



Treacherous Sun

Book One of
The Nu Hayven Chronicles

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content, which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Nu Hayven Chronicles

TREACHEROUS SUN

Jade Archer

Dedication

For Pumpkin—thank you for the fireflowers sweetheart,
and for sharing your beautiful, creative heart with me.

Chapter One

Admiral Jaynous watched the two huge Deamond warriors circle each other warily. Their claws were fully extended—shiny black and over an inch long. Fangs were exposed with deadly intent and the curved horns that would normally have only just been visible through their thick, black hair had grown to wicked sharp weapons that could easily rip open a man's belly.

But it was the intensity of their eyes that was the most truly terrifying thing about the whole display. It was quite clear nothing short of a thermonuclear explosion would stop them now. A violent confrontation was inevitable.

One of the Deamonds let out a feral hiss, his black eyes changing to the red glow of battle rage as he prepared to attack. The second Deamond, a more seasoned warrior, merely flicked his tail, testing the razor sharp edges that had formed as his body prepared for the fight. He stood—loose limbed and eyes fixed but unchanged on his opponent—not giving anything away as he waited patiently for the perfect moment to strike.

With a burst of speed and agility that belied their bulky frames, the two exploded into action without warning. They launched themselves, meeting in the middle of the training mat in a tangle of snarling, ripping and tearing aggression. Nothing was spared. No movements wasted or held back.

Kicking, biting, gouging and clawing—they attacked one another furiously until finally the younger, less experienced warrior lay bleeding, pinned to the ground. A loud buzzer sounded, indicating the end of the round, but still the older Deamond refused to relent and let the younger up. Feral snarls and growls filled the arena as the young Deamond thrashed and bared his fangs in frustration.

Gradually, the red glow in his eyes dimmed and his struggling eased.

"Yield!" the defeated Deamond said in a low rumble.

Instantly, the older male jumped clear—letting the younger up, but never once lowering his guard as he backed away.

Having seen enough, Admiral Jaynous turned and made his way back through the throng of Deamonds – some cheering, others jeering and jostling each other angrily – as the next opponents were led into the fight-cage.

As vile and barbaric as it was, Jaynous was glad the cages had finally been set up on the recreation deck. Now the Deamonds could periodically pound away at each other rather than release their frustrations and aggression randomly on the crew or the other refugees *he* was accountable for. They'd had quite enough of that sort of thing in the first week of their journey. He wasn't having any of that shit on his permanent record. They could all just save it for when they weren't his personal responsibility.

Leaving the arena pits behind, Admiral Jaynous followed the corridor to the hoverlator bay – heading back to his office now he'd finished his rounds. Glancing down at his data pad, he shuffled through the mounting entries and documents that still needed to be authorised and frowned.

Damn it! Every time he thought he'd finalised everything for their 'guests' to be transferred to the *Nu Hayven* habitat ark, the administration core found more datawork that needed to be done. Someone needed to tell them time had officially run out. They'd reached the *Nu Hayven* two standard days ago and the next phase of the operation needed to begin.

And about bloody time, Jaynous grumbled to himself, scanning through the latest supply requests. Tensions were running high to say the least. Today's display in the fight-cages was nothing compared to what it had been like when the refugees from Orison had first arrived on board.

Bloody Aenjels and Deamonds! He was well and truly sick of them.

Refusing to give into the pounding headache dwelling on either race was likely to give him, Jaynous applied his thumb print and official Intergalactic Council seal to the file he'd just read and moved on to the next entry. He relied on years of familiarity with his flagship to make his way back to his office, using the time to wade through some of the endless datawork no one had ever warned him was on the other side of his promotion to Admiral. A quick scan of the latest document revealed the same dry, boring details of contracts and expenditure. Jaynous lost interest around the second sentence, but ploughed on regardless.

Turning a corner without even bothering to look up, Jaynous approved the data entry he had just read then stopped at his favourite spot aboard his flagship, *The Bounty*. Through

the view port that filled the entire left wall of the corridor, the convoy of cruisers and bio-pods stood out starkly against the star-studded, inky black expanse of space. In the distance the massive hull of the *Nu Hayven* could be seen, ready and waiting for the bio-pods to be attached and for life to go on.

Jaynous barely managed to restrain the derisive snort that built in his chest. *Yeah! Right.* Aenjels and Deamonds had been at each other's throats for the best part of two hundred years, the chances of them learning to live together peacefully were slim to none. And yet the Intergalactic Council on Centre had decided in its infinite wisdom to build them a habitat ark. One that cost hundreds of billions of credits that could have been spent on projects more likely to succeed. And what did they expect in recompense for this extraordinary generosity? Nothing less than for Aenjels and Deamonds to learn to live and work together as an Emergency Response and Peace Keeping Force.

Several explicit, highly improper words, in a number of intergalactic languages, threatened to tumble out from between his tightly compressed lips.

Still the battle wasn't over yet. Something might still be salvaged from this bureaucratic cluster fuck. He'd just have to...manipulate things a little. Even now he had plans in motion. Plans for a little...something – to get things started.

"Sir?"

Admiral Jaynous turned his head to see his aide, Merrek Lafortea, standing ramrod straight a few respectful feet away formally waiting for permission to deliver his report.

The man looked like he would snap before he bent in his crisp, navy blue spacecorps uniform. He was the very picture of military precision and efficiency. Of course, he was also a Council spy, but no one was perfect. Every detail of the rescue mission was undoubtedly being streamed straight to his father, High Councilman Enrico Lafortea.

Right now, Lafortea junior looked like he'd eaten a rather large, extremely unpleasant bug from Org Minor—his features pinched and strained. Jaynous stifled a sigh. The man always reacted this way when he had inauspicious reports to give. Almost as if anything less than perfection offended his sensibilities.

"How are they today, Lafortea?" Jaynous asked, keen to get whatever it was out in the open—like ripping off a sutureplast, fast was often best in Jaynous' opinion.

Lafortea glanced down and thumbed through his personal data pad.

"The Deamonds are restless and bored, sir. They are a very...physical race. They're finding the cramped conditions on the cruisers...challenging." It was a tactful euphemism for most of the warrior Deamonds being mad enough to chew through flexisteel. They hadn't taken the inability to do anything to save their world well and the current inactivity on the transport vessels was only exacerbating the situation.

"And the Aenjels?"

The pause Laforteau indulged in before addressing the question spoke volumes. "Despondent would seem to be the best way to describe them. I think they miss their home world quite keenly. They had a very...nurturing relationship with the planet, sir."

Jaynous glanced down at the data pad in his hand, wanting to throw it against the wall in disgust. Instead, he closed the file with a decisive flick of his thumb. The datawork would have to wait—he just wasn't in the mood. "How many reported fights this week?"

"One hundred and fifty-four major incidents, sir. No deaths this week, however."

Jaynous clamped down on the colourful curses he once more wanted to give vent to. They had only been in transit for three weeks and already there had been over a dozen killed as tensions and frustration fuelled by anger and loss threatened to send them all into meltdown. Injuries numbered in the thousands. And yet someone on the Council still thought this was a good idea. What exactly would it take for them to get their heads out of their asses?

The project should never have been given to a civilian population in the first –

"Only fifty-five Aenjels remain on suicide watch in sick-bay, sir."

"Excellent." Jaynous wasn't sure he managed to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

He wasn't sure he cared at this point. Except, of course, he had to keep up appearances. The last thing he needed was Laforteau running off to tell Daddy on him.

Jaynous took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Yes, it was definitely time to start taking more...proactive steps towards seeing his plan come to fruition.

"Please have the executive officers join me in my office, Laforteau. I think it's time we had a little chat."

* * * *

Mykel stared out into the cold, empty expanse of space at the bright glow that was his home system's final burst of brilliance. The supernova that had claimed their world was stunning, despite the soul-searing tragedy it represented.

Such a beautiful end for such a beautiful world.

Mykel wiped away the single, silvery tear that slid down his cheek. He repositioned his wings to wrap around his shoulders—unconsciously seeking comfort in their soft embrace.

Placing a hand against the portal, he let the icy chill seep into his palm as he sent out a mourning and peace prayer for those who had been lost. So many had decided to stay with the world they loved, including his mother and father. Damn stubborn pair.

A hurt, cynical part of his heart suspected it had all ended up being just too hard for them. The pain of losing their world. The thought of having to pick themselves up and start again. The inevitable changes that would need to be made.

Mykel lowered his head, no longer able to watch their sun's final decay. No matter how hard he had begged, pleaded or cajoled, his parents had refused to leave Orison. They had simply trained him as quickly as possible to assume leadership and settled in to die. Mykel felt the pain like a fresh slash to his heart.

Why weren't we more important than a dead lump of rock...? Why wasn't I?

Nothing survived on the surface of the planet by the end. The only way life had managed to struggle on was in specially constructed bio-pods, most of which had been brought with them. It was just dirt and rocks and death everywhere else by the end. And now, not even that.

When the Intergalactic Council had offered the *Nu Hayven*, he thought everyone would jump at the chance to survive and carry on. But no. Many had refused to leave—preferring to die with their world. As nature intended, they said.

Mykel snorted angrily as another tear tracked down his cheek. There was nothing natural about what had happened to their world.

A hundred years ago, when he'd been barely old enough to leave his home nest, something catastrophic had happened. Something Mykel didn't believe for one moment was a natural process. Some even blamed the Intergalactic Council—the sun had been fine before they began sending diplomatic envoys to negotiate peace treaties between Aenjels and Deamonds. But if they were a part of the problem, which Mykel seriously doubted, they had

ultimately proven to be their salvation as well. After all, the Intergalactic Council had built them a habitat ark, the *Nu Hayven* – their last refuge.

Mykel still couldn't understand how it had ended up being necessary though. By all rights it shouldn't have been. Two hundred years ago, their solar system was young and vibrant and strong. Their sun had been countless millennia away from burning out. It had never even crossed anyone's mind that it would die. Then everything changed. The sun began to decay more rapidly than anyone had ever documented in recorded intergalactic history.

No one understood it. No one could explain it. It just happened. Like a cancer, taking over the fiery body at the centre of their lives and slowly eating away at it until one final explosion claimed its heart.

"Sir?"

Mykel spun around to face the military aide at the door. He hoped the man hadn't seen the tears. The last thing he needed was for the Intergalactic Council to get word that the Aenjel's leader was weak and weepy. He had to present a strong front if he was going to make sure his people were well cared for. They were orphans now in a cold universe. And the neighbours were anything but friendly.

"Yes," Mykel answered as steadily as he could manage.

"Your comm link appears to have malfunctioned again, sir."

Mykel fought down the sense of chagrin at being caught with his comm link turned off. He hated the little device that kept him tethered to this floating hunk of flexisteel.

"Admiral Jaynous would like a word, if you please," the aide continued when Mykel made no reply to his subtle censure.

Mykel stifled the sigh that threatened to escape his lips. *What is it this time?* He resettled his wings in irritation. The last few weeks on board the transport vessels had been...difficult. He'd found himself in front of the stern rescue fleet's commander on more occasions than he cared to recall. Jaynous had little patience for Aenjels in mourning apparently.

Inclining his head, even though it wasn't truly necessary – they both knew he really didn't have a choice in the matter – Mykel followed the aide out of the room and down the sleek, sterile corridor to the Admiral's office.

Why are all the cruisers so lifeless and cold? he wondered as they walked. *Was this what they had to look forward to on the Nu Hayven?* Mykel could see many long hours spent in the biopods if it was. And he knew he wouldn't be alone. No Aenjel could live like this for long. Feeling more and more depressed with every step, Mykel entered the Admiral's large, austere office...and froze.

He needed to continue into the room. He should look away and acknowledge the rest of the executive officers he could sense scattered around the room. He should be focussing on Admiral Jaynous, wherever he was. But he couldn't. His eyes simply would not cooperate as they drank in the tall, dark-haired Deamond standing in the shadowy lee of the view portal on the far wall.

Damn! Every line and inch of the man was caught in perfect relief against the star-spattered background of black. Tall and well-muscled, with broad shoulders and a trim waist, the Deamond was all hard, hot warrior. Which, of course, shouldn't have turned Mykel on, but did. In a big way. Every damn time he laid eyes on the man.

Even though the shadows hid his face, Mykel knew every nuance and expression well enough to imagine Lusaffar's wicked grin. The fact that Mykel was standing frozen in the doorway would amuse Lusaffar to no end. The tiny points of his fangs would be just peeking out over his bottom lip and his black eyes would be filled with derision.

As he watched, Lusaffar tilted his head in a mocking bow. Light glinted off the two tiny black horns that grew from the top of his head and his thin, mobile tail snaked out in a lazy undulation behind him. It was enough to snap Mykel back to reality. He hurried into the room, trying desperately to avoid eye contact and ignore the gorgeous Deamond that haunted his thoughts – night and day.

Mykel badly wanted to shake his head to clear his mind, but he restrained himself. Instead, he nodded politely to his second in command, Yoeseph, who stood talking quietly with his Deamond counterpart—a tall, black-skinned Deamond named Baylelle. Unfortunately, they seemed to be the only Aenjel and Deamond making an effort to get along.

Looking around the room he spotted Gayebreel and Cayle the *Nu Hayven's* military specialists—standing as far apart as they could get, eyeing each other warily. Doctor Asura was pointedly ignoring his peer, Doctor Raffayel, by the Admiral's desk. In fact, the room

was full of Aenjels and Deamonds—both males and females—all supposedly destined to lead Orison's survivors into their future, snubbing one another. Science officers, chief communications technicians and head flight coordinators—none of them were speaking, or even looking at their counterparts.

It was a troubling pattern that was beginning to mark all their gatherings, but Mykel's mind really wasn't paying much attention to the issue at the moment. It was still far too focussed on his own particular Deamond problem—Lusaffar.

Mykel hated the fact he couldn't control his lust around Lusaffar. It was a bad thing. A very bad thing. Lusaffar was the leader of the Deamonds. If there was anyone on board Mykel should be wary of, it was Lusaffar. Deamonds always and only ever looked after themselves. Mykel had to make sure he was there to look after the Aenjels and protect them from the Deamond's aggressive nature.

"Thank you for coming, ladies and gentlemen," Admiral Jaynous said, setting aside the two data pads he had been looking at and lacing his fingers together in front of him.

Gayebreel snorted rudely from the wall he leaned against—his arms crossed and face set, as always, in a dark sneer. Mykel knew just how Gayebreel felt. None of them had really had a choice, but the snort was still way out of line. He was going to have to deal with Gayebreel soon. If the Aenjel wasn't pulled up in the near future, he was bound to cause trouble. Mykel just wasn't sure what to do with the male.

"Blow-hard," murmured Cayle, the rare winged Deamond, shaking out his leathery appendages irritably.

Gayebreel straightened up immediately, his sneer morphing into an angry scowl as he took a threatening step towards the small, dark-haired Deamond he was supposed to work with. Cayle responded by widening his stance, readying for a fight.

Just as Mykel was about to step in and separate the two military specialists who seemed to be perpetually at each other's throat, Doctor Asura cleared his throat.

"If I have to patch either of you up again because you can't keep your hands...or fangs," he added, looking pointedly at Cayle, "to yourselves, I won't be held responsible for what bits you wake up missing."

Considering the doctor was a Deamond and looked completely serious, Mykel wasn't surprised when both Gayebreel and Cayle backed down. Doctor Raffayel looked fairly

certain his colleague would follow through as well—his eyes wide and terrified. Mykel made a mental note to check up on the slight Aenjel sometime soon.

“As I was saying,” the Admiral continued, his face calm, as if nothing untoward had happened, “the final arrangements have been made to start moving essential personnel into position so they can take over the day-to-day running of the *Nu Hayven* as quickly as possible. These are the final details and assignments. Mykel and Lusaffar, as co-commanders you’ll need to acknowledge and authorise them before we can begin the transfers.” Jaynous slid two data pads across the desk.

Mykel reached across, trying to concentrate on the information in front of him and ignore the Deamond who stepped up beside him to take the other data pad.

Within seconds, one line jumped right out and metaphorically smacked him in the head. Hard.

Floor One, Apartment A, living assignment Mykel Anghelescov and Lusaffar Ifearnan.

“I’m not sleeping with him.”

“No one asked you to,” Admiral Jaynous replied, arching an eyebrow but otherwise remaining completely impassive in the face of Mykel’s outburst.

Lusaffar, on the other hand, started a low chuckle that grated on every one of Mykel’s nerves. Around them Mykel could hear a mixture of muttered curses, sniggers, agitated wing ruffling and derisive snorts.

“I mean,” Mykel ground out between clenched teeth, “I’m not sharing quarters with him.”

“You have very little choice in the matter, Mykel. You signed a contract before you were rescued, stating you would work for and under the auspices of the Intergalactic Council. Accepting reasonable requests to share limited resources, such as living quarters, was specifically outlined in your agreement. You will *all* be expected to share with your counterparts.”

“What?!” Cayle screeched, no longer sniggering.

“No way am I fu—”

“Gayebreel!” Mykel snapped. Gayebreel looked furious, but subsided under Mykel’s stern gaze.

Mykel took a deep breath before turning back to the Admiral. "Surely on a ship the size of the *Nu Hayven* we can work out something that wouldn't require such drastic measures! Or perhaps we can look at Aenjels sharing with Aenjels and Deamonds with Deamonds." Mykel stared across at the Admiral. He refused to back down, even when the Admiral's eyes turned dark and his eyebrows knitted together in an ominous frown—a sure sign he was reaching the end of his rather limited patience.

A leader always stands firm, Mykel reminded himself. It was Father's first rule.

"I'm not impressed by the attitude I've seen developing between your two species in general, or between the executive officers specifically. I'm well aware of your peoples' history and the fact that on your home world you solved this by staying as far away from one another as possible. But I'm afraid that simply won't be practical anymore. The Intergalactic Council has one ark available and you *will* share it."

Admiral Jaynous looked around the assembled Aenjels and Deamonds harshly. Mykel wanted to reach across and wring the man's rigid neck. But he couldn't. It didn't mean he had to like it though.

"Are there any questions?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Mykel saw Lusaffar offer a bored shrug of his shoulders.

"No, sir," Mykel finally managed to reply.

Various reluctant and belligerent negative responses were offered before the Admiral continued. "You have one standard month while your people are acclimated. They can finish their training on the various ship functions to ensure a smooth transition, but after that you're on your own. You're being assigned the Morn sector, ladies and gentlemen. I suggest you get used to living and working together. The Morn sector is no place to be fighting amongst yourselves. There'll be plenty of beings wanting to take you all out without helping them along. And they certainly won't be discriminating between Aenjels and Deamonds. There are shuttles waiting to transport you all over to the *Nu Hayven* now. Collect your personal effects and make your way to the shuttle bay. Good luck, everyone. I will join you on the *Nu Hayven* for the final handover soon."

Chapter Two

The shuttle ride over to the *Nu Hayven* was uneventful. And made in complete silence. Which was fine by Lusaffar – if the little bird didn't want to talk to him, all the better as far as he was concerned.

Lusaffar watched the pretentious little pretty boy out of the corner of his eye as they moved towards the hoverlator that would take them to their quarters. Actually, Mykel wasn't all that much shorter than him, he admitted. In fact, for an Aenjel he was really quite tall and well built. The two of them were much the same size, but that was where the similarity ended, Lusaffar reassured himself.

For a start, he estimated he was at least a couple of decades older than the golden-haired boy. And with those big blue eyes and the snowy white, gilt-edged wings, Mykel had a distinctly innocent, ethereal quality about him. Something Lusaffar had never had, nor wanted.

Lusaffar suppressed an incredulous snort. And looks could be very deceiving anyway. Aenjels were some of the most manipulative, devious creatures in creation when it suited them. They would use whatever means necessary to get what they wanted – what they considered best for everyone concerned. They would just sweep in and take over, doing whatever was necessary to accomplish their goals, disregarding anyone who got in their way. Aenjels didn't care about individuals. They were too focused on protecting their precious environments and ecosystems. You couldn't trust an Aenjel as far as you could throw them. Aaronn had taught him that.

Lusaffar pushed the image of his brother's dead lover away. It was ancient history, serving only as a reminder that he needed to be on guard and prepared to defend his people.

If only this bird-man weren't so gorgeous. His dark blue eyes so beguiling. And if only Lusaffar didn't find himself craving the rare hint of a smile he sometimes caught on the boy's face. Or the other, darker desires the rest of the Aenjel's body inspired.

For weeks now, Lusaffar had found himself inexplicably drawn to the beautiful Aenjel. It was bloody annoying. The very last thing he needed was to be sharing a room with the male. That wasn't going to help the situation at all.

And the bastard was moulting all over the fucking place again!

"Hey! Can't you keep these things to yourself?" Lusaffar waved one of the offending white wing feathers at the golden-haired male and watched him blush a delicious hot pink.

Oh, fuck! That was so cute. He'd have to remember to embarrass the little bird at every opportunity.

"I can't help it," Mykel snapped back. "I drop feathers when I'm stressed, and I can't think of anything more stressful than discovering I'm about to be housed with a Deamond."

Oh! Ho! The little bird had claws. Lusaffar liked that. He liked that a lot. Of course he'd have to teach the boy some manners, but he was going to have one hell of a fun time doing it.

A hoverlator purred to a stop in front of them and the doors slid open to let them aboard.

Lusaffar let the amusingly naïve, winged male step in ahead of him, waiting until the door slid shut – sealing them into the soundproof car. Then he pounced. He grabbed Mykel by the shoulders and spun him around, pinning him to the wall.

Mykel stared back at him in shock, and Lusaffar felt himself getting caught in his own trap. He lost himself in the wide, deep blue eyes that seemed to look right down into his soul. He focused on the plump, kissable lips that begged to be sucked and nibbled. And he allowed himself to be distracted by the warm breath that feathered across his cheek.

Then the hoverlator chirped.

"Please select destination," the soft synthvoice requested politely, and the moment was gone.

Mykel's eyes narrowed and darkened with anger as he struggled to break free. But Lusaffar merely tightened his grip, while at the same time being careful not to dig his sharp claw tips into the vulnerable flesh beneath his fingers.

"How about I show you all that being housed with a Deamond can be?" Lusaffar suggested, opting for a leer and ignoring the uncomfortable awareness of just how appealing the idea really was.

"Why don't you go down to one of those fight-cages you set up on the recreation deck and beat someone unconscious?" Mykel sneered back.

"Not a bad idea. Care to join me?"

"Barbarian!"

Lusaffar sobered instantly. The contempt in the Aenjel's voice ignited a hot, hungry rage. Every irritation, tension and worry he'd felt over the last three weeks focussed in on Mykel. How dare this *Aenjel* look down on him—as if a Deamond wasn't worth wiping his boots on? As if he was just some uncivilised thug barely deserving to breathe the same air?

"Listen here, you pompous, overgrown pigeon. My people were born and bred in the Darkbelow. There were no nice, friendly fields of flowers to frolic in. No warm summer breezes to cool us down when it got a little too hot. It was dangerous. Even brutal at times. Deamonds have always had to fight to survive. Always. It's part of who we are. Would you prefer I let them exercise their natures in the common rooms and corridors?"

"No," Mykel whispered back—completely still, his eyes slightly dilated and dazed.

Lusaffar tilted his head. Something was wrong with the Aenjel. Hating himself for worrying about it, Lusaffar loosened his grip slightly. He didn't want to frighten or hurt the man. Not really. Aenjels were a funny, alien species to him. He'd had very little to do with them in the past, other than what interactions were strictly necessary to save his people and get them a place on the *Nu Hayven*. He wasn't sure what was wrong with Mykel, and he was *not* analysing why he was concerned. Not. At. All.

Leaning forward, Lusaffar breathed in the man's scent to check he was all right...and got the shock of his two-hundred-and-fifty-year life.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?"

"Stop that!" Mykel was struggling fiercely now—snapping out of his frozen state the instant Lusaffar leant forward to sniff at him.

"Mmmm, I can smell you, you know." Lusaffar moved in again to inhale the Aenjel's musk-heavy scent. "Sweet little innocent Aenjel boy's all hot for a Deamond. What would the people say?"

"I'm not—"

Lusaffar didn't let him finish. He simply moved in and took the other male's mouth aggressively—thrusting his tongue in for a fierce, demanding kiss. The shock of just how good Mykel tasted was bad enough. The stunning responsiveness was far worse.

After a gasp that only parted his lips wider for Lusaffar's kiss, Mykel was suddenly kissing him back—every bit as aggressive and demanding with his questing tongue and throaty moans. It made Lusaffar's head spin with lust and need.

Without any conscious thought to do so, Lusaffar found himself grinding his aching, hard cock against the Aenjel, delighted when he felt an answering swelling against his leg and heard an urgent moan of pleasure from the contact.

Lusaffar thrilled at the ease of his conquest. Maybe having the winged man sleep in the same room with him wouldn't be so bad after all. Although just how much sleeping he intended to let Mykel do was completely open to question. He thought it might be a long time before either of them got enough of this.

Unfortunately, just as things were getting interesting, an open emergency alarm began to sound over their comm links.

"All command personnel report to the bridge. We are under attack. Repeat, we are under attack."

* * * *

Stepping out of the hoverlator onto the bridge, Mykel tried to ignore his rapid breathing and profound awareness of Lusaffar's every move beside him. The incident with Lusaffar—the short intense kiss they had shared—had been...unsettling. But right now they had a job to do—a situation that required their full attention. He didn't need or want to think about anything else. Certainly not how incredible it had felt to finally kiss Lusaffar.

Pulling his wayward thoughts back into line, Mykel glanced around—assessing and gauging everything with an initial sweep of his eyes. The bridge of the *Nu Hayven* was a study in contradiction. Everyone was working at their stations with quick efficient movements. Orders and messages were relayed in clipped, concise sentences. But the rigid muscles and anxious expressions told a different story. The tension that laced the air—

saturating the atmosphere and assaulting the senses—hit Mykel like a physical blow. And it didn't take more than a second to appreciate why everyone was so distressed.

Fighters crisscrossed and banked, flashing across the viewscreen in vivid streaks of colourful thrusters and phaser fire. They seemed to be everywhere, surging over and around the fleet like a swarm of plague wasps. The ark rocked as a volley of energy torpedoes hit the shields and was deflected away.

The blue and grey arrows of the *Nu Hayven's* fighters scrambled to intercept and engage enemy ships as they attacked the bio-pods and refugee transports. But just as one wave was driven off, another would rush in to take its place.

The scene played out over and over again. High-energy charges and torpedoes exploded in loud bursts and screeches over the comm channel. Mykel wished the technicians that had designed the bridge systems hadn't been so eager to show off their skill. Now, one of the few benefits of space having no atmosphere was lost to them—everyone could hear the terrifying sounds of death and destruction playing out around them.

Damnation! We haven't even been aboard a full day, Mykel cursed silently. Why couldn't the universe give them a break?

Patreeshia, the young Aenjel acting as the *Nu Hayven's* communications officer for this shift, looked over with wide eyes before turning back to her workstation. The poor kid couldn't have been much more than ninety-five—barely old enough to have completed her basic training and probably never exposed to anything more deadly than a hypervid simulation.

The moment knocked Mykel back into action. He felt for her. He really did. He wished he had more experience himself. But they didn't have time for reassurance, regrets *or* self-pity right now.

Another volley of torpedoes crashed into the starboard shields, this time making the *Nu Hayven* lurch violently. Mykel stumbled, slamming into a console on his way down. White, hot streaks of pain radiated out from his cheek where it had connected sharply with the rounded corner of the desk.

But before he could complete his descent to the floor and end up in an inelegant sprawl across the deck plates, Mykel felt strong hands wrap around his upper arms and pull him

back against a solid chest. He took a moment to soak in the warm embrace, closing his eyes and breathing through the pain. His cheek throbbed and Lusaffar's arms felt so good.

Too good.

Refusing to turn and meet Lusaffar's eyes, Mykel pulled away and self-consciously straightened his tunic as he steadied himself. The last thing he needed was for the Deamond to think he couldn't even stay on his feet. Gently Mykel touched the corner of his mouth, unsurprised when his fingers came away wet with blood.

Lusaffar's eyes narrowed to slits as he focused on Mykel's red fingertips. He growled low and mean in the back of his throat, before turning away sharply. "What the fuck is going on!" he demanded, striding forward and taking the rail around the command platform in a death grip.

Mykel stepped up to take his place beside Lusaffar. He licked away the blood as it beaded at the corner of his lips and glanced sideways at the belligerent expression on Lusaffar's face. The Deamond's muscles seemed to twitch and dance under his tight black uniform. Mykel wasn't sure what was wrong with Lusaffar, but he certainly recognised the warning signs of Deamond battle rage when he saw them. Lusaffar looked about three seconds away from losing it completely. And they did *not* have time to subdue a Deamond in full battle rage.

"Do you need to step away?" Mykel asked in a barely audible undertone, hoping Lusaffar wasn't already too far gone and that their biggest problem remained the aggressors on the *outside* of the ship.

Lusaffar's head snapped around to fix him with eyes already starting to turn the tell-tale bright red of Deamond battle rage. His nostrils flared.

Mykel held his breath, concentrating very hard on maintaining eye contact – willing the agitated Deamond to calm down and focus on the problem at hand.

Finally, Lusaffar took a deep breath and closed his eyes. A moment later, he released his grip on the rail and when his eyes opened, they had returned to their normal glossy black.

"Do we have any idea who we're dealing with yet?" Mykel asked as Lusaffar composed himself.

"The marking and standard ship codes identify them as belonging to a free-privateer group," Patreeshia replied, oblivious to the battle for control taking place behind her as her fingers flew across the console.

"Bandits?" Lusaffar growled.

"A bit more organised and sophisticated than that," a tall, black-skinned Deamond interjected as he scrolled through his personal data pad – the central computer collecting and feeding it endless screens of information about their attackers. "The ships are registered to the Fennrus group."

Lusaffar growled again. Mykel couldn't agree more. Fennrus was one of the largest crime syndicates in the Morn sector. Apparently they *really* didn't like the idea of someone coming in to shake things up if they were sending out an attack before the *Nu Hayven* had even left the deep space staging area hundreds of clicks away.

"Where the hell did they come from?" Lusaffar demanded. His voice still didn't sound quite right, but Mykel was relieved to see his eyes hadn't shifted again at the news.

"The ships dropped out of hyperspace right on top of our outer alert markers."

"They must have used them to coordinate their jump." Mykel cursed the need to use the markers, but if they didn't alert hyperspace travellers to their presence, things would get a whole lot messier than repelling a few well-armed, organised criminals that used them to hone in on.

"We've been trying to contact Admiral Jaynous, but his ship was their first target. They appear to have known exactly which vessels to hit. The Admiral's communications array was knocked out in the first wave." Patreeshia glanced over at them once more, obviously looking for direction.

Mykel squared his shoulders.

"Open a broad hail. All frequencies and universal translation codes." A fission of awareness tickled down his spine. This is what he'd trained the last fifty years for. To protect his people.

"Yes, sir!" the young Aenjel replied.

"This is Intergalactic Peace Keeping Force Nu Hayven. You are in violation of the Intergalactic Peace and Emergency Services Treaty. Break off your attack."

The hollow, empty sound of the open communication channel was the only response to Mykel's demands. Then a volley of phaser fire crackled along the *Nu Hayven's* shields.

"I'll take that as a no," Mykel mumbled dryly.

"I'll take that as a *fuck you*. My turn." Lusaffar turned to the muscular, black Deamond. "Baylelle, what is our weapons and defence status?"

"All shields are currently holding. The remote defence arrays are online, but they're using quick strafing runs and massing us with drone ships. The smaller craft are evading and overwhelming most of the auto-defence settings. The electromagnetic pulse cannon is online, but the energy cells haven't finished recharging. We probably have one, maybe two good shots. But the way the attackers are mobbing the ships and bio-pods makes it impossible to use it effectively anyway. We've launched all operational fighter units, but most of the teams haven't been transferred across to the *Nu Hayven* yet. The fighters from the Admiral's ship are struggling to coordinate without their communications array."

"Send out an emergency directive transferring their orders through our secondary array," Lusaffar commanded. "Get Azrayle to coordinate until the Admiral's communication system is back up and running."

"Sir, they seem to be concentrating their efforts on the bio-pods now," Krystofer, an Aenjel operating one of the many consoles around the room, reported. "Analysis of their attack shows they're targeting the atmosphere generators. Sir, if they puncture the —"

"Bio-sphere four reports a hit on their main generator." Patreeshia's voice was tight and edged with panic.

The tension levels ratcheted up in the room. Mykel saw more than one Deamond's eyes flash an ominous red and heard wing feathers ruffle in agitation. Losing even one of the bio-pods would be a disaster for all of them.

"One more hit is likely to cause a fatal rupture," Krystofer observed, his eyes never straying from his data monitoring.

"Concentrate all fighters to driving the attack vessels away from the bio-pods."

"Wait! Did you say most of the ships out there are drones?" Mykel searched the confusing mess of ships engaged in battle on the viewscreen. "Can't we just take down the ships they're slaved to?"

"We can't pinpoint the command ships. We think they've managed to disguise them to look like the drones."

Mykel snatched his data pad from the clip at his waist.

"Patreeshia, bring me up a list of the attack vessels." Mykel waited impatiently for the information to scroll across his data pad. "Now correlate that with their outgoing communications."

"We haven't been able to crack their code yet, sir. We think —"

"You don't need the code. Just the signal," Lusaffar interrupted, sounding excited. "The Admiral's ship was taken out first. They've been focussing on priority targets. Coordinating attacks. The only way to do that is —"

"Got them. Krystofer, can you somehow highlight these vessels to our fighters?" Mykel transferred the data to the Aenjel's console.

"Yes, sir."

"Baylelle, realign the auto-defences to target the ships Krystofer paints," Lusaffar barked.

For several crucial seconds the fighters continued to buzz around them. Splashes of phaser fire could be seen crackling and deflecting off the various ships and the shells of the bio-pods.

"Okay, our fighters should be able to pinpoint the controlling ships now."

Five glowing targets stood out in the realigned sensor arrays. For a few moments nothing seemed to happen, then all the defenders' firepower began to concentrate on the real threats. The highlighted targets disappeared under a constant barrage of phaser shots and torpedoes. Soon, drones began to float aimlessly. Without orders they were picked off by the ships' auto-defences as they wandered into range.

Before long, the last of the attack vessels were being dispatched and loud whooping victory calls sounded across the bridge, echoing the jubilant comm chatter. But what was truly amazing was the number of Aenjels and Deamonds who turned to offer one another wide, triumphant smiles and congratulations. It was...shocking, but in a very welcome, oddly pleasant way.

“Have repair crews start work on stabilising bio-pod four. Run a full diagnostic on all ships and bio-pods. Prioritise the most damaged to be docked with *Nu Hayven* first.” Mykel couldn’t believe he managed to keep his voice so even and calm.

“Baylelle, you have the bridge,” Lusaffar added beside him as they headed to the small office attached to the bridge.

The tall, dark skinned Deamond nodded, his voice low and rumbling as he called back his acknowledgement. “Yes, Overlord Ifearnan.”

* * * *

Mykel stepped into the commander’s office behind Lusaffar. Neither of them said a word as the door slid shut, sealing them off from the bridge. Mykel allowed himself to sag with relief once the bridge crew could no longer see him.

“Oh fuck, that felt good!” Lusaffar crowed.

The Deamond’s eyes were bright with excitement...and lust. Before Mykel could brace himself, Lusaffar had him pinned to the door – grinding against him and fusing their mouths together in a savage kiss.

Mykel didn’t think, he just reacted – grinding back and opening his mouth wide to admit Lusaffar’s demanding tongue. Mykel wrestled for control, taking and tasting every inch of Lusaffar’s hot mouth. Giving every bit as good as he got, and insisting on more.

The sharp coppery tang of blood coated Mykel’s tongue and he knew tussling with Lusaffar had split his lip open again. But he didn’t care. He simply licked the taste away from their lips and plunged back in for more of Lusaffar’s addictive flavour.

“You taste so good,” Lusaffar moaned between sharp nips that eased into soft caresses.

Then Mykel felt Lusaffar’s hand insinuate itself between their bodies, freeing the fastenings of Mykel’s pants until they slipped down his thighs, and everything snapped back to reality.

Like an ice-cold rainstorm in the high mountain country of his birth, Mykel felt the wash of realisation at what he was doing flood over him. Frantically he pushed against Lusaffar, catching the Deamond by surprise enough that he stumbled back a pace.

But it was only a momentary reprieve. Before Mykel could gather his wits, Lusaffar was back, pinning his hands on either side of his head and getting right up into his face.

"Don't pretend you don't want this, pigeon. Don't pretend you're not aching for me to ride you until you come."

"Get off me, you...you egotistical maniac!" Mykel snapped, struggling to break Lusaffar's hold. "And stop calling me pigeon, or —"

"I can feel it, Mykel. I can feel how much you want me." Lusaffar illustrated his point by rubbing their cocks together.

The course grain of Lusaffar's uniform rubbed against Mykel's semi-exposed cock, sending delicious sensations radiating out through his body.

"It's just...adrenaline. Battle hype. It's a well-known... Oh!"

Mykel felt the smooth, rounded tip of Lusaffar's prehensile tail slip over his balls and gently touch the sensitive skin behind them.

"Mmm." Lusaffar licked at Mykel's lips lazily, still holding his hands in place.

Mykel couldn't do it. He'd tried to fight, but his desire for the dangerous man savaging his mouth was too much. Mykel wanted Lusaffar too badly to deny himself.

Using every ounce of strength he possessed, he managed to push Lusaffar away. But instead of escaping, Mykel rushed forward, wrestling with Lusaffar until the Deamond was pinned against the wall beside the door. The delicious placement of Lusaffar's tail at his hole was lost in the process, but Mykel couldn't bring himself to worry about it. He didn't bother to hide his grin at the stunned look on Lusaffar's face either. It was a truly priceless expression and a moment he would treasure for a very long time. He had the distinct impression not too much shocked Lusaffar.

"You want to do this? Let me show you how it's done," Mykel whispered against Lusaffar's lips.

Pulling aggressively at the fastenings of Lusaffar's pants and shoving their shirts out of the way, Mykel soon had the other male's cock well in hand.

Lords, he was gorgeous. Long and thick with a network of veins wrapping around the hard-as-formisteel, soft-as-satin length. Mykel began a firm pumping action and a crystal clear bead of pre cum emerged from the tiny slit in the flared head. It reminded Mykel of the

dewdrops that formed on leaves, or the raindrops that glittered in the sunlight after a storm—so beautiful.

“Oh, fuck! That’s good, Mykel.” Lusaffar threw back his head, surrendering to Mykel’s ministrations.

In that moment—that perfect instant of Lusaffar’s surrender—Mykel felt all-powerful, and completely at peace with the universe.

Fisting his hand in Lusaffar’s hair, Mykel closed the last millimetres of space between them. He took Lusaffar’s mouth in a deep, brutal kiss that was all about need and possession. At the same time he positioned his own shaft so he could wrap his hand around both of their cocks and begin stoking them together.

With long, even movements of his hand, Mykel worked them together. He slid their cocks against one another as they leaked copious amounts of pre cum—almost as if their shafts wept for release.

On a firm, upward stroke, Mykel swiped his thumb over the heads of their cocks, collecting a little of the pre cum and rubbing it in to the sensitive flesh at the tip. Their kiss muffled Lusaffar’s desperate moan as Mykel continued to manipulate and massage the straining shafts in his hand. Hips thrust forward in desperation. Fingernails edging towards claws dug into Mykel’s back, adding a surprising excitement as they played over his skin.

In urgent need of air and release, not necessarily in that order, Mykel jerked his lips away from Lusaffar’s. He thrust once, twice, three times and came in long, thick jerks of creamy cum. It splattered up between them. Then Lusaffar cried out, arching his back—he bowed away from the wall and painted their bellies with his seed.

Mykel stared at Lusaffar, mesmerised by the stunning beauty that was the dark, dangerous Deamond in ecstasy. The man was glorious. So sensual. So passionate.

So not a man he should be doing this with.

“Ah...” Lusaffar stared at Mykel in shock.

“Yeah.” Mykel breathed heavily.

Shit! Now what? Lusaffar had never felt like this before. So wild and desperate and—*Shit! Shit! Shit!*—connected. Tasting Mykel’s blood had been a mistake. A highly addictive

one. Lusaffar wanted more. He wanted to taste every inch of the Aenjel. He wanted to bite and—

What the – No!

Blessedly, their comm links chose that moment to announce a change of shift—its soft synthvoice breaking into Lusaffar's panic and wishing them a pleasant day.

They sprung apart like two naughty nestlings caught in a clandestine tryst. In a dim, rather absurd part of his brain that obviously hadn't read the 'Oh, shit!' memo, Lusaffar was pleased to see an equal amount of guilt and confusion showing on Mykel's face as was currently battering at his own, rather sluggish brain.

"I...ah...I have to..." Lusaffar fumbled, both with the fastening of his pants and to come up with an excuse when his mind was still blissfully swimming in happy hormones.

"Yeah...umm...me too. I'll...ah...see you...yeah..." Finally managing to close his trousers, Mykel spun around without another word and hurried away.

It was neither a walk nor a run, but regardless of what it was, Lusaffar was instantly drawn to watching the man's tight ass framed by those luscious gold tipped wings moving away from him like temptation in motion.

Oh, I so want some of that! And as if that wasn't bad enough, Lusaffar was starting to suspect it wasn't all he wanted from the spunky Aenjel.

Shit!

Following Mykel out of the room, Lusaffar deliberately headed in the opposite direction from Mykel as they hurried from the bridge. He needed time to think. Time to process what had happened.

* * * *

Admiral Jaynous stared across at the *Nu Hayven*. He couldn't believe what he had just witnessed. Mykel and Lusaffar had done the unthinkable. They had assumed joint command. And the bridge crew had obviously worked side by side. To save their home and their people, Aenjels and Deamonds had come together and triumphed. It wasn't at all what he had expected. Things had just become slightly more interesting all round.

"Sir, shall I prepare a shuttle to take you across to the *Nu Hayven*?"

Jaynous considered the huge floating ark, watching as the first repair crews emerged to crawl across its massive hull.

“No.” Time, that’s what was needed. “Not at the moment, Laforte. Let’s give them a day or so to sort things out.”

A few days should be more than enough.

“Should I continue with my daily reports, sir?”

For a moment Jaynous debated letting them flounder along on their own, completely unsupervised. It was tempting, but in the end he decided against it. After all, technically the *Nu Hayven* was still under his command. He might need to step in, before things got *too* out of hand. There was no sense giving anyone reason to question his actions if and when things went bad.

“Yes. Continue with your daily reports.”

“Yes, sir. Will that be all, sir?”

“For now. I’ll expect a report at 0800 tomorrow.”

Chapter Three

Mykel strode as quickly as possible towards the hoverlator bay while at the same time trying not to draw attention to himself. It was a delicate balance. The last thing he needed was Admiral Jaynous or his aide finding out about yet another altercation between an Aenjel and a Deamond.

Lately, every time he turned around Lafortea seemed to be there—taking notes and making reports. It was damn annoying and certainly wasn't winning them any points with either Jaynous or the Intergalactic Council. In fact, just this morning, Jaynous had arrived, intent on doing a full inspection before approving handover based on Lafortea's report of several minor incidents and infractions.

Mykel grit his teeth. He *really* needed to get to the fight on level sixty-four and put a stop to it before Lafortea found out about it.

Damn it! He didn't have time for this. There was still so much to do. So many details that needed to be worked out. Not to mention the incredible pressure they were all under to get the damaged bio-pods patched up and attached to the ark. It was a logistical nightmare. And now he was forced to play referee to a couple of hot heads who apparently didn't have enough to do. Well, he'd be sure to fix that. If they had enough time to fight, they had enough time to scour decking plates. Possibly with their dental skims.

He stepped into the hoverlator and waited impatiently for the doors to close. The only positive thing about the last hectic few cycles was that he'd been so busy keeping everything together and heading in the right direction, he hadn't bumped into Lusaffar once. He still wasn't sure how he was going to face the other man after—

Just as the hoverlator doors began to close, Lusaffar's tall, muscular body angled deftly through the gap and pushed its way into the compartment.

Mykel's heart skipped a beat then sped up to pound away with annoying enthusiasm. Apparently the unruly organ was excited to see the Deamond.

"We've got to stop meeting like this," Lusaffar drawled, his grin infuriatingly cocky and self-assured.

"Tell me about it." Mykel stepped back and looked away, trying to avoid the Deamond's mesmerising black eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lusaffar demanded, suddenly defensive.

"Nothing."

The tension and discomfort ratcheted up another few notches. Mykel worked hard to hold his wings still when they wanted to shift and move in agitation.

His reaction to Lusaffar was so confusing and contrary. On the one hand, Lusaffar's presence ruffled every one of his feathers. The man was just so annoyingly smug and self-opinionated. But still, the heat of the Deamond's body reached out to him—drawing him in and rushing over him in waves of desire that no matter how hard he tried he couldn't deny.

Most of the time, Mykel found he just wanted to hit the arrogant male. But at other times, like now, he could hear the underlying hurt his caustic remarks caused Lusaffar. He could see the passion and need shining in the Deamond's eyes. And he couldn't stand it. He wanted to reach out and—

Mykel sneaked a surreptitious look at the male causing him so much consternation. And caught Lusaffar watching him right back—his eyes intense and heated even while he looked annoyed enough to bite someone. The idea of Lusaffar latching on to him with that hot, hard mouth and wicked, sharp fangs sent a fresh, unexpected shiver of desire down Mykel's spine.

Something urgently needed to be done to distract them both.

"The Admiral arrived a few hours ago. I put him in guest suite two-nine-five. He's going to be doing a final inspection before handover."

Lusaffar narrowed his eyes and silently studied Mykel for a moment before snorting in disdain. "Nice try, pigeon."

"What?"

"Oh, please." Lusaffar rolled his eyes.

"What?" The pitch of Mykel's voice rose with his growing discomfort at Lusaffar's scrutiny.

"Is that the best you can do?"

Blast! Lusaffar wasn't stupid. He could no doubt smell a distraction a click and half away. And unfortunately, the Deamond wasn't willing to give an inch right now.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You want me."

"You're so delusional." Mykel wasn't sure he pulled off the bravado he was aiming for, but he refused to back down. Or take his eyes off Lusaffar for a moment.

"Am I?"

Mykel felt the first wave of panic—oddly mixed with a wash of excitement—overtake him as the Deamond's mouth turned up in a feral grin. Just as Lusaffar's body tensed to move, however, the hoverlator arrived with a pleasant chirp, announcing their destination as the door slid open smoothly.

"Duty calls," Lusaffar said with a suspiciously smug, happy lilt to his voice.

Mykel really wanted to wipe the smirk clean off the annoying Deamond's face. But right now there wasn't time. In the distance he could hear the sound of raised voices. Quite a number of raised voices.

Ignoring Lusaffar, Mykel hurried down the corridor, letting the commotion guide him. The alert he'd programmed to monitor security calls was deliberately vague to keep just these sorts of incidents under Jaynous's radar. All he knew was that something was going on somewhere on this level. Nothing could have prepared him for the scene playing out in the dining room though.

Walking into the communal mess hall on floor sixty-four was like walking into a war zone. Upended chairs and tables were scattered around the room—most bent and broken beyond repair. The walls were dented, fractures radiating across their surface like veins where heavy objects—possibly bodies—had been thrown against them. And several food dispensers hissed angrily, looking damaged beyond repair. But worst of all, several of the large plant specimens that had been brought in to create a more natural environment lay overturned and in need of serious attention.

Striding across the room, allowing his anger to grow, Mykel carefully avoided the food trays and their scattered contents that created slick hazards across the floor. He sensed Lusaffar beside him—a tall, dark slash of pissed off making its way to the large, noisy crowd at the centre of the room. For an instant, he found himself thinking how good it was having Lusaffar there, but he quickly shook the sensation off.

Presenting a unified front is important, Mykel reassured himself quickly. That's all it was.

He quickly distracted himself by concentrating on the situation in front of him.

A Nu Hayven Security Team was already on the scene, struggling to hold back the crowd of onlookers. Mykel could hear them shouting for everyone to step back. But their directions were largely ignored as the bystanders pressed closer to whatever scuffle was of continuing interest in the middle of the room. They bellowed and screeched in a deafening clamour of noise and confusion.

It was definitely time to step in and throw a little weight around and get things back under control.

“What’s going on here?”

At the hard-edged authority in his raised voice the noise levels dropped away dramatically. Some of the Aenjels, and a surprising number of Deamonds, even stepped back, affording Mykel his first glimpse of the troublemakers.

A part of Mykel wasn’t at all surprised to see Gayebreel’s jet-black wings and hear the man’s angry snarls, demanding to be let go as the crowd subsided. Cayle was on the opposite side of the crowd, struggling against the officers restraining him. What *was* a surprise was the large, unconscious Deamond on the ground a few feet away who seemed to be the focus of Gayebreel’s rage.

It was such a shock seeing Gayebreel’s anger focused on someone *other* than Cayle that for a moment Mykel just stood and stared, taking in the scene and trying to process exactly what he was seeing. Then one of the security officers yelped in pain as Gayebreel managed to get an arm free and lash out with his elbow, trying to get to the fallen Deamond even as a medical technician worked over the prone body, assessing and stabilising him.

Mykel sighed. The Aenjel was destined to be a great big, black winged pain in the —

“Let me go! I’m going to fucking kill him!”

Gayebreel’s scream raised every hair on Mykel’s body. There was something feral and primitive about it that warned everyone to get out of the way as the dark winged Aenjel lurched forward against the restraining hold of the security officers.

“Back the fuck off, Gayebreel!” Cayle yelled back.

“He nearly fucking killed you! You could have died, you stupid asshole!”

“You’re not my mother, dickhead! And I don’t need you fighting my fucking battles!”

“You need —”

"That's enough! Stop it, both of you," Lusaffar demanded, stepping between them.

Just as Mykel was about to join him, Gayebreel turned his head—his eyes blazing a shocking, blood red. What the—

"Let. Me. Go!" Gayebreel's voice was so deep and rough with fury it was almost unrecognisable.

Mykel froze—too shocked to speak or move. He'd never seen an Aengel look so out of control and aggressive. He almost looked like a—

But that wasn't possible. It just couldn't be.

Lusaffar wasn't nearly so circumspect. "Somebody tell me what the fuck is going on right now!"

"I'm going to kill him. That's what's going on," Gayebreel growled, gesturing to the still unconscious Deamond on the floor.

"How about you just shut up for a minute and let someone rational have a go at explaining things?" Lusaffar barked back.

"Fuck you, sub-dweller!" Gayebreel's jet-black wings buffeted against the men struggling to hold him.

"That's enough!" Hearing the profanity Gayebreel screamed at Lusaffar broke Mykel out of his shock. "Don't you ever let me hear you speak to Lusaffar like that again."

Gayebreel's growl was unsettling, but Mykel didn't let it show. Now was not the time to show any weakness. "Gayebreel, if you can't control yourself, I'll have you sedated."

Another growl escaped, but Gayebreel seemed to be visibly struggling to get himself under control, so Mykel gave him a little time and leeway.

Eventually, after several deep breaths, Gayebreel bowed his head.

"Yes, Majesty."

"I'm not your Majesty here, Gayebreel. I'm not anyone's Majesty anymore. But I *am* a commander. And so is Lusaffar." Mykel turned to address the crowd. "This has to stop. It's about time you all took a good hard look around. Lusaffar and I are sharing leadership of you all. Not Aenjels for me and Deamonds for him." Mykel spun back to Gayebreel, who, while calmer, was still vibrating with anger. "Our lives have changed. Our circumstances have changed. Unless you want to truly be adrift? Is that what you all want?" Mykel paused to wait for a few to start shaking their heads in denial. "Because we have a job to do, and the

Intergalactic Council expects us to do it together. If we can't do that, not only won't we be allowed to keep our new home, we won't deserve it."

Mykel paused, meeting as many eyes as he could while he gave the statement time to sink in.

"And I better not hear *anyone* speaking to Lusaffar like that again. He's your commander. You will respect him." Mykel looked pointedly at Gayebreel. "Have I made myself clear?"

Murmurs of agreement moved through the crowd, but for a moment he didn't think Gayebreel was going to back down. Long, tense seconds stretched out ominously before finally the black-winged Aenjel lowered his eyes with a barely perceivable nod of his head.

"Perfectly," Gayebreel finally ground out between clenched teeth.

"Good. Now what's going on?"

Cayle pulled free of the security officers holding him back roughly. "Nothing's going on. I had it all under control until —"

"You're so full of shit! How can you —"

"For the love of Ion! Enough!" Lusaffar bellowed, pushing Gayebreel and Cayle apart as they got up into one another's faces and looked ready to start another brawl. "Personally, I don't give a flying fuck. You can both write up a report and I'll file it right alongside the rest of the bullshit. But it stops now. You two work this out, or I'll work it out for you. And I guarantee you won't like that."

Lusaffar turned his attention to the medical technician, obviously fed up with dealing with the two of them. Mykel knew just how he felt.

"Is he ready to be moved?"

"Yes. I'm just waiting for—" The man was interrupted by the arrival of a pair of orderlies directing a floating transport bed between them. "Here they are now."

Mykel turned to Cayle. The winged Deamond was scowling fiercely at Gayebreel, looking like he wanted to take several well-placed chunks out of him.

"Cayle, go with them." They both needed some distance and cool-down time in his opinion.

"I'm fine."

"I didn't ask."

Cayle looked ready to argue, but then snapped his mouth shut again as Mykel continued to stare him down.

"Fine." Cayle's scowl was as black as tripanomite, but he fell into line and within moments was trailing belligerently behind the medical team as they left the dining hall.

"I'll expect to see your report on my data pad by 1700, Gayebreel. Are we clear?" Mykel said.

"Yes, Commander," Gayebreel replied, formally bowing his head.

Mykel sighed. Still, if this was what it took to get the male to settle down, so be it.

"In the meantime," Lusaffar said in an ominously happy tone, "since you all enjoyed the show so much, each and every one of you can stay and clean up after it."

A few grumbled, but most were smart enough to just turn and start working.

Mykel spun around. He wasn't interested in hearing any protests or complaints. They all just needed to get on with it.

"You want to explain that one to me?" Lusaffar asked, falling into step beside him as they made their way out of the dining room.

"How should I know what's going on between those two hot heads?" Mykel replied.

"And the little 'respect your commander' speech?"

Mykel had no idea what had possessed him. Honestly. Hearing Gayebreel mouthing off at Lusaffar had sparked every possessive, protective instinct he had. He'd found himself leaping in to defend Lusaffar before any real thought had gone into why.

Mykel looked across, not slowing his steps for a moment. He eyed the hint of amusement in the Deamond's eyes.

"So, you going to explain that little outburst to me?" Lusaffar asked again.

"Nope." No way was he elaborating. Not only was Lusaffar quite unbearably smug and arrogant enough already, but he had no desire to analyse the whys and wherefores himself.

A soft chuckle was the only reply.

Lusaffar sneaked another peek at the Aenjel striding along beside him as they made their way back to the hoverlator bay. Mykel looked so hot right now. Determined. Triumphant. Full of fire, with just a hint of ball-buster bluster.

Hearing him snap angrily at Gayebreel like that, and in his defence no less...well, it had certainly got Lusaffar's attention. In fact, he was so hard right now it was uncomfortable to walk.

Lusaffar frowned as he adjusted his rigid shaft.

Fuck! Here I go thinking with my cock again!

Remembering the incident on the bridge when they had been attacked, leading to Mykel falling and cutting his lip, had an equally hard knot of tension forming in Lusaffar's gut as had formed in his pants. It was unpardonable. He didn't even want to think about how close he had come to biting the distracting Aenjel later, in the hoverlator.

Lusaffar knew his behaviour that day had been inexcusable, and it had been bothering him ever since. It was confusing and disturbing on so many levels. Worst of all, he wasn't exactly sure what had happened, other than he'd almost lost control. Twice. And over something as stupid as seeing blood trickling down from the corner of Mykel's luscious mouth.

Damn it! He was supposed to be a better warrior than that. A better leader. More disciplined and self-restrained in every way. How could he be effective if he was going to lose it at the first sight of a little blood? How could he expect his warriors to respect him if he couldn't maintain control of himself? And he certainly wasn't ready to face *why* the sight of Mykel's blood had affected him so badly. That was a whole other story he was judiciously avoiding altogether.

In the end, Lusaffar had found himself resenting the crap out of the enticing Aenjel. And with that resentment had come a, possibly juvenile, determination to provoke the male at every opportunity. But his plans to taunt and bait when he'd entered the hoverlator had backfired badly when Mykel ribbed him back. He still felt the prickle of offended pride at Mykel's return thrust.

Slowly, he was coming to the conclusion that perhaps provocation wasn't the answer. There was another way. If he accepted the fact that he was attracted to Mykel, the solution became very simple. He would allow himself the freedom to indulge in the winged male's considerable charms, and once he'd got it out of his system, things could start getting back to normal.

Without stopping to think about consequences or just how plain stupid it might be, Lusaffar grabbed Mykel and pulled him back into a shadowy alcove. He sealed their lips together before the other male could make a sound.

Half expecting to end up on his ass, or at least for Mykel to *try* to put him there, Lusaffar was slightly stunned to feel the slide of Mykel's tongue reaching out to meet him after only a momentary hesitation. It inflamed his desire for the gorgeous winged male all the more. He closed his eyes and dragged Mykel closer, feeling the soft brush of feathers across his arms as he wrapped them around Mykel, holding him close.

The kiss went on and on. Mykel responding eagerly, as both of them moaned and pulled at each other in wild abandon—surrendering to the all-consuming passion that flared to life between them. Their tongues moved and stroked over each other—the sweet, sharp sound of their mouths meeting and parting before diving back in for more, driving his need higher and higher.

Breathing heavily, Lusaffar pulled back from their kiss, leaning his forehead against Mykel's—trying to calm his raging lust before he took the Aenjel right there and then in the corridor. It was tempting, but his libido demanded more than just a quick tussle. He'd need several long hours in the Aenjel's tight ass to wear down some of his overwhelming lust for the gorgeous male in his arms.

After several seconds spent recovering his senses, Lusaffar opened his eyes...and looked straight into a small, contented smile.

Damn it! He felt his cock throb impatiently in response. It was too much. He needed Mykel. Now.

"Come on." Lusaffar licked at Mykel's kiss-swollen lips. "Let's go back to our quarters where we can play properly. I want in this tight ass." He palmed the firm globes of Mykel's ass and squeezed gently for emphasis.

But even as the words left his lips, something changed in Mykel's eyes. The smile slipped away and the warm, supple body in his arms stiffened. Suddenly, Mykel was pushing against Lusaffar's chest, trying to get him to move back.

Lusaffar stumbled away, surprised and confused by the change in Mykel. *Now what?*

"No. I can't do this," Mykel said, trying to brush past him.

"Sure you can. You just..." Lusaffar reached out to pull Mykel back against him — back where he belonged so they could continue their delicious assault on one another.

But Mykel evaded him, ducking to the side and stepping into the corridor — out of the little alcove and back into the light.

"No. I can't." Mykel's eyes were implacable, his voice hard with his resolve.

Lusaffar considered the Aenjel in front of him for a moment. What the fuck was wrong with the male now? One minute he was grinding against him like a dogamenie from Darius Prime in heat, the next he was iceberg-cold and staring at him with faint disapproval.

Was that it? Did he suddenly realise who it was he was grinding against? Did he regret making out with a Deamond? Lusaffar narrowed his eyes, studying the capricious Aenjel.

What-the-fuck-ever!

Hurt by the rejection he saw in Mykel's eyes and not *really* wanting to know the reason behind it, Lusaffar raised himself up to his full height.

"Fine. You want to pretend, pigeon, you go right ahead. Delude yourself as much as you like. But you know where to find me when you finally admit you want me. Even if I couldn't smell it, I can feel how hard you get every time I touch you."

Stupid, stuck-up Aenjel. Lusaffar turned to stomp away.

"Lusaffar, this isn't a game. There's too much at stake."

Lusaffar spun around, anger building and bubbling up inside him like a lava lake. How dare the pompous little prick suggest he wasn't being responsible? That he wasn't aware of how much rested on them doing their job properly?

Was that what this was all about? Mykel didn't think he was being a good leader by chasing after his tail?

"You don't think I know how important this is?" Lusaffar gestured around them wildly. "You don't think I'm taking this seriously?"

"Are you?"

Lusaffar studied Mykel's solemn face. Intense blue eyes stared back at him, burrowing into his soul. With a sudden, sinking sensation, he was fairly sure they weren't still talking about the *Nu Hayven* and their mission.

"When it's more than playing, you let me know."

Lusaffar could only watch as the Aenjel turned and walked away from him—proud, regal, and completely gorgeous. *The self-righteous prick!*

* * * *

Jaynous flicked off the spybot feed and sat back in his chair, steeping his fingers in concentration.

Well, this is an interesting development.

“Sir, I’m not sure the Intergalactic Council would approve of these sorts of...relations between the co-commanders.”

“Honestly, I don’t think they’d give a toss at the moment as long as the two of them got the job done.”

“Do you think they’re bonding?”

“Mmm...it’s a possibility. Though things look far from smooth sailing at the moment, wouldn’t you say?”

Laforteia looked seriously at the monitor, as if it might provide some profound answers to what would happen between the two men in the future. But in Jaynous’s experience, nothing was certain. Contingencies and back-up plans—that’s what a good military man relied on. Just in case things did start to go astray.

“Laforteia, I need the files on Mykel Anghelescov and Lusaffar Ifearnan.”

Chapter Four

Baylelle watched Lusaffar stomping round the recreation deck. The man was spoiling for a fight. Every line and muscle was tense, his movements agitated and aggressive. While he'd seen Lusaffar like this once or twice before, it was unusual for the normally controlled Deamond. Especially when others might see him.

As their leader, Lusaffar was not only expected to be the very best, fiercest and most skilled warrior amongst their people, he was also expected to be able to contain it at all times. Nothing less than perfection would be tolerated in the Deamond's leader.

Baylelle had always thought it unfair. No one was perfect. Everyone had his breaking point. If anyone knew that, he did. He'd certainly never envied his half-brother his position. Even though he was a few decades older than Lusaffar and could have contested their father's decree that Lusaffar be next in line, he'd simply never wanted the job. In fact, if it weren't for the minor detail of their father being long since dead, and the small matter of him nearly killing Baylelle and banishing him from the clan, he would have thanked the old bastard for overlooking him.

As he watched, Lusaffar began to pound into one of the practice dummies that had been set up for training sessions. The poor mechanical never stood a chance. In moments it lay in pieces across the decking plates. This was why they had fight-cages set up on various levels throughout the ship, even though he personally hated the places, because mechanical opponents just weren't enough of a challenge when a fully trained Deamond really wanted to let loose.

But apparently Lusaffar was more interested in destruction than challenge right now. It was probably just as well he'd chosen to work his frustrations out on the dummies—at least for the Deamond population.

Baylelle sighed. "You know that Laforte guy's going to mark that against your name, right? Apparently those things cost money."

Lusaffar merely grunted and lashed out for one final kick at the downed robot. Then he powered up another of the practice dummies and began sparring with it. The advanced

hand-to-hand combat programme was no match for Lusaffar's speed and skill. His movements were almost lazy as he took it apart piece by piece.

"Have you spoken to Mykel recently?" Baylelle asked, admiring Lusaffar's skill.

"No," Lusaffar growled, kicking out to block a blow from the mechanical fighter.

"Is everything all right between the two of you?"

"Fucked if I know." Lusaffar hissed when the droid managed to clip him.

Nothing could have been more telling than the mechanical actually landing a blow. Baylelle knew for certain now that his half-brother was in trouble. The tall, winged variety of trouble that he envied with all his heart.

Lashing out, Lusaffar amputated the appendage that had hit him with one quick slash of his claws. "Mykel's not talking to me."

"Do you know why?" Baylelle asked mildly.

"How the fuck should I know what his problem is?" Lusaffar delivered a final devastating blow to the robot and it crumpled to the ground in a mess of metal and circuitry.

Lusaffar barely looked winded, a fine sheen of sweat the only real suggestion he had exerted himself at all.

"Maybe you should go talk to him."

"Why should I do that? I don't need him or his sanctimonious bullshit. Once Mykel gets his head out of his ass he can come to me."

"Don't push him away, Lus. Mykel is not Aaronn."

"Don't say that asshole's name in my presence. If he wasn't already dead —"

"Lusaffar. Stop. It was a long time ago, and I've moved on."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Baylelle shrugged. He wasn't about to get into his fucked-up love life. He was here to talk about Lusaffar's Aenjel issues, not his own.

"In any event, I'm not sure about you needing Mykel, but I'm pretty sure Mykel needs you right now."

Lusaffar rounded on him quick as Boronean arc-light. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean? What's wrong with Mykel?"

Baylelle held out his hands in a placating gesture. "Calm down. I don't really know. It's just..."

“What?”

“Yoeseph is his best friend, you understand. Has been for years and...” Baylelle cast around for the right words for a moment. “Well, he says he’s never seen him like this before.”

“Like what?”

“So...down. He says it’s nothing obvious, just little things, small signs he’s noticed at times that Mykel might not be quite as all right as he pretends to be. Yoeseph’s worried. There are a lot of Aenjels having troubles adjusting—”

“Mykel is not having trouble adjusting. He’s too strong for that. There’s no way —”

Baylelle could see the cogs starting to turn in Lusaffar’s mind, could see him thinking about the Aenjels in the infirmary needing to be watched day and night in case they hurt themselves. Or worse. And then there were the ones they hadn’t been able to save.

“Mykel is fine.”

“I’m sure you’re right.” Baylelle fell into silence. There was no need to say anything more. He knew that within hours his overprotective half-brother would be seeking out the Aenjel’s leader.

Phase one of the plan was complete. Now if only Yoeseph could work on Mykel, they might finally get the two stubborn males both heading in the right direction. Preferably a direction that involved a flat surface.

* * * *

Mykel concentrated on repairing the small network of data nodes in front of him. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t seem to distract himself from a certain tall, dark and completely egocentric Deamond.

It was infuriating.

And it was completely messing up his schedule. He was supposed to have finished this small section of repair work an hour ago.

When Yoeseph had asked for his help in the air generator and filter rooms, Mykel had jumped at the chance. His shift had just finished, and the likelihood of bumping into Lusaffar if he went back to their quarters was far too great for his peace of mind to contemplate.

Mykel wasn't up to facing the man yet. And certainly not anywhere near the vicinity of a bed platform.

Unfortunately, right now he wasn't sure he wasn't being more of a hindrance than a help to his old friend.

Mykel scowled at the data node. It was all Lusaffar's fault. Why did the male have to be so...there? As in right there and irresistible. He was so damn sexy, Mykel wanted to ravage him every time he laid eyes on the handsome Deamond.

But Lusaffar was the last person he should be considering as a lover. He wasn't even likely to hang around long enough to help straighten the sheets, never mind form anything meaningful or lasting. His comment about playing still dug its claws into Mykel's head...and heart. It was quite obvious what was driving Lusaffar. It was just a shame there didn't appear to be anything more behind it. The Deamond certainly hadn't gone out of his way to correct him when he'd questioned the depth of his interest and regard – either at the time or over the last two days.

Mykel didn't want to be a plaything. A casual distraction. In fact, he'd never been good at casual. He wasn't the psycho-stalker-who-needs-the-commitment-bands-locked-around-his-lover's-bicep-before-the-sweat-dried-on-their-skins type. But he did like a little more than just wham-bam-thanks-for-the-good-time-can-you-let-yourself-out?

And now, more than ever, he needed to stay firm. Because he was one hundred percent certain it couldn't just be about sex between them. What happened when the first flush of passion wore off? Where would that leave them if that was all there was to it? They still had to be able to work together. And then what if it wasn't just a slow tapering off of horniness? What if it all went horribly wrong? Then what?

Then of course there was the little matter of his heart giving him warning signals that he was already more attached to Lusaffar than was either wise or safe. Allowing things to go any further wouldn't be smart. Casual, when he was pretty sure he was starting to feel a whole lot more than just lust, would be plain dumb.

Mykel slammed the housing that protected the data nodes he had been working on back into place, adding a vicious twist to the lock mechanism for good measure.

What's wrong with wanting more than just a quick tumble anyway? Why should anyone think less of me for that? He'd seen the look of horrific panic on Lusaffar's face when they'd talked about not playing games with one another.

Completely unnecessarily, Mykel kicked the data node cover in frustration. He wished he were kicking a certain Deamond's ass.

"I think it's in place," Yoeseph said drily from across the room, disconnecting his data pad from the analysis port he was working on before connecting it to the next in the series.

"Sorry." Mykel's cheeks heated with embarrassment. He didn't usually let things get to him like this, but Lusaffar seemed to have a way of getting under his skin every time. Even when he wasn't around. Bloody annoying Deamond.

"Something on your mind?"

"Nothing grievous bodily harm wouldn't fix," Mykel mumbled, stepping along to the next data node needing to be repaired without meeting Yoeseph's eyes.

Yoeseph chuckled. "I don't imagine Lusaffar's the easiest Deamond to deal with on a day to day basis."

Mykel looked up sharply. "What makes you think I was talking about Lusaffar?"

Yoeseph shrugged his broad shoulders, but didn't offer any further explanation for his comment.

Yoeseph was a friend. Had been for years. If there was anyone on board he could talk to, it was the affable giant. He was also one of the most astute men Mykel knew. Maybe talking to Yoeseph would help.

For a while, Mykel let the silence stretch out between them. He wasn't sure what exactly he wanted to say, or even how much he should reveal.

It was a comfortable silence as Yoeseph merely went back to his work. Placidly waiting him out. In the end, that more than anything reassured him he could trust the other Aenjel.

"You and Baylelle seem to get along well," Mykel finally said, feeling his way forward carefully.

"We're just friends," Yoeseph shot back far too quickly, and with a sharp edge to his voice.

Mykel was taken aback by the sudden pinched, serious expression on Yoeseph's face. He hadn't actually imagined anything else. As far as he knew, Yoeseph preferred females. But now, of course, he had to wonder.

"Okay." He didn't want to pry or make Yoeseph feel defensive. True friends were hard enough to come by without antagonising the ones he had.

After several minutes of tense silence, Yoeseph cleared his throat "It's easy to like Bay. He's...different."

"You mean different from someone like Lusaffar?"

Yoeseph let out a bark of laughter. "Yeah! Baylelle's about as different from Lusaffar as it gets."

Mykel felt a stab of jealousy. Just how well did Yoeseph know Lusaffar anyway?

Even before the thought had finished forming in his head, Mykel dismissed it. He was *not* jealous. It was ridiculous even to think it. And there was absolutely nothing going on between Yoeseph and Lusaffar anyway. The two hardly knew each other apart from a very recent professional relationship. He'd known Yoeseph for years. Surely he'd know if Yoeseph and Lusaffar —

Then again, he'd had no idea — still had no idea — what was going on between Yoeseph and Baylelle.

Mykel shook the silly thoughts away. He'd drive himself insane if he kept this up.

He'd been about to ask what the secret was to dealing with an unpredictable, arrogant Deamond, but if Baylelle was so different there really didn't seem to be much point.

"If it's any consolation I think you have an equally disturbing effect on Lusaffar," Yoeseph said, breaking into Mykel's chaotic thoughts.

"What do you mean?"

Yoeseph shrugged again. "Just something Bay mentioned in passing. He said he's never seen Lusaffar react like this before."

"Like what?" Mykel's eyes narrowed. What was Yoeseph suggesting?

"Always following you with his eyes. Baiting you. Smiling."

"What are you talking about? Lusaffar's always got that dark, feral smile on his face. As if he's just waiting for the world to amuse him."

“Apparently that’s a fairly recent development. According to Bay, Lusaffar has always been far too serious. And the way he reacted on the bridge the day of the attack —”

“That was a tough day for everyone.” Mykel found himself defending Lusaffar. “I don’t think Lusaffar was the only Deamond barely in control of his rage.”

“I don’t think it had anything to do with the battle situation. At least not directly,” Yoeseph replied, looking away to focus on his data pad.

“What do you mean?”

Yoeseph looked back up, studying Mykel for a moment, before continuing almost reluctantly. “Bay says it was because you got hurt. He says he was watching Lusaffar right when it happened and that Lusaffar reacted to seeing your blood. Apparently it’s a fairly common reaction when...” Yoeseph’s voice trailed away.

“When what?”

“Well...when a Deamond is bonding with someone. They exchange blood during the bond and...well...seeing it spilt, or Ion forbid if anyone else takes it. Let’s just say, not good.”

“Bond? You think —”

“You know during a mati —”

“I know what Deamond bonding entails. But you’re insane if you think Lusaffar wants to bond with me!”

“Why?”

“Why?! Because...well, because...it’s just crazy, that’s why!”

“The way he looks at you —”

“Like dinner is about to be served?” Mykel deadpanned.

Yoeseph snorted. “I’m not sure you wouldn’t enjoy it if Lusaffar decided to eat you.”

“Yoeseph!”

Yoeseph’s grin was completely unrepentant. “What? Lusaffar isn’t the only one obsessed with following someone with his eyes. I’ve seen the way you look at him too.”

“I am not obsessed.”

“So it was the housing’s fault?” Yoeseph pointed to the data node housing Mykel had been abusing. “Glad you sorted it out then. Hate it when inanimate objects get out of line.”

Mykel looked at the inoffensive metal housing, then back to Yoeseph’s smug face.

"Shut up." Even as he said it there was no heat in the words. Yoeseph meant well. And he'd given him a lot to think about. But Mykel still wasn't sure he was ready to face Lusaffar. Just because Yoeseph thought the man might want more than a quick screw, didn't mean Lusaffar had got the same memo.

He needed time to think. For the moment he'd just keep out of the male's sight — until he'd worked it all out. Yes, it was hiding. But so what? Right now he didn't want to have to cope with Lusaffar while he tried to work out what the male's deal might be.

Mykel and Yoeseph continued to work side-by-side. The silence comfortable and easy. Slowly, Mykel found himself relaxing and ploughing through the work more efficiently than he had in days.

"Damn it," Yoeseph suddenly cursed.

"What?" Mykel looked over, concerned by the scowl of frustration on his normally easy-going friend's face.

"I just can't seem to get these filters to spit out an analysis. It's driving me up the wall!"

"But aren't they all collated and monitored automatically?"

"Yes, but the breakdown reports are just coming up with pass or fail on set parameters. I can't get a complete breakdown."

"So?"

"I should be able to get a breakdown of what exactly is in the atmosphere in each section of the ship. It's just not right that I can't get that kind of report. It feels...off."

"And what do the maintenance techs say?"

"They say don't worry about it. That there haven't been any rises in waste gases or disease vectors detected so it's not really a priority. They say it's just a glitch they'll work on as soon as they get time. But —"

"Yeah, I hear you. It could be months before they get to it. Is it really a problem though if there hasn't been any concerns showing up?"

"I don't know. It's just bothering me."

Mykel nodded. There were a lot of things bothering him too. There wasn't much he could do about them either, except wait and see.

After a few minutes, Mykel finished the section of repairs he was working on, stood and stretched his arms above his head, groaning as his joints popped and his muscles

protested the strain. Looking down at his data pad, he saw it was just about change time again. Lusaffar would probably be on the move soon, and since Yoeseph was acting in-charge of the current shift, it was logical to expect Lusaffar would seek him out for a report before taking over.

Time to find somewhere else to be.

"I need a break."

"Huh?" Yoeseph asked, still distracted by the readouts, or lack thereof.

"I'm heading out to check on bio-pod four if anyone's looking for me."

Yoeseph pierced him with shrewd, dark brown eyes. "You know, you're really going to have to get used to the comm links being a part of the deal."

Mykel grimaced. "I know."

"It's not so bad. Letting people find you. You're less likely to miss out on something that way."

Mykel got the distinct impression they weren't talking about comm links anymore.

Yes. Yoeseph was definitely far too quick and astute.

"I'll think about it." Mykel hurried towards the door, making good his escape before Yoeseph could make any more, unsettling comments.

Chapter Five

Lusaffar strode purposefully along the sinuous, suspended walkway that wound its way through the Sigorea canopy. Bio-pod four was now a fully integrated part of the *Nu Hayven*. Looking around at the dark, emerald green leaves and the huge, edible seedpods dangling in elegant clusters, he couldn't help but thank Ion that they'd been able to save it. Losing this precious little piece of home, while not somewhere he was completely comfortable, would have been tragic.

But admiring the scenery wasn't why he was here. Mykel had been hiding from him for two whole days now, and after his little 'chat' with Baylelle earlier, Lusaffar was well and truly sick of it. He needed to find the male.

Not to check up on the priggish, pain-in-the-butt bird, he reassured himself for the thousandth time since starting his search. That wasn't what this was about. He just needed to...see the male. That was all.

Pushing past another low hanging branch, Lusaffar refused to entertain the idea that he was worried about the Aenjel. As he told Yoeseph when he'd gone to ask if he knew where Mykel was, he just had a few things they needed to discuss.

He certainly hadn't been actively avoiding Mykel over the last few days himself. Deamonds did *not* run away. Ever. He'd just needed a bit of...space. Time to sort things out. There had been a lot going on aboard the *Nu Hayven* over the last few days.

And so what if he hadn't gone out of his way to catch up with the Aenjel. He was tracking him down now. That counted.

Lusaffar's mind strayed to the last time he'd spoken to Mykel. The Aenjel's comments about whatever was between them needing to be about more than lust were...disturbing.

Damn it! Deamonds weren't supposed to have to deal with any of that crap. They weren't built for it.

But he sure wasn't built for the feeling of hurt and rejection that had overwhelmed him when Mykel had pushed him away either.

So maybe there's something to what Mykel was saying. Maybe.

Then again, he'd never said it *couldn't* be about more than lust. He'd just wanted to get to the good stuff. So Mykel had a large part to play in this whole mess. The rift that had formed between them just as things were getting interesting wasn't really his fault at all. Mykel was just too...uptight and emotional.

Lusaffar moved a little faster along the path, worry eating away at him now. What if Baylelle was right and Mykel was suffering under the stress and strain of everything that had happened over the last few months? What if it was all getting to be too much for the Aenjel?

A little growl escaped from deep in his chest. He was going to kick Baylelle's ass so hard when he found Mykel and he was fine.

And Mykel was going to be fine. There was absolutely nothing to worry about. He was going to be—

Rounding a bend in the path, Lusaffar finally spotted Mykel.

The Aenjel stood at the very edge of one of the observation platforms that had been set intermittently along the boardwalk. He was staring off into the distance with an expression that could only be described as...forlorn.

Lusaffar's breath hitched in his throat. He'd never seen anyone looking so...lost. It was doing strange things to him—tight, achy, painful things in the region of his heart—seeing Mykel like this.

Maybe the idea of one or two quick fucks to get Mykel out of his system *had* been a little naive and unrealistic. It might take slightly more than that, he acknowledged, as he edged towards the observation platform.

The artificial sunlight glinted off the gilt edged tips of Mykel's wings—framing him in a golden glow against the massive, clear blue sky. Lusaffar focused all his attention on Mykel as he stepped out from under the dense canopy, trying not to look at the wide-open space in front and all around them. This *so* wasn't his idea of a good time. It was too exposed and open and...vulnerable.

What's the crazy Aenjel doing out here anyway?

Heart pounding painfully, Lusaffar wondered if Mykel had been seen by the medical technicians recently. *Was* it possible Mykel could be a threat to himself? Surely not. The Aenjel had so much determination and fire. At least he usually did.

Lusaffar had been surreptitiously studying Mykel for weeks now. Even in the first few chaotic, painful days of their travel to *Nu Hayven*, he'd seemed to be a strong, resilient, if somewhat prissy man. He was certainly a fierce adversary if he thought anyone was a threat to his people.

Lusaffar grit his teeth in frustration. He couldn't stand to see the other male like this. He wanted the Aenjel whose mind leapt to solving problems. The one who took command of situations and bit back at him with such heat and intensity. He wanted the passionate male who threw him against walls and jacked them both into orgasmic oblivion.

There was no way Lusaffar was going to let that male slip away.

He marched forwards, determined to bring Mykel back to life if it was the last thing he did. And given the very large open space, and long drop to the ground below, it just might be.

"So this is where you've been hiding."

Mykel spun around—eyes wide and lips parting in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"You've been avoiding me."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Lusaffar snorted in derision and was thrilled when Mykel's eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched. There was still some fight left in the Aenjel. That was good. Now to really get the male going.

It would be an absolute pleasure to fight and goad him just that little bit more—to see the spark of fire and intelligence flare to life in his eyes. And if they were really lucky, the natural heat and passion that seemed to exist between them—forever simmering just below the surface—would explode to life again too. All sorts of delicious possibilities opened up for the rest of the day.

"You haven't even set foot in our quarters for nearly two days," Lusaffar pointed out.

"So what, you're my keeper now?"

"Do you need one?"

Lusaffar wasn't surprised when Mykel pointedly ignored the barb. "I've been busy," he snipped instead.

"Sure you have. I can see how busy you are. Sorry to interrupt."

Mykel opened his mouth—no doubt about to issue a scathing retort—but he snapped it shut again just as quickly.

Mykel cocked his head to the side and Lusaffar got the rather uncomfortable impression that Mykel was digging into his mind—probing and assessing...and coming away less than impressed.

Lusaffar barely resisted the urge to start squirming.

"It's not going to work, you know," Mykel finally said.

"What?"

"You needle me. I get mad. We kiss. You get jerked off."

"Of course—"

"It was a one-time deal. An aberration. I've been thinking about it, and I really don't see it ever happening again," Mykel insisted.

Lusaffar growled. Was Mykel really saying there was nothing more than a momentary lapse of reason between them?

Reaching out, he dragged Mykel forward until they were chest to chest. For a moment Mykel struggled to break away. But when their lips met, within seconds Mykel was battling for control of the kiss—thrusting his tongue into Lusaffar's mouth.

The sharp metallic tang of fresh blood made Lusaffar jerk in surprise and pushed his arousal even higher. He must have nicked Mykel with one of his fangs, but it didn't seem to slow the Aenjel's enthusiastic response to their kiss. In fact, if anything, it had him grinding harder against Lusaffar.

Finally, they had to pull away from each other to gasp for air.

"Definitely a one-time deal," Mykel whispered, eyes closed, lips slightly parted as he caught his breath.

Lusaffar chuckled. There was no way he could take the Aenjel seriously after the kiss they had just shared and the euphoric look still on the other male's face. It was a strange relief, most especially because he hadn't been aware he'd needed reassuring in the first place.

"Sure. You keep telling yourself that," he drawled.

"You really are..." Mykel seemed to fight to find the right words. Lusaffar's smile morphed into a full tilt grin and Mykel narrowed his eyes again. "So incredibly arrogant."

"Sorry to burst your bubble, pigeon, but I think I have every right to feel a bit arrogant right now." Lusaffar looked down between their bodies at the growing bulge in the front of Mykel's uniform.

Mykel blushed profusely, and Lusaffar's cock twitched in response.

"I meant it, you know," Mykel said. "What I said about it needing to be —"

"I know." Lusaffar looked away, uncomfortable with the intensity in Mykel's gaze.

He hated this. Hated having to do this touchy feely crap. But if it was necessary...

For Mykel. And only once he would do it.

Meeting Mykel's eyes, Lusaffar took a deep breath. "What makes you think it isn't?"

Mykel just stared at him for a moment, his eyes searching.

"Isn't something more, I mean..." Lusaffar cleared his throat, his heart pounding and unfamiliar nervousness setting in. "I don't think it's just lust. I don't...I don't want it to be...just lust, I mean." Lusaffar paused, letting the words sink in and struggling for the next. The exact words he needed to make things right. "I guess in the end it boils down to two things. Do you trust me, and are you brave enough to see what happens? To...try...with me?"

"It's not that simp —"

"Yeah, Mykel. Yeah, it is." Lusaffar put everything he had into meeting Mykel's eyes at that moment.

Mykel continued to search his face for long seconds, the moment stretching out between them.

Lusaffar tensed — preparing himself to be knocked back. *And after laying my heart out on a silver platter. Well, doesn't that suck?*

Then Mykel started nodding. "I want to...to try, that is. See where this...thing might go."

"Okay." Lusaffar felt like a huge weight he hadn't even realised he was carrying around had been lifted from his chest.

Touching their foreheads together, Lusaffar breathed through the moment for a few seconds. The lightness in his heart made him feel...mischievous.

"So," Lusaffar drawled, "can you come out to play now?"

Mykel pulled back, just staring at him for a moment—slightly stunned. Then a tiny smile and a hint of amusement lit his eyes. “You know, I don’t generally swear, but for you I’m very tempted to make an exception.”

“Please, don’t put yourself out on my account,” Lusaffar replied with a nonchalant shrug. He smiled, enjoying the cut and thrust of their banter. Messing with Mykel was now his favourite thing to do. And it was certainly better than the look he had seen on Mykel’s face earlier. “I swear enough for both of us anyway.”

Unexpectedly, Mykel laughed. “Asshole.”

“And now I suppose you expect me to make an effort to be nice.”

“Don’t put yourself out on my account.”

“Okay.”

Mykel shook his head, but his smile got wider and Lusaffar felt a strange lightening in his chest at seeing it transforming the Aenjel’s face until he was radiant. He felt oddly proud and pleased with himself—he’d managed to make the male smile and he felt damn good knowing he’d done it.

“Was there something you wanted, or are you just here to be a pain in my butt?” Mykel asked.

“Well, now that you mention it—”

“That wasn’t a suggestion.” Mykel was quick to point out. “Or an offer either. Just so you know.”

“Spoil sport.” Lusaffar tried for a pout. It was a very foreign expression to try to pull off for him, but it seemed to have the desired effect.

“Well, not right now anyway. Maybe later.”

Mykel’s voice was husky and Lusaffar loved the cheeky smile that accompanied it. It was relaxed—almost lazy—and at the same time so hot with promise. It eased something tight and hard that had formed when he had first come across Mykel looking so despondent.

“As a matter of fact, there *is* something we need to discuss.” Lusaffar couldn’t resist another quick kiss, before stepping back to stop things from going too far. “We need to talk about our plan of attack.”

“Why?”

Lusaffar's breath caught in his chest and his muscles locked tight with tension. The warm feeling in his belly drained away, leaving behind an icy ball of dread.

Damn it all to Perdiassion's black heart. Had he been so busy worrying about the Aenjel, fussing over the state of their relationship—whatever the hell that was—and his heart, he'd been completely blind to Mykel plotting and planning to take over? How many times had he seen Aenjels step in and arbitrarily take over—disregarding everyone and everything in the process? What a fool he was.

"Why what?" Lusaffar forced himself to ask, his jaw so rigid it was hard to get the words out.

"Why do we need to attack?"

Lusaffar studied Mykel closely, wondering what the man was thinking. "The Fennrus Group attacked us."

"I'm aware of that. But I'm also not interested in starting a war, Lusaffar."

"No one said anything about starting a war. But I think we need to make sure we're not walking into one. And the first thing we need is more information. They knew far too much about us, while we only know what the Intergalactic Council computers tell us."

The silence stretched out between them as Mykel's forehead furrowed in concentration. "Okay. That sounds reasonable."

Lusaffar only just managed to catch himself before he gaped in shock. He wasn't at all sure he'd heard right. Had the Aenjel really just listened to him? Agreed with him?

"So what do you suggest?" Mykel asked.

If he hadn't heard it with his own ears, Lusaffar would never have believed an Aenjel was capable of listening to a Deamond. Even more astounding, he was asking Lusaffar's opinion. In all his long life, Lusaffar couldn't *ever* remember an Aenjel—certainly not a ruling class Aenjel—seeking out a Deamond's opinion on anything. Not even when it directly affected them.

But then, Mykel wasn't just any Aenjel. He was...Mykel. Special. His. The sudden realisation was stunning. Lusaffar froze, letting it flood over him and then slowly sink in.

Mine. And he wasn't panicked by the notion. Didn't regret the sensation.

Lusaffar realised Mykel was staring at him, waiting for a response, and he rushed on to cover his astonishment. "I suggest we start by sending in a few intelligence and

reconnaissance teams. The Fennrus group obviously knows a lot more about us than we know about them. And I, for one, want to know how and why that is. Once we know more, we can decide what to do from there."

"Any ideas who we should send?"

Again Lusaffar found himself playing catch up to Mykel's attitude. It was so not what Lusaffar had come to expect from Aenjels. Maybe Aaronn really had just been an aberrant son of a bitch. He'd certainly never considered Baylelle the way Mykel seemed capable of considering a lover. He would never forgive Aaronn for the pain and humiliation he had put his gentle half-brother through, but perhaps it was wrong to hold the bastard's sins against the whole species.

"I...ah...I'm not sure. I have some ideas, but I want to think a bit more before we start talking about forming up teams."

"Mmm...you might be right. But it should definitely be a joint team approach. I think if we're ever going to make this thing work, we need to begin as we mean to go on. We should pair up Aenjels and Deamonds right from the start."

"We'll need to include Gayebreel and Cayle in on the preparation and planning."

"Eventually. But right now those two are too busy antagonising one another to think straight. I certainly don't think they'd have anything constructive to add at this point."

"Yeah, they seriously need to just fuck and get it over with."

This time it was Mykel's turn to look stunned.

Lusaffar grinned, making sure to let his fangs show.

Surprisingly, Mykel's lips turned up in an answering smile. "Imagine the ray shielding you'd need on that blast radius."

"Oh, yeah!" Lusaffar enjoyed the moment of companionship – the shared laughter and easy camaraderie. He could really get used to this.

"Okay," Mykel said, still chuckling a little at the idea of Gayebreel and Cayle together. "Why don't we each form up lists of candidates and then we can see about pairing them off. We don't have to make the decisions straight away, and I think we can both agree not to involve Gayebreel and Cayle until we have more of a plan ourselves."

"Right."

As silence settled around them now they'd finished discussing their next move against the Fennrus group, Lusaffar became aware of the huge blue expanse of sky and not much else all around them. He'd been so focused on Mykel he'd forgotten about his discomfort with the exposed position. Now he wasn't distracted, it all came flooding back.

Lusaffar looked down, trying to convince his brain that the decking platform was fascinating. That there really was no big, blue sky right there in front of them. He scuffed his boots along the synthwood plates designed to blend in with the surroundings. Really, it was fascinating how they'd got the swirling impression of the wood and –

"You don't like it out here, do you?" Mykel said, surprising Lusaffar enough with his astute question that he looked up – straight into Mykel's intense, knowing gaze.

"It's all right," Lusaffar tried to reply casually.

When Mykel simply continued to look at him as if he didn't believe a word of the lie, Lusaffar finally shrugged. "It's better when it's dark. It feels closer. Less...naked. And the stars are pretty."

Lusaffar looked across at Mykel, horrified and embarrassed by how much he had just relieved. But Mykel simply stared back calmly – curiosity the only thing reflected in his bright blue eyes.

Lusaffar found himself continuing without really meaning to do so. "Sometimes...sometimes when we were home I would go out and look at the night sky with my brother."

Mykel looked slightly shocked at the news, and Lusaffar knew it was fairly justified. Deamonds were notoriously isolationist and generally shunned the surface. Some fanatics never ventured above ground and were violently opposed to those who did. But Lusaffar wasn't one of them. Never had been. He thought such prejudices were stupid. But it didn't mean he was entirely comfortable out in the open in broad daylight like this either.

Thank Ion they'd started training most of the duty-active warriors and younger generation to be surface tolerant. In a few years no one would know their species' weakness. He only wished he'd had more time and opportunity to train himself.

"You're pretty young to be the Monarch Aenjellus," Lusaffar said, thinking it was high time to distract Mykel with a change of subject.

"I'm not—" Lusaffar watched Mykel swallow—a momentary flash of pain clouding the Aenjel's features. "I'm not the king."

Lusaffar frowned in confusion. "You mean since we lost Orison and ended up on this floating circus?"

Mykel shook his head. "No. I mean I was never the king."

"What are you talking about? The Anghelescov family have been the sovereign leaders of the Aenjels for hundreds of years. Even Deamond nestlings know that much."

"My father was king before...before the end. I was next in line, but I was never crowned. I never ruled my people on Orison. And now...well, everything's changed."

"But why..." Lusaffar searched for the right words. Nothing was making sense at the moment. "I mean, how? You're here as a co-commander, or whatever we're supposed to be calling ourselves now. What happened...?"

"My mother and father refused to leave Orison."

"What?" Lusaffar gaped openly at the news.

"They felt they should die with the planet as nature intended."

Lusaffar was astounded. He'd heard vague rumours that some of the Aenjels had refused to leave the planet, but the king and queen? It was unbelievable. A scandal.

Actually, it was a testament to the Aenjels' loyalty to Mykel that Lusaffar hadn't heard even the vaguest hint of it before now. Then again, he doubted the Aenjels wanted anyone to know their rulers had abandoned them.

Deamonds, although a much smaller population, were obviously a lot more practical too. Not one of them had refused to leave when the time came. It just defied logic to Lusaffar's way of thinking. Life went on. And rulers didn't abandon their responsibilities.

"Selfish bastards," Lusaffar finally spat. How could they leave their people—their son—adrift in the universe like that?

Mykel reared back—heartache and anger contorting his beautiful features. "Shut up. You don't... Just—"

"Your people deserved better than that." Lusaffar's voice softened as he studied Mykel closely, seeing the lines of pain etched around his eyes. "*You* deserved better."

Mykel turned his head away, but Lusaffar thought he saw the male's eyes mist over suspiciously.

Damn it! Don't fuckin' cry, Lusaffar silently begged.

He wasn't good at this tender crap. He'd much rather trade biting quips or overwhelm the male with a passionate kiss. He hated feeling the sadness and dejection radiating off Mykel right now. He wanted to do something to make it better. But he wasn't really sure what he *could* do.

Stepping forward, acting completely on instinct, Lusaffar turned Mykel's head and kissed him. In truth, he ravaged the other male's mouth in pure self-defence. He wasn't sure what he would do if the Aenjel's tears actually started to fall. But the kiss quickly became so much more as Mykel took it deeper—nipping at Lusaffar's lips and demanding an equally fervent response by tugging on the soft vulnerable flesh with his teeth.

Lusaffar felt Mykel's hands push through his hair and run over the curved horns on his head. He shivered in delight. While not precisely an erogenous zone on a Deamond, having Mykel touch them, accept them, did something strange to his heart. As did the feeling of strong arms holding him close as they ground together—firm, hard bodies rubbing and thrusting against one another. He wanted more. He wanted everything.

But as much as Lusaffar wanted it to continue—for them both to find release against one another right here and now—this was not the place. He didn't want to do this here and risk being discovered. Not because he didn't want anyone to know, but because he found he wanted more than a quick hump against the wall with Mykel. And he didn't want to share. He felt completely and utterly possessive of what was between them. Of Mykel. It was a shock. But perhaps most surprising of all, not an unwelcome one.

Lusaffar gradually gentled the kiss until their lips parted on one final, lingering caress.

"You know, you're getting a little predictable with these sneak attacks," Mykel observed—eyes still closed, leaning heavily together as they were still panting for air a few minutes later.

Lusaffar chuckled. "Is that a challenge?"

"Maybe." Mykel's lips tilted up in a cheeky smile, but his eyes remained closed as if savouring the moment for as long as possible.

"You are so going to regret issuing me with a challenge, Aenjel."

"Doubt it," Mykel snorted, then opened his eyes wide in mock alarm. "Unless, of course, you're not up to it."

“Brat.”

“Sir?” a small, timid voice interrupted behind him.

Lusaffar stiffened. Looking into Mykel’s eyes he could see the Aenjel watching, waiting to see what his response would be. Lusaffar slowly let his muscles relax. Mykel didn’t look embarrassed by having been caught in an intimate moment with him. And Lusaffar certainly wasn’t ashamed. Not at all. Mykel was his!

Turning his head, but not releasing his hold on Mykel for a moment, Lusaffar spotted a half-grown Deamond standing several feet away – his eyes wide and frightened.

“Yes?” Lusaffar asked calmly.

“M-Master Fieldsmen Azrayle sent me to...to fetch you, sir. I mean...ask you to come. H-he said to tell you it was urgent.”

Lusaffar frowned. Why hadn’t Azrayle used the comm link? Looking at the boy, he suddenly wasn’t so sure his reaction was a result of having caught the Aenjel and Deamond commanders making out. Something else seemed to be at the heart of his distress. Something far worse than a few stolen kisses between traditional enemies. A tickle of unease began to stir beneath his skin.

“Tell your Master I’ll be right there.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Field-bay forty-seven, sir.”

With that the boy ran off like the hounds of hellimun were after him.

“No rest for the wicked.” Lusaffar sighed, reluctantly letting go of Mykel and stepping back.

“You should know.”

Mykel’s murmur was low, but Lusaffar was pretty certain he was meant to hear it. His lips twitched up into a smile. It was comforting to know there were at least a few things that were going to stay the same. Over the last few weeks he had got attached to Mykel’s wicked tongue.

Of course, he was kind of hoping to get a lot more attached to it, but duty called.

Chapter Six

Mykel felt only the tiniest twinge of guilt for goading Lusaffar the way he had. But in the end it had been the only way, and so worth it. Any pangs of conscience had quickly been overwhelmed by the giddy sense of elation he'd felt when Lusaffar had passed the impromptu test.

He'd needed to find out for himself if what Yoeseph had suggested about Lusaffar starting to bond with him might be true. Seeing the possessive, demanding passion flare to life when he suggested what had happened between them was just a random, one time aberration that wasn't likely to happen again was heady stuff. The kisses that had come after still had his head reeling. And he couldn't wait for more of the same.

Still lost in the intense arousal Lusaffar had ignited in his belly—and in other, slightly lower regions—Mykel nearly ploughed right into the Deamond's back when the male stopped in the doorway to the fireflower field.

"What..." Mykel's voice died in his throat as he stared around Lusaffar's broad shoulders into the room.

All around, the beds that should have been gently warmed by the glowing heat of artificial lava-flows were scattered and broken. A mess of uprooted plants, overturned stands and volcanic soil mixed with dark, swirling water covered the floor. More water dripped from the ceiling, hissing on the last of the hot lava rocks in an angry sizzle. Several Deamonds were working to try and salvage what they could, but it looked fairly hopeless.

"What on Ion happened?" Mykel asked no one in particular, staring around in shock at the devastation.

A huge Deamond with a scarred face noticed them and strode over. Although he had never met the man, Mykel assumed it was Master Fieldsman Azrayle—the Deamond responsible for all the fireflower nurseries. While it might have been his appearance—which was certainly daunting—the man also had a distinct air of authority, and the other Deamonds give way deferentially as he moved through the room.

Hopefully, he would have some answers. Mykel seriously doubted there was any reasonable explanation to go with them though.

"How?" Lusaffar finally managed as the Deamond stopped in front of them.

Mykel cast a worried look over at Lusaffar. He didn't sound at all like the bold, brash man he knew. And he looked even worse than he sounded – dazed, bewildered, and most concerning of all, speechless.

"We don't know, Overlord Ifearnan."

"Commander," Lusaffar murmured absently, picking up a broken fireflower with a tenderness and sorrow that shocked Mykel.

"Overlord?"

Mykel felt his heart ache at the look of pain and confusion on Lusaffar's face. All he wanted to do was reach out and wrap his arms around the shaken Deamond, but he knew Lusaffar wouldn't thank him for it once the shock wore off, so he kept his hands to himself.

"I'm Commander here..." Lusaffar murmured. His voice trailed off as he looked over the scene of destruction around them. "Who would do this?"

The Deamond guard hesitated, looking over at Mykel apprehensively.

"Just spit it out for Ion's sake, Azrayle!" Lusaffar barked angrily, an alarming red tinge bleeding into his eyes.

"We think it was a Deamond, Overl—Commander," Azrayle said with obvious reluctance.

"What? Why?" Mykel couldn't quite believe what he was hearing.

Why would a Deamond do this? As far as Mykel could tell, Deamonds revered and loved fireflowers.

Azrayle regarded Mykel suspiciously.

"Just tell me!" Lusaffar screamed.

"Each of these beds weighs in excess of three hundred standard units. The strength needed to lift one..." Azrayle cast a quick look Mykel's way before continuing. "It's far more than most species possess."

In other words, it couldn't have been done by an Aenjel. Mykel quickly ran through a mental list of all the species still aboard helping with the transition phase. There wasn't any

species noted for their physical strength amongst them that he recalled. Well, except for the roughly one hundred and forty-four thousand Deamonds aboard, of course.

"What about mechanical aids?" Mykel wondered, searching for any evidence they might have been used to create the havoc.

"No signs of anything other than brute force and..." Azrayle really looked like he'd rather not go on, but the look Lusaffar gave him demanded he continue anyway. "Claw marks, sir."

"Fuck!" Lusaffar spun around and paced away obviously furious.

"Thank you for your report, Master Fieldsman. Please keep us informed of anything else that comes up."

"I'm sorry I failed you, Commanders." The big, scarred warrior's head was bowed low, his cheeks ruddy with shame.

"You are not to blame yourself for this." Mykel reached out and clasped the Deamond's shoulder, feeling muscles stiffen under his touch, but holding on regardless—offering solidarity and forgiveness the only way he knew how. "We will find whoever did this."

Azrayle inclined his head, cast a worried look at Lusaffar then returned to directing the clean-up efforts.

Mykel watched Lusaffar for a moment as he scrutinised a broken bedding stand. Now that Mykel knew to look, he could indeed see very obvious claw marks in the metal. But what really shocked him was how upset Lusaffar seemed to be. He vibrated with barely contained emotion.

"I'm so sorry." Mykel stepped up beside Lusaffar, not touching, but hoping the male might still feel his care and support. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Does it look like there's anything anyone can do?" Lusaffar spat.

"Lusaffar—"

"Just back the fuck off!" Lusaffar stepped away, even though Mykel had been very careful not to touch or crowd him.

"What's wrong with you?" Mykel couldn't help the edge of hurt that crept into his voice.

"Nothing's wrong with me." Mykel could see Lusaffar losing his battle for control.

"Calm down."

"Fuck you!"

"Lus –"

"Just because I want to hit something instead of bursting into tears doesn't mean there's anything wrong with me!" Lusaffar screamed.

Mykel felt as if Lusaffar had hit him. He stared – stunned and hurt by the caustic words. What the hell was going on?

That more than anything helped Mykel to focus past his pain. He took a moment to study Lusaffar closely. This wasn't normal. This wasn't the Lusaffar he'd come to know and...

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

Suddenly, Lusaffar grabbed the overturned bedding stand beside him and threw it across the room. It landed with a booming crash of metal that plunged the room into silence. Everyone froze, staring at their out of control leader.

For an instant, Lusaffar turned desperate, haunted red eyes towards him – as if pleading for something. Perhaps help. Possibly understanding. But before Mykel could pin down exactly what it might be, it was gone – drowning under a sea of rage.

"Lusaffar, you need to calm down." Mykel made his voice as calm and reasonable as possible, even though he was feeling far from either right now.

"I can't!" Lusaffar screamed. A scream that ended up sounding suspiciously like a wail.

"Lus –"

"Just get away from me!" With that, Lusaffar turned and sped from the room.

Mykel stood fixed to the spot as he watched Lusaffar leave. Hurt, confusion, anger and worry all churned away inside him, vying for supremacy.

"Sir?"

Mykel turned to see Azrayle standing behind him. "Yes?"

The Deamond cleared his throat nervously. "I...ah...Overl...I mean Commander Ifearnan, he... Fireflowers are not just plants to us, sir. They're...a precious treasure. Each of us carries the juice of our clan's fireflowers with us everywhere we go." He indicated a small metal cylinder clipped to his waist. "I know it's hard –"

"No, I understand." But he really didn't. The only thing keeping him calm right now, keeping him focussed, was the soul-deep knowledge that Lusaffar hadn't been himself. He clung to it like a lifeline.

Earlier, Lusaffar had said he needed to trust him. And so that was what Mykel would do. He had to just hold on and trust Lusaffar. Hope they could work out whatever the hell was going on once the Deamond had calmed down.

"I'm sorry he—" Azrayle began awkwardly, but Mykel cut him off. He *really* couldn't talk about it right now.

"Why aren't you upset?"

Azrayle cleared his throat. "I...ah...might have already..."

For the first time, Mykel noticed the bloody mess that was the Deamond's hands, as if he'd gone several rounds with a bulkhead and lost.

"Have you seen a doctor about those yet?"

"No."

"Get yourself to the infirmary."

"I'm fine." The big Deamond looked away as if embarrassed.

"What is it with you Deamonds? That wasn't a suggestion." Mykel thought it was just as well there were a few Aenjels around to take care of the stubborn, hard-headed lot now.

"Yes, sir."

As the Deamond turned to lumber off, Mykel's data pad began to chirp with a preprogrammed reminder.

Now what?

Reading the short message, Mykel cursed under his breath. *Shit. Handover. Great timing.* Running his hand through his shaggy blond hair, he wondered what else could go wrong. This did not bode well.

* * * *

Lusaffar ran.

There was no other word for it. He ran as fast and as far as he could away from Mykel. And he was still running.

Redoubling his effort on the hazards-track that had been set up to test and train Deamond warriors, Lusaffar tried to purge his body of the last of his rage. He had felt it building up inside him, lapping at the edges of his self-control until finally it had threatened to burst over the thin barrier and overwhelm anyone in its path. And Mykel had been in its path. The mere thought sent a shiver of dread down his spine.

The worse thing of all—now he had worked off whatever had come over him and settled down enough to think straight—was knowing he'd well and truly fucked things up with Mykel this time.

He couldn't believe the way he had acted around the Aenjel, the things he had said. It had been as if he could hear himself from a long way off—dimly and down a dark tunnel—but had absolutely no way to stop the verbal shuttlewreck.

The knowledge he had destroyed any chance, however slim it might have been, of exploring what was between them was a devastating blow. His chest ached, and not from the physical exertion he was putting himself through.

What have I done?

Remembering the pain he had inflected with his hurtful words nearly sent him spiralling back into another uncontrolled rage. He managed to groom the anger eating away at his inside into more speed as he powered through the deadly field of obstacles. Just. But it was damn hard work.

It was getting harder and harder all the time to maintain control. Every day he battled with it now. It had never been like this before. The smallest irritation that normally would never have bothered him sent his blood pressure soaring. And when he had seen their beloved fireflowers—

No! Not going there. He couldn't think about the destruction right now. But when he did—

Lusaffar growled. Retribution would be swift and bloody.

For a Deamond, fireflowers were sacred. In the old days, the precious tears they exuded were revered as gifts from the goddess Brinna herself. They were prized for their amazing healing and pain relieving properties. One tiny vile, which took an entire year to collect, could repair the most devastating injuries imaginable. In a society as brutal as the Deamonds, they were quite literally a godsend. No clan nest was complete without a fireflower field.

And no matter how vicious the dispute, no one would dare desecrate a fireflower lava bed. Until now.

Screaming his anger, Lusaffar lashed out, shredding the whirling blades from another obstacle in his path.

What the hell is wrong with me? This was the second time he had almost lost control around Mykel. And each time it was getting harder and harder to pull back from the edge.

Okay. Enough. It was time to get his head out of his ass and get on with it.

Lusaffar let out one last, high-pitched scream then breathed through his anger as the echoes died away. When he'd found a small measure of calm in the eye of the storm, he headed to the sonic shower, determined to make things right. Both with Mykel and as commander of the *Nu Hayven*.

Chapter Seven

All around the room various officers and officials brought in to witness the handover ceremony had begun to whisper and murmur amongst themselves. But Mykel remained aloof and quiet, trying to project an air of confidence as he stood with Admiral Jaynous and his aide. All the while his insides squirmed and twisted in worry.

Where the hell are you, Lusaffar? Please be all right.

While numerous attempts had been made to contact the Deamond commander, no one had managed to locate him. He'd turned off his comm link and disappeared into the depths of the ship somewhere.

When they did find him, Mykel was very tempted to kick his ass. It was a pleasant fantasy to pass the time. Of course, after he'd finished kicking Lusaffar's ass he planned on hugging the man, figuring out what the hell was going on, fixing it and then doing other, much more pleasurable things to the Deamond's delectable rear-end—for a long, hot and sweaty time.

But that was a whole separate fantasy.

Clearing his throat, Mykel forced himself to stop thinking about his plans for Lusaffar when they finally managed to catch some private time. He glanced around the room again. Many of those present were casting furtive glances his way now, as if he might be hiding the Deamond somewhere or know where the man might be.

Mykel took another sip of the wine that had been forced on him as they'd tried to distract everyone from the delay.

Come on, Lusaffar.

"We can't do this without both parties present," Laforte said once again, his officious voice grating on Mykel's nerves. "If Lusaffar is refusing to—"

"Sorry I'm late."

Mykel spun around to see Lusaffar striding into the room—cool, confident and completely at ease with his late arrival. Lusaffar looked anything but truly apologetic, as if the universe was expected to revolve around him and await his pleasure.

Father would approve, Mykel realised. He'd always said it was the mark of a true leader if the room stopped when you entered. Mykel had never mastered the skill himself.

"Nice of you to join us, Commander Ifearnan," an elderly statesman from the Intergalactic Council drawled.

"My apologies, I was unavoidably detained."

"Nothing serious, I trust?" another official enquired, his brows furrowing in concern.

"Nothing I couldn't handle."

Mykel stared in disbelief. But Lusaffar remained completely calm and unaffected. He didn't resemble the man he had seen in the fireflower bay in any way, shape or form. In fact, he was almost like a stranger – aloof and self-contained.

"Shall we begin?" Admiral Jaynous indicated the data pad set out ready to complete the final agreements.

Lusaffar inclined his head regally, not once looking over at Mykel.

He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end – not only in irritation, but with the first real stirrings of disquiet.

As the details of the agreement went on and on, and seals were added to more and more datawork, it became increasingly obvious Lusaffar was ignoring him. Mykel bristled in indignation. After everything that had happened. After the way he had acted in the fireflower fields, Lusaffar had the audacity to ignore him!

Mykel pushed down the hurt and let his anger rise to the surface to protect himself.

Fine. If Lusaffar didn't want to face it, if he wanted to pretend nothing had happened and cover his embarrassment by pushing him away, so be it. If he didn't want his help, didn't want to share and work through whatever it was that was happening to him together, so be it. If he wanted to withdraw and not even try anymore...well, that was disappointing. He'd expected more from Lusaffar.

Okay, so his heart felt like it was being ripped in half, his throat so raw and tight he didn't think he'd be able to swallow, much less talk. But he sure as hell wasn't going to let the damn Deamond know that.

But it was definitely time to get out of here. Before he did something embarrassing – like try to shake some sense into the man...or cry.

Mercifully, just as he thought he wouldn't be able to hold out any longer, the Admiral cleared his throat.

"Well, I believe that's it. Congratulations, gentlemen. The *Nu Hayven* is now officially yours to command."

"Thank you, sir," Lusaffar's deep voice rumbled, sending an involuntary shiver down Mykel's spine.

Time to go.

"Please excuse me, Admiral. I have...matters to attend to." Mykel managed to clasp forearms with the stern commanding officer, before turning away and taking carefully measured steps to the door.

Around him, he could hear the other officers and officials beginning to relax. They broke off into groups as the refreshments were replenished and the gossiping then began in earnest under the thin disguise of networking.

Mykel focused solely on making it out the door and as far away from Lusaffar as possible.

* * * *

"Mykel! Wait!"

Lusaffar wasn't sure what he was going to say. He hadn't had the first idea *before* he'd walked into the conference room and seen Mykel standing there—tall, lithe and so stunningly handsome it made his heart ache.

He'd longed to just ignore everyone, stride across the room and take the Aenjel into his arms to beg forgiveness. But he couldn't. They had a job to do first, and he didn't want anyone else to see. To hear what he had to say. It was...private. Personal.

But apparently he'd hurt Mykel again. He could smell it—the anguish and torment rolling off the stiff-backed Aenjel hurrying away from him in waves. It assaulted his senses and called to him to make it better all at the same time. One thing was certain—he couldn't let Mykel walk away. He didn't *want* to let him walk away.

When Mykel didn't stop walking, Lusaffar ran after him, heedless of who might see. Latching onto an elbow, Lusaffar forced the Aenjel to stop and turn to face him.

Mykel's expression, when he turned around, stopped his heart. It was so cold and reserved – like an ice storm on the Great Southern Tundra.

"Yes?"

Lusaffar looked around. Officials and witnesses mingled and moved past them.

"Not here." Lusaffar tried to steer Mykel away, but the Aenjel pulled his arm free and took a step back.

"Why not?"

"Because there are...things I need to say to you. Private things."

"Oh! So now you want to talk to me? You're happy to look at me now that it's convenient, is that it?"

"Mykel, don't do this."

Mykel studied him for a moment and Lusaffar got that feeling of being weighed and measured again.

Then Mykel's eyes narrowed ominously. "Fine." Without another word, he turned to walk away.

"Mykel! Wait! Just list –"

Mykel spun around to confront him so fast Lusaffar wondered if the male had any Deamond DNA hidden away in that tight body of his.

"That's what it was in the meeting, wasn't it? You don't want anyone to know, do you? About us," Mykel accused.

"No."

Mykel drew back as if he'd been slapped.

"Screw you!"

"No. I mean, no, I do want people to know. I mean –"

"Anytime you want to start making some sense, Lusaffar, you go right ahead," Mykel snapped angrily.

Way out of his depth, Lusaffar fell back on the one way he knew to make Mykel listen. To make him understand.

Closing the distance between them, he kissed Mykel like his life depended on it. And having watched Mykel about to walk away from him, this time perhaps forever, he wasn't sure it didn't.

Their mouths fused so easily, so natural that Lusaffar knew he'd made the right decision. He stroked his tongue across Mykel's lips, gently licking and begging entry – and ultimately, forgiveness.

When Mykel opened for him, Lusaffar wanted to shout for joy. Instead, he swept inside, teasing and stroking, taking the soft sigh that drifted up from Mykel's throat.

After a long, intense moment, Lusaffar gently brought the kiss to an end.

"What the hell was that?" Mykel demanded – his voice low and husky, his beautiful blue eyes slightly dazed, but with an edge of don't-fuck-with-me fire still hidden in their depths.

Lusaffar swallowed down the spike of lust that shot through his system at the incredible vision Mykel made.

"That was me telling you I don't give a fuck who knows. This is me saying..." Lusaffar swallowed. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Mykel. I don't –"

A hoverlator door opened beside them and chimed to announce itself ready for service. Lusaffar hadn't realised they'd ended up standing outside one of the hoverlator bays.

After only a moment spent in silent study, Mykel pulled at him, dragging him into the compartment and requesting their quarters. Before Lusaffar could open his mouth to say anything, or the doors could even finish sealing themselves properly, Lusaffar found himself slammed up against the side of the car.

"Don't ever do that to me again," Mykel growled and Lusaffar felt his shaft thicken with arousal at this slightly rough, demanding side of his Aenjel. "When you didn't look at me, when you wouldn't speak to me, I thought... Especially after..."

"Please, I'm –"

"Don't say sorry," Mykel demanded angrily. "Sorry is completely meaningless if you don't plan on changing anything. It's useless if you don't promise never to do it again."

Lusaffar wondered briefly if Mykel had heard too many regretful platitudes from his parents to accept them anymore. Had his mother and father filled his ears with insincere regret for their selfish decision? In the end, it didn't matter. Mykel was right not to accept them – to expect more.

"I promise, Mykel. I won't do it again. I just..." Lusaffar's voice faltered embarrassingly. "I couldn't have got through the ceremony if I had looked in your eyes and seen the pain I put there."

"It hurt more when you wouldn't let me in. I thought you didn't want me any —"

"No! That's not it at all. In fact, if anything I want you too much."

"There's wanting me, and then there's wanting to share with me."

Lusaffar felt his cheeks fill with heat. He looked away. "I cocked-up, okay. I'm..." Glancing at Mykel, he saw the Aenjel was watching him intently, wondering no doubt if he was capable of learning — of change. "I'm not going to do it again."

For long moments Mykel studied him. It was a disturbing habit that made Lusaffar squirm every time. He hoped he wasn't going to be on the receiving end of *the look* too often. Unfortunately, experience suggested he couldn't keep himself out of trouble for any length of time, so he suspected he better get used to it.

"Okay," Mykel finally said.

"Okay?"

That was it?

Mykel stepped up and carefully wrapped his arms around Lusaffar's waist, resting his head down gently on one shoulder.

"I was worried about you. I'm so glad you're all right."

For a moment, Lusaffar was too stunned to move. The simple tender intimacy was...quite overwhelming. As Mykel slowly relaxed into him, Lusaffar hesitantly closed his arms around the Aenjel, feeling the soft brush of wing feathers across his arms and the supple, warm body moulding to him. Lusaffar couldn't remember ever feeling more shocked, or more content in his life.

He nuzzled gently into the golden strands of Mykel's hair and breathed in the sweet, musky scent. "I really am sorry."

Mykel lifted his head and placed his fingers gently against Lusaffar's mouth — sealing the words in. "Later. Yes, we need to talk about it, but not right now."

The hoverlator chose that moment to deliver them to their quarters and Mykel dragged them inside — not even waiting until the door slid shut to settle back against him. The ridge of Mykel's shaft pressed into Lusaffar's half-hard cock, which swelled a little more when Mykel

kissed him hungrily. A hand slid up over his chest, rubbing one nipple to a hard peak before tweaking it through the material of his tunic and moving on to the other nipple—doing the same thing to the neglected nub.

Lusaffar threw back his head in ecstasy, revelling in Mykel's touch. He wasn't sure what he had done to deserve the attention, but he wasn't stupid enough to knock it back. He needed this. Needed to connect and let everything else fall away for a while. He released all his tension into the feelings Mykel produced with his talented fingers.

The ecstatic torture went on and on until—when he couldn't take it anymore—Lusaffar grabbed Mykel and spun them around.

Mykel released a small grunt of surprise as he came up against the wall. Lusaffar swooped in to steal the soft sound, then trailed biting little nips down the long, smooth column of the Aenjel's neck, drawing more groans and fluttering sighs of pleasure.

When Lusaffar reached the pulsing vein in Mykel's neck, the one connected to the beating heart he had hurt so recently with his cruel words, he paused and nuzzled in—burrowing his head into the warm, musky skin.

"I'm sorry." Lusaffar licked at Mykel's collarbone, finding he couldn't raise his eyes to look at his soon-to-be-lover he was so ashamed of himself. "About the...you know...crying comment...thing too. I won't—"

"Shh. Less talk, more action."

Lusaffar knew Mykel was just trying to make it easy on him, but he couldn't take the easy out. It would be cowardly, and he'd never been a coward in his life. He wasn't about to start now with this Aenjel who was filling a place in his heart he never knew he had.

He pulled away slightly so Mykel could see how serious he was, waiting until the Aenjel was focussing on him properly. "I mean it, Mykel. I don't... I'm never going to be able to say sorry enough. I don't know—"

"I know, baby. You've already said it, and I believe you. We're fine." Mykel reached up to cup his cheek.

Lusaffar leaned into the hand. He never would have suspected he would find such intense peace and joy in such a gentle touch. He closed his eyes, overwhelmed by the moment. It made him strong enough to face the truth. To let it slip past his lips and share the growing fear he had of himself aloud.

"I don't think so, Mykel. I don't think I'm fine. I don't—"

"Shh. We'll work it out."

Lusaffar stilled, letting the words seep in and settle over him. Gradually, he relaxed into Mykel. *We'll work it out.* No expectation that he would only be worthy if he triumphed on his own. No censure that he wasn't perfect. No derision that something might be amiss. Just gentle acceptance and support.

"What the hell's wrong with me? I've never been like this before. I swear," Lusaffar whispered.

Recalling the incident in the fireflower field, Lusaffar shivered. He never wanted to feel so out of control around Mykel again. It had been terrifying.

"I don't know," Mykel murmured back, gently running his fingers through Lusaffar's hair and over the hard nub of his horns.

But Lusaffar's erection had wilted and he wasn't sure he would be able to overcome his remorse-fuelled impotence, no matter how much he wanted to be with Mykel right now. He could still pleasure the Aenjel though, he realised. In fact, the more he thought about it the more he liked the idea of bringing the male to orgasm without any thought to getting off himself.

Running his hand down to caress Mykel's cock, Lusaffar wasn't surprised to discover Mykel's hardness had waned somewhat as well. Fortunately, it didn't take more than a few strokes with his hand for it to start showing interest again.

Buoyed by Mykel's reaction to his touch, Lusaffar pushed his hand down inside the material of Mykel's pants—thrilled when he felt the velvet soft brush of a bare cock against his palm.

He stoked the hardening flesh in this hand then ran his thumb over the head of Mykel's cock to collect the thin trickle of pre cum that was leaking from the slit. It felt so good knowing he was giving pleasure to his Aenjel—bringing him closer and closer to the edge. But it wasn't enough.

Dropping to his knees, Lusaffar tugged at the material of Mykel's pants until the long, pale cock sprang free, so hard and desperate for release it almost hit Lusaffar in the face—as if it had a mind of its own and wanted in his mouth urgently.

"Lusaffar, what—"

“Sshh. Just relax. Let me do this.”

“But—”

Without another word, Lusaffar took Mykel's shaft deep into his mouth. Mykel gave a strangled grunt of pleasure and surprise. Lusaffar would have smiled only he was too busy pulling back to savour the flavour of Mykel's pre cum—letting it flow across his tongue and flicking gently to encourage more to trickle out.

It was salty, with a unique sweetness that lingered. Like summer Sigorea fruit. Lusaffar was certain he was going to become addicted to the flavour.

Bathing the head of Mykel's cock, he licked and swiped across the sensitive tip to catch every drop before plunging back down over the shaft. He drew another strangled moan as he took Mykel's cock deep into his throat and swallowed around it. It was a sensation Lusaffar knew from experience would push Mykel to the very limit.

Mykel's hips thrust forward in small, uncontrollable movements and Lusaffar knew he had the Aenjel right on the edge. Reaching up, he caressed the tight globes of Mykel's balls and that was all it took. A blast of cum rushed down Lusaffar's throat. Quickly, he pulled back and savoured each rich spurt of seed on his tongue, then swallowed it down with pleasure—taking Mykel into his body.

Mykel's orgasm went on and on, until finally he seemed incapable of holding his spent body up any longer and collapsed back against the wall, panting for breath.

Lusaffar milked the last of the cum from the cock in his mouth then surged to his feet, eager to share the amazing taste with his lover. He kissed Mykel, plundering the Aenjel's mouth—taking advantage while the man was still too weak from his explosive orgasm to fight him.

He explored freely without having to battle for control. It was bliss. One that only intensified as Mykel slowly came back to life and responded eagerly to the questing tongue in his mouth.

Lusaffar pulled at Mykel's tunic. He needed skin. Now.

Frustrated beyond tolerance, Lusaffar extended one razor sharp claw and slit the uniform right off his lover with two quick swipes that parted the fabric front and back. The

pieces dropped away effortlessly and Lusaffar ran his tongue from collarbone to the sweet sensitive spot below Mykel's ear as he ripped his own tunic from his body.

With a sweet, mutual groan of appreciation, bare chest met bare chest.

Apparently, Mykel was just as primed for more action—his soft white wings fanning the air around them lightly as he tilted his head for Lusaffar's kisses.

"Pants off now, pigeon," Lusaffar breathed into Mykel's ear before giving it a hard nip.

Mykel jerked at the sensual assault. "Make me."

A great burst of exhilaration radiated out from the centre of Lusaffar's chest. Nothing excited him more than a challenge. It was the very breath of life for a Deamond. And Mykel was at the centre of it all—absolutely perfect for him in every way, he realised.

Lusaffar lunged for the male. The tussle to remove their pants was both physical and rough. Muscles bulged with exertion, teeth clenched tight with effort as they fought each other for control. Mykel hadn't been kidding when he had dared Lusaffar. He didn't hold back at all. By the time they were naked, both men were slick with sweat and breathing heavily.

"There's a bed platform over there, and I plan to have you on it—literally and figuratively." Lusaffar held Mykel's waist firmly—not because the male showed any real inclination to escape, but because it felt right to do so.

One of the hands gripping Lusaffar's upper arms trailed up into his hair and ran over a horn, sending a shiver of delight through his system at the contact.

"If you think you're up to it, big boy, go for it," Mykel whispered.

"Oh! I'm up for it all right." He pulled Mykel hard up against his body and ground their cocks together, letting the rock hard shafts meet and rub over one another, mixing and mingling their pre cum.

Mykel groaned—all pretence of playing hard to get evaporating.

"How do you want me?"

Every way! Lusaffar wanted to shout. But he paused, considering the question carefully. How *did* he want Mykel for their first time?

"On your back, in the middle of the bed. Spread your legs."

Red-hot wickedness flared to life in Mykel's eyes. With a deliberate seductiveness that threatened to blow away completely any restraint Lusaffar might have had, Mykel sauntered

to the bed platform and crawled into position. Rolling over onto his back, he spread his legs obediently. Then the naughty Aenjel reached down and began stroking his cock.

"No touching!" Lusaffar barked.

Shit! If Mykel started touching himself like that, Lusaffar knew he'd end up coming in seconds. And he wanted more than just a quick unloading of his balls. Much more.

For a long moment, Mykel didn't look like he was going to comply. Then slowly the Aenjel released his shaft. He ran his hands up his flat stomach—pausing briefly to pinch at his nipples—before settling them innocently on either side of his head.

"You better make it worth my while." Mykel smirked.

Brat!

Lusaffar didn't bother to reply—he simply prowled to the bed platform and stalked up the soft mattress. The smirk slowly slipped from Mykel's lips until, by the time he was settled between Mykel's legs, a slight tremor pass over the other male's body. Perhaps Mykel wasn't quite as cock-sure as he made out.

"Shh." Lusaffar kissed the smooth, tender flesh on the inside of Mykel's thighs. "Just...let me take care of you."

Mykel stared at him, eyes widening in surprise. Lusaffar blushed. He knew it was a soppy thing to say. Completely out of character and likely to ruin his tough-as-formisteeel reputation, but—

"Lusaffar." Mykel's voice was gentle, slightly awed and...completely accepting.

Once again the balm of knowing he didn't have to pretend or live up to any preconceived expectations with Mykel settled over him. Lusaffar kissed the soft skin of Mykel's inner thigh again, then ran his tongue over the firm globes of the Aenjel's balls.

The moan that escaped Mykel as he threw back his head spurred Lusaffar on. He licked again and again, delighting in the thin, sensitive flesh beneath his tongue. Running down the bisecting line of Mykel's sac he paused to tease at the small area of skin directly behind the balls, before dipping lower and circling the puckered rosette of Mykel's ass.

Mykel pushed back against his tongue, wanting more. Lusaffar was more than happy to oblige, lapping and slipping his tongue over the hole that pulsed and quivered eagerly. When he knew Mykel was nearly mindless with need, he pressed forward with his stiffened tongue, breaching the entrance of his body steadily before beginning an insistent thrust and

retreat. At the same time he reached up and stroked the throbbing shaft above Mykel's tight balls.

Mykel arched up, shouting his orgasm to the universe.

For a male who had come not so long ago in the hoverlator, the pearly white seed that erupted from the head of his cock was infinitely gratifying to Lusaffar's ego. He'd done that to Mykel. He'd brought the man to the euphoric precipice of orgasm once more then sent him over the edge into oblivion. And he planned on doing it again too. So many times neither of them would be able to walk by tomorrow. Unconsciousness was the only way either of them would be getting any rest tonight.

Lusaffar groaned at the mental images that flashed across his mind. There were so many things he wanted to do with and to the delicious Aenjel currently coasting down from another powerful orgasm. But first he needed to release some of the torturous pressure in his own balls. Watching Mykel in the throes of ecstasy had only heightened the agony to the point of blue balls.

Collecting some of Mykel's cum, Lusaffar replaced his tongue with a finger, gradually working his way up to two, then three fingers—scissoring them in and out to open his debauched Aenjel so he could take the male without hurting him.

"Now, Lusaffar," Mykel finally gasped. "For fuck's sake, enough. Now, I'm ready for you now."

In retaliation, Lusaffar thrust his finger into Mykel's ass, making sure to rub over the sweet spot deep inside with just the right amount of pressure to have Mykel bowing up from the mattress again.

"Now, you're ready."

Lusaffar surged to his knees, hefting Mykel's knees in the crook of his arms and lining himself up with smooth, efficient movements that belied his own desperation to be inside the spectacular male beneath him. With one long, steady thrust he sheathed himself in Mykel's tight ass, throwing back his head and tensing every muscle in his body to stop himself from coming as he slid home inside the amazing heat and perfection of his lover.

"Oh! Fuck, Mykel. That's so fucking good."

"Yes! Yes! Fuck me. Make me feel it."

Lusaffar couldn't even spare the concentration needed to tell the male he'd definitely feel it. He was simply too close. Instead, he concentrated all his energy on starting a gentle rocking motion, building up slowly in depth and intensity until he could begin pounding into Mykel just the way they both wanted without embarrassing himself and spending too soon.

As the time spun out, Lusaffar finally managed to look down at his wanton Aenjel. Unbelievably, Mykel was getting hard again. His cock had slowly thickened until it rode against his hard stomach, brushing the indent of his belly button with the shiny rounded head of his shaft. Lusaffar wrapped his hand around the insatiable length and stroked gently.

Mykel moaned and thrashed his head from side to side on the head bolster as if it was too much. But his expression was glorious — a rapturous agony.

Fingernails dug into Lusaffar's ass and scraped along his side, adding to the intense pleasure with the tiny bites of pain.

Lusaffar licked at the soft flesh beneath Mykel's ear. "Can you do it again? Can you come for me again?"

Mykel's breathing was erratic now, shallow pants and gasps for air. "I don't think —"

"Do it. Come for me."

Lusaffar thrust back into Mykel — one heavy lunge that buried him inside Mykel's body at just the right angle to rub against the sweet spot deep. At the same time he stroked Mykel's cock one last time, leant forwards, then sank his fangs into the pale column of the Aenjel's neck.

Seed shot from the head of Mykel's cock up between their bodies. Not quite as copious or forceful as earlier perhaps, but the shout of pleasure was just as powerful, just as sweet to hear.

With each pulse of cum, Lusaffar drew on his lover's neck. The sweet, rich flavour exploded over his tongue, just as his cock exploded deep inside Mykel's ass. His echoing cries of pleasure joined Mykel's, melding them together in one glorious song of release.

* * * *

Mykel lay his head down on Lusaffar's chest. Still glowing from their intense, mutual orgasm, it was blissful to simply soak up the warmth of the other male's body. And Mykel refused to think beyond that. It was just too much effort. Wallowing in the here and now was all he was capable of at the moment.

He couldn't deny it had felt good. Okay, maybe better than good. All right, it had been fucking fantastic, out of this universe sex. And he wanted to do it again. Lots and lots of agains. But there was no way he was telling Lusaffar how amazing he was. That would just be stupid. The Deamond was unruly enough as it was.

Speaking of which.

"Hey, Lusaffar," Mykel said softly, his head still cushioned against the big Deamond's broad chest, fingers unconsciously tracing swirling patterns across his sculptured muscles.

"Mmm?"

"You plan to keep snacking on me while we're supposed to be making love?"

Mykel felt the soft snort as much as heard it.

"Only if you keep using me as a scratching post, pigeon," Lusaffar replied, chuckling softly.

Mykel coloured as he recalled the deep claw marks he had seen on Lusaffar's flank, back and ass when the man had got up to retrieve the cleaning wipes a few minutes earlier. He squirmed in embarrassment.

"Settle down. No need to get all fluffy and start that mottling crap. I kind of like having your marks on me."

Lusaffar went completely still and silent, as if he realised what he had just said. Mykel stopped moving too. Did Lusaffar want to take it back? Did he want to deny the amazing connection they had found?

"Yeah. Like the marks," Lusaffar said as if surprised by the revelation but not necessarily repulsed by it. Mykel relaxed back against him. "Get some sleep, pigeon. We got a lot of work to do if we're ever going to get this bucket of bolts and everyone on it military ready before we reach our destination."

Mykel thought that was probably a good idea. Sleep was a very tempting prospect after this past week. Since their arrival on the *Nu Hayven*, there seemed to have been precious little

opportunity for rest. And Lusaffar made a surprisingly comfortable pillow. There really was no sense in wasting such a comfy position.

Snuggling closer, Mykel released a sigh. He drifted off to sleep with a contented smile on his lips – safe in Lusaffar's arms.

* * * *

Something had needed to be done. Things had drifted way off course. They'd actually gone through with the handover! That had never been part of his plan.

Still, at least it freed him to start really messing things up now. But time was definitely running short.

Fortunately, Lusaffar's little delay had provided the perfect opportunity. And the lover's quarrel so many had witnessed after the ceremony had been wonderfully timed. He couldn't have arranged a more convenient motive.

Come morning things should be quite chaotic. By the end of the week, the Intergalactic Council would be begging for the military to take over and remove the Aenjels and Deamonds from the *Nu Hayven* forever. Which played right into his hands.

Chapter Eight

Lusaffar watched Mykel rub at his head again and he threw down his data pad in disgust. "That's it. You're going to the infirmary."

"I'm fine."

"You're not fucking fine. You've been looking terrible ever since we got up this morning."

"Gee, thanks. You really need to work on your morning-after lines."

"You know what I mean. That's the fifth time you've done that in the last ten minutes. You're in pain, aren't you?"

"It's just a headache. I'll get something for it in a minute."

"You look exhausted."

Mykel finally looked up. "Well, whose fault is that?"

Despite his worry, a smug smile tugged at Lusaffar's lips at the reminder of the night they had spent together. Neither of them had got much sleep and, yes, there were definitely tender spots that Lusaffar fully appreciated this morning—every twingy, memorable one of them.

Mykel smiled back at him—the delicate pink Lusaffar adored infusing his cheeks.

Lusaffar sobered again. "Promise me you'll go see someone if it gets worse."

"I will." But Mykel was already turning back to his data pad.

"Mykel," Lusaffar growled in warning. He wouldn't stand for Mykel pushing himself to the point of illness. He wasn't losing the delectable Aenjel just when they'd finally found their way to each other. Even if he did leave feathers in the bed.

"I promise. In fact, I've already asked Doctor Raffayel to stop by this morning. There's something I want to ask him about. That's why I can't stop right now. I think I'm on to something, but I need to correlate this data before I can show it to him."

Lusaffar frowned, but admitted his curiosity was peaked. Leaning over Mykel's shoulders, he wrapped his arms around the man and studied the information scrolling across the data pad's screen in long rows of names, dates and datalinks.

“What are you working on?”

“A list of all those who have been on suicide watch or involved in a major incident since we left Orison.”

“Why?”

“I was thinking about what happened yesterday, in the fireflower bay.”

Lusaffar flushed at the reminder of his behaviour.

“Stop that. I don’t think it was your fault. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I think —”

“What?”

This time it was Mykel’s turn to flush. “I don’t know. It just feels like something’s not right. Like there’s something...bigger going on.” Mykel shook his head—looking embarrassed at the fact he was being so vague.

Lusaffar leant down and offered a small kiss to his lips. “You’ll figure it out. You’re the smartest male I know.”

Mykel’s blush went positively supernova. “Sweet talker. That tongue will get you everywhere.”

Studying the Aenjel at close range, Mykel’s smile looked just a little strained, a little too pinched at the corners for Lusaffar to relax into the banter and forget about his concern for his lover.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“How can I convince you?” Mykel’s eyes, while clouded with exhaustion, held an increasingly familiar twinkle of promise and need. They’d spent half the night exploring both.

Stepping around the small couch, Lusaffar sat down beside Mykel before pulling the Aenjel in for another, deeper, more thorough kiss. He stroked his tongue over the seam of Mykel’s lips until they parted willingly, then he pushed in to take a long, lingering taste of the Aenjel’s sweet mouth.

Mykel met and tangled their tongues together in a fierce, demanding tussle, but gradually his initial, enthusiastic response tapered away to a soft submission that let Lusaffar explore at will.

Just as Lusaffar was about to pull back, realising the Aenjel was probably too tired from the previous night and running on empty right now, Mykel gave a strange whimpering moan.

“Mykel?”

Their eyes met briefly, before Mykel’s rolled back in his head and he went limp in Lusaffar’s arms.

“Mykel!”

* * * *

Mykel woke with a low groan, feeling a little like he’d been stuffed into a bag and dragged through the Deamond’s crazy hazards course on the training deck.

Disorientated, stiff and sore in places he didn’t even realise he had, Mykel lay perfectly still and let his eyes roam around the room, trying to work out where he was and how he might have got there. But even that hurt. The room, while dimmed and a restful grey-blue, still made him squint as his eyes adjusted to the light.

It wasn’t anywhere he recognised immediately. Various machines he didn’t know the names of were positioned strategically around the room. A constant, rhythmic beeping and the distinctive smell of antimicrobial cleaners suggesting he was in some sort of medical facility.

Forced to tilt his head to the side to get a better idea of where he was, Mykel’s breath caught in his throat when he spotted Lusaffar—hunched and looking distinctly uncomfortable in a padded chair beside him, fast asleep. The black, shaggy mess of his hair fell across one cheek and Mykel could see the dark, bruised flesh under his eyes that suggested the Deamond hadn’t slept very much recently.

Strange, I can’t remember them being there this morning. He frowned in confusion, not really sure what pieces of the puzzle he was looking at. Nothing really made sense at the moment, and his brain refused to fire up and start giving him answers to the really tricky questions—like, *where the hell am I and how the hell did I get here?*

“Hello, sleepyhead.”

Mykel turned sharply towards the unexpected voice, flinching when the movement caused pain to shoot up the back of his stiff neck and lance through his skull.

An equally exhausted looking Raffayel stood clutching a data pad by the door to the room. At the same time, Lusaffar leapt up from the chair he had been slumped in—going from sound asleep to wide awake with a painful looking jerk.

Mykel winched in sympathy. “Where am I?”

“Intensive Care Infirmary,” Raffayel replied gently.

“Huh?”

“You nearly died.” Lusaffar’s growled words sounded suspiciously like an accusation, but Mykel really wasn’t in any condition to deal with it at the moment, so he simply ignored the Deamond’s tone.

“How long?” Mykel realised his voice felt as rough and dry as the desert moons of Gromon 7, so he assumed it had been a little while.

“Three days,” Raffayel replied.

“What?”

“We managed to keep it reasonably quiet.” Raffayel thumbed through his data pad. “I listed you as suffering from exhaustion and issued you with a five-day medical leave for rest and recuperation. We just prayed you’d be up and about before then.”

“What happened?”

“What part of ‘you nearly died’ didn’t you catch?” Lusaffar asked, really sounding pissed off now.

But even as his expression suggested fire and brimstone on the horizon, he reached across and lifted a sipper cup to Mykel’s lips so he could soothe the parched landscape that was his dry, sore throat.

“Thank you.”

Lusaffar ran his hand through Mykel’s hair, his face softening—pain and worry suddenly dominating his expression.

“Just don’t do it again. Even using fireflower tears, we nearly lost you.”

“What happened?” Mykel whispered, the words catching in his throat as Lusaffar continued to stare at him—almost as if he was afraid to look away.

Mykel swallowed. *I must have been really sick.* He felt bad for putting his lover through that, which was both absurd and illogical – it wasn't as if he'd planned on nearly dying – but there it was.

Raffayel cleared his throat nervously. "You were poisoned."

That got Mykel's attention. "What?"

"I know it's hard to believe, but I ran the tests dozens of times. It was subtle, a combination of drugs actually. Quite ingenious –"

At Lusaffar's low growl, Raffayel blanched. Mykel placed a restraining hand on Lusaffar's arm and the agitated Deamond subsided, still frowning darkly, but quiet again as Mykel stroked the sculptured muscles of his forearm.

After a few moments, Raffayel cleared his throat again. "It...ah...it was a combination of nixtros auxhid and –"

"Nix-whats-hide?" Lusaffar snapped, obviously in no mood for confusing medical terminology he didn't understand.

"Nixtros auxhid. It's a gas. To the vast majority of humanoid species it's a mild anaesthetic, but it has a marked mood destabilising effect on Aenjel and Deamond – which as you can imagine can be a bit of a problem, particularly in Deamonds. But when mixed with erosthalien it's almost always a fatal cocktail to us. Long term exposure to the first drug so it could build up in the system, followed by a dose of the second caused Mykel's system to start shutting down in a cascade effect, with one organ failure tumbling into another. If it wasn't for the fact I was virtually outside your door and you –"

"So what are you saying?" Lusaffar demanded, his eyes flashing an ominous red warning.

The small Aenjel took a step back, his wings quivering.

"Lusaffar! Settle."

Raffayel seemed to catch himself. His face set in a firm, determined mask and he stood as tall as his thin five-foot-four frame would allow, squaring his shoulders. "I'm saying that Mykel wasn't just poisoned. I'm saying he's been drugged slowly and deliberately, possibly over a long period of time. Worse than that, I think we all have. I'm also saying that sometime in the last twenty-four hours a final, lethal drug was administered, interacting within Mykel's already primed system in an attempt to kill him."

Mykel stared at the slight, trembling male in front of them incredulously. The Aenjel looked ready to pass out, but was holding his ground against Lusaffar's dark scowl. "But that's —"

"I know. Impossible. Unbelievable. Inconceivable. But as I said, I ran the tests dozens of times. And it gets worse. I ran several tests on myself, Lusaffar and a few other patients. We all have traces of nixtros auxhid in our system. I think —"

"You think someone's been drugging all of us?" Lusaffar interrupted incredulously.

"I think —" The doctor broke off again, clearly intimidated about sharing his theory with them.

"What?" Lusaffar was growing impatient, but Mykel really felt for the shy, retiring doctor. He looked like he wanted to be anywhere but talking to the two of them right now. Yet he stayed. The timid man deserved a measure of respect for that alone.

"Please, Raffayel. Tell us what you're thinking," Mykel said gently, hoping to coax the man into sharing.

"I think the gas has been dispersed in the ventilation system. I think someone managed to get access to the air scrubbers and changed them to allow the poison into the atmosphere."

"That's not possible. Something like that would be picked up straight —"

"Wait. Yoeseph and I were working in the air generator lab just the other day. He said something about not being able to access detailed reports. What if —"

"Shit."

Shit was right. If someone had managed to interfere with the air filtering system and then hidden it so thoroughly it had remained undetected for days, possibly weeks... It was sabotage at the highest level. Not just anyone could pull something like that off. Only senior, trusted personnel had enough access to do something of that magnitude.

"And the second drug, eros-whatever-it-was, how did that get into Mykel's system?" Lusaffar asked.

"I don't know," Raffayel admitted.

"Cocktails," Mykel muttered, thinking back to Raffayel's use of the term earlier. Two sets of eyes turned to focus on him with concern, as if they feared he might still be out of his mind. "I think I was given the second drug at the handover ceremony. We had drinks, cocktails before the meeting started. It's the only time I can remember taking something that I

didn't get myself from a dispenser recently. I can't think of any other time it could have been done."

Mykel was quite proud that his brain was still capable of adding two and two together and coming up with a reasonable looking four...maybe. But his self-satisfaction was short lived. Lusaffar looked ready to take someone apart with his bare hands.

"Who gave you that drink?"

"I don't remember. It was just one of the waitstaff."

"Tell me." Lusaffar's eyes were changing again.

Any name supplied now would be an automatic death sentence, regardless of their guilt or innocence. Just as Mykel was thinking he was going to have a tough fight on his hands keeping Lusaffar from killing any number of hapless serving staff, Raffayel piped up.

"They wouldn't necessarily have been the ones to slip the drug into the drink. If it even was in the drink. Unless you were exposed to both drugs you wouldn't be affected anyway. The would-be murderer could have spiked several drinks and just waited for Mykel to take one."

"Since we were the only Aenjels and Deamonds scheduled to be present for the handover..." Mykel added.

"Who knows about this?" Lusaffer growled.

Raffayel shifted uncomfortably, his eyes darting away.

Lusaffar tensed. "Why are you so nervous? What have you done?" He took a step in the doctor's direction.

"Nothing! And I haven't told anyone."

"Then why —"

"Not even Dr. Asura?" Mykel asked, taking a guess as to what had the doctor so uneasy.

"No." Once again Raffayel refused to meet their eyes.

Interesting. Mykel frowned slightly. Raffayel was the last Aenjel he would have suspected to have a prejudice against Deamonds. He'd always seemed the most gentle and empathetic of souls. And he was fine with Lusaffar, if slightly terrified by the big Deamond. But then who wouldn't be. Maybe it was the fact a Deamond held down the position of senior medical advisor.

"You don't trust him?" Lusaffar asked, blunt as ever, his tail whipping from side to side in agitation.

Finally, Raffayel looked up. The first hint of courage reflected in his eyes. "No," he replied simply – no remorse or embarrassment at the statement.

"Why?"

Raffayel shrugged, but he looked anything but casual and relaxed. "If you would like me to inform –"

"No," Lusaffar interrupted, surprising Mykel. "We keep this quiet and to ourselves until we know more."

"Okay." Raffayel looked around when muffled voices echoed down the corridor. "I need to get going. I don't want anyone wondering where I am. As I said, we've kept your illness as quiet as possible."

"Thank you, Raffayel. I owe you one."

Raffayel blushed. "You're welcome. I really better go. I'll check back on you in a couple of hours."

Mykel watched the doctor hurry away. "So what do we do now?"

Lusaffar's eyes ran over him, but there was no heat in the gaze, just warmth and worry. He ran a hand over Mykel's hair and along the side of his face in a tender caress. "Now you get some rest." The gentle order was punctuated by a sweet, undemanding kiss on the lips.

"I'm fine." When Mykel tried to sit forward, Lusaffar restrained him with little effort.

"You said that once before, and I spent the next three days watching over you in Intensive Care."

"Lusaffar, we need –"

"No." There was absolutely no room for negotiation of any kind in Lusaffar's voice now.

"Lusaffar –"

"Don't *Lusaffar* me. I just spent the last three days watching your ass vacillate between living and dying. You rest. I'll start working on tracking down who had access to the air generator labs and finding the son of a bitch that did this. But you need to stay here."

"But –"

"Please."

And that was it. With that one word, Lusaffar won. Mykel felt every ounce of the love hidden away inside the fierce, often sardonic Deamond's plea. He saw the sincerity in his eyes—the need to protect. But more than that, he knew in his heart Lusaffar was saying, 'I need you to be safe. To be okay.' He seemed to be saying, 'You're...important to me.'

Mykel reached out and took Lusaffar's hand. In a lot of ways it felt far more intimate than anything they had ever done previously. And at the same time it felt so right he never wanted to let go.

Lusaffar turned a deep shade of red, but didn't pull his hand away.

"Please be careful, Lusaffar. I don't want to lose your snarky ass now. I've kind of got used to having you around."

* * * *

The message chip sat lifeless in his hand. The short missive completely erased. But it echoed in his head enough to give him nightmares for the rest of his life. His 'partners' had made it perfectly clear that time had run out for him to complete his promises. If he didn't end the *Nu Hayven* now, he was the one that was going to meet a *very* nasty end.

Chapter Nine

Mykel stretched his stiff wings a little and tried not to let a grimace of pain show. Much as he would have liked to follow Lusaffar's continued 'advice' to get some rest, he couldn't. He'd been away for far too long as it was. There were things he needed to do. Besides, technically he *was* doing as Lusaffar had asked. He was still in the Intensive Care Infirmary, albeit the visitors' lounge several doors down from his room.

Still technically the ICI though.

He paused by the view port, staring out into the velvet expanse of space and contemplated the mess they were in. As hard as they had tried to pin down who was responsible for poisoning him and messing with the air filtration system over the last twenty-four hours, they were still none the wiser.

The list of suspects was...depressing. All of them were people he knew and trusted. Even the ones he didn't necessarily like, he respected. Council officials that had been with them since before they'd left Orison. Aenjels he considered extended family. Deamonds that were members of the *Nu Hayven* Executive. High ranking military personnel. Even Admiral Jaynous was on the list for Ion's sake! And honestly, he couldn't imagine any of them being involved in something so...underhanded and vile as poisoning and sabotage.

Mykel shook his head. *What a mess.*

The only bright spot he could see—at least at the moment—was that they had somehow managed to keep the situation quiet. He knew he had Lusaffar to thank for that. The male had been pulling double duty and dodging difficult questions with the slippery skills of a diplomat for days. It was yet another side of the enigmatic Deamond he was coming to appreciate.

But eventually the powers that be *would* find out what was going on. At which point they really needed to be able to hand over a perpetrator.

Come on, Mykel! Think!

There had to be some way to work out who the bastard was. It was important to demonstrate they could handle whatever the universe threw at them—even murderous

saboteurs. After all, it was kind of in their job description now, and the whole reason they'd been granted a fresh start on the *Nu Hayven*. Mykel wouldn't let anyone or anything jeopardise that. Not even a subconscious reluctance to find out someone he knew and trusted had tried to kill him.

Unfortunately, trying to track down a killer on the loose and presumably still after him wasn't the only thing that was troubling Mykel. There was another, lingering fear playing on his mind. One he couldn't ignore no matter how hard he tried or how often he told himself he was being stupid. It was the fear that Lusaffar would end up seeing him as a weak link and walk away.

As much as he would never admit it to the crazy Deamond, he'd grown extraordinarily fond of having Lusaffar by his side. And not just on the command platform or rolling around on a bed platform—though admittedly that was a lot of fun. He wasn't ready to face putting a name to what he was feeling yet, but the thought of losing whatever it was he had with Lusaffar was...rather unbearable, actually.

But for all the amazing passion and whispered words they had shared the night before he was hospitalised, along with Lusaffar's astonishingly tender devotion over the last twenty-four hours since he had woken up after nearly dying, Mykel continued to feel like he needed to prove himself. Somewhere deep inside he just *knew* that if he didn't show Lusaffar he was a strong, capable partner the Deamond wouldn't stick around.

What would Lusaffar do if he didn't think Mykel was pulling his weight? Would he start to feel it was too much bother? That it was all too hard?

Pushing the distracting thoughts away—determined it wouldn't be an issue anyway because he refused to be down and out of the game long enough—Mykel renewed his stroll. He just needed to get his strength back, figure out who the bad guy was and make sure Lusaffar wanted him enough to stick around.

Nothing to it!

Mykel mentally rolled his eyes at himself. Yet another reason why he was stretching his legs and wandering around—not only did he do some of his best thinking on his feet, he obviously needed to clear his head too if he was starting to be sardonic with himself! If only he could shake the feeling he was walking around with a rather large target painted on his back.

And now I'm being paranoid. Wow! I needed to get my head back on straight worse than I thought.

It was a very big ship, and both Raffayel and Lusaffar had assured him they'd been deliberately vague about where he was 'resting and recuperating'. The likelihood Yoeseph, his best friend, even knew where he was seemed pretty slim—otherwise he was sure he would have had a visit from the big goofball by now. The chances the killer was going to be able to track him down—

Probably about the same as someone systematically drugging an entire ship full of Aenjels and Deamonds... Blast!

Newly inspired to head back to his room and try to break the encryption code they had found buried in the air generators mainframe, Mykel jerked to a halt when he spotted Lafortea hurrying towards him. The man looked more harried and agitated than Mykel could ever remember seeing the normally pristine aide.

Instantly, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

Now what?

"Thank Ion, I found you," Lafortea said by way of greeting.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Lusaffar."

All the blood rushed to Mykel's boots, leaving him light headed and shaky. He was forced to reach out and steady himself on the bulkhead when he felt his knees weaken.

"What happened?" Lusaffar is fine. He's fine!

"We don't know. Some sort of freak accident. They rushed him to the Emergency Infirmary, but..."

Mykel didn't wait to hear any more. He ran towards the hoverlator bay he'd discovered at the end of the ward earlier in the day.

"I have a hoverlator waiting," Lafortea called after him.

Mykel thought the other man was following, but he really didn't care. The only thing he could focus on was getting to Lusaffar.

He's fine. He's going to be fine. Lusaffar is fine! Mykel repeated to himself over and over. The stubborn damn Deamond *had* to be fine.

Panic setting in rapidly, the sight of Lusaffar running towards him—fangs bared, face dark as Barlium thunder—didn't register for several seconds.

"Lusaffar! What—" As Mykel turned to ask Lafortea what the hell was going on, he felt an excruciating, burning pain stab into his right shoulder.

Mykel's cry of pain blended seamlessly with Lusaffar's screech of fury. But the Deamond was too far away. Mykel felt his right wing droop, the long flight feathers dragging on the ground as the limb hung loose and useless.

Motherfucker knew just where to cut!

Even as the thought flashed through his mind, Mykel heard the distinctive whine of an energy weapon powering up and the cold blunt tip of a pistol pressed against his right temple. With his wing damaged on that side, there was absolutely no chance he could deflect the weapon. Mykel froze as an arm snaked around his belly, holding him securely in place as Lusaffar came to a screeching halt in front of them.

Great way to prove yourself, Mykel castigated himself as he looked into Lusaffar's furious, snarling face. At least the Deamond's anger wasn't directed at him—Lusaffar's gaze was focussed completely on Lafortea.

"Don't move, Lusaffar. Even a Deamond should find it difficult to fuck a corpse long term."

Lusaffar snarled, and his eyes began to flicker ominously—a red glow burning in the normally glossy black depths.

Mykel's heart rate accelerated. He wasn't sure whether Lusaffar going into battle rage would be a good thing or a bad thing. But it might be their only hope, if he could work out a way of distracting the asshole holding an energy-pistol on him.

"Why?" Mykel blurted, hoping to at least buy them some time while he came up with a plan.

"Shut up!" Lafortea snapped, his voice edged with panic.

Lusaffar snarled. Looking at his Deamond lover's face, Mykel completely understood Lafortea's fear.

"It's over, Lafortea. Just lower the energy-pistol an—"

"Do I look fucking stupid to you?"

Lusaffar's continued low growls weren't helping, but Mykel was sure there was nothing anyone could do about them, least of all Lusaffar—his eyes were now a solid, glowing red, his fangs were showing and wicked claws extended from the tips of his fingers.

"We can still work something out. It's not too—"

"I don't need your help. I'm in control here." As if for emphasis, Lafortea pressed the pistol more firmly into Mykel's head.

Mykel scrambled for something, anything to distract the man and give Lusaffar the opening he needed. He racked his brains for everything he knew about the man behind him.

"I'm sure your father—"

"Father! That lousy son of a bitch! This is all his fault!" Lafortea screeched.

Mykel felt Lafortea's muscles lock. He steeled himself for the pistol to fire—the sudden fury he felt rolling off his captor made being shot increasingly likely.

Try to keep him talking, some small, completely insane part of his brain told him.

"I don't under—"

"Father wanted me to work my way up through the ranks. Builds character, he said. Makes for a better leader, he said. Well, so be it. If he won't help me, I'll help myself. I'll end up with more power and money than he's ever dreamed of!"

"What are you—"

A frightened gasp somewhere to the right had Lafortea jerking instinctively towards the unexpected noise.

Then everything happened at once.

The instant Mykel felt the press of the pistol leave his temple he dropped, pulling Lafortea—who still had an arm around his waist—off balance. The sound of the energy-pistol firing was drowned out by Lusaffar's primitive roar as he launched himself—claws extended, eyes gone wild with fury.

Lafortea was knocked flying by Lusaffar's crash tackle. Mykel—suddenly released from Lafortea's hold—fell forward onto his knees with a painful, hollow boom against the metal decking plates.

The sounds of ripping and tearing filled the room. Mykel's stomach rolled with nausea. He couldn't look. Glancing to the right, he caught sight of Raffayel standing frozen in the doorway to the visitors' lounge, staring in horror at the scene playing out before him.

"Raff! Run!"

Mykel's scream seemed to be the catalyst the slight Aenjel needed for his self-preservation instincts to kick into high gear. As he bolted from the room, Mykel prayed the male had enough about him to call for help.

About to pivot around to do what he could to help Lusaffar, strong arms suddenly caught him up from behind, pressing him into a solid, hard body. Mykel tensed, ready to struggle before he realised it was Lusaffar who held him in place.

"Laforte. What—"

Lusaffar snarled, the hot brush of his breath sending tingles of sensation right through Mykel's body.

Yeah, stupid question, Mykel realised. If Lusaffar was alive, Laforte wasn't.

Lusaffar's warm, wet tongue ran over the wound in Mykel's shoulder, drawing a surprised gasp of pain from him.

"What—"

"Hold. Still." Lusaffar's rumble was low and fierce.

Mykel froze at the harsh, primal sound of his lover's voice. He heard a faint pop—like some sort of seal being broken—then liquid fire burned over his shoulder where he'd been stabbed.

"Fuck!"

"Shh. Fireflower tears."

Running feet and shouting were the last things Mykel was aware of before everything went black as he felt the bones, muscles and tendons of his injured shoulder knitting back together in white-hot agony.

* * * *

"Lusaffar. Lusaffar, put him down. Step back and let us help him."

Mykel heard a loud, animalistic roar—the bands of steel around his body tightening painfully.

What the hell's going on? Blinking open his eyes, Mykel tried to sit up and orientate himself, but all he could see was black, and whatever was holding him refused to let him go.

"There! Did you see that? He moved. He's waking up!" someone said frantically.

"Mykel. Mykel, can you hear me?" That sounded like Yoeseph.

Another low growl filled the room.

Slowly, Mykel registered that the black in front of his eyes was actually the material of Lusaffar's uniform tunic where he was pressed against the male's firm chest.

All things considered, not a bad way to wake up.

"You need to kill him or we're going to lose them both."

That got Mykel's attention and slapped him back to reality quick smart. He stiffened at the harsh, biting sound of Dr. Asura's voice.

"What's he doing?" another strained voice asked.

"Look at his eyes," Asura continued. "This isn't battle rage. It's final rage. There's no cure for this. No hope except to put him out of his misery. He's no longer Lusaffar; he's an animal. If none of you have the guts for it, I'll do it," Asura was saying.

"No!" Mykel twisted in Lusaffar's hold, catching even his lover by surprise as he rushed to protect him.

Lusaffar snarled and wrapped his arms around Mykel to drag him back – this time back to chest. "Mine."

Mykel got his first good look at the room and was stunned to see most of the Executive Officers crowding the Intensive Care Infirmary waiting room. In addition, Admiral Jaynous and a number of military personnel – all heavily armed – were in attendance as well.

How long was I out? Mykel wondered, slightly stunned by the crowd.

"I'm fine. Don't hurt him."

Lusaffar hissed at someone or something.

Not helping, Lusaffar!

There was no sign of Lafortea – or what Mykel suspected was left of Lafortea – but that was probably a good thing. He wasn't sure he wanted to know, and he was pretty certain Lusaffar didn't need the reminder right now either.

He felt Lusaffar's hot breath against his neck. Saw the numerous energy weapons pointed their way, and knew he had to do something. Fast.

"Just back off! I can handle this." Mykel twisted his head slightly and looked up into Lusaffar's face. It was terrifying, but at the same time he knew down to his soul that he was safe. Everyone else in the room – well, that was a different matter entirely.

The silence – broken only by Lusaffar's rumbling vocalisations – stretched out, straining every one of Mykel's last remaining nerves to breaking point.

"Everyone step back," Jaynous finally barked. "That's an order."

Reluctantly, everyone slowly did as they were told, but didn't leave. Lusaffar's forearm tightened around Mykel – the Deamond pulling him closer and snarling when the others moved regardless of the direction.

The pressure around his chest threatened to crack a rib, but Mykel fought hard against the instinctive panic and offered no resistance. He had to trust. He didn't think Lusaffar was intentionally hurting him. He had to believe with every fibre of his being he could reach the Deamond. Could calm the male he loved.

"Lusaffar," Mykel managed to gasp. "Lusaffar, you're hurting me."

Instantly, the pressure around his middle disappeared. Lusaffar stepped back and Mykel felt a sense of loss as the warm solid presence disappeared from his back.

He spun around, focussing on Lusaffar and completely ignoring everyone else in the room. Lusaffar was looking at him with a confusion that was almost painful – his eyes gradually bleeding to black from their angry blazing red.

"Mykel?"

"Shh. It's okay. Come here."

"I...I was hurting you?" Lusaffar's voice was so lost and bewildered, Mykel's heart ached.

He just wanted to wrap the big warrior up and reassure him everything was going to be all right. But he held back, letting Lusaffar come to him when he was ready, rather than risk spooking him and sending him back into a rage with any sudden movements.

"It's okay. It was only for a moment and hardly even at all really." Mykel slowly opened his arms, eager for Lusaffar to step into them – to be safe and back against him.

Lusaffar only hesitated for a moment before stepping in to him and burying his head against Mykel's neck. Mykel felt the male's hot breath on his throat and began to relax, closing his eyes with relief.

"Watch his fangs," Asura said. "He might just be—"

Lusaffar spun around, pushing Mykel behind him, growling low and fierce deep in his chest.

"Get out." Mykel couldn't believe the doctor had been so stupid to call out and startle Lusaffar like that. Was he trying to get his leader killed?

"But—"

"Go. I can handle him. We just need a moment."

"Okay. Everyone, back away slowly." Admiral Jaynous almost sounded like he was breaking up a tussle between nestlings. "Meet us in the command room when you're ready, gentlemen."

Lusaffar continued a rumbling growl as everyone slowly backed away and left the room. Some looked hesitant—Yoeseph, Dr. Asura, Gayebreel, surprisingly enough—but eventually the room was clear.

Admiral Jaynous was the last to leave. He nodded succinctly once—a strange look almost like respect or relief crossing his face—before he turned and walked away.

Very carefully, making sure to keep his movements smooth and slow, Mykel stepped around Lusaffar so he could face him. His lover was still growling.

"Mine."

Mykel nodded slowly. "Yes." Simple and from the heart. He was Lusaffar's.

Lusaffar's eyes, while tinged with a faint red again, seemed to calm a little. He chuffed, almost like a large, predatory cat native to their home world and leaned in to nuzzle at Mykel's neck. When a tongue ran along his jugular, Mykel moaned and tilted his head in submission—not really understanding his reaction but instinctively knowing it was the right thing to do.

It certainly seemed to drive Lusaffar wild. Frantically, the Deamond began to tear at the fastenings of their pants until he gripped both their cocks in his hand and pumped them together.

"Lusaffar!"

The sound of his name was apparently the final push. Lusaffar struck hard, piercing Mykel's neck with his fangs and suckling as he jerked their cocks in time with his gulps. It was wild and passionate, and not something Mykel ever would have suspected would push

his buttons, but he was so close to spending he almost screamed in frustration when Lusaffar pulled back and carefully sealed the puncture wounds with a gentle swipe of his tongue.

He was just about to ask what was wrong when Lusaffar tilted his head, exposing his own throat. "Do it. Please. Finish the bond."

Mykel stared at the long column. He knew what Lusaffar wanted. He wanted Mykel to bite, to draw blood and drink from his vein. But he wasn't sure he could. It wasn't that the thought of tasting Lusaffar like that was repulsive—in fact it was a shockingly appealing idea. He never would have suspected he would want to do something like that. But with Lusaffar, it just felt...right. The trouble was he wasn't equipped for it. He didn't have fangs.

"Lusaffar. I..."

"Please." The pleading note in Lusaffar's voice was painful to hear. More than anything he wanted to do this for Lusaffar, but...

"How?"

Without blinking, Lusaffar reached up—one razor sharp claw extended—and sliced a small, neat cut into his own neck. The hot, coppery scent of blood filled the air between them and Mykel was shocked to feel saliva pool in his mouth. He wanted it. Needed it.

Before he could think about what he was doing, he latched onto Lusaffar's neck. Drawing deeply at the wound, the spicy tang of Lusaffar's blood flowed over his tongue. Fireworks exploded behind his eyes. His cock, which had softened slightly, sprang back to full, throbbing hardness. Lusaffar's shaft felt seconds away from exploding now too.

When Lusaffar seemed incapable of coordinated movement, Mykel reached down and wrapped his hand around their cocks. With a firm grip, drawing another deep pull on Lusaffar's neck, he began to stroke them together again. Desire and need spiralled into one another, pushing him higher and higher. The taste of Lusaffar on his tongue, the feel of their rock hard shafts in his hand kicked him over the edge.

Together they exploded into orgasm—white-hot rockets going off behind his eyes. Muscles locked tight with bliss, he could feel their cum mixing together, as it coated their bellies and flowed down his hand. For a moment everything went white.

Lusaffar leaned heavily against him. Mykel could still feel the Deamond's muscles trembling slightly and suspected the beast was only just below the surface. But with each

breath he took, Lusaffar seemed to calm a little more as he filled his lungs with the sweet, musky scent of their mating.

"I thought I told you to say in bed," Lusaffar grumbled slightly hoarsely.

Mykel snorted derisively. "The sooner you accept I'm not going to be a compliant mate, the better off you'll be. Besides, I'm still in the ICI."

Lusaffar growled low in his throat, but there was no real threat in the sound anymore. In fact, to Mykel it sounded more like a purr. Lusaffar rubbing his head against him only added to his suspicion that the Deamond wasn't truly annoyed. Mykel breathed a sigh of contentment.

"I'm kind of glad I was unconscious when you gave me fireflower tears the last time. They hurt like a...wait a second. Aren't they supposed to relieve pain as well?"

Lusaffar's cheeks mantled with embarrassment and he mumbled something Mykel couldn't quite catch.

"What was that?"

"I said they're supposed to be swallowed to allow the pain relief to take effect before the healing starts. I think...I just...I sort of panicked...when I saw the blood all over you and—"

"You panicked?" Mykel was shocked. He couldn't picture Lusaffar frightened enough by anything to panic.

"Sorry."

"No. It's okay. Really, look." Mykel flexed his wing, gently beating the air in demonstration. "Good as new."

"But I hurt you." Lusaffar looked like the one in pain.

Mykel solved the problem the way they always seemed to solve their problems when words weren't the answer. He kissed his lover—long and deep, but with a slow tenderness that said everything that was in his heart and stole his breath so they had to part and just hold one another for a while until they were calm again.

After several silent, peaceful seconds, Mykel stroked Lusaffar's head. He was getting quite addicted to brushing his fingers over the smooth hard horns nearly hidden in the thick black head of hair. It was a very special kind of delight, knowing he was the only one whom Lusaffar would ever let touch him like that.

"I wasn't trying to be difficult," Mykel finally said. "I needed to get up and get back to work. I...I didn't want you thinking I wasn't doing my bit. I wanted to help you."

Lusaffar snorted, but tilted his head into Mykel's touch at the same time. "If you could manage to stay out of trouble for more than ten minutes that would be a big help."

Mykel reached down and pulled the Deamond's tail playfully. "You should talk."

Lusaffar growled and nipped Mykel's ear lobe. Hard.

"Ouch! Hey, watch the fangs, you big barbarian!"

"You love my fangs, pigeon."

Mykel sobered instantly. "Yeah, I do. I'm just afraid that one day you're going to wake up and work out—"

"Work out what?"

"That...I'm too much effort. That you're not interested in—"

"Stop. Stop right there. I will always be interested. You are a constant surprise to me. A good one. More than good. You're the most important thing." Lusaffar paused, looking so serious and intense Mykel couldn't breathe. "You're it for me. So just get that through your head right now, pigeon."

Mykel didn't know what to say. He wasn't sure there *was* anything to say. So he just leaned up and took the male's mouth in a long, passionate kiss, only breaking apart when the need for air became critical.

"I love you, too." Mykel froze. He hadn't actually meant to say it out loud.

Too much. Too soon.

But then Lusaffar smiled. A big, goofy smile that made Mykel's heart skip a beat. "My pigeon."

And then Lusaffar leaned in for another kiss and all thoughts—concerns, the future, the past—simply disappeared.

Epilogue

Admiral Jaynous watched as Lusaffar—the fiercest Deamond he’d ever met—offered his mate another slice of Sigorea fruit. If the conversation weren’t so serious, he’d have ribbed the male horribly for his undignified descent into ‘cute coupleness’. This, right here in front of him, was exactly why he had a command post and a ship—not a mate.

Still, the pair of them looked disgustingly pleased with themselves and their predicament. *Each to their own.*

“The Intergalactic Council would like to offer you both its sincerest apologies.”

“Not fucking good enough, Jaynous!” Lusaffar snarled.

“Lusaffar, please.” Mykel’s cheeks coloured.

“Don’t you ‘Lusaffar, please’ me. You could have fucking died. You nearly did. Twice.” Lusaffar shivered. “Their apologies don’t mean shit. I want to know how this happened in the first place.”

“It appears that Aide-to-Admiral Lafortea was secretly working for a shadow agency with a vested interest in seeing your mission fail.”

“I’m shocked,” Lusaffar offered in the blandest of dry statements. “Who?”

“We don’t know.”

Lusaffar threw up his hands in disgust and walked away.

If it wasn’t for the fact Mykel had that soppy, blissful look that made Jaynous slightly queasy, he might have felt bad about subtly influencing Baylelle and Yoeseph into getting the pair to extract their heads from their respective asses long enough to get together. But Mykel looked happy enough with the outcome, so he didn’t bother to feel any remorse.

“We know he’s been getting covert messages from an unknown source and there have been several large credit deposits made to him over the last two years, but tracing it back has proven...difficult. From what we can piece together using the data Mykel and Raffayel were able to correlate, it appears Lafortea programmed the air filters to target key personnel and not the entire Aenjel/Deamond population. Basically he went for those in command and anyone who was expected to submit reports. Drugging them to make them depressed or

aggressive, depending on the species. We think he was trying to influence the Intergalactic Council against you."

"But why?" Mykel asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"We don't know."

Jaynous ignored Lusaffar's grunt. "The gas was sent to specific quarters on the executive level. As it turns out it's not a very sophisticated system. In fact, it's based on the generator's own programme. When the carbon-dioxide rises, which would be when there's someone in the room, it was programmed to release the drug."

"Fascinating," Lusaffar drawled. "Now, what are you actually doing about it?"

"The air filters have, of course, been cleaned and the system fixed so it can't happen again."

"And whoever was behind it all? The people who actually put that slime ball up to it? What about them? Surely that can't be the end of it."

Jaynous didn't like that he didn't have more to give them. But he did enjoy shrugging—just because he knew it would annoy the crap out of the irritable Deamond. Lusaffar's eyes narrowed predictably. "Official channels are still looking into it. They don't want to accuse any innocent parties, or cross potentially powerful organisations."

"Assholes."

"My suggestion," Admiral Jaynous continued, "is that you start looking into it yourselves. Official circles...well, let's just say they don't tend to move very fast or even necessarily in the right direction. Even with your long life spans, you might not live to see a full official Intergalactic Council Inquest reach any meaningful conclusions."

"Great," Lusaffar spat.

Mykel prevented Lusaffar from adding to his comment by standing. Instantly, Lusaffar was hovering by his mate's side.

Jaynous smiled at the small manipulation he suspected the Deamond hadn't even noticed.

"Thank you for all your help, Admiral Jaynous." Mykel extended his arm in farewell. "We'll be sure to let you know if we discover anything...interesting in the Morn sector."

"Yes. All the best of luck to you there, gentlemen. The Council obviously believes in throwing you in the deep end and seeing if you sink or swim. I'll be interested to see how you go. You've been...a challenge, but one full of surprises."

Mykel smiled. "Thank you."

Lusaffar looked a little confused by the exchange, but no doubt Mykel would sort the Deamond out later.

Admiral Jaynous clasped both male's forearms, then walked towards the door. He had a shuttle to catch back to *The Bounty*. He'd done everything he could to get them started now. At least most of the crew were talking to each other. The gas certainly hadn't helped, but he was rather pleased with the way his plans had worked out. Being forced to live together, face a common enemy... It had all worked out rather well in the end. Now it was up to Mykel and Lusaffar and the inhabitants of *Nu Hayven*.

Looking back at the way Lusaffar was fussing over Mykel, and the way Mykel smiled back, Jaynous thought they had a pretty good chance.

* * * *

Nile stepped into the plush office with its expansive view across the lake and tried not to fidget nervously. The last of the sun's rays reflected off the water like golden fish dancing on the rippling surface and the desk chair had been turned to take in the sight while it lasted. But Nile couldn't wait that long—he was too anxious to deliver his news and get away.

"Sir, it appears our operative has failed."

"One of our operatives, Nile. You should know me better than that."

"Of course, sir."

"Do not concern yourself, Nile. This was just the first round. Laforte was never my only hope. This was merely the opening volley."

About the Author

Jade Archer was born in 2010, after a prolonged pregnancy and labour of over thirty-four years! I've decided she's about twenty-four, enjoys long walks in the country because she doesn't have five kids and a husband to care for, eats as much chocolate as she wants because she never has to worry about putting on weight (must be all those long walks!) and can often be found planning her next whirlwind world tour or endlessly typing away (without any interruptions) on another hot and steamy erotic romance. It might be space pirates; it might be shifters or a lonely vampire with a hunger for the girl next door, but one thing's for sure, she loves variety and can't wait to meet the next characters destined to fall in love.

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