours of agony, Elisa still hadn't called back.

Braden was supposed to have the upper hand here. He usually did, and the lady always called, pleading. It usually took less than an hour, though he'd known it to go as long as forty-eight, when the woman in question had to debate long and hard with herself. Braden usually whiled away the time with other ladies, and in any case the waiting had never gone longer than forty-eight hours.

Braden would die if he had to wait two full days, and this time he didn't want to touch any other woman in the meantime.

At the end of the longest twenty-four hours of his life, Braden called Elisa at her library. Elisa's professional face filled his terminal screen, and Braden touched his fingers to the image. Even that pseudo-touch relieved some of the pain inside him, if only a little.

"Serestine Quarter library," her smooth voice came to him. "May I help—" Elisa broke off and leaned forward, her face-framing veil fluttering. "Braden? Why are you calling me *here*?"

"This is what you do," Braden said. "First, you give me your word that this is no trick, that patrollers aren't going to break in and haul me off to the cells for even thinking about touching you."

Elisa blinked, startled. "They'd do that?"

"You're celibate, sweetie. Sacrosanct."

"But I have a dispensation."

"Give me your word."

Elisa nodded. "You have it."

Anyone could mouth a promise, but the look in Elisa's eyes told him she meant it.

"All right," Braden said. "The next thing you do is, when you go home tonight, you send your servants on a vacation. I want no one in the house with you. I mean no one."

Elisa's brows shot up. "All of them?"

Braden relaxed enough to chuckle. "Yes, love, you'll have to wash your own dishes and cook your own food. You send them away. You recode the keypad on your door and you send me the code."

"Why don't you just come over when I get home?"

"Doesn't work that way. Don't expect me. You do what you usually do, and don't look for me. All right?"

Elisa clearly didn't understand any of this, but she nodded. "All right."

"Good. Remember, send me the key code."

Braden touched the disconnect, which was a little easier this time. His body knew that things were moving where they should be moving.

He smiled. She wouldn't be able to resist watching out for him, waiting for him, anticipation of his arrival building up hour by hour, minute by minute. Her wanting

would build up with her impatience and her nervousness. The power of the level three had already begun.

Braden groaned, got himself out of the chair and went to take another cold shower.

* * * * *

Elisa went home after her shift, told her staff she was giving them a vacation to the cool mountains, all expenses paid, and sat back to wait for them to go. She only had three servants in the house plus Alonda, a far cry from the twenty who'd waited on her at her mother's house. Four servants, to the Way of the Sky, was simplicity.

Alonda gave her suspicious looks and offered to stay and look after Elisa by herself, but Elisa remained resolute. The others were overjoyed with the unexpected bonus, packed their bags and hurried off.

"Call me if you need me, m'lady," Alonda said before she went. "I can be back here in an instant."

Elisa promised distractedly and sent her away.

Elisa knew how to prepare her own meals and clean her clothes—she'd learned self-sufficiency at the retreat center. Even if she weren't certain about her choice of celibacy and her spiritual convictions, she was grateful for some of the lessons the Way of the Sky had taught her. Self-discipline and independence weren't bad things.

She changed the code on her front and back door locks and sent the codes to Braden. He didn't answer the terminal—she left a message.

Elisa spent the next three days trying to behave normally and failing. She went to work each day, half expecting Braden to appear there. She jumped every time the front door hissed open and every time anyone male entered the library.

Braden never came.

She tried to call him on the evening of the second day, but he didn't answer. Elisa keyed off, leaving no message.

On the third day, she had to stay late for a meeting of the library board. The event with the art museum had gone off well, and the board discussed what to do better next year. Tired after that, Elisa walked the few blocks between library and home, hoping the cool night air would refresh her.

It didn't. She was sweating as she entered her house, pulling off her robes down to her silk sheath. She unpinned her veils and let her hair fall down her back while she searched the house for Braden.

He wasn't lurking in the sitting room or the hall, the kitchen or the servant's quarters. She checked every room, but Elisa was still alone. Sighing, she ate a light supper, bathed and went to bed.

In the middle of the night she woke, her heart racing.

The air had changed, something subtly different.

A warm hand on her wrist made her jump, and then the weight of a hard body pressed her to the mattress. A padded manacle replaced the grip on her wrist, snapping snugly in place.

"My librarian." Braden's breath whispered on her cheek. "I'm here to teach you so many bad things."

Chapter Eight

Elisa shivered, hard. "What things?"

Braden pressed fingers to her lips. "No questions." His voice was stern. "You trust me, or I leave."

It wasn't in Elisa's nature to not ask questions. She drew another breath, and his fingers grew heavy.

"You trust me," he said. "Do you?"

Elisa waited, debating whether she did, then she nodded. After all, she'd been the one who'd asked him to come.

He lifted her unbound hand and kissed her palm, lips scalding. "This hand stays free. You've never touched a man, am I right?"

Elisa nodded again. Her heart danced in her chest, her female places wetter than they'd ever been.

"Touch me, Elisa. Get used to me."

In the darkness, he guided her hand to his shoulder. She found bare skin, smooth and warm, no fabric in her way.

She stopped. Was there no clothing all the way down? *Goddess, be with me.* Elisa glided her fingertips down his back, over the curve of his spine, down, down.

Nothing stopped her. His breath was hot on her face, body still, the muscles of his back sculpted from the best genetics in existence. She stopped when she reached the firm cushion of his buttocks.

Braden's teeth flashed in the gloom. "Keep going, sweetheart."

Elisa tentatively smoothed her fingers over his backside. His skin was cooler there, even though he was hotter than a normal human. His buttocks were smooth mounds, muscles tight. She wanted to stroke and squeeze them.

"Touch and learn." He smiled at her again. "I have to go slow with you, my librarian. I don't want you fearing the feel of me."

"I'm not afraid."

Braden bit her lower lip. "Shh."

"But that wasn't a question," she protested.

He bit her again. "I see how this is going to go. Lots of spanking in your future, darlin'. Now touch me. All of me."

All of him. Elisa drew her hand up his spine again, fingertips still tingling from the encounter with his backside. She slid her fingers around his shoulders, tracing the muscle around to his chest.

Braden made a soft noise as she drew her hand across his pectorals, propping himself on his side so she could reach him. The hair on his chest was wiry, and while she stroked it, her fingertips found his nipple.

It was flat and small, so different from her own soft areolas. Elisa traced it, and Braden's sigh became a groan.

She pulled away. "I thought only women liked their breasts to be touched."

"It's erotic for all of us, love. Are you saying you like your breasts to be touched? How do you know? Are you out begging men to touch them every night, breaking your vows, naughty lady? Or do you do it to yourself? Still naughty, but more fun for me."

Elisa had never dreamed of touching herself, not before she'd met Braden. "I've read about it."

Braden chuckled, his laugh shaking the bed. "You're precious. Keep touching me, sweet love. I didn't tell you to stop."

"Being celibate doesn't just mean not having sex," she said as she flicked her finger over his nipple again. "It means indulging in no sexual thoughts at all."

"Later you can teach me all about the Way of the Sky and how wonderful it is. Right now you're learning the way of Braden."

And what a fine lesson it was. Elisa reluctantly left the tight poke of his nipple to stroke down to his abs, so tight and smooth. His navel was a smooth indentation, and she lingered there, not daring to move downward anymore.

"If you were developed in an incubator, why do you have a navel?" she asked.

Braden laughed again. "So we'd look more human, of course." He laced his fingers through hers and led her hand firmly to his cock.

Elisa sucked in her breath. She'd never touched a penis before, had never even seen one outside of an anatomy text. And then it had been cross-sectioned to show the inner workings. Not very appealing.

Braden's penis was hot and hard, his skin satin smooth and stretched tight. Definitely appealing. His breath came faster as she skimmed her fingers down it, touching in wonder.

"You're a quick learner," he said. "Do you do research, my librarian?"

"I've read plenty about anatomy." But this was different from clinical drawings and holopics. *Oh my, yes*.

"If you know so much about anatomy, tell me what you're touching right now."

"Your shaft. And this is the head." Elisa found the skin stretched tight there too but the head itself a little springy, softer flesh than she'd imagined. Elisa had pictured penises to be ramrod hard, like steel, made to penetrate the tight corridor of a woman.

"Yep, that's the head." Braden's words died into a groan. "You can call it what you want, darlin'. The cap, the flange, the tip, the purple helmet of the warrior, whatever. Or the best one — the thing I want to put in my mouth."

She drew her hand away. "Mouth?"

Braden guided her back to his cock, which felt hotter now. "This isn't working. Please, I'm dying here. Listen to me begging for you."

Elisa smiled. "You feel alive to me."

"Baby, you've been torturing me since the day you looked at me over your desk and asked if you could help me. I've been craving you, your scent, your taste, your touch. Goddess, don't stop."

Braden's entire body was rigid, his eyes closed, his face tight under the lights that had risen to illuminate them. Elisa's blood felt hot, her opening wet.

"Am I hurting you?" she asked.

"Hell no. I'm sorry, sweetheart. I can't..." He broke off and groaned. Braden fitted her fingers around the shaft and pulled her hand up his penis. "Like that. Keep doing that."

He let go, and Elisa stroked by herself. The hot hardness in her hand excited her, and she loved how his tip bumped her palm. Braden rolled over onto his back on the big bed and propped up on his elbows, letting her get to all of him.

He was beautiful in the artificial light, a man stretched out for her pleasure, stark naked on her sheets. Elisa adjusted herself so her bound arm wouldn't pull her, and continued. Braden's hips came up as she pumped, his head went back.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry about this, sweetheart."

Why was he apologizing? This was fun. Elisa explored his cock with all curiosity. He stopped trying to guide her and simply lay there with his head back, face softening in ecstasy.

What power. To make this huge man with his foot-long erection tame to her touch was exciting.

"Do you like that?" she asked as she ran her fingertips around the base.

"Hell."

"I believe you do." Bravely, Elisa dipped her hand to his balls, which she found tight like the rest of him.

"Fuck," he whispered.

Elisa tickled his balls with her fingertips then grasped his shaft again. There was nothing to be afraid of. Warm man, skin and sweat, so human. She brushed her thumb across his tip, startled to find moisture there.

"Are you..." She groped for a word and couldn't find one. *Ejaculating* sounded so clinical.

"Coming? Not yet." He opened his eyes, Shareem blue filling them. "Very soon. Keep going, baby, please."

Elisa swept some of the moisture from his tip down the shaft, liking how even that little wetness lubricated things. She understood now why people used oils—oil would

make him so slick that her hand would glide up and down with almost no friction. Elisa could stroke him and pump him as fast and hard as she could. She wanted to.

"Did you bring any oil with you?" she asked, eager to experiment.

"Shit." He was panting.

"I want to use some."

"I'm the Dom, sweetheart. You're supposed to obey me."

"But it would be fun."

Braden broke her hold to roll over and reach to her bedside table, where he'd left a valise. In seconds, he was back in position, his penis standing straight up, a bottle in his hand. He worked out the stopper and more or less dumped oil onto the base of his shaft. He jammed the stopper back on and the bottle rolled away, sealed tight.

Elisa smiled happily. She smoothed the oil onto him while Braden lay back again, weight on his elbows, watching her.

She was right. The oil made everything smooth and slick, easy to maneuver. This wasn't frightening at all. Braden spread his legs and Elisa smeared the oil all over his penis, down beneath his balls.

This was crazy. Braden loved how Elisa smiled at him, her face sweet as she stroked. Her breasts brushed the silk of her nightdress, hanging unfettered against the thin fabric. It was all he could do not to rip off the nightdress, roll her over and fuck her until they were both screaming.

Slowly. She didn't understand, yet.

But damn, she had a magic touch. Fingers teasing, sometimes barely skimming his flesh, sometimes gripping his cock hard. She had no clue what she was doing, and she was unpracticed, but who the hell cared?

Elisa's smile widened as she worked him. A woman loving her power. And damn it, Braden, level-three Dom, commander of ladies, lay there and took it.

Fuck, he was going to come. He was going to come, and come right into Elisa's hands. He wanted to. He also wanted to be inside her, breaking free, feeling her tight and hot around him.

"Squeeze," he grated. "Squeeze hard."

"Like this?"

Warm, firm grip. Slide of hand. Shy look from beautiful eyes. A man could fall in love with her.

A wave of crazed wanting crashed over him. Braden heard his shout, felt his body focus on one beautiful point. *Her.*

His hips left the bed. Elisa pulled back, startled, as ropes of come burst out of him. Braden swiftly grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her down onto the sheets, wrapping her hand around him again. He pumped his hips, wishing to the gods he were inside her, but her tight hand would have to do.

Braden fucked her hand, kissing her face. Her lips tasted good, so did her skin, her beautiful body smelled so damn good.

Braden kept kissing her, smiling into the kisses, loving the smile she gave back.

"My librarian," he said. "You are so damn beautiful. Look what you've done to your Shareem."

Elisa looked up at him with warm brown eyes, not understanding. It didn't matter. The last of Braden's come washed out of him, but he kept on moving in her hand, more satisfied than he'd been in a long, long time.

Elisa lay still under Braden's body, wondering how it could feel so good to have another person on top of her. He braced himself to keep his weight from hurting her, but the strength in every muscle was dizzying.

Braden's skin was slick with sweat, and sweat beaded on his face as well. He kissed her, slow, hot, open-mouthed kisses.

No other human had ever kissed Elisa like this. One didn't need touches of the flesh to show affection.

So many things she'd grown up believing were being proved wrong by a decadent, forbidden Shareem. A being who had been made for sex alone.

Braden's breath scalded her skin. The smile he slanted her, the look from his half-closed eyes, told her that touches of the flesh could be a wonderful thing.

"That wasn't supposed to happen," he said.

"It wasn't? I thought penises did that."

Braden's brows flickered in surprise, and then he laughed. "You are so damn precious. Yes, penises—cocks—do that. You're not allowed to say *penis* the rest of the time I'm here. If you refer to it, it's a cock. Got it?"

"Not a purple-helmeted warrior?"

He bit her chin. "Little vixen."

Elisa touched his face, and he turned his head and kissed her palm. "Why did you say that wasn't supposed to happen?" she asked. "I liked it."

"Because I'm a level-three Shareem. Because I came here to teach you pleasure. You touch me and all of a sudden, I'm the slave. I rolled over and begged for you. It's supposed to be the other way around."

"But I hired you."

"Shareem are inferior every other place in Bor Narga. But in a woman's bedroom, I'm the master. Don't you forget it."

"It was fun."

"Fun." Braden shook his head. "I remember Calder's women coming out of his place, barely able to walk. They were so sexually satisfied and so wigged out at the same time that some of them couldn't talk. Now *me*, I prefer to leave a woman laughing, but at the same time, I want them tied up in knots and begging me to be sweet to them.

I want them to *want* me spanking their beautiful asses and then thanking me for it. But you..." Braden clasped her wrist and brought it to join the bound one. "I look at you and want you touching me."

"I don't mind."

"But I do." Braden pressed a soft kiss to her upper lip. "We made a mess in here. Time to get cleaned up."

With a simple twist he unlocked the manacle, carefully releasing her hand. Her fingers tingled a bit, but the manacle hadn't pinched.

Braden kissed her as they sat up, his strong hand furrowing her hair.

Then he ripped her nightgown from her shoulders.

Elisa gasped, and Braden stood up and deftly slid the gown from her body. He wadded it in his hands and tossed it aside. "We don't need this anymore. Up."

Elisa scrambled off the bed. Braden quickly stripped off the sheets and found her laundry chute, throwing sheets and nightgown into it. Then he lifted her nude body into his arms and carried her into the bathroom.

Elisa had a bathtub in there that she used for meditation. Most houses had done away with water except for drinking, using the more efficient sonic and other non-liquid methods of cleaning. Water showers were for the lower classes.

But water was also used for calming effects and meditation. Fountains, water gardens and bathtubs were soothing on the senses and cleansed the emotions. Elisa often lay in her tub at night, watching the stars above the transparent ceiling.

She had to admit that she didn't think as much about spirituality as she ought. Most of the time she basked in the beauty of the night and the sensual slide of water on her body.

That sensuality couldn't compare with the feel of Braden sloshing them both down into the tub to set her on the bench.

"A private pool," he said. "Gods, the rich are decadent."

"It's for meditation."

"Sure it is."

Elisa lay back, half floating, the hot water tingling on her skin. Braden sat down next to her, his thigh firmly against hers.

"The tub really is for meditation," Elisa said.

"Tonight, it's for getting you clean. After that, I'm going to feast on you."

"Feast on me?" She wondered what he meant by that and looked forward to finding out.

He looked so sensual with his skin slick with water, moisture on his lashes. Braden had a *presence*, dominating everything in the room the minute he walked into it. No meditation technique could ever blot him out.

"That's what I said, love. Feast on you."

Braden moved until he straddled her on the bench, knees on either side of her. He lowered his head and licked her neck, drawing his tongue across her throat.

Elisa's head went back, and he kept licking, slow, light strokes across her skin. Braden slid his hands to her waist, lifted her a little, and kept on licking. Down her chest until his hot, wet tongue was between her breasts. Elisa's hand stole to his hair, loving the heavy silk of it.

Braden licked slowly, drawing out each stroke. He turned his head and moved to her breast with the same leisurely care, until his tongue flicked the point of her nipple.

Fire ripped through her body. Elisa moaned. Braden smiled as he kept up the play, teasing and licking, circling with his tongue, until her nipple stood up in a tight, hot peak.

"Beautiful," Braden whispered. He closed his teeth over the nipple, a gentle bite.

Elisa arched back, wanting him to take more of it in his mouth.

"You have fine breasts," he said, blowing gently on her areola. "I'd love you to have a small ring on each." He touched his tongue to each point again. "A gold chain stretching between them."

A chain? "What for?"

Braden looped his finger around an imaginary chain and drew it toward him. "To keep you close."

Her heart thundered. She imagined a fine chain, like a necklace but dipping between her nipples, little rings through the taut peaks. That image should bring thoughts of pain, but instead, her female places squeezed.

Braden would tug her to him with the chain, his eyes hot, and then he'd start licking her, as he did now.

Braden moved to the other nipple, repeating the teasing dance with his tongue. He nibbled a little then began to suckle. His eyes closed, black lashes wet on his skin, mouth working. The sight of him drawing her breast into his mouth made her crazy.

When he lifted his head far too soon, Elisa groaned in disappointment. "More?" she asked.

"Maybe later."

She wanted to whimper. His mouth was so skilled, so fine, and she felt so wicked and wild when he sucked her. And *free*.

Braden put hands on Elisa's waist and scooped her farther out of the water. Her hips rested on the lip of the sunken tub, the marble cold on her backside.

He smiled up at her, blue eyes wicked, and then he spread her legs.

Elisa looked down at the man between her legs, her heart pounding until she couldn't breathe. His eyes were so blue, the irises betraying that he was so different from anything she'd ever known.

"Do you know what I'm going to do now?" he asked.

"No."

"This is the feasting part."

But he'd done it, hadn't he? He'd certainly feasted on her breasts. Not nearly long enough.

Braden licked her navel, and she jumped. "That tickles!"

"Good." Braden pressed more kisses to her belly, slanted her another wicked smile, and planted a kiss on her lower abdomen, right above her mons. He licked, and heat streaked up Elisa's body.

"We might have to shave you."

"Why?" The word came out a gasp.

"Because it would be fun." Braden brushed two fingers down her opening. "And because I'd like to see you bare."

She was going to die. Braden's fingers brushed again, and then he was lowering his head, kissing the hair he wanted to shave.

He pressed her thighs farther apart and kissed her right on top of her clit. Elisa jumped, moaned, and then closed her eyes.

"That's it, my love. You lie back and enjoy it."

The marble was hard under her buttocks but Elisa barely felt the discomfort. Her awareness was taken up with Braden, his hard hands on her inner thighs, his sandpaper whiskers scraping her skin as he lowered his head. Then he licked.

Feast on you.

He flicked his tongue over her clit then drew it across her opening, his wet tongue meeting the moisture already there. He fastened his mouth over her clit and suckled.

Goddess help me.

He was devouring her. As he had at her breasts, Braden closed his eyes, mouth working as he drank her. He suckled and licked, nipped and pulled, suckled some more.

She'd never felt like this in her life. When Braden had whispered those naughty things to her in the bar, Elisa's body had come open and she'd lost all control. But that feeling was nothing compared to what she felt now.

Tongue and teeth, nipping, licking, sucking, glorious friction. His mouth was hot and dark, scraping, and she wanted more and more and more.

Elisa opened her legs, frantic, lifted her feet and twined them around his back. Braden's magic tongue kept moving, licking molten heat into her, tongue bumping the walls of her sheath. He was eating her, drinking her, taking all that she was.

Above her the stars flowed against blackness, she and Braden alone in this sheltered world. Her core was hot, her juices flowing into Braden's mouth. She wanted him to drink her dry, to take as much as he could.

Waves of giddy happiness swept her away, yet the tub's lip was still hard under her back. Braden held her steadily, his hands strong, his mouth stronger.

Elisa was shouting, hips rising to his mouth, Braden fused to her. He drank and drank, fingers hard points on her thighs. Her cries rang to the stars, which absorbed her voice and sent it back. Happiness she'd never known in her life streamed into her and Elisa came in an explosion of joy.

Braden drank her like a madman. She was drowning in him, and she didn't care. She could feel nothing but him, his mouth, his hands, his breath and tongue inside her.

Then suddenly his beautiful mouth was gone, cold air rushing to replace the heat. Before she could cry out in disappointment, Braden was on top of her, his large, wet body holding her down.

Elisa's legs were still spread, and she felt something impossibly large, hot, blunt and beautiful slide a few inches inside her.

Chapter Nine

No. No, no, no. Not yet.

Elisa wasn't ready for full sex. Braden wasn't ready for her to be ready. There was so much more she had to do first.

But his body had taken over, made him roll on top of her and slip inside. He couldn't believe he'd stopped himself partway instead of shoving himself all the way in.

"Gods, you are so damn tight," he whispered. "Beautiful Elisa."

Elisa gazed up at him, fully trusting, her face flushed with her coming. She was wet and tight and, *damn*, so fucking slick.

Braden barely had to move to feel her clamping down around him. Her fingers drifted down his back, her breath sweet on his face.

Elisa lifted her head and kissed his mouth. Braden started to resist—don't kiss until the very end and then make them sorry to see you go. Shareem rule one hundred and twenty-seven or something.

Screw that.

Braden kissed her back, licking and nipping her lips. She smiled, and he licked her again.

Elisa threaded hands through his hair, kissing him back lightly, her lips closed. She had no idea how to kiss. Why did that delight him?

He kissed her again, this time licking across her mouth, making her lips part. Braden scraped his tongue into her mouth, tasting her, showing her how to taste him back.

Her mouth slid hesitantly across his, tongues just touching, Elisa catching on. She started licking inside his mouth, slowly at first, then with bolder strokes. Braden met her tongue, tasting the sweetness of her.

Another kiss, another sweep into her mouth, and his cock inched inside her.

Elisa was feeling it. Her eyes half closed, her lips parted in pleasure. Braden was stretching her, widening her little by little. Her pussy was opening for him the same as her mouth.

He didn't want to hurt her. If Braden gave in and pumped inside her with the intensity he wanted right now, he might hurt her. She was a virgin, even if she'd had her hymen removed when she came of age, as all Bor Nargan women did. But Elisa was nowhere near ready for a Shareem.

Braden's heart hammered in excitement. He was the *first*.

He wanted to be the only.

"You are too damn sweet. I can't do this to you."

Elisa smiled. Her bare, wet foot traveled up his leg. "It's what I asked for."

"You had no idea what you were asking. I should get out of you, do other things, get you ready to take all I have to give you."

"Why?" A languid stroke down his back, her fingernails just scratching. "I like this."

Yeah, why? Braden was never one for following the rules. Why the hell couldn't he simply enjoy being inside a beautiful woman? To make love to her and love it?

Braden let his smile go sinful. "You like it, do you?"

She nodded slowly, a woman deep in pleasure.

"Naughty librarian."

Elisa smiled.

The smile undid him. She wasn't a woman smiling because she was being screwed and enjoying it. She was smiling at *him*, at Braden.

"Gods." Braden thrust his hips, his stroke taking him all the way in.

Elisa drew a sharp breath, her brown eyes widening.

He stopped. "Am I hurting you?"

"Not exactly." Elisa's eyes closed. "Braden."

Braden lay still, resisting the urge to drive inside. Elisa was new to this, unable to control her reaction. Her sheath was already pulsing around him, her beautiful pussy wanting his cock.

Elisa kept stroking his back, movements languid, and her cream wet his cock. It was so hot, her come, so fucking hot. Braden had never been so warm and happy in his life.

"Damn it," he whispered. "Damn you."

He tried to fight his own buildup, but he might as well have tried to stop a sandstorm with his outstretched hands.

His hips moved and Elisa cried out, arching up to him. Braden met her, thrusting, trying to control it so he didn't hurt her. He wanted her so bad it was killing him, but he couldn't hurt her. Never, ever.

Elisa's cries turned to shouts then screams of joy. Braden's shouts mingled with hers. Then they both were moaning, sweating, moving together in perfect rhythm.

In and out, back and forth, Elisa's fingers clamping down on his buttocks. Her head went back, eyes dark, lips parted, hips rocking. Braden kissed her, stroked her, fucked her, repeating her name. He loved her name.

Elisa.

"Elisa!"

His seed shot out of him, and Elisa's body dragged it in. She held him so hard, her pussy all wet and slick and hot, swallowing him.

Braden rode her for a long, long time while he came, clinging to that dark, wild feeling of ecstasy inside her. Perfect freedom.

They crashed at the same time—together—falling, panting and gasping, back against the marble tile.

It was good. Too fucking, fucking good.

So fucking good Braden wanted to stay inside her for the rest of his life.

* * * * *

"Naughty librarian."

Braden lay next to her on the marble floor, his sinful smile in place, his hand warm on her belly. Elisa felt stretched, opened, scoured and hot. It felt odd. And good.

Blue still filled Braden's eyes. "So how does it feel not to be celibate anymore?"

She tried a smile. "Temporarily not celibate."

"Whatever."

"It feels wonderful." Elisa touched Braden's face and pain flickered through his eyes. "You're wonderful, Braden."

The pain vanished in an instant, and Elisa wasn't certain she'd truly seen it.

"Naughty librarians who break their vows should be spanked. Especially naughty librarians who aren't supposed to like cocks in their pussies."

"Spanked?" Her heart squeezed, and so did the pussy in question.

"I'm level three, darling. It's part of the package."

"But I liked that so much."

"I know. You're not supposed to like it. You're supposed to wear robes and meditate and think about non-sex."

"Non-sex?" She laughed. "Is there such a word?"

"You'd know, my librarian. It's your job to know."

"I'll look it up tomorrow."

"Good girl. Now, turn over sweetie. Time to teach you who's Dom around here."

Before Elisa could form an answer, he clipped the soft-lined manacle around her right wrist. Her second wrist followed, and he bound her hands together in front of her. Then he lifted Elisa's hands above her head and rolled her over in the same move.

Elisa found herself facedown on the cool marble, her hands stretched above her, one foot dangling into the warm water. The hard stone under her felt strangely good against her hot pussy. She wriggled, letting out a soft sigh at the friction on her clit.

"That's it, love. You're learning your body, and what you like."

Elisa wriggled some more, rubbing, enjoying it.

Braden's heavy hand on her buttocks stopped her. "I'll go easy on you," he said. "For now."

Easy?

When the first stinging slap landed across her backside, Elisa jumped. Her body curved against the marble, her clit burning.

Second spank. It stung yet didn't, hot tingles radiating through her skin.

Braden's hand was large, strong, and the third spank was harder. Elisa squirmed, wanting more.

He soothed her burning skin with a caress, the stroke easing her and sending her into a warm, contented state. She'd read that Shareem could calm with a touch, but she hadn't quite believed it.

She believed it now. Braden smoothed his palm across her buttocks—then surprised her with five more spanks.

She gasped, and he caressed.

"Sweet little ass," he said. "So cute and red. I want to fuck it. But I won't. Not yet." What?

"Soon, though." Braden's hands smoothed her skin while her hands dug at the marble. She wanted to reach for him, and not being able to both frustrated and excited her.

"Soon?" she asked.

"Pretty soon." Another spank, another caress. "I'll bring out all my gear. I'll lay you over pillows, and spank you until you're pink and hot, and then I'll lube you up nice and go up your ass. You'll feel full and so damn good you'll wonder why you never did it before."

Elisa never heard of such a thing. Even in her research on sex, she had seen it confined to man and woman, penis and vagina. No licking, no feasting, no manacles, no spanking and definitely no asses.

"Break time's over."

Braden's voice was dark, sinful.

"What do you—"

She broke off with a cry as Braden's hand came down on her backside, the spanking increasing. Elisa squirmed against the tile, the hard stone rubbing her clit and her tight nipples.

Incredibly, she felt the waves of climax reaching for her, her body loving the contrast between the hard floor and Braden's punishment. Braden's warm skin, the sting of his palm, the smooth coolness under her, his breath on her backside—all conspired to send her over the top.

Elisa pressed her hands flat, bumping against the tile, her clit so hot, her ass tingling with fire. She tried to pull her hands apart and couldn't, and moaned with frustration.

As her climax hit hard, she felt Braden lay down over her, holding her in his warm embrace. His laughter filled her ears, his hot breath touched her face and his slow kiss on her cheek made everything perfect.

* * * * *

Braden looked down at Elisa, peacefully asleep in the sunshine pooling on her bed, and didn't want to leave.

She lay with her head cradled on one arm, her light brown hair snaking across the pillow, her face flushed. The thin sheet would keep her warm in her nest while she slept the exhausted sleep of afterglow.

The sun filtered through the trees in her shielded garden, announcing that morning had arrived. Time to go.

Damn it.

Braden had thought his friends—Rees, Rio, Calder, Rylan—crazy for fixing on one woman and one woman only. He'd thought crazy the risks they'd taken to stay with their ladies. He envied them, yes, but he hadn't really understood.

Now he did understand. He'd risk things to be with Elisa – he already was.

But why, *why* did he have to find enlightenment with a registered celibate who was only taking Braden for a test drive?

Braden dumped his gear in his bag and shrugged on his tunic. He should go, forget her, move on to the next honey who wanted him.

Braden leaned down and kissed Elisa's cheek. He'd never forget her, and he knew it.

He quietly left the room, pulled on his sun-blocking robes and slipped out of the house. Shareem knew how to leave a woman's house discreetly, so that neighbors and patrollers never saw them.

Braden moved through alleys and emerged near the train station several streets lower down the hill. Skulking through the backstreets pissed him off, but he'd do it to protect Elisa.

Wouldn't it be sweet, he thought as he punched his ticket and walked to the train platform, to be welcomed at the front door, to stay all day and all night, to not have to meet her covertly? To not have to hide? Ever?

To be able to walk openly with Elisa, to visit her when he wanted—hell, to move in with her—would be bliss.

Fuck all this. Braden eyed a patroller wandering the platform, looking for trouble. His anger boiled over.

He'd double his effort to help Rees get them the hell out of there. They'd go to whatever planet that wasn't Bor Narga with its fucked-up restrictions, and Braden would never have to leave the lady he wanted asleep while he crept from her house.

Having Elisa touch him, and he her, hadn't been enough. Braden wanted more. He wanted *her*. He'd get her to run away from Bor Narga with him, even if he had to haul her onto the transport over his shoulder. With his hand on her ass. That would be sweet.

The patroller glanced at him as though sensing Braden contemplating the kidnapping of a highborn celibate. Braden longed to give her the finger but resisted. He wouldn't be able to help Rees from inside a cell, and besides, his train was coming.

* * * * *

"Justin, tell me about that planet you lived on." Braden paused from shoveling in his breakfast when Justin came out of his bedroom.

Braden had stopped in the market and bought a feast on the way home—a Shareem had to keep up his strength. Justin sat down in the other chair and helped himself to a juicy peach.

"Sirius III?"

"Yeah. They welcomed Shareem?"

Justin bit into the peach. "I wouldn't say welcomed with open arms. But it's not illegal for Shareem to be Shareem there. They weren't thrilled that DNAmo had sold me to a Siriun woman, and she was ordered to release me when we reached the planet. Just as well. She was a total bitch."

"I'd like to go there."

Justin wiped peach juice from his mouth. "Sirius III is not the promised land. You have to work your ass off to stay alive. And no selling your services for what you do best. Sex is free between equal partners, no sex trade of any kind allowed. They're hard on anything that doesn't smack of consenting adults. Like deadly hard. Like you wouldn't survive your arrest."

Braden shrugged. "I'm all about consenting adults. The more consenting the better."

"I'm just saying you'd have to get off your lazy ass and do real work."

Braden pushed away his empty plate. "I don't mind."

"How are you figuring on leaving?" Justin asked. "I got out because someone gave DNAmo money, stuck me on a cargo ship and blasted me out. Next to the livestock, I should add, which stunk like hell. I'll never forget that smell. But Shareem can't just buy a ticket to Sirius III."

"I'm working on that part."

Braden wished he could focus but he kept seeing Elisa's eyes half closing, her face softening as she experienced pleasure for the very first time. *Thank you, Braden,* she'd said. Her librarian voice wove around his senses, taking away all pain, all loneliness.

Justin waved his hand in front of Braden's face. "You still here?"

"You're funny. I had a good night."

"Obviously."

"You have to tell me why the hell you came back here," Braden said. "I mean, who for?"

"Why is that your business?"

"I'm curious. I have to meet the lady who could make a Shareem run *back* to Bor Narga. Either she's one hell of a woman, or you're so crazy you should be on heavy meds for the rest of your sorry life."

Justin tossed down the peach pit. "OK, Braden my friend. If you want to know so bad, I'll show you."

"Show me?"

"Yeah, you actually have to get up off your ass and walk. All right?"

Braden wiped his mouth and left the table with renewed energy. Strange what curiosity could make a man do.

Of course, right now, Braden needed anything to distract him from thinking about Elisa, the woman he could never have. He grabbed his sun-blocking robes and left with Justin.

No need to clean up the dirty dishes first. They'd still be there when they got back.

* * * * *

Justin led Braden to a part of the city called the Vistara. It sat on the western slopes of the hill topped by the Serestine Quarter. It wasn't as prestigious as the Serestine, but never try to explain that to anyone from the Vistara.

The Vistara housed people who'd worked hard for their money, at last rewarding themselves with a nice house on the hill, a few servants, fine transport. Their children went to schools that mingled them with the Serestines, and some of those kids ended up marrying into the highborn families.

Most ordinary people of the metropolis aspired to the Vistara. The Serestine Quarter was attainable only by being born into or absorbed by one of the great families, the d'Aroths being the pinnacle of those families. But any lady could live on the Vistara if she worked hard enough and was lucky enough.

Braden had never liked the district. Oh sure, he could go for having a big house with cool rooms and water anytime you wanted it, shielded gardens and fancy hovercars. But when people moved to the Vistara, something happened to them. They

suddenly became impossible snobs and closed ranks against anyone below them, even their best friends from their hardworking days.

Once on the Vistara, no one even wanted to look at Pas City. The views from the houses always faced north, to distant desert rather than the sticky city below.

They wouldn't look at Pas City, Braden figured, because they feared they could fall right back down there if their luck changed. And they were right.

If the Serestine Quarter barely tolerated Shareem, the Vistara didn't like them at all. Highborn women, it was understood though not talked about, sometimes dabbled in the forbidden, like pleasure drugs from off-world or Shareem.

Vistara women, on the other hand, considered themselves the most morally upright on Bor Narga. Nothing soiled them. Vistara women were the most heavily robed and closely veiled, and only their family and dearest friends saw what was under all the covers.

Just as well, Braden thought as he and Justin emerged from the train. Those veils probably concealed faces so bitter and sunk in themselves that shriveled prunes would be more attractive.

While the ministries were run by highborn women, Vistara women filled the lower ranks. They were determined to make Bor Narga the most pristine city in the universe.

If only those pesky millions in the slums of Pas City weren't there to drag them down.

Patrollers eyed the two men sharply as they left the train station, but Braden and Justin pulled folds of their robes around their heads, a signal that they weren't looking for female company. Even so, one patroller broke from her pack and followed them as they strolled leisurely down a public street.

"You came back for a woman from the Vistara?" Braden asked as they walked. "I swear to the gods, I'm starting you on those meds."

"Patience. Think we can ditch the patroller?"

"Are we Shareem?"

The main shopping boulevards were already filling, though the sun had been up only a few hours. People in the Vistara were early risers.

Street vendors existed up here as they did in Pas City, though here they were more likely to sell fine fabrics, expensive fruit and the most up-to-date gadgets that nobody needed. Awnings overhead kept the area cool and many of the vendors had heat-shielding around their booths.

Braden and Justin strolled along, looking at the goods, the patroller trying to be inconspicuous behind them.

As the street became more crowded, Braden and Justin drifted apart, forcing the patroller to choose which of them to follow. Braden wove around booths, back and forth across the street, and then plunged down an alley to take a roundabout route back to the shopping boulevard.

By the time he emerged into the vendor-lined boulevard again, a host of people, mostly women, were between him and the patroller. The patroller scanned the crowd in irritation, obviously having lost sight of both Braden and Justin.

Braden stepped into the shadows between two booths, sucking on a flavored icestick he'd bought while he roamed. At this distance, he might pass for a pampered Vistara husband idling away his time while his wife was at the office.

The patroller looked up and down for a while longer then gave up and walked back toward the train station, her stride angry.

Braden spied Justin bending over a vendor's cart a little way up the street. He finished his ice and pushed the stick into a recycling bin as he headed for Justin.

Justin looked up from a display of handheld devices Shareem weren't allowed to buy as Braden approached. Justin gave the woman behind the booth a warm smile, and she blushed and actually smiled back. She must not have been from around there.

"Not her, is it?" Braden asked as they walked away together.

"Who?" Justin glanced back. "No, not the vendor. I just like to smile at women. It's instinct."

Braden had the same instinct. "So where is she?"

"Calm down. Almost there."

Braden strolled along, trying not to feel stifled by the perfect buildings and perfect houses and immaculately clean streets of the Vistara. He decided he liked sand-scoured alleys and tattered awnings and brusque fruit sellers who actually let Shareem buy things. Real life.

Justin grabbed Braden's wrist and jerked him into a too-clean alley between buildings. Justin was gazing intently at a café across the street, one with seating on the walkway in front of it. Not many sat at those tables, but a large window showed that the interior of the café was filled with morning caffeine-seekers.

"Second table from the left," Justin said. "Rose-colored robes."

The robes in question shimmered as the wearer moved. Because she was inside, the lady had removed her concealing face veil, her head still framed with translucent silk fabric the color of pink roses.

The woman was much younger than Braden had expected, early twenties. Maybe just finished with university, maybe still there. A few curls of light brown hair trickled around her veil as she leaned forward to delicately sip her coffee.

She was pretty in an unselfconscious way, talking and laughing with her friends because she liked to. If Braden hadn't already found Elisa, he'd be tempted to beguile this one into bed. Pretty Vistara ladies needed pleasure too.

"Very nice," Braden said with admiration.

Justin nodded, not saying a word.

Braden glanced back at the woman again, the mystery not solved. Sure, she was pretty and animated and looked as though she might be fun in the sack, but was she wonderful enough to merit a return to Bor Narga?

Justin had lived a normal life in a place that had acknowledged him as human. Here on Bor Narga, he risked arrest for the slightest offense, real or imagined, and termination, every single day.

Something didn't track.

Justin's gaze was still riveted to the café. Whoever the young woman was, she'd knocked Justin on his ass.

"So, my friend," Braden said. "Why are you letting me see her? To show her off? Or did you want a threesome and couldn't think of a better Shareem to have it with?"

Braden had been joking, but the last word was barely out of his mouth before Braden found himself against the wall, Justin's hand hard against his throat.

"Don't you even *think* about touching her. *Ever*."

"Whoa." Braden lifted his hands. "I get it. The lady's yours—" His breath cut off as Justin squeezed harder.

"She's not..."

Abruptly Justin released him, as though the oomph had gone out of him.

Braden fingered his throat, watching Justin in surprise. "Where the hell did you meet this lady? On Sirius?"

Justin shook his head, eyes filled with pain. "She's never been off Bor Narga."

"Then when? At that age, she wouldn't have been born before you got shipped out. Just before you left at most."

Justin looked at Braden again, and what was in his eyes made Braden's mouth go dry.

"What are you saying?" Braden asked. "That's not possible. You know it's not possible."

"It *is* possible, my friend." Justin lowered his voice to a whisper, mindful that the Vistara had more surveillance per square foot than did any other part of the city. "Her name is Sybellie, and she's my daughter."

Chapter Ten

Braden looked in shock at the girl sitting so happily with her friends in the café. She laughed and talked like any carefree young woman who had enough money to shop the boulevards of the Vistara and then stop for coffee with friends.

Questions poured into Braden's head—*How the hell? Are you sure? How is that possible?*—but he kept his mouth closed.

Talking about it here would be a bad idea. No telling when a patroller would pop up or how well this alley was monitored. Even Shareem staring at a woman for too long would land in the cells.

Justin looked at Sybellie with a kind of hungry longing, a mixture of sorrow and happiness. He clearly didn't want to leave but when Braden nudged him, he nodded, knowing they couldn't stay.

With one last look, Justin led Braden out to the main street again.

They didn't speak all the way back to the train station. Braden didn't even have the heart to wave at the patroller they'd ditched, who glared at them as they stepped onto the shielded platform.

Braden and Justin didn't talk during the half-hour train ride back down to Pas City. There, they walked out of the station and headed directly to Judith's bar. Once inside, Braden claimed his usual corner table, ordered two glasses of Judith's best ale and paid for them himself.

This early, he and Justin were the only Shareem here—Shareem liked to sleep in. Mitch was there, and Judith's attention was all for him.

"Explanation time," Braden said in a low voice. He paused to take a drink of fortifying ale. "When you say 'daughter', what exactly do you mean? That DNAmo took a sample from you and mixed it with human DNA to produce a child for a rich couple?"

"No."

The blunt syllable explained more than whole paragraphs. "But we're sterile," Braden said. "That's what's been pounded into my head my whole life. Created sterile, pumped with drugs to make sure we stay that way."

"I guess it didn't work with me."

Justin's quiet conviction made Braden's world spin. He took another sip of ale. "Who's her mother?"

"One of the guinea pigs."

"Guinea pigs" were what Shareem had called the women who took jobs with DNAmo for sex experiments with Shareem. These women signed all kinds of forms saying they gave full consent to be used for this purpose and were paid a handsome fee in return. Working-class women were most likely to answer DNAmo's ads, welcoming the extra money, while middle class and highborn shunned it. But it wasn't prostitution, the DNAmo administrators insisted. It was science.

The women were mostly used to keep Shareem calm, because Shareem needed daily sexual activity in order not to go insane or die. They also participated in experiments to see what kinds of things the scientists could program Shareem to do.

No emotional connection had been allowed between Shareem and the guinea pigs. The women were rotated frequently, and the moment the researchers suspected a guinea pig was growing too fond of her Shareem, she was removed from his section or let go altogether.

Both Shareem and the women had learned to keep any emotional ties secret. When DNAmo shut down and the Shareem escaped, a few met up with whatever guinea pig they'd formed a bond with and were able to get off planet with them before the order was given to round up the Shareem.

Justin had been shipped off to Sirius III two years before DNAmo had shut down.

"Which guinea pig?" Braden asked.

"Lillian."

Braden thought but couldn't place her. "I don't think I knew her."

"She wasn't in your section. She wouldn't agree to go past level two. When she told me that she was pregnant, I told her to quit and get out. If they'd found out..." Justin trailed off.

"Yeah, I can imagine."

If the DNAmo scientists had found out that Lillian carried a Shareem baby, they'd have either rid her of the child or done experiments on it and her—probably both. Even if the child had survived, once DNAmo shut down, the government would have hunted her down the same as they had Shareem. She wouldn't have had a chance.

"What happened to Lillian?" Braden asked.

Justin studied his ale glass. "She had the child, obviously. She carried Sybellie herself instead of using an artificial incubator, not unusual for a working-class woman. That kept too many doctors and techs away from the baby. When Sybellie was born, Lillian managed to get a message to me on Sirius—told me she'd had a daughter and that she'd given her up for adoption. A rich family on the Vistara had taken her. Lillian didn't explain why she hadn't kept her, but I can imagine. Lillian had no money, and questions would come up about who the father was—you know how the ministries are. I don't know who Lillian told people he was. She must have made up something, maybe said he was an off-worlder."

"You could find Lillian and ask her."

Justin ran his fingers along his chilled glass. "Lillian's gone. I've looked for her, but there's no record. She's either dead or off planet."

"How can there be no record of her? This is Bor Narga, home to the most recordhappy people in the universe."

Justin shrugged. "She could have smuggled herself out. Changed her name. I don't know. She dropped out of sight. Maybe she thought it would be safer for her daughter if she left, and she was probably right. Lillian, she was a sweet person. The self-sacrificing type, always concerned with the welfare of others before herself."

"Then how did you find your daughter?"

"Records." Justin gave Braden a faint smile. "Kept by the record-happy Bor Nargans. I looked up adoptions on the Vistara in the database of Ministry of Children and Families."

"Because, hey, they let Shareem search that all the time."

Justin's smile grew stronger. "I wouldn't say they *let* me. Let's just say I got access. There aren't many adoptions done on the Vistara—they're snobbier than the highborns about bloodlines. But I found the adoption record dated about the time Lillian got the message to me. And when I saw Sybellie in the flesh, I knew she was the one. She's the spitting image of Lillian." His look turned fond.

"Not to be a pain in the ass," Braden said slowly, "but are you sure you're the father?"

Justin didn't look offended. "Lillian could have lied to me, you mean? I thought of that. But what would it benefit her to tell me I'd gotten her pregnant? She had to quit her job, and lost income because of it—they paid the guinea pigs pretty well. If the father was another Shareem, what would Lillian gain by telling me Sybellie was mine? I couldn't do any more for her than any other Shareem could—I couldn't help her at all. Neither of us had any idea at the time that I'd be sent to Sirius III, and when I was, I was cut off from all communications with dear old Bor Narga. Lillian had no obligation to tell me anything, no obligation to get word to me when Sybellie was born. She told me to be fair to me, because she knew I'd want to know."

"She could have been mistaken."

Justin shook his head. "The Ministry database had record of the exact minute of Sybellie's birth. I counted backward. Gestation periods, even when the woman carries the baby herself, are exact. The science Bor Narga is so fond of has made sure of that. Nine months, the kids come out whether they want to or not. The week Sybellie was conceived, Lillian had been with me twenty-four seven." He smiled in remembrance. "It was one hell of a week."

Braden sat back and blew out his breath. What Justin had just told him would change the world.

If the Bor Nargan government discovered that Shareem seed was viable, what would they do? Round up all Shareem to ensure no seed ever got out?

And what the hell would they do if they found out that young Sybellie had been fathered by a hated Shareem?

Braden thought of Sybellie's pretty face in the rose-colored veils, they way she'd chatted so happily with her friends. Her happy future was finishing university and moving on to a profession, taking a husband, planning for children. Moving into her own house on the Vistara, browsing the market to find the perfect decorations. An easy life, one without fear and strain.

But not if her father were Shareem.

If Sybellie were found to carry Shareem DNA, her life would become hell. At best she'd be exiled, but most likely she'd be experimented on or even terminated and dissected. Her innocence would be ripped from her in one swift stroke.

This was dangerous, dangerous knowledge.

Braden glanced around but the bar was still empty. He didn't fear listening devices, because Judith swept the place for them every day and removed them, and the patrollers seemed to have given up putting them there. Got tired of hearing the flush of Judith's waste disposer, Braden figured.

"Does Sybellie know any of this?" Braden asked.

"Gods, no. I'm sure she's been brought up to despise Shareem—if she even knows we exist."

"Then if you can't talk to her, if she will never even know about you—why did you come back?"

"To see her." Justin's face softened. "I just wanted to see her."

The pain in his Shareem-blue eyes proved the lie that Shareem could feel no emotion.

Braden took another gulp of ale. "So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"You know you can't leave Bor Narga again. You gave up your whole life for the chance of a few glimpses of your daughter from across a street?"

"Yep."

Before Braden had met Elisa, he'd have thought Justin insane. But now Braden felt a sharp tug of longing. To be bonded to someone like that, even if he could never have her, would be sweet, something to hold on to. Forever.

Braden thought of the taste of Elisa's cheek as he kissed her goodbye before slipping away. Would he give up everything in his life just to be able to look at her from across a street?

Damn it all. I would.

I would.

How in the name of all the gods did this happen to me?

* * * * *

Braden left Justin, who said he wanted to linger, and went back home. He nodded politely to Kamile, the woman who ran the fruit shop across the street, and keyed open the door, troubling thoughts chasing through his head.

Shareem were bred to fuck, not think. The problem was, Shareem now had too much time to think, and it hurt, stirring the emotions they weren't supposed to have.

Braden stripped to his loincloth and lounged back on his sofa, swinging his monitor around to tap in Elisa's call number. "Hey, sweetheart," he said.

Elisa's face filled the screen, sleepy, hair mussed. She blinked. "Braden. Where are you?"

"Home."

"I thought... Why didn't you stay with me this morning?"

He gave her a smile, as though he hadn't been shocked out of his mind by Justin's revelation. "To make you ask me back," he said.

This was the moment of truth. Braden tensed, a trickle of sweat running down his back. Would she want more, or decide to end it right here? Would they continue the game another day or would Braden never see her again?

Didn't matter that Braden was level three. Elisa was in charge, and he knew it.

Elisa wet her lips, that sexy gesture he already loved. "Will you come back?" she asked.

"That didn't sound very enthusiastic, sweetheart. More like asking if I felt like going for a walk."

Elisa flushed. She looked so sweet and beddable. "Braden, I would like you to come back to my house."

Good, good, good.

"I need more than that, darling." Damn, this sucked. He knew how to make women beg for him—he was an expert—so why was he now worried about pushing Elisa too hard? What was he, a *gentle* Dom?

Elisa's blush deepened but so did the need in her eyes. "Please come back, Braden." "I'll consider it."

Elisa's mouth became a round O. "But – I hired you."

Braden cut the connection. It killed him to do it, but this was the game. The woman had to want him. She had to make herself believe the fiction that the Shareem was in control—of all her needs and her sexual satisfaction.

His console softly chimed. Braden let it for a moment, let her panic, thinking he wouldn't answer.

"What is it, sweet thing?" he asked when he turned it back on.

"What happened? Why did we cut off?"

"I cut you off, love. I have some rules. I don't want to hear any talk about hiring. I choose who I go to, and that's final. All right?"

"Oh." She blushed, but a spark entered her eye. Good, she wasn't the easily cowed type. "I beg your pardon, I didn't mean to offend you."

Wasn't she precious?

"You beg me to return and I'll consider it. Then you thank the gods I'm not like Calder. He never let a lady in a second time. Ever."

"But I don't want to be with Calder. I want to be with you."

Damn it, she was breaking his heart, and Braden didn't want his heart breaking.

"I said, I'll consider it," Braden said, pretending to sound hardass. "This time, I bring a collar."

"Collar? What for?"

"To keep you close to me, sweetheart. And other things."

Curiosity glowed in her eyes, but he saw that Elisa was too polite to let on she was interested. He'd have to change that.

"Braden," she said. "Please come back."

As a plea, it wasn't much good. She didn't sound desperate but Braden saw what was in her eyes. She wanted this, needed it.

And for some reason, her quiet, "Please come back," caught at him far more than the last little off-worlder on her knees screaming, "Braden, please, please! I need you."

"Braden?"

Braden flashed her a smile. "I'm thinking about it, love."

"No, I mean, is something wrong? You look...troubled."

Troubled? What troubles did Braden have? Yeah, well, maybe he'd just found out that Justin had come back to Bor Narga looking for his *daughter*, for the gods' sake, opening a whole new can of worms for Shareem.

Justin proved they weren't naturally sterile. So what would happen if Braden missed his shots? Would his seed impregnate the first woman he was with—maybe the beautiful one on his vid screen right now? Or would it take a while for the effects to wear off? Or had the inoculations done permanent damage?

Or was Justin an aberration, a failed experiment?

"Braden? Is everything all right?" Elisa's voice radiated concern. Sweet thing.

Braden gave her a tight smile. "Just wondering how long it will take me to see you again."

He knew that *Elisa* knew he was hedging the truth. Her expression told him so. She knew something was wrong but she wasn't going to push it, not on an open channel, may the gods bless her.

"Very well," Elisa said. "I'll wait." She quickly tapped the button to break the call.

Braden blew out his breath and touched the screen where her face had been. This was getting bad, and getting bad fast.

* * * * *

Elisa stopped at the singing sphere in the hall and touched it.

Its beautiful notes sang out, filling the hall like musical sunshine.

"Legends say that the crystals used to be alive," a deep male voice said in her ear. "Eons ago, before humans ever landed here. Then they went dark, and now only the best artists know the secret of how to make them live again."

Elisa tried to turn around but Braden's hard arms kept her pinned. Her heart beat swiftly, and the delight that he'd come to her matched the beauty of the music.

Braden went on, "I like to think about that sometimes. The crystals inside the caves, lit up, each ringing with a different note but working in harmony. It must have been beautiful."

"It's beautiful now," Elisa said.

Braden kissed the back of her neck then Elisa felt something supple but strong encircle her throat.

She reached up and touched a leather collar as Braden lowered a thin chain down her back. The cool metal touched her through the silk of her sleeveless sheath.

"*This* is beautiful." Braden kissed the collar and Elisa's skin above it. "My librarian. In chains."

Chapter Eleven

She looked so fucking good. Her simple dress, her hair pulled into a knot and the slim band around her throat made a fine picture. The chain whispered when she moved. So satisfying.

He wanted to lean her into the wall, strip off her clothes and slide inside her right now. Braden needed that.

But he knew he needed to go slowly with her. Level three didn't mean diving into raw sex whether the lady liked it or not. Level three meant taking care of his lover, giving her what *she* needed. Sometimes she needed it hard and fast, sometimes easy and slow.

Braden rubbed his cock between her buttocks, the friction nice even through layers of clothing.

"Take this off." Braden undid the catch that held her sheath in place.

Elisa slid the fabric from her shoulders without asking questions. That little act of obedience made his heart beat faster.

"And this."

Braden touched the underwear that hugged her hips even as he pressed a kiss to her bare back.

That made her hesitate, but finally Elisa unfastened them and let them fall. Braden ran his hand down her front, easing fingers across her clit. Wet...very wet.

"You stay bare for me," he said. "Until I say."

Elisa nodded, her stance tense. Braden wrapped the chain around his hand and pulled her gently back into him. He kissed her neck, giving it little licks up and down.

While Elisa closed her eyes, relaxing, Braden flicked her clit, then parted his fingers and drew them down either side of her opening.

He rubbed the wiry hair between her legs. "I need to shave you."

Her eyes popped open. "Why?"

"I told you last time. Shareem like their ladies bare. Didn't you know that?"

"That wasn't in any database about you. I checked especially."

Braden chuckled. What a cute, sassy mouth. He needed to kiss it.

Braden pulled on the chain until she tilted her head back. He leaned down and bit her lower lip then moved his mouth over hers.

Beautiful, warm kiss. Elisa had learned how to do this by now, and her tongue flicked up into his mouth. Braden suckled it in hard little strokes, and she tried to suckle his back, the little sweetheart. Braden explored with his tongue then dropped kisses around her mouth. He nibbled on her lips a little before plunging his tongue between them again. Her tongue met his, Braden's stroking and swirling around it, licking all of her mouth.

When he finally pulled away, her lips were red and slightly swollen, her eyes halfclosed. Elisa reached for him again but Braden used the chain to pull her away from him. She made a noise of frustration.

"Don't want to get you too raw too quick," he said. "We're going to do a lot more, don't worry."

"Braden." Elisa's eyes held eagerness. "I've decided that I want to suck your cock."

Braden's heart missed a beat then started banging away again. "Whoa, baby. It's me who gives the commands."

"I wish to learn what it feels like to have you in my mouth."

I wish to learn. Oh gods, she was going to kill him.

"My librarian, you are impossibly sweet."

"I just wanted you to know," she said. "In case."

He loved looking at her eyes, watching the green flecks. Braden leaned forward and eased her eyes closed with kisses, loving the feel of her lashes on his lips.

"All right, love. If that's what you want."

"It's what I want," she whispered.

Braden kissed her. "As you like to say, very well."

It was all kinds of well. Braden drew his tunic off over his head, threw it to the floor, unfastened his loincloth and let it fall. His cock stuck straight out, happy to be free.

"Kneel," he said.

Elisa's eyes widened. "Right here?"

Braden's hand tightened on her chain. "Yes, here. In the front hall. Now."

Before she could respond he used the chain to gently ease her to her knees. With his other hand he brushed the singing sphere, making it shimmer with lovely music.

Elisa studied the cock in front of her, the intensity of her gaze making Braden's entire body tighten. Then she leaned forward and softly blew on his cock.

Gods, where had she learned that?

Next, she licked the tip. Fuck.

"Suck it, baby," Braden said. "Put your mouth around it and suck hard. Suck for all you're worth."

Elisa licked the tip again, ignoring him. "You taste good."

"You are so asking for a spanking."

She slanted him a little smile. "Maybe."

Braden's cock jerked. She was learning, yes she was. Soon she'd be a cute, sassy little sub, deliberately disobeying him and daring him to discipline her. He couldn't wait.

"Suck," he said.

Elisa kissed his tip one more time. Then she opened her mouth and drew him deeply inside.

Elisa was right about how he'd taste. Beautiful.

She had to open her mouth as wide as she could to accommodate him. Braden's cock was heavy on her tongue, the tip bumping the roof of her mouth.

It felt strange, this large thing inside her, but she wiggled her tongue on the underside, loving the salty taste of his skin. Braden groaned when she did that, and Elisa's joy surged.

She wrapped her lips more tightly around the shaft and gave an experimental suck.

The soft noise Braden made encouraged her. She must be doing it right. She suckled some more, liking the strange sensation of his slick but firm flesh.

Elisa pulled her mouth from around him and licked her way down his shaft. The cock nudged her face as she went, Braden's hand rigid on the chain.

"You shaved yourself," she said, studying the bare skin at the base of his cock. She blew a soft breath on his balls, his scrotum also bare of hair.

"The better for you to reach me, darlin'."

Elisa snaked her tongue under his balls and licked. She had no idea what she was doing, but Braden's reactions told her how to proceed. He liked her blowing on him, liked her tongue rubbing between his balls, liked the little nibbles on his staff. Best of all, he liked being fully in her mouth.

She loved the taste, the feel, the smell of him. She knew she couldn't have this wonderful man in her life forever, so she determined to enjoy Braden to his full while she could.

He was certainly full. Elisa closed her mouth over his cock again and suckled him while she played with his balls with her fingers. He liked that too.

Braden stroked her hair, moving his hips a little as she licked and explored. He still had hold of the chain, and though he didn't pull it, she could feel him through the collar, a connection between herself and him.

This was why he'd feasted on her, she realized as she gripped his hips and went on. Having him fill her mouth, tasting every part of him, feeling him react to what she did was wonderful.

He rocked faster, his cock moving in her mouth.

"Sweet librarian," he said. "Gods, you're good. You're fucking good."

Braden threaded a hand through her hair as he arched to her. It was heady, having this big man—a Shareem no less—reacting to what she did to him.

Elisa traced her tongue around his head, loving the ridge of the flange, the little slit in the tip. She could only take so much in her mouth, and her fingers found the larger end of his shaft, the hot tightness of his balls.

The chain clinked in his hand. He smelled salty and hot, tasted of sweat and musk. His cock was so hard in her mouth, yet the tip was smooth against her tongue. The balls were tight enough that she could ring them with her fingers.

Braden groaned. The music of the singing sphere sounded again—Braden had touched it.

She felt his coming begin, small pulses in his balls, the rock of his hips.

"No," he moaned. "Damn it, not yet. Oh shit."

Hot cream suddenly flooded her mouth. Elisa checked her instinct to pull away and relaxed, letting the liquid fill her. When she could take no more, she swallowed, enjoying the smooth, slightly salty taste of him.

The cream kept coming, thick and hot. Braden called her all kinds of dirty names while she sucked him down, and Elisa tingled with excitement.

After the last had trickled in, Elisa swallowed and drew back. She smiled up at him, wiping her lips.

Braden braced himself on the wall, his hand still clenched around the chain. His eyes were half-closed, his face flushed, his breathing ragged.

He helped Elisa to her feet, and then Braden closed his arms around her, pulling her against his sweat-slicked body.

They stayed together like that, skin to skin, warmth to warmth, arms around each other, while the notes of the singing sphere floated and sang then whispered away into nothing.

* * * * *

Braden had brought a shaver with him. "On the bed," he said, after he'd led her upstairs, holding the chain all the way. "Legs spread."

Elisa lay down on her bed, the sheets cool on her back. She spread her legs for him, the chain from the collar snaking between her breasts. Braden turned on the shaver, which made a pleasant buzzing noise.

"Will this hurt?" she asked.

Braden clicked off the shaver and looked at her in impatience. "What did I tell you, sweetheart, about trusting me?"

"Then it won't hurt?"

Braden thunked the shaver to the bedside table. "Turn over."

"Why? I was only asking."

Braden took up the chain. "I said, turn over."

Elisa sucked in a breath and rolled over on the bed. She quivered, waiting, but all Braden did was caress her buttocks with his warm hand. She closed her eyes, enjoying.

He gave her four swift spanks. Elisa held in her squeal until he leaned down and bit her.

He didn't command her to roll back again, he simply stepped back and waited.

Elisa turned face up again, pretending she'd learned her lesson, and resumed her position with legs spread. Braden clicked on the shaver, smoothed her hair with his fingers, and touched the shaver to her mons.

The hair came away without pulling or pinching. Elisa moved as the shaver worked, the vibration feeling good.

Braden finished, clicked off the shaver and smoothed lotion over her pussy. She wriggled her hips, her skin warming at his touch.

"You're pretty," Braden said. "All bare for me." He leaned down, kissing what he'd just shaved. His breath caressed her clit.

"Why is it better if I'm bare? I trust you," she said quickly. "I'm just curious."

"Same reason I shaved myself for you. Nothing between you and me."

"I liked how it felt."

Braden dropped slow kisses on her clit and nuzzled his way down to her opening. "You liked the shaver's vibrations." He licked her, making a noise of satisfaction when he found her wet.

"Yes, I did." Warm, sweet, tingling, much like when he spanked her.

His tongue was slow, hot, raking sensations through her. She lifted to him, wanting his tongue, wanting him to drink her as he'd done in the tub.

"I have something for you," he whispered.

He gave her one last kiss on her pussy then sat up. Elisa watched the play of naked muscle as Braden reached to take a small device from his bag. His skin shone with sweat, his dark lashes flicking as he looked from the device to her.

He touched a switch, and the thing buzzed like the shaver.

Braden sent her a smile of such wicked intensity that Elisa went hot all over. Braden could stun someone at ten paces with that smile.

She felt a delicate touch on her clit then the heady sensation of vibrations. Elisa's body rose instinctively toward the feeling as Braden smoothed the device over the pussy he'd just shaved.

His smile widened, and he slid the vibrator inside her.

A wide lip kept the device from going all the way in, letting it rest snugly against her opening. Inside, it moved with a steady hum, buzzing her walls, feeling so wicked and warm.

Braden kept smiling. He didn't touch her, he simply watched, eyes so blue, liking what he saw.

The little vibrator kept up its steady hum, driving her crazy. "I want *you* inside me, Braden. Please?"

"Mmm. Not yet."

"Why not? This makes me want you so much. Please, Braden."

He leaned forward, his warmth sliding around her. "Not yet."

Elisa wriggled her hips. The vibrator pulsed at a rapid, even beat, making her want to squeeze it and pull it deeper inside her. She knew she wanted to pull Braden inside instead, but he only watched her, his very erect cock telling her he was excited too.

"Please?"

"No, baby."

"Why not?" Elisa whimpered. "I'm dying for you."

Braden's lips brushed her cheek. "You're not dying for me enough. You have a little while to go."

"No, please, Braden."

He licked her cheek. "I love listening to you beg."

"But I need you."

"I know exactly what you need, darlin'. You have to trust me."

Elisa tried to argue but the words that came out of her mouth were incoherent—sounds of longing. Braden kissed the lips that begged for him while the vibrations inside her took over all feeling.

She knew nothing but the warm, pulsing sensation, the slow, hot licks of Braden's tongue. She was crying and panting, begging and groaning.

Braden cupped her breasts, thumbs teasing her nipples, then he licked his way down and took a nipple between his teeth. She loved how his teeth scraped the sensitive point, and even more how he opened his mouth and sucked her in.

She was dying, and it was all bliss and rivers of heat. The leather collar was a band of warmth, the chain cool against her hot skin. Her nipples and clit were so tight, swollen, and her cream was coating everything.

Elisa felt Braden's hand, hard and strong, slide down her abdomen. He closed his fingers around the vibrator and drew it out, but before she could gasp her disappointment, Braden moved his body over hers and slid himself inside.

Elisa shouted for the joy of it. Braden's smile was beatific. He filled her and spread her as he closed his eyes, his groan heartfelt.

"You're damn tight," he whispered. "Sweet librarian, so wet and tight for me."

Elisa collapsed into dark feeling, where nothing existed but her on this bed and Braden on top of her. He opened his eyes to watch her, his face flushed, eyes hot blue.

He glided in and out, beautiful sensations. Hard and fast, body against body, skin heating skin. Elisa's climax surged, built, broke and surged again. His cock was so deep inside her that she thought they'd never come apart.

"This is what you do to me, baby," he said. "You make me lose all control."

He threw his head back, eyes squeezing shut, but he kept pumping, sliding into and out of her, until she could feel nothing else.

"Damn you," Braden whispered, but he smiled against her mouth as he said it. "Damn you for making me feel like this."

He kissed her mouth, his lips warm, tongue caressing, and Elisa's heart thrummed with joy.

* * * * *

"Turn over."

Elisa's beautiful eyes jerked open. The windows were still dark, night taking over the city.

She'd been sleeping while Braden watched her, feeling something tear in his heart.

The chain whispered as Elisa obediently rolled over. Braden grabbed a small pillow and slid it under her hips, which lifted her butt nicely.

"Are you going to spank me again?" Elisa asked. "I thought I did everything you asked me to."

"Oh, you did, sugar. You did just fine." Braden caressed her buttocks, liking the satin-smooth feel of them. "This is for something else."

Braden took up his scented lube and trickled it between her cheeks. Elisa jumped at the cool sensation and squeezed her buttocks together.

"What is that?"

"This makes you slick so nothing hurts," Braden said. "Then I rub you so you relax a little."

"Umm."

She sounded relaxed already. Braden kissed her butt cheek as he gently pressed his finger around the rim of her anus. She rubbed herself a little on the pillow, humming as it massaged her clit.

Braden lifted the tiny plug he'd brought with him, lubed it well, and very slowly slid it into her.

Elisa gasped when she felt the hard pressure at her anus. Her pussy and buttocks clenched.

"Relax, baby. I won't let it hurt you."

Slowly, Elisa made her body obey her. Her muscles loosened, and whatever Braden touched to her slid inside.

It was a strange sensation. The plug was rigid and yet giving, her body wanting to both eject it and draw it into her. She wriggled, her clit and nipples enjoying the friction of the pillow and sheets.

Braden stretched out beside her on the big bed, his body long and warm. "This is to get you used to having something inside you," he said. "So that when I finally take you there, it won't hurt."

"Hmm." She felt stretched and full and complete.

"I like when you smile at me. Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

Braden stroked her hair. "My librarian. I want to do this in your library, with you ass-up across your desk."

Elisa closed her eyes. He needed to stop putting fantasies in her head. She couldn't look up at the atrium railing in the library now without remembering the visions he'd spun of her—naked, playing with herself while he watched, stripped and erect from below.

"I'd love to take you like that," Braden murmured. "You on the desk, me behind you. The quiet library with all that knowledge, and us doing the most basic thing in the universe."

Elisa rubbed the pillow again and sighed happily.

She felt Braden touch the plug, the small pressure exciting. "I want you to wear this tomorrow," he said. "When you're at work, I mean. I'll teach you how to clean it and put it in yourself. You put it in there, and you wear it for an hour or two."

She opened her eyes. Braden lay facing her, his eyes so close to hers. "While I work?"

"Sure thing, darlin'. I want you thinking of me—of me inside you—while you're helping people look up the history of sand-sea cultures."

Could she do it? Elisa swallowed. "I'll try."

Braden's hand landed lightly on her butt. "You do it, don't just try. Or it's a spanking for you."

"Very well."

Braden's smile warmed her. "Is that very well, you'll wear it?' Or very well, I can spank you?"

"Maybe both."

"Damn, sweetheart, you make me so hot for you, I want to fuck you again."

She let her smile widen. "Very well."

Braden growled as he rolled her over onto the mattress, the plug still snug inside. "I'm going to love spanking and fucking your ass. Disciplining my lovely librarian."

Elisa widened her legs, eagerly opening for him. How easy it was now to let him into her, how *right* he felt lodged deep inside.

Braden started to pump into her, and Elisa held onto him and enjoyed the ride. The plug fit snugly in her ass, warming her there, and Braden filled her from the front. She was whole, complete, and had never felt happier in her life.

Chapter Twelve

Elisa watched Braden sleep. He looked so *normal*, so human sleeping on his stomach, head pillowed on his arms.

She'd read that level threes didn't sleep with their women. They commanded their obedience, gave them sexual pleasure and then left.

Braden stayed and slept. He even snored a little.

Elisa wanted him with a fierceness that scared her. Not just for sex—for always. She wanted to get to know him, to find out everything about him, to look forward to coming home to him, to sleep curled together with him every night.

She had the feeling Braden would never tell her everything about him. He hid his true self behind his jokes and smiles and sex play, the real Braden lurking only in the dark depths of his eyes.

What was there? What made Braden who he was, unique from other Shareem?

Elisa slid out of bed quietly so she wouldn't wake him, left the room and made her way to her office.

She keyed up her terminal and used her library codes to override various blocks around the information she wanted. She pulled up everything on Shareem and filtered out various things until she had a string of information on the Shareem called Braden.

He was a level three. Born in incubator number 73. Accelerated growth had given him an adult body in only thirteen years, the next five honed it to what it looked like now. Growth over the next ten years had slowed almost to a halt.

Physical exercise regimens, *satisfactory*. Sexual performance, *excellent*. Obedience to authority, *highly unsatisfactory*.

That Braden hated doing what he was told came as no surprise to Elisa.

She read on. He resists taking the inoculations to the point that shock rods are necessary. More than once, he's had to be subdued with severe shocking before he would take the needle. No permanent damage was done to his nervous system.

Goddess help her. They'd beaten and shocked Braden to get him to hold out his arm for shots, and they worried only that they'd caused permanent damage. *Permanent* damage, meaning they'd caused some temporary.

Test of drug 73098P for enhanced sexual drive satisfactory. Subject Braden stayed hard for five hours, and repeated ejaculations did not reduce the readiness of the penis.

Test of drug 289E for obedience not satisfactory. Drug seemed to enhance unruliness. Subject attacked tester and had to be rendered unconscious with shock rods. Drug 8923BA given to suppress violence. Recommend daily doses.

Test of level-three skills satisfactory. Subject aroused by restraining volunteer and giving her commands. When given the choice of devices, subject preferred nipple clamps, collar, chain, whip and manacles. Subject prefers to perform intercourse on female when female is in the facedown position.

So clinical they made it. Braden had emphasized that it was all about trust—trust that he would never hurt Elisa, no matter what position he put her in, no matter what he asked her to do. The researchers took that beautiful trust and turned it into notes on a chart.

Many more observations of what Braden liked to do with the volunteers followed, screens and screens of it. Then a different kind of entry caught her eye.

Subject Braden confined to quarters, in isolation, until further notice. Recommend termination.

Elisa's heart squeezed, even though she knew the termination order obviously hadn't been carried out. Braden was happily free and now sleeping in her bed.

An appended note said, Subject Braden used whip to strike male lab tech and punched said lab tech in the jaw. Lab tech's wounds were tended and lab tech released from further duties for the week. When questioned, subject Braden responded with abuse and harsh language.

Elisa wondered what on earth had made Braden attack a lab tech. Another objection to shots?

She felt him behind her, his warmth folding over her. He kissed her ear.

"Reading about those happy old days at DNAmo?"

Elisa gestured to the screen. "Why did you hit him?"

"Who? Oh, the lab tech. Because he tried to rape a guinea pig."

She jerked around. "I beg your pardon?"

Braden's grin was as warm as ever, but his eyes held old rage. "Guinea pig is what we called a woman who signed up at DNAmo to do sexual tests with Shareem. The lab tech decided the guinea pig in question was a whore and tried to force her. I told him to shove his dick up his ass, and he came at me with a shock rod. So I beat on him a little."

Good for you. "I thought Shareem weren't supposed to be violent. That it was bred out of you."

"I make an exception for assholes."

Elisa caressed his strong wrist. "So, Shareem are chivalrous."

"Yeah, well, my chivalry got her fired and me beaten and locked in a room. Then they debated terminating me."

"I cannot believe they were going to kill you for helping her."

"They had to, because of the whole *Shareem are not violent* myth. I never did learn to behave myself."

"And you don't like shots."

Braden grimaced. "Hey, you get twenty little needles shoved into your arm and see how *you* like it."

She smiled. "Aw, big, bad level three."

Braden nibbled her earlobe. "The big, bad level three who made you beg for mercy not an hour ago."

Elisa shivered at the memory. "Are you always level three?" she asked. "Do you sometimes just...fuck?"

He smiled when she remembered to use the words he told her to. "Sure. But you hired me for level three."

Elisa touched his chest. "Pretend that I didn't hire you."

Braden lost his smile. He watched her for a long time with eyes that were dark and still. "No, sweetheart. That's too dangerous."

"Why? Is that a Shareem rule?" She tried to keep her voice light.

No, Braden thought. *Because I might like it.* "We do what you asked me here to do. Nothing more."

She looked disappointed. Damn her, why did she have to look disappointed?

Braden caught the chain on her collar and repositioned her over the chair, ass up. He gathered the silk robe she'd thrown on for warmth and lifted it over her back, then he lined up behind her.

He didn't even need the lube to slide straight into her pussy. She made soft noises as Braden stroked all the way in, her voice muffled against the chair. Then Braden slid out and back in. Again. And again.

"You're fucking beautiful," Braden said brokenly.

He pumped harder, smelling her, leaning to lick her, sliding hands around to catch her swaying breasts.

"This is what I want to do behind your library desk. I'll have you screaming out loud. You wouldn't be hushing me then. Aw, damn it."

Braden cried her name, finesse gone, and slammed his cock all the way into her, groaning as she squeezed him.

They fell together, laughing and coming. Braden wrapped himself around Elisa and gathered her against him. He never wanted to let go.

* * * * *

Braden left in the dim light of dawn. It was going to be another clear day on Bor Narga, which meant early doses of sun and heat, followed by heat and more heat. Braden pulled on his sun-blocking robes and headed through the back alleys for the train station.

He'd left Elisa snuggled up alone in her bed. So pretty with her head on her pillow, her lovely hair loose across the sheets. Braden had resisted kissing her cheek before

departing. If he'd woken her, she'd have asked him to stay and he wouldn't have been able to refuse.

Braden needed to refuse. This had gone beyond dangerous.

Catching her reading all about him in the database had done funny things to his heart. On the one hand, what had he to be ashamed of? The assholes at DNAmo had pretty much tortured him on a daily basis. He'd resisted as much as he could, put one over on them as many times as he could, fought back.

He'd nearly got offed for his pains. The only reason they hadn't terminated Braden was because the head scientists thought him a good test subject for new and experimental subduing drugs.

Aiden, for one, had always tried to get Braden to give up and go along with it. *Just pretend, damn you. You like getting beaten up with shock rods? Act like you obey and they'll leave you alone.*

But Braden couldn't let it go. Something in him had resisted with all its might—maybe it was his level-three programming, he didn't know. Aiden was level one, always looking for ways to soothe and keep the peace.

Aiden had probably been right—an obedient Shareem got decent food and a cushier cubicle. Braden pretty much slept on a hard slab in a cold room and ate crap.

Braden had always admired Rees, who'd been the biggest bastard of the bunch. Rees had futzed computers, trapped researchers, turned the tables on experiments and pretty much told the scientists what they could do with themselves. Everyone at DNAmo had been terrified of Rees, except the other Shareem. The Shareem—the few who knew about him—had cheered him on.

And then Rees had escaped, good for him, which had brought the whole edifice of DNAmo crashing down.

Then, that meant Shareem fleeing for their lives, hiding out in squalid holes until the termination order was reversed by some kind-minded ladies of the ruling council.

Well, *kind* was stretching it. The rulers had been put under pressure by governments of worlds they traded with, especially Ariel, which was pretty damn powerful. The Bor Nargan ruling council decided they'd look benevolent if they let the poor Shareem live. What sweethearts. They'd do anything to keep Bor Narga from losing money.

Rees, unpredictable and unstable, had popped back up under the radar and quietly lived his life. He'd done his best to help other Shareem, and then he'd met Talan and discovered the true meaning of happiness.

Speaking of Rees, Braden had a message from him when he arrived home that morning, asking him to meet with Rees at Judith's bar.

Except when Braden reached Judith's, Rees was nowhere to be seen. Aiden leaned on the bar, idly conversing with Mitch, while Judith herself was backed into a corner talking loudly to three patrollers.

This couldn't be good.

Braden was about to depart the bar quietly and return home, but Aiden motioned him to come on inside. The patrollers had seen him anyway.

Braden put his elbow on the bar next to Aiden, who didn't say a word. Mitch gave Braden a look and abruptly walked away.

"What's with him?" Braden asked.

"New rules. Non-Shareem can't talk to more than one Shareem at a time."

Braden stared at him. "What new rules?"

"New rules that came down this morning. Brianne shot out of the house, hightailing it to the hill to talk to her grandmother. In person. Means Brianne is seriously pissed off." His mouth softened, Shareem pheromones kicking in to downplay his anger. "Sweet baby."

"Why the hell are there new rules?" Gods, if they'd figured out what Rees was up to...

To his surprise, Aiden grinned. "Seems two Shareem were seen yesterday morning on the Vistara. People reported it, not happy that Shareem had been allowed on their precious streets. Another Shareem has been reported coming and going to some unknown destination in the Serestine Quarter."

Aiden leaned closer, lowered his voice. "Damn it, Braden, you really need to learn to be more sneaky."

Chapter Thirteen

"Shareem."

One of the patrollers left Judith and came striding over to Braden. She was older than most of the street patrollers, her air of authority like a whiplash. A sergeant, Braden thought. Maybe even a lieutenant.

She stopped in front of Braden and fixed him with a sharp stare. "Ident card."

Braden made a show of straightening from his slouch against the bar and rummaging in his robes. He pulled various things from his pockets—a box of ice candy, a coiled-up piece of leather, his breath mask, a small handheld.

He piled these onto the bar, one after the other, and finally pulled out the strip of plastic that was his ident card. The patrol sergeant watched the procedure with a cold eye, never changing expression.

"Funny how I can never find it when I need it," Braden said.

The patroller snatched the ident card from Braden's fingers and slammed it into her handheld. She studied the readout. "You're one of the ones seen on the Vistara. Why did you go up there?"

Braden shrugged. "Can't get good peaches down here."

"Who was the Shareem you were with?"

They would already know, would have crosschecked records. She was trying to get Braden to lie.

"His name's Justin," Braden said. "Recently returned from Sirius III. He's staying at my place."

"You know the new rules?"

"Nope. Slept through them. Thank the gods."

The patroller gave him a severe look. "A human may speak to only one Shareem at a time. No more than two Shareem can be in one place at a time. That means that you and your Shareem roommate don't get to invite any Shareem guests to your flat."

"Damn, there goes my cocktail party at the end of the week."

The patroller didn't look amused. "Disobedience means termination to the Shareem who violates any rules."

Braden hid his rage under a mask of supreme indifference. *She and her fucking rules can bite me.*

"Right."

The patroller studied the handheld again. "Says here your inoculations are coming due in a few days. Why haven't you gotten them?"

Braden tapped the line on the handheld. "Because I still have a few days. I'll go to a medic on my due date. I always get there on time." As much as he hated the shots, the thought of termination didn't thrill him either.

"You'll go today," the patroller said. "Now, in fact."

"I'm busy today."

The patroller pulled out her stun weapon. Stun guns didn't do permanent damage, but they hurt like hell and gave their victims a serious hangover.

"We'll go together," the patroller said.

Braden gave her a look of mock-surprise. "What, you aren't afraid to be alone with me?"

She gestured with the stun gun. "Move."

Aiden was facing the bar, leaning on it, pretending not to listen, but Braden sensed his waves of fury. Aiden, the level-one Shareem who went through life with a smile, was angry.

Braden was too, but he was more used to anger than Aiden was. Braden had lived his entire life angry, from the moment he'd understood, at age five, what he was and why he'd been made. He loved women and liked his friends, but Braden knew that his own life wasn't his. Never would be.

Without a word to Aiden and Judith, he let the patroller direct him out the door.

The nearest medic, fortunately, was Katarina d'Arnal. Months ago, she'd left her cushy house in the Serestine Quarter to move to Pas City and minister to the downtrodden. The downtrodden included Shareem.

Most Shareem now went to Katarina for their six-month even if they had to travel from the edges of the city to do it, because they liked and trusted her. Even Calder hovering over her like a worried giant didn't keep them away.

Braden sauntered into the clinic, leaned on the front counter and smiled at the young woman behind it. She, used to Shareem by now, simply made a note on her terminal and called Katarina.

Katarina, bless her, wouldn't let the patroller follow Braden into the back. The patroller looked irritated but didn't argue. Katarina was a highborn woman, even if she'd blackened her reputation by living with a Shareem, and highborn was highborn. The patroller could arrest Braden on any pretext, but if she wanted to keep her job and make it to her next promotion, she'd obey Katarina.

Calder was nowhere in sight when Braden ducked into the exam room. Braden hated exam rooms, which were filled with machines and beeping things, clinical steel and gray walls.

Katarina tried to keep the place cheerful with bright-colored curtains and by wearing a pretty tunic. She was a lovely sight as usual, but she couldn't quite cure Braden's misgivings about inoculations. At DNAmo, he was never sure exactly what

would be *in* the shots, and he'd woken either to excruciating pain or in some bizarre situation every time.

Katarina closed the door. Calder came out of hiding, quietly emerging from a dressing room in his customary black leather tunic and leggings.

A few scars remained on his rebuilt face, but they gave him character, in contrast to the smooth perfection of Aiden's face. Aiden could look beautiful and vacant, like a model for the perfect Shareem—until he opened his mouth. Then his smartass attitude poured out, ruining the picture of the flawless sex god. Calder would never be mistaken for anything less than someone you didn't want to mess with.

"Hey, rules is rules," Braden tried to joke. "One human, one Shareem. That means she's mine this morning, Calder."

Calder didn't bother answering. He planted his ass on the edge of a table and folded his arms.

Katarina slanted Calder a warm smile, loving his highhanded protectiveness. "It will make a threesome a bit tricky."

"That's why Brianne is already up on the hill arguing with her granny," Braden said. "She can't be with both Aiden and Ky under these new conditions. She'd have to trade off, and how would they decide who went first? Draw straws? Roll dice? Damn, I'd love to see that fight."

Braden spoke rapidly, his heart rate off the charts, his body heating in his nervousness. Katarina smiled at his attempt at humor as she lined up her instruments.

Instruments. Gods, Braden hated instruments.

"If you'll just disrobe," she said.

Usually Braden would turn this into a game, refusing to use the dressing room and shocking her by dropping his clothes all at once. Maybe wriggling his butt at her to make her laugh.

Today he tossed his outer robes on a hook and silently stripped off his tunic. He felt the glance Katarina and Calder exchanged.

"You all right, Braden?" Katarina asked.

Braden turned. He was mother naked but Katarina regarded him calmly, used to him. Braden had joined Katarina and Calder for a little play more than once. Besides, after Calder, Braden didn't have much that could surprise her. She, out of all the Bor Nargan women Braden had met, had no fear of naked flesh.

"Katarina," Braden asked in a low voice, "what would happen if you left out the contraceptives?"

Katarina looked up from adjusting a scanner. "Left them out?"

"You know, gave me all the disease-killing drugs but not the sterility things."

"I know what you mean, Braden. I'm just wondering why you're asking."

Braden shrugged. "Don't you ever think about it? Whether you and Calder could have kids, I mean? If you stopped giving him the sterility drugs, how long do you think it would take you to get pregnant?"

Katarina stared at him in surprise, and Calder watched, gaze sharp. "I've wondered," he rumbled.

Katarina swung to him. "You have?"

"I'd be a rotten father, but yeah, I've wondered if it would be possible."

"Dangerous," Braden said.

But his imagination took hold. He pictured Elisa coming to him, smiling a secret smile and telling him she was going to have a child. She'd likely have it moved to an incubator as all highborn women did, but even so...

"Dangerous," Calder agreed. "But maybe..."

He broke off before he finished. Maybe when Rees figured out a way to get them off planet, and they found a place to settle and live, wherever that might be, they could have families. What a wild and wonderful idea.

"I don't know whether it's possible," Katarina said quickly. "I've thought about it too, but I don't know what all they did to you originally. I hate to say this, but it might not be possible, even if I never shot you with a sterility drug again."

Braden closed his mouth. Justin had proved it was possible, but Justin's secret was Justin's.

"Is that what you want, Braden?" Katarina asked. "For me to leave out the sterility part?" She touched the tube that contained the Shareem drug cocktail.

Yes, Braden wanted that, but no, he couldn't let Katarina do it. She was right—Shareem might not carry viable seed anyway. Justin might be an aberration, or maybe the researchers in Justin's section had done a few secret experiments.

Plus, Braden couldn't do that to Elisa. Elisa wasn't his. She was having fun exploring a side of herself she'd not been able to before, using Braden to do it. She could have chosen any Shareem to fulfill this role—Braden just happened to be the one who'd walked into her library.

When Elisa finished learning about her sexuality, she'd say goodbye to Braden, put her celibate's robes back on and return to the Way of the Sky. Finished with Shareem and that part of her life. She probably wouldn't even send him a Yule card.

"No," Braden said. "Just shoot them all in me. Don't leave anything out."

Katarina exchanged another glance with Calder. The two of them would be talking about Braden as soon as he left.

"Come on," Braden said. "Let's get this over with."

He stepped under the scanner and waited impatiently while Katarina fiddled with the settings. A full scan, inside and out, and he was done. Katarina picked up the inoculation tube. Braden closed his eyes and held out his arm. "Don't bother to tell me it won't hurt." "All right," Katarina said. "I won't bother to tell you."

It didn't hurt. Katarina had the touch. Even so, Braden flinched when it all went in him, then he sat down, dizzy and angry and very fucking tired of being Shareem.

"Do me a favor," Braden said as he dressed again. "Call Elisa n'Arell for me. Tell her to come to my apartment and how to get there." He stood up, grabbed his sunblocking robes and breath mask while Katarina did the surprised thing again.

"All right," she said.

Braden swept out without explaining and went home.

* * * * *

Elisa decided to take the train down to Pas City in answer to Braden's summons. She wore a plain tunic and leggings under unadorned sun-blocking robes so as not to reveal her highborn status.

She followed the directions Katarina d'Arnal gave her to d'Enela Street. No awnings shaded this street of dingy apartment blocks, which meant that no sandstorm shielding was in place either. That made her a little nervous, but she reasoned that people had survived down here a long time without it.

Elisa easily found the shop that sold exotic fruit halfway along the street. The elderly woman on the bench outside the shop gave Elisa a smile as she approached.

"He's in there, love," the woman said, pointing.

Across from the fruit shop was a rusting door pitted by sand. No one had bothered to clean or paint the door, Elisa realized, because the sand would just destroy it again.

Elisa approached the apartment but before she could touch the buzzer, the door slammed open to let out a Shareem she'd never seen before. He was as tall as Braden but had dark brown hair and blue eyes that held sadness. His mouth curved to a grin, though, when he saw her.

"I'm clearing out," he said. "Don't want to break the rules."

He swept past her, winked at the fruit-seller and strode away. The door remained open and Elisa tentatively walked inside.

In contrast to the battered exterior, the interior of the apartment was clean, freshly painted and neat. The front room had chairs, a terminal, and a digital feed monitor and small alcove kitchen in the back. To either side of the kitchen were closed doors that likely led into bedrooms.

That was it. The apartment had no extra rooms for displaying artwork or for meditation. There was no library, no garden room. Basic living, a far cry from the luxury of the Serestine Quarter, even from the "simplicity" of Elisa's house, which was considered modest.

A bedroom door opened as the apartment's main door closed behind Elisa. Braden leaned on the open doorframe, arms folded, just looking at her.

No wicked smile, no sexy words in his bad-boy voice.

"Thank you for coming," he said.

His tone made Elisa stop and her heart beat faster. "Katarina said it was important. She made me worry."

Braden's face softened a little. "I didn't want to call you on a monitored channel. The fewer people who know you're down here, the better."

"I understand." The worry increased.

"It's been nice being with you, Elisa," Braden said. "But I think we're done. You can put your celibate's robes back on, or go to your center for cleansing, or whatever it is you have to do. You don't owe me anything. It's on the house."

Chapter Fourteen

Braden hadn't realized how hard it would be to say the words. His mouth didn't want to work, and his chest hurt with every breath.

But the new rules handed down today meant that patrollers would be watching Shareem more closely than ever. It meant that being with Elisa would get tougher, especially for her.

Patrollers monitoring Shareem meant that Rees' project might be compromised at any time. If the project were exposed, it meant termination for the Shareem involved. Braden knew this and accepted it.

But what would happen to Elisa? Her connection with Braden might be discovered —probably already had been. Would her celibate status protect her, or would the fact that she'd decided to try out Shareem negate that protection? At best, Elisa might lose her job, her place in the Way of the Sky—she might even have to leave the planet, never seeing her family or friends again.

Elisa didn't deserve to have her entire life ruined, her reputation scrutinized—maybe even her life endangered—because she'd decided to have a little fun with Braden.

She'd be surprised, even angry at Braden's dismissal, but she'd get over it. She'd return to her meditation center and get reinstated as a celibate, go back to working at her library and move on with her life.

Without Braden.

As it should be.

"Done?" Elisa repeated in a stunned voice. "But my dispensation is for a month."

Braden shrugged, putting every bit of indifference he could into the gesture. "Doesn't matter. You already got what you came for. It was fun."

The look in her eyes wasn't the indignation or wounded pride he expected. It was bewilderment. "You don't want to be with me?"

The hurt in her voice nearly undid him. Yes, I want to be with you, nonstop and forever. Always, my librarian.

"No," he made himself say.

He didn't imagine the tears that sprang to Elisa's eyes either. He wanted to cross the room, fold her in his arms, kiss her, hold her, tell her he didn't mean it.

What the hell is wrong with me? Braden and his ladies had fun for a night, maybe for a few days, then it was over. The ladies went back to their own lives and Braden went back to his, everyone involved enjoying memories of the encounter.

He'd never wanted to hold and comfort a woman when it was time to go. And his ladies had never started to cry at the thought of not seeing him again.

Hell.

Elisa wiped her eyes. "What happened?"

Braden shrugged again. "Nothing happened. It's just over, baby."

"I heard about the new regulations this morning. Is that what's wrong? You don't want to get into trouble over seeing me? And what we...do?"

"Partly," Braden said. "But you don't want to get caught up in Shareem problems, sweetie. Trust me."

Her gaze turned sharp. "There's more to this than what you're saying, isn't there?"

"Nope, that's it. I figured we've pretty much done everything you wanted to do, so why keep it up? You don't need to be embarrassed by overzealous patrollers. And they love being zealous."

Elisa watched him a moment longer then calmly drew off her sun-blocking robes. "Braden, please do not bullshit me."

Braden hid his uneasiness. "Oh, so you've learned bad words hanging out with your Shareem?"

"I learned that Shareem cover up emotions by pretending they don't have any. Tell me what is the matter."

Fuck, this isn't working.

Braden rubbed his face and lost his nonchalant pose. "Sweetheart, things are bad. There's all kinds of shit going on. I can't tell you most of it, but I want you out of it. I want you back up in your library all safe, not doing anything more dangerous than looking up declensions of weird words from Ariel."

"Safe in my library while what happens to you?"

"I don't know."

Braden couldn't stay away. He went to her, took her hand, pressed a long kiss to her palm.

"I don't know what's going to happen to me, love," he said. "I don't know if anything's going to happen at all. But the thought of you being hurt by any of it, Elisa, is killing me."

Elisa hated the emotions running through her—anger, worry, pain and knowledge that she didn't want to leave Braden for any reason. The emotions tangled and beat at her, hurting her...scaring her.

"Maybe I can help," she said.

Braden pressed another kiss to her palm, his lips so warm, so smooth. "No, I want you out of it. Please, sweetheart. Go back up on your hill and stay there."

"Braden, you don't understand the full extent of what the vows of celibacy mean. It's more than declaring you won't have sex or conceive a child. It bestows amazing privileges on us. Even me taking a leave of absence to be with you won't change that. My order considers what I'm doing a part of testing and training for my calling. It means that I can get away with a *lot*, because a vowed celibate is the most trusted of women. By implication, whatever I choose is right. So tell me what I can do to help you."

During this speech Braden simply watched Elisa with his Shareem blue eyes. He was so strong, so tall, his hands holding heat that warmed her. Her body felt fragile against his, and yet, she suddenly understood he was more vulnerable than she ever would be.

"No, Elisa. Go away and be well."

The stubborn glint in his eyes wasn't going to fade. Elisa tightened her grip.

"Not yet," she said softly. "We haven't finished yet."

"Sweetheart —"

"Not yet, Braden. There are still things I want to do. Things you wanted to teach me."

She felt the bump in his pulse, his skin start to heat. Elisa slanted him a smile, rubbed her thumbs over the backs of his hands. "I wore the plug to work," she whispered.

The blue in Braden's eyes began to spread. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. It felt good. It made me think of you."

"You are so asking for trouble, sweetheart."

"I know."

"Hell." Braden slid one arm around her, pulled her against him. She felt his heart hammering in his chest, his body temperature rising. "Don't do this to me."

She kissed his chin, his whiskers like sandpaper. "Why not?"

His grip tightened. "I'll show you why not." He kissed her, mouth opening hers, teeth scraping her lips. Hot, wet, wicked.

He ended the kiss too soon and pulled her not to the bedroom but his bathroom. The chamber was just large enough to contain a dispose hole, a sink and a standup shower. The shower took up one entire wall and drained right into the tiled floor.

The lights came on when they entered the bathroom, but Braden left the door open.

"Strip," he said.

Elisa glanced nervously out the open door and Braden stepped in front of it. "Yes, Justin might come back. Or not. What if he sees you?"

"I'll be embarrassed."

"No, you won't. You'll be turned-on." Braden's blue irises spread. "You'll like him watching me pleasure you, him listening to you moan as you come."

No. Elisa was prepared to let Braden do what he wanted—he always made her feel good—but to have another man *watch*? That was crazy.

And yet, imagining the tall man she'd just passed returning, leaning on the doorframe as Braden was, regarding her with quiet blue eyes while Braden pleasured her, made her juices flow.

"That's right," Braden said. His tongue flicked, as though he tasted the air. "You'd like it. Strip for me now, Elisa. I'm getting impatient."

Elisa quickly tugged off tunic, boots and leggings. Her undertunic followed. Braden gathered up the clothes, tossed them onto the couch in the living room and returned.

"You're beautiful, Elisa. Show me your breasts. Play with them for me."

Elisa cupped her breasts in her hands, fingers rolling the nipples. The tingling sensation made her draw a sharp breath.

"Nice." Braden stepped past her to the shower. Still clothed, he keyed on the water then rotated a knob that sent the water out through a handheld nozzle. "Come here."

Elisa closed the small distance to him. Braden gave her another hot, passionate kiss then gently guided her under the water. Warm liquid spilled over her, making her shiver in delight.

"I want to wash you, so you'll be clean for what I want to do," Braden said. "I don't want you ever to worry."

Elisa wasn't worried. "What do you want to do?"

"Face the wall."

Elisa put her hands on the tile and leaned into the cool wall. Braden sprayed the water over her back, so warm.

"Spread your legs," he said.

Elisa moved her feet apart. She heard Braden getting rid of his clothes and then the water was back. He stood behind her, his body heat almost as warm as the water.

He moved the nozzle down her spine, letting water spill over her buttocks. Then he ran the water up over her smoothly shaved pussy, parting her opening with his fingers to let the water run right into her vagina.

"The water is clean," he said. "It won't hurt you."

Elisa shook her head. Water from her hair sprayed over her chest and ran from her breasts. The stream softly entering her pussy felt good, though not as frenzied good as when Braden touched her. But it did feel good. She moved her hips, enjoying it.

Braden took the water away, to her disappointment, but splashed it over her thighs and buttocks.

He rested his hand on her butt cheeks then spread them, one finger touching her anus. Elisa squeezed in reaction.

"Relax, sweetheart," Braden said. "This will feel good. I promise."

His fingers smoothing across her star made Elisa unclench her muscles. She leaned a little forward, so that her butt moved from the wall. She wished he'd rinse her with the water again. It felt nice, so soothing.

Braden moved the nozzle between her buttocks and, to her surprise, she felt the tip touch her anus. She sucked in a breath. "No."

"Yes, love. It won't hurt."

Her gasp of protest cut off when warm water flooded her. She turned her head, gripped by wild sensation.

Braden didn't thrust the nozzle inside her, but the water warmed and opened her. It was beautiful. She felt cleansed and happy, invaded yet comforted. The water ran down her legs, the warm sensation heady. She felt wicked and naughty, bold and bad.

More beautiful was the feel of the soft plug that went in her ass once she was clean, the water gone, this plug slightly larger than the last.

Elisa squeezed it. She'd never have thought she'd like anything *there*, but it gave her a splendid and excited feeling. This was taboo, forbidden, so exciting.

"I like that you're getting used to this," Braden murmured to her. "I want you to feel good, never hurt. Trust me, love?"

Elisa nodded. She was learning that when it came to sexual play, Braden could be trusted without doubt. He knew how to take her as far as she could go and then ease back and let her rest.

And then Braden would take her to the next step.

Today would be the next step. Braden stepped behind her, as naked as she was, his big body warming her back.

He lifted her hair and pinned it out of the way then kissed the back of her neck. He touched kisses down her neck and spine, breath heating her, lips sliding on her slick skin. Down each vertebra to the small of her back. She felt his tongue on her buttocks, licking and tasting, tongue sweeping around the plug.

What would it be like to have his tongue inside her? Wet and hot, plunging in and out of her? She imagined it—transposing the feel of the plug to what Braden's tongue would be like. Deep, penetrating, but warm, human and *him*.

Elisa groaned. Braden's hand stole to her mons at exactly the right moment, rubbing and stroking while he kissed her back. Black waves of passion lifted her, weakening her knees, and she started to collapse.

Braden held her, his strong arms keeping her from falling while he stroked and rubbed, kissed and nipped. His cock was firm against her backside, the tip of it moving on the butt plug.

"Please, Braden."

Braden nipped her ear. "I love it when you beg."

"Please."

"You got it, babe."

Before she fully wound down from the wonderful climax, Braden lifted and carried her, soaking wet, out and into his bedroom and laid her facedown on the bed.

She was so damn beautiful, skin slick and wet, eyes warm with desire. Braden rubbed her dry with big towels and then quickly toweled off his own body while Elisa watched.

He carefully eased out the plug. Elisa whimpered when she felt it go, which made Braden's pounding hard-on pound harder.

He smoothed her with lube, working a finger inside. He was big, and the last thing he wanted was to give her pain.

Braden slid a pillow under her, lifting her at just the right angle, and Elisa smiled at him. She knew what was coming and she wasn't afraid.

Gently, Braden parted her cheeks and touched his tip to her well-lubed opening. He rubbed more lube on his cock, making everything nice and slippery.

Elisa felt him slide a half an inch in before she instinctively clenched, but Braden soothed her with hands and voice.

"Hush now. You're all right. I won't let anything bad happen to you."

His voice, as always, mesmerized her and made her believe him.

Another push, more of him. This was different from the plug, which was small and just *there*. This was Braden, hot, big, her Shareem.

Yes, she thought, and her body opened to him.

"That's it." Braden put a reassuring hand on her back. "That's my girl."

She opened more, and Braden slid farther inside.

He stopped. Through her very tight walls, she could feel his pulse – one, two, three, four. Rapid, exciting.

"Yes," she whispered. "Thank you."

Her breasts were tight, nipples hard little points that brushed the sheets. Wonderful. Her clit rubbed the pillow, the swollen nub pleasured by the friction. And then Braden's heat all over her, his very hard cock pushing into her back opening.

She was surrounded by him, penetrated by him. Elisa couldn't move, but her whole body beat with pleasure. This was what Shareem did, what they were made for. Her heart soared. This was *Braden*, buried inside her. Gods, it was glorious.

Braden moved. Unbelievably, he went in farther, his cock so big and wide. She couldn't take it, she couldn't. Elisa shook her head against the bed, bracing herself. She couldn't.

And then she did. Braden was all the way in her, his groan loud, his cock hard. But it was slippery, and Elisa was loose and open, and he simply lay there, filling her.

"You're all right," Braden said, stroking her hair. "I'll take care of you."

"I know. I love you."

Braden stilled. Elisa knew she shouldn't have said it, but she had no control over her mouth right now. It said what she felt, and that was that.

"Elisa."

Elisa pinched her lips together. She wasn't taking it back. She loved him, she loved him inside her, and Braden would have to live with it.

"You get me so excited," Braden whispered. "With your body and your groaning and what you say to me. So, so exited, I never know what I'll do."

A thrill shot through Elisa. She looked back over her shoulder at him, wanting to see him.

He was on his knees behind her, his body so large, his skin beaded with sweat and remains of water from the shower. His pulled-back hair was damp and dark, his eyes hot and blue in his square, hard face.

He was smiling, his smile positively sinful. He was around her and holding her and inside her. Touching, penetrating.

Braden kissed her back, mouth hot. Elisa lowered her head again. Her come wet the pillow, her pussy so happy against the mounded cushion.

Braden nipped her skin, then he pumped. Slowly, in short slides, he started riding her. Nothing too hard or deep, just enough to make her crazy.

Without realizing she did it, Elisa slid her hand underneath her and clamped it to her pussy. She cupped herself, moving against her own hand, needing to feel that. She craved release but didn't want it. Not yet.

"That's it, my sweetheart." Braden's voice was ragged. "Let your Shareem fuck you in the ass. You love it, don't you?"

"Yes. I love it. I love it. I love it!"

Elisa's cream poured over her hand, her fingers working herself. Braden kept on inside her, ramrod hard and yet so smooth.

He rubbed her back, kissed her hair, glided in and out of her. Hot wildness filled her, heat rippling from the glorious friction. She loved what he did to her, loved *him*.

Elisa sobbed in her climax and still he rode her. On and on. *She's so tight, so fucking tight. Damn it I love her.*

Braden reveled in the sound of her voice, broken and crying his name. He loved how her climax opened her wide to him.

He wanted her now, wanted her forever. Elisa squeezed him in little pulses, not even knowing she did it. Her ass was so beautiful, and he knew that her pussy was too, where she rubbed herself with the heel of her hand. He wished he could see her pleasuring herself. Next time, a mirror.

Braden's mind went blank to everything but the feel and scent and sight of her. He felt his seed work its way up and into her, too soon, but damn it was good.

Messy, messy, hot and fun. Gods, thank you!

Braden groaned as he pulled out of her, more spent than he'd ever been. He let himself collapse beside her, cuddling her so she spooned back against him.

They were sticky, sweaty and the room smelled of lovemaking. Braden pushed Elisa's still-working hand aside and cupped her bare, sweet pussy himself. Her clit was still swollen and he rubbed it for her, knowing how much she loved the fiery sensation.

Elisa rocked back against him, tired now, her sighs gratifying. She relaxed and closed her eyes as he played, a woman happy.

Her Shareem was happy too.

Chapter Fifteen

"Can we do it again?"

Hours later, Elisa woke, rolled over, smiled up at Braden and asked the question. So cute she was, eyes sparkling in anticipation.

Braden kissed her mouth. "Vixen. Didn't you get enough?"

"I don't think so."

Braden kissed her lower lip, which led to him licking the seam of her mouth, which led to a deep, tongue-melding kiss.

She tasted so good, all salty and warm. He licked the corners of her mouth, the backs of her teeth, slid his hand to cup her breast.

He loved her breasts. He broke the kiss to study them. Firm globes, dusky tips, the areolas round to fill his mouth. Braden nuzzled the weight of one breast, licking upward until he drew the nipple into his mouth.

Lovely. The soft satin of the areola and the hard point of the nipple felt good against his tongue. He suckled, drawing the nipple tighter. Elisa rose against him, pressing her breast into his mouth.

Gods he would miss her. Braden suckled harder, cupping her other breast in his hand. He loved the feel of it in his palm almost as much as he did the one in his mouth.

Braden circled her nipple with his tongue one more time then slid his body upward until he lay on top of her, face-to-face, staring into her eyes.

"Why green?" he asked.

"Pardon?"

Braden touched her lashes. "You have green in your eyes. From where?"

"Oh, it's from my great-great grandmother. She came here from Castor Seven a long time ago and married a Bor Nargan."

Why she'd want to, Braden had no idea. "The women of Castor Seven must have beautiful eyes."

"I wouldn't know. I've never been there."

"Neither have I. But I know they do, because you do."

She smiled, liking the compliment, and Braden kissed her lips. These kisses weren't heated, they were slow, sweet, loving. If she were his, it could be like this whenever he wanted.

While she'd slept, Braden had showered to clean himself and the toys. So now he was perfectly ready to part her legs and slide inside her slick pussy.

He made love to her, face-to-face, man to woman. No manacles, no plugs, no restraints. Just Elisa lifting to him, and Braden leisurely thrusting into her. It was slow, hot and wonderful.

They warmed to each other until they were moving in rhythm, the room filling with soft cries and sounds of need. Her pheromones and the smell of her come scented the air, and Braden's eyes grew wet.

I love you, my librarian. He pushed all the way into her, taking her mouth in a long, dark kiss.

I will always love you. Forever and ever.

No matter what.

* * * * *

How Elisa found herself an hour later, dressed and staring at the closed door of Braden's apartment from the outside, she never quite knew.

One moment she drowsed with Braden after the sweetest lovemaking imaginable, the next he was hurrying her out of bed, into her clothes and out.

Finished. Over.

The wonderful things they'd done inside that apartment would never happen again.

"I just got in some real strawberries," the elderly woman said behind her. "Come and see. You look like you can afford them."

Elisa turned, but everything was blurry through her tears. "I'm sorry. Not right now."

The woman gave her a look of understanding. "That's Shareem for you. They lure you in then they turn around and break your heart. Rio was the same."

Elisa wiped her eyes and approached the woman, curious in spite of herself. "I thought Rio went to Ariel."

"He did. Found the 'one', he told me. Rio was going to send her away for her own safety—sacrifice his happiness for her—but she convinced him to go with her. If you want Braden, you'll do the same."

Elisa's tears threatened again. "But the wanting has to go both ways," she said. "Or it doesn't work."

"Don't give up, love. You keep at him. I've watched Braden for the year he's lived here, and only you have given him the haunted look he wears now. He needs you."

"He's pretty stubborn. It will take a lot to convince him."

The woman nodded, not bothered. "You'll do it. Now, have some strawberries. Finest in the city. I won't even charge you."

* * * * *

Later that evening, Braden faced Rees in Rees' little basement apartment. Talan had a nice little hideaway on a moon resort, but Rees had kept this place because getting to that moon resort wasn't always easy, and he liked having crash space in town. Talan getting the five of them to her villa, especially with the new rules, would have been impossible.

The basement room was crowded by the time Rees, Talan, Braden, Justin and Calder squeezed themselves in. Calder, the biggest of them, leaned on the open door to the bathroom.

Aiden and Ky weren't coming—they were involved in a dispute with their landlord about Brianne staying with them when a human was no longer allowed to be with more than one Shareem at a time.

Rees eyed Justin. "Braden wants you in on this, and I agree."

"In on what?" Justin slid off his sun-blocking robes and hung them on the hook Talan indicated. Talan, the gracious hostess, offered them ale, water or other drink of choice, which they each declined.

"Leaving." Rees took a seat in front of his terminal, tapped a few things on the screen and brought up a list that looked like gibberish to Braden. "For the last few months, Talan and I, with the help of Brianne and Katarina, have been looking for ways to get Shareem off planet."

"Yeah?" Justin looked impressed.

"You understand that me telling you this endangers you? If we're terminated for it, so are you."

Justin shrugged. "I never mind a little danger."

"Ariel is willing to take Shareem, but they like everything nice and neat and highly legal. Which means they *will* take us, but one at a time, over long intervals. That's fine, but each of us getting off Bor Narga at long intervals will be a problem. We have to go all at once or the ones left behind get snagged by the patrollers."

"True," Calder rumbled.

"I can arrange transport," Rees said. "Braden was able to give me timetables, and Judith's guy, Mitch, said he can hook us up with a pilot who asks no questions. Plus Mitch can help out himself but his rig's not big. I've seen it. Three seats and a hold that's designed for cargo that doesn't need to breathe. One of the seats is for the pilot, so that leaves room for two."

Braden broke in. "Mitch knows that if he's caught illegally transporting Shareem the officials of Bor Narga can arrest him, right? Plus they might arrest Judith as his accomplice, whether she knows anything about it or not."

"Mitch understands," Rees said. "And he says it's not a problem because he won't get caught."

Braden grinned, having known Mitch would say something like that, but Calder shifted. "So we trust Mitch? How do we know he's as good as he says? Or that he won't turn around and give us up to the patrollers?"

"I don't think he will. I've gotten to know him pretty well."

"Yeah?" Calder said. "And he's going to do this because he loves you? Because he loves Shareem? Gods, don't tell me he has the hots for Aiden. Aiden's already too damn full of himself."

"Not anything so funny," Rees said. "Mitch is doing it for Judith. I think he'd do anything for Judith."

"That bad?" Braden asked.

"That bad."

Justin folded his arms. "Yeah, but will Judith do anything for Mitch? You're trusting your life that Mitch won't get pissed off at Judith sometime down the road and betray us?"

"If you all had been paying attention, you'd get it," Rees said. "Mitch will do anything for Judith—and she'll do anything for us. If she thought there was the slightest chance of Mitch giving us up, she wouldn't have recommended his services to me."

"That's a lot of trust going around," Justin said.

"We don't have a choice," Rees said. "This is the best chance we've ever had. Rio is opening things up for us on Ariel, but if we go to some intermediary place—a station or planet that won't extradite us—we can get to Ariel one at a time. We can pull this off."

"What about Sirius III?" Braden asked Justin. "The sticklers for no human trafficking or selling sex?"

"It could work," Justin said. "I know people there. A flood of Shareem might not be what they want—same problem as on Ariel—but they're not as regulated as Ariel. At worst, we'd hang around in a Sirius spaceport waiting for clearance."

"We might have to split over several places," Rees said. "But my biggest worry is getting out of here in the first place. Justin, can you contact people there without getting caught? Or you can give names to me and I'll contact them? I know I won't get caught."

Justin lifted his brows. "You're damn sure of yourself."

Talan, who'd been standing behind Rees, smiled and caressed Rees' shoulder. "He is. It's tough to put up with."

She gave Rees a look of such total love that Braden felt a twinge of envy. What they had was special, a bond no one could sever.

"I can try," Justin said.

"We can pay anyone necessary," Rees said. "I'm good for it."

"You can pay them," Justin said. "I won't be going."

Talan blinked, surprised. Rees' look turned hard and Calder pushed himself from the doorframe.

"We all go," Calder rumbled. "This is an all-or-nothing thing. Any of us left behind will get arrested and most likely terminated. It would be too risky for you to stay."

Justin gave Calder an unworried look. "I came back to Bor Narga on purpose. I can't leave. Not yet."

"It's not optional," Rees said.

Justin shot his gaze right back at him. "Sorry, Rees. I can hide out in a desert colony or something in order not to jeopardize your plans, but I can't leave the planet. Not yet."

Braden knew damn well why he couldn't leave, was the only one in the room who did. And he didn't blame Justin at all for not wanting to go, because Braden wouldn't want to either. Not if he knew he had a child, an impossible miracle of a child, living her life only a few miles away on the Vistara. Nothing short of a planet-wide disaster would drive him away from her, and then he'd linger to rescue her.

"I'm not leaving either," Braden said. "I'll stay behind with Justin."

Justin shot him a surprised look and Rees got to his feet.

"Damn it, this is not a debate," Rees said. "You want to stay here forever getting inoculations, knowing you can't ever have a real life, knowing that even falling in love is dangerous? Is that really what you two want?"

No, it wasn't what Braden wanted. He knew he could never have what he craved with Elisa.

At the same time, he didn't want to leave the planet she was on. He could at least see her, know she was there, watch over her. Braden understood exactly what Justin felt about his daughter, because it was what Braden felt about Elisa.

She stays, I stay.

Justin apparently saw no reason to explain. "Sorry."

"You're coming," Calder said. "Whether you like it or not. I'll get Katarina to tranq you both and I'll carry you out if I have to."

"Then you'd have a fight on your hands, my old friend," Braden said.

Rees stepped in front of Braden, his blue eyes full of anger. "Braden, what the fuck? You hate it here. This planet is your prison and I'm working my ass off to break you out. If you and Justin stay, you'll be dead. You think the rest of us want to live with that?"

"Sorry, Rees," Justin said. "I never meant to throw off your plans, but I can't go. I'll help you and the others get out of here but I can't leave."

"Is it worth staying behind to die?" Rees demanded.

Justin nodded. "Yes."

Rees looked at Braden. "You too?"

Braden steadily returned the look. "Yeah."

"Shit." Rees was keeping his temper down with effort, one Dom trying to out-dominate another. "Braden, you know Elisa has already taken her vows. Giving them up and leaving the order for a Shareem would ruin her. She knows that."

Braden's heart was hurting like hell, but he gave Rees a calm nod. "She won't choose me. I get that."

"So you think watching her from the sidelines is a good thing? It will kill you, Braden. The best thing to do is make a clean break, start again somewhere else. Somewhere we'll have choices."

"Yeah, right, Rees. If it were me standing here telling you to leave Talan behind, to make a clean break and start somewhere else, you'd have your fist in my face so fast it wouldn't be funny."

Rees opened his mouth to argue but Talan broke in.

"You know he's right, Rees," she said. "And I wouldn't be able to leave you behind either."

Rees gave Braden another hard look, but the one he briefly turned to Talan softened to something tender. "Yeah, well, I get how you feel, I really do. But why stay and torture yourself?"

Braden answered with conviction. "Because, even if I can't have everything I want with Elisa, I can still be her friend."

The room quieted. Justin watched him in understanding, but Calder shook his head. "Ky will kill you," he said.

"Ky will have to deal," Braden answered. "I'm sorry, but I can't go. Not right now."

"Hell, I thought you'd be the first one on the ship," Calder rumbled. "Leading the pack. You hate Bor Narga."

Braden shrugged. "Shit changes."

Rees rubbed his hand through his hair. "All right, all right. You know how to fuck things up, Braden. Let me think about this. Go the hell away now, and do...whatever you think you need to do."

Talan showed them to the door. She had a smile on her face, and Braden realized that out of all of them, she would best understand what Braden was feeling.

Braden kissed her cheek as Calder and Justin made their way out. "Thanks, Talan, sweetie. Don't let him explode or anything."

"Oh, I think I can take the edge off." Talan's eyes held the light of a woman in love.

"I just bet you can."

Talan hugged him back and Braden went.

"You're crazy, you know that?" Calder said to him as they emerged on the street. "I should have had Katarina shoot you full of obedience drugs."

"Don't think that hasn't been tried before. Didn't work."

"And what's *your* deal?" Calder asked Justin. "You're doubly crazy. You came back here on purpose."

Justin gave him a good-natured grin. "None of your damn business."

"Shit, you two living together has made you both insane."

"You know that if you had to leave Katarina behind, you'd never go in a million years," Braden said. "No matter how many obedience drugs were in your system."

"I know that. I'd put Katarina over my shoulder, plant my hand on her backside and carry her off with me." Calder drew his robes over the black tunic and leggings he always wore, adjusted face cloths against the sun and drew on his sun goggles. He no longer had to hide his face from the world, but he said he liked the habit—it made people get out of his way.

True. Seeing seven feet of menacing male, eyes hidden with sun goggles, bearing down on them, did make lesser beings scramble for cover.

Without another word, Calder turned his back on Braden and Justin and strode off.

"Good thing Katarina loves him," Braden said as they watched Calder go, his boots kicking up little clouds of dust. "It's why he stays alive."

"But he makes a good point." Justin wound his own sun-blocking robes around him. "Just carry her off over your shoulder. Women like that."

Justin was one to talk. He took off after Calder but Braden split from them to walk home alone. Wouldn't want the patrollers getting their panties in a twist seeing three Shareem together.

Braden let himself enjoy the pleasant fantasy of lifting Elisa over his shoulder and running on to a cargo ship with her, but he let it go.

He took care of his lady. If his lady wanted to wear a celibate's robes and stare at rocks all day, that was her choice, her life. He'd love her no matter what.

A patroller hovered around the next corner, waiting to catch him breaking the new rules. Braden gave her a grin and a wave and walked on past.

Chapter Sixteen

Elisa knelt before Lady t'Lenka in the pavilion, the red silk cushion comforting in its color and softness. Lady t'Lenka had served her a formal mint tea, which was refreshing even drunk hot under the merciless sun.

They were not allowed to discuss business until the ceremony finished. This was, in theory, to give each of them time to organize their thoughts, relax and calm, rather than rush headlong into discussion.

Elisa had to admit that the tea and silence were soothing, but her thoughts were agitated.

She loved Braden. She loved every part of him, from his infectious smile to the little growl he made just before he came. He was a level-three Shareem, a forbidden man, and Elisa felt fulfilled with him in a way that meditation and the order had never made her feel.

Lady t'Lenka set aside her teacup. "You have enjoyed yourself these last few days, I trust?"

"Yes, m'lady."

Lady t'Lenka laughed, a sound that mixed with the wind chimes around them. "You may be more plain than that. I can tell from the way you sit and walk and speak that you have found joy in this experiment."

Elisa thought of the way she'd worn the butt plug to work, the toy warming her and evoking thoughts of Braden in the hours she'd had it in. She also remembered how excitement had lit his eyes when she'd confessed that she'd worn it.

"I have found more peace than I ever thought I would." Elisa closed her eyes. "And also more agitation and worry that I've ever known. For him, not for me."

"You mean, you've fallen in love with him."

Elisa popped her eyes open and Lady t'Lenka smiled.

"My dear, love is a perfectly natural emotion. Caring for someone else more than yourself is a wonderful thing. You wish to ensure that the world is right for them, that they want for nothing, that they are never hurt."

Yes, exactly. Elisa did want that for Braden—to have him be able to throw off his chains, to have the same rights as any human on Bor Narga, to come and go from the planet as he pleased. She wanted him to fly far away, to be free and happy, even if that meant he'd have no more part in her life.

"Is this what love feels like?" she asked. "It's pleasure and pain all mixed up. I don't know if I want that. I don't know if I can take it."

"What would you prefer? To rejoin the Way, to sit in this garden and think of nothing but patterns of the sand and the sound of wind chimes?"

The picture Lady t'Lenka painted sounded soothing. Simple.

Love should be easy, Elisa thought. *I fell in love with him without meaning to.* He never meant me to – I'm just another Shareem groupie to him.

She remembered the dark look in his eyes when he'd said, "You have to go. Now."

Braden pretended not to have emotions, but he had them. But even if he had feelings for Elisa, she understood that he didn't want to pursue them. He'd seen pitfalls of such a love.

He'd watched his friends struggle through their lives and watched their ladies struggle along with them. It wasn't an easy life. Look at the sudden restrictions slapped on the Shareem because Braden and his friend Justin had dared walk in the Vistara.

Ridiculous. Braden ought to be able to get off whatever train he bloody well pleased and shop in any market he bloody well wanted to. He was more openhearted and generous than any tight-fisted miser who lived on the Vistara or in the Serestine Quarter. Damn them.

Lady t'Lenka laid her hand over the fist Elisa had clenched. "You see? Wind chimes and sand are not going to fulfill you, child. Your path may not be with the Way, but I don't view that as a bad thing."

Elisa looked up, anguished. "The last thing I want to do is disappoint *you*. I've tried to embrace the Way, and I do love it. And you."

Her heart went into the words. Lady t'Lenka had given her nothing but kindness.

"Elisa, you would disappoint me only if you followed the path against your heart. If you love this Shareem, he should know. He deserves to know. What you do about it after that is up to the two of you. Not to me, not the order, not the Ministry of Non-Human Life Forms. To you and him."

"I'm not sure he would agree."

Lady t'Lenka's serene face took on a wise look. "I have some experience with males, my dear, and what they say they feel and what they do feel are usually two different things. You need to face him with the truth. I warn you that the matter might not turn out as you wish, but I can't allow you to rush back into the order and never know what might have been."

Lady t'Lenka finished and they both sat in silence.

The breeze moved the trees and the wind chimes, the sounds sweet and soothing, but Elisa knew the breeze was false. Machines hidden above them generated it, and this technology also generated the force field that kept the harsh Bor Nargan heat and frequent sandstorms at bay.

If the shield were deactivated, the strong winds would strip the trees bare, and the dry air would shrivel them and the intricate flowerbeds to nothing. The fountains

would clog with sand, the wind chimes would tangle and break. There would be no kneeling on silken cushions in the pavilion, quietly sipping mint tea.

As beautiful as it was, everything that made this garden possible was a lie.

If Elisa turned her back on the desire that Braden had introduced her to, her life would also be a lie. She could hide under the shield of celibacy and search desperately in the false breezes of this garden for happiness, but she'd never find it.

If Braden didn't want her in his life, so be it. She could devote herself to what she held dear—knowledge and helping others find that knowledge.

Elisa could help Brianne d'Aroth and Talan d'Urvey in their efforts to make life better for Shareem. She could do at least that to repay Braden for what he'd given her.

Elisa gazed across the meditation garden with a pang in her heart. The gardens were beautiful even if they never had been real.

"If I leave the Way," she asked, "must it be forever?"

"Anyone can join the Way of the Sky anytime they like," Lady t'Lenka said. "Life is long, changes occur. You will always be welcome here, Elisa. But you must return for the right reasons."

She meant that Elisa couldn't use the Way of the Sky for escape. Lady t'Lenka knew exactly why Elisa had sought the Way in the first place, and Lady t'Lenka had allowed Elisa that choice.

But never again. If Elisa came back, she'd truly have to believe and embrace celibacy for what it was meant for—the cleansing of the mind and soul, the rejecting of bodily sensations.

Elisa thought of the full and satisfied feeling of Braden inside her at the same time he'd made her wear the plug. She'd been surrounded by him and filled with him. Love had made the erotic sensations even better—heart and body entwined.

Elisa unfolded to her feet and bowed to Lady t'Lenka. "Thank you, m'lady. I will begin the process of leaving the order."

Lady t'Lenka also rose, went to Elisa and embraced her. "Nonsense. You run along, and I'll make all the arrangements for you. This does not have to be a painful and public process, my dear. Go home, work in your library, enjoy your life, and for the gods' sakes, talk to your Shareem."

"I will." Elisa hugged her mentor with true affection and kissed her cheek. "Thank you. For everything."

The transport back to the city left from an underground station, well hidden from the houses and gardens of the order. The trail shot out of its tunnel a few miles away, heading across the desert to the city, which spread over its hills under a blue-white sky.

The train let her off in the heart of the Serestine Quarter, on a platform that let her view the sprawling city below. The noise, the heat, the crowds, the *realness* of the metropolis crashed into her, and Elisa opened her arms and embraced it.

* * * * *

Braden tried to ignore Elisa's summons to her house on the hill. Each time she called, Braden didn't answer, but Elisa left messages.

The messages were heartbreaking. The first began with Elisa excited, her brown eyes dancing as she stared into the screen.

"Braden, I need to see you. I must speak with you about something, privately. It's quite important. Please come to my house tonight."

The next morning she called again. "I waited for you all night. Are you all right? I truly need to speak with you. It is most urgent."

That afternoon. "Braden, please. I would not continue to plague you were it not important."

Gods, the sweetheart talked like an old-fashioned novel. Who the hell said *plague* you or were it not important?

Not that Elisa *plagued* him or even annoyed him. He loved everything she did.

That night she left another message. This time her face was calm, her eyes showing resignation.

"Braden, I apologize for calling so often. Hear me out before you delete this message. Please." She drew a breath.

"This will be my last call. I wish to thank you for what you have done for me. You helped me learn about myself, and what I could be. You taught me to live inside my body instead of pretending that most of it doesn't exist. I will always be grateful for that.

"I have decided to leave the Way of the Sky. In fact, the formal separation came through today. I entered the order for the wrong reason—to escape from what life had dealt me. I'm not sorry that I chose the Way, because I learned much from it, but neither am I sorry to leave it. I will continue to work at the library, because that is where my heart lies, in books and the wonderful things inside them.

"This is goodbye, Braden. If you've listened to this entire message, I thank you." The formal tone left her voice and she touched the screen. "I truly thank you. And I'll miss you. Goodbye."

The screen went blank.

Braden stared at it, suddenly unable to breathe. Voices cried out in his head, anguished at the loss of something precious and rare. Something that would never come again.

Braden touched his console as though he still saw her face, while his heart lay like lead in his chest.

This is what he wanted, wasn't it? For her to break from him, to go on with her life?

Her goodbye meant that Braden could tell Rees he'd join him in finding a way off planet. Justin still had his problem, but they'd work something out.

Braden had told Rees he'd rather stay and watch over Elisa, but maybe that would be too hard. It was too damn hard just listening to her messages on the console.

Elisa had left her order. She was no longer an official celibate.

Damn her, why had she decided to do that? Had she asked Braden's permission first? No, she had not. He needed to punish her for that.

Braden tamped down on his level-three instincts. It was Elisa's life, her choice. Why the hell should he care?

But he did care. Elisa was throwing away something important to her. And why? For a Shareem. A person who, according to the rules, wasn't even human.

What if the dickhead she'd dumped used her leaving the order to renew the breach of contract suit? Dickhead and his family could ruin her.

And she'd have done it because Braden had taught her that sex wasn't so bad.

Damn it all.

Braden sprang up, slammed into his bathroom and started retrieving toys from the sterilizer.

"Where are you running off to?" Justin ducked into the front door from wherever he'd been roaming and watched Braden shrug on his leather tunic.

"The Serestine Quarter, to teach a pretty young lady a lesson." Braden stopped, studied Justin. "Hey, are you busy? Wanna help me?"

Justin gave him a wide, very Shareem grin. "Thought you'd never ask."

* * * * *

When Elisa woke in darkness to the cuff closing around her left wrist, her heart began pounding in joy.

She'd not changed the key code since sending Braden the last message, retaining hope. He'd come to her. He'd received her messages and come to her.

Braden tugged her right hand to her left one and closed a cuff around that wrist. An inch-long chain joined the two cuffs, keeping her from moving her wrists apart.

Elisa felt momentary panic over the restraint. It was a strange sensation, and instinct wanted her to get free.

Braden's strong hand smoothed her hair. "Shhh. You're fine."

Elisa took a long breath. She drew on her meditation techniques to calm her, focusing on her breathing to swallow her fear. She rested her hands calmly on her belly and waited to see what he'd do next.

"That's it, love," he said, touching a kiss to her lips. "You're doing well."

Braden kissed her again, his lips on her mouth, chin, throat. He raised her bound hands over her head and rolled her over onto her stomach.

"Lights," he said. "Dim."

The lights rose marginally to reveal Braden in black leather tunic and leggings. He unfastened and slid off her nightclothes in swift, practiced movements then he stretched a chain from her bound wrists to one of the bedposts.

Elisa's skin prickled in anticipation as she lay facedown and watched him. Would he play with her? Spank her? Enter her? Would it be in her vagina or—happy thought—her ass again?

For an answer, Braden slapped a hand to her buttocks. "You left your order. Why? Did I give you permission?"

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"Braden, I—"
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Another slap. "Answer the question. Did I?"

"No."

He drew a thin piece of leather from his pocket and unfolded it. Elisa's eyes widened.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "Are you afraid, my librarian?"

Terrified. And excited, so excited. "No," she said. "I'm not afraid."

"Good."

Braden pulled out the next thing from his pocket, a simple piece of cloth. He braced one knee on the bed and tied the cloth around her eyes.

Elisa sucked in a breath. "But I can't see."

"If you could see, it wouldn't be a very good blindfold, would it?"

"But why?"

Braden leaned down, his cool leather clothes touching her skin. "You think you want to be with Shareem, Elisa. I've been going easy on you, being gentle, because I know you're new at this. But that's not what you'd get if you stayed with me. You're not ready for the real things I'd do."

"Real things? What does that mean?"

"Level three. Every bit of it."

Braden's large hand landed on her ass again, a mild sting. She'd grown to love the sensation, especially when he soothed it away with a caress.

He didn't soothe this time. He lifted his hand away, and next she felt the sharper cut of the leather lash.

She cried out, and Braden's hand soothed the fire. "Hush now. This is for your disobedience."

"What disobe—"

Swack.

"I said, hush now."

Elisa clamped her lips together. She curled her hands into the rumpled sheets as Braden smacked her with the strap, stopping every couple of strokes to ease her.

"This is level three, baby," he said. "Discipline and bondage."

Elisa squirmed as the next slap came down. She was his. That was what the strap told her, what the manacles told her. He was in charge of her.

The strap hurt and it didn't. The sting radiated through Elisa's buttocks and her pussy, making her undulate in pleasure.

Slap, sting, fire, soothe. Slap, sting, fire, soothe.

The sound of the leather hissing through the air added to the pleasure...the creak of his clothes, the whisper of his breath.

"Your ass is so red, sweetheart. So pretty." Braden kissed it, his lips cool to her hot skin. "You make me want to fuck you."

"Please." Yes, to feel him enter her after this would be heaven.

Swack.

"Not yet."

He'd liked it when she'd begged for him before. "Please, Braden. Please."

Swack. "Hush now, or I get out the gag as well."

Elisa closed her mouth again. What did he want? For her to tell him she'd changed her mind about leaving the order? It hardly made sense for him to be pleasuring her if he preferred she go back to being celibate.

Braden spanked her a few more times with the strap, kissing her to soothe it instead of using his hands. Then the strap went away but, joy, she felt his finger, cool with lube, at her anus.

She lifted her hips, eager for him to touch her there. Braden gently pressed the opening. In the darkness behind the cloth, her hands unable to reach for him, she felt only that sensation, a point of excitement.

Elisa let out a little moan as she felt a plug slide in, this one the largest yet. It was still fairly small, about the size of his finger, but the difference was there.

"I have a surprise for you," he said. "A few, actually. This is the first one."

The plug began to vibrate—fast. It buzzed and hummed, and Elisa pressed herself upward with the pleasure. Maybe, just maybe, he'd put another one in her vagina. Or better still, roll her over and enter her in the front while the wonderful plug did its dance in the back.

When the strap cracked across her buttocks again, Elisa screamed in joy. He had to take her now, had to.

"Are you ready for the second surprise?" Braden asked.

The vibrator and strap together *wasn't* surprise number two? This could be wild.

Braden left the bed. The mattress no longer bore his weight and she felt suddenly cold. She wanted to beg him to come back, but maybe he'd punish her. Glorious thought.

Then again, him *not* taking her now would be the worst of punishments. Elisa bit the inside of her mouth and said nothing, in case.

She heard the door of her bedroom hiss open, the tread of someone else entering the room.

"This is my friend Justin," Braden said. "Justin, meet Elisa."

Justin—the tall Shareem with brown hair she'd seen leaving his house two days ago. Seeing her naked, facedown and blindfolded, hands manacled, her ass rising as the vibrator pleasured her.

"Very, very nice," Justin said in a rumbling voice.

She heard Braden's voice in her ear, felt his lips brush her cheek.

"Surprise," he said.

Chapter Seventeen

Two Shareem.

Two. Taking her.

She couldn't. Elisa couldn't let them.

Her body – excited, shaking, hot, open – told her she could.

Braden watched Justin look at Elisa as she lay stretched out for their pleasure. The light at half volume flooded her body with a rosy glow.

She was beautiful, her cheek on the pillow, her ass slightly elevated, showing Braden how much she craved him. He didn't need to touch her to know she was wet, so very wet.

Justin eyed her like a hungry man at an unexpected banquet. The idiot probably hadn't gone to a woman since he'd arrived in Bor Narga.

"What can I do?" he asked.

"Anything you want," Braden said. "Touch, taste, play, fuck. The pussy is mine, but all else is fair game."

"Got it. Can she do a double?"

"I think so. I plan to try."

He imagined Elisa lying on him, fully enclosing his cock, while Justin came behind her. The two of them sandwiching her in ultimate pleasure. Gods, yes.

Elisa had been made for pleasure. She might not have realized it until she'd dumped the asshole who'd wanted to marry her for her money, but she was. At least she'd been wise enough to prefer no man at all to one who'd never fulfill her.

When Braden had walked into her library, he'd seen the spark in her eyes in spite of her celibate's robes. She was a woman who wanted to know pleasure, to discover the depths of her own sexuality.

So lucky Braden was willing to show it to her.

Justin approached the bed and started stroking her skin—legs and arms, back, getting to know her body. Elisa moved under his touch, responding to Shareem caresses.

Braden suddenly wanted to snarl, dash across the room and shove Justin away from her. Maybe this had been a bad idea.

Mine. My Elisa.

His spark of jealousy surprised him. Braden had done plenty of two on one—even three and four on one. He'd never been jealous of the second, third or fourth man in the equation.

Focus. He'd brought Justin here for Elisa's pleasure. Not for his needs or Justin's.

"Nice to meet you, Elisa," Justin said. "For real, this time."

His hands went all over Elisa's back, down her legs to her feet and up again. Braden clenched his fists and forced himself to watch.

Justin flicked the vibrator with his fingertip. "This looks fun. Is it?"

Elisa made a little noise of surprise but said nothing.

"Answer him," Braden said.

"Yes," Elisa groaned.

"Would you like my cock back here?" Justin asked, caressing her buttocks. "My cock *will* go back here, and you're going to like it." He grinned, his level-two pheromones heating. "This would be even more fun with whipped cream. Got any, Braden?"

"No," Braden growled.

Justin shook his head. "What can you do with level threes? No sense of play. I'd like to dab whipped cream on my cock and have you suck it off, Elisa. Maybe with a cherry on top. Then I'd lick the cream from your pussy. I'd lick it so slowly, Braden would be all hot and bothered and pissed off at me, because he'd be dying to have you."

Elisa quivered both from Justin's touch and his words. The dark of the blindfold shut him out but Elisa remembered walking past him and looking up into his lonely eyes.

Now she heard glee in his voice, felt heat in his touch. He might be sad and lonely, searching for something, but he was putting that aside right now to be Shareem. For Braden and for her.

Justin's touch was different from Braden's. Justin's hands were as hard and calloused, but his fingertips skimmed featherlight over her skin. He tickled, he wove patterns over her back, he playfully dipped to her pussy and out again before she could gasp.

Level two. Fun and games.

His hand rested on her buttocks, caressed. Then spanked. Not as hard as Braden did, more like friendly little pats.

Then the strap, stinging across her backside. Again not as hard—just enough to make her squirm and laugh.

Justin swatted her a few more times, then he put his hand on her shoulder. "Turn over, sweet thing."

Elisa waited, sensing that Braden wouldn't like it if she obeyed Justin without question.

"Go ahead," Braden said. His voice held approval, as though she'd done right.

Elisa maneuvered herself onto her back. The butt plug fit snug against her and kept on vibrating.

"Pretty," Justin said.

He skimmed hands over her breasts, tugged at her nipples. His hair brushed her belly as he leaned down and licked her navel. She giggled.

"Level twos," Braden said in disgust. "Never can keep to the essentials."

Justin licked Elisa's navel again. She loved the tickle of his tongue.

He pressed a kiss below her navel and another just above her clit. "You shaved her."

"I like it bare."

"So do I," Justin said, breath warm on her clit. "Hair is nice too, though. It can be pretty."

Justin continued the kisses, dropping light ones to her clit and across her opening as he bent her knee and pushed her legs apart.

"She tastes good," Justin said. He blew on her opening. "Come and taste this, Braden."

"I've tasted it. Keep on."

Justin kissed and licked some more, his tongue light and tickling. He briefly suckled her clit, teeth scraping, then lifted away. Elisa wiggled her hips, wanting more.

What she got was his hand. First he cupped her, warmth and pressure, and then he patted. Little slaps and pats against her pussy and clit, making them tingle.

She heard Braden cross to the bed. "You're beautiful, love."

Then they were both patting her, her legs wide apart, four hands applying sweet pressure to her pussy, her clit on fire. Elisa rose to it, her bound hands wanting to part, the chain frustrating her.

"Braden," she begged. "Braden."

"Don't come yet," Braden said. His voice was in her ear, breath scalding.

"But I want to. I need to."

Another slap on her pussy, harder this time. "Not yet."

"Hell, *I* might come," Justin said.

"Fucking level twos."

"Tight-ass level threes."

More pats to clit and pussy, moving down to her ass and the vibrator there. Waves of climax rushed at her, blotting out all other sensation.

"Not yet," Braden growled.

"Please, Braden!"

"No, sweetie. Not until it will be the best coming you ever had."

Elisa didn't care right now. A pretty good one would be fine with her.

"Let her," Justin said. "I want to see it."

"I'm the Dom in this room. We do it the way I want it done."

"Damn it." Justin's touch left her, and Elisa heard fabric slither.

She wished she could see. Was Justin stripping down? Would he be as hard-muscled as Braden? Would he be as erect, wanting her?

Something blunt and warm touched her nose then bumped her lips. If this was Justin, then yes, just as erect, and pretty much as large.

"Suck him," Braden said, his voice now coming from across the room.

Justin got up on the bed behind her, knees on either side of her. He gently tilted her head back, supporting it, so she could open her throat and take him upside down.

Strange sensation. Justin's firm cock slid between her lips and bumped the roof of her mouth. It took her a moment to understand how she would so this, but finally she closed her mouth and sucked.

"Oh yeah," Justin said above her. "Damn, Braden, she's good."

"She learned from the best," Braden said. "She's a good librarian. This is what she means when she asks her patrons, 'What can I do for you?'"

"What, she takes them into the stacks and gets on her knees?"

Elisa stopped in surprise, and Justin batted her cheek gently. She worked him again, realizing his game.

"Sure," Braden said, closer now. "She's bad that way, can't wait for the next person to help."

Justin groaned, his fingers tightening as he rubbed her hair. "Mmm, makes me want to visit the library."

Braden gave her pussy a little spank. "She likes devices too. She wears an ass plug all day while she's working."

Partly true. Elisa remembered the warmth of the plug inside her while she quietly helped her customers find the digitals they needed. The secret knowledge that she wore the plug had kept her nipples tight with excitement.

"I like that," Justin breathed.

"She loves to have things up the ass," Braden said. "Plug, vibrator, tongue, cock."

Elisa moved, climax rushing at her. It made her want to suck, and she sucked hard at Justin.

"Gods, she's beautiful." Justin rocked into her mouth, his hands still supporting her. "It's been too long. Oh, sweet baby, take me."

Braden cupped his hand hard over Elisa's pussy. "Now."

Hot, salty-smooth seed filled Elisa's mouth as Justin gave it up. Elisa rose, stimulated by the vibrator and, most of all, by Braden's firm hand. He cupped her, harder and harder, until she lost hold of Justin's cock in an open-mouthed scream.

She coughed, raised her head to swallow, Justin helping her. Braden was on top of her then, riding her climax with her, hand still on her pussy, kisses all over her face, throat, breasts.

"My sweet Elisa," he whispered. "My sweet, beautiful lady. I lo—"

The word cut off, lost in Elisa's cries and Justin's groans. Braden kissed her again, tongue mastering her mouth, his hand doing its dance to send her to paradise.

* * * * *

Not long after, Braden lay on his back on her bed, watching his sweet lady come to him. She still wore the blindfold and her hands were still bound as Justin guided her down onto Braden's stiff cock.

Braden held her steady and pushed up into her. Her head went back as he went in deep, her little gasp making his heart pound like crazy.

Damn the games, and damn it, why had he decided to bring Justin? Braden just wanted to fuck. Simple, straightforward, man and woman, no games, no elaborate preparations.

Just making love to the woman he wanted most to be with.

But what the hell? Justin was here, might as well make use of him. Elisa would love this.

Justin let Elisa pleasure herself on Braden a few minutes before he eased her onto Braden's chest. Braden gathered her in his arms, the librarian he loved.

Justin clicked off the vibrator and withdrew it from Elisa's ass. Elisa murmured a protest then sighed in happiness as Justin smoothed her back opening with lube. His eyes were filled with blue, his cock as hard as though Elisa had never sucked him off. But Justin was Shareem, reacting to chemicals in the air, unable to stop himself.

Justin got behind her. More lube, to her and to Justin's cock. Ready.

"Do it," Braden said. "This is for you, sweet Elisa."

Elisa was already filled with Braden, her position on top making him go all the way into her. She loved it, and she loved they way he held her.

His hands were hot, strong, steady. She couldn't see him, but she could find his lips with her kiss, show him how happy he made her.

That is, until she felt Justin's enormous hard-on at her ass. She jumped, clenching, and Braden groaned. Elisa hadn't minded Braden there, but...

Justin took his cock away and his fingers soothed as they touched her anus. "Open for me, sweetheart. That's the way."

Elisa's muscles loosened on their own. Justin's thick and well-lubed finger slid into her. "There you go."

Elisa kissed Braden. She opened his mouth with hers, sliding her tongue in as she'd learned to do. Lips met, fused, Braden cupping her face in his hands.

Elisa's backside rose a little higher under Justin's ministering without her telling it to. Justin withdrew his finger, and she felt his large tip pressing where his finger had been. She automatically stiffened again but she made herself focus on Braden's kiss, the feeling of Braden's cock, hard and long inside her. Justin, now unimpeded, slid in.

Two of them. Inside her.

Elisa couldn't take it. It was too much. She'd come apart. They had to stop.

But she *could* take it. Both of them at the same time, Braden hard in her pussy, Justin snug in her ass.

She could take it because Braden had taught her, and she'd learned her lessons well. The touching, the spanking, the plugs, the vibrators—all had been to ready her for this moment.

Teaching Elisa to trust Braden, to obey him whatever he told her, was to make sure that when they did this—two Shareem inside her—it would be the ultimate pleasure, with no pain.

It was a beautiful, beautiful feeling.

They stretched her, penetrated her, filled her. Justin started a little rhythm back and forth, careful so he wouldn't hurt her. Little thrusts, designed to make her thrust back to take him.

When Elisa pulled forward, there was Braden. Thick inside her, *all* the way inside her. Then back to Justin, filling her ass.

This pleasure was a gift Braden was giving her. Elisa needed it, she wanted it.

Never mind that Braden called it punishment, told her that she needed to understand what Shareem truly were.

Elisa did understand, and she embraced it.

Give this to me forever.

Braden slid the blindfold from her eyes, his own completely blue, and Elisa smiled down at him. Justin pumped into her backside, Braden holding her in position to give her the greatest pleasure.

Elisa squeezed in response, clamping around Braden's cock.

"Damn you," he grated.

Justin gave an answering groan. "She is so damn tight. This is good."

"I know," Braden said. He kissed Elisa's face. "She's beautiful. Squeeze him, Elisa. And squeeze me. Show us what you can do."

Elisa squeezed. She wriggled, she thrust, she kissed. She shoved herself down on Braden's cock and back on Justin's until both men were making ragged noises.

Braden's cock penetrated so deep. Justin's slid even farther into her, until she jerked and squirmed, the pressure driving her insane.

I can't take it, I can't.

But oh, goddess, it's so wonderful, so freeing, like nothing I've ever felt before. They're both so huge, so deep inside me.

I'll die if I take any more – I'll die if I don't.

Braden. I love him so much. I never want him out of me.

"Fuck it, I'm coming," Justin said.

"Not yet," Braden said. "Wait 'til she has hers."

"I can't. She's too good. A sweet little peach, and I can't get enough of her."

Seed suddenly filled her, Justin's thrusts increasing as he came, fists on her back.

Justin's coming was different from Braden's, who always shouted and said dirty things, or snarled at himself for not holding off longer. Justin was mostly silent, hips moving, hands holding her steady.

Justin pulled out in one swift stroke. He immediately wiped her with a towel, the friction of it tingling on her ass.

And then there was only one cock. Hard, long, so deep inside her. Braden pulled her against him, his hips moving rapidly. He kissed her, their mouths all over each other's, strong hands stroking her body.

Elisa kissed him again and again, sweat slick on their bodies, Braden driving harder into her. She felt the joyous pressure of the butt plug sliding back into her—thank you, Justin—then the hum of the vibration.

The little movement, jiggling her in her backside while Braden opened her so wide, sent her over the top.

"I love it," she shouted. "I love it, Braden. I love you!"

She slammed down against him, rocking with the wondrous feeling of both him and the vibrator, her words spiraling into incoherence.

Braden arched his body to push up into her, hard, his seed barreling out of him as his shout rang to the ceiling.

They went on together, both peaking, Elisa coming apart, Braden holding her and keeping her safe. Justin's warm weight pressed against Elisa's back, his hands and voice soothing.

Together, her Shareem brought her down from her heights, into a warm and comforting place that Elisa never, ever wanted to leave.

But when she woke, after the mind-numbing sleep she fell into on top of Braden, both were gone. They'd cleaned up and taken everything with them, leaving no sign that they'd ever been there.

Chapter Eighteen

"What are you doing in here?" Braden demanded a day later, staring into the open doorway of his second bedroom. "Where's Justin?"

Elisa turned around with a calm smile as though she were doing nothing unusual.

Braden had just spent hours buried in ale, trying to convince himself that leaving Elisa was the right thing to do. He comes home, and here she is, going through the built-in drawers of Justin's room. Putting things in, not taking them out.

"Elisa, what the hell?"

"I'm moving in," Elisa said. "Justin's found another place. This is such a small apartment I thought I'd store my things in here, regardless of where I sleep."

Regardless, Braden thought, somewhere behind the buzzing in his brain. Those sexy words again.

"You have a house in the Serestine Quarter," he said. "It's modest for the hill, but it's a hell of a lot nicer than this one."

Elisa shrugged. "I'll use it for vacation. Or rent it to others in the Way of the Sky. Or donate it to the order. I haven't yet decided."

Braden braced one hand on the wall and tried to remember he was a Dom. "This is *my* apartment, sweetheart. I decide who stays."

"It's not yours, actually. You rent it from the government on sufferance. They can turn you out anytime they want. That is, they could have, but not any longer. Not now that I've purchased it."

The danger of Braden falling increased. "You purchased it?"

"Much of this block, actually. Your apartment is one of a dozen in this complex. I decided I'd use this one as mine. You don't have to pay rent if you don't want to. That will save you a few coins."

Braden gave up and sagged against the doorframe. "Who said I wanted you to buy my apartment block and give me free rent?"

Her smile didn't fade. "It really has nothing to do with you, Braden. I'll need a place close to the Pas City library, and your place is just around the corner. I requested a transfer, you see. The library down here is small and pathetically equipped, but I intend to turn that around. I'd much rather help people who truly need to learn than indulge highborn women who want to look themselves up in the society archives."

Braden's tongue lay heavily in his mouth. It had been harder than hell to leave her sleeping at her house two nights ago. He'd wanted to snuggle with her until morning—getting rid of Justin first—but he'd made himself go.

His purpose in going up to her house had been to teach her that Shareem were difficult to take. Once would be enough. She'd have her fill and want no more.

And now she'd plunged herself into the heart of all the dangers that came with the Shareem.

"No," he said. "I can't explain why it's too dangerous for you to stay here. You just have to trust me. And get out."

"Do you mean the fact that you and other Shareem are trying to get off planet?" she floored him by saying. "To start a new life elsewhere?"

Braden was across the room in two strides, his hand over her mouth. "Who the hell has been talking to you? And why are you saying it so loudly?"

Elisa pulled at his hand until he lowered it again. "Don't worry—I had every listening device removed from this block as soon as it became mine. Not that most of them worked anyway."

"Shit."

"And no one told me about your plans. I deduced them."

"Deduced..."

She gave him a pitying look. "Really, Braden. A Shareem comes to my library, gains access to a restricted computer and charms me into authorizing it with my own print. He looks up a ton of transport data, erases the time stamps and sends me a singing sphere as thanks. A wildly inappropriate gift for simple help at a library. It's as though he feels guilty about something."

"No, I can just get singing spheres cheap."

"Next you give me the best few weeks of my life then, just when we're starting to like each other—no, not *like*. I'm not afraid to say it. When we start to fall in love, you tell me you must leave me for my own good. Put all that with your secretive gatherings in Judith's bar and I start to draw conclusions."

"Hell."

Elisa's smile blossomed. "I might be naïve about sexuality and the like, but not about people. It's amazing what you can learn about people when you work in a library. You've been planning to escape Bor Narga, haven't you, and you didn't want me to know, in case repercussions came my way. Am I right? I know I am, so don't bother to deny it."

"Stop." Braden rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Just stop, Elisa. You're talking so fast you're giving me a headache."

"Sorry." Elisa touched his forehead, rubbed her thumb there. "I babble when I get excited."

"Sweetheart, you can't know this. You're right that I don't want you to suffer the backlash. The less you know, the better. Moving in with me is a stupid thing to do." He stepped away from her. "But it doesn't matter. I'll just move out."

"Braden, I came here because I want to be with you. I don't care about repercussions. I can even help you. I have resources, I know people."

Damn, she was so fucking sweet, he was going to die. She wanted to help, just like Katarina, just like Brianne, just like Talan. Elisa wanted to be one of them, to live and die with them.

But the problem was, she *might* just die.

"You gave up the order," he said. "You're not protected by your celibate status anymore."

Elisa stepped close to him, kissed him briefly on the lips and turned away to resume unpacking.

"You don't understand the celibate orders then. Once you're a part of them, you are highly respected, even if you choose to leave. People don't want to mess with you in case you still have powerful friends in your Way, which I do. These friends love me, understand me and don't blame me for what I've done. Did you know, for instance, that the holy lady of the Way of the Sky, Lady t'Lenka, is related to the ruling family? She's Brianne d'Aroth's grandmother's aunt. An aunt who likes to have her wishes carried out without question. The latest restrictions on Shareem have been lifted, by the way. As of this morning."

"Whoa. Wait. The lady who runs your celibate order is Brianne's great-great aunt?" Elisa nodded. "That's right."

"Hell. That will melt Aiden and Ky's butter."

"I didn't know, actually, until yesterday. Lady t'Lenka has so divorced herself from her old life that she never talks about it. But she told me when I approached her about the restrictions and asked what I could do about them. She talked to Brianne's grandmother, as a favor to me."

"Elisa." Braden resisted the urge to seize her, to yell at her, to shake her, to push her onto the bed and fall on top of her. "You got the restrictions lifted so Shareem could conspire together easier?"

She gave him a thoughtful look. "Yes. Well, that and the restrictions are so unfair."

"Elisa, what am I going to do with you?"

"You're going to let me help you, that's what."

Braden made a noise of exasperation. "Damn it, I don't want you helping. I don't want you to have any part of this. Don't you understand that if we're caught—if any patroller has the slightest suspicion about what we're doing—we'll be terminated? And you'll be arrested right along with us."

Elisa had her back to him, lifting the singing sphere from a crate. She set it on a small table and stepped back to admire it.

"I won't get caught," she said, sounding certain of herself. "Neither will you. You're very careful—all you Shareem are so careful, in spite of pretending to be the most careless bunch of sex-crazed males ever created. And once we get off planet, I have

enough money that you and I can go where we wish, live as we wish. I do like your apartment, Braden, but I think we'd need something a little larger eventually. Especially if we decide to have a family."

Holy fucking crap on a crutch.

"We were bred to be sterile, remember? They give us all those damn shots to make sure we stay that way."

Elisa shook her head. "But if you don't take the contraceptive shots for a time, maybe your ability to have children will return. Katarina and I have been talking about this, and she's researching it." She touched the singing sphere and its music vibrated through the room. "After all, Justin had a child, didn't he?"

Braden stopped, all feeling leaving his body. "Elisa, how the hell...did you know that?"

She shrugged. "It only makes sense. Justin was freed on Sirius III. I know his lover there passed away, but still, why in the world would he leave a place where he was happy, loved and free—to come back *here*? He can't ever leave Bor Narga again, and he's now under the same restrictions and regulations as the rest of the Shareem. Justin *chose* captivity. No one does that unless they have a very good reason, and that reason usually involves another person."

Braden folded his arms across his chest, as though holding himself together. "Go on."

"It made me ponder. If Justin came back for a lady he'd loved, wouldn't he have found a way to get her to Sirius to be with him? If the lady didn't love Justin back, he'd hardly have come back here after twenty-five years to find her again. I thought maybe the lady in question was married to someone else, but even then, why would he come to Bor Narga—wouldn't it be easier for them to meet in secret off planet somewhere? That left a child. One he conceived before he left, one who maybe doesn't know anything about him. After twenty-five years, that child would be a grown-up person, easier to find, easier to approach. A son or a daughter who probably doesn't even know they have anything to do with Shareem."

She finished, smiling, looking proud of her conclusions.

"You are too damn smart," Braden said. "Too damn smart for your own good."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

Braden let out a breath. "I hope to the gods none of the patrollers are that smart."

"They're not," Elisa said. "They see Shareem as mindless beings, the fools. In their opinion, Justin came back here because he couldn't think of anything else to do once his lady on Sirius passed away. They don't think males can think for themselves, especially not Shareem." She paused. "I'm right, aren't I? About the child?"

"Yes. It's a daughter."

"Poor Justin. His secret is safe with me, believe me."

"I know it is." Braden went to her, hot, panicked and hurting all together. "I know you won't tell anyone, sweetheart. You've been good to me since the day I saw you behind that desk. All innocent and pretty and...librarian-ish."

"I was fascinated by you," Elisa said. "You were my first Shareem."

And by all the gods, Braden swore he'd be her only one.

Braden touched her face, looking into green-flecked brown eyes brimming with sincerity. What the hell had he done to deserve this wonderful woman? This beauty who'd charged down from her high-priced house on the hill to take care of him?

"Elisa, I'm so fucking in love with you, it scares the hell out of me."

Her eyes warmed. "Why should it scare you?"

"Because we can't be in love."

"Why not? I don't believe the lie that Shareem don't have emotions."

"I don't mean that. I mean because it's too dangerous." Braden rested his forehead against hers. "If something happened to you, I'd die."

"Then we'll be very, very careful." She kissed his lips, her mouth soft. "I love you, Braden. I'm staying with you, and I'll help you, and I'll get you free. I promise."

"I'm not going anywhere anytime soon. Not until Justin figures things out. I get why he wants to stay, and I'm staying with him."

"Of course you are. We'll help Justin too. I don't think that pilot—Mitch is his name?—will mind the excuse to keep visiting Judith."

"You know about that too, do you?"

Elisa shrugged. "I'm a librarian. Knowledge is my business."

Braden pulled her close, his hands sliding around her waist. "What do I do, Elisa? I love you so much. It's killing me to not be with you."

"Then be with me."

Such a simple solution. Risk everything, acknowledge love, be together every day. Braden craved it with his whole being.

"All right." He kissed her lips, the corners of her mouth. "You win, damn you. Stay, and we'll fall together."

Saying it, surrendering to the love, relaxed something inside Braden that had been tight for years. He felt floating, free. Lightheaded, even.

He gave a name to the feeling, one he'd never had in his long and totally screwedup life.

Happiness.

He kissed Elisa, his love, his lifemate. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulled him down into the kiss. Her lips were hot, wet, her wicked little tongue delving into his mouth and tasting him back.

That kiss led into a second, equally passionate one. Braden scooped Elisa against him, liking that she'd worn a thin tunic. Her nipples were hard behind it, pressing points into the fabric.

Elisa rubbed her hips against him, smiling into the kiss when she felt his rock-stiff hard-on. "Next time you go for your inoculations, will you tell Katarina to take out the sterility drugs?"

Braden's heart beat faster. "You want to risk that?"

"I want a family. With you. We'll find a way."

Braden wanted it too. He completely understood why Justin had voluntarily come back here to rules and regulations just for a glimpse of his daughter. That pull, that love, was amazing.

"All right," he said. "We'll see what happens." He cupped her waist and slanted her a sudden and wicked smile. "And now, love, what is this about you buying my apartment building without my permission?"

"It was a gift. For you."

"Don't disarm me with those sweet eyes. I was thinking along the lines of a little discipline."

The spark in Elisa's eyes made Braden's heart leap. She was too special; liked to play his games and knew exactly when Braden needed to play them.

"Maybe I've been a bit naughty," she said, smile sly.

"I'm glad to hear it. But I don't think I'll give you a punishment here."

She looked surprised. "No?"

"No. Do you still have the key codes to your Serestine Quarter library?"

"Yes." The spark again. "Why?"

Braden leaned to her and lightly kissed her lips, grinning. "It's a surprise."

* * * * *

In less than an hour, Elisa found herself leaning over her reference desk in the closed library, Braden swiftly stripping off her clothes.

The library was dark except for the little light below her desk that sent illumination upward. The atrium was like a silent, waiting jungle, the trickling of the fountain loud in the stillness.

She'd worked at this desk for two years, and never had it been *this* much fun. She looked over her familiar console and keypad, the drawer that stuck a little, the now-dark frame where she'd displayed her holopics.

Familiar and yet strange in the dark, with her naked. With a man looming behind her in the darkness, his growling voice telling her to spread herself across the desk.

Elisa laid down on it, stretching her arms above her head, tingling with pleasure when Braden clicked cuffs around her wrists. He'd pulled off his tunic and stood next to the desk, hard and dark.

The tip of his cock touched her lips. "Suck me."

Yes. Elisa opened her mouth and welcomed him in, loving the now-familiar taste of his cock in her mouth. She licked the tip, moved her tongue on the underside and sucked the way he liked it.

Braden let her for a while, rocking his hips, hand on her back, softly telling her how beautiful she was. He withdrew before she finished, backing out of the way of her outstretched hands.

"Not yet," he said. "I want to come with you."

"But I like it when you come in my mouth," she said.

Braden made a sound like a growl. "Hell, don't tell me that."

He reached into his pack and pulled out the thin strap. Elisa squirmed in excitement.

She screamed when the first lash landed on her buttocks, her laughter ringing up through the atrium. The leather hissed through the air—swish, slap. Swish, slap.

Then Braden's lips, kissing away the fire, his tongue probing down between her buttocks.

Elisa moved against the desk, knowing now how to pleasure herself on the surface below while Braden worked her ass.

He parted her cheeks and licked her star, wetting her and relaxing her. Next lube, and, happily, the hard feel of a butt plug. When it began vibrating, Elisa moaned her thanks.

Braden spanked her ass. "Thank me when it's done, love. Right now, we enjoy."

Elisa was already enjoying. The vibration inside her made her crazy, the hard desk beneath her, where she'd worked so many hours, doubling the intensity.

Braden lifted her and turned her over, her bare back against the cool desktop now. He leaned down and kissed her face, throat, breasts, belly, pussy, and then straightened up and positioned himself between her legs.

Elisa groaned in pleasure when Braden lifted her hips and guided himself into her, then raised her from the desk. He went deep inside her, holding her, surrounding her, while the vibrator pulsed in the other side.

It was bliss. Elisa held him, sinking into his warmth. He smelled good, so dark and hot, and she nibbled his neck.

They rocked faster and faster, Braden's skin slick with sweat, his eyes filled with blue. He kissed her, he nipped her earlobe, he suckled her neck. They swayed together, breaths ragged, groans tearing from them. The only other sound was the fountain, playing into the silence.

They peaked together, Elisa full of him and the plug, Braden crying her name. His hands were all over her; she clung to him.

They collapsed to the chair behind Elisa's desk, panting, laughing, kissing. Loving.

"I love you so much, baby," Braden said. "My librarian."

"I love you. My Shareem."

They sat together, Braden holding her secure in his arms. It was a wonderful moment, the two of them, alone in the silence with their love.

"Do you think we're finished?" Braden asked after a time.

"Mmm?" Elisa was comfortable and happy. They could stay in this chair forever, as far as she was concerned.

"This isn't what I brought you up here for. Well, not the whole reason."

Elisa raised her head to look at him. "What then?"

"Remember my fantasy? The one I told you about, back when you were still celibate?"

Elisa's body thrummed with excitement. "Yes."

"Then you know what I want. Go up on that balcony. Don't worry, I won't leave you. I'll be right here."

Elisa hesitated. It was one thing to be behind her desk, which had always felt like a safe place to her, another to walk naked through the library.

She hesitated until Braden gave her a swat on the butt. The plug was still there, and he clicked it on to vibrate again.

Why not? Braden had taught her how to be wild and wicked, and now she could be.

She leaned down and gave him a long, hot kiss. Then she walked rapidly through the atrium and punched the button to open the lift.

It felt strange to move around this dark place stark naked. Exciting. Elisa cupped herself as she rode upward in the lift, enjoying the sensation of her fingers in her wet pussy.

She stepped off the lift and moved to the balcony. Braden had been playing with the lights, and one now shone directly on a space in front of the rail. Elisa stepped into it.

Below, Braden smiled up at her, a hot Shareem smile. His cock was lifted, ready, wanting, in spite of them finishing crazed and wicked sex only a few minutes ago.

He waited for her, her lifemate with the wicked eyes, the near-slave who'd taught Elisa what true freedom was.

I love you, Braden. I love you with all my heart.

Elisa cupped one hand around her breast and touched the other to her pussy. Braden's smile turned to a grin as he gripped himself.

"You're beautiful, baby," he said.

Elisa smiled, warmed by his words, and proceeded to give the man she loved the best show of his lifetime.

* * * * *

Rees faced Justin over an ale at Judith's bar. Talan was across the room, talking animatedly to Mitch and Judith, Talan asking all about Mitch's ship. Mitch, Justin had seen by now, liked the attention of ladies, and Judith liked watching Mitch talk.

Rees' focus, on the other hand, was at the moment all for Justin, which Justin decided was a little unnerving.

"I figured out why you don't want to go," Rees said quietly. "I just want you to know that I don't blame you."

"Shit." Justin gripped his ale glass. "Braden has a big mouth."

Rees shook his head. "Braden didn't tell me. He can be a loyal friend. A pain in the ass, but loyal. I did a little research and put things together. Was the child from a guinea pig?"

"Yep. I don't know where the woman is anymore. Or if she's even still alive."

"Your child—son or daughter?"

"Daughter. And I know the risk to her. It's tearing me apart, trust me."

Rees' look turned sympathetic. "I'll do whatever I can to help. I was pissed off at first when you didn't want to leave with us, but I got to thinking." He glanced at Talan, the affection in his eyes stark. "What if it were me, and the child one I'd given Talan? No way in hell would I leave Bor Narga, even if it meant my life here was hell. I understand your pain, Justin. And believe me, there's been a lot of pain."

Justin held up his glass. "Give me a little bit of time, that's all I ask. I want to find out what happened to her mother and decide what to do. Then I'll join in your search for a way off this rock and accompany you to Shareem paradise. Promise."

Rees clicked his glass to Justin's. "We'll get there."

"We will."

Justin thought of his daughter, that beautiful young woman laughing with her friends. He could destroy her simply by existing.

What good finding her mother would do, he didn't know. But he needed to find Lillian, needed to find his peace with it all.

Justin thought next of Braden and Elisa, even now celebrating their lifemating. He'd celebrated such a thing once, and he silently toasted Shela, one hell of a woman.

He lifted his glass again. "To Braden and Elisa."

"Braden and Elisa." Rees clinked his glass again.

Rees drank then reached for Talan, who came to him and snuggled into his embrace. Rees gave her a long kiss that made Justin remember nights of passion with Shela. He missed her like fury.

"We'll find a way, Rees," Justin said when Rees and Talan came up for air. "I swear it by all the gods."

"Yep," Rees said, giving him a wicked Shareem grin. "We will. This is not over yet."

About the Author

Allyson James writes romances, mysteries, erotic romance and mainstream fiction under several pseudonyms. She has made the *USA Today* bestseller list, has won several Romantic Times Reviewer's Choice awards, and won RWA's RITA award. Her books have earned starred reviews in *Booklist* and Top Pick reviews in *Romantic Times BookReviews* magazine.

Allyson loves to write, read, hike and build dollhouses. She met her soul mate when she was eighteen, traveled the world with him, and settled down with him and two cats in the desert southwest.

Allyson welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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