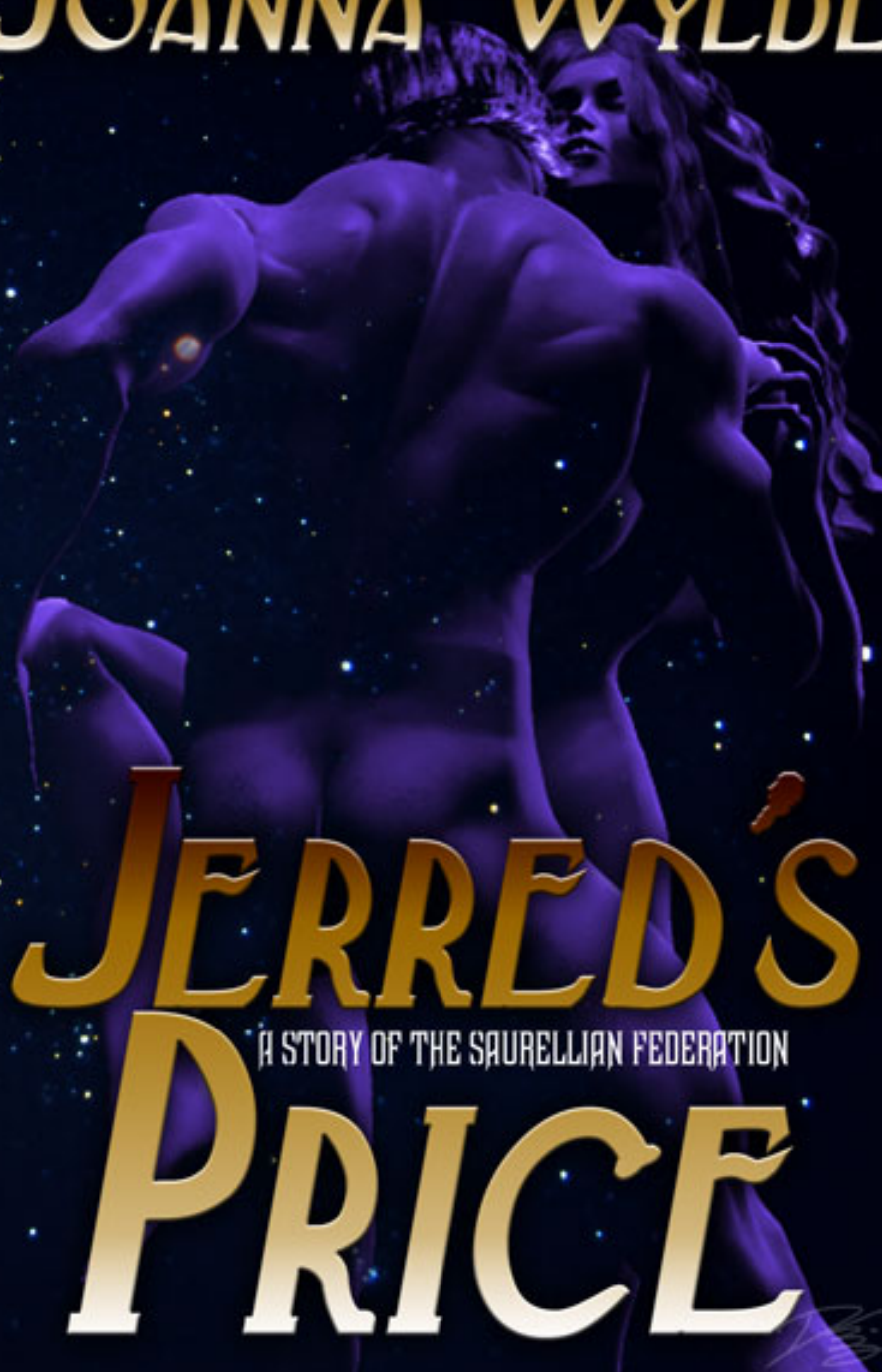


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

JOANNA WYLDE

A muscular man and a woman are shown from the waist up, embracing in a space-themed setting. The man is in the foreground, seen from the back, with his arms around the woman. The woman is behind him, looking towards the viewer. The background is a dark blue space filled with numerous small, bright stars. The overall lighting is a cool, blue-purple hue.

JERRED'S
A STORY OF THE SAURELLIAN FEDERATION
PRICE

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JERRED'S PRICE

Joanna Wylde

Chapter One

Transit Station Three

Just inside Imperial Space

Year 6296, Saurellian Calendar

"How's Giselle this evening?" Vetch asked expansively as he walked into the bar. Giselle winked at him, used to his flirting. The station was part of the freighter captain's usual run, and he came in at least once every other week. She gave him a big grin and leaned forward across the bar, flashing her cleavage at him.

"I'm fine, Vetch," she said. "Getting better all the time. What can I do for you?"

"My friend and I needed a comfortable place to talk, and naturally we thought of Manya's," Vetch said, gamely attempting to maintain eye contact with her. Every few seconds she caught his glance darting downwards. Men always looked at her chest first. She was used to it by now.

"They're still there, hon," she whispered conspiratorially. "Don't worry, I check on 'em first thing every morning, just for you."

Vetch blushed, and she gave a deep, rich laugh. Then he started laughing, too, and to her surprise he leaned forward and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

"You're one in a million, Giselle," he said. "But I have business to take care of this evening. Can you set up me and my friend with a pitcher? Talking business is thirsty work."

"Is there anything that's not thirsty work for you, Vetch?" a man asked. Giselle looked up, startled.

Her breath caught.

Vetch had always seemed tall to her, but this man towered over the friendly freighter captain. His face was hard, angular, and a nasty scar twisted one side of it, pulling his features into a permanent snarl. Startled, she looked down quickly, but she couldn't seem to take her eyes off him. He wore tall, black boots that seemed to be made of leather, of all things. Leather was expensive... Her eyes moved slowly upward following a roughened pair of black breeches that clung to every lean muscle of his legs. A loose, black shirt draped his upper body, and he carried a leather jacket cradled in one arm.

His gaze met hers coolly as her eyes reached his face. That scar caught her attention again, and she found herself looking at it with morbid fascination. What kind of wound would do damage like that, and why hadn't he gotten it fixed? He cleared his throat meaningfully. Embarrassed, she flashed a smile at him. She had been rude. He didn't smile back. In fact, he didn't respond to her at all. Instead he looked away, checking out

the room as if he was expecting trouble. Her intuition pricked, and she made a mental note to keep an eye on him. If there was trouble this evening, she'd bet her last credit it would come from him.

"Find a seat, and I'll be right with you," she said to him, trying not to let him see how uncomfortable he made her. She'd be damned if she'd show him weakness.

"Thanks, Giselle," he said softly. He rolled her name across his tongue slowly, as if savoring its taste and sound.

He nodded to Vetch, indicating a table against the wall. As they walked over together, she watched out the corner of her eye as he took a seat against the wall. Definitely dangerous. She might want to warn Manya...

She brought them their pitcher and some glasses, and tried flashing another smile at him. But even Vetch's expression was sober now, and it was clear her presence wasn't wanted. Then a group of Debsian traders came in talking loudly, and her attention was taken up filling their drink orders. Still, she pointed the man out to Manya when he came out from the back office to tend bar. She didn't like Black Leather's attitude one little bit.

The bar filled steadily over the next two hours, and while she checked regularly on the two men, they didn't want anything more from her. She had to admit, the way Vetch's friend ignored her piqued her interest. She was used to men noticing her, used to them paying attention when she flirted and smiled at them. She was getting nothing from him, although at times she felt as if might be watching her.

After she stopped by the table to check on them a third time, something flickered in his eyes as she brushed past him—she knew she was on to something. He noticed her, but he didn't want to show it. She smiled to herself, wondering why she was bothering to play this little game with him. Boredom? Maybe. A little flirting would make the shift go faster. After all, if he were going to cause trouble, he would have by now. She reached one hand to her already low neckline and pulled it down just a bit. Manya gave her a pointed look, which she ignored. Cleavage sold drinks—he knew that. She was just doing her job.

On her next pass through the tables she ignored Black Leather, focusing on the Debsians instead. She leaned over as she served the traders, flashing them a wide expansion of soft, sloping breast littered with ginger-colored freckles. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Black Leather's stare. She pretended not to see, and then leaned forward even further.

"Anything else I can get you boys?" she asked in a low voice, winking at the loudest of the traders. He was a bluff, friendly looking man who didn't seem used to getting attention from women. His friends hooted, and one slapped him on the back.

Encouraged, the man leaned forward and held out two fingers with a credit chit between them.

"This is all yours, darlin'," he said. "I don't suppose you want to come back to my hostel with me?"

"Nope," she said with a wink, "I'm not really that kind of girl. But I appreciate the offer."

The men groaned, and then, to her surprise, their leader reached out and tucked the credit chit between her breasts. She drew in a breath, about to let him have it, when she caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. She had Black Leather's full attention now. Feeling pleased with herself, she laughed and stood up.

"Thanks, sweetie," she said, picking up her tray and balancing it against one full hip. "I appreciate the tip."

"Another round!" one of the traders said in a loud voice, face flushed from drink. "We'll keep you busy tonight!" They all broke into a round of cheers, thumping the table for emphasis. Feeling pleased with herself, she sashayed away from the Debsians toward the two men against the wall. Vetch waved her away from them, but she came over, pretending to misunderstand his gesture.

"Can I get you boys anything?" she asked. Black Leather shook his head, darkness filling his face. Vetch looked a little nervous, and Black Leather leaned back in his chair, lifting one arm casually and laying it on the seat back behind him. Her eyes ran down his body languidly. Then they stopped. He had a blaster holstered against his side. The jacket had hidden it from her sight when she'd first come in.

Damn.

Manya had a security screen on the door. Why hadn't it picked up his weapon? She felt the smile fade from her face, growing uncomfortable under his steady, cold gaze.

"We ask our customers to check their weapons before coming in here," she said uncertainly, looking toward the bar for backup. Manya was deep in conversation with Kisti, the other barmaid. Neither looked in her direction. "It's against station regulations to have a blaster in an establishment that serves alcohol. It's a serious offense."

"I prefer to keep my blaster with me," he replied in a cool voice. She glanced at Vetch, saw him swallow, and then nodded her head, feeling sick. Black Leather was trouble. She had sensed that from the start, why hadn't she trusted her instincts? Damn men.

"All right, then," she said, trying to smile. "I'll leave you to your drinks."

This time there was no hint of a swing in her step as she walked away. She ignored the wave they gave her at another table, walked right past the bar and down the hallway to the ladies' fresher. It was a one-seater, and she locked the door behind her with carefully controlled movements. She turned to the basin and flicked her hand in front of the spout. Warm water poured out, and she shook her head in disgust.

"Cold," she said shortly. Obediently, the temperature of the water changed. She splashed her face with it, leaned against the counter and sighed. She needed to let Manya know something was up with this guy. But would Manya be able to do anything about him? He wasn't the kind of man to be dismissed lightly. If they just left him alone until he left, that might be safer for everyone. Only fools provoke predators, she reminded herself. Lay low and you'll be fine.

She stood there for a moment longer, then took a deep breath and opened the door. He stood in the hallway opposite her. Waiting.

"I have to get back to work," she said, trying to duck past him. He stepped forward, blocking her. She looked around nervously, hoping someone would see them, come to her rescue. There was no one.

"We're going to talk," he said shortly. He stepped forward again, backing her up against the door. She fumbled at the handle, damning whatever idiot had decided to install it so the door opened outward. Otherwise she might have just been able to duck back inside. Not that a door would stop him. She would just have to brazen him out.

"What can I do for you?" she asked brightly, trying to sound confident. Up close he was huge, much bigger than she'd realized before. Her head came to the middle of his chest. She could smell him. Male. A hint of something else, maybe the leather? Something inside her uncurled and she felt a tingle between her legs. She was actually attracted to the man, she realized in disgust, despite the blaster. How had that happened?

"How much?" he asked shortly, breaking through her mental dialogue.

"What?"

"How much?" he asked, reaching one hand to her chin, tilting it up so that she looked into his face. His features were grim, strained. The gash of his scar twisted the skin along his left cheek, a dark-red tangle of rigid flesh.

"For what?" she asked, confused. "Look, I won't tell anyone about the blaster."

"You."

She burst out in nervous laughter—this was just too surreal. Instantly his face grew colder, and she fell silent. She had provoked him far too much already.

"I'm sorry, but I think you've got the wrong impression," she said carefully, searching his face. "I'm a waitress, not a whore. I'm not for sale."

"Really?" he asked, his mouth twisting. "That's not what I saw."

"Just because I flirt with a customer doesn't mean that I'm selling myself," she said softly, eyes darting down the corridor. Where the hell was everyone? "I'm allowed to flirt. I like flirting."

"You carry yourself like a whore," he said grimly. He reached between them, slipping his fingers into her cleavage and pulling the credit chit out. "I saw them giving you money. Do you think you're too good for me? You're not."

She stiffened, feeling fury build up within her, overwhelming the fear that had been there seconds before.

"You have no right to speak to me like this."

He smiled, the movement twisting the scar until he looked like a monster.

"I'll pay extra," he said smoothly, stepping closer. He angled his head in toward hers. "I've had to do it before. You can even keep your eyes closed so you don't have to see me. Just tell me the price."

She shook her head, unsure what to say. He was dangerous and he was armed. Anything might set him off.

"It has nothing to do with how you look," she said finally. "I'm simply not in the market. Go to a pleasure house, they'll take care of you there."

"I want you."

He caught her hand in his. She tried to pull away from him, but he was so much stronger she might have been an insect for all the good it did her. He pulled the hand down between them and pressed against his groin.

His cock pushed against his breeches, hard and ready. Reflexively she squeezed her fingers, and he gasped. He leaned forward against her, crushing her to the wall. She squeezed again and he moaned.

Panicked, she writhed against him, trying to escape.

"Don't move," he said between gritted teeth. "Not unless you want me to fuck you right here."

Giselle froze.

After a moment he eased back, still holding her hand to his hard length. She could feel the heat of his arousal coming off in waves. To her disgust, she was responding. Her legs tingled and she held back a shiver.

"How much?" he asked again, his voice hoarse.

"I'm not for sale," she whispered. "You have to believe that."

"Everyone is for sale," he said. "It's just a matter of finding the right price."

His eyes held hers for a moment; she was transfixed. Then he eased back from her, releasing her hand. She drew it back, wiping it against her apron reflexively. He propped one arm up against the wall, imprisoning her just as effectively as before.

"I'm staying at the Pleasance Hostel with Vetch," he said slowly. "He's going off-station tonight, but I'll be here another two cycles at least." He lifted one hand between them and reached into her cleavage, slowly sliding his fingers back down between her breasts. His fingers caressed the gentle slopes. Why had she worn such a low-cut, tight blouse? Why had she pulled it down so far? His gaze burned through her with an intensity beyond bearing. She closed her own eyes, denying him that window into her soul.

She felt him lean forward, and he whispered in her ear.

"Take this," he said, his warm breath sending shivers through her. She felt his fingers brush something scratchy against her soft skin. He'd put something in there, where the credit chit had been. "And think about your price. I'm prepared to pay it."

She remained still, frozen with eyes closed for another moment. She felt the heat of him pull away, heard him walk slowly down the hall. She counted to thirty, took a deep breath and opened her eyes again.

It was as if nothing had happened. She could hear the distant sounds of the bar, hear people laughing. She walked slowly back into the open, eyes immediately turning toward the table where he and Vetch had sat. It was empty.

"Giselle!" Manya called from his spot behind the bar. She turned to him, and her boss looked over at her, frowning. "Where have you been? You got customers waiting."

She turned toward him, forced herself to smile.

"Sorry, I was in the fresher."

"You move faster next time," he said, his words harsh but his tone gentle. Then his face softened. "You all right?"

"Manya," she said slowly. "Did you see that guy who was in here with Vetch? He had a blaster."

The man's broad forehead knotted into frown.

"You sure 'bout that?" he asked. "We have the sensors turned on. They were serviced less than a week ago. No way would he be able to get in here with a blaster."

"Well, he had one," she said. "I don't know how he got it in, but he did."

"You see him again, you let me know," Manya said, frowning at her. "Now go take care of your tables. I'll let Brant know, he'll keep an eye out for him."

She nodded, picking up a tray. The Debsians called out to her in a drunken chorus; she hurried toward them, pasting a bright smile on her face. Black Leather was gone—everything would be fine now. Their bouncer, Brant, was a big man. She doubted that even the tall, scarred man would be able to get by him without a fight. Things were back to normal, and she should be thinking about her tips, not the man in the hallway.

Four endless hours later her shift ended. She picked up her small bag from Manya's office and headed out the door, glad that it wasn't her turn to close. She wasn't up to it. She nodded goodbye to Brant and headed out the door, keeping one eye open for Black Leather. She doubted he was still around, but you couldn't be too cautious. Blessedly, the open, two-story arcade that served as a thoroughfare through the space station's port was almost deserted.

Here and there groups of drunken spacers lurched by her, talking to themselves and calling out to every woman they saw. Ahead of her were three men dressed in engineer's coveralls. They waved at her, shouting something. She couldn't make out the words, but she knew the tone. They wanted to get laid. She laughed, shaking her head at them. Typical spacers. They were no threat to her, years of experience had taught her how to distinguish between men who were truly interested and those simply going through the motions.

She doubted the engineers would be capable of making it with a woman at this point anyway. They could hardly walk, yet two of them peeled off from the group and lurched toward her. She rolled her eyes and waved them off with a short, shooing gesture. A dark shadow detached itself from a narrow passageway between two stores. She sensed him right before he took her arm.

"She's with me," Black Leather said coldly to the drunks, who looked confused. He gave a low noise, almost a growl, in the back of his throat and they took off down the street. *So much for chivalry*, Giselle thought in disgust. It hadn't occurred to even one of the engineers to ask her if she *wanted* to be with Black Leather.

"I told you, I'm not for sale," she said tightly, turning away from him. He was wearing his jacket now, but it didn't fully hide the bulge of his blaster. She tugged at his arm, trying to pull free. He ignored her.

"Where do you live?" he asked shortly. "It's not safe out here. I'll see you home."

Like hell you will, she thought darkly. She was suddenly sick of his attitude, sick of men treating her like some kind of play object. She had worked a long shift, and she was damn tired. Was it too much to ask to simply go home and rest?

"I'm not headed home, I'm going to visit a friend."

"Male or female?"

His tone froze her.

"Male," she said slowly, wondering if that might get rid of him. "I'm seeing someone. We've been dating for several weeks now."

"No," he replied shortly.

"What?"

"No," he said. "You won't visit him. Tell me where you live and I'll see you home."

She searched her mind, wondering what to do now. She didn't want him to know where she lived, and didn't want to lead him to any of her friends. Hell, she'd only been on the station a couple of months. She had acquaintances, not friends. How was she going to get rid of him?

"I forgot something at the bar," she said suddenly. "Can you take me back there?"

"I don't believe you."

"Well, it's the truth," she said, putting a note of irritation into her voice. "I forgot my keycard, and I'm not going to get into my apartment without it. Let's go back to the bar."

She eyed him sideways under her lashes, wondering if he'd go for it. Without a word, he tugged at her arm and started walking back toward Manya's. When they reached the door, she asked him if he wanted to wait outside for her, but he just shook his head. Brant stepped aside and let them pass through the door without a word. She tried to signal him with her eyes, but the big man seemed distracted. Damn. She waited for the alarms to go off as they passed through the security sensors guarding the door, but nothing happened. Would *anything* go her way tonight? Why the hell didn't anyone but her seem to notice his blaster? Disgusted, she opened her mouth to catch Brant's attention; this had gone too far already.

Black Leather squeezed her arm tightly, pulling her close to his body so she could feel the outline of his weapon.

The message was clear.

If she tried signaling someone for help, they'd pay the price.

True fear filled her as she realized Manya's might not be the sanctuary she'd hoped to find. Manya and his employees had been good to her. She shouldn't have brought them trouble like this, she thought in disgust.

"I have to go behind the bar into the office to get my keycard," she said slowly. "Will you let me do that?"

"Take me with you."

"It's not allowed."

"Make an exception," he said smoothly. "Don't make me do something you'll regret."

"Don't you dare blame me for this," she muttered in disgust.

"If you want your friends to live, be good," he replied in a low voice.

She quieted at that, visions of Manya's broad, friendly face covered in blood flitting through her head. Bastard.

"I'll be quiet," she muttered grimly. Manya saw them and raised one eyebrow in question. She wasn't quite sure, but something about his gaze seemed different. Unusual. Did he suspect something?

"Manya, I need my keycard for the apartment," she said slowly, looking him directly in the eye. "I forgot it here earlier. Can you help me out?"

Manya smiled and nodded.

"Sure thing," he said. "It's in the office? You wait right here and I'll get it for you."

He turned and walked down the bar into the back room. She stood nervously, trying to figure out what to do next. There was no keycard in the office. She'd had a retinal scan lock put in just last week. Would Manya remember?

Manya came back out, a triumphant smile on his face. He held up a keycard.

"I've got it right here, Giselle," he said. "Looks like it fell out of your bag when you pulled it out of my desk drawer."

She reached out for the card, wondering what to do next. Just shy of the bar, Manya slipped in a puddle of beer, falling on his back with a startled cry. Black Leather held her back as she started forward to help the man. There was a loud, cracking noise, and then Black Leather sagged against her body, pushing her to the floor. She fell with a thump. Manya jumped over the bar to kneel beside her, lifting the heavy man's body to one side. She looked up to see Brant holding a metal club smeared with blood.

"That one ain't gonna be botherin' you no more, Giselle," Brant said with a smile. "I don't like it when people sneak blasters past my security. Makes me look bad."

Chapter Two

Jerred could hear the people around him before he could see them. There was a burning, roiling feeling in his stomach. Was he sick? His head hurt... Shot?

"He's waking up," a deep voice said. He opened his eyes and saw the big bartender standing over him, both arms folded across his chest.

"I don't know how you did it," the man said, face filled with anger. "But you brought a blaster into my bar. Nobody messes with Manya. You're lucky I didn't kill you."

"Back off, Manya," another voice chimed in. Jerred rolled his head to one side, focusing on a man dressed in a station security uniform. By the Goddess, he thought in disgust. He'd thrown everything over for that damn witch. The last thing he needed was Imperials breathing down his neck. What had come over him?

If he had blown his cover over her, Nicolai would kill him.

Hell, if he'd blown his cover over her, he'd kill himself and save Nicolai the time.

"Sir, you're been hit on the head," the guard said, his voice carefully neutral. "It is illegal to carry weapons such as your blaster into an establishment that sells alcohol. Further, it is illegal to disrupt or disable weapons detectors on station."

No mention of the girl, he realized slowly. Why hadn't she come forward and accused him of something? Did she want to avoid the uniforms as much as he did? Or was she just too smart to get caught in the middle of something like this? Probably the latter, he thought in disgust.

"What is the penalty?" he asked, his voice sounding shaky and foreign to him. In the background he could hear people whispering to each other. Hell, now he was providing entertainment for the entire bar. So much for keeping a low profile. Fuck.

"That's for the magistrate to decide," the guard said piously. "Of course, it may depend in part on whether you're prepared to pay damages for the trouble you've caused."

Money, he thought, feeling hopeful for the first time. If they were interested in money, he might be able to buy his way out of this one. Manya snorted in disgust.

"I think I could arrange that," Jerred said slowly. The guard's gaze sharpened.

"We'll take care of it after we've taken you into custody," he replied, the tone of his voice warming.

Jerred smiled, and then closed his eyes. They wanted money to make this go away. That was something he could arrange.

* * * * *

Giselle watched as they hauled Black Leather out on a floater. She stayed in the background as the station guards took names and contact information from the various bar patrons. There were a few who looked uncomfortable, but for the most part the situation was routine. A few of their more concerned patrons had slipped discretely into the storeroom for the duration. Free drinks would be served and damages would be paid. In a week, nobody would remember what had happened.

"How you doing?" Manya asked gruffly, coming to sit beside her. "I'm sorry I left you hanging out there for a moment, but I didn't want him to know we were on to him. You looked kinda scared."

"He was waiting for me outside the bar," Giselle said softly. "He wouldn't leave me alone. I'm sorry I brought trouble back to the bar, but it was the only thing I could think to do."

"It's all right," he replied. "I didn't like the way he was touching you, anyway. Like he owned you or something. I run a good, clean bar, and I don't like anyone treating my girls like they're hookers. We can afford to lose an occasional customer, but losing a good waitress? Now that's a loss!"

Giselle smiled weakly, and leaned her head against Manya's broad shoulder. For all his rough exterior, he was a good man.

"You stick around 'til closing," Manya said slowly. "You can wait in my office, and I'll make sure you get home all right."

"No, that's all right," she said. "Just 'cause one guy scared me doesn't mean I can't take care of myself, you know?"

"You sure?"

"Yep, I'm sure."

"Well, I'm not your father," he said after a moment. "Not my place to tell you what to do. Sit and relax, though, and I'll get you a drink."

She nodded gratefully, and Manya smiled.

It was an hour before she felt ready to leave again, despite her brave words. She wanted to take Manya up on his offer, but he couldn't escort her home every night. The sooner she got over it, the better. Still, the once-friendly station corridors were filled with shadows, and every drunken spacer she passed seemed to leer menacingly. Things got better as she left the main gallery, ducking through back corridors toward the tiny block of apartments where she rented a room. She could afford better—she made good money at Manya's. But she had better things to do with her credits.

She caught sight of her apartment entrance and relaxed for the first time. It always seemed to greet her from the distance, a small, blue door tucked in the corner of the hallway. She wasn't scheduled to work the next cycle, and she was damned glad of it. She could use the rest. She reached the door and leaned forward to press her eye to the retinal scanner when she heard them to her right.

"You haven't paid up, Sula," a man's voice said. Catching her breath, Giselle swiveled noiselessly. They were just a few feet away, down the other end of the hallway. Two guardsmen stood over a young woman, their stance anything but friendly.

Sula.

An unlicensed prostitute who worked the port. A sand junkie who was high ninety percent of the time, Sula slept in the corridor sometimes, and Giselle often left her food out of pity. The girl was harmless. Now she lay huddled against the wall, tears running down her always-pale face.

One of the guards kicked at her, and she whimpered, pleading wordlessly for mercy.

"Sula, you know what it means if you don't pay up on time," the man said. His friends laughed, as if they were sharing some sick joke. "This is the second time in row. Didn't we tell you what would happen if you did this again?"

"I'll do better," Sula whimpered. "I'm gonna do better. Just give me another chance. Please."

"I don't think so," the guard said, his tone deceptively light. "I think it's already too late for you, Sula. You keep doing this and people will think it's all right not to pay. We're gonna make an example outta you."

Giselle caught her breath as the guard pulled a blaster out of his belt and pointed it toward the cowering girl. She knew, deep down inside, that there was nothing she could do to help Sula. Nothing. That didn't make her feel like less of a monster for watching.

With surreal slowness, the guard raised the gun to Sula's head and pulled the trigger. There was a bright flash, and the corridor was filled with the smell of burnt hair and flesh. The body slumped to one side, and to Giselle's horror, she could feel her fingers loosen. Her bag hit the floor with a loud thumping noise, and the guards whirled to face her.

"I didn't see anything," she muttered, turning away from them and fumbling at her door. Had the computer already recognized her? Would it open? They were going to kill her. She knew it.

She could hear them stalking toward her, and then the door opened. She stumbled through, slapping it closed and screaming, "Lock!" to the computer.

A small light glowed red. How long would it hold?

The door shuddered as the guards shot it with a blaster. She scrambled to her feet, running across her small, one-room apartment toward the fresher. She dove in and scabbled at the shower's back panel. She'd wondered if she was paranoid when she'd decided to get the apartment. The landlord charged her extra for an apartment with an escape hatch. Who the hell would be after her? Why would she need a second exit?

But she'd always had a hint of paranoia, and it had saved her ass more than once. This time was no exception. The panel slid open, revealing a narrow service shaft. She crawled in, pulling the panel closed behind her. She figured she had about ten minutes before they figured out where she had gone. More than enough time to get away if she hustled. As she crawled down the narrow shaft she whispered a prayer of thanks to the Goddess for saving her yet again.

* * * * *

Jerred smiled broadly as the security captain offered him a drink. Amazing what kind of service a few credits could buy, he thought in amusement. The bastards must feel like they'd won a prize, a man who was willing to pay almost anything to make the little run-in with station security go away.

"It's a real pleasure to deal with such civilized representatives of the local government," he said, tipping back his drink. The captain gave an oily smile.

"We do our best," he said. "Of course, we wouldn't want to have to go through this with you again. I'm sure that Manya can be persuaded to drop any charges against you, and as the representative of the port, I can assure you that we hold no grudge, but we really will have to ask you to leave within the next cycle. A little time does wonders for hot tempers."

"That won't be a problem for me at all," Jerred said, mulling over the idea. A full cycle was more than enough time to find the girl and get out. Mission or no, he wasn't going to leave her behind. He'd already decided that.

She'd cost him far too many credits.

"How much longer will you need me to stay here?" he asked, rolling the sharp liquor in his mouth. It was decent stuff, far better than anything he'd had in a long time. The captain and his men seemed to do pretty well for themselves. Idly he wondered if their Imperial keepers got a cut, or if this was strictly a local enterprise. If so, it might come in handy for Nicolai down the road. He made a mental note to tell the general about the captain in his next report.

"You can leave as soon as all the credits are transferred into the escrow account," the man replied. "This would all be much simpler if you would simply authorize it directly."

Jerred didn't reply, simply smiling at him. If he authorized it directly, the price to leave this room would almost certain to go up. Immediately.

Finally the captain's computer bleeped, and he nodded.

"It looks like everything is in order," he said with a smile. "You'll need to authorize the release from escrow before you receive clearance to leave the station."

"Naturally," Jerred said. "May I leave now?"

“Of course,” the captain replied. “In fact, I’ve even arranged for you to get your blaster back. Carrying such a weapon illegally is a serious infringement of port regulations, but I’m certain we can trust you not to do it again.”

Jerred nodded then stood slowly to leave. A younger man waited in the outer office with his blaster. Easy enough, Jerred thought. It was refreshing to deal with Imperials who were so direct. Too bad the captain and his men weren’t guarding the Imperial court on Tyre. That would be a real treat.

* * * * *

Giselle crawled through the service shaft as fast as she could move, wishing desperately that she’d taken the time to explore it more. Where the hell was she? And perhaps more importantly, where should she go?

Manya’s was out of the question. It wouldn’t take them long to discover where she worked, and she’d brought him enough trouble already. If the station guards turned against him, he could lose his livelihood. But all her money had been in her bag. What was she going to do?

A glow of light appeared ahead of her. Was it a way out?

She headed toward it, trying to keep as quiet as she could. It wasn’t easy. Her breath came in loud, harsh gasps that seemed to echo along the narrow metal shaft, and every movement seemed to rattle the metal beneath her.

The light was coming from a metal grate. She reached it and peered out into a long, empty corridor. She had no idea where she was, but they had to have discovered her escape route by now. It was only a matter of time before they cut her off. It would be safer to head back into the main areas of the station, to try and blend in somewhere. With a sigh, she realized that she would have to leave her hard-earned savings behind.

Again.

Was she ever going to be able to keep the things she worked for? Was that really too much to ask?

She shook her head—no time for self-pity. Pushing at the grate, she managed to pop it free and crawled out into the corridor. She looked down at herself with disgust; she was filthy. She brushed the dust off, wiping her hands down her clothing to get at the worst of it. She twisted to reach her butt, and something poked her breast. Memory came to her. Jerred, sticking his fingers into her cleavage and tucking something in. How had she forgotten about it? Why hadn’t she checked earlier? She must have been too rattled. Hopefully it was something useful. She reached down between her breasts and pulled it out. A credit slip, wrapped around a plastic room key. There were directions written on the slip, and her lip curled in disgust.

What a bastard.

But, she realized, he was an incarcerated bastard. Unless he was able to come up with an enormous bribe, he would be in custody at least a cycle before he even saw a magistrate. There would be paperwork, fines, all of that. Until then, his room would be empty.

She smiled slowly, wondering if he had left anything valuable in it. Under normal circumstances she would never consider robbing someone. But this was hardly a normal situation. Her life was at stake, and he was at least partially responsible, she reminded herself. It was his fault she'd been so late getting home. His fault she'd witnessed the murder. The image of Sula's lifeless body slumping in the corridor flashed through her mind, and she cut it off ruthlessly. Sula was dead. Thinking about her wouldn't change anything.

She moved cautiously through the corridor until it branched with another. She followed the larger branch until she was in territory that, while still unfamiliar to her, was at least recognizable. Here were apartment doors and the occasional small business with the shutters down. The only places open on the station at this time of cycle would be the bars, the places that catered to drunken spacers on leave. Blessedly, everyone on this corridor seemed to be asleep.

She ran through the corridors until she saw signs she recognized. She checked the credit slip again, realizing how close she was to the hostel. There it was up ahead of her.

Deserted.

She walked toward it with a deliberately casual stride, then ducked into the doorway and pressed the key against the lock. It slid open. She held her breath as she crept inside, praying no one would see her. She was fairly sure she could talk her way out of anything that might come up, but it was always better not to leave a trail. There might be surveillance cameras, but nobody would bother to check them unless they had a good reason.

She walked swiftly down the corridor, checking off the rooms. There it was, number seven. The door opened smoothly and soundlessly when she slipped the card in. Then she was safe, the door shut behind her. She turned to survey his kingdom.

At first she wondered if she had made a mistake—it hardly looked as if anyone were staying there at all. Her visions of credit chits or valuable merchandise lying about vanished. Still, a safe place to rest was better than nothing, and now she had a few hours to figure out what to do next. Hopefully it would be enough.

She moved across the small room to the plain metal wardrobe, opening it to find a small rucksack. She picked it up, took it to the bed and dumped it out. A change of clothing. A small comp pad. Several entertainment disks. She looked at the titles, and curled her lip in disgust. Porn.

The man was truly lower than a *krellet*.

Nothing of any use, though, or of interest. On to the fresher.

There was a neat kit on the counter, containing several small packets of cleanser and a shaver. A brush. Nothing else. Was the man some kind of monk? She'd never heard of a male this tidy.

She stalked back into the room and sat down heavily on the bed, thoroughly disgusted. Not a damn thing of value in the place. She was going to have to find some other way to buy passage off the station.

Exhaustion filled her limbs and she scooted down into the bed, taking unseemly pleasure in the simple act. She checked her wrist chrono, realizing she had been up hours past her usual bedtime. She was wiped. Part of her screamed out that taking a nap at this point would be a huge mistake. She needed to move, to get going.

But on the other hand, when would she have a chance to rest again? She couldn't keep moving forever. In fact, she couldn't keep moving much longer. She needed to be sharp and alert if she was going to get through this. Perhaps taking a nap would be a good idea after all. It would give her subconscious a chance to work on an escape plan...

Before she even finished the thought, she was asleep.

* * * * *

Jerred entered the hostel silently, aware that even the wildest of its residents were probably asleep by now. It would only take a few minutes to gather his things. Then he'd go and find the girl, and they'd leave the station. He was relatively certain the guards would love to arrest him again and get more money.

The door to his room slid open with a quick touch—he saw her immediately. She was sprawled across his bed with an arrogant abandon that brought a smile to his face. He shut the door behind him silently, and came to stand beside her. Here was one challenge resolved already. She was his for the taking.

He noted his belongings spread out across the bed and smiled. The little witch had tried to rob him. So much for her holier-than-thou attitude. It was just as well. He would have taken her with him no matter what, but now he could do so without guilt. The woman was a thief. She deserved whatever she got.

He reached down and grasped her shoulder lightly. She didn't stir. Bemused, he sat down beside her and shifted her to the center of the bed. She muttered something in her sleep but sleep didn't wake. Her face seemed soft, almost innocent. He smothered a laugh. This one was anything but innocent—she'd made that clear in the bar. She might claim to be a waitress, but she was offering far more services than that with every step she took.

She would be well-paid for her time. But he'd make her earn every penny of it along the way. She rolled toward him, murmuring softly in her sleep. His breath

caught. He had been so angry, so disgusted, that he'd forgotten the punch-to-the-gut kind of feeling seeing her gave him.

Her face was so lovely...

Reddish-blond hair, wildly curly in a way he just knew had to be natural. He settled himself closer, running one finger lightly through a reddish ringlet of hair beside him. A smattering of freckles across her nose and cheekbones... They turned lighter lower on her face, but there was a darker one, right next to the corner of her mouth. Almost against his will, he leaned forward and kissed the small speck of a spot.

Her skin was smooth, soft. Wonderful smelling.

The adorable little spots continued down her neck, growing darker and more distinct across her chest and the slope of her breasts. Now there was something else that held his full attention. She wasn't huge, but she was well-endowed. They were a woman's breasts—full, with the kind of deep cleavage a man just wanted to sink into. He leaned forward and nuzzled down into her, kissing the exposed flesh, tracing his tongue down into the crevice that tantalized him so. He could feel himself hardening, feel the tension in his body rising. There was something so wonderful about being close to her, as if he could sink into her body and find a kind of peace he'd never dreamed possible.

No wonder he had lost his mind over this woman. No wonder he'd risked his mission without a second thought. In that moment, he knew he would have done anything to stay close to her.

Anything.

He pulled back, and looked down into her sleeping face. Her eyes moved beneath their lids, and he felt her draw in a deep breath. She was waking up.

Her eyes fluttered open slowly, pure and blue before him. She looked confused, and then her gaze narrowed. Her face transformed, all softness gone.

"You," she hissed. "What are you doing here?"

"Don't you think that I should be asking the questions?" he replied softly. "After all, it's my room."

She moved toward him suddenly, and he rolled on top of her. It was instinct, self-preservation, and not a moment too soon. Her knee slammed into his thigh; she'd been aiming for his crotch.

Witch.

She bucked against him, trying to escape. He held her down, imprisoning her with his body, allowing himself to simply enjoy the feeling of her moving beneath him. Every twist, every motion, rubbed her against his cock. He wanted to thrust into her and take her, but if he couldn't have that quite yet, this wasn't a bad alternative.

All too soon she caught on, and stilled.

"So, what do we do now?" she asked, her voice tight.

“Oh, I have all kinds of ideas,” he replied dulcetly. “But I don’t know if you’d like them or not. I suppose that before we get any further, we should agree on a price? I’d hate for you to think I’m not a man of my word, and I think we’re long past playing coy.”

Chapter Three

Giselle glared up at him, disbelieving. After all that had happened, how could the bastard still think she was for sale? She'd had him beaten and arrested, for love of the Goddess! Her eyes narrowed as she thought about that. "How did you get out so quickly?"

He smiled at her, a disgustingly smug look coming across her face.

"I've found that justice is for sale here on Transit Station Three," he said slowly. "Remember, I told you everything was for sale if you were willing to pay the right price. Why don't you tell me what your price is?"

"How did you manage to pay a fine that big so fast?" she asked. He merely looked at her, one eyebrow cocked in amusement.

"Your price?" he prodded after a moment.

"I told you, I'm not for sale!"

"Then why are you here?" he asked. "If the only reason you came here was to rob me, it seems that it may be in my best interest to call the guards and report you. What do you say to that?"

She froze, terrified. She had more than a guess as to what the guards would think of that... Time to try a new approach.

"Can we just forget this ever happened?" she asked suddenly, giving him her most winning smile. "I only came here because I needed a place to stay and I didn't think you'd be around. I made a serious mistake, and I'm sorry for that. Can you just let it go?"

"Why did you need a place to stay?" he asked. She shook her head, disgusted for revealing so much.

"Tell me, or I call the guards," he said with sudden insight. He knew something was up; she could see it on his face.

"Look, you're imagining things," she replied. "I'm sorry I bothered you, but there's nothing to this. I was just locked out of my apartment, and I figured your room would be empty. I wasn't carrying any cash to get a room of my own and Manya had already left for the cycle."

"That's ridiculous," he said. "You didn't need a keycard for your apartment; you already used that little excuse to fool me once. After that, I think it's very generous for me to offer you money. Some would say you owe me."

She rolled her eyes, forgetting to smile.

"You don't want me to call the station guards for a reason, don't you?" he asked.
"You're here because you're in trouble."

She shook her head, denying it. His grin grew broader.

"No, I'm right," he said, "I can tell. There's a little twitch by your eye. You're lying."

"No," she said softly. "No, just let me leave. Please."

He sat up abruptly. She felt exposed, insecure. Why was all this happening at once? Why had she been so foolish as to come to his room?

"You're running from something, probably the station guards," he said shortly.
"Tell me what your problem is. Maybe I can help you."

"You're wrong."

"If you have nothing to hide, you won't mind me calling the station guards.
Computer, open a connection—"

"No," she whispered. "Don't call them. Please."

"Tell me."

"I saw something," she whispered, defeated. "I saw one of them commit a crime.
Justice is for sale here, you said it yourself. They'll kill me if they find me."

"The guards?"

She nodded quickly, hoping desperately that he would have the decency not to turn her in.

He smiled broadly.

"I take it they know where you live," he said slowly. "That you came here as a last resort?"

She didn't reply. He was right, of course, but she'd be damned if she'd admit it openly.

"You need to get off the station."

She nodded.

"And you don't have any money? Or not much."

She stayed still, once again unwilling to confirm how desperate her situation really was. Something about saying it out loud would make it too real.

"I can take you off-station," he said slowly, his smile growing broader. "But I won't do it for free. Can you pay me?"

"No," she said shortly, suddenly beyond lying. She needed to get off-station, and he was her best bet. "I don't have any money. I came here because I was hoping to find some."

"That's a real shame," he said. She was starting to hate that smile of his. He was enjoying her pain, there could be no doubt. Bastard. "Because I won't take you off the station unless you can think of a way to pay me."

Silence fell between them.

"I don't suppose you need a crew member?" she asked hopefully. He actually laughed at her then, and shook his head.

"You know what I want. Of course, I understand you aren't for sale."

She felt a slow rage start to burn within her. The bastard had no morals at all.

"You want me to have sex with you."

"More than once," he said lightly. He leaned forward, and his face grew intense. "In fact, I want to fuck you. I want to fuck you long and hard, and I want to keep doing it until you start screaming at me from need. I want to lick you and bite you all over your body, and push inside you long and slow. Later I want to take you fast, ram into you and fill you with my seed. And I want you to love every minute of it and beg me for more."

She gazed at him, mesmerized and horrified at the same time. He actually licked his lips as he stopped speaking.

"What if I won't do it?" she asked softly.

"Well, then," he said. "I'll just have to call the guards and let you work things out with them yourself."

"You wouldn't," she whispered, but she knew he would. She could see from his face that he was dead serious. He had no softness, no mercy. Only lust. She closed her own eyes, trying to escape from that terrible, hungry gaze.

A scene from a vid she had watched as a teenager popped into her head.

"When I was a kid, my friends and I went to see a show," she said slowly. "The heroine, a beautiful Imperial princess, was being held captive by a pirate. He forced her to choose between her life and her virtue. That princess chose to die rather than allow her touch. My friends thought it was very romantic."

"Your friends sound stupid," he said abruptly. She could hear him walk across the room.

"That's what I thought," she replied, opening her eyes again. He was sitting on the small couch across from the bed. She looked at him closely, taking in his cold, hard face, the black leather breeches, and the spacer's belt with the blaster hanging off it casually. "I guess I'm for sale after all."

"It's a good price," he said softly. "You won't regret the transaction."

She nodded, knowing he was right. She wanted to live, dammit. "Now what?"

"We seal the deal, of course," he said.

"Let me guess, with a kiss?"

"Hell, no," he said. "Kisses are for princesses. We'll seal this deal with a fuck."

Chapter Four

Jerred watched closely as the words hit her. A part of his mind, something that sounded suspiciously like a conscience, whispered that his behavior was disgusting. What kind of bastard treated an innocent woman like this? It was one thing to offer her money, quite another to blackmail her when she was in fear for her life.

He pushed that part down, hard. He wanted her and he was going to have her. He'd already decided that, long before fate dumped her in his lap with a bow tied around her pretty neck. This just made getting her onto his ship and into his bed easier.

"How long does this little deal last?" she asked quietly. "Will you let me off at the next port?"

"No," he replied, gut clenching at the thought. "I'll let you off when I'm damned well good and ready. If you have a problem with that, find someone else to take you off-station."

"It seems that you have all the power in this situation," she said softly.

"Yes, I do," he said shortly. He leaned back in the couch, lifting his hips as he unbuckled his belt and slipped it off. He took the blaster and set it on the bolster behind him, carefully locking the trigger, then turned his attention back to her.

"You ready to seal the deal?"

She nodded, looking faint. He wondered how far he could push her, and considered letting things go for the moment. After all, he'd have as much time as he liked once they were on the ship. But then she took a deep breath, her breasts swelled beneath her low-cut blouse. The freckles that dusted them stood out against her pale skin, and her riot of red curls had gone completely wild as she slept. He had never wanted a woman so badly in his entire life. His cock filled to bursting; there was no way he would let her off now. He needed her in a way he'd never needed a woman before.

A bitter thought crossed his mind. Was this a shadow of what his Saurellian brothers felt when they found their life mates? If it was even half as bad, he was happy he would never have a life mate of his own. This was too much power for a woman to have, for anyone to have. Thinking about it made him angry.

"Come here," he said roughly. He reached down and opened his pants crudely. His cock sprang forth, and he ran a cupped hand up and down its length. A small pearl of moisture was already beading up at the tip. He ran one finger across it, rubbing the fluid in a circle across the head, and shuddered. She looked at him, her pouty, red mouth open in a silent "O" of shock. He imagined those lips cupping him and shivered.

"Get over here," he said shortly. The look on her face hurt him. She was afraid, horrified. What he was about to do was wrong.

He couldn't bring himself to stop.

She stood slowly and walked toward him from the bed. She reached to her blouse, undoing one of the buttons at the top. A gentle blush rose across her chest, tinting the slopes of her breasts with a soft pink that made him moan. The next button opened beneath her fingers, and then the next. The shadow between her breasts grew darker, and as she opened the garment he saw a lacy, black scrap of fabric as seductive as anything he'd seen before in his life. She paused when all the buttons were open, arms hanging loosely at her side. The blouse gaped wide, although her breasts were still held captive by the wisps of black lace. He could see the pink circles of her nipples, though. Soft. Gently pointed and growing harder as the cool air hit them.

Without thinking, he pumped his hand up and down his cock, holding back a moan. His entire body seemed frozen, rock-solid arousal holding him prisoner. If she knew, would she use that need against him? Would she find some way to manipulate him and take control of his life?

Having her touch him was the worth the risk.

"Kneel," he said hoarsely.

She cocked her head to one side, and then did as he asked, dropping gracefully to her knees. He stroked his hand up and down once more, and then let his arms fall to his side.

"Now you," he whispered.

She rested one hand on each of his knees, and then leaned over to breathe softly on his cock. She wasn't even touching him, yet a wave of fire spread through his body so fast it was a wonder he didn't burst into flames. He moaned, allowing his head to fall back against the cushions.

Then she placed her hand on him and he almost died.

Her fingers were hot and smooth around his flesh. She didn't move, just grasped him gently. At first it was exquisite; as the seconds slowly passed, it became maddening. What the hell was she doing?

He opened his mouth to ask her, but before he could say anything her fingers gripped him firmly and slid up the length of his shaft. He shuddered. She repeated the gesture and he felt his balls tightening in anticipation. His heart pumped faster and faster as her fingers drifted across his taut flesh. His hips lifted off the couch. He needed more, and he needed it now.

His hand circled hers, squeezing her fingers tight around his cock as he pumped up and down. Two strokes, then four. He wanted to do more with her, wanted this first time with her to be better, but the feeling of her hot fingers gripping him was too much. With a groan, he felt the tension rise almost beyond bearing. He slammed their joined hands down over his cock one last time, his lust exploding.

She gave a startled cry as he came, but he hardly noticed. He kept his eyes closed, breathing deeply as the aftershocks of his orgasm washed over his body. He had never felt anything so intense in his life. What had happened? Why had this woman's mere

touch been enough to send him over the edge? It had been a while since he'd had a woman, but not that long. There had been a wonderfully accommodating pleasure worker on Gemini, and that had been less than two weeks ago.

Her snort of disgust broke through his thoughts, and he opened his eyes to see her dabbing at her chest with her blouse.

"You might have given me some warning," she said tartly. "You may find this amusing, but I don't have any other clothing to wear. Now I'm all covered with..." she broke off, and looked away from him.

"Sorry," he said, meaning it. He felt like an ass. He'd come on her like a boy with his first woman. All his life he'd taken care not to be a selfish partner, but he had failed miserably this time.

She stood abruptly and walked away from him toward the fresher. She pulled the shirt off, exposing her entire upper body to him, except for the wisps of black lace binding her breasts. There was something about those tiny pieces of fabric he found more erotic than nudity. His loins tightened, and his cock stirred in interest.

Now was hardly the time, though. Not after what he'd just done to her. From the sound of slamming fresher door, she wouldn't welcome his advances no matter how desperate she was to get off-station. At least not until her temper had a chance to cool. He stood slowly, and then stripped off his clothing. He pulled on another pair of undershorts, bundled his dirty laundry together, and placed it in the wardrobe. Taking out one of the loose, natural fiber shirts he favored, he walked across the room and knocked hesitantly on the fresher door.

"Giselle," he said. "I have something for you to sleep in. I'll just set it outside the door."

He put the shirt down and walked back over to the bed. He was suddenly exhausted; it had been a very long day for both of them. Keying the alarm on his wrist chrono, he laid down on one side the bed, careful to leave her plenty of space on the other side.

"Computer, lights off, please," he said softly. The room fell dark. He closed his eyes and listened. After a long while, the fresher door opened and she pulled the shirt in. A few moments later, he heard her cross the room and she sat on the edge of the bed.

"I know we have a deal," she said hesitantly. "And I want to get off the station. But I would really appreciate it if you didn't touch me again tonight. I'm not feeling very friendly."

He agreed quickly, wishing he could go back just a few moments and make things better for her. Being an ass just seemed to come so naturally to him.

She crawled into bed beside him. He listened to her breathe slowly in and out for what seemed like hours. Then she spoke.

"I just realized that I've had your seed all over me, but I don't even know your name."

"It's Jerred," he replied, feeling even lower.

"Just Jerred?" she asked after a moment. "No family name?"

"None that you need to know," he said slowly, wishing he could tell her the truth. "Go to sleep. It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

* * * * *

Giselle clutched Jerred's arm closely as they walked through one of the massive transit station docks. He was moored on-station, which surprised her. It cost so much less to moor on one of the outlying buoys that a shuttle ride out was standard for smaller ships. If he had so damn much money, why hadn't there been more in his room?

It was hard to walk on the ridiculous shoes he'd brought her. She teetered on the tips of her toes, the heels were so tall. Not that the shoes didn't match her outfit. She looked like the lowest class of whore the station had to offer, and the long, obviously fake blonde wig didn't help matters at all.

On the bright side, she looked nothing like Giselle the barmaid. It was a good thing, too. She'd seen her picture flashing across a security screen they'd passed on the way out to his ship. The station guards were saying she'd attacked them without provocation. She had no illusions as to whether she'd survive her initial arrest to try and tell her story to a judge. Sula hadn't had that chance, and neither would she. It was safer and smarter to play Jerred's little power game.

By the time they reached airlock 182 A, her feet felt like they were going to fall off. While Jerred busied himself entering a code into the airlock, she took a moment to look out the small porthole at his ship. The craft was surprisingly big and graceful looking. Nothing at all like the grotty spacers she was used to seeing in one-man operations. Whatever this Jerred did, he was obviously good enough at it to keep the credits flowing regularly. She wondered what kind of business he was in. He'd been meeting with Vetch to discuss "business," but that didn't exactly narrow it down. Vetch was a typical freighter captain, and every load he carried was likely to be different.

But Vetch's ship wasn't even close to being *this* nice. Normal cargo didn't bring in the kind of credits Jerred seemed to be throwing around. Would she be safe with him? She shook her head, dismissing the thought. He was safer than the station guards, and that was all that mattered.

The airlock hissed open, and he gestured her ahead of him through the door. She stayed silent as they cycled through the lock. Then he pressed his ship's key into the slit on the outer hull of the ship. The second door slid open, and she stepped into the most unusual freighter she'd ever seen.

Instead of the normal, utilitarian interior, the entire ship seemed to be designed with comfort—even decadence—in mind. There was a light scent in the air, a teasing

fragrance that sang along her nose. It smelled so real, so like something on a planet that it caught her breath. How did he make his ship smell so good?

The walls pulsed gently with a swirl of colors, as if the ship itself was happy to see them, was trying to make them feel welcome. She stepped into the entryway, turning to him with questions in her eyes.

“What kind of ship is this?” she asked slowly. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“In my line of work it can be important to make a good impression right up front,” he said slowly. “I like my clients to know that my business is solid, that I can be trusted to deliver my goods on time and in working order. This helps lend some credence to that claim.”

She didn’t buy his explanation for a moment, but now wasn’t the time to call him on it. She didn’t want to give him even the slightest excuse not to take her with him. Transit Station 3 had become a very dangerous place for her over the past cycle.

A chirping sound broke through her thoughts. *A bird?*

“What’s that?” she asked, startled.

“End program,” he said shortly. The noise ceased, and the walls faded to gray metal. “It’s nothing, just part of the welcoming program. You can change it to a wide variety of settings, depending on what you’re interested in.”

“What was that setting?”

“That was my mother’s garden,” he said shortly. “Your cabin is the second one on the left. Go ahead and make yourself comfortable. We’ll be pulling away in about an hour if everything goes right.”

She nodded, walking over to the cabin and opening the door. It was barely big enough to turn around in. There was a fold-down bunk, a single. She stared at it for a moment, wondering if by some miracle she’d misunderstood what he intended for her. His voice came from behind, startling her. She hadn’t realized he’d been following her.

“My cabin is across the way,” he said. “I’ll expect you to be available to me whenever I want you.”

“But I won’t be sleeping with you?”

“No.”

She shrugged her shoulders, not knowing quite how to take that statement.

An hour later they left the station. She barely felt them move as it pulled away from the dock, probably wouldn’t have noticed if he hadn’t called over the com instructing her to strap in. Whatever else his faults, he seemed to know how to pilot, she thought.

Now they were steadily cruising away from the station. She had no idea how long it would be before he made the leap out of normal space, but she figured at least a week. Most stations required that kind of clearance.

She wandered out in the corridor and started down it, away from the airlock they’d entered through. To one end there seemed to be cargo holds. She had no idea what he was shipping, but she had her suspicions. If he wasn’t a smuggler, than she was the

Imperial princess. It was the only thing that could explain the cash he could throw around. Hopefully the criminal wouldn't get caught while she was still on board, she thought sourly. She came to the end of the corridor, and started making her way back up toward her room. The ship had several crew cabins, and she suspected she'd been given the smallest, least comfortable one.

At least it was better than sharing with him, she reminded herself wryly. She ambled back up the other direction, discovering a small galley, an eating area, a living area and, to her surprise, a library. A real library, with what appeared to be thousands of datatabs and vids. She scanned them quickly, noting he had far more than the porn she'd found in his room.

The man appeared to be educated. In fact, far more educated than she was. Half the tabs were in languages she didn't even recognize. What the hell kind of smuggler was he, anyway?

"You're free to borrow any of the titles," he said, and she squawked. She whirled on him, speaking without thinking.

"Why the hell did you do that?" she demanded. "You shouldn't sneak up on people."

He gave her a chilly smile. "You shouldn't poke around in places on a ship that you haven't been invited into."

"Why, afraid I'll discover some of your goods are smuggled?" she asked acidly. "Perhaps prohibited?"

"No, afraid you'll accidentally stumble into an airlock while I'm running compression checks," he replied smoothly. "It's a terrible way to die."

Her anger suddenly faded and reality washed over her in a rush. She was utterly dependent upon this man for survival. It didn't matter that he was smuggling—staying alive was what counted.

"I'm sorry," she said, trying to sound genuinely contrite. "I wasn't trying to pry, I was just exploring."

"I know," he said. "I watched you from the cockpit."

She stilled. It hadn't occurred to her that he had video access to the ship, but of course he did. It only made sense.

"I suppose you have my room bugged, too?" she asked softly.

"Yes," he replied, turning to walk out of the small library. She followed, unsure of herself. She didn't really want to be near him, but she didn't like the idea of him watching her from afar, either.

"I'm going to fix us some dinner," he said. "Do you have any preferences?"

She gave a nervous laugh, and then nodded her head. When in doubt, make a joke. It always worked on her bar customers. She wracked her brain, coming up with the most exotic dish she could imagine.

"I don't suppose you have roasted *kvana* with Beloni herbs?"

He smiled, and the tension between them broke.

“Naturally,” he said. “I’ve just gotten back from the Emperor’s summer palace on Beloni, where we hunted *kvana*.”

She smiled back at him, feeling more comfortable now that the tension was broken.

“I don’t suppose you have some of his Imperial Majesty’s private reserve wine to go with it, then?”

“Well, naturally,” he said. “What well-equipped smuggler doesn’t?”

For the first time since she’d met him, he seemed almost playful. The hard façade had dropped, at least for the moment, leaving behind a surprising nice looking man. Even his scar seemed less menacing.

“So, are you going to prepare this wonderful meal for me?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “You may be surprised to discover this, but I’m actually quite a cook.”

“Forgive me if I’m doubtful,” she replied pertly. “You just don’t seem like the cooking type to me.”

“Well, you don’t really know me very well, do you?” he replied. “Go ahead and make yourself comfortable. I’ll get started on dinner.”

* * * * *

He couldn’t wait to see the look on her face when she saw dinner. He didn’t allow himself to consider why he cared so much. Moving efficiently, he placed a last few sprinkles of fresh herbs over the glazed *kvana*, then placed both warm plates in the stasis box. The first course was already prepared—thin slices of toasted bread topped with grilled Gnoscan mushrooms in a light vinaigrette sauce, and still-crisp steamed vegetables. A meal fit for an emperor, he thought wryly.

He poured wine into two gracefully sculpted crystal goblets, carrying them over to the small table. Things were almost perfect. He brought over the plates with the grilled mushrooms and arranged them, and then spoke quietly to the ship’s computer.

“Jenna, please turn on the dining program.”

Instantly the utilitarian colors of the walls shifted. Light, lovely patterns reminiscent of natural wood appeared on the walls, and a window seemed to open along the table. The view was of a tropical garden, swirling with colors. A soft chirping filled the room. This garden always seemed to soothe him. He hoped it would work for Giselle. He didn’t like the tension between them. However badly they’d started out, it was time to make peace. There was no need for their time together to be unpleasant.

“Dinner is served,” he said as he walked out into the main room. She looked up from the vid she was watching, and smiled at him. She must have taken a shower, because she seemed to glow at him with health and cleanliness. Her face was bare of the

dreadful cosmetics, and the freckles dotting her nose made her appear charmingly youthful, although he knew she was a woman grown. She wore one of the simple jumpsuits he'd purchased for her on the station. Plain as it was, it still showed her figure to advantage.

"Dinner is ready," he said. "Would you care to join me?"

She wrinkled her nose at him and asked, "Do I have a choice?"

"Yes," he said slowly. "You do. But I really hope you choose to eat with me, because I put considerable work into preparing dinner."

She laughed, and then shook her head. Her wild riot of reddish curls bounced, then she stood up.

"Then I would be honored to join you," she said.

He let her walk before him into the room, savoring the small sigh of appreciation she gave when she saw what he'd done.

"Jerred, this is amazing," she said slowly, turning to face him. "It's just like some kind of fancy restaurant!"

"Well, I figured that if we were going to eat the Emperor's *kvana*, we should do it right. Of course, I don't have servants to wash our hands for us, and I'll have to bring out each course..."

She burst out laughing again, and sat down. He sat across from her, watching her face as she took a sip of the wine. Her eyes closed and she moaned in appreciation.

"What is this?" she muttered. "I've never tasted anything like it. It's amazing."

"It's the Emperor's private reserve," he said. Her eyes opened, and she wrinkled her nose at him.

"It's good, but it isn't *that* good," she said.

"Really?" he asked, lifting his glass and taking a sip for himself. His taste buds were overwhelmed with a symphony of tastes. It stole across him like a ray of moonlight, and he almost felt the coolness of an evening breeze along an ocean. The taste was rich and full, and as it matured in his mouth he could feel sparkles of sensation washing down along his spine. His loins tightened in response, and he felt himself harden slightly. He opened his eyes.

"I think you should take another sip," he said, meeting her gaze. "It really is good."

She took another sip, and her eyes closed again.

She didn't moan this time, but a becomingly pink flush stole across her face, and her breath quickened.

"Okay, it is pretty good," she said, opening her eyes and giving him a sheepish look. "What is this stuff, anyway? It's not like any wine I've ever tasted."

"I told you," he said softly. "It's the Emperor's private reserve. It's made by a group of monks sworn to the Goddess, and the last five hundred years they've only produced

a thousand bottles a year. The emperor has first bid on it, of course. Some say it's an aphrodisiac."

"So how did you get it?" she demanded.

"That's my little secret," he replied with a smile. "Why don't you try your food?"

She looked at him a moment longer, suspicion in her eyes. He could tell she didn't believe him about the wine, which made it all the more fun to see the surprise in her face when she took another sip.

She reached down, and hesitantly cut into the mushroom. He followed suit, careful to watch her face as she took a bite.

"Oh, Goddess," she said. "This is almost melting in my mouth. Where did you get these? They don't taste like they've been in storage at all, but I know you didn't buy them at on Transit Three. And we're a long way from Gnoscanny."

Now she had surprised him.

"You've had Gnoscans mushrooms before?" he asked. "Not many people have."

She nodded and turned away for a second. Then she turned back to him and took a generous gulp of her wine. It didn't hit her as hard this time, but she flushed and stayed silent for a moment.

"I can see how a person could get addicted to this stuff," she said slowly. "It really has a way of making you feel better about things. I used to have Gnoscans mushrooms all the time. I grew them myself."

"Really?" he asked, startled. "It takes a pretty sophisticated biosphere set up to grow them. No offense, but I have trouble seeing how you could afford something like that on a waitress' income."

She shook her head and laughed, but this time the sound came out bitter.

"They grow wild on Hector Prime," she said, her face growing wistful. "I used to live there. I had my own bar, actually. Of course, it's gone now."

He nodded his head slowly, remembering. Hector Prime's surface had been destroyed by Imperials several months after the cease-fire. They'd claimed it had been an intelligence error, a mistake of planet-wide magnitude. Millions had died, including the cream of the Imperial academic community specializing in biology.

"You're Saurellian, aren't you?" she asked. "I haven't met many of your kind, but I think I recognized the facial features. Or kind of recognize them. It's hard to tell with your scar, but the coloring is right."

"Yes," he replied, not quite sure where she was going with this. "I'm Saurellian. I remember when your planet was destroyed. I'm so sorry – did you lose family?"

"No," she said slowly. "But I lost friends. And employees. I just happened to be off planet, meeting with a supplier on one of the moons. It was a fluke. Two hours earlier or two hours later and I would have been dead. Tell me something?"

He nodded, wishing he hadn't asked. There was pain written all over her lovely face, and it hurt in him a way he never would have thought possible.

"Why didn't your government do anything?" she asked, her voice anguished. "We were in the neutral zone. We were supposed to be protected. Why didn't you do anything when they broke the truce and killed us?"

"We couldn't," he said slowly. "We had to pretend to believe their excuses, otherwise the war would have started again. We couldn't afford to let that happen. Too many people had died already."

"They killed our planet because they heard you had a secret base there, or at least that's what I heard," she said softly. "Well, one of the things I heard. Can you tell me if it was true?"

He closed his eyes, and shook his head. Damn Nicolai. It had been wrong to hide their resources among a neutral civilian population—it broke all the rules of war. But Nicolai had insisted that following those rules was no way to win, and he'd been right. The war with the Imperials had almost destroyed them. He sighed, and then opened his eyes.

"There was no base—" he started to say, but the pain in her face was so open, so raw, that he couldn't finish. He took another drink of the wine, but now it tasted more like water to him. Foul water, the kind that couldn't quench a man's thirst.

"I can neither confirm nor deny that we had a base there," he said slowly. "But I'm very sorry for your loss."

"You prick," she whispered. She stood up slowly from the table. "You killed all of them, you and your fucking war. We were neutral—the entire planet was a damn *ecological* preserve. The people who died were students and teachers! What gave you the right to do that to us?"

He shook his head slowly, not knowing what to say. It wasn't the time for an argument on the importance of checking Imperial power, or the fact that the Imperial rebels had asked his people for help long before the war started.

"I know we have a deal," she hissed. "I know I have to fuck you. I'll do it here and now if you want. But I'll be damned if I'll eat with you. Enjoy your wine alone."

She turned and stalked out of galley with a dignity so frail it pained him to watch her.

Chapter Five

Giselle sat on her bunk, legs curled up to her chest, hugging herself. Damn him, why did he have to make her think of Hector Prime? She'd put it out of her head for months, almost a year. Why did he have to bring it all back?

She knew in her heart that whatever his flaws, he probably wasn't personally responsible for the Saurellians' decision to breach Hector Prime's neutrality. But that didn't make it any easier to deal with the memory of her lost friends and dreams.

Men and their wars. They were to blame for all of this, and he was one of them. His scar hadn't come from natural causes; that was no birthmark. He'd gotten it fighting, and even if he'd never set foot on Hector Prime, he'd caused destruction somewhere else.

It was always the women and the children who paid for men's wars.

She sat and sniffled for a while, allowing herself to wallow and feel sorry for herself. It wasn't like she did it that often. When she'd lost her home and her business, she'd immediately gone out and gotten a job. And when a better opportunity came along to go to Transit Three, she'd taken that. She knew how to work, how to take care of herself. She'd done it before and she'd do it again. But just once, it would be nice to lay back and mourn all she'd lost.

Even now he was probably watching her. Even though the light was off, it was a good bet that there were infrared lenses on the spy cameras he had everywhere. Defiantly, she raised one finger in a universally hostile gesture and waved it up at him, letting him know just what she thought of him and his fellow Saurellians.

All too soon, her pragmatic nature took over. She was trapped on this ship with him, and if she wanted to get away she would need to establish some kind of bond with the bastard. She'd already agreed to have sex with him. Hell, it wasn't as if he didn't attract her, at least on a physical level. Slowly, she stood and turned on the light. There was a small mirror on the back of the door; it reflected a face red and puffy with tears. She scowled at her reflection, disgusted with her coloring. Why did she always have to look blotchy when she cried? It wasn't fair.

Of course, better blotchy than dead, she reminded herself. It was more than her friends on Hector Prime had going for them, and more than she would have had if she hadn't escaped Transit Three. No matter how mean Jerred might be, she didn't doubt for one moment that the station guards would have been meaner.

She opened the door, intent on going to the fresher to wash her face. He was there, sitting on the floor in the corridor looking up at her. His face was cool and hard, no trace of emotion in sight, but he stood quickly and reached for her. She shot him a look of pure ice, and he pulled his hands back, and tucking them behind his back.

"Are you all right?" he asked stiffly. "I regret the harm my people did to you and your friends. I wanted to give you a nice dinner, to try and make some sort of peace with you. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

"It's all right," she said, feeling tired. "You didn't know. Can you please answer one question for me, though? Were you on Hector Prime? Were you one of them?"

He shook his head.

"No," he said. "I had nothing to do with it, although that hardly makes a difference at this point. They're still dead."

"A lot of people are dead," she replied, sighing heavily. "I guess we need to blame the Emperor and the Saurellian Council for that. You aren't on the Council, are you?" she asked suspiciously.

"No, I have nothing to do with them," he replied, startled. That emotionless mask slipped for a moment, and she had a burst of insight. He used that combination of emotional blankness and his scarring to hide himself from everyone around him. How interesting... And effective. She never would have guessed there was a man capable of compassion within him, but there was no faking his concern. He cared that he had hurt her.

"Would you like to finish dinner?" she asked softly. "If the Saurellians and the Imperials can manage to hold a truce, shouldn't we be able to?"

"Yes, I think so," he said. "May I escort you to the galley?"

He held out one arm gallantly, as if they were in a vid about the Imperial Court. She reached out and took it. When he seated her this time, the mushroom dish was gone. The wine was still there, however, and within moments he placed a plate of something covered in a thin, speckled glaze.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's *kvana*, in a Beloni pepper glaze," he said slowly. "It's kind of my specialty. At least, when I can get the *kvana*."

She shook her head, wondering how he'd gotten *kvana*. Then she took a bite. The meat was tender, flavorful without being too strong—perfectly balanced by the sweet glaze. After a moment her tongue began to burn, and she took a sip of the wine to cool it off. The strange shiver of sensation it caused wasn't unexpected this time, but it was still startling. The stuff seemed to go straight down between her legs. She looked at him speculatively, wondering if it was doing the same thing to him.

He really was quite an attractive man.

They ate dinner slowly, keeping their conversation light. When they were done with the *kvana*, he brought her a small cup of flavored ice, to "cleanse her palate." She was on her third glass of wine by that time, and feeling more than a little silly when he followed the ices with a platter of greens, cheeses and fruits, many of which she had never seen before.

He also opened a new bottle of wine, this one much lighter and fruitier.

"So, where did you learn to cook like this?" she asked as they moved slowly out of the galley into the living area. At some point he had turned the garden program on in there, too, because they were still surrounded by the soothingly natural sights and sounds. Now, though, the lights had dimmed, as if to simulate evening.

"I learned to cook from my parents' cook," he said as they sat down on the low couch. "She was an amazing woman, a refugee from the Imperial Court. She loved exotic foods."

"Where did you grow up that you could get stuff like this?" she asked. "I thought Saurellia was pretty out of the way, kinda primitive."

He burst out laughing. She leaned her head against his shoulder, and his arm wrapped around her. She snuggled into his warmth. It was amazing how nice he could be when he wasn't actually going out of his way to be an ass, she thought drowsily.

"We are a bit isolated," he said finally. "But I hardly think that we're backward. Saurellian customs and lifestyles tend to be simpler than Imperial customs, but that's not a bad thing. For example, we don't have to keep billions of slaves to support us. I may be crazy, but I find that to be rather civilized of us."

"Well, you've got a point there," she said softly. "Although I've never lived anywhere that had many slaves."

"Really?" he asked. "What about Transit Three? Did you know that nearly 30 percent of the population there is slave?"

"What?" she asked, startled. "Where are they all?"

"Most of them live on the lower levels," he said softly. "They're the ones who provide the 'transit' of cargoes. Just out of curiosity, do you know what your friend Vetch does for a living?"

She sat up and looked at him.

"He runs cargo," she said.

"What kind of cargo?"

"All kinds," she replied, confused. "It just depends on where the money is."

"Often, the money is in slaves," he said. "They generally ship them with an assumed mortality rate of twenty-five percent. On his last run, Vetch lost thirty percent because one of his heat exchangers blew out. He still made a profit, though. In fact, he left some of it behind for you as a tip."

She sat back, feeling sick. "I didn't know that," she said finally.

"Most Imperial citizens don't," he replied. "Of course, the Empire hardly goes out of their way to publicize it, but slavery is the backbone of their economy."

"What about Saurellia?" she asked. "What's the backbone of your economy?"

"Some would say fighting," he said slowly. "At least for men like me. Almost all of us leave home to work as mercenaries sooner or later. But very few Saurellians hold slaves."

"It is illegal?"

"On Saurellia it is," he said. "But it's just one planet within the federation. There are hundreds of others where slavery is legal. We do have economic sanctions in place to discourage it, though."

"I'm sure that's a great comfort to the slaves."

"This isn't going well, is it?" he asked finally. "I really don't want to fight with you anymore, Giselle."

"Why not?" she asked softly. "Honestly, why should you care? You have complete power over me—I've agreed to do whatever you want. Wasn't that the plan?"

He fell silent for a moment, and then spoke again.

"Yes, that was the plan."

"So why all the worry?" she asked softly.

"Because I don't want to fight with you," he said simply. "I don't want to force you, either. When I thought you were a whore, I thought I could just pay you and everything would be all right. But I know now that you aren't a whore, and to be honest, I'm not sure it would make a difference if you were. It just doesn't feel right like this."

"Does this mean you don't want to have sex with me?" she asked.

He gave a low, humorless laugh. "No, that's not what it means."

He reached over and took her hand in his. For a moment she wondered if he would lay it across his lap, repeating the crude gesture he'd made at Manya's. But instead it carried it slowly to his mouth, turning it so her palm brushed his lips.

"I find that I just want to be near you," he said after a moment. He kissed her palm softly, and she could feel the sensation singing down along her nerves. Between her legs there was an answering twinge, as if her body had just been waiting for him to make a move. He kissed her palm again, and then slipped his tongue out just enough to trace one line across her hand.

"It's amazing to me," he said. "We came from worlds that are thousands of light years apart, yet we're made exactly the same. Same hands, same little wrinkles, same desires."

"It's why so many people have faith in the Goddess," she said lightly. "Because no matter the distance between the human worlds, we all stay human. We're tied together by our genes and our heritage."

"Are we?" he asked. "I'm not so sure about that sometimes. Saurellians are different than most humans, you know. We can't mate outside our species."

She froze, and then carefully pulled her hand back from him.

"What the hell is going on here?" she asked, confused. "Call me crazy, but licking each other's hands seems sort of like a prelude to mating. I've seen you down there, and you looked human enough to me before."

He laughed, and then pulled her close again.

"I meant mating to have children," he said. "I'm sorry, that did sound kind of strange. Saurellians can only mate with other Saurellians, and then only with a life mate. Unfortunately the Goddess hasn't seen fit to grace us with enough women to match our men. Makes things a bit awkward for people like me."

"People like you?"

"Men without a life mate," he said. His mood seemed to change, and he turned to her, looking deeply into her eyes.

"This has been a very serious evening," he said. "That's not really what I was looking for. How about you?"

She shook her head, and then laughed a little out of nervousness. He constantly surprised her.

"No, not really," she said. "But to be honest, I rather suspected we'd just have sex. We've already done more talking than I was anticipating, that's for sure."

He stood suddenly and pulled her to her feet.

"Talking isn't getting us anywhere," he said. "Let's dance."

She looked at him, eyes wide.

"You do realize that you're an enormous man who looks like a killer and who wears black leather, right?" she asked.

He nodded his head slowly, and then grinned at her. "It's an image I cultivate," he said. "Helps me get women. But I can still dance."

"All right then," she said, rolling her eyes at him. "Are we going to have music for this dancing, or are we expected to sing?"

"I think music would be in order," he replied, eyes sparkling. "Jenna, play us something good. Try the harvest festival recording."

A swell of lively music burst into the room, and he grabbed her around the waist. She didn't know the steps, but after a moment it didn't seem to matter. He danced her across the room in giant, leaping strides, and she burst out laughing.

"You lied," she gasped when the song ended. She could hardly catch her breath, and she clung to him, giggling. He looked down at her, smirking.

"How's that?"

"You said you could dance," she gasped, and he swung her around.

"Well, I didn't say I could dance *well*. Jenna, let's have something slower next."

A new song welled out from Jenna's hidden speakers. He pulled her close and they swayed together. Finally, she looked up at him and spoke.

"I think this is the weirdest date I've ever had," she said.

"Thanks," he replied, dropping his head to kiss the tip of her nose. "It's just my way to trying to make myself memorable."

"Are you telling me that this is all deliberate, all part of your great plan? Because I don't believe that for one minute."

He winked at her, and then pulled her head back down against his chest. She sighed, and snuggled into his warmth. He was so big, so strong. She could feel the strength in his arms around her. His chest was hard with muscles, but still warm. He smelled good, too. Like leather, and *man*.

"Why do you wear leather?" she asked quietly. "It's nice, but it's not what most spacers wear."

"I like how it feels," he replied. "It's natural, reminds me that humans belong on planets, not space stations."

"Do you live on a planet, then?" she asked. "I thought you lived on this ship."

"Unmated men my age don't stay on planet," he said after a long pause. "I guess it's a reminder of what I could have had, in some ways."

She stopped dancing and looked up at him. His expression was distant, and a bit sad. She didn't like it.

"Why don't you kiss me?" she asked.

He looked startled, then smiled again. He lowered his head slowly to hers, and then his lips touched her. They were firm but still soft, and they danced across her mouth with a self-control that did nothing to hide his strength. Then he turned his head to one side, and his lips opened across hers, deepening the kiss with an intensity that made her sag in his arms. His tongue pushed into her mouth, and she knew that for all his restraint earlier that evening, there could be no denying the depth of his need. They might have been back at the hallway in Manya's. His arms wrapped tight around her body, pulling her belly against the hardness of his groin. He grew against her, and his tongue plunged into her again and again. There was no doubt what he was trying to communicate to her—he wanted to be inside her, to take her with an intensity that was frightening.

It was the most incredibly sexy thing she'd ever experienced.

She'd been with men before, but not like this. There had never been the sense that they would die without her. The urgency of his every touch, the feel of him as his hips pressed against her—it was almost too much. She wanted to scream, scratch, even bite at him. To *do* something to release some of the tension that was building in her body. But she couldn't—her entire body was held motionless by his, his mouth dominating her totally.

After an endless kiss, he pulled his mouth back from hers and she opened her eyes unsteadily. His face was flushed, and his scar had deepened to a deep, dark red.

"Giselle, would you be willing to join me in my cabin this evening?" he asked, the formality of his words at complete odds with the embrace they'd just shared. She took a deep breath and replied fervently.

"Oh, yes."

Chapter Six

He swooped her up in his arms, laughing—he could hardly believe how much her answer meant to him. Most of his women in the past had been paid for, and they always said yes. He'd never worried before now whether a woman actually meant it.

She laughed as he carried her down the hall. He loved how her curls bounced, loved how she wiggled against him, wrapping her arms around his neck and holding him tight, as if she actually *enjoyed* being held by him. When they got to the door, her mouth was too tightly attached to his for him to give an open command, so he bumped at the plate with his hip. Nothing.

Pulling his head away from hers, he muttered, "Damn, I can't seem to get anything to go right tonight."

She giggled as she slid down his body. Her hand snaked around to the front of his pants, cupping his erection lightly. "At least one thing seems to be doing just fine," she muttered.

He slapped at the doorplate and it slid open. Together they stumbled into the small room, and he gave mental thanks to the Goddess that he'd opted for a full size bed. He'd never anticipated anyone to share it with, but he'd figured the extra sleeping space would be worth sacrificing some living space.

She ran her hands over his chest, clawing at his shirt and pulling it open. Then her hands were rubbing across him and she licked his left nipple fiercely. He shuddered, and pushed her back with a gasp. Her knees hit the bed and she went down. He followed her down, mouth gripping hers as his hands frantically scrabbled at her clothing. Her hips thrust up at him, and he could feel his own hips answering her rhythm. Every little movement sent the fabric of his pants scraping against his cock, and for a moment he thought he'd explode right then and there.

He had to do something, or there would be a repeat of his humiliation in the hostel.

He gripped each of her wrists with his hands, and brought them together over her head. He sat up, and she whimpered, gasping for breath.

"Why are you holding me prisoner?" she asked. "What did I do to deserve this?"

The look on her face was so indignant that he couldn't help but laugh.

"I think you need some specialized attention before we go too much further," he said gravely. "But for some reason, I tend to forget that whenever you move."

"Hmmm..." she replied with gravity matching his own. "But how are you going to give me that kind of specialized attention if you're busy holding my hands prisoner over my head?"

"Well, I was thinking I might tie you up," he said thoughtfully.

"No!" she shrieked, bucking against him, giggling uncharacteristically.

He transferred both of her wrists to one hand, then reached down and tickled her stomach with the other. She shrieked again, and twisted against him.

"Truce!" she cried out. "Truce! You're breaking our truce!"

"Well, do you have any suggestion for how I should deal with this dilemma?" He asked. "You obviously can't be trusted not to wiggle."

"What if I grip the top of the bed with my hands?" she asked hopefully. "If I promise not to let go, then you don't have to tie me up."

"Well, that would leave me free to have my wicked way with you," he said seriously. "All right, we'll give it a try. But if you don't keep hold, I'm going to have to tie you up. Remember, this is for your own good."

She laughed and nodded her head. He let her wrists go free and she twisted, turning both hands so she could grip the edge of the mattress.

"So," she said archly. "Here I am, spread out at your mercy. What do you plan to do with me?"

He schooled his features into a grimace, barring his teeth at her. He knew he looked fearsome. "I'm going to take wild, passionate advantage of you."

"You hide behind that scar way too much," she said suddenly. "You can't fool me any longer. You're a nice man, and you aren't going to hurt me."

"You talk way too much," he said, his expression darkening. "I'll need to do something about that mouth of yours."

Before she could reply, he lowered himself, covering her mouth with his. He kissed her deep and hard this time, pushing himself into her mouth the same way he wanted to push his lower body into hers. Damn, she was so soft and hot and open. Touching her was almost more than he could stand, but he'd be damned if he'd let her go.

He slid one hand down the front of her body, flicking at the tabs that held her jumpsuit shut. When he had enough of an opening, he slipped his hand in, tracing it across her stomach. He could feel her flinch against him, both on her skin and through her mouth. His fingers wandered down into the patch of hair between her legs. She was even hotter down there. He slid his fingers along her labia, dipping into her opening to catch some of that moisture, and then rubbing it up across the erect button of her clit. She jumped against him, and he lifted his mouth from hers to smile at her.

Her face flushed red again, and he leaned down to kiss one particularly big freckle on her chin.

"I like these little dots," he said. "You look cute as hell."

She tried to wrinkle her nose at him, but he wiggled his fingers again. She gasped, eyes closing and heaving her hips against his fingers.

"I don't like being called cute," she muttered after a few more gasps. "I think the word you were looking for is 'Goddess'."

He laughed again, and then kissed another freckle. She was trying so hard to look upset with him, but every time he twisted his fingers her entire body heaved with pleasure. He kept moving his fingers as he kissed across her chin and down the length of her neck. He nudged her jumpsuit aside with his nose, burrowing down and kissing the crevice between her breasts. Then he nudged the fabric aside to kiss up the slope of her breast.

He found the nipple in a moment, a large, pink peak of flesh that quivered in anticipation of his touch. He licked it once, twice, enjoying the sight of it as it tightened further. She muttered something, but he ignored it, fascinated by her nipple as he first blew across it and then licked it.

He turned his attention to the other side, deciding to kiss each freckle along the way. There were sixty-two of them, he discovered. Of course, it was hard to count because her body kept jerking as he worked her clit. But it was worth it, because by the time he finally reached the other nipple she moaned and gasped as if she were in pain.

He played the same game with the other nipple before starting down the length of her torso toward her stomach. There were another 153 freckles along the way to her belly button. She almost jumped off the bed when he stuck his tongue in it, and her muttering grew louder.

Her clit hardened beneath his fingers, and he could tell that she was getting close to her orgasm by the fluids collecting between her legs. He pushed two fingers up inside her opening, stretching her and prepping her for his cock. There was nothing more wonderful than the moment when a woman swallowed his length whole. Just the thought of pushing his cock inside that hot opening was enough to make him grind his hips against the bed, and for once second he considered simply pushing her jumper off and thrusting into her. She was ready, he could tell from the little noises she made and the way she gushed against his hand. He could bring her over the edge with his cock in seconds.

But he held back, reminding himself that this time was for her. She'd earned a little consideration. So he steeled himself as he kissed lower, using both hands to push her jumpsuit down her shoulders. Her hips lifted to help him, and he slid the clothing down her legs. He followed the fabric to the floor, kneeling between her legs and hooking them over his shoulders.

He leaned forward, inhaling her scent, and then touched the tiny, hard knot of her clit with his tongue experimentally. Her legs clutched him closer and she moaned. To tease her, he pulled back a bit and blew on the stiffened nub. He flicked it once with his tongue, and then flicked it once more. Then he started laving it slowly, stiffening his tongue and swirling it around her clit slowly and deliberately.

Her entire body clutched and stiffened again, and he increased his pace. She was like a wonderful dessert, something to be savored and suckled. She bucked against him, and he had to clamp his arms around her legs to hold her still for his ministrations. She muttered something in a guttural tone of voice before her hips twisted and she

exploded around him. He felt her orgasm in her legs and between his lips, her body falling limp.

He raised himself and sat down behind her. Her expression was sated, filled with pleasure and smug in a way that he would normally associate only with a feline.

She rolled her head to one side and looked up at him.

"Damn, that was good," she said in a low voice.

"Am I forgiven for the other night?" he asked softly.

She laughed a little, and then shook her head.

"Nope," she said. "Not before I get a couple more like that one. You're talented, Captain."

He laughed, and fell down on the bed. He'd be more than happy to give her a few more like that one, providing he got some relief of his own along the way. He was about to rupture.

He lay next to her, unwilling to make the next move. He wanted to jump on her, take her fast and hard. Doing that would wipe out everything he'd accomplished, though. He needed her to understand that he could be a compassionate lover, not just the kind of man who spent himself like a boy. Her pleasure mattered to him; he'd prove that to her, even if it killed him in the process. He closed his eyes, listening to her breath come slowly beside him. Then her hand touched him and sensation curled through his body.

She ran her fingers along his arm, her touch so soft and gentle that he wondered for a moment if he imagined it.

He could feel each little hair standing up, and then her fingers lifted, just grazing the tips of those hairs rather than truly touching his arm. He pushed his arm toward hers hopefully.

She seemed to understand, because she gave a low laugh and then her hand grasped his arm more firmly. He felt the bed shift as she sat up. She pulled his arm up above his head, then grasped his other hand and did the same to it.

"Now it's your turn to hold your hands still," she said in a low voice. He shivered, following her instructions willingly. He started to open his eyes, but her fingers grazed across his lashes.

"No peeking," she said. "I think that this time is for me—you've already done your damage here."

He shook his head in denial, but he did as she asked. If it involved her touching him, that was good enough. He didn't need to see her so long as he could feel her. He clutched the edge of the mattress with both hands, holding himself breathless as he waited for her to make her next move. It came a moment later when her weight shifted again.

One leg slid over his, and then she straddled him. He could feel the heat of her body cradling his cock, and cursed himself for not taking off his clothes earlier. Then

again, that had probably been for the best. If he'd been able to feel her bare skin against his, he would have lost it.

Still, this was torture.

She wiggled on top of him, grinding her pelvis down over his. He pressed back up at her, for the first time realizing how cruel his little game had been. Having her so close, feeling her touch him without the chance of touching her back was maddening. He wanted to grab those soft, rounded hips and thrust up into her so high she screamed.

Instead, he simply lay there trying not to whimper. Each movement pressed her heat against him. Each twist of her pelvis imitated the dance he wanted to perform so desperately he thought he might explode. Then her fingers pulled open his shirt and he thought he'd died and gone to hell.

For a moment she stilled, and he couldn't breathe. If she didn't touch him he would die. If she touched him it might be just as bad. His cock was so hard he thought it might split. Worse yet, he might explode on her again. Fuck, he thought in disgust. He should have jacked off first. At least that way he wouldn't be like a teener in heat. Then her fingernails touched his chest and he forgot to think altogether.

She trailed them down the length of his chest, moving between his nipples toward his belly. She trailed them across the rippled muscles of his abdomen, and he twitched. She flattened her fingers across him, and then massaged him lightly, rocking back and forth across his cock at the same time. He shifted uncomfortably, trying to find some relief. Just as it became more than he could bear, she lifted her fingers and grew still.

Her weight shifted once more, and he felt her hair brush across his chest. He imagined what she would look like leaning over him. Hair dangling, breasts just above his flesh, nipples hard and ready for him. He gasped at the thought, a sound that turned to a moan as she nipped his right nipple sharply.

"No peeking," she reminded him. Her tongue darted out to lave the small wound. He shivered, and let his head fall to one side. The temptation to look at her was too strong. He knew without asking that if she caught him, he'd be sleeping alone that night.

After a moment her hot little tongue lifted. The cool air hit his nipple and it tightened. Something flicked across it – her finger? He moaned again.

"You're going to kill me," he muttered after several long seconds of teasing.

"Tempting," she said lightly. "But perhaps a bit premature. I haven't figured out how to fly the ship by myself yet."

"You'd better save me, then," he said softly, thrusting his hips up at her. "If I have a stroke you'll be all alone out here."

She laughed, and then lifted herself enough to scoot down his body. Her clever fingers worked at the fastening to his pants, and then he felt the cool air hit the length of his erection.

Before he could say anything, she shifted again and sheathed herself suddenly on his length. After all the slow teasing, the sudden shock of her heat was enough to make him cry out. She seemed to enjoy his shock, squeezing him tightly with her internal muscles. Then she stilled, seated on him with her hands braced against his chest.

"So, what now?" she asked.

"What kind of question is that?" he asked back. He twisted beneath her, vainly trying to create some friction between them.

She laughed, deep and low, then pulled herself up and abruptly seated herself again.

"It's a question of technique," she said. "Do you want hard and fast, or long and slow?"

She punctuated her question with brief demonstrations and he nearly exploded on the spot.

"I think fast and hard is probably the best at this point," he managed to whisper. He clutched his hands more tightly into the mattress. Everything in his being cried out at him to grab her, clutch her tightly and roll her beneath him. He wasn't used to giving up power, in bed or out. Oblivious to his internal struggle for control, she rocked back and forth across him, each movement tight and controlled. He bucked his hips up at her, wanting more, but every time he started to move she stilled.

So he concentrated on holding himself as still as possible, gritting his teeth as she slowly stroked across him.

She was hot and wet around him—had been from the beginning—but he could tell she was getting more excited as she moved. She seemed to grow wetter and hotter over him, and after a while her movements became less controlled. Her fingers clutched his chest tightly before she started riding him in earnest.

Perhaps she'd intended to go long and slow, but soon it was clear she had as little control over her body as he had over his. She moaned and gasped each time she sheathed him. He could feel the tension spiraling up within him, and every muscle in his body tightened in anticipation of his completion. He bit his lip to hold it back, realizing instinctively that she was only seconds away from her second orgasm.

He felt something warm and salty fill his mouth and realized it was blood. He didn't care. All that mattered was holding back the explosion threatening to overwhelm his system. His pulse roared in his ears, his fingers went numb from holding the mattress. Still he held his release back.

Again and again she took him. Suddenly she leaned forward, changing her position slightly. Then she screamed and her nails dug into his chest. She detonated around him with such force that he lost control. His hands flew to her hips, slamming her down over his cock as his seed flew out and up into her. Again and again he pulled her body against his, shuddering with the force of his release. Then he was spent, and he seemed to completely lose his ability to move. Simply breathing became an effort.

She lay down over him, her body cradling his as they relaxed. He wrapped his arms around her, marveling at how right she felt with him.

He wanted her to sleep with him.

It was ridiculous, of course. She had her own cabin for a reason. He knew he'd get tired of her, knew just how annoying it was to be trapped with a woman in bed. The main reason he paid prostitutes was to avoid such situations as this. That, and he was tired of women asking questions about his scar. It didn't seem to bother her at all, though, and he wasn't even sure how he felt about that. Why didn't it bother her? What did that say about the other women he'd been with?

What did it say about her?

He shook his head, wiping the thoughts away. This was crazy – he didn't want to think about things like this.

She shifted, and then yawned.

"I'm wiped, let's turn off the light and go to sleep," she muttered, rolling toward him and tucking herself against his side.

"Your own cabin," he muttered without thinking.

"What?" she asked, turning to look at him.

"Your own cabin," he said again. "I think it's better for both of us if you sleep in your own cabin. That way we won't get confused."

Any more confused, he thought darkly. He wanted her, wanted her to want him. But this was just a little more than he'd pictured. She rolled off the bed and stood stiffly. Every line of her body radiated affronted dignity, and he sighed in disgust. He'd just made a fool out of himself again.

She started to walk out of the room, and paused as she reached the door.

"You know, Jerred," she said. "You almost made me believe you're a human being tonight. Thanks for the reminder that you're not."

Then she stalked out the door and it slid shut behind her.

"Shit," he muttered to himself. He really was an ass. Hell, he deserved to sleep alone.

* * * * *

Giselle woke up the next morning feeling out of sorts, and more than a little hung over. That Imperial wine might taste pretty good, she thought as she examined the circles under her eyes, but it packed a hell of a punch. Or maybe that was just Jerred.

She'd never felt anything like what she'd felt with him last night. The man was incredible, a force of nature.

And a complete jerk.

"Remember, it's all about survival," she muttered to herself as she showered. He might be the biggest idiot she'd ever met, but at least he was pleasant to look at. More than pleasant. Every time she thought of last night her entire body clenched. Even if he was a jerk, being trapped with him on the ship could be a hell of a lot worse. He could cook, for one. And he was better in the sack than anyone she'd ever been with.

As a woman who didn't have many of options, things could be worse.

She finished in the fresher quickly then looked around her cabin. There was no way she'd be able to spend any extra time in here. It was simply too small. His cabin had been small, too. For a man who lived on his ship and enjoyed his comforts, he certainly hadn't put much time in designing his cabins. Then again, he was a smuggler. Perhaps the smaller cabins allowed him to hide more cargo.

Not that she'd ask.

Smugglers were just a step above pirates, and she didn't want to know the details of his little business operation. Only a fool asked questions like that. She pulled on another jumpsuit, realizing she needed to retrieve the other from his cabin. He really could have picked out nicer clothing for her, she thought in disgust. These jumpsuits were functional, but hardly attractive. Not that she wanted to attract to him, of course. But she always liked to look her best. It was just a point of pride.

She opened up her door and walked out in the main room. He was nowhere to be seen.

She stuck her head in the small library and then made for the galley. Hangover or not, she was hungry. The night before the lights and the holo-projectors had hidden things, but now she could see that his galley was unusually well stocked, especially for a ship. Among other things, he had a stasis chamber. She'd never seen one of those outside a restaurant, and she ran her fingers over it lovingly. She's always wanted one. But even when she'd owned her bar, she couldn't afford it. His smuggling business must do very well, indeed.

She rummaged through the cold storage, surprised to find a wide selection of foods. Within a few moments she had a nice plate of food ready, complete with what looked like fresh bread and fruits. She took the plate with her into the main room, and then sat down the couch and flicked on the vid screen.

"Jenna, please show our course and current destination," she asked.

"I'm sorry, but that information is not available to you at this time," the computer replied in smooth, modulated tones.

Great.

"Where is Jerred?" she asked.

"The Captain is in the cockpit," the computer replied. "Would you like me to call him for you?"

"No," she muttered, focusing on her food. She'd go and talk to him herself when she was done eating. She wanted to know where they were going and when they'd get

there. Time to start researching her new home, and figuring out whether or not she needed to find another ship to a better destination. She'd signed on to crews more than once to get transportation, and for the most part it wasn't a bad way to travel. Lots of work and crappy food, but she'd survive.

She finished up her breakfast and dropped the plate into the galley's cleaner. Then she marched purposefully toward the cockpit. The door was open, and she stepped in without asking permission. He sat in the pilot's chair, apparently waiting for her to arrive. Just looking at him was a shock—every time she saw him, his face surprised her. It was as if her mind's eye never remembered his scar, the way it slashed across his face and twisted his expression into a perpetual snarl.

Why didn't he get it fixed?

She almost asked the question, but managed to catch herself in time. Just because he was an ass didn't mean she needed to act like one, too.

"Where are we headed?" she asked, settling herself down in the co-pilot's chair as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

He turned away from her, studying his instruments for a moment, then he spoke.

"It's probably better if you don't know," he said finally. "I'm meeting with someone, and it really isn't relevant to your situation."

"Well, I think it's rather important," she replied. "I need to do some research, find out if it's a good place for me to settle for a while."

"It isn't," he replied coolly. "You'll need to stay with me a bit longer than just this first stop, I think."

"You may think that, but I'd really like to judge for myself," she replied firmly. "I agreed to give you sex in exchange for a ride. I didn't agree to become your indentured servant."

"I'm well aware of that," he said slowly. "But in this case, you won't be able to get off quite yet. We're meeting in open space—it's been planned for months. There's nowhere for you to go."

The way he said it was so smug, so annoying, that it made her teeth clench. Smug bastard.

"Maybe I'd rather go with whoever you're meeting," she said pertly. Instead of getting angry, though, he just burst out laughing.

"I sincerely doubt that," he said finally. "This guy makes me look pretty damn good. I think you'd be better off if you just stay out of sight while he's here."

"Afraid I'll like him better than you?" she asked.

"No," he said slowly, "I'm more afraid that he'll kill one or both of us to protect his identity. He only expects me to attend the meeting, and he's not a trusting kind of man."

She shivered, and fell back in the seat, unsure of what to say. Jenna chimed a warning, and he turned to her.

"We'll be jumping to hyperspace before too long. If you're going to stay up here, you need to strap yourself in."

She nodded, and reached around to grab the straps. This was always her least-favorite part of space flight. People who traveled a lot seemed to think it was no big deal, but the jump always made her feel queasy.

He seemed to go through the preparation checklist far too quickly for her comfort, as if he were barely noticing each of the details and checking the settings. He didn't even do the math himself, trusting Jenna to feed him the numbers. She added sloppy piloting to his list of faults, in addition to being a jerk. Hopefully he wouldn't get them killed.

That morose thought was the last she had before they twisted out of normal space with a gut-wrenching shudder. She reached to unhook her belt, wanting to go back to her cabin and lie down for a while, but he held out a hand to stop her.

"Go ahead and stay strapped in," he said. "We're only going to be in transit for about fifteen minutes, and then we'll be out again."

"Why?" she asked, startled. "We can't go very far in 15 minutes."

"That's the point," he said. "It's not far at all. We only left normal space to keep anyone from following us. It wouldn't occur to anyone that we're only going a few light years from Transit Three."

"Is this so we can meet your friend?" she asked. "The one you won't tell me about."

"Yes," he replied. They fell silent for several minutes, and she contented herself with watching the patterns on the ship's view screen. She knew they were mathematical calculations translated into colors by the computer, but they seemed like some kind of weird landscape after a while.

"Jenna, is that what you see through your sensors when we travel outside of normal space?" she asked abruptly. Jerred looked at her in surprise.

"Yes and no," Jenna replied. "They are a visual representation of the mathematical explanations I am creating to understand and govern our current state. Thus they represent the data that governs our position. But my sensors are not capable of providing information on that which is around us at the moment."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because I am not being presented with data I have the capacity to detect."

"Is that a fancy way of telling me that you can't see anything?"

"Yes," the computer said. "I can envision calculations that make our current state possible, but I cannot collect any data on that state."

"Why not?"

"Because the very act of attempting to collect the data changes the data collected," Jenna finally said after a long pause. "Thus any data I collect is, on a certain level, being created by my collection. Thus I prefer to project images of the theoretical data, rather than any I might attempt to bring in from the outside."

Gisele fell silent, wishing she hadn't asked. Jenna was a weird computer.

"We're ready to drop back into real space," Jenna announced after a brief pause. Even as she said it, another warning chimed, and the screen before them abruptly filled with stars.

And another ship. No, it was a space station. No ship was that big.

It was huge, much larger than anything Giselle had imagined. It bristled with armament, and several smaller ships hovered nearby. Not only could it destroy their ship like an insect, it could swallow them whole if it wanted to.

"I can see why you were nervous," she muttered to Jerred. "I'll stay in my cabin. No problem."

"Good idea," he replied dryly. "You might want to go there right now. I'm getting a message from them."

She stood and walked quickly out of the room. There was something about that station that she really, really didn't like. Perhaps it was the fact that it seemed to be pieced together from bits of smaller ships. She didn't doubt for a moment that they were pirates.

She was definitely in over her head.

Chapter Seven

Her self-imposed exile didn't last nearly as long as she would have liked. Not two hours after she had gone to her cabin, Jerred combed her and asked her to come out.

"Our guests want to meet you," he had said through the speaker, giving her no indication of what she should do or how she should act. She opened the door uncertainly and walked out into a situation that seemed tense at best.

There were five armed men in the room. She tried not to look at any of them directly, focusing her attention on Jerred instead. He stood as she walked into the room, holding out one hand to her.

She looked to his face for some kind of sign, but it was completely impassive. She took his hand and was strangely relieved when he pulled her against his side.

Then she looked at the man standing across from him and felt faint.

He was big—every bit as big as Jerred, although not as muscular. He had short, spiky white hair and his skin was so pale it hardly seemed to have pigment at all. His eyes were a piercing blue, light and icy. Tattooed across one cheek was a scarlet symbol, something she didn't recognize. It looked bloody and carnal. She would have thought him handsome if there had been even a hint of warmth or humanity in his eyes. There was none.

"Giselle, this is Josiah," Jerred said casually, as if they were at a party among friends. "He and I are business associates."

"I don't think Jerred intended for us to meet you," Josiah said, flashing his teeth in a parody of smile. "He seemed to want to keep you out of the way. Naturally, I protested. I wanted to see what kind of woman would make Jerred feel protective."

"Nice to meet you," Giselle said, feeling ridiculous. "But as you can see, I'm not really dressed for company. I really think it would be better if I just went back to my cabin until you finish your meeting."

"Our meeting is going to take longer than I initially anticipated," Josiah replied smoothly. She felt Jerred's arm tighten around her, and she tried not to betray her fear. She had no doubt this strange man would enjoy it if she bolted. His men watched her closely, hands hovering over their weapons.

"I'd like to invite you and Jerred over to my ship to share a meal," he continued. "I'm sure you'd enjoy the opportunity to meet more of my crew."

"We'd be delighted," Jerred said, his tone anything but. "I suppose it's too much to hope that you'll leave the ship untouched while we enjoy your hospitality?"

“Yes, that would be too much to hope for,” Josiah said. “I don’t trust you, Jerred. I’ve never made a secret of that. Now you’re on my territory and we’ll do things my way.”

She shivered, and Jerred squeezed her again, as if trying to comfort her. It was a nice gesture, but it wasn’t enough. She didn’t like Josiah, not one little bit, and she’d been a waitress long enough to trust her instincts where strangers were concerned.

“We’ll leave immediately. Jerred, would you like to take the lead?” Josiah asked politely. Jerred nodded tightly, then dropped his arm from her shoulder to take her hand. She gripped his fingers gratefully.

“How long will we be off the ship?” she whispered. Jerred shrugged, then smiled reassuringly at her as he led the way to the airlock.

It took them less than five minutes to make the short trip to Josiah’s station. She’d known it was big, but as they walked out of the airlock and down the corridor, she realized it was more than a small space habitat. It was a fortress. There were tough-looking men everywhere, all carrying weapons and eyeing them suspiciously. Several times she thought she spotted women, and even a child or two peering down from an overhanging railing, but it was hard to tell. The lighting was just a bit dimmer than standard.

They were escorted to a small, well-appointed room, and Josiah spoke again.

“You’ll find toiletries in the fresher, and I had them round up some clothing for you,” he said. “We’ll have dinner in an hour. I anticipate you’ll be with us for a while, so make yourself comfortable.”

He gave them a mocking bow, and then the door slid shut behind him. She turned to Jerred, and saw to her disgust that he had a bemused smile on his face.

“You can’t tell me this was part of the original plan,” she asked. “You said it would be a quick meeting. I don’t think this man intends to let us go!”

“That’s a distinct possibility,” he said softly. “At least at the moment. Don’t worry, though.”

“Easy for you to say,” she snapped, throwing herself down on the bed. She draped one arm across her eyes, and decided that Jerred’s ship really wasn’t so bad after all. At least he didn’t lock her in the cabin.

“What are we going to do now?” she asked after a moment. To her disgust, her voice wavered.

“I think we should just relax,” he said. “I would imagine we’ll be treated to a very nice dinner. Josiah likes to show off.”

“Lovely,” she muttered. “And after that?”

“If things go well, we’ll be done here within the next cycle and be on our way.”

“Do I want to know what will happen if things don’t go well?”

"You may want to be careful not to display too much personal loyalty toward me," he said after a brief pause. "There are always opportunities for people with Josiah. You may wish to examine them."

"Wonderful," she muttered, and rolled over onto her stomach. She thought longingly of Manya's, where all she had to think about was filling drink orders. Granted, good waitressing was a challenging job, but it was fairly straightforward. People ordered drinks, she brought them.

Nobody ever locked her up in the process.

She felt the bed depress as he came to sit next to her, and his hand rubbed slowly up and down her back.

"I'm sorry that you're caught in this," he said after a moment. "I really didn't anticipate that we'd be here this long, let alone that we'd be leaving the ship."

She tried to reply, but to her disgust a snuffling noise came out instead. She was crying, dammit. It wasn't fair. She burrowed her head in the covers, allowing him to rub her back steadily as the tears flowed. It started slowly at first, but the more she thought about everything that had happened to her, the more she felt like crying. Her home had been destroyed. She'd been forced to leave Manya's. Now she was stuck in a cabin that belonged to some damn space pirate, all because her "rescuer" had business with him. Things didn't look good. It felt good to cry, but she wasn't able to keep it up for long. Her natural pragmatism kept rearing its head, demanding that she get control of her emotions and figure out the next move.

After a while she sat up, wiping her face with her fingers. He sat next to her, his eyes filled with such compassion and concern that it hurt. Without thinking, she leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the lips. He kissed her back, a soft, gentle kiss that seemed to wash over her with infinite patience. It was enough to make her want to cry again.

She reached up her arms to deepen the kiss, but as she did so the chamber door slid open and a young woman stepped in. She looked past them at the wall, carefully ignoring their embrace, and held something out stiffly before her.

"Captain said to bring you this," she muttered. "To wear for dinner. Said your coverall was ugly."

Jerred stood and took the swath of fabric from her, and she turned to leave the room. Giselle waited until she was gone before she stood and joined him.

"Nothing like a vote of confidence from your captor," she said wryly. "What is it?"

"It seems to be a dress," he said. She took it from him and held it up. Her breath caught.

It was a lovely, filmy floating thing, made of some kind of shimmering fabric she didn't recognize. The color, a deep, emerald green, would provide the perfect foil for her reddish curls. It was generously cut, too, to accommodate her chest. A chill washed over her as she realized just how closely Josiah must have examined her body.

“You might as well put it on,” Jerred said softly. “He won’t be happy until you do. I would imagine you’ll look lovely in it. He has good taste.”

“I can’t decide which of you I like least right at this moment,” she muttered acidly. “I really can’t.”

She stalked off toward the fresher without waiting to hear his reply.

To her disgust, the dress did look lovely. Incredible, in fact. She’d never seen herself look so fine before. The fabric’s color was perfect for her complexion, giving her a soft glow like a goddess come to life. It did wonderful things for her chest, too. She’d always been well-endowed, but the cut of the dress celebrated the voluptuousness of her figure with a new level of comfort. Whoever had designed it was a genius, she thought. It supported her very well, yet left her feeling as sexy as if she were wearing nothing at all.

There were cosmetics in the fresher, and while she’d initially decided not to use them, she couldn’t help herself. She looked so good, dammit. She wanted to see the full effect. And she wanted to see what kind of effect it had on Jerred.

She didn’t have to ask him if he liked it. He froze as she walked back into the room, a terrible longing across his face.

“Do you like it?” she asked, knowing the question was rhetorical. She could see the bulge in his pants all the way across the room. He was hers – in that moment she knew he’d do anything she asked of him.

She sauntered over toward him, and laid one hand flat across his chest provocatively.

“I think we’ve got at least twenty minutes or so before dinner. Can you think of any way we might pass the time?”

He swallowed, and she gave a low, throaty laugh. No matter how mad he made her, seeing him like this made her want him. And she *did* want him.

She could smell him, see the pupils of his eyes widening as he looked at her. She let her hand slide slowly down his chest toward his waist, and felt the stiffening of his body beneath her touch. She leaned forward on her tiptoes, and offered her lips to him in a kiss. He didn’t need to be asked twice.

He took her mouth harshly, his lips ravaging hers and pulling out a response that was nearly uncontrollable. Her arms wrapped around him. He picked her up, grinding their hips together even as they stood in the center of the room. She felt his fingers working the fabric of her dress up, sensing the exact moment he realized she wasn’t wearing any undergarments. His mouth grew harder. His fingers clutched the rounded mounds of her buttocks, and she wiggled against him enthusiastically.

He pulled his mouth away from her and gasped.

“Lift me up just a bit more,” she whispered. He hardly seemed to understand her, so she took matters into her own hands, boosting herself up his body. “Now, open your pants,” she muttered. “I need you inside me.”

She clung to him as his hand reached past her. Anxious seconds were wasted, and then she felt his length springing free below her.

Instantly, she lowered herself down over him and they both moaned. His hands were once more firmly grasping her cheeks, supporting her as they stood in the middle of the room, fully connected. She marveled at his strength. Even that short period when she'd fully supported her own weight had been enough to strain her arms. He hardly seemed to notice that he held her. His hips rocked against hers, and she wiggled in response. An answering shot of sensation shimmied through her, and she rocked again. Intriguing what a difference their new position made. Parts of her body that had never been fully touched before were being touched. Each twitch of the hips brought new sensation...

She would have liked to stay still for a while, fully exploring this new position, but he seemed unable to control himself. Beads of sweat started to build up on his face, and his hips pressed against hers until she started moving faster. Up and down she rode, seating herself on his fully length with each movement. Every stroke brought her just a little closer to where she wanted to be. There was a tightness in her legs, a need for something that was becoming impossible to ignore. She tilted her pelvis inward, wanting to get closer, knowing it would be hers if she only waited a bit longer.

Each thrust seemed to bring him closer, too. She could feel it in his cock, so hard it had to be close to bursting. But she could also feel it in the rest of his body. He breathed harshly, and every part of him was rock hard from the strain. His motions became jerkier, and then he was moving across the room to back her against the wall.

"Can't get enough leverage," he muttered in her ear, thrusting into her with a new strength. His cock pinned her, grinding her into the wall with an urgency that was impossible to ignore. He thrust harder, and each time he hit home, his pelvis ground against her clit with an intensity that made her want to scream. She was so close, it seemed like each thrust would set her over the edge. There was a wire inside her body pulling tight, winding so hard that her heart pounded to keep up. If that wire didn't break she would die, smothered by the pressure from within. He thrust into her again and again, and then she screamed as he gave one final thrust, slamming into her with such force that she knew she'd be bruised in a few hours.

She screamed, clutching him to her body as she convulsed in orgasm. Her body gripped him so tight he couldn't move, and then she felt the hard, hot spurts of his seed within her. He moaned, leaning into her with his full weight, pinning her against the wall so hard he could hardly breathe.

They gasped for breath, and then a sound entered her consciousness.

A horrible, nasty, intrusive sound.

A lone, slow clap of the hands.

She closed her eyes as Jerred stiffened, then slowly lowered her so her feet could touch the floor. He shielded her with his body as she fumbled with the dress, doing his best to preserve her modesty.

When she was done, he fixed his own clothing. He stepped back from her, and she opened her eyes to find Josiah watching them with sick amusement. Behind him were two of his armed men, their faces carefully impassive.

“Nicely done, Jerred,” he said softly. “I see you like the dress.”

She caught her breath, wanting to tear into him, but Jerred grasped her arm in firm caution.

“Josiah, why is it that I’m not surprised you didn’t knock?” Jerred asked with an acid smile. “I assume that you’re ready for us to come to dinner?”

“Yes,” Josiah replied idly. “Follow me, I have a special treat for you. Wine from the Emperor’s own private reserve... I came across three bottles of it recently.”

Giselle’s breath caught. Did all pirates and smugglers have a direct line to the Emperor’s cellars, or had Josiah stolen the wine from their ship? She glanced up at him, trying to determine if his face gave any hint. She might as well have been staring at a stone – his expression betrayed nothing.

They followed Josiah through more corridors and several galleries. She was struck again by the size of the place, and the openness. She wanted to know more about this place, but something told her asking was a bad idea. Maybe when Jerred was all done with his meeting and they were safely away, he’d give her more information.

They crossed through a large, heavily guarded doorway into the most lavish set of rooms she’d ever seen. Women garbed in clothes every bit as fine as her borrowed dress bowed low to them as they walked through the rooms, until they finally reached a dining room. There were low, long tables on the floor, flanked by comfortable couches designed for lounging.

“We eat in the Imperial style tonight,” Josiah said, a strange smile on his face. She felt Jerred stiffen beside her.

Josiah walked slowly to one of the couches and lowered himself gracefully. There was a menace in his movements, as if he were a predator who had just found a particularly tasty piece of prey.

“Jerred and I have dined together like this many times,” he added. “Although rarely in such charming company.”

He gestured for her to lay next to him. She would have preferred to sit on one of the couches across from him, but Jerred shook his head in a barely perceptible manner.

Great.

She walked over to where Josiah had indicated and sat on the edge of the couch, wondering just what was the proper way to lie down and eat. She’d seen people eating like this on vids about the Imperial nobility, but never tried it herself. Seemed awfully decadent.

Still, she managed to get herself seated.

Jerred took the couch across from them with a grace that surprised her. She wondered again about the stock of Imperial wine on his ship. Surely he didn’t actually

move in Imperial circles? There were hundreds of billions of people on the settled worlds. Only four or five thousand had that kind of rank. What were the odds?

"I'm sure you'll enjoy dinner," Josiah said softly, and he rang a small bell conveniently placed on the table. Instantly, a number of scandalously clad women came in carrying platters of sumptuous food.

It was all she could to keep her mouth from hanging open. This really *was* like a vid. Soft music began to play as the women brought them food, a haunting melody that seemed somehow very sad to her. She took a sip of her wine. Even though she was prepared for its effect, the strangely erotic tingles it sent through her were startling in their intensity.

Once again, it seemed to go straight down her throat and between her legs. She shifted, feeling liquid pool there. Jerred caught her gaze from across the table and a wave of longing swept over her. Her muscles actually clenched, she wanted him inside her so badly. A memory of him slamming her up against the wall earlier made her clench her legs. The memory was so enveloping that it took her a moment to realize their host was speaking to her.

"How long have you and Jerred been...ah...partners?" Josiah asked, taking a drink of his own wine. She turned her attention to him, noticing for the first time how attractive he was. Of course, the disturbing tattoo faced away from her. She examined the feeling carefully, turning it around in her mind. Was she attracted to him? No, not really. She could appreciate him aesthetically, but the longing she felt for Jerred seemed to leave no room for other kinds of longing. It was a good realization. At least now she knew that whatever special properties the wine had, it wasn't solely responsible for the way she reacted around him.

"We've only been together for a few weeks," Jerred replied, surprising her. She turned her gaze back to him, catching a hint of a warning in his expression. For some reason he didn't want Josiah to know they'd met on Transit Three. Fair enough.

"That's right, it hasn't been that long," she said. "We met in a bar," she added awkwardly. Great. Now she sounded like a cheap floozy.

Josiah burst out laughing, and Jerred's face turned grim.

"In a bar?" he repeated, "How very unusual. I don't believe I've ever seen you pick a woman up in a bar, Jerred. Well, at least not a woman that you kept for more than a few hours. This one must be special."

He reached over and grasped her chin firmly, turning it so he could examine her face. She froze, disgusted by his rudeness. Her eyes flew to Jerred, but once again he shook his head very slowly.

"You see, Jerred knows better than to make me mad," Josiah said. "Well, at least better than to make me mad in my own stronghold. I would imagine under the right circumstances he'd kill me for touching his woman."

He dropped her chin and turned to smile blandly at Jerred.

“She’s not my woman,” Jerred said, his tone light. “I find it convenient from time to time to acquire a bed mate. Just because you’ve never seen me do it before, hardly makes it a novelty. I’m actually growing tired of her, though. Care to take her off my hands?”

He smiled back at Josiah, his expression every bit as bland as the other man’s had been.

“That’s a possibility,” Josiah said, taking another drink of his wine. “But we can discuss that later. For now, shall we eat?”

Jerred nodded. The women came forward again, this time filling small plates with delicacies from the different platters. One placed a dish covered in candied fruits and nuts before Giselle, and she took a bite resentfully. Damn, it was really good. If only it had been inedible—she would have enjoyed snubbing Josiah’s hospitality. Jerred also seemed to be enjoying his food. She noticed that one of the women has lowered herself to the floor beside Jerred’s couch. She was tall, svelte, and dark, with raven-colored hair that hung well below her waist. Everything that Giselle wasn’t.

The woman touched Jerred’s shoulders, and holding up small, particularly choice bits of food for him. He took them from her without sparing a glance for Giselle, and she felt her anger rising. She took another deep drink of the wine, and then set the goblet back down in disgust. The last thing she wanted was to feel more lust for the man. If he wanted to get laid, he could do it with the slut sitting next to him. The woman hardly wore any clothing at all, just a few strategically spaced scarves.

She felt a hand touch her shoulder, and she turned to find Josiah watching her closely. He smiled, and for the first time she thought there might be a spark of human emotion in those cold, icy blue eyes.

“I’m sorry Jerred isn’t paying closer attention to you,” he said softly. He ran his fingers across her shoulder lightly, and she felt a frisson of sensation uncurl from where he’d touched her. She pushed it back, unwilling to acknowledge it.

“You really don’t know him very well, do you?” Josiah continued softly. “He says you’ve been together for several weeks, but I would imagine it’s been less than that. Do you know what he is, for example?”

She ignored him, carefully taking another bite of fruit. The woman had come around Jerred to kneel in front of him, blocking her view of his face. What was he doing? Did he want her? How could any man not want her, Giselle thought, repulsed. The woman was perfect. Not short and round and spotted, for love of the Goddess. She wasn’t the kind of woman men met in bars. This was the kind of woman who could serve the Emperor without anyone thinking twice about it. She was definitely out of her league here.

Josiah leaned toward her, whispering in her ear.

“He’s a spy, you know,” he said softly. His breath brushed against her cheek and she shivered. The tip of his tongue flicked out, tracing her earlobe so softly that she

hardly realized he touched her at first. She quivered even as she willed herself not to respond.

"He pretends to be a smuggler, but he's really in service to the Saurellian government. If he knew you knew that, he'd have to kill you."

She tried to pull away from him, but somehow his arm had wound its way around her, holding her securely so she couldn't move. His insidious whispers continued.

"He's also a friend of the Emperor's," he said softly. "He's a double agent, and a darling of the Imperial court. He's bedded hundreds of women there. He fucks them until they give him their husbands' secrets. How much room do you think has in his life for someone like you?"

With that, he pulled away from her. Any hint of emotion or warmth was gone from his gaze.

She looked across the table to see the woman sitting next to Jerred, rubbing his back languidly. Her eyes, so deep and rich and brown, gazed back at Giselle. There were secrets in that gaze. Her touch on Jerred seemed possessive, as if she knew she owned him.

Or perhaps as if she'd touched him before.

"I'm glad you're enjoying Celia," Josiah said smoothly. He turned back to Giselle. "She's always been his favorite. He likes those tall, dark types."

Giselle gritted her teeth and nodded her head. What had she done to deserve this? All she wanted to was a decent, regular job so she could get back on her feet. This simply wasn't fair.

"Celia has been asking after you as well, Jerred," Josiah continued. "I promised her she could have you. Of course, that was before I searched your ship. I'm not sure you'll be capable of accommodating her once I'm done with you now. I really wasn't very pleased with what I found there."

Giselle looked to Jerred quickly, suddenly afraid.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he replied lightly. "There's nothing on my ship that should concern you."

"Oh, really?" Josiah said, his tone growing harsh. "I find that interesting, because in one of your encrypted databanks there was a detailed schematic of this station and the five largest ships in my fleet. Why would you want information like that, Jerred?"

She looked to him, waiting to hear his explanation. She had no idea why he might have such a thing, but she hoped to hell he had a good reason. Josiah didn't seem very pleased about the situation at all.

Jerred didn't reply, though. Instead he sat up and pulled Celia against him, whipping out a knife and holding it to her throat.

Everyone froze, and Celia gave out a low moan. The music stopped.

Then Josiah burst out laughing, and the music started again.

“Oh, Jerred,” he said. “I’m impressed by your play acting, but I really don’t care whether you kill Celia or not.”

The woman moaned piteously, and her eyes caught Giselle’s. All trace of seduction, superiority was gone now. They were just two women afraid of the men around them. Giselle’s breath caught her in her throat.

“Please, Jerred,” she whispered. “Don’t kill her. She doesn’t deserve to die, and I don’t think that Josiah cares about her at all.”

She knew she was right about that. As far she could tell, Josiah didn’t care about anyone. He wasn’t human—or at least he wasn’t human where it counted.

“Shut up,” Jerred said roughly. “You aren’t part of this. I don’t care what a little whore like you thinks.”

His words stung her at first. Then she thought back to his comment early, about making friends with Josiah. Was he trying to protect her? Or simply reverting to form...

She sat back, trying to think what to do next. Before she came up with anything, one of the guards came up behind Jerred and hit him over the head with the butt of his blaster. He dropped like a stone, and Celia scrambled away, clutching at her throat and screaming. A line of crimson blood dripped down between her fingers.

Josiah sat through it all, a smile on his face, his arm curled around her rigidly. After a moment he turned to her and spoke.

“Celia will be fine,” he said softly. “Jerred is a weak man. He never intended to hurt her. I know him well enough to predict that. You have a choice to make now.”

She nodded slowly, watching two men roughly lift Jerred’s body and haul him out the door. Where were they taking him? Would they hurt him?

“Are you listening to me?” Josiah asked softly. “I really think that you should. You’ll only have one opportunity to make this choice and I’d hate for you to miss it.”

She swallowed and forced herself to pay full attention to what he said.

“Now you get to decide where your loyalties lay,” he said smoothly. “You can either choose to stay with Jerred or you can choose to join me.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. “How would I join him?”

“In my prison cells,” he said. “I haven’t decided what to do with him quite yet. Normally I would set an example of man who betrayed me. It’s good for business. On the other hand, I’ve known Jerred for a long time and we’ve had many mutually profitable business dealings with each other. I can’t help but wonder whether I should let sentiment enter my decision-making process.”

She saw nothing resembling sentiment in his face. He was inhuman—she had more than enough proof of that. Poor Celia still clutched her bleeding throat as the women fluttered around her, trying to help.

“What about her?” she asked softly, nodding toward the woman. “Do you care about her?”

"No," Josiah said, cocking his head thoughtfully. "Not particularly. I mean her no ill will."

She thought for a moment, desperately considering her options. She'd told herself a thousand times that she hated Jerred, but seeing him attacked like that tore at her inside. She cared about him for some reason. There was no point in denying it to herself.

"What if I decide to stay with you?" she asked softly. "What do you intend to do with me?"

"Well, I suppose I'd discover what it is about you that intrigued Jerred so," he said softly, running one finger up along her cheek.

"He seems to genuinely care about you," he said. "He's lying when he says he's taken other companions. He's never done anything like that before, and I assure you that I make it my business to know such things. There's something different about you."

She closed her eyes, and then nodded. His fingers cupped her chin, a gesture that should have been comforting. But he gripped her just a little bit too tight, with too much calculation—she had a sudden flash of insight. He wasn't interested in her sexually. He played with her, just as he'd played with Jerred over dinner. Something else drove this man.

"What is it you really want?" she asked suddenly, opening her eyes.

He seemed surprised, and then a look of utter enchantment came across his face.

"Aren't you a cute little thing?" he said slowly. "Maybe Jerred isn't such a fool after all. I'm still thinking about what to do with you," he continued. "Why don't you run along and get some rest? We'll talk about it in the morning."

"I'm not tired," she replied. "I've only been up for a few hours. The ship's cycle is different than yours."

"Ah, yes," he said slowly. "You're still on Transit Three time. I had forgotten that. I'll get you nice room and you can read or something. I have other business to take care of right now. You'll be fine on your own, I assume?"

She nodded, still unsure of him. He hadn't answered her question.

He stood, turning away from her.

"Gwendlyn, please take Miss—what is your name again?"

"Giselle Canting," she said slowly, rising to her own feet.

"Miss Canting to her room," Josiah said. "Make sure she's comfortable, and give her full access to the station's libraries. I certainly wouldn't want her to get bored."

He nodded to her, then strode out of the room. She looked to Gwendlyn, who smiled and nodded toward the door. Everyone else ignored her.

Clearly, they didn't consider her a threat.

Chapter Eight

Sitting in the cell, waiting was maddening. He'd known the bastard was up to something from the first. He'd smuggled cargo and information past Josiah a thousand times and the man had never shown an interest in his ship before. Hell, half the time he was Jerred's partner in the smuggling deal.

He should have missed his scheduled meeting. Sure, it would have caused some hassle for his superiors, but keeping Giselle safe was more important.

The thought stopped him cold.

How was keeping Giselle safe more important than his mission? She was just a woman, one of thousands.

Even as he told himself that, he knew it was a lie. Giselle was far more than just any woman. Just seeing her lying next to Josiah had made his blood pump hard. He'd wanted to kill the man. He should have done it while he had the chance, he thought slowly. Although the guards would probably have killed them.

That thought brought him up short.

He couldn't imagine doing anything that might hurt Giselle. As long as she was alive, there was still hope for her. He needed to focus on that. The most important thing he could do was deflect Josiah's attention from her. If he thought she was just a whore, he'd ignore her.

Hopefully.

After a year or two she might find a way back to a station, find some new way to support herself. Giselle was strong and she was smart.

All she needed was a chance...

He kept repeating that to himself as he sat for hours. The cell was small and sparse. Along one wall was a metal cot; in the corner was a disposal unit. Nothing else. The walls were metal, the door smooth. Even the light was recessed into the ceiling and covered with translucent plast-crete. He tried to sleep, to conserve his energy, but it wasn't happening.

Finally, the door slid open, revealing two armed guards

"The Captain wants to see you," one of the men said as he stepped into the room. His partner held a blaster pointed at Jerred.

"Turn around so I can cuff you."

He did as he was told, wincing as the polymer strips went tight around his hands. He could feel his circulation slow immediately, and realized that he might lose his

hands if they were kept on long enough. Of course, that was assuming that he stayed alive long enough to lose them. For all he knew, he was headed to his own execution.

They marched him down the hall to small room. In it was a table, behind which sat Josiah. Standing behind him was Celia. Her throat appeared to be completely healed, and Jerred breathed a sigh of relief. He'd been afraid he'd killed her. He had heard them coming up behind him and moved the knife, but it had happened much faster than he'd anticipated.

"How are you doing, Jerred?" Josiah asked, something dangerously close to a smirk on his face.

"Lovely," Jerred replied, forcing himself to give a casual smile. "Although I have to say, I liked the earlier accommodations better."

"Well, it is lonely in these cells," Josiah said. "I understand you've gotten used to having company."

Jerred bit the inside of his lip, willing himself not to give in to temptation and ask about Giselle. She needed to live, and that wouldn't happen if she got stuck with him. He swallowed, and then spoke casually.

"I've been through worse. Why don't you tell me what you plan to do with me?"

"You are so direct that it's vulgar," Josiah replied. "I've always disliked that about you. Don't you want to know how your little Giselle is doing? Or rather, *who* she's doing?"

"She's a whore I found in a bar," Jerred said. "I'm more interested in what you have planned for me."

"What, not concerned that she knows your secrets?" Josiah asked archly. "You're slipping, Jerred. Safety first, remember?"

Jerred cursed himself internally. Josiah was right. His first concern should have been protecting the information revealed over dinner. Mission procedure called for someone like her to be terminated. But if he changed his story now, the bastard was likely to kill her just spite him. No weakness, he thought to himself. You can't afford to show any weakness here.

"I'm more concerned about what's going to happen to me," he said slowly. "My secrets aren't worth a damn if I'm dead."

"Now that remains to be seen," Josiah said archly. "I've found all kind of interesting information on your ship. Does Lord Drake Van'Ot know the Saurellian government has such an interest in him? I think that tidbit of information might be valuable to certain parties. Perhaps the Emperor's chief of security?"

"I would be wary of deals made with the Emperor's chief of security," Jerred said. "He's not a nice man, and he tends not to keep his promises of safe conduct."

"Oh, yes," Josiah said, offering Jerred a frown of mock sympathy. "There was that unfortunate little incident with your diplomats, wasn't there?"

"That little incident started an interstellar war," Jerred gritted out. He'd lost good friends on that trip. It still hurt to think about.

"Don't be naive," Josiah said. "The war was going to happen anyway. Suing for peace was just good form – the battleships were already in place."

Jerred tried not to think how true that might be.

"Think what you like to think," Josiah said slyly, as if reading his thoughts. "It won't change the ultimate truth of my words. I'm still left with my problem, though. I can't quite decide what to do with you? Should I let Celia decide?"

The woman in question gave a squeal of surprise and leaned forward.

"I'd take very good care of him," she purred. "Just let me have him."

"Would I still be alive after you were done?" Jerred asked softly. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't," she said lightly. "Ten minutes in the growth generator and I was fine. It's amazing what those nano-machines can do for a woman. Of course, I haven't forgiven you yet. It really was rude of you to treat me like that."

"I also haven't decided what to do with your little pet," Josiah said. "But I have a feeling I'll try her out before I do anything else. See what keeps you interested in her."

Jerred shrugged, trying not to think about it. It would be better if she went with Josiah. She had a better chance for survival, more of a chance for a future. And image of Josiah touching her with those pale hands ripped through his head, and he held back a shudder of hate. Seeing her in his arms would be better than seeing her dead.

"I think I'll send Celia back to your cell with you," Josiah said. "I'll be visiting with your friend. I'll let you know if I like her as much as you seem to."

Jerred forced himself to hold still. Josiah stood slowly and walked around the table. He walked up to him and leaned in close, whispering in Jerred's ear.

"Does she like it up the ass?" he asked softly. "She looks like she might. I hope you've broken her in well, because I like it rough."

Jerred closed his eyes, concentrating on his breath. *In and out. Think of something else.*

Josiah laughed deep and low in his throat, and then walked away. The guards came up and grasped his upper arms, roughly pulling him to his feet and out the door.

He could hear Celia following behind them, talking quickly.

"I want you to turn the lights down and bring me a torch," she said.

"That's a security risk," one of the guards said. "You'll have to make due with the lighting in the room."

"Just having me here is a security risk," she whined. Jerred winced. How had this woman ever been one of his favorites? She seemed so nasty compared to Giselle. Always wheedling and using her wiles to get what she wanted.

Giselle was open and honest.

He liked that about her.

When they got back to his room, they thrust him down on his cot roughly.

"Tie his arms and legs," Celia said. "I don't want him moving too much. And I don't want him to be able to get at me again. I have plans for him."

They laughed, and rolled him over on his back. He thought about fighting, but there didn't seem to be much point. It was better to conserve his strength for when he'd need it. If he had a chance to escape, he wanted to be ready. Although how he would manage to escape and rescue Giselle was beyond him at this point. One thing was utterly clear, though. He wasn't leaving without her.

Within seconds they had both his legs and arms secured. Celia sauntered over toward him, and he suddenly remembered why he had liked her so much. With her fully, pouty lips and her dusky skin, she had the power to arouse any man. Physically she was stunning. If only her eyes weren't quite so hard... The fleeting attraction faded. He wanted *Giselle*, with her fair skin and her silly little freckles.

Celia leaned in closer and smiled in what he imagined was supposed to be seductive manner. He watched her with something close to indifference, even as she reached a hand down to cup him through his pants. His cock hardened, but he felt strangely detached. Her body called to his on a purely physical level. He didn't want *her*—she disgusted him. Her fingers massaged him slowly. He shook his head, and spoke.

"I don't want to do this with you, Celia," he said slowly. "You're a beautiful woman, but this is wrong. You shouldn't touch someone who doesn't want to be touched."

"Oh, really?" she asked, her voice low and husky. "You say you don't want to be touched, but your cock is telling me something else. You're hard for me."

"It's a physical response," he replied. "It doesn't mean anything."

"I'll tell you what," she replied. "You go ahead and keep telling yourself that. I'll go ahead and touch you for a while. Then you can make your decision."

He shook his head again, but she ignored him, opting to kneel on the floor and slowly unclasp his shirt. He'd expected her to go straight for his cock, but she was too smart for that. Instead she started massaging his taut legs. He tensed, trying to keep her from getting to him. But her fingers felt good. They dug into his muscles, and he realized just how tense he'd gotten.

Her fingers dug into his tight muscles, and he felt himself relaxing. She was devious all right. She knew that if she went straight to his cock he'd be strong. But this sense of relaxation, this cool peace that washed over him—that was sensuality on a different level. He closed his eyes, trying to think of something else. All he could think of was her touch and how good it felt.

Then she leaned forward over him and he felt a tingle of sensation as her hair brushed against him. Her lips touched his chest and he gasped. She nibbled at him, occasionally letting her tongue flick out to touch him, but mostly nipping him with her lips. She came close to his nipple several times, but always pulled away, teasing him.

His nipples hardened, and he sucked in a deep breath. It wasn't supposed to be this way – he didn't want to respond to her. His own weakness disgusted him, but it did nothing to stop his reaction to her touch.

Witch.

She nibbled at him once more, her hands still moving lightly across his muscles. Finally, after what seemed like hours, she returned to his nipples. This time she touched them, flicking at them with her hot, wet tongue. He shivered, and when she reached down to grasp his cock firmly he couldn't help but groan.

Damn, he wanted inside her.

Instantly, thoughts of what she felt like leapt into his mind. He'd been with her many, many times. Her mouth was as clever as her tongue, and she knew how to ride a man. A night with her was enough to wring him dry, leaving him breathless. Once upon a time he'd looked forward to seeing her.

Giselle. He tried to think about Giselle, but imagining the buttery white smoothness of her skin didn't help. If anything, he grew harder. What if it were Giselle who touched him like this?

Celia gave a low, throaty noise as the thought sped through his mind, and he realized his cock was now rock hard and twitching in her hand.

Damn.

She pulled away from him briefly, and then his pants were open. He felt the coolness of the air on his member, and he opened his eyes. He wanted to look at her, to realize that she wasn't Giselle.

To see her for what she was.

The guards chose that moment to dim the bright light of his cell. She was gone in the darkness, no more than a shadow. For all he knew, she could *be* Giselle, his traitorous body whispered. He could give in, accept her touch. All he had to do was imagine that she was Giselle, and he'd get his release.

Her head moved lower on his body, and she kissed his belly slowly and deliberately. Her hand began to work up and down his turgid length. He shuddered as the hot, wet opening of her mouth moved lower, approaching his cock. He shivered in anticipation, desperately wanting her to touch him.

If she did, he would be lost.

She touched him.

He gasped, and for the first time thrashed against his bonds, trying to get away from her. Her mouth opened slowly around his length, sucking him like some kind of dreadful beast. He shuddered, lifting his hips and pushing up into her warmth. She moved slowly down his length, and then pulled back up. She was an expert, a professional, and in that instant it became all too clear to him that no matter what he might have thought, Giselle was no professional. When she touched him, it had been with an earnest desire. She hadn't been polished like Celia.

The thought gave him a new power, a new control over himself. He imagined Giselle again, this time as she looked over dinner. Her cheeks had been flushed, and her nose crinkled in laughter.

Adorable.

It was enough. He felt his desire fading.

"Celia, you can suck on me all you want, but it won't get you anywhere," he said softly. "I really don't have much interest in you."

She froze over him, and then started moving again. He was still hard, but now he felt no urgency, no desire to release. What she was doing felt good, but it had no meaning. He was in control again.

"Celia, your mouth is going to get sore," he said. "And so is my cock. Wouldn't it just be easier to end this now?"

She pulled away from him, stilling in the darkness.

"You're serious, aren't you?" she asked softly. "You really don't want to be with me."

To his surprise, she sounded almost hurt.

"You love her, don't you?"

He stayed silent, unwilling to betray himself. She was right. He loved Giselle. How had that happened?

Celia, of course, would report this conversation back to Josiah as soon as she left. He needed to do something.

"I don't give a damn about either of you," he said roughly. "Has it occurred to you that I simply don't want to fuck a whore like you any more? Goddess only knows what kinds of diseases you have. At least Giselle's clean. I had her checked before I bought her."

"She's your slave?" Celia asked, her tone incredulous.

"No," he muttered. "I simply contracted with her. An *exclusive* contract. Now the little bitch is fucking Josiah and doesn't seem to think she owes me a damn thing. Of course, my credits are already safe in her bank account..."

She didn't reply, and he held his breath. Did she believe him?

She stood abruptly and knocked on the door.

"Jakab, open the door for me," she said, her voice angry. There was no answer. "Jakab, open the damn door. I know you've been listening. You've probably been watching. Open the damn door *now*."

The door slid open and she left. Jerred lay alone in the darkness.

His hands and feet were losing some sensation, but he didn't think the ties so tight that he was in serious danger. His cock was still out. He imagined it would be embarrassing when they came to let him up. It didn't matter though, because he had learned something.

He loved Giselle. He smiled in the darkness. Now he just had to figure out how to escape and rescue her.

Chapter Nine

Giselle sat in her room, fuming. The more she thought about what had happened, the angrier she grew. Who was this man to play with people's lives?

Josiah had her taken to a very nice room, she couldn't complain about that. But she *could* complain about the lock on the door and the rather unpalatable choices he wanted her to make. At least she'd learned one thing. He wasn't interested in her personally. He wanted to use her to hurt Jerred, something that made her even angrier. Sure, the man was insufferable. Hell, he was even an ass sometimes. But something inside her rebelled at the thought of Josiah using her against him. If anyone was going to call him an ass, it should be her, she thought wryly. Josiah was just going to have to wait in line.

Thinking about him made her mad, too. He just assumed she'd dump him if a better prospect came along. He certainly didn't think that highly of her. Beside that, if Celia was any sign, women weren't too valued on this station. Despite what everyone seemed to think, she wasn't a whore; she was a barmaid. Big difference. But even if there were bars on this unfortunate chunk of metal, she had a feeling they wouldn't be hiring on the kind of terms she liked to see in her employers.

There was nothing else for it; she was going to have break them out of this hunk of junk. The thought made her laugh. After all, guards surrounded her. This was Josiah's station, and he clearly controlled everyone and everything on it.

But she had a few things going for her, she thought coolly. She was station-born and bred. As a child on Vega, she'd learned all about the little nooks and crannies that filled even the most carefully designed stations. She was still relatively small, and while her hair was noticeable, it wasn't so bad when she pulled it back in a braid. In fact, unless he had thought to restrict her access to food, she could probably even manage to order something up to color her hair with. If she got the chance to run, she wanted to be ready to take it. She wandered over to the data terminal, hoping against hope that his "access to the library" included data privileges. If it did, she was set.

She flipped on the terminal, opting to use the manual interface, and checked into the 'net. There was the library all right. She took a moment to look it over, surprised to see that it went far beyond the standard titles one might expect on a station of this size. There were the most recent vids and lits, far more than she'd seen in the data shops on Transit Three. Whatever else Josiah was, he must be an educated man. He and his people had an impressive library.

She chose an Imperial space opera at random and flicked it on to the large vid screen. Hopefully that would distract anyone who might be watching her. Of course, if they were monitoring her data terminal it wouldn't do her much good, but it would provide minimal cover against the casual observer. She flicked through data screens,

wishing she'd had more interest in the 'nets as a child. She knew there were ways to hack into them, to move around so that nobody could see what she was doing. Unfortunately, she didn't have a clue as to how one even tried something like that.

She flicked back out of the library, discovering that the station's public 'net was open to her. She started by calling up a map. It wasn't as detailed as she might like, but it did give her some general idea of how big the station was. She looked in the directory for a brig or jail, but nothing was listed.

She sighed – that would have been too easy.

Instead, she took a moment to look over the station. It seemed to be built along the lines of a giant cylinder, spinning on its axis to provide gravity. She winced. It was an ancient design, the kind usually reserved for habitats around planets.

She sat back and tried to think.

If the station was based on the habitat design, the exterior should be fairly uniform. Sure, there would be protrusions and hatches and such, but still, it was hardly likely that there were giant holes in it. That just didn't fit in with the design. In the map she'd found online there were several large, dark spaces that really should have been filled.

She decided they probably were filled, but just filled with things that weren't available to anyone who happened to access the general 'net. She'd bet her last credit Jerred was hidden there. There were four of them, two at each end of the station. Given that the whole thing had to be six or seven miles long, she decided it made sense to work on the assumption that he would be in one of the closer areas. It seemed to make sense that all prisoners would be held in the same general area. She probably wouldn't be able to travel the length of station without being caught, anyway.

Of the two holes in the map on this end, one of them seemed to be larger than the other. It was near several of the largest hangars, and also seemed to be centered in the middle of the barracks area. It would be a good, safe place to keep a prisoner, she thought, but perhaps an even better place to store weapons. And would they really keep a prisoner so close to potential escape? There seemed to be hundreds of small vehicles in those hangars...

The second hole looked more promising. As far as she could tell, their little banquet had taken place in or near it, and she decided that it was most likely Josiah's private "compound" within the station. In fact, her little room was either in it or very, very close to it. She thought about Josiah for a moment, wondering if he would be the kind of man to keep his prisoners close to him. He'd been playing with her and Jerred at dinner like a big, hungry *zarna*. The more she thought about it, the more it made sense. *Zarnas* enjoyed toying with their prey before killing it, just like Josiah.

If she was right, Jerred wasn't far from her at all.

She looked at the map one last time, then flicked back to the library. The less time spent accessing such dangerous data, the better. She spent another hour scrolling through the titles and watching snippets of different vids, then settled on a drama centered on a Saurellian priestess.

To her surprise, it turned out to be engrossing. The woman was torn, because her entire family wanted her to take some man as her "life mate," whatever that was. Giselle assumed some kind of marital bond. But the priestess didn't want a mate, she wanted to stay single and free at the temple. Finally, toward the end, the scorned life mate kidnapped her and took her to his estate in the mountains. Josiah chose that moment to walk in on her, and the vid fell silent. Giselle stood up and frowned at him.

"I was watching that," she exclaimed in disgust. "I want to see how it ended."

The normally stone-faced guards seemed surprised by her outburst. Reality hit her. This man held her life in his hands; she had no business berating him over a vid.

But the corners of his mouth twitched in amusement.

"Saurellian vids always end the same way," he said softly. "They fall in love and live happily ever after as life mates. It's their genetic heritage, did you know that?"

She didn't know, but she wasn't about to admit that. Jerred was only the second or third Saurellian she'd ever met; her entire life had been spent in Imperial space. But she'd be damned if she was going to ask him what he meant. He walked toward her, every step graceful and filled with that languid strength one saw in predators. She met his gaze as he came closer, until they were standing eye to eye. Or rather, eye to chest... He was far too tall for her to meet his gaze head on.

"Have you been enjoying our library?" he asked softly. "Did you find anything of interest in it?"

"It's pretty good," she said. "Is everything on your station as well-stocked as this?"

"Yes," he said softly. "I'm a man who likes his material comforts, and so do my people."

Having him so close was unnerving. She took a deep breath, then turned and strolled casually away from him. She had no idea if it would fool him or not, but she couldn't handle the intensity of being so close any longer.

"I've been thinking," she said as she walked. "About your offer."

"And?"

"I've made a decision," she replied, turning to stand behind a chair. She braced her hands on the top of it, grateful for the support, and leaned toward him. "I've decided that sticking with Jerred at this point is a losing proposition. I'd rather join forces with you, so to speak."

She forced herself to look up at him through her eyelashes, hoping that it came off flirtatious, rather than simply desperate. Fortunately she'd had years of practice. Customers tended to tip barmaids who flirted...

He gave her a cool smile, with just a hint of polite surprise in his expression.

"I thought you'd stick by him," he said softly. "I guess I misjudged you, Giselle."

Her stomach twisted, but she didn't let anything show on her face. Prick.

"I'm very pragmatic in my affairs," she replied softly. "I believe that a woman owes it to herself to make the most of what comes her way. Jerred was the best at the time,

but he's no good to me now. Something tells me you could be very good... Whatever is it you want me for? Correct me if I'm wrong, but sex doesn't have anything to do with this, does it?"

He started laughing, and she thought for a moment there was genuine amusement on his face. It was hard to tell.

"No, I'm not interested in sex with you," he said. "Please don't be offended, you're a lovely woman. I prefer not to take Jerred's leavings, however. I want something else from you."

"What?"

"Jerred, of course," he said, his voice low and intense. "The man is crazy for you. I have no idea why, and I can't see that there's any kind of future in it for either of you. He's a Saurellian, and they can only take life mates from among their own kinds. He's genetically incapable of having a meaningful relationship with you."

She nodded her head slowly, forcing herself to breathe as the knowledge hit her. She'd had no idea, and up to this moment she might have sworn she didn't care.

She cared, all right. The thought of him with another woman made her feel sick. Still, she'd rather he be with another woman than be dead. No question.

"That's not my concern," she said. "I'm more interested in what you can offer me."

"Survival," he said. "Perhaps some credits to take with you, and a ride to another space station? I imagine that would be all you could expect at the end of your affair with Jerred."

"So what do I need to do?" she asked.

"I'm going to send you to him," he replied softly. "I want you to tell him that you've stayed faithful to him, and that you've chosen prison to stay with him."

"He'll never believe that," she exclaimed softly. "He'll suspect something."

"Of course he will," Josiah replied. "But he'll want to believe. He cares about you, and he wants to be with you. That's obvious to me. All you need to do is feed his little fantasy."

"And what's the point of this game?"

"I want you to find out how he got my station plans," Josiah said. "I have a traitor on board. I could try and get it out of him through torture, but I doubt I'd succeed. His kind of have special training and other safeguards to protect them—this will be much more effective."

"All right," she said softly. "How will I report to you, though?"

"I'll bring you out for questioning, of course. Let me worry about the details."

"You've got a deal," she replied, smiling brightly at him. She had no idea what she'd do when she reached Jerred, but at least she was going to see him again.

That was about as close to good news as she could imagine at this point.

"Now, I'm very sorry, but we'll have to do something to make this look believable," Josiah said. The guards advanced toward her, one grabbing her arms and pulling them behind her back. The other punched her in the face. She screamed, and then fell abruptly silent as his fist hit her stomach. Again and again he hit her as Josiah supervised, his face stony and devoid of compassion.

* * * * *

How long were they going to leave him like this? Jerred wondered in disgust. He had been through worse, but still, there was something so seedy, so repulsive about lying flat on his back with his limbs tied and his cock hanging out. The door opened, and the light from the outside blinded him briefly. The light flicked on his in room, and he closed his eyes, squinting.

"I have a surprise for you," one of the guards grunted. "Your slut decided she wanted to be with you more than she wanted to stay and enjoy our hospitality."

The oaf thrust Giselle into the room.

She was still clad in the filmy gown she'd worn for dinner, but now the dress was torn in several places. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of her mouth, and bruises formed on her cheek. Jerred forgot his restraints as a bolt of sheer hatred and adrenaline shot through him. His entire body lunged toward the guard with every intention of killing him. Unfortunately the ties were far too tight, and he merely succeeded in twisting on the cot. The guard laughed.

"I've given her the keys," he said after a moment. "She'll let you up when the door's closed. I think you might need some time to cool your temper. But don't take too long. Until I feel like it's safe to come back, I'm not bringing either of you any food."

The man snickered again, and then slammed the door shut. Giselle slowly picked herself up from the floor where she'd fallen, and crawled over to the cot.

She looked like hell.

Her eyes were shadowed, and she had a startled look on her face. He knew without asking that she'd never been beaten before. There was sense of violation written across her face that no woman could fake.

"I'm so sorry they did this to you," he said softly. "Why are you here? If you'd done what Josiah wanted, you'd be fine. He treats his women well, you know."

She gave a haunted little smile. "He's not as easy to work with as you might think," she said softly. "I thought you were the better bet. What have they been doing to you?"

She gave his bare groin a pointed look, and he sighed.

"Torturing me, in a way," he said softly. "Josiah sent Celia to me."

He saw her breath catch, and she turned away quickly.

"I suppose you couldn't help yourself," she said softly. "She is beautiful."

“Not as beautiful as you are,” he whispered, trying to make every word sound as sincere as he felt. “All I could think about was you. I managed to fend her off in the end.”

“You mean you didn’t have sex with her?” she asked. “They taped you, Jerred. I know you did.”

“And how did the tape end?” he asked. “Did they show you that part?”

She stayed silent, then abruptly turned and started to work at the cuffs holding his left arm.

“It doesn’t matter, Jerred,” she said. “I’ve made my choice and there’s no going back. Do you think there’s any chance that we’ll get out of this alive?”

“No,” he said softly. “I don’t think we’ll get out of this alive.”

She sat back, forgetting the cuffs. “I guess I expected you to at least try lying about our chances,” she said after a moment. “You aren’t very encouraging.”

“Would you rather that I lie to you?” he asked, fighting back a laugh. “I really wish you hadn’t come here. I don’t want you dead, Giselle.”

She started to work on the cuffs again, managing after a few tries to free his legs. She crawled up to his head and attacked his hands.

“I don’t want me dead, either,” she said. “But I think it’s too late for that.”

She looked into his face and smiled at him. He only shook his head sadly at her.

“I only have one thing left to trade, Giselle,” he said softly. “That’s information. If I give him what he wants, he might let you go.”

She didn’t reply, focusing instead on the cuffs. He took in a breath to speak again, and she shook her head every so slightly.

He looked confused.

“What—?” he started to ask, but she cut him off, kissing him deeply.

Every time they’d kissed before, he had taken the lead. Not this time. She kissed him hard, like she really meant it. Like she’d wanted to for a long time, she realized. She could feel that attraction leap between them, but she tried to hold her libido in check. This wasn’t the time for sex—she needed to think. There had to be some way to get through this and get them out. She wasn’t ready to give up yet, and she wouldn’t let Jerred sacrifice himself for her.

Either both of them got out together, or they wouldn’t get out at all. There was nothing in the middle she’d accept. She pulled away from his mouth slowly, and he shifted awkwardly. He seemed dazed, and then he pulled himself together and flexed his arms, still cuffed above his head.

“I’d really like it if you’d finish the job,” he said softly. She shot a look down his body to his erect member.

“Which job?” she asked archly. “I can see a couple of things that need attention.”

He laughed at the joke, although the noise sounded a bit strained.

"As much as I'd like you to take care of other things, I think my hands need to come first," he said. "I wish this wasn't true, but I'm glad to see you, Giselle. Even if you are an idiot for coming to me."

"What a touching sentiment," she replied dryly, turning her attention to the cuffs once more. "You'll turn my head with talk like that."

He laughed and she joined him, feeling some of the tension ease. Things weren't looking good, it was true, but she was still glad to be with him.

Now she just had to figure out how they were going to escape.

Chapter Ten

Josiah sat on his bed, watching Giselle and Jerred on a large vid screen on his wall. He could see how much Jerred cared for her easily enough. Now if he could just tell for sure how she felt about Jerred. There was a tenderness in the way she worked to free him. And the kiss...well, that had been spectacular. Either the woman cared or she was an amazing actress.

The woman sucking his cock make a mewling noise, and he run his fingers through her hair absently as she moved over him. Karia was stunning, of course. All his women were. But even as she worked her mouth around him, he couldn't help but feel a bit of boredom.

How long had it been since he'd kissed anyone with the fervency he'd seen between Giselle and Jerred? He couldn't remember.

Karia took his soft caress as encouragement, and he let himself fall back among his pillows to enjoy. Her mouth worked up and down him steadily, each stroke sending streaks of sensation through his body. He managed to watch Giselle and Jerred through slitted eyes, although he no longer paid close attention to them. They whispered together, nuzzling like puppies. His guards were monitoring them, of course, and he'd be able to hear the playback later if they said anything of interest. Still, he liked to watch their faces. Maybe he was crazy, but he really did think the woman cared for Jerred.

He realized with a start that he was more than a bit jealous of his old friend. The thought disgusted him.

With a snort, he waved the vid off and turned his attention to Karia. Her long, curly black hair spilled over his stomach in a way that couldn't help but arouse him. He shifted his hips beneath her, and she wrapped her arms around his waist. He could feel his body pulling together, energy building at his center. His response was purely physical, his body reacting to hers the way men had responded to women since time began. Her mouth was hot and moist around him, sucking him deep within, and then pulling slowly back until he felt like screaming.

He didn't want to come in her mouth tonight, though. He wanted her beneath him—he wanted this time to be mutual. The thought startled him. He had been with Karia many times, and her mouth was definitely her best feature.

Still... if she came too, he had a feeling it would be a bit more like what Jerred and Giselle seemed to share. What would it be like to have sex with a woman who really cared? Karia didn't care—he knew that. But she was very good at pretending.

He reaching down and pulled her up his body. She came hungrily, her eyes large and brown and smoky. He pulled her across his chest, kissing her deeply and running

his hands down the smooth length of her back. She wiggled against him, all but purring in his arms, and thoughts of Jerred and Giselle faded.

He gripped her round, firm ass in his hands, pulling her close, and then slowly rolled her over on to her back. She seemed a bit startled but more than willing to go along with him. He kissed her again, this time rubbing the spot between her legs with his thigh. He could feel moisture there; her response wasn't feigned. He started kissing down her chin, and then followed the long, smooth line of her neck. She twisted against him appreciatively, her fingers curling into his shoulders.

He reached her chest, nuzzling the hollows between her soft, rounded breasts. Her nipples were hard, and he reached over to nuzzle them with his lips and tongue.

She growled.

He moved lower now, kissing his way across her stomach, dipping his tongue into her navel. She shuddered beneath him, and her nails dug into his shoulders sharply. The slight pain shot through him, and for the first time he felt a shock of real interest in her.

How jaded had he become?

She dug her nails into him further, and he moved lower. Her mound was smooth and shaved, almost unnaturally perfect, and he wondered if she'd had surgery. Not that it was any of his business; he hardly cared what she chose to do with her body. Giselle had never had surgery, he was relatively sure of that. She seemed to be utterly comfortable with herself just the way she was... He shook off the thought. He reached Karia's clit, a small, hard point of desire that called sweetly to him. He licked the tip, and then sucked the small organ into his mouth softly. Her fingers dug into him again, and he sucked harder.

The harder he sucked, the more she seemed to respond, until he realized that she liked it rough. This was a side of Karia that he'd never seen. He'd never followed her lead before, never tried to truly please her.

No wonder he didn't have a woman like Giselle; he was a selfish lover.

The thought threw him off balance, and he grazed her clit with his teeth. Instantly, he pulled back, but she sighed in pleasure and murmured, "Do it again..."

He did.

Soon he was nipping at her, taking care not to hurt her but growing steadily rougher. The new sensation was exciting. He felt himself getting harder, and suddenly it wasn't enough to simply pleasure her. He wanted to experience it with her. He pulled his head back and knelt to look at her. Her eyes were glazed, a strange little smile twisting across her face.

"What are you going to do to me now?" she asked, her voice almost taunting. "You want to play; I can see it in your eyes. I like to play games."

He watched her steadily for a moment, trying to decide what to do next. She seemed so sure of herself, so different from the deferential lover he was used to having

warm his bed. She slithered up the bed on her butt, and slowly leaned forward on her knees so she faced him.

She cocked her head, looking at him strangely.

"How far will you go?" she asked softly. "Would you rape me? Would you fuck me even if I screamed at you to stop?"

He smiled slowly. "Would you scream at me to stop?" he asked.

"No," she whispered in reply. "I wouldn't. There's nothing you could do to me that I wouldn't want you to keep doing."

Something about the way she said it, the intensity in her eyes, frightened him. It was too arousing, almost too much for him to comprehend. Nothing touched him any more, but the thought of chasing her did. He wanted to chase her, catch her, take her in the strangest ways he could imagine.

He felt a slow smile steal across his face. "Turn around," he said.

"Make me."

He nodded his head, holding her eyes as he reached out to grab her shoulders. He rotated her slowly, and then pushed her down roughly onto the bed. She wiggled her ass at him, and he slapped it lightly.

"Hold still," he said softly, allowing a touch of menace to creep into his tone. She shivered, and he reached down between her legs to feel her slit.

She dripped for him.

He fingered her for a moment, trying to decide what to do with her. She writhed, thrusting up at him and offered herself without thought.

"Lay your arms out flat," he said abruptly. "I want to see them above your head."

He leaned down over her, allowing his cock to rest against her ass as his chest touched her back. He reached out along her arms, feeling the smooth flesh and sleek muscles of her young, hard body.

His arms were longer, of course, which made it easy enough to grab the tasseled cord that held back the heavy hangings surrounding his bed. Within moments he had her hands tied. He was careful to keep the soft ropes loose enough to allow circulation, but they were tight. He felt her pull against them, and then felt the quiver run through her body as she realized she wasn't going to get free. Not until he let her.

He raised himself again, rubbing his hands against her back and digging his fingers into the muscles. He was careful to be gentle, working the flesh in a way that made her shudder in a new kind of sensual pleasure. Usually she gave *him* backrubs, he realized. It had never occurred to him to return the favor. His hands moved lower and lower on her body, grasping the globes of her ass and squeezing them tightly.

She wiggled at him again, and he squeezed tighter. This time his fingers left marks, and she moaned.

"More," she whispered.

Bemused, he slapped her. Her butt bucked up, and when he reached down to touch her slit again she was sopping. He slapped her harder, this time hard enough to leave a reddish mark.

She writhed harder, her ass bright red from his blows. His cock tightened painfully. It was time take her.

He reached down around her waist and roughly pulled her up into position. She struggled a bit, but her knees came up to support her weight. He positioned himself at the opening between her legs and abruptly thrust in, hitting home with the first motion. His cock was big, and it bumped against her cervix. She gasped and moaned, wiggling around as he impaled her. Normally he was careful to hold himself back, realizing that he was big enough to hurt a woman.

Karia liked it, though.

He slammed into her again, harder this time. He knew it had to hurt her, but she just pushed back at him, as if she wanted him to go into her body even harder. He reached down under her body and grasped one breast firmly, pinching it as he slammed down into her again. Her muscles spasmed around him and she arched back at him.

"More," she muttered under her breath, her voice rough. "I want more."

He slammed into her again and again, each time harder than the next. She pushed back at him, and he could feel her body growing tense. She was near her orgasm, and that was a good thing. He wasn't sure how much longer he'd be able to hold out. Her vagina was like an exquisite, painfully tight glove encasing him, squeezing him, milking him so hard it hurt. He heard the blood roaring in his ears, felt his heart pounding in a staccato.

She bucked against him once more, and struck with inspiration, he pulled himself up and slapped her ass one more time. Hard. She squealed and came. Her entire body seized, gripping him as if in a vise, and he exploded into her. Again and again his body pumped into her. Finally, spent, he collapsed on top of her. She lay still for a while, and then started testing the ropes holding her hands.

"Are you going to let me up?" she asked in a sooty voice. "Or am I just going to lie here under you forever? I think I could stand that if I had to."

He reached forward and loosened the ties. Normally he would dismiss her, but there was a sparkle in her eyes that intrigued him. He leaned in closer, as if to kiss her. She struck swiftly, biting his lip hard enough to draw blood. Once again, that new awareness came over him. It was as if he could feel again for the first time in ages.

"Do you like that?" she asked, her tone arch. "Because I do. I want to play with you in ways that redheaded girl couldn't even begin to imagine."

The image of Giselle in Jerred's arms leapt into his head one more time. He didn't want to think about them, about the bond they shared. Angrily, he leaned forward and took Karia's mouth harshly, grinding her lips under his, pushing her down again on the

bed. Her legs wrapped around his hips, pulling him against her body even as she dug her sharp nails into his ass. Pain seared through, sweet and cleansing.

“Do you think you’ll be ready for another round any time soon?” she asked in a whisper when he finally released her mouth.

He ground against her, feeling the beginnings of an erection. “Yes,” he replied softly.

“Good,” she said. “I want you long and hard, and this time I want it in the ass.”

He shuddered, taking her mouth once more. Jerred and Giselle were forgotten.

* * * * *

Giselle leaned against Jerred, enjoying the strong warmth of his body as she tried to think of some way to escape. She knew they were being watched, and almost certainly taped. She needed to find some way to let him know what was going on, but she didn’t want to tip her hand.

He wasn’t helping. All he had talked about since she arrived was how foolish she had been. She should have stayed with Josiah. She should have saved herself. She should have sold him out. Finally she’d told him not to talk to her at all.

Instead, he held her, softly nuzzling at her neck and causing all kinds of new problems. She knew all too well that anything they might indulge while in the cell was bound to amuse their watchers. As she felt his length grow against her leg, she almost decided she didn’t care. She wanted him, and every cell in her body sang out for her to mate with him. But she had a feeling Josiah would enjoy that a little too much, and she’d already provided him with far too much entertainment.

He made her think of those hideous insects that lived on Hector Prime. They wove a silky, sticky web, then hid themselves to one side and waited as other insects caught themselves in it. She had read somewhere that the creatures liked to eat their prey alive. Definitely similar to Josiah, on so many levels.

She felt exhausted. Jerred stroked a finger through her hair slowly, and the sensation soothed her until she was dozing. She slipped into a dream, blessedly free from worries for the moment. She and Jerred were sitting in the middle of a field of green grass. A child sat near them, several children, in fact. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew they were Jerred’s nephews. A woman came walking up to them, carrying two tall, cool glasses filled with water. She looked like Jerred—same strong features, same black hair, although hers was streaked with gray, lending her an air of authority and dignity.

She knelt beside them gracefully, and turned to Giselle with a smile.

“I’m proud of you, child,” she said. “You’ve been taking very good care of him. But I think it’s time for the two of you to come home.”

Giselle nodded at her, agreeing. Unfortunately, she couldn't remember how to get home. She opened her mouth, ready to ask the woman for directions, but one of the children called out. The woman's face creased with concern, and she turned away. Giselle tried to speak, but nothing came out. The woman stood and started walking away. Giselle wanted to get up after her, but Jerred's head was heavy in her lap. She looked down at him and saw something dreadful.

He wasn't sleeping—he was dead. Jerred was dead, and deep in her heart she knew it was her fault. She tried to move, tried to scream, tried to do anything, but she was frozen. The meadow faded around her, and then they were alone in space. She saw ice forming on Jerred's face. He was freezing, and when she tried to wrap her arms around him to keep him warm, they cracked and shattered.

She came out of the dream abruptly, a stillborn scream stuck in her throat.

Jerred lay beside her sleeping peacefully. She could hear his heartbeat beneath her head. He was fine. They were both alive. The cell door slid open, and Jerred came awake with a start. The guard looked down at them sullenly.

"The Captain is ready to see you," he muttered. "Stand up and turn around." he added, nodding at Jerred.

Jerred did as he was told, and Giselle watched as they slid yet another set of cuffs around his wrists. She must not have seemed dangerous to them, because when they led him out into the hall, they allowed her to follow, unrestrained. She felt panicky. Josiah wanted his information and she still didn't have a plan. She hadn't even managed to discuss the situation with Jerred. It wasn't good.

They walked down the hallways slowly to a small room. Josiah sat at a small table. Something about him looked different. She examined his face, and noticed a bruise across his pale cheekbone. There were several scratches, too. Had he been in a fight?

It didn't matter.

"I see you and your little friend have been reunited," Josiah said, his tone acid. He spoke to Jerred; her presence hardly seemed to register with him.

"You're a smart man, you know I have to kill you," he continued. "But I don't have to kill your slut. I can let her go. I've decided that maybe you care about her enough to try and save her."

Jerred didn't answer, and Giselle's stomach clenched. There was no good response he could make. If he convinced Josiah he didn't care about her, her usefulness would be over. On the other hand, if he agreed that he cared, the man would use her against him.

"I need the information," Josiah said. "I want to know where you got the plans for my station. I'll make this easy on you. You tell me who the traitor was and I'll let her live. You don't tell me and she dies. Slowly."

Jerred seemed frozen; then he spoke.

"I'll tell you," he said. "But I want proof that she'll be safe."

"I can't give you proof," Josiah said lightly, shrugging his shoulders. "You're just going to have to trust me to take care of her."

"I want her on a ship and out of here before I agree to anything," Jerred replied through gritted teeth. "A ship that doesn't belong to you."

Josiah shook his head slowly.

"You just don't understand, old friend," he said, his voice dropping to little more than a whisper. "You don't have any of the power here. I have the power, and you're going to do what I tell you. If you do, I'll let your friend live. If you don't, I'll kill you both."

Jerred stayed silent for a moment, apparently lost in thought.

"No," he said slowly. "I'm sorry, Giselle, but if I betrayed my secrets he'd probably kill you anyway, and lot more people would die. People every bit as innocent as you."

She came over to him and knelt beside him. She didn't want to betray herself by saying anything; she had no doubt that once Josiah realized she wasn't secretly on his side, he'd have no further use for her. But she understood. Jerred wasn't a perfect man, but she had to respect his desire to protect his people. Beside that, the deal Josiah offered wasn't good enough. She didn't want to go free without Jerred. It was either both of them or nothing.

"Take him back to his cell," Josiah said finally. "Leave the woman here. I want to talk to her longer."

The guards came forward, pulling Jerred to his feet. His eyes met Giselle's, and she could feel them pleading with her for forgiveness. She tried to show some of the love she felt for him in her expression, but she had no idea if he understood. Then he was gone, and she was alone in the room with Josiah and only one guard.

"Wait outside," Josiah said to the man. She stayed still until he was gone.

"You don't have any information for me," Josiah said slowly. "I reviewed the tapes. I don't think you're trying very hard, in all honesty."

"I haven't had a chance," she said, a trace of desperation in her tone. "You need to give me more time."

"Giselle, don't play games with me," he said, sounding weary. "I can tell you aren't going to do anything for me. In fact, I no longer need your help. I already know who the traitor is and I'm taking care of the situation."

She froze.

"In fact, I'm not quite sure what to do with you. I hate to kill someone as young a pretty as you are, but you aren't giving me many options, now are you?"

Her mind blanked, and she realized her time was up. He walked around the table and started slowly pacing the room. He used the silence to intimidate her, but instead it made her angry. Prick. Without pausing to think things through, she leapt at him while his back was turned. She landed on his back, wrapping both arms around his neck and holding on for dear life. If she could just hold on long enough he'd run out of air.

For endless seconds they thrashed together, fury making her strong. He might be bigger and stronger, but his strength flagged as she cut off his oxygen supply. He slammed her up against the wall several times. Fortunately, the room was built for interrogation and was fully soundproofed. After an eternity, he began to slow down and slumped to the floor. Then he fell unconscious.

She released him, knowing she only had seconds to take action. Behind the table were some storage lockers. She ran toward them, flinging one open and searching through it ruthlessly. She found a pair of the same cuffs they'd used to hold Jerred.

She ran back to him, slapping them on his wrists behind his back.

Smiling, she pulled the blaster from his belt. What a pompous ass. He'd been so sure of her that he hadn't had her restrained, and he hadn't even bothered to put his weapon out of reach. Served him right, she thought smugly.

She fumbled with the blaster, pressing one of his fingers to the lock so the safety would come off. The display flickered to life, and she noted with satisfaction that it held a full charge. She trained the weapon on his chest, and sat back to wait.

He woke up before long, eyes flickering open to find himself a prisoner.

"Bitch," he managed to whisper. His voice was rough, and she knew he'd have a sore throat if they managed to survive the next cycle. The thought gave her a savage pleasure; he should have to suffer some of the pain he'd caused them.

"We're going to go and fetch Jerred now," she said softly. "I hope that your people like you enough to try and keep you alive."

His gaze was cold; he didn't bother to respond.

"Up," she said. She watched coldly as he struggled to his feet. "Not as graceful now, are you?"

She came up behind him and placed the blaster's barrel in the center of his back.

"One move and I'll kill you," she muttered.

"If you kill me, you're killing yourself," he replied softly. "They'll take you out in an instant."

"If you're dead, I'll die happy," she muttered, surprised by her own bloodthirstiness. Wisely, he stayed silent. She marched him over to the door, and then popped the hatch. It slid open. The guard outside froze, his hand going to his weapon automatically.

"I want you to take out your blaster and drop it on the floor," she said. He looked to Josiah, who nodded.

"Do as she says," he ordered tightly.

The man did.

"Now, step away from it," she said. "I want you to go down the hallway in front of us. We're going to get Jerred out of his cell. If anyone tries to stop us, I'll kill your boss."

The guard nodded once more. He turned and moved down the hallway with slow, steady steps, hands held up. This man, at least, wasn't interested in becoming a martyr. That was good. They turned a corner and found another guard standing outside Jerred's cell. He, too, was ordered to drop his gun.

"Open the door," she muttered, feeling a trickle of sweat beading up on her forehead. It itched, and for a moment she found herself reaching up to wipe it off. Josiah tensed, as if to make a move, and she caught herself.

The door slid open.

"Jerred, I need you out here right now," she said in a firm voice. He appeared in the door. He must have been surprised, but he didn't show it. Instead he took in the situation with one quick glance. He reached down, grabbing the blaster off the floor.

"Hold out your hand," he muttered to the guard. The man did as he was told, and Jerred held the second blaster up to it, deactivating the safety. With a composure that frightened her, he took charge of the situation.

"Guards, in the cell," he said. They did as they were told. "Giselle, keep your blaster on Josiah. He's going to be our ticket out of here."

She nodded, thankful he knew what to do next. He looked up at the ceiling as if searching for something, and then he spoke again.

"I know you're watching us," he said slowly and clearly. "So I'm going to say this one time only. We're taking Josiah and we're going to return to our ship. I want a shuttle ready and waiting for us. I want all the corridors between us and the hangar cleared. You have one minute."

With that, he raised his blaster and shot at several small boxes mounted on the walls. She assumed they were sensors, although she hadn't noticed them before to check.

Jerred turned to her, a smile spreading across his face. "Thank you," he said, eyes softening. "Giselle, you constantly surprise me. I didn't think we'd get out of this one."

"You're not out yet," Josiah said dryly. "I think you may want to hold the celebration until *after* you escape. I wish to survive this little escapade of yours, so we should probably begin negotiations."

"You have nothing to negotiate with," Giselle said harshly, poking him with the blaster. "You do what we tell you."

"No, that's not quite good enough," Josiah said. "If I believe there's no way for me to get out of this situation alive, I have no motivation to work with you. Give me a reason to believe I'll live."

"We'll let you go when we get to our ship," Giselle said quickly. "I promise."

"No," Jerred said, leaning back against the wall. "We need to take him with us, at least for a while. Otherwise they'll just shoot us as soon as we leave."

"Bring an escape pod," Josiah said softly. "You can put me in it and jettison it as soon as you're out of our weapons range. They'll come and get me."

"Are you sure?" Giselle asked, snorting. "If it were me, I think I'd leave you to die."

"It isn't you," Josiah said coolly. "These people need me and they know it. They'll come and rescue me."

"It's a good plan," Jerred said. "Of course, you have to trust me to let you go."

"I do trust you," Josiah said softly. "You need me and we both know it. You won't kill me."

"Maybe *he* won't kill you, but I will," Giselle said in a menacing voice. "This isn't just about him, you know. You messed with me, too, and I'd like a little revenge."

"We'll spare your life," Jerred said, holding up one hand to calm her. "We all have something to gain from making this work. Are you with us?"

Josiah nodded his head. "We'll need to go back to the main corridor so I can give them orders," he said. "You've taken care of all my spy sensors in here."

"Lead on," Jerred replied.

* * * * *

Their escape went smoothly. True to Josiah's promise, his people cooperated. Nobody met them in the hallways and corridors as they made their way to the hangar. A shuttle, complete with escape pod, waited for them in one of the cargo holds. In less than half an hour they were headed away from the station as fast as Jerred's ship could move.

It wasn't fast enough for Giselle.

She sat in the living room with her blaster trained on Josiah. He watched her with a strange expression on his face, as if amused by her diligence. After all, he was tied up. Jerred had seen to that immediately. Still, she didn't trust him not to have some sort of trick up his sleeve.

He didn't try anything, though, and as soon as they were out of range, Jerred came down from the cockpit and freed him. He marched the man at blaster-point to the cargo hold, where he locked him into the survival pod. Seconds later it had been jettisoned, and they watched as Josiah fired the small navigational jets to turn back toward the station.

Jerred came to her and pulled her into his arms. For the first time in since they'd arrived, she let herself relax. Finally, she was safe again. She drew close to him, wrapping her arms around his back and simply leaning against him. There was a tingle of desire, of course. It seemed impossible to be around him without feeling something. There was something more, though, something deeper. Being with him felt right. Maybe it was only temporary, but as long as she had him, she planned to enjoy every minute of it.

Jenna made a chiming noise and announced an incoming message. Giselle looked to Jerred, confused, and he shook his head.

Holding hands, they made their way up to the bridge to listen to the message.

It was from Josiah.

"I'm hoping you get this, Jerred," the man said. "I'm in this blasted pod now, and I'm not sure what kind of range the radio has. I just wanted to tell you to jettison those two blasters you took from my station. They're no good, and I'd hate to have you die in a real fight because they don't work. I'm assuming I won't be seeing you for a while, so take care. Give my best to Nicolai, and remind him he owes me twice as much now. Oh, you might also want to tell him to find a new spy on my station. The old one is... indisposed, and I don't think she'll be feeding either of you any more information. Take care."

Giselle looked at Jerred, puzzled. "What did he mean, the blasters aren't any good?"

Jerred seemed amused, and started shaking his head. "The fraud," he muttered. "He wanted to let us go—he just didn't want his people to think he was going easy on us. The whole thing was a setup."

"You mean he never needed any information from you?"

"I think he did at first," Jerred said, looking thoughtful. "But not anymore, apparently. He found the spy on his own."

"I didn't tell him anything," she said softly. He smiled at her, and cupped one hand along her chin.

"Well, among other things, you didn't know anything to tell him," he said. "But even if you had known, I wouldn't doubt you. There's not one woman in a thousand who would have had the courage to do what you did for me."

She shrugged, feeling her face grow warm.

"Well, seeing as Josiah orchestrated the whole thing, I hardly think I have anything to be proud of. I did exactly what he planned."

"Don't be too sure about that," Jerred said softly. "He probably had several other plans in mind. I doubt he expected you to attack him. I would imagine that I'd have been given the chance later on. You definitely took him off guard."

She smiled, feeling some pleasure at the thought. "He certainly wasn't faking it when he lost consciousness," she said slowly. "I nearly choked him to death, I was so mad."

"I thought his voice sounded a little raspy," Jerred replied. "I can't say that I'm unhappy about that. He plays with people, and I have no doubt that if he hadn't found his traitor, he would have killed us. Just because he let us go doesn't mean that he's a nice man."

"Oh, there's no danger of that happening," she muttered. "So now what?"

He pulled her close to him, kissing her lightly on the lips. She raised both hands to his shoulders, and then he leaned down and picked her up, striding down the hallway toward his cabin.

"I've decided to have my wicked way with you," he muttered, a gleam of appreciation in his eyes. "Don't bother fighting it, I won't let you go."

"Do you see me fighting?" she asked archly. "Walk faster."

* * * * *

Josiah drifted in the pod, waiting for his people to come and get him. It would be another thirty minutes at least before they arrived. He'd waited to send for them, wanting to make sure that Jerred and Giselle had enough time to get away.

He wondered for the thousandth time if he was going soft. For so many years he'd had to fight for his survival, and he'd never hesitated to kill an enemy. Still, it was hard to think of Jerred as an enemy. They'd worked together for many years, exchanging information that benefited them both. He'd known Jerred was spying on him—known it for the past year at least. But until now he hadn't worried about it. He knew Jerred, and could predict what he'd do with the information he stole.

This time had been different, though. He'd known it if from the minute he'd seen his old friend. Something had changed for him, and now he knew what it was. Giselle. It was a pity, really, that he'd had to take them prisoner at all. Fortunately, his own people had ferreted the spy out, allowing him to set them free. Now he could say he got the information from Jerred, protecting his sources on the station.

He twisted in the small capsule, wishing he'd thought to have it stocked with a bottle of his favorite wine. The wait bored him, and he didn't like thinking about Jerred and his new mate.

It reminded him just a bit too much of all that was missing in his life.

Chapter Eleven

Giselle leaned up on one arm to look down on Jerred. He slept the sleep of the totally exhausted. His lovemaking the night before had been fierce, as if he needed to pull her inside him and keep her there.

She understood; she felt the same way.

It still amazed her that they were alive and free again. There were so many unanswered questions about him that she longed to ask. It was a bit startling that even after all they'd been through, they still had no more than a temporary arrangement and that neither of them had any hold on the other. If what Josiah had said was true, they never would have anything more than a temporary arrangement.

The thought was almost too horrible to bear—yet she also knew with certainty that she wouldn't go back. She was glad that Jerred had walked into Manyá's, and glad that he'd fixated on her. She wished things could have progressed more naturally than they had, but still, her life was better with him than without.

She leaned over and kissed his shoulder, enjoying his texture. She let her tongue steal out to lick him. He tasted salty, which made sense. He'd certainly sweated enough the night before.

He stirred and groaned as she rubbed her hands lightly over his chest. Little bumps popped up across his skin. She licked his nipple, lapping at it for moment before pulling away.

He turned toward her, pulling her into the circle of his arms. "I missed you," he said softly, eyes still closed.

"When?" she asked, giggling. "I've been here all night."

"I missed you while I was in that cell," he said, his voice serious. "I can't believe how lonely and sad I was when I couldn't be with you. I thought I'd never see you again."

She turned in his arms until her back was against his chest, and then snuggled down into his warmth.

"I felt the same way," she said softly. "I wouldn't have left there without you. I couldn't even imagine it."

"You should have," he said. "But I'm selfish enough to be glad that you didn't."

They lay quietly together for several minutes, neither speaking. She felt the length of his morning erection against her butt, and for some reason it comforted her. He was all hers, at least for now, and she intended to enjoy every minute of it.

She lifted her leg and rubbed it over the top of his. Her foot twisted so she could caress the back of his calf, and he pressed against her insistently.

His hand stole down her body to the crevice between her legs. He found the little bud of sensation between her legs and pressed against it softly with one finger.

She sighed. "I love it when you do that," she said. "Don't stop."

In answer, he rubbed the tip of one finger back and forth against her as he nuzzled the back of her neck. Whispers of sensation crawled down along her spine. His hips started to press rhythmically against her butt, the length of his cock rubbing back and forth between her cheeks. She tightened them and he gave a sigh of pleasure. His fingers dropped from her clit to the opening between her legs and he slid two fingers inside.

She shivered. They went in easily enough, she was drowning in moisture.

"Are you ready for me?" he whispered in her ear. She nodded, not wanting to speak.

He lifted her leg ever so gently, then she felt the head of his penis poised at her opening. He nudged it just a little, just enough to stretch her, then his fingers returned to their slow massage of her clit. That light pressure against her slit was strange, but incredibly tantalizing. She pushed back against him a bit; she wanted more. Instead he held her there, nudging at her without penetrating. Shivers ran through her and the pressure within, already high, grew higher. His fingers started to move faster as he whispered little kisses against the back of her neck.

She pushed back at him again, wanting to feel the slow stretching that came with penetration. He refused to move, although his fingers changed their stroke. Now he ran the rough tips up and down the length of her enlarged clit, each brush sending shudders through her. She was close, but it wasn't quite enough.

"I need more," she whispered, "And harder."

In answer, he pressed hard with his fingers and moved slightly faster. Still, it wasn't enough. She squirmed against him—this was nothing more than torture disguised as foreplay. She wanted him inside her body, *needed* him to fuck her. Instead, he simply toyed with her.

The first small shudder moved through her. Still, he wouldn't give her more. She flirted with the edges of her orgasm, unable to reach it. Not unless he moved faster.

"Jerred," she muttered. "I swear I'm going to die if you don't fuck me right now."

His laughter washed over her, the warmth of his breath wreaking havoc with her skin.

"Giselle, I love how you talk," he said. "I never have to play games with you, I always know what you're thinking."

With that, he flattened his hand across her pubic bone and thrust into her abruptly. He slid all the way home, filling her so suddenly that she thought she might explode. At the same time, his finger pressed against her clit. Hard. It was enough. She shot over the edge with a shudder, internal muscles squeezing him so tightly it must have been painful. Stars exploded behind her eyes. She felt him continuing to thrusting into her;

felt the pressure against her clit, his lips on her neck. All of it seemed to happen at a distance, though. For one shining moment she simply hovered in space, marveling at the gift she'd been given.

In that instant, she knew she loved Jerred. Loved him with her whole heart, her entire being. She fell back toward reality. He was moving in her quickly now, and his breathing had become harsh. As if he could read her mind, he squeezed her tight with his entire body, as if to reassure her that he was still there, still thinking of her.

Her clit, still incredibly swollen from the first orgasm, responded to his touch again. He rubbed it back and forth, instinctively finding the right motion to drive her wild. Pleasure sang through her veins and she whimpered. His arms grew tighter, and she felt him growing even harder within her body. He was close; she knew it. Still, he held himself off and continued to move with her. He was waiting for her to come again, she realized.

He squeezed her once more, this time shifting so his hips were tilted even further into her, allowing him to hit a new spot within her body. The head of his cock rubbed over it once, twice. The third time she convulsed in his arms, the orgasm so sudden and hard that it surprised her. Every muscle in her body clenched, including those within. He gasped something in her ear, and then he exploded into her body. Hot jets of his seed filled her. His hips pumped, spurting his fluid deep within, and then he was finished, and they grew still. After a long silence, he nuzzled the back of her neck once more, then dropped little kisses along it until his lips reached her ear.

"Good morning," he whispered.

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Jerred smiled as he expertly flipped the rounded circles of batter sizzling in the pan. The small cakes, fried and drizzled with sweet, sugary syrup, had always been one of his favorite breakfast foods. A memory of his childhood home sprang to mind. They had had a cook, of course. His parents had been too busy to prepare meals, and they had never quite understood why he liked to spend so much of his time in the kitchen. Still, they had never discouraged him from cooking.

He remembered the first time he'd fixed breakfast all by him himself. Or rather, all by himself with the supervision of the cook and the assistance of two smiling kitchen maids. They'd carefully followed his directions, "helping" him pour out the batter, reminding him when to pull each dish out of the oven. Under their direction, he'd carefully laid out each dish, added sprigs of sweet, fresh herbs, and popped them into the stasis boxes with the kind of flourish only a six-year-old boy could pull off. When he'd gone into the breakfast room and seen all the food he'd prepared laid out for the family, he had stood tall. His parents had been so proud of him, their oldest son. His

father had gone so far as to remind him that all they had would be his some day, provided he married.

His hand stilled, and the memory turned sour. He could only marry if he had a life mate.

He allowed himself to think of Giselle for a moment, toying with the thought of her as his life mate. He could take her back to Saurellia, introduce her to his family.

They could have children together.

Of course, such a thing was unthinkable. Sure, there had been one or two lucky men who had found their life mates outside of Saurellia, but for every one of them there were millions who hadn't. And as much as he liked Giselle, he couldn't imagine that she might be his life mate. She didn't fit the profile.

For one thing, she was too independent. Life mates had to make decisions together, live together, and build a future together. She hardly seemed interested in that. He thought about the way her eyes lit up when she talked about rebuilding her business. She wanted to have a bar—she didn't want to help him manage his family estate. He pictured her and his mother together and winced.

They were from two different worlds. Both wonderful in their own way, but what could they possibly have in common? *They're both kind, decent women who seem to care for you*, an insidious voice whispered from within. *They would find common ground, given a chance.*

He pushed the thought back. He had no right to keep Giselle with him, despite the fact that every instinct in his body cried out for him to take her back to Saurellia. Forcing her to go with him had been wrong—he could see that now. In his blind determination to have her, he had almost killed her. He should be ashamed of himself.

Mulling these dark thoughts, he put all the food together on a small tray and carried it into his cabin. She still slept, curled up in a little ball in one corner of his bed. He sat down beside her. Her long, wavy red hair snaked across the pillows like a living thing. He reached out, curling a bit of it around one finger. He'd never seen a woman on Saurellia with hair like this. She'd cause riots among the young men when she went out on the street, he thought, a smile stealing across his face. He'd have to watch her carefully, or some young buck might try to steal her away.

Of course, if she were his life mate she'd fight her way free and come back to him. He remembered the cool gleam in her eye as she'd threatened to kill Josiah. He might try to rescue her, but he'd have to move quickly. She was excellent at rescuing herself. He rubbed one finger across her cheek and she stirred. She looked up at him and gave a sleepy smile.

"What are thinking about?" she asked softly. "You seem too serious."

"I was thinking about Saurellia," he said slowly.

"Oh?"

"I can't really explain it," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I brought you breakfast. Made it myself, straight from my mother's recipe. Or rather, my mother's cook's recipe," he added wryly.

She sat up, and his eye caught on the perky mounds of her breasts. The nipples were softened, reddish circles in the center of each generous swelling. Here and there those adorable little freckles dotted her. Without thinking, he licked his lips and reached one hand toward her.

She batted it away, grabbing for the food instead.

"Oh, no you don't," she said, laughter filling her voice. "I'm starving, and I need nourishment to keep up my strength. We can play later. Now, what's this about your mother having a cook?"

"Well, my mother has a cook," he said, confused.

"I heard that," she replied around a mouthful of cake and syrup. She rolled her eyes at him in disgust and stabbed another forkful of food. She held it up in the air and gestured at him with it.

"I mean, why did she need a cook?"

"Well, because most of her time was spent running the estate," Jerred said. "My father was away much of the time, so she was in charge of everything. It hardly seemed fair to ask her to cook, too."

"You have an estate?" Giselle asked, her eyes popping.

"No, my parents do," Jerred said, reaching out with one finger to wipe a droplet of syrup from her lip. He raised it to his own, and thought with some smugness that not even the sugary sauce tasted as good as she had the night before.

"I have this ship," he said. "Family lands only pass to sons who have life mates on Saurellia, and I don't have one."

"So it's true, then?" she asked thoughtfully. "Josiah told me that you wouldn't stay with me, that you couldn't even if you wanted to."

Her tone was lighthearted, but a serious look had come into her eyes. He sighed, trying to think of what to say. Honesty was best.

"Yes, that's true," he said slowly. "I wish you could be my life mate, Giselle, but that's just not possible. You're not Saurellian."

"You mean nobody on Saurellia has ever found a life mate outside his or her own race?" she asked softly.

"A few have," he said slowly. "But even those women seem to have Saurellian DNA in them. It's very rare even then, though."

"Oh," she said, falling silent. He felt uncomfortable watching her now, as if he were simply taking advantage of her. It was better not to talk about things like this, he thought in disgust. He didn't want to ruin what time they did have together with maybes.

"I'm going to go and get cleaned up," he said finally. "Just put the dishes and tray in the galley when you're finished, and I'll take care of it."

"How long are we going to be traveling?" she asked as he stood to leave. "And where are we going from here?"

"We'll be ready to make the jump out of normal space in a few hours," he said. "From there we'll go to Davidian, where the Saurellian military headquarters are located. I need to make my report."

"What about me?" she asked softly.

"Don't worry," he replied, his heart clenching. "I'll take care of you. I'm due for a long leave. From there we'll go wherever you want and take a nice, long vacation together."

"And after that? Are they going to send you out on another mission? Would I be able to go with you, or will that be it for us?"

He shook his head slowly, not wanting to think about it.

"Let's deal with that question when the time comes."

Chapter Twelve

Davidian Station was huge. Bigger than anything Giselle had seen before, and she'd done a fair amount of traveling in her life. It looked like a small moon orbiting the remote planet. In fact, it had once been a moon, according to Jerred. Hundreds of years of building and hollowing out its core had riddled it with tunnels and rooms; now it was little more than a shell for Saurellian military operations.

These were Jerred's people, the men who dared challenge the might of the Empire.

It was a bit intimidating.

"We'll be leaving this ship here," Jerred said quietly as they docked in of many hangars. "They'll need to go over it carefully for the information encrypted in the databanks, and to make sure Josiah didn't leave any nasty little surprises on board. I'll requisition another ship for my leave and we can take it wherever we want."

She nodded, trying not to think about what would happen after that leave was over. It was pointless.

"How long will we be here?" she asked quietly.

"Hopefully not too long," he said. "I'll take three or four days to debrief and write up my reports. After that I'll be free."

"Will we be staying on the station?"

"Yes," he replied with a smile. "This may surprise you, but I actually have an apartment here. It's my home, at least as much as a home as I have. It may be a military station, but millions of people live here. You'll find that there are hundreds of things to do in your free time. You'll want to be careful, though. There aren't many women, and those who are here are generally life mated. I'll make sure you have an escort if you want to go out and I can't be with you."

"How dangerous is it?"

"Well, I don't think any of them would deliberately hurt you," he said slowly. "But Saurellian men tend to lose perspective sometimes when it comes to women. It's better to be careful."

When they left the ship an hour later she understood what he meant. All around here were tall, dark men with hungry eyes. Surprisingly, not all of them were Saurellians, and she cocked one brow at Jerred in question.

"Most of the maintenance functions are performed by off-worlders," he explained.

"Why is that? Are Saurellians too good to do their own dirty work?" she asked jokingly.

He shook his head and grinned at her. "No, unmated Saurellian males tend to be unreliable in such positions," he said softly. "Unless a Saurellian finds a mate, he tends to be a bit wild. Most of us won't live past forty standard years. We need jobs where we can work off our aggression."

"Like fighting?"

"Well, before the war most of us were mercenaries in the Empire," Jerred said softly. "It was good work. And it gave us an edge when our people called us back to fight the war against the Empire."

"So, did all of your people come back?" she asked softly.

His gaze grew distant for a moment, and then he shook his head. "No," he said softly. "Quite a few didn't come back."

"Did they stay and work for the Empire?"

"Some of them did," he said softly. He didn't seem to want to talk any further, so she stayed silent. There was a lot more going on here than she cared to understand. She'd never been interested in politics, and it sounded like Saurellian politics were more confusing than most.

He guided her across the large hangar toward a low arch marked with a green sign.

"This is a transit station," he said, nodding toward it. "You can catch a pod to anywhere on the station here. You can also catch a train along the main lines. Most of the time the trains are the best way to go, but I wouldn't want you taking one alone. Pods are more private, but they're more expensive. You'll need a credit account, too. I'll get one set up on your name."

She opened her mouth to protest, and then realized how foolish that was. She had no money of her own – she was utterly dependent on him.

They stood in the station for several moments, waiting for the right train to arrive. Every few seconds a new one would slip into place, and men would get on and off. Many of them carried blasters, and she noted those who were armed were primarily Saurellian. Their faces were dark and brooding, and a memory of Jerred as she'd first met him popped into her brain. He seemed so different now, so much lighter and happier.

She liked him better that way.

Everywhere she turned, men watched her. She noticed one or two other women in the crowd, but they all seemed untouchable somehow, as if there was an invisible aura of protection over them. She noticed that the men watched them with just as much hunger, but they didn't do it openly. These women were Saurellian. Tall, dark-haired goddesses with ivory skin and light green eyes. She stepped closer to Jerred, and he wrapped a protective arm around her.

"I don't like this station," she whispered softly. "I don't feel safe here."

"You'll be safe with me," he said, giving her a gentle squeeze. All around her, men stared with speculation in their eyes, stripping her mentally and laying her out before them. One caught her eye, and walked up to them slowly.

"Jerred," he said in greeting, his expression cool.

"Xander," Jerred replied, nodding his head. Giselle waited for an introduction, but one didn't come. It was just as well, he decided. Xander didn't seem like a particularly nice man. His cold eyes swept over her, taking in everything about her person in a way that seemed somehow dirty. She shivered.

"I've never known you to have a pet," Xander said to Jerred, his tone conversational. "How long do you plan to keep her?"

Jerred bristled beside her. His tone of voice, though, was casual as he replied. "I can't imagine you would be interested in the details," he said lightly. "I'm certainly not interested in sharing them—or her—with you. You'd do well to stay away from me while I'm here."

A flash of intense anger, even rage, blazed in Xander's eyes, and he flushed a deep red. Giselle held her breath, terrified he might attack. She could feel an answering tension in Jerred, and he pushed her behind him. A loose ring of watchers had gathered around the three of them, their grins feral and menacing. Without thinking, she spoke.

"I don't feel very well," she said softly. All eyes turned to her, and some of the hostility left their gazes. Deciding to play it for all she was worth, she spoke again.

"Please, can't we go to your apartment and rest?" she asked, turning to give Jerred a liquid look of concern. "There are so many people here, *I really don't feel well...*"

She allowed herself to sway on her feet, clutching Jerred's arm for support. It provoked a protective instinct, not only in Jerred but also in the men around her. Xander nodded his head tightly and backed away, and the ring of observers broke apart. Jerred took her arm and walked her toward one of the pods.

"We'll skip the train for now," he said. He helped her into the small vehicle, and she sat down gratefully. He knelt beside her, searching her face. "How sick are you?" he asked.

"Not sick at all," she replied tartly. "I'm annoyed. You and that Xander were going to fight, weren't you? Why? Are you enemies?"

"No," Jerred said softly, a slightly confused expression coming across his face. "Actually, we grew up together. Normally I would consider him a friend."

"So that's how you treat your friends?" she asked.

He sat back on the seat across from her, and keyed something into the pod's control pad. She felt a slight motion as the pod slid away from the station. He sat, silent for a moment, and then leaned forward

"I have no idea why we acted that way," he said finally. "It doesn't make sense to me at all. Xander and I have fought thousands of times, but never over a woman."

She stayed silent, unsure of how to respond. She didn't quite like the way he referred to her dismissively as "a woman," any more than she had liked Xander's tone earlier. She was getting pretty tired of everyone thinking she was Jerred's pet, for love of the Goddess. On the other hand, in a way she *was* his pet. She was his toy, completely dependent on him for everything from food to affection and companionship.

The doors opened as the pod slid to stop. This transit station was much quieter, with only a few men around them. It was smaller, too. Jerred took her arm and guided her through the exit into an open gallery that stretched above and below them for hundreds of stories. Looking around, she could see bridges stretching from one side to the other, and walkways stretched along the walls to either side of them. Across the open gallery, there was another walkway and more doors. It was similar to many of the stations she'd seen in her life, but once again on a scale almost beyond her ability to comprehend. It was just so *big*. It reminded her of the descriptions she'd read of the Imperial warrens on Tyre, vast developments deep within the planet surface housing billions of people.

They walked down the gallery for twenty minutes before he stopped, sliding a keycard into a door that looked just like every other one on the corridor.

The door's light blinked green, and slid open.

The apartment was good-sized, with a large kitchen and living area, fresher and a bedroom. Still, it looked as if no one lived there. The walls were bare of decoration and the furniture was plain and bland.

"How long have you had this place?" she asked, thinking of her own tiny apartment on Transit Three. Even though she'd only lived there a few months, she'd filled it with plants and cheap holo-posters of various planets she dreamed of visiting. This might as well be a room in a hostel.

"I've had it about six years," he said, dropping the rucksack holding their clothing on the floor. She looked at it in distaste. All she had was her uniform from the bar and the two jumpsuits he'd gotten her on Transit Three. She'd recycled the dress from Josiah. Despite how lovely it was, there were too many bad memories associated with it to ever wear again.

"I think you need to go shopping," Jerred said, breaking into her thoughts. "Your best bet would be to go on the Station's 'net. The female population is pretty low here, and while there are stores, it's probably more efficient to simply order something and have it delivered."

"All right," she said, sitting on the couch. It was nice and soft despite its utilitarian appearance, and a thought popped into her mind. She bounced up and down, testing it and looking at him speculatively. He ignored her.

"I have to go and make my report," he said. "Just go ahead and use the terminal to shop if you like. It should bill me automatically for whatever you decide to get."

With that he turned and walked out the door. It closed behind him with a hissing noise. So much for the soft couch, she thought wryly.

* * * * *

Nicolai Trasky, commander of Saurellian intelligence operations, searched Jerred's face, trying to figure out what was different. He'd already heard rumors that one of his most reclusive scouts had returned with a woman in tow – that was unusual enough in and of itself. But even stranger was Jerred's demeanor.

If he wasn't mistaken, the man was happy. Or at least content. And now he wanted leave to go and spend time with his new companion. Nicolai made a mental note to have one of his aides look into the situation. Unlikely as it seemed, perhaps Jerred had found a life mate. Thank the Goddess, it was something he was seeing more and more in his men. For some reason, for the first time in Saurellian history, men were finding mates outside their own people.

His own wife was one of them. Not, of course, that it was relevant to the task at hand.

"So, Josiah let you go," he said thoughtfully. "Very wise of him. It doesn't benefit either of us to upset the status quo at this point. I'm assuming he just meant to send us a message?"

"I'm not so sure about that," Jerred said slowly. "I would have sworn he meant to kill me. I honestly think the only reason he changed his mind was because he got the information somewhere else."

"Yes, well, that source was compromised a while back," Nicolai said thoughtfully. "We've suspected she was a double agent for quite a while. I would imagine we won't hear from her again."

Their spy was almost certainly dead by now. Not that he felt sorry about that. She'd been feeding information to the Empire as well, and they were probably better off without her. Still, they'd have to find someone new, and Josiah's organization wasn't easy to penetrate. For some reason his people were alarmingly loyal to him.

"Our technicians will have the information out of your databanks soon," Nicolai continued. "I'm assuming that everything will be in order, but I'll want you to stay here until we're sure we don't have any questions. Preliminary reports are that Josiah didn't break the sub-encryption shell, which means your information is safe."

"He'd have a pretty hard time doing it in the amount of time he had," Jerred replied. "He was angry enough about the schematics of his station that I doubt he looked much further. Not that any of this information would have interested him directly, anyway."

"No, but it would interest others a great deal," Nicolai said. "And Josiah is always looking for business opportunities. Don't underestimate him."

"I don't, I assure you," Jerred said wryly. "Are we done here? I'd like to get back to Giselle."

Nicolai nodded, and leaned back in his chair. Jerred gave a casual salute and left the room, leaving Nicolai with his thoughts. Yes, he was almost certain the younger man

had found his life mate. The thought made him smile. Jerred was a good man, and he deserved better than the life of loneliness and violence that awaited an unmated male.

Now, how long would it take him to figure his situation out?

The com on his desk buzzed, and Nicolai grabbed it. Within seconds he was on his feet, headed out of the office. There had been an ambush in the truce zone, a Saurellian freighter had been looted and the entire crew left for dead. Through some miracle another ship had found them before they all starved to death.

Jerred and his life mate were forgotten.

* * * * *

Giselle scrolled through the clothing catalogues, trying to imagine herself in some of the stranger creations. She had quickly realized that Saurellian women's fashions weren't suited to her figure. These women were long and lean. She was short, and while she wasn't fat, she wasn't lean, either. She would look ridiculous in most of these outfits. There were other types of clothing, though, designed for women with her generous body type. Unfortunately, as far as she could tell, the entire non-Saurellian female population of the station consisted of prostitutes. Cheap prostitutes at that, not licensed pleasure workers. She'd never seen such a nasty selection of tacky clothing in her life. Finally she found some serviceable, if not exactly attractive, jumpsuits. When they left on their vacation, they would have to get more.

She was a bit worried at first about paying for the clothing, but Jerred seemed to have plenty of money available for her. She decided to splurge, and got some pretty black combs to go in her hair. She also got some conditioner for it. The soap he had on his ship made it feel a bit dry, and she was ready to pamper herself.

Her purchases arrived less than an hour after she ordered them, sliding into the apartment through a delivery shaft she hadn't noticed at first. How handy. Moments later she hit the shower, ducking her head under the hot water and reveling in the warmth of it with a pleasure that bordered on the obscene. She started singing a little song, and turned to the wall so the water could sluice down her back.

She hardly felt his touch at first. His hands slid around her waist, and then he was in the shower with her, pulling her up against his tall body. He leaned over and whispered in her ear.

"I've missed you," he said. "I'm sorry I had to leave so quickly before, but I knew that if I let myself stay, I wouldn't make my report at all. I really couldn't let that happen."

"It's all right," she said, dropping her head back against his chest. He felt lovely.

His hands slipped up and down the front of her torso, cupping her breasts lightly. His fingers reached around to tweak her nipples and she sighed. Against her back, his penis swelled.

"I'll have to wait around for a few days, but I don't really have any work that I need to be doing," he said softly. "We'll have to find some way to while the time away..."

"Hmmm," she said thoughtfully, wiggling her butt against him. "I have a few ideas, but I'm not sure that you'd like them."

"Try me."

"Well," she said archly. "For one thing, I really think you need to get cleaned up. You haven't been scrubbed properly, I do believe. Would you like me to help?"

"Sure," he said. She twisted in his arms until she faced him, then ran her hands up and down his chest. His cock, now against her belly, rose just a bit in response, and she gave a low, throaty chuckle.

"Close your eyes and hold still," she said suddenly. Then she grabbed her new bottle of soap and poured a little into her palm. Jerred wrinkled his nose at the smell.

"What, you don't like it?" she asked.

"Oh, I like it," he said slowly. "I'm just not sure I want to smell like that myself. It's a little flowery."

She slathered it across his belly, rubbing up and down across the lower section of his stomach. He stayed silent as the lather built up and then gasped as she moved lower. She let the bubbles drift into the black curls surrounding his shaft, massaging it into a thick lather. His erection rose through the soap like a monument, and against her will, she laughed.

He stiffened, and she poked him in the stomach.

"Don't be getting all serious on me," she said, looking up at him with a twinkle in her eye. He shook his head, and smiled back at her. She watched his face, a sly smile on her own as she rubbed her fingers around the base of his shaft. He thrust his hips at her, but she ignored his move, dropping her fingers lower to trace the contours of his scrotum.

The skin there was very soft. She felt the orbs of his testicles inside, and smiled to herself as she cupped first one and then the other. They tightened under her grip, pulling up just a bit as his cock hardened and thrust upward toward his belly. She let her hand slip lower, touching the smooth skin behind his scrotum and he shuddered.

"Unless you want this to end very, very quickly, I think you should stop doing that," he muttered softly. She laughed again, reveling in her power. She loved making this big, strong man plead with her.

But he *did* have a point. She didn't want to end things before they started. So she let her hands smooth the soapy bubbles to his stomach, moving slowly so she could run her fingers through the tiny black hairs that dotted his body. She reached his navel, prodding it softly. Involuntarily his hips rocked forward. He was very sensitive there. She moved her hands higher, until they reached his nipples. Despite the warmth of the water, they were rock hard. So were hers, for that matter. She leaned forward against his chest, rubbing him sensuously with her breasts. He sighed and muttered something.

She tilted her head up to look at his face and gasped.

He wore an expression that was new to her. He had the same physical need and lust for her in his eyes that he always did when they made love, but there was a new tenderness. If she didn't know better, she would have thought he loved her. She closed her eyes, willing herself to not think of that possibility. No matter what he felt for her, he would never be able to stay with her. He didn't have the capacity. Even allowing herself to dream about it was a mistake. It would drive her crazy if she let it.

She needed to break the mood, needed to change things. Time to bring it back to a purely physical level.

She reached up and pulled his head down to hers suddenly, kissing him more deeply than she'd ever kissed him before. His arms came around her, crushing her to his body. She squirmed against him urgently, suddenly wanting him inside her, filling her with his seed. He turned off the water, lifted her in his arms, and stumbled out of the shower. They left a trail of water and bubbles behind them as he carried her into the hallway, and then he slipped, falling to one knee. She slithered from his arms, and pulled him down on top of her on the floor. She couldn't wait another second – she had to have him inside her body.

He thrust in with one smooth motion. The broad head of his shaft hit her cervix and she orgasmed instantly, squeezing him with all her strength. He pulled back and thrust once more, and then he exploded as well. She felt the hot seed bursting inside her, felt his body pulsing against hers. After a moment he rolled off her, picking her up carefully and carrying her into the bedroom. He laid her on the bed and then joined her.

"I've never felt this way about anyone," he said softly, and she turned her head away. That was the last thing she needed to hear.

It gave her hope, and that would be her downfall.

Chapter Thirteen

Xander watched as Jerred stepped out of the apartment door, kissed the woman lingering, then started down the corridor.

He'd never seen his friend like this. First there was the hostility when he'd arrived. In the days since then, he'd taken great care to keep the woman hidden in his apartment. The only times she'd gone out, he'd been with her and he'd guarded her closely. No man was allowed to talk to her, let alone touch her.

It intrigued Xander.

He'd known Jerred all his life, and they'd shared women together more than once. Jerred had never been the jealous type. He'd always enjoyed women, but never asked anything of them. Sometimes he found them in the bars around spaceports, but more often he preferred to hire them for an hour or two. He had always said it helped keep things from getting complicated. As a man who liked to keep his relations with women uncomplicated, Jerred was definitely in over his head with this one. Xander could only think of one reason that such a thing might happen.

The woman had to be his old friend's life mate.

He'd tried to talk to Jerred the day before, but the man had refused to see him. The woman possessed him, consumed him, and he seemed completely unaware of what must be going on. If the girl was his life mate, she needed to be recognized at the temple and granted formal status. Until then she had no place in the station hierarchy. Given how protective Jerred was of her, that could lead to someone's death if they made the wrong move. Xander didn't want to see that happen.

Jerred needed to be brought to his senses.

He waited until he was sure Jerred was gone, then pushed himself away from the shadow where he'd been standing and walked to the apartment door. He nodded, waiting for her to respond.

He didn't have to wait long.

"Jerred, is that you?" she asked through the com panel.

"No, I'm a friend of Jerred's. My name is Xander," he said slowly, trying to keep his voice neutral and unthreatening. It was hard; her presence called to him. As an unmated man, he found it hard to be around women, especially those he couldn't have. There was something about another man's life mate that could drive a warrior slowly mad with lust. Their culture was wise to keep the women away from the unmated males. Otherwise, there would be a bloodbath; she couldn't stay here.

"What do you want?" she asked, and he could hear the tension in her voice. Jerred must have warned her about the men on the station. At least he hadn't completely lost his mind, Xander thought with a tinge of dark humor.

"I've come to talk to you," he said. "You don't have to let me in, but I do need a few minutes of your time. It's about Jerred."

"I'm listening," she said. "But not for long. I'm not going to open the door."

"All right," he said, looking up and down the hallway. It really was a shame she wouldn't let him in. Out here he was more likely to be seen. If Jerred found out, he would kill him. Still, a man had to die some time, and at least then the horrible burning, aching emptiness within him would be gone. Sometimes he thought death would be a mercy.

"Do you know that Saurellians can only mate permanently with someone called a life mate?" he asked through the door, feeling ridiculous.

"Yes," she said, and he could have sworn her voice held a touch of hurt. Good. She cared about him.

"Well, you've probably heard that only Saurellian women can be life mates, then," he said.

"Yes."

Her tight, strained intonation spoke volumes. He sighed.

"Maybe you don't realize that in the past year, several Saurellian men have found life mates who aren't Saurellian."

Silence. He took a deep breath and forged ahead. "I think you might be one of them."

"Don't play games with me," she said. "This is cruel."

"It's the truth," he replied slowly. "Jerred probably doesn't believe it's possible, and the odds are certainly against it. But he's showing all of the signs of a man who's found his mate." *I should know, he thought bitterly. I've watched enough of my friends and brothers find their loved ones on Saurellia.*

He pushed the disloyal thought out of his head. The *Goddess* decreed which men would have mates and which would suffer alone. Still, the irrational part of his mind screamed out at him to break down the door and take her.

After all, if she could mate with Jerred, why not him? He pushed the thought back and took a deep breath.

"You need to go to the Temple," he said shortly. "They'll be able to tell you if you're the one for him. You need to know this, for both your sakes."

"How do I go to the Temple?" she asked, softly. "And why should I believe you?"

"You should believe me because I care about Jerred," he said. "Despite what you may think, we've been friends forever, and I'm afraid he might lose his only chance for happiness. Not to mention *your* only chance for happiness. The life mate bond goes both ways, you know, and it only ends with death."

Silence. He shook his head, hoping she was still listening. She didn't exactly have a reason to believe him, after all.

"All you need to do is get on the 'net and look up the local temple," he said. "Call them. Talk to the priestess. They'll help you make the arrangements you need to make."

"What makes you think they'll believe me?" she asked.

"Whether they believe you or not, they have a duty to check your story out," he said. "Tell them about Jerred, and tell them that I came to talk to you as well. Make them understand that you need their help."

"I'll think about it," she said slowly. "Why are you telling me all of this?"

"Because I want Jerred to be happy," he muttered through gritted teeth. Deep down inside, he knew it was true. That didn't make it any easier, though.

"He loves you and I know it," he said softly. "It's written all over his face, in every step he takes. I'm just worried that he'll let his own fears get in the way of his happiness. If it were me," he paused to take a breath, swallowing deeply. "If it were me, he'd do the same."

She fell silent, and he turned quickly and walked away. If only it were him. If only the Goddess was that kind.

* * * * *

Giselle found the number for the station's Temple. She still wasn't quite sure what to think of Xander's strange visit. Was he playing some kind of sick game with her? She shuddered to think how humiliating it would be if he was... On the other hand, what if he was right? Even a *chance* to have Jerred as her own was worth any humiliation. Taking a deep breath, she pressed the call button.

Almost immediately a man's face appeared on the screen. He smiled at her, and she realized there was something different about him. He didn't have that tense, questing look she had come to associate with Saurellian males.

"Hello," she said softly. "I need some information, I think."

He smiled at her reassuringly. "Go on," he said. "I'll do my best to help you."

"I think that Jerred, uh, the man I've been seeing, is my life mate. Does that make any sense to you?"

A look of surprise came over his face, but he quickly masked it.

"Well, there is a slight possibility that this is true," he said. "But it's very unlikely. I'm sorry, but I have to be honest with you about this. Many young women imagine they are life mates when they meet a handsome Saurellian soldier, but it's rarely true. Why is it that you think he might be your life mate?"

She blushed, unsure of how to answer without sounding silly. Somehow, *I think I'd just die without him*, seemed juvenile at best.

"I'm not really sure," she said finally. "I realize that it may just be wishful thinking, but I really do love him. And I think he loves me, too. I think we're just both afraid to let ourselves say it because we know it can't last."

The man nodded grave, a look of compassion on his face. "Well, I don't wish to hurt you, but it is most likely that what you are feeling is infatuation. I want you to be very honest with yourself and answer this question for me. Does he really care for you as much as you care for him?"

"I'm sure he cares for me as much as I care for him," she said softly, knowing it was true. "I can feel it in the way he touches me, and how he looks at me."

The man nodded his head slowly, his expression still non-committal. "If you would like to come to the Temple, we would be able to do a reading on you," he said. "That way you will know for sure. But I need to warn you that the reading may not go as you would like."

"I'd rather know," she said softly. "In my heart, I know I need to be with him. If I'm deluding myself, it's better to find out now."

"All right," the man said. "Can you come here yourself, or would you like us to send someone to fetch you?"

"I want you to send someone for me," she said quickly. "Jerred has been very clear that I shouldn't go outside by myself. He says it isn't safe."

The man's face turned thoughtful. She wanted to ask him what his thoughts were, but decided it wasn't a good idea.

"We'll send someone for you shortly," he said. "I have your address from your call number. Be sure to leave a message telling Jerred where you are; you don't want him to worry about you."

"Or tear apart the station looking for me," she added, grimacing. His expression turned thoughtful again, and then he faded out.

The knock on her door came more quickly than she'd expected. She had just finished the note for Jerred, when they arrived. To her surprise, they had a private pod waiting for her, parked right beside the open walkway. Somehow it hadn't occurred to her that pods would be allowed to navigate through the open air of the galleries, but she supposed the Temple must have special privileges. There were two people waiting for her, a man and a woman. To her surprise, it was the same man she had talked with over the com. The woman was tall and striking in that way she had come to expect from Saurellian women. She held out one hand to Giselle and gave her a gentle smile.

"Come with me, child," she said. She looked so young that Gisele was taken aback for a moment by her tone. Then she noted small strands of grey in the woman's hair, and the tiniest of lines around her eyes. She was older than she looked.

She took her hand, and together they stepped into the pod. "I am Grania," the woman said. "I'm a priestess at the temple. Velor," she nodded toward the man, "is my life mate. I must say, I find your situation unusual. We do occasionally get calls from

young women who feel they have a special connection with one of our warriors, but I find that it usually isn't true."

"Well, I'm only here because Xander, Jerred's friend, told me to call you," Giselle said softly, feeling embarrassed. This was probably some sort of sick prank. How horrible. She wished she could bolt back to the apartment.

"Really?" the woman asked. She and her spouse exchanged unfathomable looks, and then she leaned in more closely to Giselle.

"Tell me about this Xander," she said.

Giselle blushed to realize how little she knew.

"I've only met him twice," she said slowly. "He and Jerred grew up together. He told me that, and Jerred told me, too. When we first met him, he said some really nasty things about me, and he and Jerred almost got into a fight. I thought Jerred was going to kill him."

"Go on," the woman said.

"Then he came to the apartment earlier today. I was afraid of him at first, because of what happened before. But he said that Jerred was acting strangely, and that I should call you. He said there might be a chance that Jerred and I were life mates but that Jerred was too scared to admit it."

The woman patted her hand comfortingly, and smiled at her again. There was something incredibly soothing about that smile. Giselle felt calm wash over her.

"Well, we'll know soon enough," the woman said. "We're almost to the temple now."

The pod came to a stop and the door slid open. Grania took Giselle's arm and led her gently from the vehicle. She looked around, expecting some kind of monument or grand entrance. Instead they were in something that looked more like a garage.

"We're taking the back door in," Grania said, as if reading her thoughts. "Not quite as impressive, I know, but far more convenient. I hope you don't mind?"

Giselle shook her head, bemused by the woman's practicality. She looked so stately that it was hard to imagine she thought about things like parking pods. A guard nodded to them as they left the garage, walking into a lavishly appointed corridor. Unlike much of the station, which was largely utilitarian, the floor here was tiled, and there was a different kind of smell in the air. The scent of living things. Perhaps there was a garden?

Her question was answered as they walked through another arch into a large, open area. All around were trees and birds. Grass covered the ground, and in the distance a sun seemed to be shining down on them.

"What is this?" she asked with a gasp.

"This is the temple," the woman said in a soft, sweet voice. "The grounds here are twenty-five miles across. What you see up above is our 'sun' – the engineers built and

maintain it for us. Even here in the middle of the station, it gives our people a taste of home."

"It's amazing," she said. "Are all your temples like this one?"

"Most of them," Grania replied. "They're built as a reflection of the central temple on Saurellia. Of course, they're different sizes in different places. On a small station they might feel more like a greenhouse than this."

Giselle nodded her head slowly, eyes searching all around.

"This place is amazing," she said softly. "I can hardly believe it's real."

They started walking along a stone-lined path, and within moments Giselle had lost sight of the doorway they'd entered through.

"It's not far," Grania said. "We'll be going to our house for a while, and then perhaps to the main temple precinct."

"How far is it?" Giselle asked.

"It will only take us a few minutes to get there," Grania said. "There are many, many entrances to the temple. One can almost always enter near one's destination, which is important. There is no motorized travel allowed within the sanctuary, which means you will have a long walk if you come in at the wrong place. Of course, one of the reasons we have such a large space is precisely so people can walk. We find that walking with the Goddess often helps to clear the mind."

Giselle nodded slowly. Grania's words made perfect sense to her; she could easily imagine how walking along these smooth, beautiful paths could help a person think. Before long they reached a surprisingly primitive cottage. The walls appeared to be made of stone, and the ceiling from bunches of dried grass.

"Here we are," Grania said. She opened the door, nodded for Giselle to come in with her. The cottage was small, and filled with furniture that seemed to be fashioned out of wood and primitive textiles. Giselle goggled openly; she'd never seen anything like it.

"You live here?" she asked, and then closed her mouth with an embarrassed gasp. What a rude question...

Grania laughed, and Velor shook his head.

"It's slightly more up-to-date than you might think from its appearance," he said. "Our kitchen is modern, and we're hooked into the 'net. But we find simplicity does help us stay focused on serving the Goddess."

"It's lovely," Giselle said. "I guess I've never seen anything like this on a space station before."

"Well, this is an unusual space station," Grania said with a smile. "And you, Giselle, appear to be an unusual woman. Will you sit with me?"

She walked gracefully over to a large, wooden table, taking a seat along one side. Giselle sat across from her, feeling uncomfortable.

"I think you already know why I'm here," Giselle said quietly. "I'm not quite sure what to do now, to be honest," she added with a nervous laugh. "How can you tell if I'm Jerred's life mate? Do you have to do tests, or scan me?"

"Oh, no, I don't think that will be necessary," Grania said with a serene smile. "I already know the answer."

"Well?" Giselle asked, feeling a bit impatient. "What is it?"

"Do you really need me to tell you?" Grania asked quietly. "I don't think that you do. I think that if you look into your heart you'll know."

It took all Giselle had within her not roll her eyes and snort in disgust. This was why she usually avoided temples. Too touchy-feely. "I don't know," she said slowly. "If I knew, I wouldn't have asked you."

Grania cocked her head at her and laughed. "Yes, I can see that," she said. "You're very literal-minded, and you don't trust your senses, do you? You need to work on that child. It's really the only way you'll ever grow close to the Goddess."

This time Giselle did sigh, wishing she'd never come. These people were like sticky candy—their words clung to her, clogging up her brain. Even the air in this place seemed to clog up her mind. Suddenly she felt hot and uncomfortable.

"I think you should tell her," Velor said to his life mate, coming up behind her to place one hand on her shoulder. "She seems confused enough already."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Grania said. "It's just that I wanted her to see for herself."

"Well, I don't see," Giselle said, growing frustrated. "Please, tell me."

"You and Jerred are clearly life mates," Grania said, smiling. Giselle felt dizzy. Was this woman playing games with her? They hadn't done any tests, how could they know for sure?

"The Goddess tells us these things," Grania said, replying to her unasked question. Giselle started, suddenly feeling a little uncertain. She'd never really liked priests and priestesses who claimed to speak to the Goddess. In her experience, they usually wanted money. But this couple really didn't seem to be asking anything of her.

"The Goddess rejoices at your presence, child," Velor said, his voice soothing. "We were both able to feel it as soon as we met you. It will be stronger when your Jerred arrives, of course, but there's no question that you're newly life-mated."

"So what does that mean?" Giselle asked, almost afraid to know the answer.

"Well, it means that you and Jerred will probably have very long, happy lives together," Grania said. "Of course, there will be hard times. But, all in all, the Goddess chooses wisely when she creates mates. You are very lucky to have found each other."

"What about Jerred?" Giselle asked, feeling even more confused. "How is he going to react to this?"

"Well, I would imagine that once he understands what's going on he'll be thrilled," Velor said. "Although I wouldn't be surprised if right now he's tearing the station apart"

looking for you. My chief of security tells me that he's demanding entrance to the temple," he added, tapping his ear lightly. The man must have a communications implant, Giselle realized. How funny, that a man who lived in a wooden house had a com implant. This temple was an extremely strange place.

"You'd better go and fetch him, dear," Grania said, turning her head to smile up at her mate. "The poor boy will have a heart attack if we don't let him know his mate is safe. They tend to get very concerned about these things," she added, looking at Giselle.

Velor nodded, then quietly left the room.

"He won't be but a moment," Grania said. "We have an entrance in back of the house, too. We only took you the long way because we wanted you to see some of the grounds."

True to her word, Velor was back within moments. Jerred followed him, his face filled with strain. He came up to her and pulled her roughly into his arms.

"Are you all right?" he asked, running his hands over her shoulders.

"Yes," she said, looking up at him with all the love she felt. She couldn't quite figure out why he was so concerned. It wasn't as if she hadn't left a note.

"Xander told me he'd had a talk with you," Jerred said, his face betraying his nerves. "He told me you'd gone to the temple. I was afraid you might be seeking sanctuary from me."

"Sanctuary?" she burst out laughing. "Why on earth would I need sanctuary?"

He blushed, and then looked to Grania and Velor.

"Considering how I originally got you to come with me, I had reason to be worried," he said softly. "My mind just kept racing through all the reasons you might be trying to leave me. I couldn't understand why you'd go to the temple, either."

"It is customary for life mates to have their union sanctified within the temple," Grania said. Jerred's head jerked up, and he looked at her.

"What are you saying?"

"We're life mates, Jerred," Giselle said softly, looking up into his face. For an instant, joy chased across his features, and then he seemed to clamp down on the emotion firmly.

"This isn't a joking matter, Giselle," he said. "You have no comprehension how unlikely it is that we could possibly be life mates."

"And yet that is exactly the case," Grania said. "And I think you know that already, young man. You're just afraid to give in to your happiness. You're afraid to believe it's real. But it is."

Jerred suddenly sagged against her, clutching her so hard Giselle thought she'd fall over. He caught himself quickly though.

"This is more than I could have imagined," he muttered, giving her a soft kiss on the mouth. "Giselle, I love you. Will you do me the honor of sharing my life?"

“Oh, hell yes,” Giselle said. “Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t suppose you want to open up a bar, do you?”

He shook his head, and started laughing. “Can we discuss this further?” he asked. “I think we have quite a few things to talk about.”

“Not least of which is you getting out of the spying and smuggling thing,” Giselle said. “Or at least I hope you’ll consider it. I don’t think I can handle another run-in with Josiah.”

He kissed her, his mouth slanting over hers in a gesture that was frankly carnal. Giselle sighed, allowing herself to fall into the kiss. A second later they were brought up short by a discrete cough.

“As much as the Goddess celebrates physical love,” Velor said softly, “I believe I wouldn’t be overstating my bounds by requesting you celebrate yours in private.”

Epilogue

Jerred landed the small shuttle with a gentle thump and flicked off several switches. He left the view screen on, though, and Giselle could see a largish group of people standing to one side of the landing pad.

She had never been more intimidated in her life.

"Relax, they won't bite," Jerred said softly. "In fact, I'm imaging they'll be very happy to meet you. You and I represent their hope for the future."

"You really should have told me about this before we got together," Giselle muttered softly. "If I had known marrying you included marrying an entire estate of people, I might have thought twice."

"Why do you think I didn't tell you?" he asked archly.

He stood up and led her to the shuttle's doorway, which opened with a touch of his hand. A set of stairs had already extended itself from their ship.

"Come on," he said. "It's all right, I promise. They'll be happy to meet you."

"Even your mother?" she asked softly. "The thought of her scares me. She looked so stern in the pictures you showed me. Are you sure she'll be able to handle a daughter-in-law who isn't Saurellian?"

"She'll just have to learn, won't she?" he replied. "Don't worry about it. She'll love you. They all will."

Giselle rolled her eyes, knowing that would be too good to be true. They walked down the stairs, and a young woman broke free of the group, running up to hug Jerred.

"I've missed you so much, Jerred," she said. He squirmed awkwardly, and then pulled himself free of her embrace.

"Giselle, I'd like you to meet my sister, Krissandra," he said. "Krissandra, this is Giselle, my wife."

Giselle smiled hesitantly. She extended one hand to Krissandra, but the young woman pulled her into her arms.

"Thank you so much for bringing my brother home," Krissandra whispered in her ear. "You can't imagine how happy we are that he found you."

"Krissandra, let the poor girl go," another woman said. Her voice was stern and cool. Krissandra pulled away, and Giselle found herself face to face with a woman who could only be Jerred's mother.

She was tall and slender, her hair pulled back to the nape of her neck. She wore a full-length gown, one that should have seemed old-fashioned but was entirely elegant instead.

"You must be Giselle," she said slowly. "I must admit you are not what I expected in a daughter-in-law. Of course, I had long since given up hope of ever having my son back. I cannot thank you enough for finding him and saving him."

Giselle nodded her head, dumbstruck. The woman's tone was so cold that her words hardly sunk in.

"I have waited many years for this day," she continued. "I understand that you once owned a bar?"

Giselle nodded again, her stomach sinking. Jerred came up beside her, reaching around her waist with one arm. She felt his support and love, and she felt more confident.

"Yes, I owned one for five years," she replied. "It was very successful."

"Good, your business skills will serve you well here," Jerred's mother replied. "You'll find that our family estate is just another kind of business. I'm very happy that he found someone who has the skills and intelligence to take my place."

"I wasn't planning on taking your place," Giselle said, horrified. The other woman smiled at her kindly.

"Of course you will," she said. "You're his life mate, and he is our heir. My darling, welcome to our family."

For the first time she smiled, and Giselle felt a weight lift from her shoulders.

"I'm honored to be a member of your family," she said softly.

"And we're honored to have you."

About the author:

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