

ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**

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Calder

Tales
of the
Shareem

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Calder

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CALDER

Allyson James

Chapter One

DNAmo compound, Bor Narga

"I got word from the directors." A man's voice cut through Calder's fog of pain. "The specimen is to be terminated."

The room went quiet except for the faint *beep* of machines. In the darkness of Calder's brain, his screams went on and on.

"Just what I need," a second man said. "Directors interfering with my research."

"He's got to be in excruciating pain. It will be kinder to him."

The second man growled, "Yes, but the whole *point* is to see what he can stand. I can't do that if they terminate him, now can I?"

"Well, he's not much of a Shareem anymore," the first voice said. "The company won't make any money off him like this."

"He can still provide valuable data on how they behave in high-stress situations. We can add it to the code for the new batch."

"Maybe, but if they lose money, I'll give you three guesses whose salary it will come out of."

The second man sighed. "Damn it. Oh, all right, give me the hypo."

Calder dragged his eyes open. The pain of the tiny movement nearly killed him.

He could see nothing but a gray haze and lumps of darker gray. He summoned all the air in his lungs and forced his lips to form words.

"Fuck you."

Two dim blurs froze. "Gods," the first one said. "He's conscious. How can he be conscious?"

Because I have bigger balls than you.

"He won't be for long." Calder felt a touch on his arm. "You'll be out of pain soon, Shareem. Just relax."

"Stop!" A female voice cut through the quiet room like a knife on glass. "What the hell are you doing?"

The first man answered, "Obeying orders. He's a write-off."

"Get away from him. Now!"

Heels clicked swiftly across the room. Calder heard the sound of a tray falling and the crunch of a plastic hypo under a stiletto heel. He would have smiled if he could.

"Angelica..." the first man began.

"Don't you 'Angelica' me. He's in this state because of you. Now get the *hell* out of my way so I can save his life."

"Why?" the second man asked. "He's a total loss. Shareem are supposed to attract women. *He'll* scare them away."

"He has a point," the first scientist said. "Even if you save him, he won't be useful for anything but stress experiments."

"If we let people live based on their usefulness, you two would have been put down a long time ago. Now get out and let me work."

"This is our lab," the second man said petulantly.

"And I'm commandeering it. Go whine at the directors. It will probably take you three days to get in to see them."

The first man heaved a sigh. "All right. It's your funeral."

The second was more put out. "This isn't over, Dr. Laas."

"Don't forget to close the door on your way out," she snapped.

Calder started to chuckle. It hurt like hell, his burned and ruined skin pulling and cracking. All the male scientists at DNAmo were intimidated by the petite genius of Dr. Angelica Laas.

He heard the door slide closed. A cool hand touched him.

"Calder," she whispered. "Oh gods, what did they do to you?"

Calder tried to form a reply. "Fucking experiments."

"No, don't talk. You'll damage the vocal cords even more. I'm going to fix you. Do you understand me? It will hurt, but I'm going to fix you. I'll not let you die."

Calder touched her hand with his two good fingers. As he closed his eyes, she burst into tears.

Great. Here I am, burned and broken, and the very best DNA scientist in the galaxy is crying because she knows she can never make me whole again.

He calmed her with his Shareem pheromones, letting them brush over her body. At least that part of him still worked.

* * * * *

Twenty years later

A soft chime sounded.

"Time," Calder said.

He lifted himself off the writhing woman, his cock deflating, his body cooling rapidly.

She clutched at him and moaned. "No. Not yet."

Calder backed away and faded into the shadows. The woman on the floor whimpered. "No, please. Come back. I have money. I'll pay you twice as much. Please. I need you!"

He didn't answer. His breathing calming, Calder exited through a hidden door that noiselessly slid shut behind him.

The woman would do what the others did, plead for a while then swear at him and threaten him. Eventually she would pull on her clothes and quietly depart. He'd never see her again.

Calder made his way through the long back hall to his own apartment, far from his lair. The lights came on in his tiny bedroom when he entered it.

In his bathroom, he stripped off, avoided looking into the mirror and stepped into the cooling stream of his water shower. Calder had a more expensive sterilizer, but he liked the feel of water on his skin. It was especially nice after unsatisfactory encounters like the one he'd just had.

Fucking stupid way to live. But there were few options for Shareem.

Calder had another appointment in a half-hours time but not with a highborn lady who wanted to experience The Beast. Every six months, Shareem had to submit to an exam and get an inoculation that prevented both conception and disease. That had been the price levied on all Shareem twenty years ago for being allowed to stay alive. Any Shareem who missed his inoculation was arrested and terminated.

Calder visited the same medic each time, in a backstreet clinic run by the Ministry of Health. Dr. Mareesh had reached her century mark and didn't care about the genetically enhanced Shareem and their powers over women. She'd silently roll back Calder's sleeve, administer the cocktail of vaccinations and contraceptives into his arm, slam her thumbprint on her handheld and dismiss him with a sour nod.

Mareesh saw no need to strip him down to be scanned, for which Calder was silently grateful. His weight and height never changed, and Shareem bodies deteriorated twice as slowly as a normal human's. The scan would say the same thing each time, so why bother?

Calder dressed in a black leather bodysuit that hid every inch of skin. He pulled sun-blocking cloths around his head and face and fixed his sun goggles in place. He slid on the black gloves that hid his hands and stepped from his house into the harsh Bor Nargan sun.

People in this neighborhood were used to seeing the six-foot-eight, black-clad giant walking through the streets. Even so, they didn't greet him, and most turned hurriedly away when he trained those blank goggles on them.

The clinic Calder sought was four blocks away. This was the heart of Pas City, the biggest slum of Bor Narga. The streets were crowded with vendors selling everything from useless robot parts to colorful sweets, from bright cloth to questionable meat on skewers. People swarmed everywhere despite the heat, Pas City always alive.

Calder ducked under the rusted metal entrance of the clinic. The place mostly catered to junkies who could afford a quick dry out, or to women with too many children who bullied their husbands into coming in for sterilization.

The receptionist gave Calder a nervous look when he stepped into the crowded waiting room and immediately ushered him into the back. Soon Calder found himself sitting on a metal table in the familiar examination room. He peeled off one glove as he waited.

The door opened and a young woman glided in. She wore the baggy silk tunic and colored leggings of women of the medical profession and an opaque veil across the lower half of her face. A few curls of light brown hair trickled from the veil draped over her head and shoulders. The color and pattern of the veils told the world that she was upper class and unmarried. That she wore a face veil told him she wanted to hold herself aloof from the unwashed masses.

Mareesh never bothered with veils. Her seamed face had always been bare for all to see.

"I'm Dr. d'Arnal." The young woman glanced quickly at him, revealing brown eyes and thick, black lashes. She set down a handheld computer and a plain metal box, which she opened, revealing the usual hypo. "Please undress behind the screen."

Calder didn't move. "Where's Mareesh?" His voice grated, his vocal chords never having properly healed.

The young woman's nervousness screamed to Calder, who could smell fear, taste it on the air. Too bad, because what he could see over the half veil was pretty. More than pretty. Lush and sexy. Those eyelashes would feel good against his balls.

"Dr. Mareesh retired," she said. "A month ago."

Damn.

"She left me her notes. I'll get a quick scan and then inject you. I'm sure you know the routine." She tried to sound matter-of-fact, but her voice quavered.

Calder shoved his sleeve up his arm, baring six inches of burn scars. "Give me the hypo, then I go. No scanning."

"But the Ministry of Non-Human Life Forms requires —"

"Fuck the Ministry. Give me the damn hypo."

Uncertainty then anger flashed through her eyes. "I'm sorry, but that's not what I was told to do."

"This your first time with a Shareem?"

"Yes."

Calder leaned forward. He'd removed his goggles but kept his facecloth tucked around the left side of his face, the ruined side.

"I don't undress," he said. "I don't get scanned. That's the way it is. Mareesh knew."

Dr. d'Arnal met his gaze. She had lovely eyes, warm and flecked with gold. His Shareem imagination put her on the floor under him, those eyes hot with passion.

"I'm not Dr. Mareesh," she said.

"No, you're young and naïve." Calder grabbed the hypo out of the box and pressed it to his arm.

She tried to snatch it then stopped as though fearing she'd hurt him. *Fearing to hurt a Shareem.* Gods, what an innocent.

Calder lifted the handheld, seized her frozen hand and jabbed her thumb onto the thumbprint pad. "There. Done."

"You can't do that."

"I just did."

She gaped at him. "I could lose my job for that."

"Then don't tell anyone."

Calder rose from the table, towering over the woman by a good foot. She'd snuggle nicely under his chin. That is, if she ever removed the stick from her butt.

Her chest rose and fell, a shapely bosom waiting under the layers of garments. He'd love to peel back the cloths, lower his head to one of her tightening nipples, rub his tongue over the firm bud.

No.

Calder didn't get to have sweet fantasies with sweet women. His purpose was to fulfill rough, nasty, dirty fantasies for women who could afford it. Whatever they wanted for whatever amount of time they paid for, no safety words and no stopping. The women signed consent forms before arriving that said Calder could do to them anything he wanted. Anything he deemed necessary.

"I'll be back in six months," he said.

He gave Dr. d'Arnal's curved ass a slap and walked out. He wasn't allowed to touch women without their permission, but Calder liked to bend the rules when he could, and her ass was so very spankable.

He heard her gasp of outrage as he went and permitted himself one little chuckle.

* * * * *

Katarina d'Arnal had no idea how long she'd stood with her hand held to her chest and her mouth open.

He'd touched her. The Shareem had touched a highborn woman without permission. And the *way* he'd touched her...

She felt a tingle on her backside the exact size and shape of his hand. What would it feel like to have him smooth his hand there instead?

It was forbidden. He'd broken all the rules—not allowing himself to be scanned, grabbing the hypo and inoculating himself.

What had she expected? A grateful Shareem, happy that she'd tried to help him not spread disease or father children?

Katarina had always felt sorry for men on Bor Narga, relegated to lesser jobs because it was thought they didn't have the intellectual capacity for business or government. Men in the slums of Pas City often didn't get good health care because their women wouldn't pay for it. Hence Katarina's volunteer work in this clinic. She wanted to help men in need.

Men of Pas City included Shareem. The clinic's director, who didn't think much of Katarina's soft heart, had said, "If you love males so much, you can have the Shareem. One's coming in at two." The woman had sneered when she'd said it. Doing a Shareem check was considered a crap job.

His name was Calder, the appointment roster said. The first Shareem Katarina had ever seen in the flesh.

And what a Shareem. The man was huge. She'd never seen a man with as large a body, with such power when he moved. Every part of him was gigantic.

Every part, her cursory research on Shareem had said.

His eyes, shadowed by his head cloths, had drawn her in. No, *sucked* her in, as if she'd become a puppet on strings the minute he'd looked at her. She'd done what he'd said with only token protest.

Shareem blue, she'd heard the color called. Shareem eyes were larger than those of a normal man, the irises a bit wider.

But there was something wrong with him. His bared arm had been covered with ropes of scars and mottled flesh. She recognized that he'd been burned so deeply that skin grafts hadn't completely repaired him. The repairs had been competently done, but the flesh would never be whole.

His voice was gravelly and broken, probably another souvenir of whatever had burned him. But when he'd spoken to her, she'd sworn that just for a moment another smooth, rich voice had whispered in her mind.

Tell me what you want, Katarina. What you want deep inside yourself.

Ridiculous. Katarina slammed the hypo back into the box and snapped the lid shut.

She had everything she wanted—a career, a fine house her mother had left her in the Serestine Quarter, plenty of friends.

Loneliness.

Katarina punched her handheld and swept from the room to see her next patient. Sometimes the little voices inside her needed to shut up.

* * * * *

Dr. Laas flicked off her screen and grinned. A curious young woman had been sifting through the Shareem database at the Ministry of Non-Human Life Forms, digging through for information on one particular Shareem.

Calder.

“Baine, bring up all the information you can on one Dr. Katarina d’Arnal.”

Dr. Laas’ computer, so ultra-superior that it had a complex about it, whirred and hummed. “Here she is, madam,” Baine said, his voice accented like an old Earth butler’s. “Dr. Katarina d’Arnal. The usual sort of highborn woman.”

She wasn’t though, Dr. Laas thought as she skimmed the information. Katarina d’Arnal had not yet married. Her mother had been prominent in Bor Narga’s social sphere, but both mother and father had been killed in an accident in a hovertrain, leaving a house and fortune to Katarina.

After grieving, Katarina had entered medical school. When she finished, she’d volunteered in a clinic in Pas City, saying that she wanted to help the underprivileged, especially males, whose health care was too neglected.

The young innocent. Dr. Laas chuckled. If Katarina d’Arnal wanted to do good, she could learn on someone who really needed it.

She smiled, pulled her bare feet up on the sofa that was massaging her back, and told Baine to bring up a data code that was deadly secret except to those in the know.

She keyed up the encoded application to enter Calder's private sexual paradise and, with one finger, typed "Katarina d'Arnal."

Chapter Two

“Are you sure this is right?”

Katarina studied the sand-scoured face of the building in front of her. Her handheld told her the street vendor she needed to treat lived here, but this place looked like a disused warehouse.

The woman who drove the cab leaned out the open window and gave Katarina an odd look. “385 Barkelo Street, ma’am. You sure this is where you want to get to? You don’t look the type.”

Whatever that meant. “I might not look the type, but I have a job to do.”

The woman raised her brows, charged Katarina’s credit slip, closed the window and roared off down the street in a choking cloud of sand.

Katarina waved away the dust and turned to the door. Rust-streaked and peeling from dry rot, the door was almost as unprepossessing as the rest of the building. In the center of the door, a perfectly good, modern, clean thumbprint pad awaited the right person’s touch.

She found no door chime, no way to indicate she’d arrived. The thumbprint pad would be keyed to the owner, not her.

Annoyed, she pressed it anyway—then stepped back in surprise when the door rolled open.

A dim corridor coated with a thin film of sand stretched away from her. Katarina stepped inside then jumped when the door slammed shut behind her.

“Hello?” she called to the empty corridor. “Someone here called a medic?”

No answer. Sand gritted under her boots as she walked along, but no one greeted her or came to meet her.

When Katarina reached a door at the end of the hall, it obediently opened for her. Unlike the front door, this one slid back smoothly and quietly. Katarina stepped through it into a place of amazing beauty.

A mosaic-tiled walkway twisted before her, leading the way through lush greenery. The light overhead was soft, the ceiling twilight blue, baffling the eye as to how high it was. A cool, natural-feeling breeze ruffled Katarina's hair and tranquilizing calm stole over her, as though a relaxation scent was being pumped into the air.

She moved curiously down the path. The walkway was mazelike, bending around greenery and latticework walls laced with exotic flowers. Fountains trickled and the flowers' scents filled the air. The garden was a masterwork, at once lovely, peaceful and disorienting. A lot of money had been spent transforming this warehouse into a paradise.

The mosaic walk ended at another door, this one open. Katarina stepped through into a room about twenty feet square, painted black, with the same dark, cool-air ceiling. Muted lights kept everything dim and candles placed in a few tall stands created wavering shadows.

A reflective copper sheet ran from floor to ceiling at one end of the room and water quietly shimmered down it. A platform about ten feet square and three feet high rose in the middle of the room. It was covered with black, white and red cushions, and a bundle of roses lay in the middle of it.

Katarina wandered to the platform and touched a rose petal in wonder. They were real, heady-smelling Earth roses, blood-red.

"Katarina."

The voice rolled through empty air, low and male, smooth and deep.

Her breath stopped. It was the voice she'd heard in her head when the Shareem Calder had come to the clinic five days ago.

Every night since, she'd dreamed of his voice, waking with her hand under her nightgown, fingers between her legs. As a doctor, she knew that, technically, the

aroused vulva swelled and opened to receive the penis, then squeezed to encourage the penis to release its life-giving seed. Technically.

She'd never felt a hardening clitoris, never experienced stabbing need between her legs. Alone in bed, she had rubbed herself until she'd groaned and released cream all over her hand. Every night.

Someone at the clinic must have tricked her here to see Calder again.

"I have to go." Katarina swung around, seeking the door to the walkway and the path out. But where the entrance to the green garden had been, a black wall now stood, solid, sealing her in.

"Open this," she said, her voice shaking.

"Not yet." His voice flowed, sending warmth down her spine.

She wanted to beat on the wall, demand he let her out. He had no right to keep her here, she a highborn lady of Bor Narga, he a mere Shareem. How dare he?

And why did she buzz with excitement, wondering what he would do? Her research on Shareem told her they couldn't touch her without permission. It had been built into their genetic programming.

Calder wasn't touching her, he was talking, watching. He wasn't even in the room with her, as far as she could see.

A door in the wall next to her hissed open, revealing a closet. Inside was a short dress of bright red supple leather and black boots with the highest heels she'd ever seen.

"Remove your clothing," Calder said. "And put on what you find in there."

Her heart beat faster. "Why on earth would you want me to wear that?"

"Put them on." The voice brooked no argument.

Katarina suddenly thought she understood what was going on. Her fellow medics were testing her. Katarina had been put in charge of inoculating Shareem, and her colleagues wanted to see if she'd be afraid of them.

Wouldn't they love that? The highborn doctor who'd condescended to work in the slums running home at the first challenge? They'd ridicule her, say she didn't have the guts. And they'd be right.

Calder's voice rumbled through the room. "Take off your clothes for me, Katarina."

"Why?" she said to the air. "You wouldn't take yours off for me."

A laugh floated to her, deep and dark. "Too many eyes at your clinic. Here, we are alone. No one else will come."

Katarina closed her eyes. Dear gods, she wanted this. She wanted to slide her tunic and leggings from her body and let him see her. She wanted to face him and open her arms, ask him if he thought her pretty.

What on earth was she thinking?

She remembered suddenly the scars on his arms, his harsh voice sharpening when he told her he wouldn't disrobe.

Because he was ashamed.

Compassion made Katarina do what lust couldn't. She undid the clasp that held her tunic and lowered the thick material to her waist. Her breasts tumbled out, unfettered.

She'd woken from another dream of him last night, her nipples tight, and she'd pinched the buds to ease the ache. The nipples were again as hard as little pebbles.

"You are lovely," Calder said.

Katarina drew her thumbs across her areolas, marveling at the tingling sensation. She knew he liked her doing this, even though he said nothing from behind the walls.

"Now the rest," he said. "Let me see you."

Katarina toed off her sand boots and, before she could think about it, let her pants slither to her ankles.

She assumed she'd be more embarrassed once she'd shed her clothes, but the cool air touching her skin made her feel curiously free. She liked the sensation of standing

naked in this black room while her unseen watcher observed her. She moved her legs apart, enjoying the feel of the tile on her bare feet.

"Katarina."

She loved how he said her name, all long vowels separated by smooth consonants.

"Yes?"

"You are even more beautiful than I expected."

"Expected? What did you expect?"

"I saw your picture on your consent form, with your face unveiled." His voice dipped lower. "I grew hard just looking at you."

Katarina's breath poured back into her lungs, her skin suddenly cold. "Consent form?"

"It told me all about you. You are Katarina d'Arnal. You are twenty-seven years old, unmarried and rich. You have taken a job in Pas City to seek... What have you come to seek?"

"Peace. I think."

"Fulfillment."

She hesitated. "Maybe. Maybe that's what I want, I don't know."

"With me, you will truly find out what you want. I will show you every step of the way, with my own hands, what you want."

Her heart pounded. Without thinking about it, she touched the curls at her cleft. "How can you possibly know when I don't?"

It seemed easy to talk to him when she couldn't see him, a voiceless entity whose rich tones wove magical strings around her mind.

"I *know*. I will give it to you."

Katarina's own fingers calmed her, muscles relaxing as she touched herself.

"You can run if you want," he said. "I will find you and catch you, but you can always *try* to get away."

"Run?" She glanced at the dark walls that shut her in. "Run where?"

"Away from me."

"I'm not running anywhere. Especially not without my clothes."

Calder laughed again, the sound low and soft. "Put on the garments you found in the wardrobe. I had them made for you."

Katarina turned back to the closet and took out the red leather dress. It was soft and supple. And tiny. The kind of dress she'd never dream of wearing, even in private.

Feeling suddenly daring, she slipped it over her head. She wondered how to fasten it, but as soon as it settled on her torso, a mechanism kicked in that tightened it to every curve of her body.

There she stood, covered from her nipples to just below her buttocks in tight red leather. Far from confining, the small dress felt surprisingly comfortable.

She sat down on the platform with the boots, well aware that Calder watched. She knew he could see between her legs where the dress parted, could see her nipples press against the tight leather.

Katarina awkwardly drew the boots onto her feet and up her thighs then she stood, trying to get her balance in the impossibly high heels. "I have got to see what I look like in this."

Calder didn't answer. Silence reigned as she tottered to the copper fountain and observed herself in the reflective sheet.

The copper was polished to a mirror sheen, reflecting her even with the water running down it. Katarina peered at herself and laughed.

She certainly did look different. The leather dress bared most of her body and the boots reached halfway up her thighs. Her honey brown hair was mussed from removing her veils, and the brown eyes that looked back at her held both anxiety and curiosity.

The boot heels made her legs long and shapely and the dress complemented her body, building up her chest while slimming her waist. She'd always considered herself a shade too plump, but this dress made her look curvy and sexy. Bold. She smiled in wonder.

The dim lights suddenly went out, leaving nothing but the flickering of the few candles. The tiny, distant flames reflected on the copper sheet and thin stream of water like wavering fireflies.

"Don't turn from the fountain."

His voice came out of the darkness, in the room now, not over a speaker. Katarina tried to peer into the reflection and find him, but the darkness hid him.

"Where are you? I want to see you."

"Put your hands on the copper and leave them there." The voice was not as smooth as it had been over the speaker—he must have a program that took off the rough edges. Katarina thought she liked it better without the smoothness.

She leaned forward, balancing carefully on the stilt heels, and touched her palms to the copper wall. The thin sheet of water slid gently around her fingers.

A prickling between her shoulder blades told her Calder still watched, but she didn't know from where. Did she hear soft footfalls right behind her, or were they across the room?

Then he was there, his body curving over hers. "Don't turn around," he whispered. His chest touched her back as he leaned over her and rested his fist on the copper—and a large bulge of cock pressed against her buttocks.

His breath burned her bare neck, then came the feeling of velvet on her skin—a glove? Then lips, just as soft but smooth and firm, on her neck.

Hot sensations flowed through Katarina's body, along with a need she'd never experienced. A trickle of liquid touched her thighs.

"Please let me see you," she begged.

Teeth nipped her ear. "Do not speak until I allow it."

"Yes, but – Ow!"

The nip turned to a sharp bite. "*Not* until I allow it."

Katarina focused her attention on the wall. She could see herself in the copper but he was only a shadow, dressed all in black, hooded, his face hidden behind a mask.

His hand moved on her thigh, the feeling of velvet again. His fingers slid under the hem of the dress, tantalizingly brushing the crease between thigh and torso.

Calder moved his hand to her breast. She saw it in the mirror, black and large, cupping her in the red leather. Her cleavage made a satisfactory picture and he nipped her neck, seeming to like what he saw.

The hand now slid to her abdomen, kneading her stomach, his touch warm and soothing.

"You will kneel when I tell you to," he said.

Katarina nodded. Anything, as long as he continued to make her feel like this.

"Why not resist?" he whispered. He glided his hand, velvet warm, up to her throat, over her chin and face. She closed her eyes, drinking in the feeling.

"I don't want to resist."

"You are not afraid?"

"Did you drug me?" That was the only explanation for this acceptance of his intimate touch.

"What you feel, you are doing to yourself. I am only a catalyst."

"Your Shareem pheromones," she said, understanding. "I read about them."

His breath scalded her ear. "I will offer again to let you run if you want to. But I will catch you in the end, remember that."

Katarina's heart beat faster as she imagined fleeing through the dark with him behind her, hearing him close the distance, knowing she couldn't outrun him. When he

caught her... She could imagine his large hands closing around her, his weight bearing her to the ground, his fingers jerking open her clothes.

She swallowed. "I couldn't possibly run anywhere in these heels."

"Then I am your captor. You were brought here to be my slave."

His touch calmed her shaking, and she felt warm and loose. "I thought I'd come to treat someone. They tricked me."

His mouth found her neck again, biting harder, the pain making her wet. "Kneel for me now, Katarina."

She tried but her knees locked as she lost her balance on the heels. She clutched at the wet copper, trying not to fall.

Calder's hands moved to her upper arms, grip impossibly strong. He eased her down until she was on her knees on the floor, his huge body towering over her.

"I will have to punish you, Katarina, for not obeying right away."

A shiver pulsed through her. "I couldn't figure out how to."

"And again, for answering when I did not allow it."

She drew a breath, ready to argue, then stopped. Perhaps she'd better find out what these "punishments" were before she earned more.

"You learn quickly." He knelt, the leather stretching over his thighs as he put his knees on either side of her. "I might go easy with you."

His big hands stroked her again, running over her abdomen and breasts. She closed her eyes, enjoying it.

When his gloved hand pressed her clit, she gasped. The velvet felt odd, but good.

"Choose," he said. He moved his fingers slowly, first teasing the lips of her opening then brushing her clit, now wet and swollen. "Which punishment would you like first?"

Katarina's breath caught. "What are my choices?"

"You can have the lash." Calder's voice caressed the word, and Katarina envisioned herself naked on hands and knees while the shadow of him stood over her. She could already feel the sting of leather on her backside as he whipped her.

"Or?"

"My bare hand, spanking your ass until it's red. Or you can play with a toy I have devised. You bring yourself off with it while I watch, but you cannot stop until I'm satisfied."

Katarina wondered very much what this toy was and what it did. "I think I'd prefer the spanking," she said in a rush.

"Make sure." His fingers moved on her. "I will be harder on you as we go along. If you have the lash now, it won't be so bad as it will later."

There wouldn't be a later because she'd find a way to make him understand that she'd been duped, that she'd never filled out his consent form, whatever that was. That it was all a mistake.

And then this beautiful dream would be over.

"I want the spanking," she repeated.

He bit her ear, gently this time. "Say, 'Please spank me.'"

"Um...please spank me."

"Say, 'Please, Calder, discipline me. I deserve it.'"

His fingers moved faster, and she gasped. "Please, Calder, discipline me. I deserve it."

His fingers moved again, smearing her own cream all over her, her clit hot and aching. She felt herself winding toward climax, wanting it, reaching for it...

Calder withdrew his hand and the sensation died. She whimpered. "Could you do that a little longer?"

"No." He stripped off the glove. The hand he bared was huge, bronze-colored flesh tight against sinew. Katarina realized too late that a spanking with that powerful hand would be no less painful than one with a lash.

"Pull up your dress," he said. "Bare your ass for me."

Hands shaking, Katarina caught the hem that hugged her buttocks and jerked it upward. She felt his hands, one bare, one velvet-covered, both stroking her gently.

"You have a fine ass. So beautiful. Did you know that, Katarina?"

Katarina closed her eyes. "No one's ever said such a thing to me."

"What I'm going to do with this beautiful ass is spank it until it's cherry red. Then I'm going to put my tongue inside it."

Katarina drew a sharp breath. She imagined his warm, wet tongue delving into her, something she'd never felt in her life. Heat squeezed her body.

"Later," he went on, "it will take my cock."

She thought of the huge, hard thing that had rubbed her backside, and she gulped. "I've never done that before."

"Mmm." He brushed her buttocks, soft velvet contrasting with calloused fingers. "I might be sweet to you and show you how, slowly." He put his lips to her ear. "But you have to be very, very good."

"I will be," she babbled.

"I don't believe you. But we'll see." He moved from her, taking away his beautiful touch. "Bend over my knee, Katarina."

She glanced behind her. He was waiting, still on the floor, one knee bent, his bare hand pale in the shadows. His thighs were large and strong in tight leather, his face completely hidden behind a black hood.

Suddenly what the people at her clinic thought of her didn't matter. So what if the medics had sent her here to play a joke on her? She no longer cared. What she cared about was how this man made her feel.

Sexy. Beautiful. Wanted.

Taking a deep breath, Katarina turned around and lowered herself facedown across his thigh.

Chapter Three

The leather of Calder's leggings was cool on Katarina's half-bared chest. She felt the warm power of his thigh beneath the fabric, smelled leather and his sharp musk.

He circled his palm over her ass, smoothing her skin.

Then he spanked her once.

Katarina yelped. She was right, he was strong. But the instant she felt the sting, he placed his gloved palm on her skin and the sting turned to a tingle of vast pleasure. She groaned.

"Remain quiet until I say."

Katarina sucked in her breath. Another swat on her ass, another caress, the pain segueing to pleasure in an instant. She wriggled, wanting more.

He gave it to her. He spanked her thoroughly, his hands practiced, and yet what might have hurt only gave her deepest pleasure. He had her squealing and laughing, despite his command to keep quiet.

Calder made a circular motion with his gloved hand on her skin and leaned over her. "Do you need to come?"

"Yes," she gasped. "I think so. Yes."

"I might let you...in time."

"Oh no, please," she begged. "Now. Please."

His voice turned thoughtful. "Is that why you are here today?"

"What? No. I didn't mean to be here at all."

"Get on your knees, Katarina."

He didn't believe her. She was too out of breath to tell him the whole story, and she knew she didn't want to anymore.

She eased off his leg, down to her knees, her butt tingling as the leather dress slithered over it again.

Calder unfolded his big body and stood, planting his feet on either side of her. Katarina found herself looking straight at the front of his leather leggings.

The fabric molded to the incredible bulge of his cock, outlining it from base to tip. It was huge, at least twelve inches in length, rigid and wide.

He brushed a hand over it. "Do you want this, Katarina?"

"Yes." Katarina touched it with hesitant fingers. "You're big. Would it hurt me?"

"It will only hurt if you want it to. It can be all sweet pleasure or it can hurt. Whichever you want."

"Why?" Katarina looked up at his face swathed in black. "Why only what I want?"

He shifted slightly as though her question surprised him. "I am Shareem." It was a flat statement.

"What has that to do with anything?"

Again his muscles contracted the tiniest bit. "I decide the games in this room, not you."

"Games?"

He returned to his knees next to her, leaning back to sit on his heels. "Bend over."

"What?"

"Now."

The harsh word made her squeak. He caught the back of her neck and leaned her over his thighs. He spanked her, not softly this time. His bare hand stung her a dozen times and only then did he use his gloved hand to soothe her skin.

"Do you understand now?" he asked.

"Not really."

Calder let her up. Katarina surreptitiously rubbed her backside while Calder positioned himself on his feet in front of her again.

"You asked what I want," he said in a grating voice. "I will tell you. I want to feel your face pressed against my cock. I want you exploring it, learning it."

Katarina touched the cock in front of her, the leather so tight she could feel every inch, including the bump of the flange and the round tip of its head.

She knew what a penis looked like, having studied them in detail during her medical training. It was an appendage jutting from the male body, small when flaccid, extended and hard when engorged and ready to penetrate a woman. Most Bor Nargan men got injections to keep their penises soft, to not be distracted by the inconvenience of hormonal lust.

Katarina knew all this clinically. She'd studied diagrams and read long treatises. But charts and diagrams didn't prepare her for the real thing, especially not one attached to a Shareem.

She leaned forward and nuzzled it through the leather.

A small noise escaped Calder's throat. So he *could* feel. She nuzzled the tip again then the shaft beneath it.

Calder growled, and his bare hand snaked through her hair. His other hand, still gloved, balled into a fist.

Katarina nuzzled some more, enjoying the feel of the cool leather and the hard, hot flesh behind it. She acted at his command, but what she did disarmed him.

"I like it," she murmured. "So big and thick."

Her own words startled her. She'd never have dreamed of saying that out loud. But it seemed to be all right to say it to him, her faceless captor.

"Lie down on your back."

Katarina looked up. "But I thought—"

He put his gloved hand over her face. "Lie down."

Katarina's entire body tingled and she let herself more or less fall to the floor. She shivered when his large, dark body covered hers, so warm. He was so wonderfully warm.

"I want to see you," she said. "Why won't you show me your face?"

Calder didn't answer. He jerked her skirt upward, baring her groin, but he didn't touch her. Instead, he pressed his leather-covered cock right against her clit.

"Gods," she whispered.

The burning sensation as he rubbed his cock against her made her want to scream. She reached up to touch his face but he turned his head, and her hand fell on a swath of velvet.

"Please," she repeated. "I want to look at you."

"No."

"You know what *I* look like." She stifled a groan as his cock rubbed her swollen clit. "Highborn women don't like to show their faces, but I showed you mine. And so much more. It's not fair."

"You did not come here for me to be fair. You came here to give yourself to me."

Sensations clawed for attention, the burning in her clit, the hot tingling all over her body. "It's only a little thing," she whimpered.

He put his face close to hers, but she could only see velvet and the glitter of his eyes. "Come for me and I'll show you."

Come. Climax. *The woman's vulva squeezes the man's penis, helping to stroke the man into releasing his seed...*

Katarina's medical manuals never mentioned the dark power of it, the screaming need. How beautiful it felt. How she'd never want to stop.

Without realizing she did it, Katarina snaked her legs around Calder's thighs and lifted herself to him. She rocked her hips, wanting him inside her, *needing* him inside her.

She'd never be able to take him, and at the same time, she wanted it more than anything in the world.

"Show me," she shouted. "Please. Now!"

"I don't like to be commanded."

"Please. Oh please," she babbled, too happy to care what she said.

She came. Katarina gasped for breath as waves of mad pleasure poured over her. This was a hundred times better than when she brought herself off with her own hand at night.

He had to stop—she didn't want him to *ever* stop. It was too much. It was not enough.

Calder released her and she fell back against the floor, panting. Her clit tingled, still wanting his touch, and an ache started in her heart.

"Please, I know you were burned. I'm not afraid to look at you."

His voice went raw with fury. "Get up on your knees or you will have to beg harder than that for mercy."

"I just want to see your face. To touch it."

Calder lifted himself away from her, his warmth disappearing. Katarina scrambled to her feet and reached for him, sighing in pleasure when her hands closed on his warm, tall body.

Calder turned abruptly away. At the last minute, Katarina managed to grab the mask and yank it off. Shadowy candlelight fell on his face—and she gasped.

The right side of Calder's face was handsome as sin, sculpted perfection around deep blue eyes, a hard jaw, a firm mouth.

The left side was a complete ruin.

Scars overlapped scars that twisted over his cheekbone and down his neck. The left side of his mouth was pulled into a perpetual frown, the skin around it mottled and ugly. His left eye was untouched, but scars streaked the brow and eyelid.

Katarina bit her lip as she touched his cheek, fingertips finding the smooth seams of the scars.

The burning had happened a long time ago, she could tell, but the pain of it lingered in his very blue eyes.

"This must have hurt you so much," she whispered.

Calder snarled and jerked away.

"Calder..."

"No," he growled, his voice harsh like it had been in the clinic. "I don't want this with you."

He swung around, black clothes swirling, and disappeared into the darkness beyond the candles.

"Wait!" Katarina tried to run after him but the stupid high heels impeded her.

Silence. The feeling of his presence dissipated, the soothing calm, the excitement, the peace, all gone.

Tears stung Katarina's eyes. "Please. Calder, don't leave me."

As if in answer, lights went on in the room and a sudden whoosh of air extinguished the candles. Katarina found herself standing in a square room with a platform bed, a wall fountain and smoking, guttering candles.

It looked so ordinary, the magic of the darkness and the flickering light gone. She saw the cameras now, dark, shining lenses all over the ceiling and walls, surveying the room at every angle. He must have watched her through these before he'd entered.

Katarina looked for a hidden door through which Calder must have exited but she found only seamless black walls. After a few circuits of the room, she gave up and plunked on the bed.

She tugged off the boots and threw off the leather dress, not caring that she was mother-naked in a bright room with cameras all over it. Let him watch.

Katarina put on her tunic and pants and grabbed her sun-blocking robes, veils and breath mask. "I'm going," she said to the air.

The entrance to the greenery-lined walkway shot open. Katarina plunged into the garden she'd thought so beautiful, now finding it overly exotic, the scent of the flowers too strong.

Soon she was running through the door that led to the dingy hall. The outside door opened for her as she hurried toward it, heat blasting her before she even made it outside.

Katarina slithered into sun-blocking robes and veils, grateful for the ability to hide her face. Behind her the door slammed shut with finality, the rusting metal as unyielding as it had been when she'd arrived.

Blinking back tears, Katarina pulled her veils over her face then walked into the street in search of a hovercab.

Chapter Four

Fuck.

Calder, pent-up and furious, paced the small quarters of his apartment. He'd always liked the contrast of his functional, minimal living space with the exotic décor of his lair, but today he wished he had more room to pace.

Damn her. The minute she'd walked in, his plan to show the nervous medic what a Shareem truly was evaporated. She and her condescending highborn attitude were supposed to crumble like dust—she was supposed to learn that Calder would have the upper hand the next time he had to visit her clinic.

His plan had gone all to hell. Hence his frenzied pacing, like an animal in a cage.

Shareem were made for sex; they needed sex. Any woman could get Calder hard, his body built to react instantly and strongly to a woman's pheromones. If *she* wanted it, his body wanted it too.

But that was a simple chemical reaction. What rarely happened was Calder looking at a woman and wanting to fuck her because of *her*, for the pure joy of it. This woman...

Calder slammed his fists into the white wall. His Shareem chemicals had shot all kinds of joy through him, and he'd wanted to touch every inch of her.

If she hadn't been so damn curious he could still be in there, maybe with her on the padded platform, her legs around his hips while he enjoyed a good fuck.

Why had she ripped the mask from his face and ruined everything?

Women had seen him before—sometimes he decided they needed to see what kind of being they craved to be with. They'd scream in horror, those highborn, face-sculpted women, for whom physical beauty was easily purchased, and run from him. He'd hunt

them down and take them, which was what they wanted. That was the fantasy, to be ravished by The Beast.

I don't want this with you, he'd said to Katarina.

He wanted to *be* with her, and not through the stupid game of predator and prey.

Well, all right, he wouldn't mind a little predator and prey fantasy with her, but he wanted the playing to be mutual. He wanted to hunt her, and when he caught her, have her laugh and kiss him and be happy to be caught.

He wanted it to be real.

What the fuck is the matter with me?

Calder strode to his sparsely furnished bedroom and slid back a wall panel to reveal a full-length mirror. Barely glancing at it, he began to remove his clothes.

"She's just a woman who wanted The Beast," he said out loud as he shucked his gloves and skin-tight tunic. "That's why she came. No other reason."

There could have been no other reason. What Calder offered was unique and dangerous and spoke to needs women didn't want to examine too closely.

Calder didn't ask women to examine their needs. He simply offered a way to let them put aside taboos and give in. If they didn't give in, he taught them to.

He touched primal fears and primal needs, and women flocked to him for it.

Some left terrified, others more sated than they'd ever been in their lives. But he'd never had one complaint, never a threat of arrest or termination. No one ever talked about what happened in the lair of The Beast.

He'd never, ever stopped the game and fled, leaving a woman bewildered and calling after him.

Stupid, cock-brained asshole.

Calder pulled off his linen under tunic, his eyes on the mirror. His flat abdomen was tight with muscle, his chest massive, widening to broad, strong shoulders. A body made for power and pleasure.

The left side of Calder's torso was a maze of scars, with a concave indentation below his rib cage covered with unnaturally smooth skin. The rest of his body was mottled with puckers of scar tissue. Beneath that lay bones that had been crushed and rebuilt molecule by molecule.

The right side of his body was not as bad as the left, but rows of scars laced his skin from collarbone to ankle.

Some of the skin grafts had come from the right side of his body, Dr. Laas desperately harvesting every bit of healthy skin. Repairing him had been tricky business. The bones had been easiest, pinned together and left to Shareem metabolism to heal.

The organs had taken much more time and much more pain. Dr. Laas had rebuilt every single one, and now they functioned as they were suppose to. Calder had convalesced for a damn long time, during which he'd sometimes wished she would just let him die.

He had healed, but the scarring, despite Dr. Laas' work, remained. He looked a damn sight better than when he'd first been rolled out of the plasma fire, and he'd always be grateful for that. But even techniques that had evolved in the twenty years since hadn't helped. The damage was simply too extensive.

Dr. Laas had once suggested cyber replacements but Calder had snarled so viciously that she'd never brought up the subject again. He didn't want to be a damn cyborg, half man, half machine. It was bad enough being Shareem.

Calder pulled open the fly of his leggings and kicked them off. His legs had taken the worst of the burning, both mangled and twisted until they'd almost disintegrated. Dr. Laas had painstakingly pieced them back together, ignoring her fellow scientists who predicted he'd never walk again.

She'd fixed him so that not only could he walk, but his muscles healed and regained most of their strength. Now his legs were taut and strong, though the skin was ruined beyond repair.

A vain man would have gotten rid of the mirror. Calder kept it so he'd never take himself for granted.

What he could now offer a woman was not a body to gaze at, a handsome smile to make her wet in an instant. He offered a technique, an experience they would never forget.

Calder faced his naked body, remembering the heat of Katarina's pussy through the leather.

His already-hard cock tightened. There were no scars on *it*, thank the gods, except a few at the very base. He'd moved his thigh over it in time when he'd fallen. The DNAmo scientists had joked that of course a Shareem would protect his greatest asset.

Now the cock rose to full erection, a standard foot long. His hand went to it as he remembered Katarina pressing her face against it. She'd kissed and explored it, begged to see it.

He imagined her beautiful lips closing over it and he stifled a groan. He grabbed a tube from his bedside table, opened it, dribbled lube onto his hand.

He smoothed in the gel, biting his lip to keep himself from growling. If it had been Katarina's hand slathering lube all over him, her hand gripping him, he'd have come already.

He closed his hand tightly and drew his fist up the length, his palm making a snapping noise as it came together at the end. He slid his hand down for a second stroke, and a third, building up speed.

His Shareem irises widened until his eyes were nothing but blue. He felt the pulsing at the base of his balls very quickly—he'd wanted to come ever since Katarina d'Arnal had walked into his house of pleasure.

Faster and faster. The sound of his hand was loud in the silent room. His hips rocked with the rhythm, his legs moving. Calder studied his ugly body in the mirror as his hand gave as much pleasure as it could.

He thought about Katarina, how sexy she looked in that tight red dress and the high-heeled boots. How she'd put her hands on her hips and smiled at herself in the mirror. Everything about her was innocence and warmth.

His hand burned, the lube soothed and his come squirted out of him to the waiting towel.

"Katarina!" he shouted, the word falling flat against the walls of his tiny bedroom. "Katarina," Calder repeated softly as his frustration eased the slightest bit.

But not enough. His cock was still hard and hot, wanting more. He wiped off his hands and dribbled another dose of lube on his stubborn, needy cock.

Fuck.

* * * * *

Katarina glared at Calder's rusty door on Barkelo Street the next afternoon as the sun slowly roasted her. Her thumbprint wouldn't open the door and there was no response to her knocking.

Of course he would have changed the thumbprint code. That was probably his standard procedure.

So here she was, standing forlornly on the street like a fool, wanting—needing—to see him again. *Damn.*

Passersby eyed her in suspicion. Her highborn robes made her stand out on this backstreet, a person who clearly didn't belong here.

Face heating, Katarina moved away.

She turned the corner, heading back toward the clinic. She'd taken a hovercab to Calder's street, dismissing it before she'd approached the door. But she was too restless now to hunt another, and besides, she needed to walk.

The street held a market of tents and metal awnings, temporary structures that could quickly be pulled up in case of one of Bor Narga's deadly sandstorms. Katarina glanced at the boxes of colorful fruits, bright cloth, piles of robot and computer parts,

and tables upon tables of cheap, gaudy jewelry. Everything for sale, nothing that held her interest.

She wasn't sure why Calder's refusal to answer his door cut her so much. He was only a Shareem, after all.

In Bor Narga's carefully striated culture, Shareem were *persona non grata*. They were less than the lowest workers because they contributed nothing to a society that had abandoned carnality. Children were conceived outside the body by mixing DNA from carefully chosen partners. Sex was no longer needed and considered unnecessary, even gauche.

Eons ago, Bor Narga had been a barbaric place where women served men—the women on their backs and on their knees. Never again, said the women who now controlled the planet. Never again.

Shareem were created at a time when sexual pleasure had been a form of entertainment, a guilty pleasure. DNAmo, a genetics company already successful at creating the perfect servants, had come up with the ultimate male for pleasuring women.

DNAmo became famous throughout the galaxy for their creations and had exported Shareem to many planets—before the Shareem were deemed dangerous to women's safety. The Bor Nargan government shut down the company. The ruling council then had to decide what to do with the leftover Shareem, now taboo. The government didn't want to spend the money transporting the rest of the creatures off world—if they could even find a planet that wanted the refugees—nor did they want the Shareem to remain on Bor Narga.

The highborn women who ruled Bor Narga debated a long time whether to simply terminate the subjects. Shareem weren't truly human, they reasoned, so it wouldn't be murder.

In the end, someone pointed out that wholesale slaughter of the Shareem might make Bor Narga look barbaric to other worlds with which they traded. Bor Narga couldn't afford to lose trade over a hundred Shareem.

So Shareem were granted a stay of execution. Those who'd hidden themselves when DNAmo shut down were required to turn themselves in to the Ministry of Non-Human Life Forms. All Shareem were to be scanned and registered.

Shareem had to agree to visit approved clinics every six months for the rest of their lives to receive inoculations that would prevent sexual diseases and procreation. The penalty for not submitting was termination. DNAmo had claimed that they'd bred all aggression out of them, making them unable to touch a woman without her permission. And so the Shareem were tamed, controlled.

In theory.

Katarina had started researching Shareem after Calder had come to the clinic, going through the Ministry of Non-Human Life Forms' data files. She'd discovered that each Shareem was one of three "levels". Level one—pure sensual pleasure. Level two—fun and games. Level three—dangerous fantasies and bondage.

The Shareem called Calder, for whom the record was sketchy, was a level three. Katarina shivered. *Dangerous fantasy* described him well.

The rest of Calder's file held little, no holo pic, no mention of why or how he'd been burned. It noted where he lived and listed the dates of his six-month inoculations, including the one Katarina had done the week before.

Katarina shivered. Calder had commanded the session in the clinic, and he'd more than commanded her in his warehouse. She'd never been treated like that by a man before. She was highborn and female. Men were deferential to her, always.

If anyone in the Ministry found out what Calder had done to Katarina yesterday—or even discovered that he'd refused the scanning process in the clinic—he'd be arrested.

Arrested, confined. Terminated. Calder, the tall, commanding male who'd made her feel sexy for the first time in her life, would die.

Her blood went cold.

"Lady, you gonna order or block the way?"

Katarina jumped. She'd slowed to a halt in front of a tent that served coffee and pastries, and the woman vendor behind the table was glaring at her. The thick aroma of burned coffee filled the air.

"Sorry." Katarina stepped out of the way as a man passed her to get to the tent.

She stopped in shock.

The man was Shareem. He had long black hair caught in a ponytail and wore tight black leather leggings and a short-sleeved gray tunic. A thin black chain encircled his right biceps, and his skin was bronze-colored, the same as Calder's. In fact, his resemblance to Calder, minus the scars, was uncanny.

"The usual," he said to the vendor, his smooth, dark voice making it sound like an invitation to bed.

The sour vendor suddenly grinned. "Hello, Braden. How've you been?"

"All better now that I've seen you."

"Liar," the woman said, but she looked happy.

The Shareem reached for the pastry and coffee the vendor held out to him, paid with a credit slip then turned away, nearly running into a gaping Katarina.

He skimmed his gaze in a flattering pass over her body then he smiled. "Hello."

His smile could melt butter at ten paces. His voice could sop up what was left.

"What's your name, pretty lady?" He lifted his thumb from the pastry and licked away a drop of honey. Katarina followed the stroke of his tongue, watched the form of his lips as he sucked.

"Who are you?" she blurted.

"Call me Braden, sweetheart. Who are you?"

His eyes were the same blue as Calder's—sheer azure blue that glowed even under the shadow of the canopies.

Her heart pounded in her throat. "May I... May I talk to you?"

"Sure," he said, still smiling. "Tell me where you live and I'll make arrangements to come there, no one the wiser."

"No, I mean right now. And I truly mean talk."

His brows rose. "A highborn woman wanting to *talk* to a Shareem? Will wonders never cease?"

"Please."

"Suit yourself."

Braden led her to a cluster of stools and tables under canopies. All the tables were filled but Braden looked meaningfully at two scruffy men, who immediately vacated and scuttled away.

Braden set his pasty and coffee on the table then helped Katarina to a stool with a warm hand on her arm. "Have some pastry. Dilla has a sharp tongue but she'd a damn fine baker."

Katarina declined. Braden shrugged as he sat down, then broke off a chunk of pasty and put it in his mouth. He closed his eyes as he chewed, slowly savoring it. He swallowed then his tongue came out to slide every stray crumb from his lips. A woman could get wet watching him eat.

"You never told me your name," Braden said, opening his eyes again.

"Katarina d'Arnal." It didn't matter if he knew her name—he'd see her in the clinic sooner or later. "I met someone, another Shareem. You look like him. Do you have a brother?"

Braden shrugged, powerful muscles rippling. "Only if he came out of Vat 23."

Whatever that meant. "His name is Calder. Do you know him?"

Braden froze in the act of lifting another piece of pastry to his mouth. "You met Calder?"

"He came to my clinic for his inoculations."

Braden's smile dimmed. "Wait a minute. You're one of those women who use hypos on Shareem?"

"I just started. Calder was my first."

"Yeah?" He sounded wary.

Katarina bit the inside of her mouth then continued her confession. "Yesterday, I went to Calder's...place."

That brought back his surprise. "You had an appointment with him?"

Katarina opened her mouth to say *no*, but the word wouldn't form. She remembered the flood of feelings when Calder touched her, the amazing excitement of her climax, the sting of his hand on her buttocks. Her lips numbed and she couldn't say a word.

"Ah." Braden grinned, his wary look vanishing. "You couldn't resist old Calder. I give you points for courage."

Katarina hadn't felt brave in the slightest. "He sent me away and today he won't answer the door."

"Well, he wouldn't, would he? You never get a second appointment with Calder." Braden's look grew sinful. "But no worries, sweetheart. I'm not a one-time deal. You can talk to me whenever and wherever you want, for as long as you want, as often as you want. Calder's loss."

Katarina pressed her palms to the table. "You don't understand. I don't want to make an appointment. I only want to talk to him."

"Calder doesn't talk. That's not what he's for, sweetheart." He leaned forward. "Me, I don't mind a heart-to-heart."

His breath on her cheek smelled of honey and Katarina wondered whether his lips tasted of it too.

She realized in the next instant he *wanted* her to wonder that. Her research told her that a Shareem could project deep-seated longing onto a woman. Shareem needed women to want them—always—because Shareem had to keep themselves sated in order to stay alive.

“What happened to his face?” Katarina asked, trying to shut out what Braden was doing to her. “How was he burned?”

Braden sat up again, surprise slowing his outpouring of pheromones. “He showed you his face? The whole thing?”

“It must have been awful for him. Couldn’t regenerative surgery help?”

“Calder had the best plastic and genetic surgeon in the universe work on him. It was the very best she could do. You should have seen him *before* she went to work.”

“How was he injured?”

Braden took another bite of pastry. “I should shut up now. If Calder wants you to know, he’ll tell you.”

“How can he tell me if he won’t let me see him? I don’t want to wait until he comes back to the clinic in six months.”

Braden folded the paper over the remains of his pastry and licked honey from his fingers. “Tell me about you. You’re a medic, you said. Do you want to do experiments on him, try to ‘cure’ him to further scientific research? Forget it. That’s been tried.” His pheromones died away and she felt his chill anger.

Shareem weren’t supposed to feel anger, the data files had said. Katarina suddenly wondered if whoever had made those files had ever actually met a Shareem.

Braden went on. “We’ve had enough of scientific experiments, honey, Calder most of all. If that’s what you want, run back to your clinic and leave us the hell alone.”

Katarina stared at him. “No. That’s not what I meant.”

"Then why do you want to see him? Oh wait, I remember, to *talk*."

"Really, that's all."

"If you wanted a conversation, why did you make an appointment with him? You must have known he didn't let you into his lair to get chatty."

"I didn't make an appointment exactly."

Katarina blushed as she told him what she thought, that the medics at the clinic had made the request on Katarina's behalf as a practical joke. None of them had betrayed any glee when she'd walked in this morning, and she didn't dare bring it up, but she was still sure it had been one of them.

When Katarina explained she thought she'd been sent to doctor a hurt street vendor, Braden burst out laughing. Women throughout the market turned and searched longingly for the source of that incredible laugh.

"Oh gods, that's priceless. You thought you were going to use a hypo on an ailing vendor, and then Calder..."

"It's not funny. I realized my mistake very quickly."

Braden held his brawny arms across his stomach. "Man, I wish I could have seen that." He laughed a little longer then wiped his eyes. "Tell me more, Katarina. You interest me. Why are you, a pretty highborn lady, working in a slum clinic in Pas City?"

Katarina hesitated but it seemed fine to open up to him, to let him draw the words out of her. She told him that she wanted to do real good with her medical degree, not simply doctor women worried about getting too many wrinkles. "I hadn't realized I'd be inoculating Shareem though."

"Lucky us. Most highborn women won't touch us. Forbidden fruit." He winked at her, his smile sinful – and suddenly Katarina wanted him.

Her interest in Calder was no less strong, but she had the abrupt, overwhelming desire to crawl under the table, unlace Braden's leggings and put her mouth over his cock.

She wanted him to bend her over the table and screw her right there, no matter how many people watched. It was not an emotional longing, it was pure physical need. Lust in its rawest form.

The blue of his eyes widened, swallowing the white. Need crawled through her, hotter than the Bor Nargan sun, making her just as sweaty.

"You see?" Braden asked, voice soft. "You look at us, you want us, and we have no problem fulfilling our function."

Katarina pressed her thighs tightly together, her body craving climax. "Please, stop doing that."

"I'm not doing a thing. You do it to yourself. I'm a level three – like Calder – which means I'd like to tie you down and have you be a true submissive to me. That's Calder's specialty too. Women are terrified of him and beg him for it at the same time."

Tighter, tighter. Katarina drew a sharp breath as excitement laced through her, followed by a warm sensation and the feel of cream between her legs.

"Careful," Braden said, glancing over his shoulder. "Don't let the patrollers think you're enjoying yourself. I might get arrested."

Katarina looked up to see two women wearing sand-colored overalls and carrying stun pistols, watching Braden with narrowed eyes.

"Why would they arrest you?" she asked, trying to catch her breath. "You're unnerving me, but that's not illegal. Is it?"

"All you have to do is call for help and they'll come running to throw me into the cells. They'd love to do it."

"That's terrible," Katarina said.

"It's life on Bor Narga. Home sweet home." Braden grinned at the patrollers and gave them a cheerful wave. They returned the look grimly.

"I'm sorry, I should go then. I don't want to get you into trouble."

Braden gave a short laugh. "Apologizing to Shareem. No woman does that, unless she's in bondage at the time." He gave her another allover look that said he'd love to see her in the position to apologize to him. "Don't go yet, baby. I'm fascinated by your need to talk to Calder."

"Do you think he would see me if you asked him? It's very important."

"I don't know. Calder is with a woman once and once only. You let him do what he wants then you're done. It's in his consent form." Braden chuckled. "He's the only Shareem I know with a consent form."

Katarina remembering Calder mentioning it. "Consent form?"

"Calder won't allow a lady to walk through his door without signing his form. That way he knows she's already given him permission, and then he does anything he wants. Didn't you sign it?"

Katarina shook her head. Her colleagues must have done that for her, laughing.

"It's a beautiful idea," Braden said. "But not for me. I suck at paperwork. Calder spends way too much time alone, comes up with all these different and exotic scenarios. Me, I just get out the manacles."

"Why doesn't he see a lady twice? I would think he'd be much in demand."

"Because when ladies are with Calder, they lay everything out for him. They offer up everything they have, and believe me, he takes it. Besides, you feel it more don't you, when you know it's only once and never again?"

"I wouldn't know," Katarina said. "He sent me away. We didn't do much."

Braden stared. "No shit?"

She shook her head. "No shit."

"Huh." Braden swallowed the dregs of his coffee, a thoughtful look on his face.

"Will you take me to see him, Braden? If it's money you want, I'll give you as much as you ask—"

He held up his hand. "It has nothing to do with money. Forget about Calder, sweetheart. He's... Well, when he got burned he went to a bad place, and I don't mean the DNAmo lab. He never really recovered. There's a darkness to him that a pretty lady like you doesn't need to touch. He's taken level three to a height even I don't understand, and I'm pretty badass."

"It has nothing to do with that."

He took her hand, his Shareem pheromones flooding her again. "Why don't you spend the rest of your afternoon with me? I'll give you what Calder would have, and we'll figure out what you really need. All right? Say you will."

He looked slightly distressed, white patches pulling at the sides of his blue eyes.

"I have to see him." Katarina gently disengaged her hand from Braden's. "I'm sorry, I hope I don't hurt your feelings."

He stared at her in amazement. "Hurt my feelings? Sweetie, you are the strangest lady I've ever met. You're not supposed to worry about a Shareem's *feelings*."

"So everyone keeps telling me."

Braden shook his head, chuckling, his tension suddenly gone. "I have to see this. He'll kill me, but..."

He slid off the stool, crumpled the coffee cup and tossed it at a passing garbage bot. The bot's metal claw caught the cup and snaked it back into its body.

"I'll take you to Calder's place and I'll get you into the same room with him. After that, it's up to him whether to talk or throw your ass out."

Katarina exhaled in relief. "Thank you."

"If he doesn't cooperate, you'll consider my offer, right? You're adorable. We could tear up this town."

Katarina dragged Braden down to her and kissed his cheek. The connection of her lips with his skin sent another river of warmth through her, but it was nothing compared to the volcano Calder had given her.

"I'll consider it," she said with a smile.

"Gods give me luck."

He gave Katarina's backside a Shareem swat, winked at the outraged patrollers and led Katarina back to Barkelo Street.

Chapter Five

Calder sensed something wrong as soon as he stepped into the cool whiteness of his living quarters. The air felt charged, fresher, as though an ionizer had changed the stale molecules.

He set down the box of supplies he'd gone out to buy, unwound the sun-blocking cloths from his face, and tossed his robes and breath mask to their hooks. Stripping off his gloves, he strode into his front room and stopped.

"Hell," he said.

Braden lounged on Calder's square sofa, his leather-clad legs propped on the table. He'd folded his brawny arms behind his head and a spill of black hair fell over his shoulder to his lap.

"Nice to see you too."

Braden was the closest thing Calder had to a friend, but Calder was not in the mood for Braden's sense of humor right now.

Braden maintained a casual approach to life and didn't care who didn't like it. He thought Calder too anal and Calder thought Braden too careless. Usually they got along fine.

"I knew I should have changed the locks," Calder growled. "I have a client coming. Whatever it is, make it quick."

"She's not coming."

Calder halted in the act of going back for his supplies. His leather-clad body creaked as he turned around. "What do you mean? How do you know?"

"I found her in your computer. I sent her a message that said you'd been delayed and will call her later."

Calder's rage warred with relief. The client was a woman from Delta-Terra, a high-handed bitch who'd sent him messages specifying what she expected him to do to her. Women sometimes tried to command him—and then Calder taught them that their dictates didn't mean shit. It was one more way he turned their power against them.

He hadn't really wanted to see the woman today, but then again he did, to expunge what had happened yesterday with Katarina. A good hunt, followed by a good fuck, and he'd be all right again.

He swung toward his terminal but Braden's next words stopped him.

"I brought someone else to see you."

The door to his kitchen slid open, and Katarina d'Arnal, dressed in a soft silk tunic and pants, with no face veil, paused on the threshold. She regarded him in trepidation, as though she wasn't sure Braden's idea of bringing her had been a good one.

She was right about that.

Calder watched her give him a once-over, taking in his black clothes and his naked face. His cock was already hardening as those beautiful brown eyes roved over his body. He never covered his face when he was alone, so she saw his scars in all their glory.

He glared at Braden. "Take her out."

Katarina took a step forward. "I need to talk to you."

"Book an appointment. Don't ask my friends to sneak you into my house."

"At least talk to her," Braden said, bringing his feet to the floor. "What will it hurt?"

Braden, the idiot, couldn't know how it would hurt. Usually Calder didn't care about a woman's fascination with The Beast, but with Katarina he did. She'd want what they all wanted—to touch him and lick him, have him pretend to overpower her.

"Then talk," he said tightly to Katarina.

Katarina wet her lips, making them luscious and red. "I still need to scan you."

Calder stared. Of all the things she could have said, he wasn't expecting that. "You thumbprinted the exam. It's finished."

"Because you forced me."

Braden's black brows rose. "He forced you?"

"He grabbed my thumb and pressed it on the handheld."

"Calder, you shithead."

"I don't need to be scanned," Calder said. "You already have records of my body. It hasn't changed."

"But those aren't the rules."

"Fuck the rules."

Damn it, his control was slipping—again. What did this woman do to him?

"If I reported you—"

Calder was across the room, pinning her to the doorframe before she could complete the sentence.

"Are you threatening me?" he growled.

"I'm saying that if someone found out, if they'd seen you do that, you could get into trouble."

Braden returned his booted feet to the table. "She has a point."

Calder released her. She smelled too good when he stood close to her. His cock danced.

"What do you want, Katarina?"

"I told you. To scan you."

"And if I don't want you running your wand over my naked body?" *Gods, I shouldn't have put it like that.* "Will you report what I did to you in my pleasure rooms?"

She reddened. "No."

Calder remembered how pink her other cheeks had gotten when he'd spanked her. He'd wanted to get her ready to take him in her ass, something that would be as unfamiliar to her as flapping her arms and flying.

He'd known Katarina had never been fucked, not properly fucked in her pussy. A highborn woman got her hymen removed at a clinic when she came of age. Women made a big deal about it, pretending that losing the hymen taught them all the mysteries of womanhood. They forsook sweet cock-in-pussy fucking so they could study philosophy and learn how to create children without touching a male.

"Then what will you do?" he asked.

"Nothing." She folded her arms, which pushed her breasts into luscious mounds. "I'll scan you privately and enter the data. After that, no one can accuse you of breaking the rules."

She was serious. Her pretty eyes regarded him worriedly.

Calder leaned over her. He liked the way her breath smelled, spicy and sweet. He wanted to put his tongue in her mouth.

"No," he said.

"I know your body has been burned. I don't mind seeing that."

Old rage boiled up inside him, the rage that had kept him alive when the scientists in the lab thought he was a write-off. "But I mind."

"I'm not trying to humiliate you."

Calder straightened up. "Braden take her home."

Braden grinned from the sofa and didn't move. "Nah. She's right. How come I have to get scanned and you don't?"

"What you do when you go to the clinic is your business," Calder said.

"I think you're missing a fine opportunity here, my friend. Maybe you two can strike a bargain."

Calder looked back at Katarina. She stood still, folded arms shutting him out.

But he felt her pheromones, double-strength almost, her wanting pouring from her. His own body couldn't help reacting. He wanted to rub his cock against her, first on her pussy then her bare ass.

Straddle me, he'd say. Ride me, sweetheart.

Braden was here, but Calder didn't mind him watching. Having Braden's hungry eyes on her might turn Katarina on.

He let his voice grow dangerous. "You're right, Braden."

Katarina looked at them nervously. "What are you talking about?"

"What kind of bargain can I make with her?" Calder asked, looking at Katarina. "What do you think, Braden?"

"I think if you don't want her, I'll take her."

Katarina broke in. "Would you two please not talk about me like I'm not here?"

"Ooo," Braden chuckled. "She has a temper too."

Katarina stuck her tongue out at him.

"Bring that over here, baby. I have a few things you can lick." Braden smiled as he spoke, the blue of his eyes getting wider every second. His cock showed hard at his crotch, and he unashamedly adjusted it under the leather.

"Not without my permission." The tug of possessiveness surprised Calder, but no way would he let Braden simply have her.

Braden switched his gaze to Calder. "I like that idea. Will you order her to pleasure me? Pretty please?"

Calder sensed Katarina's heightening pheromones, could taste them on the air. Braden turned her on, did he? Calder wasn't sure whether the twinge in his heart was jealousy or excitement.

He put his hands on Katarina's shoulders and leaned toward her. Her lovely scent made it hard for him to remember how to speak. "You agree to do what I tell you now and I'll submit to your scan."

"For how long am I agreeing to do what you tell me?"

For the rest of my life.

"For the afternoon."

"And then you'll come back to the clinic for your scan?"

"Yes." *Fuck that.* By the time he was done with Dr. Katarina d'Arnal, her thoughts would be far from her clinic. He'd finish what he should have yesterday and she'd never want to see him again.

He had no idea why his heart constricted in that annoying way when he thought of never seeing her again.

"All right." Katarina drew a breath that pushed her breasts toward him. "I agree."

Calder straightened up. His heart pounded. "Go on then. Pleasure Braden. Suck his cock for me."

Katarina stared, mouth open, her body temperature climbing. "But —"

"Do it," he said. "I want you to."

Braden closed his fist. "Yesss!" He started unhooking his leggings. "The carpet's soft. We're good."

Katarina moved to him woodenly and Calder watched, holding his breath. Would she do it? Would she and Braden get so turned-on by each other that they'd go away and leave him alone? Then he wouldn't have to think about her anymore.

No, came a voice in his head. *Mine.*

Braden paused, his hand on his fly. "You want to do this?" he asked Katarina. "Make sure. I have to have your permission, like I told you. If you say no... I'll probably die right here, but hey, no pressure."

"What about Calder? Do I have to give him permission?"

"You signed the consent forms," Calder reminded her.

"I didn't. Someone forged my print."

Braden laughed. At least someone thought all this was funny.

Calder strode to his terminal, loaded a blank form into his handheld and brought it to her. He slid his arm around her waist and thrust the handheld under her nose.

"It's all here. You agree to let me do to you anything I want, including telling you to pleasure Braden or a wooden pole or whatever I think of. You agree to obey me and accept whatever punishment I dish out if you disobey. In return I'll visit the clinic." He leaned closer. "Yesterday, I decided to be nice to you because you're cute. Today, I've changed my mind."

Braden uttered a small moan. He thrust his hand down his half-open leggings. "Hurry up. You're killing me."

"Decide," Calder said, ignoring him. "Go and never seek me out again, or stay and I do whatever I want."

She turned her head, her hair brushing his nose. "I want to stay."

"Thank the gods," Braden breathed.

"Good." The word brushed Calder's lips against hers but he did not kiss her. He held up the form. "Thumbprint."

Katarina raised a shaking hand and pressed her thumb to the lighted pad.

Chapter Six

Katarina couldn't believe she was doing this. She watched Braden hurriedly pull open his leggings as Calder tossed the handheld aside.

Calder lowered her to her knees. As he had yesterday, he didn't exactly push her, but his grip loosened her legs until she glided down where he wanted her. He dropped to one knee next to her, thigh planted firmly behind her back.

Braden sighed with relief as his cock sprang out, hard and needy. It was dark red, the engorged tip almost purple.

"Take it in your hand," Calder said. "Get to know it. He doesn't mind."

Braden spread his arms over the back of the couch and parted his legs. "Nope. Don't mind in the least."

Katarina reached out a shaking hand. Again she reflected that she'd seen plenty of holo images of penises in her medical studies, could name all the parts, inside and out. But that had been theory only.

Braden's swollen cock was no theory. Calder's breath brushed Katarina's neck as she touched Braden's tip.

"Gods," Braden groaned. "Don't let me come too soon."

"Did you hear him?" Calder asked in her ear. "Don't let him come too soon, or I will have to punish you."

Katrina nodded. She'd never been so aware of feelings—the silk of her own hair on her neck, the heat of Calder's breath, the soft rug beneath her knees, the blood pounding through the cock under her hand.

"Hold on to it," Calder ordered. "Squeeze it in your fist."

She gripped tentatively. The cock head moved upward and Braden's skin tightened around it. Braden closed his eyes, making a sound of pleasure.

"Stroke it," Calder said.

Katarina's hand moved all the way down to Braden's scrotum then back up the length to his tip. And again.

"Stroke his balls." Calder touched the soft ringlets against her neck. "Put your finger around them, like this." He held up his forefinger and thumb, making a ring.

Katarina moved her hand down to Braden's scrotum and tried to do as Calder instructed, but her fingers were clumsy. Calder moved her hand into the right position, making her ring Braden's balls with finger and thumb.

Braden's eyes were half closed, his cheekbones flushed. He kept his arms stretched across the back of the sofa but watched Katarina intently. He was having the time of his life.

Fuck Braden. Calder wanted her, of course he did, what man wouldn't? But he wasn't about to rip open his fly and beg her to rub her hands and tongue all over him. No matter how much he wanted to.

That's not what Calder did. He controlled the situation and let the lady have only what he wanted to give her.

"I'm going to come," Braden said. "Damn it, I don't want to, not yet."

"Don't let him come," Calder growled.

"How do I stop it?"

Braden moved his large hand to the base of his scrotum. "Hold me here. Pinch it."

Katarina kept the ring of her thumb and finger on Braden's testicle and used her other hand to pinch where Braden showed her. His cock stood up on its own, so tight it must hurt him.

Calder's own cock pounded, but he didn't dare touch himself. He knew he'd squirt all over inside his clothes if he did, and damned if he would let her know that.

"Lick it," Calder said, continuing to finger Katarina's warm brown hair. "Lick his head, suck it into your mouth. Taste it."

"Gods, you're evil," Braden said.

But Braden made no objection as Katarina, moving hesitantly, leaned down and curled her mouth around the head of his cock.

Calder rubbed his erection against Katarina's body, sucking in a breath at the wild tingle the action generated.

"What does he taste like?" he asked her.

Katarina looked at him, her hands still firm on Braden's balls. "Smooth. Kind of sharp at the same time."

"Bite it. A little nibble, around the flange."

Katarina moved her head back down, sucking the head between her lips. Braden brought one hand down to stroke her hair, eyes closed. He swayed on the couch, murmuring, "*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*"

Suddenly Calder couldn't take it anymore. He was as Shareem as Braden, which meant he was as desperate. He had to either stroke himself off or have her do it for him, didn't matter, he needed release now.

He made himself calmly unfasten his leggings. No ripping them open, no thrusting them down and begging for her.

Calder had designed his clothes so that his cock alone could be released but his scarred thighs would remain hidden. He pulled the leggings open.

"Suck this one too."

Katarina flushed then she leaned down and closed her wet mouth over his cock.

Mistake. Katarina traced Calder's flange with her tongue, sucking and biting the head as he'd ordered her to do to Braden. He was amazed Braden's come wasn't all over her by now. The man had more control than Calder thought.

"Slowly," he growled. "Make it last for me."

Katarina toned down the suckling but the slow tasting didn't make Calder any less needy.

"Hey," Braden said petulantly, eyes opening a slit. "What about *my* needs?"

"Suck him too." Calder edged toward him so she wouldn't have to turn as far. "Suck both of us."

Katarina took Braden's cock into her mouth again, cheeks moving as she sucked. She released Braden's cock and did the same to Calder.

Gods, who was in control here? Calder and Braden, getting more and more turned-on every second, their Shareem blood pounding fire-hot...or the lovely wench licking and sucking two Shareem cocks?

Braden clutched the back of the couch, hips rocking, jaw clenched. Calder couldn't come before Braden did. Braden would never let him hear the end of it. Calder was the one with rock-hard control, right?

While Katarina slathered her tongue all over Braden again, Calder moved to the couch. He nudged Braden with his knee, and Braden got the idea even without opening his eyes.

He slid over so Calder could get in next him, sitting Braden almost on his lap, legs spread so Calder's cock jutted out beside his friend's.

Calder had to cradle Braden against him, arm around his back, but he was too excited to care. Calder's skin was roasting and he needed release.

"Take us both. Together."

Katarina gave Calder a startled look then she bent her head and studied the two cocks, tips together.

Calder couldn't fault her bravery. She opened her mouth wide and took in as much of the two cocks as she could.

"Shit," Braden said. He threw his head back on Calder's shoulder and Calder closed his eyes, feeling the roughness of Braden's cheek against his.

Katarina's mouth was a hot, moist, tight place. His cock crushed against Braden's and the wall of her cheek. Her tongue flicked over him, sharp teeth scraping his skin. Calder's hips rose of their own accord.

Braden jumped, groaning hard. He yanked up his tunic at the same time he pulled out of Katarina's mouth and slid away from Calder. Grasping his cock, he came against his abdomen, pumping gobs of white cream onto his sun-darkened skin.

Calder stayed in Katarina's mouth and she transferred all her attention to him. He let himself come hard into her mouth, hands curling into fists. The only noise he made was a tight grunt, and then he filled her.

Braden lay back and let out a long breath. "You know, when I got up this morning, I never dreamed my day would be this good."

Calder ignored him. Katarina took his come, sweet lady, and looked almost disappointed when he slowly withdrew from her mouth. She swallowed and wiped her lips with the tips of her fingers.

Calder hauled her onto the couch with him. He shouldn't do this, no holding, no tenderness, but he couldn't help himself. He pressed her head to his shoulder, stroking her hair, brushing it with his lips.

He looked up to find Braden watching him. Braden pretended nonchalance when Calder met his gaze.

"Shower time," Braden said. "You two want to join me?"

Calder thought of his narrow, utilitarian shower jammed into a corner of his bathroom. "Not in here."

Braden caught on and his grin widened. "Oh now, I've always wanted to do that. Seen it. Not had the pleasure."

Katarina raised her head, her lips smelling of come. "Do what?"

Braden laughed. "You'll see, darlin'. Calder is a man of great imagination and the credits to go with it."

Calder's cock throbbed, already stiffening again in anticipation. "Follow me, Katarina. Time to get wet."

* * * * *

As soon as Calder led her through a narrow door to his huge pleasure room, Katarina saw how he'd been able to elude her the day before. The door slid seamlessly into the black wall, leaving no crack when closed. A person would have to know exactly where it was to find it.

Calder had dimmed the lights again, rendering the room seductive, its black walls and shadowy ceiling confusing the eye.

Braden shrugged out of his tunic and leather pants, tossing them aside. Naked, he was tall and beautiful, every muscle sculpted and smooth. The black chain on his biceps moved with his arm, made to flex with it perfectly.

Calder kept his clothes on. Katarina bit back disappointment. She wanted to see whether his body was as firm and tight as Braden's, wanted to rub her fingers over his round biceps and the ridges of his abdomen.

She remembered what Braden had said about Shareem chemistry rendering a woman pliable to their suggestions and wondered if that had happened to her in Calder's living room. Two men gazing at her with blue eyes, their aroused state plain to see, had given her a strange feeling of power.

Calder's smell was all over her and she tasted him on her lips. She thought of the beautiful feeling of the two cocks under her tongue, each of them different. Braden's had been sharp and tangy, Calder's smooth and mellow.

Two men had bared their cocks for her, had jammed themselves together begging for her. Calder had come straight into her mouth as though he had a right to, and she'd not turned away in disgust. She'd liked tasting him.

"Ready?" Calder asked. He stood a little away from them, a slight smile on his lips. The dim light masked his scars a bit. His face was hard and perfectly shaped, his hair, loose now, hanging like a river of black to his waist.

"Ready," Braden said. "Go for it."

Ready for what?

It started to rain. More than rain—a downpour. Water cascaded from hidden jets above, warm like a summer rain in the mountains. Droplets sheeted over Katarina's face and ran in rivulets down her tunic.

Braden laughed and threw back his head, letting the water flow over him. "This is great!" he shouted over the rain. "You hunt through this?"

"Yes," Calder said.

That was when Katarina noticed that Calder was not getting wet. He stood in a precise spot where no rain fell. It pattered and drummed in a full circle around him, but where he stood, not one drop struck him.

"Hey," she said, putting her hands on her wet hips. "That's not fair."

Braden glanced over and saw what she meant. His eyes narrowed. "I say we get him."

Katarina joined Braden as he rushed Calder and pushed him out of his safe spot. Instantly, the rain ceased.

Braden stopped, panting. "He's got the controls on him, the bastard."

Calder stepped calmly out of their reach to another precise spot and the rain fell in torrents again. Katarina screamed, startled, and Braden laughed. He pushed his long hair from his face.

"Damn, this feels good," Braden shouted. "You spiked it."

"Spiked?" Katarina asked.

"With pheromones." Braden opened his mouth and licked the rain from his lips. "Tasty."

Katarina's hair plastered itself in ringlets to her face. She stuck out her tongue and caught the rain. It tasted of water, but Braden was right. It made her feel vital and excited.

"I want to hunt," Braden said.

He pinned his gaze on Katarina, his affable look replaced with one of hunger. The rain was turning him on too, she realized, but in a different way.

She glanced at Calder and stopped, her heart fluttering. Braden looked hungry, but Calder gave her the look of a beast sizing up its prey. A beast who wasn't about to let said prey get away.

"Wait a minute," she said, brushing water from her eyes. "You brought me out here to *hunt* me? I thought Shareem couldn't do things like that."

Braden grinned, the smile feral. "You signed the forms, sweetheart."

Katarina thought of the maze of greenery that began on the other side of the vast black room. She'd thought it had been meant to soothe, but now she realized it had been designed to twist and confuse, to be a jungle for the hunter and the hunted.

"Oh gods," she said.

She looked at the pair of them watching her in the same way, Braden with his hands on his bare hips, Calder with arms folded, head tilted to one side as though trying to catch her scent.

They wouldn't really hurt her if they caught her. Would they?

Would they?

She suddenly understood the complete appeal of Shareem, why women would pay fortunes for an appointment with Calder.

Shareem would do anything in the name of pleasure. And there was a hint of uncertainty about how far they would go.

Braden took a step toward Katarina, moving like a predator. Calder waited, his eyes intense and blue.

Katarina had signed the consent form in Calder's room. With her thumbprint, she'd given them permission to do anything they wanted to her.

"Crap," she said, and started to run.

They didn't follow. She reached the maze of greenery and plunged into it without hearing their footsteps behind her.

The rain continued here, coating the plants and giving off a fresh smell, water channeled into troughs on the floor. This was better than a holo room because it was all real, the branches slapping at her face, the flowers bright red and as big as her head, and the inch of water soaking her shoes.

But there seemed to be more plants and vines than yesterday, or else she'd plunged into a part she hadn't seen before. The branches were thick, the path narrow, and in some places the greenery closed over the path and she had to push her way through.

Her soggy clothes slowed her down. She was tempted to remove them but resisted, realizing that's what they wanted her to do. Run through this place naked for them.

She shivered. A few moments ago the water felt cleansing and arousing. Now it was distracting and heightened the sense of danger. She only knew that she had to run, to hide before they caught her.

She ran on. Somewhere was a fountain, she remembered. It was alabaster, with a glittering mosaic-tiled bowl. Why she thought she'd be safe there, she had no idea, but she became obsessed with finding it. She kept going, hoping desperately to find the fountain around every tight turn. It was like a dream, pushing through unfamiliar ground in the half-light, the rain making every step precarious.

Katarina shoved aside a branch—and the black form of Calder loomed over her, tall and menacing.

She screamed and swung around. Nearly a step behind her was Braden, naked, water gleaming on every muscle and flattening the curls on his chest.

Braden smiled like a wolf baring its teeth. "Decide who you'll run to, Katarina. Who will you trust to save you from the other?"

Katarina knew her choice. There was only one. She whirled around and ran straight into Calder's strong arms.

She felt him start as he gathered her against him, black leather warm through her rain-soaked clothes. He nuzzled her cheek and she started to relax, to feel safe.

"Wrong choice, sweetheart," he whispered.

Chapter Seven

No, Katarina thought, looking up at Calder's dark, hard face. *I made the right one.*

"Braden might have saved you from me," Calder purred. "I won't save you from him. *Or me.*"

"I made my choice."

Calder gave her an odd look, eyes glittering, then his mouth hardened. He slid his hands down her back to her buttocks and cupped her ass, separating her cheeks through the rain-soaked leggings. She felt the heat of Braden's body behind her, his hands warm on her waist.

"Braden loves to tongue-fuck," Calder said. "He's known for it."

"Aw, and here I was trying not to get a bad reputation." Braden's words burned the nape of her neck.

Katarina knew that Calder was hoping to frighten her, but she felt anything but frightened in the circle of his arms. His words told her one thing—that he'd let his friend hunt her—but his body language told her another. He'd protect her.

Daringly, Katarina rose on tiptoe and brushed a kiss to Calder's lips.

He jumped as if a spark had sprung from her mouth to his. Before Katarina could draw a breath, he seized the nape of her neck in his big hand and slanted his mouth fully across hers.

Katarina's world stopped. Even the sensation of Braden's hands on her body faded to nothing.

Calder plunged his tongue between her lips, forcing her mouth open. Katarina had never kissed a man before. She clumsily fit her mouth to his, trying to let his big tongue take hers, but her teeth bumped his lips, unpracticed.

He broke the kiss and stared down at her, his breath coming fast. Katarina reached for him again. If she practiced kissing him, maybe she'd get better at it.

Calder shoved her away and in a sudden movement, grabbed her tunic and yanked it from her body.

Katarina stood in a thin silk undertunic, which was wet and plastered to her torso. Calder's gaze moved to her breasts, which must have been almost completely visible through the white fabric.

Braden brought his hands up to cup her breasts. His palms were comforting against her cold skin but she looked up at Calder.

"No, I want you."

Braden nipped her earlobe. "Aw, sweetie, you break my heart."

He didn't sound heartbroken. He sounded amused and delighted.

Calder's mouth hardened. "What you say you want doesn't matter, because you will want what I tell you."

"You're very sure about that," Katarina said.

Braden chuckled.

"Because I know what you really want." Calder touched Katarina's temple. "In here, I know what you truly crave, what you want deep inside yourself."

His touch was warm, soothing, melting. She'd love to fall to her knees and tell him she longed to obey him. But somehow she knew he wanted her to do that. He was using his Shareem pheromones on her, or trying to.

"No, I don't think you do," she said.

Calder's brows went up the slightest bit, the only betrayal of his surprise. Otherwise he stood like a rock.

Braden laughed and let Katarina go. "I think you've met your match, my friend."

Calder yanked Katarina to him again, his mouth coming down on hers. She realized their last kiss had been gentle. This one was brutal, demanding, Calder not caring that she didn't know how to kiss him back.

His unshaved whiskers burned her face, his hand bruised her neck. He stroked his tongue through her mouth, commanding complete surrender. She'd taken his cock into her mouth, swallowed his semen, but that was nothing to this powerful kiss.

Katarina touched his face. The left side was smooth with scars and skin grafts, the right side almost normal.

Calder pulled back, his brows jamming together. Katarina caressed his ruined cheek, wanting to pull his head down and hold him against her.

"Tie her hands," Calder growled at Braden. "I don't want her touching me."

"Nah." Braden's voice had receded behind her. "It's more fun to watch you squirm."

"Then get out." The harsh command was directed at Braden.

Katarina didn't hear Braden leave. She wanted to turn and look at him, but she was too mesmerized by Calder's eyes. She again ran her fingertips across his face.

"This is my house, Braden."

"Your lair, you mean. I think I'll stay and make sure the lady is all right."

"Why wouldn't she be?"

"Because you can get a little...exotic. She's not ready for exotic, and she's too cute to be broken by you."

Katarina felt Calder's fury mount. "Do you think I'd ever hurt her?"

"I know what Judith told me," Braden said.

Calder's mouth flattened. "I knew what Judith wanted."

Dismay lanced through Katarina's delight. *Who is Judith?*

"I think I'll stay as long as Katarina does," Braden said.

Braden sounded worried, but strangely, Katarina didn't feel worried in the slightest. Was it because of the soothing Shareem chemicals or because she believed Calder truly wouldn't hurt her?

She'd believed in him yesterday, even with all he'd done to her. She'd been thoroughly pleased and not hurt at all. Excited, not afraid.

"It's all right, Braden," she said, still caressing Calder's face. "You don't have to stay with me."

She liked the contrast between the warm smoothness of the scarred side, the rough whiskers of the other. Both were strong with muscle, his cheekbones hard and even.

"This is *Calder*, sweetheart," Braden said. "One of the best level threes ever made. Means he's gentle as a kitten one minute, dangerous as a desert tiger the next. You never know what he's going to do."

But that made him more exciting. "I don't mind."

Calder closed his hands around Katarina's wrists, his grip like steel manacles. "Take her and go."

Katarina chilled but her nipples were tight, her heart beating hard and fast. "I don't want to go."

"We are finished." Calder moved his hot blue gaze to Braden. "Don't let her come back."

"Calder, don't be a stupid fuck," Braden growled.

"I don't want *you* here, either." The light that had been trained on Calder went out, and he disappeared into deep shadow.

Katarina ran forward, reaching for him, but found nothing but another seamless black wall. Calder had used the tricks of his lair to elude her yet again.

"Too late, he already is a stupid fuck," Braden said.

Katarina shivered, suddenly bereft. Calder was gone.

She turned to find Braden next to her, stark-naked. His body was perfectly formed, his black hair flowing over well-muscled shoulders, his eyes intense Shareem blue. She'd touched this man, taken him into her mouth.

And yet she didn't respond to him like she did to Calder, not even when he put his arm around her.

"My clothes are wet," Katarina said, biting her lip against the tears that filled her eyes. She couldn't leave in wet clothes. How stupid that this practical detail made her cry.

"It's all right. He keeps spares."

Braden's voice was comforting but what he said made Katarina's tears spill out. Foolish Katarina. Of course she was only one of dozens of women who'd fallen under Calder's spell. What made her think she'd be special to him?

"Poor sweetie." Braden pulled her against his warm, wet body, stroking her hair. "Forget about him, love. It's the best way."

Damn it, why was Braden so *nice*? He was a Shareem, a being meant to be shunned, a man who lived for only one thing.

Here he was, naked and aroused, comforting her because his friend had rejected her. And all Katarina could do was cry on him.

* * * * *

Katarina tried to take Braden's advice and forget about Calder. After all, she'd lived twenty-seven years without knowing the man existed. She could return to life before Calder and continue her job.

Calder would likely find a different clinic for his next six-month checkup, and she'd never see him again. Shareem could go to any clinic because information on their scans and inoculations was fed from the medic's handheld to the centralized Ministry of Non-Human Life Forms computer. It didn't matter which clinic did the actual checkup.

The practical side of Katarina's mind told her that. But every time a Shareem entered the clinic, her heart beat wildly in hope.

Braden had spread the word that Dr. Katarina d'Arnal was a medic nice to Shareem, and so Shareem had started coming to her.

Katarina seemed to have a Shareem in every week. Some came for their six-month scans and inoculations, but some returned for her to treat their every minor cut, scrape and bruise. When she pointed out that Shareem were amazingly healthy and didn't need much medical attention, they said they came because they liked playing doctor with her. They'd laugh—charming, seductive laughter.

Katarina found that she liked their attention. She met level ones, who smiled lazily and turned every medical exam into a striptease. Level twos liked to tell crude jokes and promise a night of unforgettable fun if she would just come out with them.

Level threes confused her a bit. They didn't tease and they weren't playful. They told her, blatantly, what they envisioned doing with her, not caring when she squirmed.

She would smile and turn down the offers from all of them. She wondered at herself, knowing she could have night after night of amazing sexual experiences. And foolish Katarina only craved Calder.

Katarina never saw him. Calder didn't come in, she never saw him when she walked from her flat to the clinic, and she didn't see him when she purposely lingered in the market near his warehouse.

She'd ask the other Shareem, casually, if they'd spoken to him, but they always said they hadn't. Some of them had never even met him, although they'd heard of him and his pleasure palace.

Katarina also met a few women who'd become the permanent lovers of Shareem.

Two Shareem, a level one called Aiden and a level three called Ky, visited for their six-month at the same time, accompanied by a lovely young woman.

"I have to come in with them because they're shy," the woman told Katarina as all three of them squeezed into the exam room. Then she laughed.

"Right, Brianne, baby," said the blond one, Aiden. "Ky's about as shy as a rock."

Dark-haired Ky growled, "Fucking level ones."

He began stripping off without embarrassment, as though being naked were more comfortable for him than being clothed. Katarina supposed it was, since Shareem body temperature was higher than a normal human's and Bor Narga was a hot place.

"Hey, you like fucking level ones," Aiden said.

"Asshole."

"Exactly. Mine."

Katarina kept her face averted during this crude exchange. She'd gotten more used to Shareem, but their casual approach to everything sometimes caught her off-guard.

"Get on with it," Brianne said. "Dr. d'Arnal doesn't have all day."

Aiden smoothed Brianne's hair and gave her a tongue-filled kiss. "Sure thing, sweet baby. I know you like it when we get naked."

Brianne blushed rosy red but she didn't look unhappy. Ky finished stripping his powerfully built body and stood under Katarina's scanner. He kept muttering about fucking exams, fucking Ministry, fucking clinics.

Aiden laughed at him as he slowly shed his clothes, conscious of his audience. Katarina kept her eyes averted but Brianne watched with enjoyment.

Brianne unnerved Katarina even more than did her two Shareem. Brianne d'Aroth was not only a highborn woman but a member of the ruling family of Bor Narga. Last year she'd broken up with her fiancé, forsaken her luxurious lifestyle and moved in with not one, but two Shareem in the slums of Pas City.

She'd made an official statement that she'd done it to look into the way Shareem were treated on Bor Narga. They were second-class citizens, and she'd set out to disprove some myths about them.

It had been the scandal of the decade. Brianne d'Aroth's name wasn't mentioned anymore in highborn ladies' circles. *Hypocrites*, Katarina thought. The same ladies who went to Shareem in secret shunned women who openly sought them.

Studying Brianne, Katarina decided that the lady hadn't moved in with her Shareem simply to prove a point. She was besotted with them. Both of them.

"Braden told me you met Calder," Brianne said.

Katarina jumped, nearly dropping the hypo she was preparing for Ky. "Yes. I did."

"More than met him," Aiden said suggestively. "Braden says you spent some time in Calder's lair and then went back for more. Interesting."

"Braden talks too damn much," Ky said. "Leave her alone."

Aiden ignored him. "Calder never lets a woman in twice, I hear. Not even Judith. But he did you."

Judith again. Who was this woman?

Ky growled. "Can we stop talking about Calder and finish my exam before I freeze my balls off?"

Katarina turned on the full body scanner and watched the readouts to keep from looking at Ky's muscled torso.

Brianne regarded Katarina thoughtfully as she finished the scans of Aiden and Ky and inoculated them both. When Katarina went to her cubbyhole of an office to finish the report, Brianne followed her.

"I've met Calder," Brianne said. Behind her, Aiden and Ky were dressing, their gorgeous Shareem voices rumbling.

"Have you?"

"Not as a client," Brianne said quickly. "He helped me when Ky was in trouble. He didn't trust me at all, but he was willing to help for Ky's sake. I have a soft spot for him for that. Calder's had a difficult time."

"How did he get burned?"

Brianne shook her head. "I don't know. The only one who knows is Calder himself and a woman named Dr. Laas, who healed him. Dr. Laas is a strange woman but she's good to the Shareem."

"I'm glad someone is."

"You're good to them too." Brianne put a cool hand on Katarina's shoulder. "Why do you think Ky came here today? He hates the clinics, but he was willing to come to this one. Your reputation for not treating the Shareem like insects has spread."

Katarina felt herself blush. "I just do my job."

"No, you treat them like they're human beings, give them their dignity. I'm trying to change the laws that say they aren't human, but it's slowgoing. Fears and prejudices die hard."

"I'm not as brave as you are," Katarina said. "Braden asked me to move in with him, but I told him no."

"Courage has nothing to do with it. I live with Aiden and Ky because I love them, and I need to be with them." Brianne grinned. "Besides, I've seen how Braden keeps his rooms. I wouldn't live there either."

After Aiden and Ky left, Brianne sandwiched between them, Katarina felt a bit depressed. Brianne had sacrificed her old life and reputation to be with Shareem, and Aiden and Ky showed every indication of being besotted with her.

Calder had pushed Katarina away. She hadn't seen him in weeks. How many "clients" had he entertained since then?

Katarina's heart burned.

Anger and jealousy wasn't getting her anywhere. She needed to act. She needed help—and she knew just where to get it.

Chapter Eight

Calder slammed out of his apartment for his nightly prowling.

The streets were crowded. Pas City came alive after the heat of the day was done. Lights glared but he could still find shadows to walk in, moving like darkness itself.

He ached with need. He'd put his services on hold, not wanting to touch another woman, least of all the silly cows who paid to be chased and ravished by The Beast.

Gods, did they have nothing better to do? After listening to Katarina's laughter in the artificial rain, he couldn't stand the thought of letting another woman into the lair.

Idiot. It will kill you.

Shareem needed to release every day, several times a day. If they didn't, their body temperatures rose to unbearable levels, their metabolisms spiraled out of control and they died.

The ever-resourceful Shareem had invented all kinds of pleasure toys for those days when a woman wasn't available. But toys and Calder's own stroking could only satisfy for so long. He needed relief.

Judith's bar was full tonight, with patrons spilling out onto the street around it. Calder strode into the noisy crowd, making his way toward his usual table in a dark corner.

Someone had already claimed it, another Shareem called Rees. On Rees' lap was the pretty red-haired woman who had consented to be his lifemate, Talan d'Urvey.

Calder didn't mind Rees, the only other Shareem who understood what Calder had gone through at DNAmo. Rees had been created to be the ultimate Shareem, all the levels rolled into one. Unpredictable, uncontrollable. He'd been separated from other Shareem at DNAmo and tested and tortured.

Rees had been the only Shareem who'd managed to escape DNAmo before the company went under, and some said DNAmo had been shutdown *because* they'd created Rees. He was smart, resourceful, dangerous and mysterious. The pint-sized redhead on his lap loved him to pieces.

Rees looked up as Calder slid onto his stool in the corner. Rees had blond hair, which he wore gathered into a ponytail at the base of his neck. His irises were wide and blue, a Shareem aroused. After nodding once at Calder, he went back to nibbling on Talan's neck.

Talan gently elbowed Rees. "Be civil, we have company."

"Calder likes to be ignored," Rees said, transferring his teeth to Talan's earlobe.

Rees was right, but Calder made himself nod to Talan. "Lady d'Urvey."

"How are you?" Talan asked him.

"Thirsty." Calder signaled a harassed-looking waitress and tapped the empty table in front of him. The waitress jumped when she saw who he was, then faded back toward the bar.

Talan continued to study Calder with her warm brown eyes, a little smile hovering on her mouth. Calder tried to ignore her but it was like being stared at by a puppy. A determined puppy.

"What?" he growled.

"You haven't heard, then."

"Talan," Rees said in a very soft voice.

Talan ignored him. "Your medic, Dr. d'Arnal. She's moved in with Braden."

"What? Like hell."

"A couple of days ago. He's been pestering her to do it for a while, and she finally gave in."

Calder's heart pounded, fury making him hot. At that moment, a dripping metal mug of ale slid in front of him, placed there by Judith, the bar's owner.

Judith also had red hair, a common color for Bor Nargan females. Her eyes were deep brown, and she revealed luscious curves by wearing her one-piece pantsuit open to the navel.

“Long time since you’ve darkened my corner, Calder.”

Once, about a year ago, Calder had given Judith a taste of what he did in his pleasure palace. He’d made her close the bar and they’d done it here—on the floor, on the tables, on the bar itself. He hadn’t made her make an appointment or sign the consent form. He’d done it as a favor for a woman who was good to Shareem.

Every time Calder had come to the bar since, Judith had given him a hopeful look. She wanted it again, but Calder never capitulated.

Now, with his fury mounting and his need too long unfulfilled, he wanted to grab Judith by the hair and drag her upstairs.

He caught her eye. Judith arched her brows, understanding what he meant.

Fuck, what have I just done? He didn’t want Judith, he wanted Katarina, damn her cute little ass.

Judith studied Calder a moment then she smiled and shook her head. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

Rees jerked his head up. “Did I hear right? Judith turned down *Calder*? Have the desert sands turned to water?”

Judith skimmed her hand across Calder’s shoulders. “He has someone else on his mind. I don’t want to be a substitute.”

“I just told him that Katarina moved in with Braden,” Talan said.

Rees leaned into her. “Talan, baby, I need to take you home and make your ass cherry red.”

Talan didn’t seem intimidated by his threat. “He needs to know.”

Calder poured cold ale into his mouth but it didn't cool him down. Judith gave him a wink and a smile and sashayed away. Another Shareem slid his arm around her and Judith fell happily into his embrace.

"Leave him alone, sweetheart," Rees told Talan in a soft voice.

Gods, they *pitied* him. Calder drank more ale, pretending he didn't care. Why should he care about what Katarina did? He'd told her to go away, and she'd gone.

Rees understood. His blue eyes were shrewd, but at least Rees knew when to shut the fuck up.

Talan didn't. "When I fell in love with Rees, he didn't believe me. He thought I was responding to Shareem pheromones, nothing more. It took me a while to convince him that I meant it."

Rees gave Calder a look that said, *Humor her*.

Calder took another nonchalant drink of ale. "Yeah?"

"I *did* mean it. I fell in love with him. With *him*, not just because he was Shareem. Not just because he was an experimental model. I love Rees, the man."

"Lucky Rees."

"Lucky me that he finally believed me," Talan said. "Think on it."

Calder switched his gaze to Rees. He wore a tight tunic that bared his arms and emphasized his broad shoulders and strong chest. His skin was whole and smooth, normal. No wreck of a man lingered beneath his clothes.

"She's a medic," Calder said to Talan. "Medics always want to study me. Not *me*, but this hunk of ruined flesh. It happens every time I meet a new one. They all think they're unsung geniuses. If they fix me, they rise to prominence. Sorry, I'm tired of being an insect under a scope."

"I can't blame him," Rees said.

"You aren't helping, my love. I think Dr. d'Arnal's interest goes beyond insects."

"Women find me fascinating," Calder said. "They all do, even you." He didn't boast—it was true, and he hated that it was true.

"Well, yes, because you're different."

"Because I'm like Rees. The scientists at DNAmo fucked Rees up on the inside and fucked me up on the outside. That's irresistible to women who want to fix everything, to make it all better."

Talan started to answer but Rees interrupted.

"He's right, baby. Don't shove him at Dr. d'Arnal before you know what she really wants. It hurts when you realize they don't really care."

"I care."

"That's because you're a special lady. You convinced me. Calder has to work this out for himself."

Talan scowled. "Men."

"You mean Shareem," Calder rumbled.

"Males, then. I don't care what you call yourselves. I'm sure female tortoises get just as pissed off at male tortoises."

Rees rocked with laughter. He turned Talan to him and gave her a long kiss.

Calder watched them in envy. They were so easy together, a Shareem and his lady, friends, lovers, lifemates.

And now Braden had made his move on Katarina. Why? To make her a lifemate?

Braden liked women, every woman. Katarina had a soft heart—obviously, or she'd have reported Calder the day he'd swatted her ass in the clinic, not to mention doing it more thoroughly in his lair.

Braden would make Katarina believe he liked her. Then he'd move on to the next woman he passed, leaving Katarina bereft and hurt.

Calder should be glad of that. Katarina needed to learn to leave Shareem alone. Nice that she wanted to help them at the clinics, but in her personal life, she needed to back off.

Gladness was not what he felt. He wanted to break Braden's neck.

He got to his feet. Talan and Rees looked up at him. "You going?" Rees asked.

"Have things to do." Calder tossed a credit strip on the table. "Tell Judith to keep the change."

He strode out. He couldn't help noticing that as he left the table, Rees' look turned cautious, Talan's smug.

* * * * *

"Calder."

Katarina's pulse raced with delight as she opened Braden's door to find Calder on the doorstep.

He'd muffled himself all in black again, sun-blocking cloth covering the left side of his face, even though it was dark outside. He pushed his way in, brushing Katarina's body as he passed.

"Where's Braden?"

"Out." Katarina tried to keep the disappointment from her voice. Calder hadn't come to see her.

Calder swung around. The apartment on d'Enela Street was tiny, and Calder's presence dwarfed the front room. "Out where?"

"I don't know. He didn't say."

Calder slammed open the door to Braden's bedroom and looked inside. He swung to the opposite door and opened it too.

Katarina stepped in front of him before he could enter the second room. "Do you mind? I know I sneaked into your apartment, but I never invaded your bedroom."

"Lights on," Calder said to the bedroom. He studied the neatly made bed, the clean hand sterilizer, the bare wall that concealed storage. "This is your room?"

"Yes. Braden's is much messier. Did you think I was sleeping in there with him?"

"Yes." Calder turned his half-masked face to her. "He's Shareem."

"And Shareem are irresistible?"

"Shareem are horny." Calder's voice went harsh. "He'll try to seduce you every second."

"Yes, but Shareem can't touch a woman if she says no. That's probably why he's out. I keep saying no."

Calder's visible eye narrowed. "So he *has* tried to seduce you."

"Like you said, he's Shareem. He has to have sex, or at least release, or he'll die." Katarina had learned to talk about it without blushing. "He goes out for that."

Calder's stare pinned her. She shivered, rubbing her hands up and down her arms. "Why do you wear that?" she asked.

His scowl deepened. "Wear what?"

"The facecloth. I know what you look like. I didn't run away screaming before and I probably won't now."

Calder went very still and Katarina's chill increased. She knew he was dangerous—he was level three and Braden had told her that he was scarier than even most level threes. But she wasn't about to let him see her fear or let him use it against her.

He yanked off the facecloth. Katarina smiled, thinking his face hard and handsome despite the scarring. Both blue eyes pinned her now, and her heart fluttered with something besides fear.

Katarina reached up toward his cheek but he caught her wrist.

"The rules are, you don't touch me," he grated.

"Whose rules?"

"Mine."

Katarina smiled a hot smile. "In your place, maybe. This is my place."

"This is a Shareem apartment. It used to be Rio's. It's got the stink of Shareem pheromones all over it, and don't tell me you don't feel it."

"Well." Katarina admitted to herself that she went to sleep every night warm and aroused, especially when thinking about Calder and what he'd done to her in his pleasure palace.

"It makes you wet," Calder said. "You're wet now, aren't you?"

Katarina shifted. Her cleft was uncomfortably hot. "How can I help it? *You're* here."

"Show me."

"Pardon?"

"Put your fingers on your pussy and show me."

Katarina stared at him for several heartbeats. A few months ago, she'd have been outraged at such a command—no, a few months ago she'd never dreamed anyone would even give her such a command.

Now her heart hammered, and she found herself unfastening her leggings and dipping her fingers inside them. She sank fingers into the wetness between her legs then drew her hand out, fingertips sparkling with dew.

Calder caught her wrist, drew her hand to his mouth, licked her fingertips.

Katarina dipped her other hand in and held it up. "Look," she whispered. "I'm still wet."

Calder took the offered hand, kissed her palm and closed his mouth over a finger.

Katarina's knees weakened. She wanted to melt into a puddle, or maybe fall to her knees and rub her face on the arousal behind his leggings, like she'd done in his lair.

He licked her fingers from base to tip then kissed her palm again. "I didn't tell you to touch yourself twice."

"I couldn't help it."

"I don't like disobedience. Take down your pants."

Katarina stared at him. "Why?"

His eyes filled with blue. "You know why."

Katarina let go of her loose waistband and her silk leggings pooled around her ankles. Calder wrapped his arm around her waist, pulled her the short distance to the bed, sat down and bent her over his knees.

She still wore underwear, but Calder yanked it down. He lightly caressed her buttocks with his gloved hand then he pulled back and started spanking her.

Katarina squealed and squirmed. It didn't hurt exactly, not even as much as when he'd done this in his lair. He rained quick spanks down on her, each one barely stinging but feeling so good. She started to laugh.

"I'm punishing you," Calder said. "Stop laughing."

Katarina couldn't. She screamed some more as Calder's spanking increased, but the fun of it and the joy of having him here made her laugh again.

Calder lifted her from his lap and deposited her facedown on the bed. "Your ass is red."

"It feels like it," Katarina said, hugging her pillow. "Are you going to make it feel better, like you did before?"

"No, I'm going to punish you some more."

Before she could ask how, Calder seized her ankles and dragged her legs apart. She felt his weight behind her, the warmth of him, the cool of the leather.

He jerked her hips up then buried his face between her legs.

Oh gods.

Calder licked her opening, parting the lips, kissing her there the same way he kissed her mouth. He plunged his tongue into her, a hot, wet, probing, beautiful tongue.

I want to die like this. Katarina wasn't sure whether she thought the words or screamed them. *Please don't stop. Ever.*

Calder let his tongue travel over her clit, caressing, stroking, suckling. He ran his tongue around her labia again and plunged back inside her.

Katarina's mind whirled with thoughts she never dreamed she'd have. She wanted him to pull out his cock, like he'd done in his apartment. She wanted to see it, touch it, taste it. She wanted it inside her.

His tongue kept moving, all over her pussy and between her buttocks. She wanted him to wet her then shove his cock in. She wanted him to slap her ass while he rode her, wanted to scream as she found beautiful climax.

"Calder," she moaned. "Please. Will you..."

Calder lifted his head. He rolled her over on the small bed then parted her legs again and pressed his large body between them. "Will I what?"

He was so strong, so heavy, and yet he didn't crush her. His hands pinning her wrists were gentle.

She looked into his face, his eyes, which were blue and enormous. "Will you have intercourse with me?"

Calder stilled. "Intercourse."

"Yes. I'm ready. Please."

"You mean fucking."

Katarina had grown used to crude speech enough that the well-bred lady inside her flinched only slightly. "Yes. Please."

"Say it, then. Ask me to."

Katarina longed to touch him but he held her wrists against the mattress. "Please, Calder, will you fuck me?"

"Why do you want me to?"

"Because I want to feel it. To feel *you*."

"Feel what?"

Katarina swallowed. "Your cock. Your hard, long, beautiful cock. Fucking me."

“Is that what you truly want, Katarina?”

“Yes.”

Calder’s hand went to her clit, massaging, stroking. Katarina rocked with his touch, words dying in her mouth. His thumb teased, his palm soothed – then he inserted two hard fingers into her pussy.

Katarina groaned. Calder stroked through her cream, his fingers opening her in a way she’d never been opened before. She’d touched herself after she’d met Calder the first time, still did when she thought of him at night, but she’d never put her fingers inside herself.

She was so wet that Calder’s fingers went all the way in without restraint, and his palm pressed hard against her clit. Katarina arched to rub against his hand, loving the burning friction. After a few minutes, a third finger joined the first two, and the sensations spiraled.

Calder’s gaze on her was intense. His jaw locked as he stroked her, as though he put every bit of thought into what he did. She smelled his sweat and leather, felt the heat of his body. His groin bumped her thigh, his cock hot and hard though his clothes.

Calder wanted her as much as Katarina wanted him—his eyes and cock betrayed that. His breath came faster, scalding her cheek. She turned her head to face him as her pussy squeezed his fingers.

“Calder.”

Very slowly, he kissed her. The deliberate, leisurely heat of his mouth made her pussy clamp down again. She found herself suckling his tongue, harder, faster, and his fingers moved in response.

She was still suckling when her climax came. He released her wrists and she latched fingers on to his shoulders, her hips pumping of their own accord. The hot feeling went on and on until Katarina couldn’t see, couldn’t hear and didn’t care. She didn’t know what words she shouted or how hard she clutched him, but she couldn’t stop, couldn’t let go.

Calder's eyes had filled entirely with blue, his body temperature now higher than a human could survive. A Shareem fully aroused.

Katarina lifted to him, catching his lips between hers in little kisses. "Please, fuck me, Calder. Fuck me now. I need you to."

Calder drew back a little then he leaned toward her, his satin-smooth lips brushing hers. "No."

"Wha...?"

Calder smoothed her pussy one more time then slowly withdrew his fingers. Katarina fell back to the bed, gasping and flooded with disappointment. She wanted to weep. "Why not?"

Calder lifted his fingers to his lips and unhurriedly licked them clean. "Has Braden fucked you?"

"No."

"Has any other Shareem fucked you?"

"No." Katrina took a deep breath, trying to gather her wits. Her voice was grating and tired. "I'm not a whore, Calder, thank you very much." Not that she hadn't just let him lick her pussy and her ass and bring her off with his fingers.

"Then I won't fuck you. If you've never been with Shareem, you aren't ready. I could hurt you. I'm way too big for your pussy. Have you ever even done a human man?"

"No," she said, her voice weakening.

"You shouldn't start on Shareem. Get yourself a human male and get used to it."

Katarina struggled to sit up. Her body burned all over and felt wonderful at the same time. His eyes were still filled with blue, his cock rampant against his leggings. He wanted sex, that was certain. "I don't want another man, Calder. I want you."

"That would be like falling into very deep water before you'd learned to swim."

"I don't want to have sex just for the experience."

"No? Why the hell else would you want it?"

When Calder scowled, it pulled at the scars around his eyes. What would it be like if he smiled? He'd be beautiful then.

"I want to be with you. Not just for sex. For *you*."

Calder drew back. "So many women want to be with me."

In her anger, Katarina reached for words she'd heard Braden use. "You arrogant shit. Go be with them then!"

"That's the wrong reaction, kitten. You're supposed to threaten to scratch their eyes out. Or mine."

Katarina folded her arms, trying to make her body calm down and stop wanting him. "You don't care what I think anyway. Why should I demean myself by being jealous?"

He studied her as though he wasn't sure how to respond—and she realized in a flash that Calder didn't have much experience with women.

Yes, he'd had plenty of women submitting to his level-three dominance, but no experience with simple conversation. Calder knew exactly what the women who craved him wanted, but he looked at Katarina as though she spoke an alien language.

"Why did you come here tonight?" she asked him. "Why did you, really?"

"To tell Braden to leave you the hell alone."

"If you don't want me, why shouldn't I go to him?"

Calder's face went hard. "Because I know him. He'll use you then forget about you in the space of a day. Shareem sluts know this and accept it, but you..."

Katarina brushed his scarred cheek with her fingertips and he didn't jerk away. "You think he'll hurt me."

"You don't understand Shareem, no matter how much you examine them in your clinic."

"The only Shareem who can hurt me is you."

Calder regarded her in silence, again probably not knowing how to respond.

When he spoke, his voice was low and halting. "I can't hurt you. I can only do as much as you tell me to."

"I didn't mean physically," she said.

"Some women weep when I tell them their time is up."

Cows. "Because they don't want the pleasure to stop. That's different."

Calder pulled away. "Don't make yourself believe you care for me. Don't confuse obsession with caring."

"Don't confuse caring with pity."

They stared at each other. Calder snarled and got off the bed.

"Wait." Katarina reached for him. "Don't go yet. Let's not argue. I'd rather play, like we were."

Calder leaned down, enveloping her with his body. "I don't want games with you. What I want will be real and raw and more than you can handle."

Katarina ran one finger along his jaw. "Try me."

"I'm level three. You aren't even ready for level one." He jerked to his feet again, pivoted and strode out of the room.

Katarina scrambled from the bed. "Calder."

By the time she got her leggings on again, he'd opened the front door. Hot night air poured into the front room, competing with the faulty cooling system.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I have things to do."

"Wait." Katarina grabbed his arm. He looked at her hand on the black leather but she didn't let go. "If you really don't want me, Calder, I'll stop. Can't we at least be friends?"

"Friends."

"You know, say hello to each other when we pass on the street, talk sometimes. Gossip about our other friends."

Calder's face clouded over and he pulled his cloth back into place. "I don't want to be friends with you." He turned on his heel and strode off into the night.

* * * * *

Braden made sure he was sated to the gills before he ventured back home to d'Enela Street. He liked the apartment he'd bought from Rio when Rio had left Bor Narga to be with his honey, but lately being there drove him crazy.

He'd thought it a good idea to invite lonely Katarina to share the apartment with him. He'd get to look at a pretty woman every day, for one thing, and it might boot Calder's ass into gear, for another.

But living with a woman he didn't fuck was proving to be difficult. Braden was Shareem, after all. Every day he smelled Katarina's need, every night he tasted her longing on the air. She was in dire need of sating, and she didn't want Braden to sate her.

Damn Calder. If the idiot would get off his ass and screw Katarina senseless, the sizzle in the air would ease and Braden could sleep.

The only solution was for Braden to go out every night and screw as much as he could. Tonight he'd found two women from Ariel, on shore leave from an orbiting freighter. After hauling cargo all day, they thought they wouldn't find much fun on backwater Bor Narga. Braden had enjoyed proving them wrong.

When he walked into the apartment, the scent of Katarina's heightened arousal struck him. *Damn it.* His cock, which he'd thought he'd calmed for the night, started to rise again.

Katarina sat at the kitchen table, her elbows propped on it. A barely touched meal lay in front of her and her eyes looked suspiciously red.

Braden could run, make his way through the streets searching for more horny females until he couldn't stand up. Instead he dropped into the chair opposite Katarina. "What's wrong, honey?"

She scowled up at him. "I hate them."

"Hate who?"

Katarina threw down her fork. "The women who go to Calder. Women who want him to be The Beast." She sat back. "I have no business caring. He doesn't want me and I should let it go."

"Calder was here tonight."

"Yes, how did you know?"

Braden tapped his nose. "I smell you all wet, and I smell Shareem on you too. What happened?"

Katarina told him a heartbreaking story of Calder visiting, pleasuring her and then abruptly leaving. She wasn't specific about the pleasuring, but Braden had a good imagination.

"Want me to talk to him?" Braden offered.

He knew he could never understand all that Calder had gone through, but Braden grew suddenly angry with him. The man tried too hard to push everyone away. He continually tried to push Braden away, and Braden would laugh but give him space for a while. Calder needed friends.

"No," Katarina answered. "What I want is to forget about him."

Braden reached for her hand. "I've offered to help you do that."

She shook her head. "As mad as I am at Calder, he's right about a couple of things. One, I have no business wanting to have intercourse with a Shareem, and two, you flit from woman to woman without thought."

"He said that?" Braden asked, stung, then he had to swallow his pride. "It's true that I don't have a history of being a one-woman guy. And if you're still a virgin, I

might hurt you without meaning to. Level threes get rough. We don't know how *not* to be."

Her blush told him she didn't find that as frightening as she should. "I never even wanted intercourse with a human. I never wanted to marry."

"Never? Highborn women are supposed to pick out men with good genetic histories and make more highborn babies."

Pain entered her eyes. "Maybe I mean I never met a man I *wanted* to marry. I want more than what I see my friends have. Their husbands spend all their money and hang around like lap dogs."

Braden had a swift vision of pale, wimpy highborn men in collars curled up on cushions, whining. He burst out laughing.

"You'd rather have a Shareem on your leash, would you, sweetie?"

"I shouldn't have anyone at all. The only reason I'm interested in Shareem is to make sure they're treated well at the clinic." Her eyes widened and she glanced at the digital readout on the wall. "Oh crud, I'm supposed to be at the clinic in ten minutes." She jumped to her feet and rushed to her room for her robes.

"It's the middle of the night," Braden pointed out when she emerged.

"I have the night shift this week. People get sick around the clock." She threw on the robes and veil, masking her pretty body and face. "I'll try not to make too much noise when I come back."

Braden got himself out of the chair. "You're not walking to the clinic by yourself," he said. "This isn't the safest neighborhood."

She gave him a startled look over her veil but didn't argue.

They didn't speak much as they walked the few blocks to the clinic. Braden gave her a tight hug before he left her at the door then made his way back to Judith's bar.

"Rees," he sang out as he moved through the crowd. "Just the Shareem I want to see." He slid into the seat opposite Rees and winked at Talan. "You still good at messing up computers, my friend?"

Rees gave him a nod. "I keep my hand in."

At DNAmo, Rees had driven his creators crazy by futzing computers and frying door locks and surveillance equipment, turning the tables on the researchers who tried to contain and monitor him. Sometimes the researchers would find themselves at his mercy, and didn't that scare the shit out of them?

"Calder has a pretty sophisticated system," Braden said. "I want to break into it." He winked. "I want to do a friend a favor."

Rees said nothing, but Talan gave him a big smile. She was beautiful, and Rees was one lucky bastard.

"Yes," Talan said. "I think that's a wonderful idea."

Chapter Nine

Katarina yawned, her shift almost over. She started sterilizing and stowing her equipment to be ready for the next medic and the next patient.

She heard the night receptionist say in panic, "You can't go in there," right before the door to the exam room slammed open and Calder stormed inside.

Katarina masked her gladness to see him. "You know she can call the patrollers and have you arrested."

"Tell her not to."

He was muffled to his eyeballs as before, the facecloth cutting out everything but his hard blue eyes. No wonder the receptionist sounded terrified.

Katarina ducked past him. "It's all right. He's here for me."

The receptionist gave her a startled look. "Are you sure, my lady? The patrollers can be here in a few minutes."

Katarina knew there was a button under the receptionist's desk that rang the patrol station at the end of the block. Because the clinic was open all night and dealt with the lowest of the low, sometimes it was necessary.

"It's fine. Don't worry." Katarina went back into the exam room, closed the door and glared at Calder. "It is fine, right? What are you doing here?"

"Whose idea was it? Yours or Braden's?"

"Since I don't know what you're talking about, I can't tell you."

Her heart beat swiftly, adrenaline mixed with need. She was thrilled that Calder had come to her, angry that he shouted at her, worried about what was wrong.

Calder's eyes blazed. "The entire database. Wiped. Clients past and future. Gone."

Katarina's mouth dropped open. "Database?"

"My client database," Calder said, annunciating every word. "It's been sabotaged. Every name gone, and all the backups conveniently erased."

Katarina fought the impulse to smile in joy. "You mean the list of women who like to be pleased by you?"

"Yes. Did you do it? Don't lie to me."

Katarina placed her sterilized hypos carefully back into their slots. "I'm good with the human body and how to fix it, very bad with computers. I can use them, but I can't change them or tamper with them. I don't know how."

"You could always find someone to do it for you."

"I could have, but it never occurred to me." She pushed the tray of hypos back into the wall. "I wish it had."

"Why? So you could screw me over?"

"Because you were right. I *am* jealous of those women who come to you, and I *do* want to scratch their eyes out."

"So you did it by erasing the database."

"I didn't. I'm happy someone else did, but I didn't ask them to. I've been here all night, examining patients."

Calder eased back from her. His huge fists were clenched, his eyes filled with fury. Katarina had the feeling that if the scientists who thought they'd programmed all emotion out of Shareem could see Calder now, they'd be hiding under the nearest table.

"Braden did this," he said.

"I don't know. I haven't seen Braden since I got here tonight. He didn't mention running off to wipe your database."

"Why did you move in with him?"

Katarina went to the sterilizer and let its warm beam flow over her hands. "I felt safer living down here with him. Plus I wanted to see if you'd be jealous."

When she turned around, Calder was still staring at her, but now he looked more stunned than angry.

"Shareem don't get jealous," he said.

"Or angry or hurt or depressed. Sorry, I've seen all those emotions in Shareem since I started working here. Try another tactic."

"Shareem don't get jealous," he repeated in a stubborn voice. "We don't because we don't care about sex. We need sex to survive. We don't much care what woman we have it with or whether we share her with others."

Katarina looked into the small mirror to straighten her veil. "Sure, Calder. What about Brianne and Aiden and Ky? They care deeply for each other. And Talan and Rees?" She cocked her head. "Do Brianne and Aiden and Ky have sex together at the same time? Or do they take turns or..."

Calder seized her wrist. "Come home with me."

"I beg your pardon?"

"If you want me so much, come home with me now. I'll show you why you don't want to be with me."

Katarina was glad of her veil because it hid the way her lips trembled. "If you drag me out of here, the receptionist really will call the patrollers."

Calder let her go. She almost whimpered at the loss of his strength.

"It's your choice. Come with me now and you'll learn everything. Or stay and never seek me again."

Heat flared through her. She wasn't certain exactly what he meant to teach her and how, but she knew she'd hate herself forever if she didn't accept his offer.

"All right," she said softly. "Just let me sign out."

* * * * *

She was too damn trusting. Calder would have to cure her of that too.

He took her back to his compound—to his apartment, not the lair. This time it wouldn't be a fantasy in his exotic playground. This would be real. She'd learn the reality of Calder.

Calder towed her into his small bedroom and slid open the panels to reveal the mirrors. "Strip. Let's get this over with."

Katarina paused in the act of unwrapping her veils. "*Get this over with?* Don't stint with the flattery, Calder."

"I have a hard-on bigger than a tent pole from watching your sweet ass swaying through the streets. I want to fuck you now. So strip."

Her hand trembled as she reached for the veils again. "You couldn't have seen my backside through my sun robes, you know."

"I remember it, all round and pert and begging for my hand. Strip now."

Her mouth set. "You are the most arrogant male I've ever met."

"And you are the most stubborn female. You want me. Here we are in my bedroom. Decide what you're going to do."

Katarina pulled off her robes then stopped at the clasp of her tunic. "Why aren't you stripping?"

"I will, if you hurry. Or I might just get bored and leave." He turned around.

"All right," she said hastily.

Katarina yanked open her tunic and let it drop to the floor. She wore plainer clothes now, and fewer of them, having settled into her role as medic in a backstreet clinic. No need for elaborate garb in the slums of Pas City.

Katarina's leggings followed, then her thin underwear. At last she stood before him, lovely and naked.

Dear gods.

He could stand here all night and drink her in, if his body would let him. Katarina was simply beautiful, her beauty like a lance straight through his heart. She was an artwork but a hundred times better, because she was real.

Katarina hadn't tried to make herself artificially slim like some highborn women, thank the gods. She was a small woman, but her breasts hung firm and round under strong shoulders, her waist a smooth curve above her hips. Calder had seen her naked in the lair, but that had been under muted lighting and deep shadows. Here his harsh, utilitarian lights showed every curve, every line, every soft crease.

The rosy tips of her breasts tightened to dark points under his scrutiny. He'd seen the areolas through her drenched undertunic in his lair, the nipples firmly poking the fabric. At the time, Calder had wanted to take a bud between his teeth, feeling the little point through the silk.

Her legs weren't long, but they were shapely, strong. He imagined them wrapped around his neck.

Calder resisted the urge to go down on one knee and lick her from thigh to abdomen, stopping at the beautiful pussy in between. The beautiful *bare* pussy in between.

"You shaved," Calder said, putting one finger on it. "You'd better not tell me Braden did it for you."

She shook her head. "I went to a highborn ladies' clinic and had them use a depilatory. I told them I needed it done for health reasons."

"Health reasons?"

"Because I work in a slum clinic. They bought it."

Calder stroked again, loving the bare, pink clit and lips. He leaned down and pressed a brief kiss to them. Her scent was heady, making his cock rise even more. "Why did you really do it?"

She shrugged. "Brianne told me that Aiden and Ky like her bare. She suggested the clinic—if I couldn't get you to do it for me."

"You didn't ask me."

"When did I have the chance?"

She had a point. His lady was getting used to Shareem, not afraid to take advice from their ladies, not afraid of her own body.

"Do you shave yourself?" she asked.

"No." But then he didn't need to. His hair had never grown back after the accident. The fact that he had hair on his head had been due to Dr. Laas' miraculous techniques. She'd apparently seen no reason to put it back on his scrotum. Calder supposed she liked her men bare too.

"Show me?" Katarina lay down on his bed. The plain sheets looked so much better with her on them. Her honey brown hair trickled across his pillows and her dark nipples beckoned him.

Katarina parted her legs and slid her hand down to cup her bare pussy. "Please," she whispered.

Calder hesitated then he drew on his anger to see him through. *She asked for it. Now she'll get it. Be careful what you wish for, sweetie.*

He unfastened his leather tunic and leggings, pulling them off before he could think about what he was doing. Katarina's eyes stilled as Calder's clothes came off, until he stood naked before her.

Nothing between himself and her. No barrier, no shield. Calder—what he truly looked like.

He spread his arms. "Behold The Beast."

"Calder." The word was soft. It didn't throb with disgust, but he did hear the pity. "Oh Calder, what happened to you?"

"Plasma fire. Not pretty."

"How?" Katarina sat up and clasped her arms around her knees, shutting herself off from him again. "None of your friends will tell me what happened."

Damn them. Calder didn't like them talking about it but now he wished they'd spilled the tale, because he didn't want to. It hurt too much to remember, and he didn't want to see Katarina's face when she heard the story.

"I'd rather fuck," he said.

"I want to know."

Damn her, damn his friends, damn the whole rack of scientists at DNAmo. They'd not only burned him—the entire stupid fire accident had been their fault—but now he had to stand here and relate his pain to this woman instead of burying himself in her and forgetting. His hatred of DNAmo moved up a notch.

"It was an experiment. Stupid and simple. I was with two women." Katarina flicked her gaze away, guessing *how* he was with the two women. "The research team started a fire. I had time to rescue only one. Who would I choose?"

"Choose?" Katrina asked, outraged. "How could they do that?"

"It was supposed to be 'safe' for both women, preplanned. I didn't know what was going on, of course. I thought the emergency was real. I didn't choose. I got one woman out and went back for the other. But the assholes lost control of the fire. I barely reached the second woman in time. I got her to the door, threw her out and then the room collapsed on me. It roasted me alive."

Katarina's mouth hung open. "Dear gods, how did you escape?"

"I didn't. When they finally got the fire out and cleaned up, only then did they drag out my body. They thought I was dead. They were going to harvest what was left of me and put it back into the DNA vat. They were stunned when they realized I was still alive. They would still have killed me, but Dr. Laas—she was a geneticist there—decided to save me. I'm still not sure whether I'm grateful to her or not."

"I am." Katarina got off the bed and came to him. "I'm glad she saved you and that I met you."

She slid her arms around him and leaned into him, her warmth like a gentle touch.

Calder stilled. The last woman to whom he'd revealed his true body had rubbed herself against him and purred—*Gods, you're so hideous you make me want to come*. If Katarina started doing that he wasn't sure what he'd do. Throw her out? Or use her need to sate his own?

Katarina looked up at him, her eyes wet. "I hate them for doing this to you."

Calder couldn't answer. Words stuck in his throat. Katarina ran her hands down his body, finding the smooth scars that coated his torso. They were even scars, grafts that Dr. Laas had laid down in careful succession.

He liked the feeling of Katarina's hands on him. Her fingertips were cool, lightly exploring. Calder wanted to fuck her—his hard-on was having a hard-on—but he didn't want to stop her play.

Katarina lifted her fingertips away to replace them with her lips. Her hair tickled his massive cock as she leaned to kiss his scars.

Then came her tongue. She licked across his abdomen, pausing to play at his navel then moving down to his cock. He thought of the way she'd taken him in her mouth the day Braden had brought her here, and his penis stretched toward her, wanting that hot wetness around it again.

But Katarina took her lips away and touched his tip. "No scars there."

He balled his fists. "I got lucky."

Katarina moved her hand to his balls, her touch uncertain. "It's not so bad."

"What, my cock? I'm glad you think so."

"I meant your scars." She drew her hand across his pectorals. "I know of some techniques that might reduce the scarring..."

Calder grabbed her wrist. "No. I've gone through that time and again. No more. I'm not a fucking lab rat."

She looked startled. "I didn't mean—"

"Get on the bed." When Katarina kept staring at him, Calder picked her up and tossed her on her back on the bed. "Spread."

Katrina's eyes went wide but she kept her thighs closed.

"This is what you get," he growled. "This is all me. I don't want you to *fix* me or cry over me. I want you to either be disgusted and run away, or I want you to crave The Beast. Which is it going to be?"

Katarina half sat up, eyes flashing. "I'm not one of your highborn women, wanting to be with some terrifying creature. I want *you*. Calder."

"Open your thighs and you've got me."

Her look remained stubborn. Shit, he was going to come all over her before he even touched her. No woman had ever had this kind of power over him. Calder was always in control.

Katarina was making him lose every ounce of control he'd ever had.

"I want you to be Calder," she said. "Not The Beast. Not the level-three Shareem. *You*."

"Level-three Shareem is what you'll get, honey. And when we're done here, I'll whip your ass for being so disobedient."

Calder expected her to grow frightened, to beg to leave, but she'd obviously gotten used to Shareem. "Promise?" she asked, her smile coy.

Calder gave up trying to contain himself. He climbed over her and yanked her legs apart.

"You're my lady," he said as he positioned his cock at her opening. He took a handful of her hair. "Mine. Not fucking Braden's. Not any other Shareem's. *Mine*."

"If you insist."

He kissed her to stop her talking. She was wet and slippery, no need for lube, though he knew she was a virgin. At least, she'd told him so. The thought that some other Shareem might have tasted her first made him angry.

"Am I the first?" he asked.

Katarina dragged in a breath. "I told you. Yes."

"Don't lie to me. I'll know."

"You're the first, Calder. I've never had anyone. Will you believe me this time?"

"We'll find out." He wanted to thrust in fast, but he stopped himself in time.

Don't hurt her.

He hid a groan of release as he slid in, slowly but firmly, pouring his pheromones over her to soften any pain he caused. She was so tight, squeezing him so damn hard. She'd told the truth—Calder was her first.

"Am I hurting you, baby?"

"No."

"Good." He kissed her face, stroked her hair. "I don't want to hurt you. Ever. I'll make it sweet, Katarina."

He loved saying her name. He said it again as he buried himself to his balls.

She smelled good, her come wetting his penis and his thighs. He liked the sound it made, the whisper of cream against flesh.

"This is fucking," he murmured. "This is good."

She nodded, her eyes half closing, her face softening.

Calder had never felt a pussy like hers. Because she was a virgin? Or because she was Katarina?

Didn't matter. He sucked in his breath as she clamped him like wet silk, squeezing him hard. Her breasts pressed against his chest, those beautiful nipples firm against his skin.

He should make it slow, sweet and good. If he was level one, he could. But he was level three, built to do it rough. Built to make his lady scream.

Don't hurt her.

His body had other ideas. He thrust into her a second time, then a third. She rocked up to meet him, the little sounds in her throat intoxicating. He bit her neck, then licked it, then bit it again.

He almost came when Katarina bit *him*, her teeth points of pain on his shoulder. "Vixen," he growled.

She laughed at him. *Laughing. At The Beast.*

Calder lifted her legs and wrapped them around his hips. That opened her wide, so he could fuck her harder, deeper, faster.

She was a soft, sweet armful, looking up at him with that trusting smile. He was The Beast, the scarred, hideous creature who could do anything to her. And Katarina smiled.

Calder felt her fingertips tracing the scars on his arms and back. She lifted her hand to his face but she studied his eyes, not the wreck of his skin. The caresses didn't feel like fascination with his ruined face—she was caressing *him*.

Damn you, woman. Why are you making me feel?

He growled. Nothing existed but Katarina's touch, her pussy clamped around his cock, her smooth legs enclosing his.

"Gods," he moaned. "Katarina, what are you doing to me?"

She kept touching him, her breath coming faster, and Calder couldn't stop his thrusts. This was heaven, her entire body wrapped around his, dissolving himself in this woman who wanted to be with him.

He rode her for a long time while his bed moved under his onslaught and she smiled, or groaned, or whispered his name like she loved the sound of it. It had never

been like this before, ever. Never with a woman he hadn't been paid to pleasure, never fucking her because he simply wanted to be with her.

Katarina's groans wound higher and so did his, until she cried out in joy. Calder heard his own voice join hers and then everything blurred. He was coming, great gobs of it shooting into her. His juices blended with hers, scalding where they joined.

He kept riding her, feeling her sheath pulse around his cock, drawing every last bit of come he had. *Greedy bitch*. He loved it.

Katarina fell back from him, panting and smiling. Her brown hair fanned out on the pillow like tangles of silk.

Calder rested his weight on his hands, still inside her. "Do you think we're done, sweetheart?" he asked, trying to catch his breath.

"Aren't we?" Katarina ran her hand through his damp hair. "You came. So did I."

"Do you still feel me?"

Her smile widened. "Yes."

"You want more fucking. You want me to keep fucking you until you fall asleep with me hard inside you."

"How do you know that?"

She looked so damn sweet. Calder pulled out halfway, the skin on his thighs tender where he'd rubbed hers raw. Katarina's forehead was wet with sweat, and sweat slicked her breasts against his chest.

"I'm Calder, sweetheart. I know what you want."

She touched him. "Do you read minds or something?"

"I read faces and scents and pheromones. I *know*."

"And I know that you want to keep on. You want to come again and again, but you're afraid of hurting me."

She touched him again. Damn, why was she so gentle? He wasn't worth that.

He kissed her. Katarina tried to kiss back but she could barely move her lips.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked. He brushed the hair back from her face, knowing he'd never felt so incredibly tender as he did looking down at her now.

"No. I'm resilient."

"Good." He slowly thrust into her again, ready to screw her all night. He'd never sate himself on her, never. But he'd have a damn good time trying.

He slid his hand between them, working her clit until she lifted her hips again. He rode her, faster this time, a little harder, but conscious that she was still new at this. Katarina held him, her climax sending hot shivers through her body.

Just as he came, shouting with it, Katarina pulled him close.

"I love you," she murmured.

Something cold shot through him and then a feeling so terrifying Calder didn't want to touch it. He might shatter it, shatter her.

He withdrew from her, which was physically easy because they were both so wet. He looked down at her a long time while she smiled, kissed the corner of his mouth and closed her eyes. She was ready to sleep, spent by their lovemaking. He needed to let her sleep.

His emotions rolled over him one after the other, culminating in stark terror.

Who the hell said Shareem didn't have emotions? They were driving him insane right now.

Calder finally slid next to her and drew a blanket up to cover both their bodies. Katarina smiled again then drifted to sleep, but he stayed awake, watching her, something in him breaking and falling away.

Chapter Ten

"Where is she?"

Braden's baritone woke Katarina from a sound sleep. Calder's bedroom was dark, but that didn't mean it was still night. He had no windows. He didn't have a clock either, that she could see. She asked for lights and a dim one obligingly came on.

Calder wasn't in bed with her, and neither he nor Braden were in the room. Katarina's clothes lay neatly folded over a chair. She hadn't done that.

She heard Calder rumble from the outer room and then Braden's voice again. "Bite me. She didn't come home when she was supposed to. I was worried."

Katarina pulled on her tunic and pants and opened the door. "I'm here, Braden."

Braden's diatribe shut off. "So Calder said."

Calder leaned against the end of his sofa, pissed as hell. He wore nothing but a loincloth, his long ponytail dripping. He must have been in the shower when Braden came pounding on the door.

Katarina had seen him bare last night, but she'd been wound up with need. Plus his pheromones had poured over her. Plus he'd been rock-hard, very tasty.

Now Katarina could see how the scars on his body were of one piece, as though a giant claw had raked diagonally up his body. Beneath the skin, his muscles bulged, firm and strong, except for his abdomen, where he bore a concave gouge in his left side.

His narrow hips looked normal—well, normal for a finely built, hard-bodied man. Katarina could attest to how firm his buttocks were—she'd squeezed them enough last night. But the skin had been completely tattered, shredded, removed and replaced.

Braden looked at Katarina and she read worry in his eyes, along with shock, compassion and sorrow. Had he never seen Calder's scars, then?

"What time is it?" she asked.

Calder stood like a stone, so Braden answered. "Almost sundown."

Katarina put her hand to her mussed hair. "Crap."

"When you didn't come in after your shift, I walked to the clinic," Braden said. "When you weren't there I got *really* worried. The receptionist said you'd left with a Shareem, and she didn't look happy to see me."

"I'm sorry, Braden. I should have sent word."

"Mother hen," Calder rumbled.

"Hey, this is a bad part of town for highborn ladies."

"It's nice that he cares," Katarina said.

Calder glared at Braden. "If you think I'd let anything happen to her, you're an idiot."

"How could I know?" Braden shot back. "You refuse to talk to her for weeks and hole yourself up here and don't come out. How could I guess that you were with her? She could have been back-alley fodder."

"She'll never be that. I've been making sure of it."

Katarina put her hands on her hips. "Are you saying you've been following me?"

"Not following. Looking out for you."

"What's the difference?"

Calder stood, his face dark with anger. "Braden is right that you don't belong down here. I've been watching to make sure you make it home from your clinic, because Braden never does. You wouldn't believe the scum who try to follow you."

"You mean besides you?"

Braden barked a laugh. Calder ignored him. His blue eyes burned Katarina across the room.

"Afraid I have to go with Calder on this, babe," Braden said.

"So the pair of you thinks I ought to run home to the Serestine Quarter? To my luxurious house and sequester myself like a good highborn woman should?"

Braden rubbed his lip. "I didn't say that. I kind of like having a pretty lady sharing my digs."

"Keep your fucking hands off her, Braden."

Braden smiled at Calder. "I don't know. It will be a challenge."

"Stop it," Katarina said. "Both of you." Their arrogant posturing angered her—as did her own foolishness in blurting out to Calder that she loved him. Gods, she was no better than the sex-starved women who hired him to fulfill their fantasies. Her face burned. "I have to go, Calder. I'm supposed to be at the clinic in a few hours. I'll hire a bodyguard so you won't have to waste time following me anymore."

She fastened the last clasp on her tunic and swept out of the apartment.

Calder didn't try to stop her. His silence, the fact that he didn't demand she stay where she was, hurt her more than she wanted to acknowledge. She stepped quickly into the street to let the last burning rays of sun dry her tears.

* * * * *

"I didn't know it was that bad."

Katarina had no idea what Braden meant, and for the moment, she didn't care. The two of them entered Braden's apartment together—Braden had raced after her, declaring once more that the streets weren't safe.

"How much I didn't want to leave him?" Katarina raked her hands through her tangled hair as Braden slammed the door against the heat.

"I meant, how bad his injuries must have been."

"Didn't you live at DNAmo when it happened?"

"I did, but Calder was kept in a separate wing and I really only met him after DNAmo closed. I knew he'd been burned in some damn experiment, and I knew it was bad but..."

"He saw you pitying him. He didn't like it."

"Sweet baby, the fact I saw him unclothed at all is a major breakthrough. And he was so worried about you, he didn't give a rat's ass about my reaction."

Katarina plopped onto a chair and buried her face in her hands. "Gods, Braden, it was so wonderful to be with him. I've never felt anything like that in my life."

Her tears returned, sliding silently down her face. Her body was tender, her pussy stretched and aching. The feeling of his touch, of his cock, was still imprinted on her, as though she could open her eyes and find him in her arms again.

"It's over, isn't it?" she said. "He's only with a lady once and won't have them back, no matter how hard they beg or how much they offer to pay."

Braden crouched in front of her, resting his hands on her thighs. "Want me to make it better?" He brushed her cheek with the ball of his thumb.

"No. I'm stupid. I want Calder." Katarina closed her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"I'll wait. When you forget about the shit, I'll be here."

She tried to laugh but it came out a croak. "Sure, if you're not off chasing other ladies. Thanks, but no thanks."

Braden leaned toward her. His hair smelled like soap and sunshine. "I wish I could say, 'Oh, he'll come around, give him time', but I don't think he will. Calder's all twisted up inside, and the way women react to him has made it worse."

"Bitches."

"Now you're getting it." Braden slid his arms around Katarina and held her close. "I'll do what I can for you, I promise. And if Calder won't come around, I'll throw over every lady in this town to get you in my manacles."

Katarina lifted her head, laughter mixing with her tears. “You’re a shit, Braden,” she said, then she let herself cry on him again.

* * * * *

Calder let his client database go. After Katarina stormed out with Braden, he toyed with the idea of trying to build it again but he’d lost the taste for it.

His clients weren’t so happy. The woman from Delta-Terra, Lady Demata, whose appointment Braden had broken for him, was still on Bor Narga. She insisted that Calder honor the engagement. Calder returned her money but every morning he found nasty messages from her that he started deleting without reading. Women like her, who fled him in his labyrinth then shuddered in pleasure when he caught and fucked them, now filled him with disgust.

They’d always disgusted him, he forced himself to admit. Being with Katarina had opened Calder’s eyes about a lot of things.

Katarina looked at him—*at* him—and touched him, unafraid. Not repulsed. Not fascinated. She wanted to understand his pain, to talk about it as if he were a normal human being. Which he’d never be.

Only Dr. Laas had ever treated him like that, but even Dr. Laas tended to look at Calder like he was a precious experiment. Katarina, on the other hand, had drawn Calder into her arms, kissed him, touched him, wanted him.

The other women wanted The Beast. Katarina wanted Calder.

Katarina—who’d gone home with the smug Braden, damn his ass.

The problem with letting the database go was Calder’s Shareem metabolism, which demanded constant sating. An option would be to seek out the level-three lair that Braden talked a lot about. It had started as a place for women who preferred level threes, but now Shareem of all levels gravitated there.

Braden had told him that there was a room kept dark so you could screw whatever women you found there in complete anonymity. Some women liked to enter the dark

room at the beginning of the evening and stay until dawn, getting screwed by a dozen different Shareem.

Calder could visit this lights-free room, get out his needs and go home. Just a wet, waiting pussy, nothing more.

Gods, was he that desperate? Even with the highborn women who paid him to ravish them, he preferred *some* light, knowledge, contact. He might as well stay home with his hand.

Calder balled his fist and punched the wall. The mirror on the other side, in his bedroom, slid from the wall and shattered.

Fine. Calder was sick of looking at his wrecked body anyway.

* * * * *

Three days later—three lonely days from hell—Calder answered his door chime to find Rees on the threshold.

“What?”

Rees lifted his brows and stepped into the apartment’s front room. “Yep, you have all the signs. Flushed face, nervous sweats, cantankerous attitude. We have a bet on at Judith’s that you aren’t getting any. I say I win.”

“What do you want?”

Rees had never come to visit Calder before. Smart-assed Rio had been Rees’ preferred Shareem companion before Rio had moved off planet with his lady. Rio, much like Braden, was a shit with a love for jokes. Calder supposed that both he and Rees needed a laid-back friend who looked at the world a different way than they did.

Calder and Rees had far too much in common to become close friends. Rees had been screwed up deliberately, not by accident like Calder, but both of them had dark sides to their nature from which they needed relief. Together, they’d combust. Probably why Ky, another screwed-up level three, had gone so far as to take the sunny-natured level one Aiden as a lover.

"That pretty medic you've been seeing, Katarina d'Arnal," Rees said. He stopped, sniffing the air. "Shit, you haven't had a woman in here in days."

"What about Katarina d'Arnal?"

"She's in trouble."

One of the pesky emotions Calder wasn't supposed to have—fear—swooped in and froze his blood. "Trouble? Why? Where is she?"

Rees considered him with eyes more intensely blue than any other Shareem's. "Come with me."

Calder grabbed his sun-blocking robes. He'd taken to covering his body again, the brief moment of being naked and unashamed in front of Katarina a fading memory.

Rees led him quickly through the streets toward Katarina's clinic. Sun cut at them through overhangs, patches of burning heat that made the shade seem blissfully cool.

They ended up at the clinic's door and Rees ducked inside. "She's expecting us," he said to the startled receptionist.

Calder charged into Katarina's exam room—and she looked up calmly from a tray.

Calder nearly sagged in relief. She was whole, unhurt, beautiful. She'd tucked her hair into a bun, with curls straggling from it to her neck. Her brown eyes took in Rees then Calder, and she smiled.

"Thank you, Rees."

Calder spun around. Rees, the asshole, grinned. "No problem. I'll tell Talan you said hello."

Before Calder could snarl a question, Rees walked out. The automatic door slid shut behind him, the mechanism grating.

"What the hell is this?" Calder asked Katarina.

"I need to talk to you. I had the feeling you wouldn't open your door to me, and it's easier to meet here anyway."

"So you sent Rees to trick me here?"

Katarina smiled. So innocent. *Darling, you are so going to pay for this.*

"I knew you'd never believe Braden. He's not very good at lying. So I asked Rees. He was happy to assist."

"My friends must have nothing better to do."

"Than help each other? I like your friends. Leave them alone."

Calder had to get out of there, fast. Standing near Katarina shot his adrenaline high and his heart began to pump like he'd been running. He either had to leave now or take her on the metal table.

"What do you want?" he growled. "I'm busy." He was such a fucking liar.

"I've been doing a lot of reading. And research." She turned away, lifted something from a tray. "Medics do that – have to in order to keep up with the latest techniques."

"So?"

"You're grouchy today." Katarina turned around again, a smile on her lips. "Oh wait, you're usually like this. Anyway, I've been reading about some new techniques developed for skin grafting, with excellent results. I thought you might be interested in hearing about them."

Calder took a step back, icy disappointment flooding him. "Katarina, I've been through every technique dreamed up, back when I was first hurt up until last month. Dr. Laas contacts me all the time to try something new. I used to let surgeons screw with me, but they did experiments and tossed me out. Nothing ever works. My body is the way it is, and that's the way it stays."

"It can't hurt to try."

"It can. I've been subjected to everything from strange injections to having the skin peeled off me and put back. My cells died a long time ago, end of story. And don't think about trying to fuse plastic to me like I'm a fucking android. I'm not that desperate."

"No plastic, I promise. It's a technique developed on Ariel, and it's hideously expensive. If it will even work on you, which it might not."

"And you think I can afford it? I use all the money I get for being a whore to help other Shareem and to make my life comfortable. I don't have it to spare."

Katarina's lips flattened. "I don't want your money, Calder. I want a skin sample."

"No."

"It won't hurt you. One little strip of skin that never got burned, that's all I need. You have some of that. I saw it."

Calder straightened up in a hurry. "And you're not putting a knife anywhere near my cock."

"Don't be stupid. I'll take it from your side, under your right arm. I only need a little."

"What for?"

"To test. I'm curious."

"I can't tell you how sick I am of being a lab rat."

"Even more than being The Beast? I'm a medic, Calder. I'm trying to learn. Give me one little piece of skin and I'll leave you alone."

Calder stopped. She watched him intensely, her earnestness radiating from her. She wanted to Help with a capital H.

"That's not what women usually ask from a Shareem," he said.

"It's what I'm asking."

What the hell? Calder shucked his sun-blocking robes and pulled off his tunic. He was sweating beneath, his ruined skin gleaming with moisture.

Katarina started toward him with a test tube. When she reached for his side, Calder caught her and held her back. "You don't get this for free, darling."

"Then what do you want?"

Good. She had a little tremor in her voice, her cockiness wavering.

Calder leaned to her. "I want you – going down on me so hard, working me up so bad, that I come in five minutes. All over your pretty face."

Her breath caught, her cheeks going rosy. "I can do that."

Calder straightened, a fierce smile breaking through his agony. "I'm glad to hear it."

"My shift ends in a few hours. Do you want me to come to your place?"

He laughed, a grating sound. "No, you're going to do it right here."

Katarina's eyes widened. "Here? What if someone comes in?"

"What if they do?"

"It would be..." She went redder, and he scented her pheromones on the air. Hot, ready, smelling so good. She was wet. He smelled that too.

Calder wrapped his hand through her hair and pulled her head back. "It would be exciting. You want to get caught, don't you? Have everyone know you let Shareem fuck you?"

"Not really." The words were so faint they weren't convincing.

"Right here. Right now. Or no samples."

Katarina turned the empty test tube over in her finger. A thin-bladed knife, covered with a guard, protruded from it. Gods, Calder hated knives.

Katarina gently set the test tube back on the tray. "All right," she said.

Chapter Eleven

Once again Katarina was doing things she'd never have dreamed of in her life. She found herself on her knees in front of Calder while he unlaced his leggings.

His cock tumbled out, long, hard, dark with blood. Moisture glinted on the tip and Katarina licked it.

To think that a few weeks ago she had never seen a cock in the flesh. Now she'd seen two, Calder's and Braden's. Not only seen them but touched them, tasted them.

Calder's cock took her breath away. One standard foot, it gleamed with sweat, the balls at its base tight and smooth.

Katarina licked the shaft. Calder moved slightly, his hand closing in her hair. She smiled with her power and licked some more.

"Suck it," Calder said. "Suck me."

Katarina kept licking. She ran her tongue around the flange and again across his tip.

He tugged her hair. "Suck me, Katarina. Or I punish you."

Excitement warmed her. She remembered Calder's hand on her backside, the sting that opened her pussy and made her beg for him.

"Suck," he repeated.

She licked again and he drew in a breath. "Damn you, Katarina. You're making your punishment worse by the minute, and I don't want to hurt you."

Katarina's heart pounded so hard she could hardly breathe. She rubbed her face on his cock, nuzzling it, playing with it with her lips before she finally opened her mouth wide and took it inside.

"Gods," Calder whispered. He closed his other hand on her hair and rocked his hips forward.

Calder, the big Shareem with the hideous scars, who hid behind his facecloths, was murmuring his joy at Katarina's playing. She loved his cock, every long inch of it. She loved its taste and its scent, the hot smoothness under her tongue.

She got the cock very wet and rubbed her face on it again. She liked the feel of the tip against her nose, the smell of him.

"I told you, you have five minutes to make me come. Time is marching."

Five minutes? Katarina would gladly kneel here for an hour, licking, suckling, fondling him until her mouth was raw.

But someone might come in. Appointments would pile up, the receptionist or nurse would come to see what was wrong.

Katarina took him into her mouth again, and this time she suckled. Hard, fast, moving her tongue back and forth. He pulled her hair but she barely noticed the pain. He ground his hips forward as if he were fucking her, and his breath came in strangled grunts.

It only took three minutes, by Katarina's calculation. Calder whispered, "*Fuck,*" and then a wash of come rushed into her mouth.

Calder kept pumping his hips, sending more and more inside her. It tasted smooth, like cream with a little bite of salt. Calder said her name over and over while Katarina savored his come and swallowed it down.

Calder pulled her to her feet. His pupils spread black through his irises, which had widened to blot out the white. Shareem eyes, which changed when they were aroused.

He gave her a feral look, scars distorting his face. Before Katarina could say anything, he shoved her back onto the exam table, ripped down her leggings and pressed his mouth to her clit.

Calder's tongue slid through the river of cream between her legs then he sucked, licked and teased her swollen clit. Katarina bucked on the table, her fist pressed into her mouth to stifle her screams.

His teeth abraded her, his tongue's friction made her crazy. She came fast, her hips undulating, heels kicking the metal table. Calder didn't stop. He kept lapping her clit and her pussy, holding her hips open when she wanted to close, to *squeeze*.

They had to stop now. Surely he'd cease, back away, let cool air touch her too-hot opening.

No. Calder did back away, but only to slide strong arms under her and turn her over. He leaned on top of her, his skin hot through her thin cotton tunic.

"You disobeyed me," he said in her ear. "You didn't take my come on your face."

Katarina smiled. She'd drunk it down, which had been so much better. "You didn't pull out of my mouth."

"I told you what I'd do."

"Not here," Katarina hissed.

"Right here. You need to learn to obey."

His hand came down on her backside. Like in the lair, he slapped then soothed the hurt away. His hand came down again. *Sting*. Other hand. *Soothe*.

Each slap made her jerk her clit against the table and before she could stop herself, she was coming again. She moved her hips desperately, rubbing the sterile sheet beneath her. Her body wanted to fuck, so it fucked the table.

Calder kept going, knowing what he was doing. Her climax took her into a place of nothing – no light, no sound, just the feel of Calder's hand on her backside and the table grating on her clit.

She screamed into the sheet, some part of her knowing she needed to muffle the sound. As she collapsed against the table, sobbing in joy, Calder ceased.

He lifted her in gentle arms and cradled her against his chest. He kissed her, his mouth hot and wet. She tasted him and herself mixed together, tried to match his kisses with her own.

Calder set her back down on the table. Katarina put her hand to her hair, trying to catch her breath. She must look a mess. But only a part of her cared. The rest of her sang, hummed, gloried in the ecstasy she felt.

“Calder.”

He didn’t look at her. Calder closed his leggings and took up her test tube. Working out the stopper, he scraped the unscarred part of his skin with the knife then put the stopper on the tube again.

He handed it to Katarina without a word, slid on his tunic, grabbed up his robe and banged out of the exam room.

Katarina let out her breath. She lifted the tube to eye level, though she could barely see the tiny scraping of skin inside.

Perfect.

* * * * *

Calder’s life officially became hell.

He needed Katarina. He needed her with every breath.

He’d let himself become the Dom with her, thinking if he put her in her place, he’d view her as he did every other sub. Needy upper-class women who craved sex came to him but only let themselves have it if they were punished at the same time. It was amazing how many of them begged for punishment.

But the pheromones in the exam room, mixed with the smell of her come and his, had driven him out of his mind. He’d been hot to the point of danger.

He’d tried to cool off in the pool at the bathing house Judith had set up for Shareem, but it hadn’t helped much. It didn’t help that Braden had been there to gloat that Katarina had gotten her way. *Asshole*.

Calder’s clients continued bugging him. With the database wiped, there’d been no way for him to cancel the appointments. They’d arrive at their time and push the door

buzzer for an hour before finally understanding that he wasn't open. The damn woman from Delta-Terra had her lackeys bang on his door for an entire day.

The spurned ladies joined Lady Demata in ranting messages until Calder stopped reading his mail altogether. His friends figured out that if they wanted to talk to him, they had to leave a message with Judith and hope he showed up at the bar sometime. He wasn't answering his door for them either.

Calder now had a quarter of the highborn women in Bor Narga and plenty from off world pissed as hell at him. But what could they do? The Bor Nargan ladies couldn't very well admit that they'd made an appointment with The Beast, and the off-worlders who complained got little sympathy from the patrollers.

If you want to mess with forbidden Shareem, your disappointment is your own fault, was the patrollers' attitude. Unless a Shareem was committing rape—a thing Shareem were supposed to be incapable of anyway—the patrollers didn't care.

But the very worst thing that happened in Calder's world was that Katarina d'Arnal quit the Pas City clinic and retreated to her mansion in the Serestine Quarter.

She was finished with the slums, Braden reported. Tired of the dregs of society, tired of the dirt. She'd gone back home to be clean and well-bred again.

Fuck all highborn fucking bitches.

Calder became surly and withdrawn—*How can you tell the difference from the way he usually acts?* Calder heard Ky ask Braden one day. Calder drank at Judith's bar, but no amount of ale, no amount of consolation by his Shareem friends could take away the emptiness inside him.

He'd fallen in love.

Which was a stupid-ass thing for him to do.

He'd let his friends' happiness lull him into thinking it might happen for him too. Katarina didn't mind his scars. She *liked* him. He'd allowed himself to believe that liking him might mean something.

Damn it, he should just rebuild his database, announce to the ladies that he was open for business again and go for it. Show them what The Beast truly could do.

Somehow, he could never make himself get around to it.

The day came when Calder couldn't stand it any longer. He called Rees.

"Yeah?" Rees, on the monitor, looked tousled, tired and smugly satisfied. Six guesses as to what he'd been doing.

"I want to talk to Talan."

Rees' eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Do I detect suspicion and jealousy? Emotions to have been programmed out of Shareem?" Calder mouthed the scientists' litanies at DNAmo. "I want to ask her a question."

"Fine."

Talan came on the screen, also looking tousled, tired and smugly satisfied. These two had been together for several years now. Couldn't they get enough? Calder hoped not.

Calder asked his question, and Talan gave him the answer with delight.

* * * * *

Two hours later, Calder exited the Serestine Quarter train station on the mansion-studded hill above Pas City. No one walked these streets but servants, who dressed in household liveries. They eyed him curiously. Hoverchairs and hovercars moved past him in well-bred silence, but he felt watchers behind their black glass.

Did he look out of place or something? A nearly seven-foot-tall man in black leather and sun-blocking robes, facecloths and dark goggles?

Calder stopped at a set of solid metal gates in the middle of a solid stone wall. This was the house he was looking for, but he'd never have known without Talan's directions. Rich people didn't advertise what they had inside.

The gates, however, screamed that Calder was no longer in the slums. The metal didn't have a speck of rust or dry rot on it and sand hadn't stained the walls. In a city through which sandstorms rolled at least once every two weeks, clean walls were a miracle.

People here *paid* to have their walls washed after every storm. Crazy.

Calder eyed the gate, debating. What would happen when he pressed the buzzer? Would she admit him with joy? Or have one of her servants send him away?

Humiliating choice.

"Well, well."

The sneering voice of a patroller did not improve Calder's temper. He turned to find three of them behind him, tall women in spotless uniforms. Like the houses, the difference between Serestine patrollers and Pas City patrollers was their cleanliness. The annoying condescension that bordered on brutality was the same.

"A Shareem," the leader continued. "On the hill."

"As you see." Calder fixed his eye-hiding goggles on the patroller.

She drew back the slightest bit. "Ident card."

"I'm Calder."

"I don't care if you're the god of singing spheres. Give me your ident card."

Taking his time, Calder slowly parted his sun-blocking robes and pulled a strip from his belt. He held it out and she took it, being careful not to touch his fingers.

The patroller popped the card into her handheld and scanned the readout. "You're a long way from home."

Calder took the strip back from her and didn't answer. Patrollers were the dregs of law enforcement, sent out to annoy people, especially Shareem, on the streets.

"What are you doing up here?" the leader went on. She must not have met her harassment quota for the day.

"Visiting a friend."

The leader laughed. She rocked back on her heels. "This is the d'Arnal house. They're way too rich and *respectable* to be friends with the likes of you."

Calder pushed the door buzzer, pretending he wasn't sweating inside his robes. The patroller stood on tiptoe to look over his shoulder as a monitor screen slid into view.

"Yes?" a bored-looking woman asked.

"Calder to see Dr. d'Arnal."

"One moment."

Damn it, Katarina, don't pick this moment to dump me. These ladies will slap me in a cell for even touching your gate.

The bored woman flicked on the screen again. "Welcome, Calder. Dr. d'Arnal will meet you in the main hall."

The screen disappeared and the gates slid noiselessly open, no grating on dust. Calder sketched a mock-salute to the patrollers and strolled inside, feeling satisfaction as the gates closed on their stunned faces.

Chapter Twelve

Calder was glad of the sun-blocking cloths over his face because he was gaping like a fool behind them. The gate led him not into a house but into a tree-lined garden.

Trees. In the middle of the flat Bor Nargan desert. Even the hill the mansions resided on was artificial, built up centuries ago so the rich wouldn't have to walk on the same level as the poor.

These were towering trees, alien to this planet, smelling of rich wood. They couldn't be real, could they? Holo rooms had gotten sophisticated – Calder used them himself – and the rich must be able to afford the best. He pulled off his glove and touched a tree, feeling the rough of real bark.

Amazing.

He looked up through the canopy of leaves to bright blue sky. There must be shielding overhead because no way could these trees survive Bor Narga's harsh sun otherwise, not to mention the sandstorms.

It was cool in here, pleasant. A strange sensation.

The walkway led him to a gigantic stone and marble house, complete with columns and long windows. The whole place definitely must be shielded. No one turned a real window to the weather.

The tall, arched front door opened as he approached, and Calder stepped into a massive foyer. Walls soared above him, punctuated with fan-lighted windows. A staircase spilled from above like a marble waterfall.

Katarina skimmed down this staircase, hand on the wrought iron banister, the silk sheath she wore hugging every curve.

"Calder."

At the sound of her voice, his whole body came alive. He could only think of her sweet tones begging him as he laid her back on the exam table in her office, her noises of pleasure.

His erection strained at his tight leggings. He wanted to take her here, on the stairs, in this cool, otherworldly luxury.

"You live here?" he asked.

"This is my house, yes."

"Shit."

Calder thought of his modest apartment, which would fit in a corner of this hall.

"Is that why you came?" Katarina remained poised on the last step, her hand on the railing, as though reluctant to step down to his level. Just like the houses on the hill held themselves aloof from the slums of Pas City.

"I came to ask you where the hell you've been."

"Here. Working."

"You've pissed off half the Shareem in Pas City," he growled. "The bastards like being examined by you."

"I've been busy."

Too busy to call or send a message? Gods, he was pathetic. "Whatever."

"The last time I saw you, you gave me the impression you wouldn't care if I left."

"Baby, the last time I saw you, I sucked you raw. I don't do that to women I never want to see again."

She shrugged, the silk moving on her body. "You were angry."

"You wanted a piece of my skin. I don't like being treated like an experiment. I got enough of that at DNAmo."

"I was trying to help you."

"They all try to help. Every medic, every doctor I've ever seen. They all think they have the miracle cure. None of them do. Their techniques improve but my body doesn't, and I refuse to become a cyborg."

"I don't want you to become one either."

"Then leave me the hell alone."

Katarina finally stepped off the last stair and flowed to him. "Is that why you came all the way up here? To tell me to leave you alone?"

I was worried about you. I thought I'd never see you again.

"I came here... Shit, I don't know why I came here."

Calder swung away. The door was still open, letting in the cool breeze from the garden. Everything here was unreal. Maybe Katarina was too. Maybe everything he felt for her was unreal.

If that was true, why did it hurt so damn much?

"Calder, wait."

Calder stopped on the threshold. He heard her move toward him but she stopped too far away.

His cock ached. Here he was, a level-three Shareem, close to falling on his knees and pleading *her* to fuck *him*. Right now, right here in her beautiful front hall with the breeze and tree-scent wafting in. *Please, love. Have pity on me.*

"I'm glad you came," she said. "I planned to come to your apartment, but it will be better here. My house is more comfortable."

Calder turned. She stood a foot away from him, her scent, her pheromones pouring over him. The silk sheath was thin, her nipples sharp little points behind it.

He pictured himself lounging in a large, white-sheeted bed, a boy toy for a rich lady. Not a bad scenario. Especially when the rich lady was Katarina d'Arnal.

"Will you stay?" she asked.

"Yes."

Calder reached for her. Katarina stepped forward, raising her hand.

He saw the hypo too late. Calder growled and twisted away, but she'd already touched the pad to his neck and injected her concoction.

Calder's glare could have crumbled her big house and the vast gardens beyond into dust. Katarina recoiled from his look of near hatred.

"What the hell did you just do?"

"This will work, Calder. I swear it will." She bit her lip. "I'm pretty sure it will."

The nano-protein combination started quickly. Sweat poured down Calder's face and he clawed at his clothes. *"What the fuck?"*

He flung his tunic and leggings from him, then his loincloth. His scars were stark and angry in the soft light of her hall. He didn't belong here, a giant of a man, rough-hewn like desert rocks in her house of elegant softness. Calder raked his hands through his hair and shuddered, body gleaming with sweat.

Katarina darted forward, another hypo raised. Calder swung away, his rage cutting. "Stay away from me!"

"This will ease the pain."

"It doesn't hurt... Aw, *fuck*." He shivered suddenly, violently, his face losing color. Calder jerked her to him, grabbed the hypo and injected himself.

After a second or two the tight lines around his eyes relaxed, but he clenched the delicate hypo so hard it broke.

Katarina touched his face. "I love you, Calder. I know you hate me right now, but I want you to know how much I love you."

"I don't hate you," he growled. His shivering escalated, his eyes closing in agony. His lips formed another *fuck*—then he went down.

The crash on her floor brought the servants running. Katarina fell to her knees beside him, anxiously checking his vitals. His heart raced and his skin was hot, but not

more than normal for a Shareem. She kissed his damp forehead then got to her feet and ordered her servants to get him upstairs to one of her spare bedrooms.

* * * * *

For the next few days, Katarina didn't leave his side. Calder swam in and out of consciousness, but he was never coherent. Katarina hooked him up to machines to keep him hydrated and fed, checking his vitals every hour.

She'd hired the equipment, thinking she'd have to transport it down to his place in Pas City. He'd saved her a step by coming up here, looking for her.

Why had he? Calder had made it clear how angry he was, how much he didn't want Katarina trying to cure him. How much he didn't want *her*, period.

But he'd braved Serestine patrollers to come to her house and ask to see her.

Why? And when he woke up, would he still want to see her?

It didn't matter. Katarina didn't want to heal Calder so he'd be grateful and pathetic but because she wanted to make his life better. He was Shareem, so it would be only so much better, but at least he wouldn't have to hide his body anymore. If her regenerating technique worked, he'd let himself wear the light clothing of his Shareem friends and laugh and talk with them. He'd no longer keep to the shadows.

Whether this worked or not, if he didn't want to see Katarina anymore, she'd let him go. She promised herself this.

She understood now why Braden had told her that all women wanted Calder. Calder focused his Shareem-blue eyes on a woman and made her feel like she alone existed. He delved into her fantasies and laid her bare. When he was done, there wasn't a secret in her head she hadn't trusted him with.

His women wept when it was over. Katarina would too, but she'd let him go. It was more important to her that he was alive, whole and happy.

She repeated this brave litany all through her vigil. But when she was honest with herself in the dark hours of the night, the thought of losing him for good made the misery come.

* * * * *

Calder woke with a jolt.

He was alone, flat on his back on a bed. Tubes snaked from a machine in the wall down into his arms, and a cool sheet rested lightly on his legs.

A body on a slab. *Again.*

He lay in a large room painted a cool shade of green with gold mosaic patterns running along the tops of the walls. White curtains billowed at a window, which was open to soft air.

Everything spoke of luxury and taste, including the mattress beneath him. He must still be in Katarina's house, but how long he'd been here he didn't know.

He sat up slowly, his limbs sore, but only from being immobile. A second later, he realized that his burning pain had completely vanished.

Calder pulled the tubes from his arms, sliding them out quickly so he wouldn't bleed. He'd learned how. He threw back the sheet and stood up. His legs shook a little, but not too much.

A look out the window showed him trees moving in a faint breeze. The canopy surrounding the house must allow for artificial weather. It felt like sweet, cool springtime, not the perpetual summer of the bone-hard desert.

Must be nice to be so stinking rich. Calder had money after years of being The Beast, but Shareem wouldn't be allowed to set up in something so nice. He stashed away his money so he wouldn't have to worry about survival, and to help his friends. Let the Bor Nargan ruling family think Shareem were just this side of broke.

As he turned away from the window, he scratched his arm. Whatever Katarina had shot into him made him itch a little.

As soon as he stopped scratching, the itch came back, stronger. His legs started to tingle and then suddenly the skin all over his body was one burning, massive itch.

Calder let out a growl, rubbing his palms across his arms and torso—which were still scarred, by the way. Stupid cure didn't work, and he'd known it wouldn't.

He kept rubbing but the itching increased. "Damn it!"

The door slid open and Katarina ran in. Part of him enjoyed watching her silken clothes move with her body, part of him wanted to throw her to the ground and screw her senseless. Part of him didn't want her to see him.

"What are you doing out of bed?" she demanded.

"Itching like crazy. What the hell did you do to me, woman?"

Katarina smiled. "That means it's working."

"It's killing me. *Shit.*"

"Come with me."

Katarina took his hand and led him out. She took him into another room, again with windows overlooking the garden. This one had a square marble tub in the middle of the floor and benches for lounging around it.

The tub was full, and Calder jumped straight in.

His skin burned like a thousand needles jabbed him, and he threw back his head and shouted his agony. Katarina watched, hands touching her mouth, eyes worried.

After a few minutes of horrific burning sensation, the feeling lessened. And then lessened again. "Thank the gods," Calder breathed.

"It's healing," Katarina said. "The itching means healing. This is what's supposed to happen." She sounded relieved and happy.

"Warn me next time."

Katarina looked down at him in the tub, a smile on her face. Water blotched her skirts where Calder had splashed them jumping into the water, and the breeze from the window lifted her hem to show her shapely legs.

Calder suddenly had the biggest hard-on he'd had in years.

He reached up and grabbed her ankle. "Come in here."

"I shouldn't. The servants."

Calder rose, wrapped his wet arm around her waist and dragged her into the water with him. She shrieked as her dress quickly became sodden.

"You should," he said.

Calder easily pried off her silk dress and dropped the soggy mass on the edge of the tub. Sloshing more water from the tub, Calder lifted her into his arms, wrapped her legs around his hips and slid her onto his waiting cock.

The sex was swift and brutal. Calder used the buoyancy in the water to thrust hard into Katarina, and she clung to him, her noises of pleasure driving him on.

He finished with him on top of her beside the tub. No elegance, just him spreading her and shoving inside until he shot his seed. She made a frustrated noise when he withdrew that made him harder than ever.

"Not finished, were you?" he asked.

"I was. But it was...awfully fast."

"That was me taking the edge off. If you want slow sex, Katarina, I'll do you the rest of the afternoon and all night." He kissed her swollen lips, the bridge of her nose. "Would you like that?"

"I think so."

"You'd better be sure. Once I start, I won't stop. I'm Shareem. I have to give you that warning."

Katarina smiled and laced her arms around his neck. "I believe you have my signed consent form."

"Baby." Calder kissed her lips again. "I'm going to make you regret looking so sweet when saying that."

* * * * *

Calder knew some amazing things. But Katarina refused to regret anything as she became his willing slave for the night.

He carried her into the bedroom and laid her on her bed, which was a cushion of pressurized air instead of a mattress. When the bed was covered with quilts and pillows, it looked like an old-fashioned four-poster, but a person could sleep floating or adjust the pressure to make it a firm surface. Katarina had always found her bed relaxing but Calder used it in ways new to her.

He'd brought some interesting things with him, tucked away into the pockets of his tunic. She wondered if he always carried such things about or if he'd brought them especially for her.

First he parted her legs and examined her pussy, shaking his head when he'd seen she'd let the hair start growing back.

"You should have had it done permanently."

Katarina wondered how he could be so calm while she was so excited. All he had to do was look at her and her cream began to flow. "I didn't know whether you would like me bare before I made it permanent. And then I didn't see you again, so I didn't think there was much point."

"Well, I do like it." Calder brought out a small shaver that he strapped to his first two fingers and used it to remove the hair that had accumulated. The shaver was warm, the vibration of it stimulating.

"Go back to your clinic and get it permanently gone." He gave her a dark look. "Unless you want me shaving you all the time."

Hmm, which would she choose? A cold depilatory alone in a cold room at the clinic, or Calder's hot hands moving on her pussy?

Calder put away the shaver and soothed her skin with a cream. More oil followed, his fingers dipping into her vagina and then, surprising her, into her anus.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting you ready."

She gulped. "For what?"

"For The Beast, Katarina. He wants to play."

"I see."

"No, you don't. But you will."

He strapped onto her a small pad that formed itself to her clit but left her pussy open. Calder warmed her with his hands while he fitted the device, then he activated it.

"Oh!" It tickled her clit like his tongue or his finger. Katarina lifted her hips, tightening against the sensation.

"Don't fight it. Relax. Go with it."

His voice lulled her. She felt her limbs easing, going limp. And then it felt wonderful.

"That's right. I'm Shareem, sweetie. Made for your pleasure."

"Yes." Katarina stretched. The vibration on her clit made her hips rock. "I love it."

Calder reached beneath her and pressed something warm to the opening of her anus. She gasped, tensing, then relaxed again as he calmed her.

She'd read that Shareem could soothe with hands and voice so the lady was open, pliant, game for anything. So when Calder slid a device inside her anus, she barely tightened her muscles.

"What is that?"

"A plug. For your ass. It will open you, make you feel good."

"It already does."

She never thought she'd like such a strange sensation. It was a hot, tight feeling, and made her feel wicked. She loved the pleasure and loved that Calder stretched out next to her, his body protective.

Katarina tried to see whether his skin had healed, but the light was dim and she admitted she'd stopped paying attention.

"What are you doing to me?" Pleasure built and built, and she jerked back, starting to come...

Calder rose over her, parted her legs and slid himself inside her. He made an excited noise as his cock connected with the vibration over her clit.

Katarina cried out against the waves of pure feeling that poured over her. The thing stimulating her clit, Calder inside her, his weight on her body, her nipples so hard, the hot plug in her ass... She screamed.

Calder caught her screams in his mouth. He thrust into her, her pussy so wet that even his huge length glided in and out without constriction.

"I can't stand it," she sobbed. "Calder."

"Yes, you can. You're strong, my Katarina."

"I can't. I have to stop."

"But you gave The Beast permission to do whatever he wants."

"No."

"This is what he wants. You, screaming in pleasure."

Katarina arched back, cries leaving her throat. Calder's words dwindled to sounds and he rode her faster than ever. Just when she was sure she'd die of what he did to her, Calder came.

His seed shot inside her and he kept thrusting, saying her name. The game of ravishing beast dissolved, and she was simply a woman being loved by a hot-bodied man.

"I love you!" she cried. "Calder, I love you so much."

He furrowed her hair with his fingers, head bowed, eyes closed, jaw clenched as he rode out his climax.

"Shit," he whispered as he started to slow. He opened his eyes. "What did you say?"

"I said I love —"

Calder put his hand on her mouth. "The word 'love' is not allowed in this bed. I'll have to paddle your ass if you say it again."

Wicked joy shot through her and she laughed. "Love," she babbled. "Love, love, love, love."

Calder withdrew, caught her ankles and turned her over. His hot hand covered her buttocks. "And what a nice ass it is. With the plug in, still tight and safe."

"Gods," Katarina whispered. The air cushioned her, Calder warmed her and his palm, making circles on her butt, made her want to come again.

Then his touch went away. She heard a noise in the air—and then the sting of leather slashed across her ass. "Ow!"

She tried to sit up, indignant, but his strong hand on her back kept her down. He smacked her five more times with his strap then his hands came down to soothe her.

Calder hadn't finished with the equipment he'd brought with him. He rolled her over again and fitted small, padded clamps to her nipples, each one pinching just enough to stimulate but not hurt. A little chain hung between them.

He took away the soft vibrator—*sadness*—and replaced it with a similar clamp on her clit. He leaned down and flicked the clamp with his tongue.

Katarina thought she couldn't have more cream, but out it came. Calder licked her clean.

He turned her over again, her body floating in the thick but permissive air, and tethered her wrists and ankles to the four bedposts.

Katarina turned her head to look back at him. "You just *happened* to have manacles and a whip with you?"

"I brought them for you. I was coming to see you for a purpose."

"What purpose?"

"To punish you for disappearing and not telling me where you were going."

"I didn't think you would care."

"Oh Katarina, you truly need to be spanked."

So he did it.

* * * * *

Much later — after he'd chastised her then lifted her hips and fucked her again then plied his tongue all over her pussy, clit and ass — he gently worked out the plug.

Katarina relaxed and got excited at the same time. "Are you going to enter me there?"

"Am I going to what?"

"Enter me." Her face grew hot. "*Fuck* me. In my ass."

Calder soothed her skin. "Not yet, baby. You won't be ready for a little while. I don't want to hurt you."

"I thought The Beast didn't care."

He leaned down, his body hot on her back. "The Beast has gone away, sweetheart. He's left you tied down and exhausted from sex, for anyone to find."

"Are you leaving?" she asked in disappointment.

"I didn't say that." Calder drew his tongue down her spine, all the way to her buttocks. He dipped between them and inside.

Katarina squirmed at the hot, wet feeling. She wanted it, she wanted *him*.

He lifted his head, taking his wonderful tongue away. "I could call Braden to come up here and find you like this. Would you like that? Him finding you and doing whatever he wanted to you while I watched?"

Katarina indulged herself in the enticing vision of Braden smiling wickedly, touching her back and saying, "Now, what have we here?" Calder would watch, his erection evident. She thought she'd fall through the bed if she squirmed any more.

But she knew what she wanted. "Not right now. I want just you and me."

"Meaning you might want Braden later?"

"Only if you would. If it gave you pleasure too."

"Why should you care whether I get pleasure from it?" His voice was suddenly very quiet. "I'm Shareem."

"I told you why."

Calder looked at her for a long time, his eyes glittering in the darkness.

He stood up abruptly and slapped her ass. "I'm calling Braden," he said then strode away from the bed.

Chapter Thirteen

Why did she make everything so complicated? Calder grabbed his undertunic as he left the room, his heart beating so hard it made him sick.

Why couldn't she keep this about Calder pleasuring her, the way she'd wanted him to when she'd come to his lair in the first place? Let her have The Beast, and let Calder the Shareem remain distant.

Katarina started talking about love and Calder's brain turned soft. He didn't know what to do, how to answer.

Because he knew he loved her back.

He walked past the open bathroom door, pulling his tunic over his head. Movement caught his eye in the darkness and he stopped.

Braden? What the hell was he doing here? Maybe she'd already asked him to come up here and save her from The Beast.

A second look showed that he'd glimpsed his own body in the mirrored wall of the bathroom as he'd swiftly passed. "Lights," he said as he walked in. "Lights full."

The lights came on, bright but not harsh. This was, after all, the house of a rich woman, and even the overhead lights were elegant.

The mirror reflected a tall Shareem with broad shoulders, square face and mussed black hair. He had Shareem eyes, and his arms were brown and strong, corded with muscle.

Calder ripped the tunic from his body. He saw a chest carved with muscle—prominent pecs and tight, ripped abdomen. A long cock hung between muscled thighs. Black hair curled across his chest and down his arms, with a hint of it between his legs.

Itching. Not just healing, the hair hurriedly growing from cells dormant for twenty years.

He hadn't paid attention to his skin while he'd pleased Katarina, having seen it scarred when he first got up. He'd awakened after surgery too many times in the past with little change to believe it would work.

The Shareem who looked back at him from the mirror was healthy and whole. A few light scars remained over the places where Dr. Laas had replaced his organs, but the rest of his skin bore only a little pinkness.

Calder looked back at a body he'd not seen in twenty years. An arrogant shit, but a man who'd known no pain, no darkness in his soul.

Katarina had given that back to him.

Calder bent his head and covered his face with his hands.

* * * * *

Katarina found Calder in front of her bathroom mirror, head bowed, the heels of his hands pressed to his eyes.

"Calder?"

He raised his head. His hard gaze met hers in the mirror, and at the same time, tears streaked down his face.

"What did you do?" he demanded. "What did you do?"

"It's a new procedure that I learned about after I started treating Shareem," she answered. "Nano-biology and growth hormones. I played with it so it could be boosted by the incredible metabolism of Shareem. Shareem bodies are excellent at converting intake into energy and then burning it off slowly, like very efficient fuel. It's why your aging process is so slow, and why you need so much sex—letting off steam, as it were. From your skin sample, I was able to marry the metabolic codes in your DNA with the nano-technology and then inject it back into you."

Calder said nothing. The silence pressed and Katarina twisted her hands together.

"More than you wanted to know? Truth to tell, I wasn't sure it would work."

"You weren't sure." His voice, instead of being cracked and harsh, came out smooth and velvet, as it had over the enhanced vocal system in his lair.

"I knew you wouldn't sit still while I tested it on you, so I gave you the whole dose at once," she said. "I'd planned to track you down in Pas City, but when you turned up at my gate, I saw my opportunity."

"What were you going to do, sneak up behind me and empty a hypo into my neck?"

"Something like that."

Calder turned, his gaze burning. She'd never felt anything like that heavy stare, even though his face was still wet with tears.

Then he started to laugh.

Laughter echoed across the bathroom and boomed into the hall. Calder swept Katarina into his arms and spun her around and around, laughing like a maniac.

"You crazy, stubborn, insane woman. Why the hell do you waste so much time on a wreck like me?"

Katarina looked at him uncertainly. He was laughing and crying and telling her she was nuts for trying to help him. "Does that mean you're happy I did this?"

"You have to be the craziest woman I've ever met." He slowed the spinning and cupped Katarina's face with one hand. "With the most beautiful eyes and the sexiest smile. And a fine little ass I always want to spank." He touched her forehead with his. "Why, Katarina? Why waste so much on a Shareem?"

"I think I've told you why."

Calder set her down, caught her face in his hands and kissed her. The kiss turned brutal, and Katarina didn't care.

His skin was hot, the cure still working on him. Anyone else would be flat on their back, groaning. Calder smiled, kissed her, laughed.

Katarina stepped back to admire her work. His body was as whole and sleek as Braden's, but Calder was a little taller than Braden, a little broader of shoulder. A giant of a man. A few scars remained where he'd been rebuilt, organs outward, but the rest of his skin was tight and strong.

His face—it was incredible. He'd pulled his hair out of the way, revealing strong bone structure, the lift of his cheekbones, the entirety of his slow smile. She'd been right—his smile made him beautiful, sexy, amazing.

Katarina thought he'd want to stay here in the bathroom looking at his new, restored self, but Calder laughed again, yanked her off her feet and carried her into the bedroom. For the rest of the evening and all through the night, he showed her that what he'd done before as The Beast was nothing to what he could do for pure joy.

* * * * *

Braden walked into Judith's bar, fighting a hangover. Katarina's departure had made the apartment feel empty, so he'd filled it every night with sex. One woman, two, three—he'd entice whoever he could back home with him and go at it all night. As a result, the apartment was a mess and his head hurt like hell.

Judith gave Braden a warm smile as he crossed the threshold and croaked a request for water. Judith looked as sexy as ever tonight. Maybe after his head stopped pounding, he'd take her upstairs.

A Shareem he didn't know sat at the table in the corner. He'd taken the chair against the wall, the one reserved for the rare times Calder showed up.

What an arrogant asshole. He leaned back, watching Braden with waiting eyes. He wore a simple white, tight tunic that bared his arms, typical for many Shareem. The tunic emphasized that he was big and built. Aiden would probably give the man a once-over, if only to make Ky jealous.

Braden rubbed his forehead, willing the headache to die. "Hey, Judith, who's this?"

Judith grinned as she set Braden's mug of water on the table across from the other Shareem. Her eyes held excitement. Maybe the Shareem shit had already coerced Judith upstairs. *Bastard.*

"Don't you know?" Judith asked him.

Braden peered at the Shareem, wishing his head didn't hurt so much. He gulped water, blinking away the blariness.

"He has a hangover," the strange Shareem said. The voice was warm and rich, somehow familiar. "How many women was it last night, Braden? Your record is five. How drunk did you have to get them?"

"Hey, friend, who the hell –"

His fingers went cold and the mug crashed to the floor. The Shareem smiled at him, something Braden had never seen on that particular Shareem's face. But he knew the eyes that gazed at him so sardonically, the mocking tone of voice.

"Calder?"

"Braden."

"Calder, what the fuck?"

"You act like you've never seen me before."

"I haven't." Braden looked the man up and down, trying not to let his jaw drop. The only time Braden had seen Calder's full body – weeks ago when Braden had gone after Katarina – it had been pink-white flesh ruined with scars. His features had been pulled and distorted, his body wrong.

This man looked like any Shareem born out of a DNAmo vat. Strong body, brown skin, clear blue eyes. Even his hair looked sleeker, healthier.

"Shit," Braden said. "She did it. Katarina did this, didn't she?"

"Did you know about it?"

"No. But she's a fucking genius. Where is she?"

"At my apartment. She wanted me to come here alone, to see if you'd recognize me. You failed the test."

"You bastard." Braden wanted to laugh and laugh. Calder had fooled him all right, the shithead. He'd been friends with Calder for years, and it always bothered him that he couldn't help the man, that deeply fucked-up Shareem.

Along comes cute little Katarina d'Arnal, and weeks later Calder is sitting here, whole and strong and happy.

"I want to kiss her," Braden said. He slid into his seat, gladly picking up the ale that Judith deposited in front of him. His headache had suddenly fled.

Calder lost his smile. "You touch her, you're dead."

Braden laughed, feeling good. "It's like that, is it? You poor son of a bitch."

"Who's a poor son of a bitch?" a voice growled behind him. It was Ky, wandering into Judith's in much the same state Braden had been.

Braden started to answer then shut up. No wonder Judith had grinned so hard at him. This was fun.

Aiden's body warmed Braden's side as the tall level-one Shareem slid into the seat beside him. "Who's your friend?"

Braden buried his mouth in ale as Aiden ran his gaze over Calder's body. Ky took a seat on Braden's other side, pulling pretty Brianne d'Aroth onto his lap. The man didn't take chances when there were too many other Shareem nearby, especially ones he didn't know.

Brianne, smarter than either of her lovers, got it at once. Her eyes lit up but she said nothing.

Calder gave Aiden a cool stare. "If you don't stop looking at me like that, Aiden, your face meets the table."

"Hey, I can't help admiring a pretty Shareem. Ky's not pretty at all."

"Face," Calder repeated. "Table."

Brianne bleated a laugh. Ky looked at Calder...truly looked at him. "Holy fuck. What happened to you?"

Aiden was the last to catch on. He got out of his seat so fast he knocked it over. "Calder?"

"That's what I said," Braden chortled.

"Shareem are slow," Brianne said, smiling. "Look at his eyes. Look at *him*. It's Calder."

Braden slid his arm around Judith's waist as she came back with more ale. "Did you recognize him, Judith?"

"Not the minute he walked in. I thought he was just a Shareem I hadn't met. Then I thought about how odd that was—a Shareem I didn't know? But the way he moved, the way he looked at me. I knew."

"Women are more perceptive," Brianne agreed.

Ky snorted. "Women stare at Shareem more than other Shareem do. Except Aiden."

Aiden lifted his hands. "Cured. I'm all yours, Ky."

"Oh, lucky me."

"Where's Katarina?" Brianne asked. "She's responsible for the new you, isn't she?"

"She is."

Calder set his glass of ale down carefully and rose. No more hiding in shadows, no more watching the others from behind face-concealing cloths, no more shielding his body. His tunic reached mid-thigh, baring legs to the soft sandals most Shareem favored. He looked—normal. For a Shareem.

He picked up his sun-blocking robes but draped them over his arm as he sauntered past them.

"Katarina is waiting for me, gentlemen. I have an appointment with her."

"The come-to-my-lair-pretty-lady kind of appointment?" Braden asked. His body got hot thinking about the last time he'd seen Katarina in Calder's lair.

"Yes." Calder's smile was quiet. "And no, Braden, you're not invited."

"Selfish asshole."

"You got that right."

Calder gave them all another smug grin, turned his back and walked out. He slid on his sun-blocking robes as he went, and Braden saw him strolling down the street, looking around in wonder, like a prisoner finally freed.

* * * * *

Katarina finished lighting the candles, giving the room a delicate glow. She extinguished the lighting stick and set it aside, remembering how intrigued and frightened she'd been the first time she'd come here.

Water skimmed down the copper sheet Calder had made her face, her hands in the liquid. He'd played with her, made her feel wild and wicked for the first time in her life.

Here too he'd made her wear the tiny, tight leather dress, and he'd introduced her to discipline. Katarina had never known she'd like a man slapping her rear, but she did. She liked it with his hand, and she'd liked it with his leather strap.

Calder had told her to come here and wait for him. He wouldn't say how long he'd be away or when he'd arrive. He expected her to obey.

Katarina shivered. What they'd done in her house, before he'd discovered his healed skin, had taken her places she'd never gone.

Afterward, he'd taken her even more places. He'd given her a true taste of what women had willingly come here for him to do. Calder had been her master, and she'd begged him to do anything he wanted.

What would he do today?

Her opening tightened in anticipation. He'd told her to put on new clothes he'd bought her, a tight black corset, no panties, garters and stockings.

Katarina looked at herself in the reflective sheeting of the waterfall and smiled. She was sexy as hell.

She slid her fingers between her legs, finding herself warm and wet. Calder could keep her waiting a long time, but at least he'd taught her to relieve some of her own tension.

Katarina closed her thighs over her fingers, squeezing hard. She groaned with the beginnings of climax just as a door chime rang.

"Blast." Katarina jerked her fingers free then she quivered in excitement.

Calder? Or someone delivering mail? She made her way through the secret panel to Calder's apartment, pulled on sun-blocking robes from the hooks near the back door to cover herself and opened the door.

A woman stood there, not a patroller or a delivery person. Her gown and shielding robes looked costly, but she wasn't Bor Nargan. Her forehead was too high, her eyes too large, and she didn't cover her face.

"Where is the Shareem named Calder?"

"Not here."

The woman pushed Katarina aside with surprising strength and looked around.

"I *said*, Calder isn't here," Katarina repeated. "Can I take a message?"

The woman focused on Katarina again, her gaze sharpening. "Don't you know who I am?"

A rude, pushy bitch? "Sorry, no."

"I am Lady Demata from Delta-Terra. Suffice to say, I'm the richest woman in four sectors—and I made myself that way. I'm not accustomed to men who don't keep appointments and then make me wait."

"Calder canceled all his appointments." Or so he'd said.

"Why?" She glared at Katarina. "Are you his errand girl? Be nice to me, sweetie. I might ask him to call you in to help. Maybe we can both use your services. Or just use you."

Katarina drew back in distaste. Calder had said that many of the women who'd come to him disgusted him, and she now understood why.

"Calder is closed for business," Katarina said in a crisp voice. "You can leave now."

"I didn't travel several dozen light years and ten dusty miles to be turned away by a lackey. He already put me off twice." She reached behind her and slammed the door then pulled a pistol out of her robes and pointed it at Katarina. "Let me into this lair of his, *now*."

Chapter Fourteen

Calder knew something was wrong the minute he entered his apartment. He smelled an alien perfume that wasn't Katarina's, felt a coldness in the air.

Katarina.

He'd walked back home filled with anticipation. Katarina waited for him, ready to play. He'd had no doubt she'd wear what he left for her; that she'd put it on and grow excited as she waited.

Calder wondered if she'd started touching herself, unable to resist the urge. He got hard picturing her stretched out on the black sheets, her legs spread, her hands working, her eyes closed in pleasure.

But when he walked into his apartment he froze, every enhanced sense telling him Katarina was in danger.

Quietly he slipped off his robes and crossed to the small control room where he could see all parts of his lair without being seen. From here, he used to talk to the waiting ladies, instruct them, watch them in cams that sent him feeds from each corner.

He didn't need all the cams to see Lady Demata, the woman who'd been harassing him more than any other – holding a pistol on Katarina.

Shit.

His first impulse was to scream at the woman to get the hell away from Katarina. But he made himself remain silent, fearing he'd startle her into shooting.

Making no noise, he left the overview room and slid back the section of wall that led to the lair. He'd reach the woman, disarm her and throw the bitch out.

"If Calder told you he refunded your money, then he did," Katarina was saying. "Go back home and find it."

"It won't be enough to compensate me," the woman snapped. "*I want him.*"

"For your twisted fantasy?"

Calder's heart pounded. He loved that Katarina was so brave, but now was not the time for courage.

"*Your twisted fantasy is that he's in love with you, isn't it?*" Lady Demata ranted as Calder made his quiet way toward them. "You believe you've tamed him, but I have news, darling. I know much about Calder. He's serviced friends of mine. He figures out what you want and then he gives it to you. That's the beauty of him. That's why everyone wants him. I have some very interesting fantasies I want to play out. They'd shock you."

"Calder is different now."

"I'm sure every woman hopes so. Do you really think he'd fall in love with you? I wonder how he'll use that fantasy to torture you."

"Because you're leaving, you'll never know."

Lady Demata's mouth set. "Bitch!" She shot one of the candles, which exploded into wax and flame. "I'm going to let him do to me what no man has ever done. Do you want to watch? Maybe that will cure you of thinking he's domesticated."

Katarina started to answer but Lady Demata shot again. Calder leapt at Demata and grabbed her arm, and the shot went wide. A net of energy slammed out of the pistol, frying part of the roof and searing shut the door to his apartment.

"Shit!" Calder shouted. "Katarina, get out of here!"

He hit the ground as Lady Demata shot again, lightning forking across the room. "Who the hell are *you*?" she demanded. "I want The Beast."

"He's not home." Calder got swiftly to his feet at the same time Katarina hit the woman in the back.

Lady Demata stumbled and went down but before Calder could reach for her, she swung her arm around and shot at Katarina.

Katarina dove, but a lash of energy caught her side. She screamed, landed on the floor...and lay still.

The sound that came from Calder's throat was primeval and savage. Lady Demata shot wildly, not trying to kill Calder, he realized, but trying to destroy his lair. Payback.

The polished copper waterfall exploded into shards of hot metal. The next shot made the bed burst into flame, the third sent the candles rocketing around the room in little combustions.

Calder tackled the woman. She wanted The Beast, she'd get him.

The real Beast—the one who protected the woman he loved.

Another shot seared open the wall, baring wiring and pipes. An explosion shook the building. Calder yanked the pistol away from Lady Demata, powering it down. He locked his arm around her waist and dragged her to the door to the green maze, shoving her through. "Get out!" he screamed.

Lady Demata, looking scared now, gathered her robes and fled.

Calder turned back.

His lair was engulfed in flames. They spilled from the walls and ceiling where the energy pistol had ripped open the light, heating and cooling systems. The rainspouts sprang to life but did little to dampen the fire fed by the fuel in the pipes.

Katarina lay unmoving on the other side of the wall of flames—and he saw a flame crawl onto her robes.

"Bloody fucking hell!"

The fire brigade would never get there on time. Would they even hurry when they discovered it was a Shareem residence that triggered the city alarm? They might move to save the buildings on either side, but it would be too late for the Shareem's dwelling, and no one would much care.

The intense heat transported Calder back twenty years. He heard again the screams of the two women trapped inside the room that was supposed to be safe for them. He

smelled the flames, the acrid stench of burning flesh, the choking smell of plastic and wiring.

Memories of pain flashed through him so intensely it made him sick. He saw again the fire engulf his body as he grabbed each woman and flung her to safety. He remembered lifting his hands and seeing the fire burning him, consuming him, greedily eating him alive.

He'd fallen on his side, thigh flung over his bare cock, curling in on himself in instinctive preservation. Then he'd felt a weight on his body, agony screaming through him, then nothing.

Until he'd woken, a wreck of a man in hellacious pain while researchers coolly talked about killing him.

It took a split second for this to flash through his mind. In the next instant he saw Katarina, her shy look when he'd first come to her clinic, her need to help him pouring from her.

Then her wonder when she'd come to his lair, her compassion when she touched his face. *This must have hurt you so much.* Her generosity in figuring out a way to heal his skin, no matter how much it cost her in time and resources. She hadn't done it for the sake of experimentation or to advance research.

She'd done it for him.

For The Beast.

For Calder.

Calder dove through the flames. He lifted Katarina in his arms and ran back through the fire, feeling it catch his hair, his tunic, his skin. She wore thick sun-blocking robes, thank the gods, and though flames had caught them, they'd protect her from the worst of it.

She opened her eyes and stared at Calder in horror. Calder shoved her down onto the tile floor in the maze, rolling her away from him. The flames in her robes extinguished and she scrambled to her feet, starting back for him.

"Get out!" he tried to shout.

His own body was already burning, his face melting—*just like last time*—and his voice wouldn't work. He lifted his hands and saw the flames consuming the beautiful skin Katarina had just given him. Her gift. Because she loved him.

Calder threw himself onto the floor, rolling, trying to put the fire out. He smothered some of the flames but the burning room exploded outward, engulfing him and the greenery he'd filled the place with. It was dying with him.

"I love you, Katarina," he said.

It came out a croak. Then a weight fell on him, and all was darkness.

* * * * *

"He's conscious," a male voice whispered. "Gods, how can he be conscious?"

Calder dragged his eyes open. The pain of the tiny movement nearly killed him.

He could see nothing but a gray haze and lumps of darker gray. He summoned all the air in his lungs and forced his lips to form words.

"Fuck you, Braden."

"Whew," Braden said. "At least he's not crazy."

"Calder."

Katarina's warm voice was the most beautiful thing in the world. Too bad Calder wasn't. Here he was again, a black husk of a man stretched out on a slab.

He started to laugh, a harsh, ugly sound.

"Don't." Something cool touched his face. "Don't move at all. I'm going to give you something for the pain and something to make you sleep. Then Dr. Laas and I are going to fix you."

"Don't want to sleep." If he slept, he might never wake again, never see Katarina again.

"Foolish boy." Dr. Laas' clear voice, rife with cynical intelligence, reached his ears. "I can't rebuild you while you're twitching and moaning. You really must stop letting burning buildings fall on you."

"Bite me, Doc."

He heard a squirt of air and then his body relaxed, his already-blurred vision going black.

But this time things were different. This time his friends were around him—he sensed Braden and the taller mass of Rees, with Rees' true love Talan hovering nearby. He smelled Judith's perfume. Overlaid with that, the oils Aiden liked to use on Ky and Brianne. So that threesome had showed up too.

His friends had come to him, had brought Dr. Laas, a woman who would be arrested and probably terminated on sight. She'd risked her life to come here—or to have him brought to her. He didn't know where the hell he was.

Best of all, Katarina was there. Calder felt her breath touch his face, smelled her sweet scent.

The last time he'd been dying, he'd been surrounded by cold researchers, interested in him only for their DNA samples. This time he had friends who cared for him. And Katarina.

"Katarina," he whispered, loving the feel of her name.

"Shh. Sleep now."

He managed to move his lips to form one more sentence. "I love you."

He sensed her bending forward to catch his words, heard the little sob in her throat. "I love you too, Calder."

The world was a fine place.

* * * * *

"Calder."

Hours later, Katarina let her tears fall on Calder's hand, bandaged and coated with healing oils.

His one unbandaged eye opened and his lips twitched. "Hey, baby."

She exhaled in relief. He wasn't angry or morose. He smiled like he hadn't been so happy in his life.

"You're going to be fine," she said in her best doctor manner. "I injected you with my nano-Shareem cure again." She bit her lip. "It might hurt a little."

"It's excruciating," Calder said.

Alarmed, she reached to the tubes snaking out of machines above him. He caught her arm in surprisingly strong fingers. "No. I want to stay awake. To look at you."

Katarina let go of the painkiller line and sank back down.

"I thought I'd lost you in there," he said, his voice like gravel.

"I thought I'd lost *you*." She caressed his fingers where they were whole. "They arrested that Lady Demata. For negligence with a firearm."

"Yeah?"

"They let her go though, since she was from Delta-Terra and no one wants to anger Delta-Terran traders. Besides, the patrollers said the only damage was to a Shareem and his home. She was escorted to her transport, but that's it."

"Figures."

"Brianne and Talan are furious. They filed a formal protest."

"That's nice."

"I'm sorry about your lair. It's pretty much destroyed."

"I don't give a rat's ass about my lair. But I want to strangle the woman for hurting you. Let Brianne and Talan do their worst."

"But she didn't hurt me. I got only a touch of the blast, and my robes protected me for the most part."

Calder's eye narrowed as he studied her face. He let go of her hand to trace the burn scar that ran from her cheek and down her neck. "You got burned."

"A little. From the fire."

"Didn't it heal right? I want it healed."

"It doesn't hurt anymore. Dr. Laas helped."

"Then why is the scar still there? You're not Shareem, and you're rich. You're allowed to have the best human skin replacement in the galaxy."

"I didn't want to heal it."

Calder traced the path again, his fingers warm. "Why not?"

"Because I want to know a little bit how you feel. How you felt. Disfigured—though I know this is nowhere near what happened to you."

"Sweetheart, you don't want to know that."

"But I do. It makes me feel closer to you."

"Why the hell would you want to be close to me? I'm a mess. I don't mean my body. I mean in here." He tapped his head. "They made me crazy."

"Because I love you." Katarina wasn't afraid to say the words anymore, whether he wanted to hear them or not. "If you don't want me to stay with you, if you want me to send you home when you're better and never see you again, that's fine. But I'll always love you." She touched the scar on her cheek. "And through this, I'll remember you."

"Don't talk bullshit."

"You can shut me out of your life if you want. But too bad, you can't shut me out of my own thoughts."

"I meant it's bullshit that I'd never want to see you again. I want to see you always. Every day. If I heal, I want you where I can touch you any time I want."

She swallowed, her throat tight. "You'll heal. I promise."

"Then you'll stay with me." His hand clamped down on hers again. "Understand? Because I love you, Katarina. I've never loved anyone before, but I know I love you. I'm not letting you go. All right?"

Katarina couldn't stop her smile, though tears slid from her eyes at the same time. "All right." She kissed his lips. "I can live with that."

"So you'll stay?"

"I kind of have to. This is my house."

"Good." Calder let his eye close, his body and the drugs drawing him back into healing sleep. "Because if you want to leave me, I'll have to spank you."

Katarina's heart sped, her entire body tingling in anticipation. "Spank me anyway," she whispered. "I'm looking forward to it."

Epilogue

Six months later

"Behold, the woman who tamed The Beast."

Braden slid into his place at Judith's bar and grinned across the table at Calder and Katarina. Calder held Katarina a little closer, liking the feel of her backside on his lap.

It had taken a long time for him to completely heal, but his skin was mostly in place and mostly whole. He still had a few burn scars on his face and a couple snaking down his neck and his arms, but he had ceased to cover them up. Let the world see what he'd done to save the woman he loved.

The night was hot and the patrons sat languidly, sipping cool drinks. Judith flirted with a human space captain who sat at the bar, the man flicking curious glances at the Shareem.

"The Beast is gone," Calder said to Braden.

"That's what I mean," Braden said. "Too bad though, eh, Katarina? No monster ravishing you in his lair."

Katarina stretched, which pressed her breasts enticingly into Calder's side. "I don't know. We manage to have a lot of fun at home."

Calder lived with Katarina now, despite the shock of her neighbors. He'd let his wrecked place go without qualm, rescuing the very few belongings he treasured. Katarina was the only treasure he wanted.

"I'll bet." Braden's look turned wistful. "Tell me a little?"

Katarina gave Calder an inquiring look, and he answered with a nod. Let Braden eat his heart out.

"I like the restraints," she said. "Calder has all kinds of them. I don't know where he gets them."

Braden's gaze went glassy. "Certain vendors cater to level threes."

"Yesterday, he dismissed all the servants and tied me to the railings on my staircase. There I was on the stairs, face-up, naked and spread-eagled, unable to move. Anyone could have come over and seen me like that. And done whatever they wanted to me."

Braden made a strangled noise in his throat.

Calder recalled the "lesson" he'd taught Katarina. He'd left the house entirely and returned a half-hour later, coming upon her as though he were a visitor who'd found a delectable woman displayed for his use.

He remembered that he'd meant to wander the city for an hour or so before returning, but the thought of her waiting for him drastically cut the time. He had to have her before he died.

Katarina had begged him to be good to her. Calder hadn't listened. He'd taken out the level-three toys he'd purchased on his outing and fucked her with every single one of them. Then, thinking he was about to explode, he'd turned her over and fucked her himself.

Calder was already hard, and he watched Braden's skin flush as Katarina continued. "Calder has taught me to take it in the ass. He taught me gently at first, but now I'm learning to take it rough."

Calder followed the swallow down Braden's throat. "Really?" the man croaked.

"He says I should be ready to take two cocks very soon."

Braden nearly knocked over the table getting up. "How about now?"

Katarina looked at Calder, her eyes twinkling. His bad, wicked baby—he'd taught her well. He'd dared her to get Braden worked up if they saw him today, and she'd done it in thirty seconds flat.

"Want to?" he asked her.

Katarina's eyes widened. He hadn't told her that part.

"I..." She looked back at Braden, who was begging for it with his whole body. "I think I would. If it's all right with you."

Calder nuzzled her ear. "You ask permission nice, sweetheart. I think you're ready for two Shareem. I want you to have that. I want to hear you scream in pleasure."

"I think I'd like that too."

"So can we go?" Braden asked. He must not have released today – he looked like he was ready to drag Katarina across the table and screw her right there. He'd never make it to her house up on the hill.

Calder took pity on him. "Judith." He gestured to the door that led to her stairwell. "May we?"

Judith looked up from her pilot, absorbed enough in him to not ask to join them. "Go ahead. Don't leave it a wreck."

"We won't," Katarina said. She wouldn't. Katarina was an incredibly tidy person, even though she had all those servants to clean up after her.

Braden headed up the stairs without waiting. Calder gave Katarina a deep kiss and led her up after him.

* * * * *

Judith had a room upstairs set up for sex. Calder had never been in it but Braden obviously had, because he led them to it immediately and seemed to know his way around it. Judith had planned well—in addition to a bed, she had a vertical padded rack to which a person could be tethered for either serious or playful bondage. She didn't stock floggers and manacles and the like because most Shareem brought their own, each knowing their sex toys as well as musicians knew their instruments.

As Katarina stood gaping at the setup, Calder ordered her to strip.

He loved this part, Calder thought as Katarina's clothes slid from her body. He loved watching her breasts emerge from the confining silk, nipples tightening as his gaze trained on them, loved it when she bent over to slide off her leggings. Her round

backside beckoned his cock, and usually he was up against her as soon as the cloth fell to the floor.

Today he let her finish without touching her, not missing how Braden's body went rigid at the sight. Jealousy touched him but Braden had been brought along for Katarina's pleasure, nothing more. Braden was the sex toy today.

Braden removed his own clothes without taking his eyes off Katarina. The man moved like a robot, entire body stiff except for his widening blue eyes.

Calder stood comfortably in the sleeveless tunic he'd taken to wearing. The black chain on his arm, identical to Braden's, indicated what he was—Shareem, still enslaved. But he'd never been so happy to show off his chains. He was enslaved to Katarina now, and that was all that mattered.

"What would turn me on," he said to Katarina, his lady love, "is to see you rocking on top of Braden, taking him deep inside."

"Yeah, that would turn me on too." Braden moved quickly to the bed, spread himself on it and pressed his thumb behind his rock-hard cock. "Don't hesitate on my account."

Katarina slanted Calder a glance. "Are you sure?"

"Obey me, Katarina. That's what I want or punishment follows."

"I'm having my punishment *now*," Braden said. "Please, I'm dying over here."

Katarina smiled. It was a hot smile, full of wickedness but also excitement and trust. She knew why Calder wanted to share with Braden, what Calder planned to do. He'd talked about it and described it, but this was the first day he'd said she was ready.

Katarina approached the bed—wise Judith had altered it to be low enough for a woman to easily mount a man—and put her hands on Braden's chest.

Calder held his breath, his blood hot, his cock pounding, as Katarina slid her thigh over Braden's hips. Braden caught her arms and helped her on then Katarina, with a little sigh, lowered herself onto his cock.

Braden's head went back. "Thank you, my friend. Oh, that's *nice*."

Katarina started to rock, impaled on Braden, her eyes closed, lost in the feeling. Her pheromones flooded the room, Calder's lady learning how to let go and take pleasure when it was offered. Only with Calder there of course. With his permission and with him watching.

Katarina opened her eyes and smiled over her shoulder at Calder. Oh yes, the woman belonged to him, and Calder belonged to *her*. She'd roped and tied him with her love and Calder didn't mind in the slightest.

Braden closed his fists. "Gods, her pussy is tight. And so damn wet. You are a generous man."

"You helped us, my friend," Calder said. If Braden hadn't made so stubbornly sure that Katarina stayed in Calder's life, Calder would still be alone, broken, ruined. The Beast. Nothing more.

Katarina had closed her eyes again, silently riding. Her round hips moved back and forth, sweat shining on her skin.

Calder couldn't take it anymore. He pulled off his tunic and loincloth, freeing his cock, which sprang out with relief. He climbed onto the bed behind Katarina and she curled back into his chest as he put his arms around her.

"Lie down on him," Calder said in her ear. "Raise your hips, like I showed you."

Katarina nodded. She lowered herself to Braden's chest, positioning herself to take Calder's cock.

Calder's heart thumped. He'd taught her so much this last month, using wands and plugs until she was ready to take his length in her ass. Now they fucked like that almost every night, Katarina blushing saying she loved it both ways.

She'd never had two cocks though. This would be a first.

Calder looked down at the lovely backside waiting for him and couldn't resist giving it a few spanks. Katarina squealed then laughed.

Next came the lube. Calder had asked Aiden, the master of sensual oils, to mix a batch for him, something that Katarina would love. The result was a smooth concoction of warm-scented lube, smelling a little of roses and sandalwood. The odor filled the room, and Katarina smiled.

"Mmm, my favorite," she murmured.

Calder slicked his fingers and worked them into her ass, gently softening and opening her. She could relax much faster now, used to his caresses and anticipating what would come.

Katarina made a happy noise when Calder parted her cheeks. He glided his cock in slowly, moving deeper the more she relaxed.

Then her eyes popped open. "Oh."

Braden smoothed his hands down her arms. "You all right, sweetheart? Calder's big."

"I can feel you both. *Inside* me. I can feel you pressing me. *Gods*."

Braden grinned. "Yeah, Shareem are pretty much gods."

"Shut up," Calder said. His teeth clenched and it was all he could do not to pump. He felt Braden too, at least the pressure of him through her walls. "Can you take us, baby?"

"Yes." Katarina's words came out between gasps. "Yes, I can. I want to."

"Good." Very slowly, Calder began his thrusts.

Braden knew how it was done. He timed his own slides in and out with Calder's, so that Katarina had a cock in her at all times. She was moaning, incoherent, her eyes closed, head lolling against Calder.

They rode her, fucked her until she screamed.

Calder closed his hand around her breast. "Do you want us to stop, love?"

"No!" Her shout rang against the ceiling. Good thing the bar was full tonight, although Calder suspected that Judith had soundproofed her sex room.

"That's my girl." Calder smiled and kissed her cheek.

Her scent surrounded him, coupled with sandalwood and roses, her warmth and her love. He loved how she made him feel, loved bringing her to ultimate pleasure like this.

Braden grabbed Calder's shoulders. His eyes were wide, the blue filling them completely. He said, "*Fuck*," and came.

A moment later, Katarina gyrated in yet another orgasm, but Calder held on. He wanted this to last forever, him inside Katarina's sweet ass, her voice filling his ears, her hair like silk under his lips.

But he had only so much stamina. Calder groaned loud as his hips pumped without his permission, and then he was spilling his seed and falling against his beloved, who was supported by the strong arms of his best friend. Katarina turned her head and kissed Calder sleepily, and Calder's heart swelled and warmed.

Braden let out a breath then laughed like he was happy. "Well, *that* was good," he said, and closed his eyes.

Calder didn't answer, content to be buried in Katarina's beautiful, *tight* ass.

"I love you," he murmured. "Love you so much."

"Love you too." Katarina's voice was hoarse from all her screaming. She smiled at him and Calder kissed her again.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Her smile turned suddenly sly. "Can The Beast come out to play?"

Calder stilled. She was slick with lube and squeezing him tight, but his heart beat in new excitement.

He scraped her hair back from her face and bit the shell of her ear. "Oh Katarina. You asked for it."

"I did."

"The Beast is all yours, love. And he's going to fuck you until you can't stand up."

“That’s what I was hoping.”

Calder growled, his excitement growing. Braden, still inside her, opened his eyes again. “Hey, can I play too?”

Calder nodded—then he and Braden did things to Katarina that would make Calder come just remembering them later.

But when they fell asleep that night in Katarina’s own house, Katarina nestled into Calder’s arms and gave him a smile that was his alone...melting The Beast’s heart.

The End

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 author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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