

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



AN OBEDIENT
FOR *Samharin*
MORE THAN MALE
REESE GABRIEL

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An Obedient for Samharin

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MORE THAN MALE:

AN OBEDIENT FOR SAMHARIN

Reese Gabriel

Chapter One

The special meeting of the Earth Council was less than two hours away and High Councilor Nyssa was still in bed perusing the holo data from the top-secret project codenamed Gettysburg.

The subject of the study was Abe, the Narthian freedom fighter who had risked so much to come over to the Earth side to try to bring an end to the generations-old war.

He was the first of his kind to do so and his gift of technical know-how meant there was hope to finally turn the tide against the Narthian insect hordes.

"Why aren't you getting ready?" called a stern, familiar voice.

Nyssa, her curvaceous body well displayed in a skimpy antique-lace nightgown, looked up to see her lifemate Theron standing there, hands on his hips.

The sight of him took her breath away, tall and regal in his blue uniform, the tunic gleaming with gold marking his rank as Commander of the Corps of Guardians.

The slight frown and pinched brow on his handsome face made him look even sexier. Then again, everything about this man turned Nyssa on. They had been together for more than two decades, but each look, each touch still felt like the first.

There had been universal shock at the time when she, a freedom-loving half fem, had chosen to mate with a primale. Primales were designed to rule over females with absolute power—in bed and out. The obedients were made for them, with their genetic need to submit and please. Fems had been engineered to have strong opinions and minds of their own. They were not designed to be tamed.

Theron had had his way with her body, however, just as she had stolen his heart. Their relationship was complex, intriguing, fascinating. In bed she was his absolute slave, prisoner of the passion only he could ignite. The rest of the time, she was his boss, having been sworn into the role of head of the Council.

"In a minute, my love," she replied. "Have you seen these experiment results? It's incredible. I think the Gettysburg Project may actually succeed in developing a common language between us and the Narthians. Imagine it, Theron, mutual understanding, maybe even a chance for peaceful co-existence."

The frown deepened. Ever the soldier, born and bred with superpowers to protect and defend, he offered a terse reply. "One lone Narthian turned into everyone's best bug buddy does not a war end, Nyssa."

"But Abe wasn't alone," she reminded her lifemate. "There was an entire Narthian Nest who sided with him in his effort to make peace."

"And that Nest was subsequently obliterated by the Narthian High Command as punishment for reaching out. That doesn't sound very friendly to me."

"I realize that," Nyssa replied, determined to hold onto her point. "I have studied the information Abe provided us about the death of his Life Nest. We both have. And you know as well as I that Abe is not just working on language. He's helping us build better ships, with transport beams and cloaking devices using NARTHIAN technology. If peace is unobtainable, at least we will have a better advantage in the war."

"I'll believe it all when I see it. In the meantime, I don't want a debate," Theron declared, turning primale on her. "I want that sweet little behind of yours out of bed and in the sanitizing chamber."

Nyssa's pussy dampened at his sudden exercise of male authority. She was not about to give in, however, not without a fight. With any luck, it would be a fight she would lose.

"I'll thank you to address me as Madame High Councilor," she teased.

Theron's pupils were dilated. His blue eyes gleamed like sapphire storms. Had she pushed the right buttons?

"*Madame* is itching for a spanking," he growled.

"Not now." She returned to her reading. "I have work to do."

She hadn't missed seeing the roaring erection he was sporting under that uniform and she was counting on him using it. As a primale he could control his erections at will but there was no need to, not when he had his mate alone and at his mercy.

Her belly did a hot flip. He was coming for her.

"I told you I'm busy," she attempted to swat him away.

It was like trying to brush off a falling meteor.

Even without his genetically endowed super-primale strength, Theron was twice her weight and all muscle.

Nyssa was on her belly in a nanosecond, her mate's hand on her back, holding her in place on the smooth, soft surface of the hover bed, just inches off the floor.

"Theron," she said as she wriggled, deliciously helpless. "There isn't time for this."

"All of a sudden you're worried about time?"

His lips burnt hot against hers. She nearly fainted at the feel of his uniformed chest, his perfect muscles, the smooth pectorals and ribbed abdomen, the perfect biceps through the tight material.

She could feel his cock hard against her thigh. It was primale hard and primale thick. Among his extraordinary powers was the ability to control the blood flow to his shaft and the amount of his ejaculation. He could fuck her for hours if he wished, coming over and over, or he could hold himself back, driving her to tears of distraction.

Theron looked at her with adoration, a raw wanting so deep and raw it made her swoon. She knew he would kill for her, die for her, face any obstacle. To see her in real pain, to have her denied the pleasure she needed would be to him an unbearable agony.

This was the paradox of belonging to a primale as his submissive mate. It was the submissive who was worshipped more than the dominant.

"You are perfect, my Nyssa. You are the sun and the moon. You are my every heart's desire," he told her.

Her eyes watered. "Master," she choked. "Please, take your pleasure with your slave. She is yours."

He smiled, his eyes lighting up.

She felt a small tug of guilt as she saw his hunger. She had been neglecting her mate with her all her interest over the Gettysburg Project. Theron was not a man to ever interfere when it came to her work. Willingly, he set his sexual needs aside. She was grateful to him for this. It was one of so many sacrifices he had to make with a woman who was half fem and half primale.

By all rights he should have had an obedient for a mate. Obedient females had no lives outside their mates. They were constantly available, constantly present to please and satisfy. As far as Nyssa was concerned, Theron was a greater primale for not needing his ego constantly stroked.

How fiercely she loved him and the gods help any woman who came between them.

As for any man who might think of looking too long on Nyssa, he would do better to surrender himself as larvae food for a Nest of Narthians.

Love and lust, she thought as she continued to sheath her man's erection between soft cheeks, that was what made life possible.

And adaptability. Nyssa was a testimony to that adaptability. Her genetics were experimental, the first-ever hybrid between a fem mother and a primale father. Theryssa was also a hybrid, of course, containing her parents' genes. And Nyssa had a sister too, Seria, who had married Raylar. Then there was Korlon, the Guardian cadet who had married Jaxey, a genetically derived prime female. Reeva, a fem psychosensologist, had in turn fallen in love and bonded with Vandar, a primale Guardian and Commander of a remote starbase.

Together, they had encountered Abe, who had surprised everyone by offering friendship and alliance. Reeva and Vandar were now co-directing the Gettysburg Project, a small team of scientists intent on revolutionizing Earth science and much of exobiology and psychosensorial theory too.

Was there any boundary they weren't working on crossing?

As a matter of fact, there was.

No mem, to Nyssa's knowledge, had ever made sex with an obedient.

Now that would be something.

The mems were a distinct type of males. Unlike primales, they had no particular super genetics and they were not designed to mate with a single female. They enjoyed

free sexual play, as did most fems. They were hardworking, loyal, but not monogamous.

They were also not dominant by nature.

In short, mems were a huge turn-off to obedients.

Wouldn't Gettysburg, with its interesting configuration of personalities—human and alien—be the perfect place to change that though?

Vandar and Reeve had met and fallen in love during the initial secret stages of the Project. All that needed to happen would be to put a strong mem into the mix. Someone who could interact with one of the obedient females already assigned there to provide for the sexmaking needs of the Project's detachment of primale guards.

It was a wicked, crazy idea.

A perfect idea.

Theron would love it.

Maybe.

He would be as likely to point out the dangers and ask Nyssa some hard questions. What did she hope to accomplish? She wanted a more diverse, loving human race, but was this the time and place to entertain her urges?

It was a matter of intuition. The notion had come into Nyssa's brain and she needed to trust it. Could it be that some kind of mem-obedient sexual chemistry would accelerate the research at Gettysburg and help produce some more concrete results?

Time was certainly of the essence. There were opponents on the Council, those like Theron who thought it was dangerous talking to a NARTHIAN. They would not be mollified forever.

Yes, Gettysburg needed a catalyst.

A fresh pair of eyes, a fresh brain.

A very, very special mem.

Magically, his clothes disappeared. He sank himself home, melding their bodies, sealing their souls, his cock plumbing her depths. How many times before and how many times yet to come would they perform the act of sexmaking? Nothing else mattered in this universe when they were together. There was no meaning, no eternity but him, her mate, her one true love.

Her arms wrapped about his mighty shoulders, her legs gaped to admit him as deep into her being as possible. No woman had ever been fucked like this in history, not one.

"I love you," she sighed. "My conqueror."

"I love you too, my sweet captive."

Sometime later, as they lay limp, limbs intertwined, sated, she broached the subject of further social experimentation among the four basic human genetic types.

It might not go over well, but frankly, she couldn't help herself.

"Honey," she said in her sweetest voice. "What if mems started making sex with obedients? What if we let it happen...at Gettysburg?"

"Are you asking me as your Master," he said, "or as the Commander of your military forces?"

"I don't know," she considered. "Which one will give me the better answer?"

He laughed. "I will give you both. As Master, I would say you were speaking without permission. As Guardian Commander I would say it would be adding one too many variables to an already risky situation."

"Life is all about risk, my dear Master," she said.

"So it is," he lowered his head between her legs, nudging her thighs apart to apply the tip of his tongue to her clit. "So it is."

"Theron, no more," she groaned.

Theron subjected her to the pleasure anyway.

Nyssa gripped the sheets and screamed out, her world exploding. So good, so completely enveloping, like a warm blanket of ecstasy.

She came almost instantly, so practiced were his flicks across her swollen, pulsing clitoris with his wicked tongue. What a devil he was. He could deliver her into a dozen different kinds of orgasms, or none at all if he wished to tease. This body of hers was as much his now, the instrument of his delight, his primale mischievousness. Happily she succumbed, losing herself in the physical display of their exquisite, unspeakable love.

Even as she surrendered to the latest round of internal star showers, she let her mind range over the field of possible mem candidates to send to Gettysburg.

It had to be someone truly useful to the Project and not just a potential lover for one or more of the obedients.

There were all manner of pre-eminent mem scientists and technicians. Another psychosensologist like Reeva with her telepathic abilities would be useful, or perhaps a linguist.

All that was predictable though.

There had to be someone Nyssa was overlooking.

Someone with a unique point of view, open to believing the impossible, to producing something utterly new in the universe, who would change himself, Abe and all humanity.

Did such a man exist who could be that open-minded? Even her husband, forward-thinking and reasonable as he was, had great difficulty entertaining the possibility of a good NARTHIAN.

Perhaps someone who knew what it was like to be an outsider, to have to fight for acceptance?

Hold on a moment.

There was one candidate.

Of course! How could Nyssa have forgotten him?

Step by step she had been fighting for this individual's advancement. Intuition had told her years ago he would serve a purpose and now she saw what it was.

The fate of two races could quite possibly lie in his hands.

And wonder of wonders, he was a mem with primale characteristics, just as she was looking for.

His name was Samharin and he was the only non-primale ever to attend the Guardian Academy.

How close was he to graduation?

Less than a year, if memory served correctly.

Samharin was a hero, a singular individual whose bold actions had made him worthy to enter the Guardian Academy, where he had been destined to remain an outsider by nature. Who better to understand Abe?

This man was also a scientist by background, with some skill in exobiology. Not the foremost expert in the universe, but good enough to get by as they continued their studies of the Narthian.

Yes, this was it.

Samharin's commission could be accelerated. He could be on the job with Abe in days, shoulder to shoulder with the others.

And if he happened to have sex with one of the obedient pleasure women, who was she to stand in the way of the further evolution of the human race?

Theron could make it happen. She could convince him of its necessity. Worse come to worse, she would order him. She would pay for it in bed, but such was the loneliness of command.

She grinned, anticipating the battle. He would let her win it.

So long as he could take the war.

Chapter Two

The training sergeant barked his command above the melee, fifty sweating, bare-chested warriors, covered in sweat, grappling in teams of two, sinews popping as they sought to bring each other down to the rough, icy cold ground.

"Training unit, ten-hut!"

The men of the middle class of Guardian Academy came to immediate attention, drawing deep, heavy breaths. Their strong backs were straight as a laser's beam and their eyes were just as focused.

Discipline was inbred, along with the impulse to fight, protect and defend. The Guardians had been defending Earth for a millennium, primarily against the Narthian bug hordes.

"The Old Man is looking for one of you," said the Sergeant, strolling through the makeshift ranks. "Not that any of you are good for a damn thing. What do you think, boys? Think he's going to wave his magic wand and make one of you Cinderella for the night?"

There were a couple of snickers, which promptly stopped at a glare from the hard-boiled, hairless training officer, a combat veteran with more medals than anyone could count.

Samharin exchanged glances with his training partner, a muscle-bound lug named Darthus. The Old Man was a term of affection used by Guardians for their commanding officer, General Theron.

What would Theron want with one of them? Samharin wondered. As mid-level cadets, they were generally acknowledged to be Narthian Nest fodder at this point. After graduation followed by a year or two of combat, they would finally be recognized as real Guardians.

"Samharin," the Sergeant called out.

All eyes turned to the sole mem in the class.

The sole mem, ever, in any Guardian class.

Brilliant, Samharin grumbled to himself. *As if I'm not forever sticking out like a sore thumb as it is.* "Yes Sir," he replied crisply, stamping his boot on the rocky soil and saluting.

"Looks like your lucky day, boy, you just got a hall pass."

Samharin smirked. "And a trip to the principal's office, right, Sir?"

A few of the men chuckled quietly in support.

The Sergeant smiled himself.

Samharin had friends. As for the rest of his fellow cadets, he had at least earned their respect.

There was no way Samharin could compete with them. As primales, they were designed to be superior, quicker and stronger. Samharin by contrast was smaller, just six feet tall. No super vision, no accentuated hearing.

No leaping over tall buildings in a single bound.

What he lacked in genetics, however, he made up for in heart and determination. For every hour his classmates put in, he put in two. His muscles screamed and his brain hurt day and night. His reputation was well established. If anyone challenged him, he would go to the wall.

"You might break my body," he was fond of saying, "but you will never break my spirit."

Gradually, the others let him into their circles, the tight-lipped cadre of supermen with their ancient primale ways. After a while the others began to rely on him too, for leadership, for encouragement. No one in the history of the Academy, it was said, with the exception of the women who had gone through like Theryssa and Jaxey, had ever valued more what it meant to be a cadet.

If anyone ever thought of quitting, they sent him to Samharin and he would give them hell.

There were various rumors as to how he got into the Academy, everything from wild stories of his having defeated a Narthian horde single-handed to his having bought a commission with the help of winnings from the Galactic Lottery.

The truth, as is generally the case, was somewhere in between. Nyssa, Head of the Council, had lobbied for his entrance to the Academy, following his bravery while stationed as a research scientist on Capellius Station.

The Narthians had attacked there, outflanking a Guardian force.

Samharin, a deep-space biologist, had managed to rig a weapon, a spray beam of chemicals poisonous to the Narthians. He held off a horde detachment for ten hours, saving fifty-six women and children in the process. The bug toxins he had ingested in the attack had nearly killed him, though he had never abandoned his weapon.

Nyssa had awarded him the highest medal for a civilian. Then she convinced him to do the unthinkable by taking his scientific skills into the Corps, blazing a trail for all mems.

Samharin had resisted the idea at first, but High Councilor Nyssa was most persuasive. Times were changing. Mems and primales, fems and obedients would all have to learn to adapt and work together, she had said.

In the end he could not refuse. Many times the Guardian training had left him at death's door, but he had never once regretted his decision.

He was more than halfway through now. The worst should have been over.

So why did the Old Man want to see him?

Not to swap recipes for Gangian veal soup, that was for damn sure. Were they pulling his card, blackballing him this late in the game? Had some political decision been made to terminate his Academy Commission?

The Sergeant had said it was a job though. That didn't sound like termination.

"Give him hell, Samo!" called Bejon, one of his friends.

A cheer broke out spontaneously.

The Sergeant blew his whistle, but he didn't seem particularly upset. "Save your breath, maggots, you'll need it. Samo will handle himself just fine."

Samharin hoped it really would be fine, for the others' sake more than his own. It would devastate his friends if he left. He could always go back to a civilian scientific career, but they were born and bred to be super soldiers. Many of them were counting on having Samharin in their ranks.

Whatever was happening, the Old Man would tell him soon enough in person.

Maybe High Councilor Nyssa would be there too?

He could always hope.

Whatever happened, Samharin would accept it, for he knew that his life was a gift.

He should have died back on Capellius.

That was a fact.

An experience like that changed a man forever.

A hovership was waiting for him at the edge of the training ground. The pilot said nothing as he strapped in. They were aloft in seconds flat, leaving the Academy far below.

Would he ever see it again?

Only fate knew the answer.

* * * * *

Theron, seated at his desk, his lifemate by his side, returned the visitor's salute. "At ease, Cadet Samharin."

Samharin moved into an at-rest stance with polished precision. Theron studied him with a lifetime's military experience. In a matter of seconds he could tell if a man was going to succeed in the Corps. This man had all the keys to success. He was clear-eyed, levelheaded without a trace of the arrogance he often saw in young cadets.

Still, he wasn't primale. He was mem, and much as Theron loved and trusted Nyssa, there was the distinct possibility she was making a mistake with this one.

Theron was all for change, up to a point, if it strengthened the Earth's ability to fight and adapt. But opening the Corps to mems could lead to disaster.

And why send the man to the Gettysburg Project, rushing his commission as an officer to get him there, no less?

Theron had agreed to a provisional commission. Officially he would retain the rank of cadet. This Samharin would have to prove himself. Yes, he had saved lives on Capellius as a civilian, showing the heart of a lion. But serving as a soldier in warfare was quite a different thing.

Nyssa felt that Samharin would understand this Narthian in a way no one else could. A couple of outsiders, she called them.

Nyssa was a bit of an outsider too, he realized. But she was his responsibility. So were the rest of the Earth's people.

"Cadet Samharin, how handsome you look in your uniform," said Nyssa brightly. "The Academy clearly agrees with you."

Theron rankled. Nyssa did not need to be handing idle praise to one of his men and she most certainly did not need to be noticing the attributes of other males. She was his woman and his alone. Innocent as her compliment might be, it could not help but stir his primale blood.

His lovely dark-haired mate would pay the price later when this meeting was over, writhing, naked in bondage, begging to be possessed as his property. His fingers would brand her, searing touches along her insolent curves, reducing her in whimpers to his pledged obedient.

That was what she wanted though, wasn't it? She was egging him on, as always.

Such a subtle, maddening symbiosis the two of them shared.

Too, Theron detected the note of triumph in her voice, a subtle "I told you so" as over and against his initial vehement objections to sending Samharin to the Academy in the first place.

"Your academic holo records indicate your progress is adequate," Theron acknowledged. "Though there are areas you need to improve upon."

"Yes Sir," said Cadet Samharin, judiciously avoiding further comment.

"Nonetheless," Nyssa put her hand on Theron's shoulder. "We are proud of you."

Theron frowned, never one to share emotion easily. "You are still in the Academy, Samharin," he said simply. "Obviously that indicates we are sufficiently satisfied with your performance so far."

"Thank you, Sir, Ma'am," he replied, his clear blue eyes intent as any primale's.

All in all, Samharin was exceptional for a mem specimen, muscular, six feet tall with broad shoulders and a square jaw. Give him a dose of primale genetics and he would have been as good as any Guardian who had ever served.

Theron's frown deepened. How did he begin to prepare this young man for a mission he barely grasped himself?

Samharin was about to venture into a place no human being had ever been. He was going to attempt a deeper communion with the Narthian.

Nyssa had also shared some half-baked ideas of him making sex with obedients. This was not something Theron could easily imagine.

Obedients didn't just need strong, handsome men, they needed ruthless dominators who would put them happily in their place as love slaves.

Mems made sex well enough, they made women moan and sigh, but did they know how to make a woman beg?

They were not Masters.

"Cadet," said Nyssa, beginning the formal briefing. "As you no doubt have guessed, you have been summoned here for an extraordinary purpose. We have a mission for you, one that is both extremely vital and top secret. Are you prepared to give of yourself, wholly and completely?"

Samharin looked back and forth between the two galactic leaders, his eyes registering little emotion. "My life is a gift," he said. "I do not hold on to it greedily."

Theron could find nothing to argue with in the young man's statement. It was as bold as it was humble. "You are well aware that the High Councilor and I have faith in you. You know that many people look to you as a kind of symbol."

"I do my duty," he said simply. "That's all I've ever done."

"And as part of that duty, you have fought the Narthians," he said.

"They are our enemy," he said without hesitation. "I will fight them to the death."

Nyssa squeezed Theron's shoulder. "But what if that should change, Cadet?"

Samharin stiffened. "That could never change."

Theron sighed. He shared in Samharin's belief, though he would not say so.

"But all things change," said Nyssa. "At one time a mem like you would never have dreamed of being a Guardian."

"That is true, Ma'am."

"Things change," she repeated. "Living beings change. They have to in order to survive."

"Yes Ma'am," he said cautiously, eyes narrowed. "But I'm not sure I see the connection."

Theron's frown straightened into a slight smile. Samharin was not just a born fighter, he was suspicious by nature. That was a good quality to have as a Guardian, a very good one.

"Hear the High Councilor out," Theron ordered. "Then see what you think."

"Yes Sir."

"Change is already happening," Nyssa continued. "And we cannot fall behind. Recently we had an interaction with the Narthians of an unparalleled kind. We had received intelligence telling us of an internal Nest War, a rebellion by a particular Nest against the Central Command. We were able to save one of the rebels, whom we call Abe. He has been helping us by giving us Narthian technology and helping us develop a common language. It is our hope we might be able to make peace."

"Barring that, we intend to use the new NARTHIAN weapons against them to turn the tide of the war," Theron was quick to add. "We will wipe them out if necessary."

"Whatever occurs," said Nyssa, taking back the floor, "we must learn to communicate better with Abe. We need a unique person to help us. We need you."

"Begging your pardon, Ma'am," said Samharin, echoing Theron's own thoughts. "I'm not a linguist."

"You are a trained exobiologist," said Theron.

"Yes Sir," said Theron. "But you do understand my work was in artificial high yield soy and grain research? My training is entirely wrong."

"No one has the right training for this," Nyssa pointed out. "This is new for all of us. You will get by. And may I remind you of your strength as a unique member of your sub gender, living a singular existence that puts you in your own category. You and Abe have something in common."

For the first time Samharin showed genuine emotion. "You are comparing me to a bug, Ma'am?"

Theron kept his smile under wraps. The kid had guts all right.

"Not at all," said Nyssa. "You are human and Abe is NARTHIAN. It's wrong to think of him as just a bug though."

Samharin looked to Theron for help.

"You will also be relied upon for security, as part of Abe's bodyguard detail," said Theron, giving Samharin something more tangible to focus on as a Guardian.

"Yes Sir," he said, mollified somewhat.

"There is something else," said Nyssa.

Theron braced himself. Nyssa was going to talk sex, he could tell by her tone of voice, the slight lilt.

"Ma'am?"

"There are obedients posted to the Project," she said with just enough rasp to stir his blood. "To provide comfort to the Guardians."

Samharin lowered his brow, casting a seriously puzzled look at Theron.

"When it comes to your own comfort, though you are not a primale, we don't want you to feel...restricted," said Nyssa, refusing to cut to the chase.

Ever the coquette, he thought to himself.

"What the High Councilor is saying, Cadet," Theron laid the cards on the table, primale style, "is that you are encouraged to see to your sexual relief by making use of any of the obedients who strike your fancy."

Samharin had no reply.

"You really would have a lot to offer an obedient in bed," Nyssa encouraged. "You are quite a virile man."

Theron clenched his fists. There were times his mate drove him absolutely crazy. The last thing a primale wished to do was have his virility discussed by a female.

"You will be assigned an obedient sex slave, Cadet Samharin," he said curtly, putting an end to the whole bloody discussion. "You are to make liberal use of her while you are on the Project."

"Sir," Samharin replied crisply as he came to attention once again saluting.

"Any questions?" asked Nyssa.

"No Ma'am," he replied with understandable circumspection.

"Very well, Cadet. The details of your mission will be holloed to you," said Nyssa. "You will leave for the Project as soon as possible."

"Yes Ma'am," he said.

"Dismissed," said Theron.

Samharin saluted and turned efficiently on his heel. He marched from Theron's office, no doubt as pleased to be gone as Theron was to have him gone.

"I think that went well," said Nyssa blithely.

"Well indeed," Theron grumbled, pushing the button to close and lock his office door.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" she said.

As if she didn't know.

Theron stood and swept her into his arms. "Seems to me you used to think I looked pretty good in a uniform too, missy."

Nyssa giggled. "Methinks the fearsome Old Man is jealous."

"Primals don't get jealous," he insisted, though there was no denying the possessive way he was holding her.

"No, not at all," she said, the barest note of sarcasm in her voice.

Theron replied with a kiss, molding her lips to his. He took her breath, unabashedly, leaving her shivering and sighing in his arms, helpless.

"You are mine," he said.

"Yours," she replied without hesitation.

They held each other now, just listening to each other's heartbeat.

"Did I do the right thing?" she asked at last, revealing to her husband an extremely rare moment of doubt as a leader. "Sending Samharin?"

"You followed your intuition, my love." He kissed her forehead again and again. "You can never go wrong doing that."

Indeed, hadn't that led them to each other?

Or was it genetics?

Whatever it was, they were together, inseparable.

Theron felt a momentary sadness for Cadet Samharin. He recognized that hunger in the young man's eyes. Whether he admitted it to himself or not, he was lonely. What kind of woman could a mem Guardian find? Would he be satisfied with the no-strings-attached attentions of a fem? What if he wanted a woman to call his own?

Perhaps Samharin would find her out there, in the depths of space, in the midst of Gettysburg.

Nyssa had made him enough of a romantic to make him hope for such a thing, even as he worried for the security of the entire Earth.

The stakes were high, higher than they had ever been.

What if this was all some trap? What if Abe were a Narthian spy?

Time would tell.

All would be well.

They had, after all, been in tougher spots before.

Chapter Three

As Samharin's ship prepared to land at the secret location, he wondered one last time if this might all be a test, his being called into the Old Man's office to hear some bizarre story of communicating with Narthians and making sex with obedients.

What if there was no Gettysburg Project, no Abe and no obedient pleasure woman he was supposed to make sex with?

He had half expected someone to beam him a punch line during the space flight, making the whole thing an elaborate joke.

But so far, no one was cracking a smile.

If it was a joke they had gone to some pretty great lengths, sending him all the way out here to the middle of nowhere.

"Landing procedure," called the soft, feminine voice of the guidance computer. "Prepare to disembark."

He took a deep breath. *Last chance for someone to scream "April Fool's"*, he thought.

Samharin had had no chance to speak to his friends and fellow classmates. Upon leaving the General's office, an adjutant had escorted him directly to the hangar for transport.

His journey had been solo, with nothing to pass the time but the reams of data from the Project.

This elaborate hoax, if that's what it was.

Talk about ironies. He had joined the Guardians in order to fight Narthians and here he was about to make friends with one.

And he would also have himself a pleasure slave.

No sense mincing words, that's what the obedients were. He had been around some while on leave with his friends. They were singularly beautiful, sexy and focused beyond belief on pleasing males.

Obedients were a primale's reward, it was said, for the sacrifices made in the war. If fighting the filthy, acid-spewing bugs was hell, then having an obedient at one's beck and call was heaven.

Obedients were just as their name implied. Their very arousal was tied into domination. They needed orders, they needed discipline, they craved a man's absolute control over their lives, their bodies.

Once claimed, an obedient was a primale's slave for life. Primales were more than up for the challenge. Once bonded to a particular obedient, a primale could never let her go, could never take another.

Obedient pleasure women were the exception. A primale could make use of such a communal sex slave without bonding. Stationed at rest bases and colonies, pleasure women were understood to be everyone's property, as much to one's eagerly waiting fellows as to one's self.

The female, in turn, submitted her body to every primale taker, understanding her duty as that of relieving the stress of the company.

Resistance on her part would be unthinkable. It was, after all, genetic. The presence of a dominant male made them hot and wet. They panted, they sighed. They were unquenchably needy.

Any primale would do. But no mem would ever suffice. Mems wanted free and equal lovers. They might play sexual games, but they would never be able to satisfy the obedient's need to be controlled, even to the point of being taken in ropes and chains or erotically punished with the spanking hand or whip.

High Councilor Nyssa had spoken of how virile Samharin was, but truly, she could not understand the biological situation.

As much as an obedient wished to be pleasing, she couldn't make her body do what it didn't want to do.

Mems were not arousing to obedients, it was a fact.

Some poor obedient would be assigned to him as his slave.

Would he object to sexmaking with a gorgeous, helpless, willing woman? Of course not. But he had to be realistic. He could not be the kind of lover she needed.

The ship landed with barely a sound. There was the slight hiss and a clicking sound indicating the switching off of the main engines and then the door slid open to reveal a bright, grassy expanse, bathed in sunshine, very like the Earth.

He looked around for some sign of human life. There was a structure nearby, tall and round with a single sliding metal portal.

The portal began to lift.

Samharin stood at full alert, in readiness for anything.

He half expected to find a tentacled monster waiting to greet him, the Narthian Abe. Instead there was a human female, the most beautiful and radiant one he had ever laid eyes on.

Samharin could not move from the doorway to the ship. It was as if her beauty had frozen him in place, the pure sensuality of her long dark hair, highlighted in blue, her curvaceous body and pale skin.

Raising her head, she made eye contact.

Regal, like a queen.

But a queen she was not.

At this point, with the grace of an angel and the playfulness of a sprite, his welcoming committee made her approach.

Her walk was saucy, hips sashaying.

She was used to men wanting her, used to wanting them.

"You are Cadet Samharin?" she said, speaking his name as though it were slightly beneath her dignity.

Something in him stirred, deep and ancient, almost primeval. "I am he. And you are...?"

The female's button nose tipped slightly higher in the air. He had the distinct impression she was passing herself off as something she wasn't.

"I am Deyna," she said, putting as much emphasis on the syllables as possible, as though it were the name of a Councilor or a Cult Priestess. "I am your escort."

He arched a brow. If Deyna was an escort, it was hardly of the ambassadorial kind. "You are an obedient," he said, making it a statement and not a question.

Deyna stiffened. "That really isn't your concern, whatever I am."

He arched a brow. She was insolent, that's what she was.

He watched her shake out her hair, long silky tresses of raven's-wing black highlighted with an azure color, almost neon. Her blue eyes were done in an Egyptian style and her lips were thinly painted with a teasing shade of gold. She wore black silk, a wraparound style, belted in gold, cut low between her full breasts and high on her right hip. Her sandals were golden, the straps winding high up her shapely calves.

She had a bracelet on her left arm, a twisting gold asp. It was her bangs that got him most, at one minute cute and sweet and then maddeningly sexy.

She looked like Cleopatra, though the ensemble was not designed to convey power and majesty.

Someone had dressed her up for play. She was on display, right down to the dangling hoop earrings of gold from her dainty pink earlobes.

"I had expected someone a little more important to greet me," he said, his tone light enough.

He intended no meanness. Samharin was not that kind of person. What he did want was to see her squirm a little.

She frowned, full red lips pouting in a most pleasing way. "Are you in the habit of being this rude to everyone you meet, *Cadet*?"

She emphasized the last word, making it clear she didn't think he was particularly important either.

"Only to those who are rude first. If you would kindly take me to the Officer of the Day or to the ranking Guardian so I can report in," he said. "It would be greatly appreciated."

"Everyone is busy," she said. "You will find this place isn't like other Guardian posts. We're pretty informal."

It was Samharin's turn to frown. For some reason the dark-haired beauty was irritating him to no end. "I'm glad that arrangement works for you. Some of us have missions to complete, however, which require interaction with the chain of command."

She barely hid a smirk. "Boy, are you full of yourself."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

He had heard her, though he could not believe his ears. "Are you in the habit of speaking this way to Guardians? This kind of attitude could get you in serious disciplinary trouble. Though in your case that would probably amount to a spanking over someone's knee."

She screwed up her face. "Go on, *mem*, give it a try. See how far you get."

So that was it. She was testing him because of his gender. He would have to get used to this, he would spend his whole career proving himself.

Samharin took a deep breath. There was no way this saucy female would make him lose his cool, even if she was raising his blood pressure and giving him one hell of an erection at the moment.

It was times like this he really wished he could control the blood flow to his cock like a primale. The last thing this conceited obedient needed was to see she was having an effect on him.

"Is it really true that everyone else is busy?" he asked, keeping his tone even and level.

She shrugged. "There are the guards. The others are all in the Interface Room. They have had some kind of breakthrough or other with that creepy spider thing everyone is always fawning all over."

He suppressed a smile. "That is our esteemed NARTHIAN guest you are referring to."

"It's a hideous monster to me," she dismissed.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Old enough."

He pegged her at twenty-three or twenty-four, though it was hard to tell with obedients, bred as they were for youthful appearance and vitality.

Samharin tended to think of them as cut-out dolls. This one had spunk, though, and that made her stand out. It was as enticing as it was aggravating.

"So you were designated as the welcoming committee?"

"Obviously," she said with ill-disguised disdain.

"You had something better to do?" he said dryly.

"I could be taking a nap," she said.

"Or serving one of your primale Masters," he said.

Where had that come from? What did it matter to him how this Deyna spent her time?

Deyna cocked her hip, quite satisfied with herself. "If you are that interested, I could give you details."

Samharin made a mental note to guard his tongue with this one. She was clever, very clever. "That will not be necessary."

"Are you sure?" Her eyes flicked to his erection, a whisper-quick motion under thick, sultry lashes.

Wench. He could take hold of her right now and kiss her into submission. Listen to him, he sounded like a primale.

Did this female know what she was doing? Did she care?

Samharin could not have been more surprised. Obedients were supposed to be meek and mild. This one was more like a fem.

Just the sort of fem he would love to take home for the night.

"Turn around," he ordered.

She blinked at him, taken aback.

"I gave you an order...obedient."

Deyna put her back to him without another word.

"Hold up your hair," he said. "With both hands."

She resisted only a moment. Slowly, with surprising grace, she slid her fingers into her tresses. Her pink nails, long and delicate, parted the dark silk streaked with the vibrant blue.

Her breathing was slow and delicate. Her hip turned out. She was a pleasure woman, all right, unable to help herself. The sight of those earrings, the single gold loop pierced through her ear made him think of chains on her body.

Might she be pierced elsewhere?

His eyes drank in the sight of her, trying to memorize every curve, the flow of her back all the way to the swell of her perfect ass.

She needed a spanking...and he wanted to give it to her.

"You did not wish to greet me," he said. "Why not?"

"You know why," she replied, her voice slightly husky.

He caught the scent of her, the sweet jasmine perfume.

"Assume I am ignorant and tell me," he said.

"You are a submale," she said, employing a derogatory term for mems.

"I am a Guardian," he corrected. "A provisional officer."

She said nothing, though her chest rose and fell a little more quickly. He had the impression she would start if he touched her, or would she scream?

It would be interesting to deal with her further, alone.

"That will be all," he said, his voice harsh and dominant, like those of his friends at the Academy. "Put your hands down, turn back and face me."

Deyna was flush.

Her eyes showed anger but her body told a different story.

She tried to hide her erect nipples, crossing her arms over her chest. "If you are quite done..."

"Yes," he said. "For now."

She bristled. He had left it open ended.

"I'm supposed to take you to the Interface Room," she said.

He smiled, slowly, predatorily. "Then that's what you should do, *obedient*."

Deyna's lower lip trembled but she said nothing as she turned and led him inside the round structure and down a long, white corridor.

Samharin smiled to himself at his victory, though it was not without his risks.

Distraction was something he could ill afford.

There ought to be a million questions in his mind right now about the mission, but he could think of little but his interaction with Deyna. Nor could he see anything but the swaying shape of her ass.

A couple of times he nearly reached out to smack it.

And why not? It was designed to be smacked. Who knew how many hands had been on that bottom already and how many more would feel it quivering in the future.

For some reason this idea disturbed him. It wasn't that he objected to Deyna being spanked into the submission she clearly craved so desperately, it was just that he wanted it to be him.

It was an odd feeling. A distinctly primale feeling.

I have been hanging around the brutes too long, he told himself sardonically.

Wouldn't they have a good laugh over all this afterward, he thought, he and Darthus and Bejon over a few tankards of pseudo-beer at some flyover pub.

Then again, maybe it wouldn't be funny at all.

Maybe he would never even see them again.

Whatever was going to happen, he was bound and determined to get his hands on Deyna.

And not just his hands, but the rest of his anatomy as well.

* * * * *

Deyna's palms were sweating as she moved down the corridor, Samharin right behind her. Her heart was pounding in her chest. How could this be happening? She was humiliated. A *mem—a mem*—had made her display herself and she had not only done so, she had derived sweet pleasure from the act. Her pussy sopping wet, her nipples, tight and hard as though she had been commanded by a primale.

Sure, this mem Guardian was handsome as sin, tall and broad shouldered with gray-blue eyes and the most amazing dimples. And the way he carried himself, like he had been in a million battles already and didn't give a damn if he lived or died.

It was all in his attitude, confidence without swagger, power with nothing to prove. She had known primales who hadn't been this sexually prepossessing. And to think she had intended to mock him when she met him.

There was so much at stake. All the obedients had been abuzz about the newcomer, this mem in primale's clothing. All of them had been curious about his sexual prowess but none would ever allow themselves to submit.

Deyna would be mortified if anyone found out the effect he had had on her. She had displayed her ass for him. She had lifted her hair and held her body for his pleasure, subtle, but quite real. She had not known what to expect next. She had been afraid to breathe. At one point she had imagined him reaching out, touching her, or even smacking her ass for her insolence.

She would never have dreamed of treating a primale like that.

She had thought he would be a pushover.

He was not. He had given her orders, taken over.

What if he ordered her to do other things?

Would he have the audacity?

She couldn't trust him. That was for sure. She would have to regard him as hostile. No more giving him opportunities to have his way with her, even verbally. Best off to avoid him entirely, give him no ammunition.

He was so attractive though. And that scent of his, musky and clean and masculine. It added to that overall presence, the complete assault he made on her senses.

Sometimes it was hell being an obedient, especially a pleasure woman without a Master of her own. And now this. It was difficult enough to be the sexual servant of so many men, slave to none, but to have her body at the whim of a mem, this was too much. A cruel joke of nature.

The only one she could trust was Penya. Penya knew what man trouble was all about. She had loved Commander Vandar and pledged her body and soul to him only to have him fall for Doctor Reeve, the beautiful redhead.

A fem, no less.

Was the entire universe turning upside down?

Penya would understand. She would help her.

In the mean time, she must stay away from this new Guardian as much as possible.

She now led him through the domed observation room, through which one could see the stars at night. Sometimes she came here when she had a free moment to look up at the faraway lights, wondering if somewhere a man might live who would claim her as his own.

It was a vain dream.

Her reality was the never-ending line of Guardian lovers who came to her bed or called her to theirs to serve.

Deyna could take no more.

She pointed toward a long passage way. "The Interface Room is down there. You can't miss it."

"You were instructed to accompany me there," he reminded.

Her stomach did a hot flip as he asserted himself once again. "I've taken you almost all the way."

"Almost doesn't count."

Deyna shook out her hair, her cheeks stinging pink. "You don't have to be a prick about this, you know."

"How am I being a prick?"

"By rubbing my nose in the fact that you're a Guardian and can order me about," she said.

"I did not give you the order, someone else did."

"Stop putting my words under a microscope," she snapped. "You know what I mean."

"Not without your telling me I don't."

"Look." She put her hands on her hips. "You can just go down that hall yourself and no one will ever know. I would think you would be happy to be rid of me, you obviously don't like me."

"I like you fine," he said.

Deyna's breath caught in her throat. His reaction caught her completely off guard. She shouldn't care what he thought...should she?

"You have a pretty bizarre way of showing it," she said.

He smiled. The angle of his lips slayed her on the spot. No primale had ever looked so good to her...or drove her so intensely crazy. How was this possible?

"Seems like we got off to a bad start, maybe we should try again?" he suggested.

Did Deyna dare?

"If you mean could we be acquaintances or something, polite contacts and all, I guess that's doable," she said carefully. "I'm sorry, but nothing physical is possible. I don't respond physically to mems."

Liar, liar, little pussy on fire, she grimaced internally.

Most certainly she was not *supposed* to be responding.

"Did I say I wanted anything physical, Deyna?"

His question exposed her, put her on the defensive.

Damn it, he was getting the best of her again, toying with her almost.

"No..." she admitted.

If she were bolder, like a fem, she might ask him about that erection he was sporting. Surely that betrayed some level of interest though.

"It might be interesting," he pointed out, "for you to relate to a man as something other than his sexual vessel."

Deyna's heat turned to rage, instant and hot. "I don't know what you're implying, but I'm more than a body. I'm a complete woman and that is how I am treated."

His smile struck her as condescending. "Let's not kid ourselves, Deyna."

"Kid ourselves how?" she demanded.

He shrugged. "I have seen how your kind is treated. Don't forget, I hear what the primales say when your kind isn't around."

Deyna burned to know but she dared not ask. She would do anything to better please the primales who took her, anything.

I hate you, she thought. In a few short minutes you have managed to make me question myself to the core.

"And I know what they say about mems," she shot back. "When you aren't around. I have news for you. You aren't a man in their eyes. Or mine."

The words had come out too quickly for her to stop them.

His eyes turned a shade darker, from blue to black.

She took a step backward, knowing she had gone too far.

"I didn't mean —"

"Yes, you did." He took hold of her arm.

"Let go of me," she said, her voice trembling.

"You've pushed me hard," he said, studying her intently. "Is it my hand you want on your backside?"

Deyna gasped. "Absolutely not."

She squirmed but could not get free. He might not have super primale strength, but he was a man, more than powerful enough to overcome her.

"What then?" he said.

Not waiting for an answer, he leaned in close.

Before she could react he took her lips, connecting her mouth to his in a surprisingly hot and potent kiss.

Samharin stole her breath and rendered her submissive in seconds. She closed her eyes, shamed at her body's response. She shouldn't want this man, shouldn't even like him, much less feel the familiar helpless heat between her legs as his body pressed to hers, demanding.

Oh gods, the way he kept his cool, taking from her, probing, plucking at the strings of her desires.

If he kept this up she would end up begging...

She marveled at his technique. He handled her like he had done this before, not just to pleasure another woman but to her in particular. It was almost like he had known her in some previous life, if such a thing was possible. The way their lips fit, hot, dry, promising, needy. This was a beginning but it didn't feel like an end.

Her nipples pushed through the silk, obedient, ready.

She had challenged him and he had asserted his manhood.

He had won the battle for her body.

Her thighs parted. She craved his hand, hot, hard, punishing on her ass, she wanted him to put her in her place at his feet or on her back, conquered, legs wide.

She panted, breathless.

His kiss was too soft to suit her.

How long was this going to go on?

His tongue was right there at the edge of her teeth. Was he going to enter?

Samharin stopped short of probing her mouth. She would have taken his tongue in, like a pussy accepts a cock...like her pussy wanted to accept his cock.

His hands found her upper arms, prying their bodies apart. She couldn't see straight, couldn't breathe.

"You can go now," he told her. "I will find my own way to the Interface Room."

Her knees nearly buckled.

The bastard, the absolute, smug bastard.

He had fixed her good.

For several seconds she could not move.

"I said you are dismissed, Deyna."

"Yes," she whispered.

It had been on the tip of her tongue. She had nearly called him Sir. She whirled on her heels, hurrying away.

"Deyna," he called out.

Her heart nearly skipped a beat. She turned about, unable to breathe.

"I am allowed the use of the obedient pleasure women," he said. "I should like to have one for later on tonight."

"Oh?" She tried to keep her voice steady.

"Yes," he said, his voice betraying no emotion.

Did he plan to choose her? She would have no say in the matter. No matter what her personal feelings for this man she would be required to please him...or face the displeasure of her primale Masters, first and foremost the indomitable Commander Vandar.

"Samharin, I have already indicated, it is not possible for me to be aroused by —"

"I did not say I was choosing you," he interrupted. "Though the thought seems to be on your mind."

She flushed red, humiliated. If he were to tell the other girls she would be a laughingstock. Not only had she responded to his kiss, now she was being rejected by him.

"It was my thought that you could recommend a girl for me," he said.

Something sharp zapped through Deyna. The only thing worse than serving this man herself would be having another serve him.

"Is that a problem?"

"No," she said. "There are lots of females to choose from. You need only tell me your tastes."

"I shall have to give the matter consideration. I certainly enjoy a woman's nipples. How do yours compare in sensitivity?" he asked.

"I-I couldn't say," she stammered, the tiny buds throbbing and aching in reply.

"Touch them," he said.

"To-touch them?"

He frowned. "Are you slow, pleasure slave?"

"No," she replied. Touching one finger to the center of each breast, she did as instructed.

Her entire body quivered in response. She needed to be taken, here and now. If not by Samharin, then by someone else.

"Your nipples seem sensitive," he noted.

"Yes..."

"You like to have them played with?"

She nodded, enraptured.

"Are you wet?" he asked.

She bit her lip, refusing to answer.

He spoke sternly, his words lashing like a whip. "Are you aroused or not, pleasure slave?"

"I am," she croaked.

He nodded. "That is important too. I shall come up with more characteristics and let you know."

She whimpered. "I'm not aroused for you, just so you know."

"Of course," he said.

He didn't sound convinced.

"I mean it," she said. "I want a primale to use me. I am going to find one."

"Will you command him to use you?" he asked, amused.

"No," she said petulantly.

"I don't want you making sex right now," he said.

"Ex-excuse me?"

"I want you to stay aroused. It will help you focus later when you are choosing the right sex slave for me."

Her mouth gaped.

With that he turned and walked away.

She watched him, stunned, his beautiful, hard ass, his broad shoulders, his unbelievable arrogance.

I'll ignore him, she thought. I will do what I want.

The idea sounded good in her head, in her heart though, she knew she would be obedient to the words of Samharin the Guardian, Samharin the mem.

If she thought it was a dream she would pinch herself.

It was real though, the most real thing she had ever felt in her life.

Chapter Four

"You must be Cadet Samharin," said the tall, red-haired woman holding out her hand.

She was strikingly beautiful with green eyes and a gleaming smile. Her uniform was that of a psychosensologist, first rank.

Her lithe body was framed by the doorway of the Interface Chamber. Samharin was dying of curiosity.

"Yes Ma'am," he replied with a crisp salute, force of habit for anyone in the Corps, particularly in the lowest ranks.

The woman laughed. "At ease, Cadet. This is hardly the Academy and I am certainly not your superior."

"I wouldn't be so sure, Ma'am," said Samharin.

He could sense the woman's raw intelligence, as pervasive as her natural beauty. No doubt she had lots to teach him.

"My name is Doctor Reeva, but I'll have your hide if you call me anything but Reeva," she said with a wink.

Samharin smiled slantedly. He sensed nothing untoward, just a genuine friendliness and egalitarianism. "In that case, please call me Samharin."

"Absolutely, Samharin." She took a deep breath as though cleaning her mind of stray thoughts. "We have a lot of ground to cover and we can't waste time. You're about to watch history unfold."

"Reeva, what in blazes are you doing out there?" grumbled a deep masculine voice coming from the other side of a tall white partition.

Samharin could not stop the urge to snap back to attention once more at the sight of the tall Guardian, the chest of his uniform marked with a gold Commander's crest.

Obviously he was Reeva's lifemate, Vandar, the senior officer.

"Darling, this is Samharin," said Reeva, her eyes lighting in obvious love at the sight of the Commander.

Vandar scowled, though he did not appear particularly angry. "Must you insist on calling me darling in front of my men?"

She gave him a half hug and a peck on the cheek. "Oh stop being such a Vandarsaurus Rex, will you?"

Vandar flashed Samharin a glare, as if daring him to crack a smile. Samharin cleared his throat. Obviously they were a lively and playful pair. Samharin wondered how he handled her fem spunkiness being that he was a primale. Such a union of sub

genders would have been beyond impossible a few years ago, but times were changing fast.

One thing was certain. Reevea was right, this place seemed as far from a military base as one could get.

"Where is Deyna?" Vandar wanted to know. "She was supposed to bring you here."

Samharin had no wish to get the saucy obedient in trouble. If she was to be spanked by anyone, it would be by him. "Begging your pardon, Sir, I sent her away."

Vandar narrowed his gaze. "Is she not to your liking?"

Samharin shifted uncomfortably. He had never wanted a woman so badly in his life, which was amazing, because she was an obedient. Her kind was notorious for being sexually passive, far too dependent on men. Fems with their free-loving natures and no-strings-attached attitude were more his speed.

Fems went with mems, everyone knew that.

Had the Academy changed Samharin in some subtle way, or was there something particular about Deyna that made him want to dominate her?

The answer had to be yes, given how he had played with her in the hall, having her touch herself for his amusement.

And there were so many other possibilities.

She would look fetching in chains, for example.

"Speak up, Cadet," said Vandar. "Don't be intimidated by Reevea's presence. She's a psychosensologist, it's not like she won't guess what's on your mind already."

Damn. In the excitement of things, Samharin had forgotten that the doctor's profession involved intuition and some limited psychic abilities along with a thorough-going knowledge of human mental functioning and adaptation.

Clearly it was time to confess.

"I found Deyna very attractive, Sir," he acknowledged.

"Good." Vandar nodded. "That will make it easier, because she's yours for the duration."

"Sir?" Samharin's pulse raced.

"Don't make me repeat myself," said Commander Vandar. "I am assigning you the female to serve your sexual and comfort needs. She will be yours exclusively. We'll have her stowed in your quarters now if you wish."

Reevea gave her husband's chest a light, admonishing slap. "What are you talking about 'stowing'? Deyna's not a sack of potatoes to be dragged about. She's a human being, Vandar."

The Commander scowled. Samharin gathered this was not the first time they had had this debate. "Deyna is a pleasure girl. She has no problem accepting her identity as a male possession, why do you?"

Samharin's cock throbbed at the mention of her being a possession. The thought of owning Deyna, even temporarily, was more than he dared dream.

"She might be an obedient," Reeve argued back. "But she has her own thoughts and feelings."

"If she does, that's due to your meddling," said Vadar.

Reeve rolled her eyes. "Could we please fill Samharin in on the Project and save our debates for later?"

"Later, indeed," said Vadar. He paused now to whisper something in Reeve's ear. She shivered a tiny bit, sucking in her lower lip. Samharin had a strong feeling Reeve would get her comeuppance tonight in their personal chambers.

Could it be the stately, beautiful doctor submitted to her mate behind closed doors? It made sense. No primale, least of all a man as powerful and vital as Vadar, could live without taking his woman completely as his own, body and soul.

It was Reeve's turn to clear her throat. "I trust you have studied the data, Cadet? Our records indicate you are a trained exobiologist. You made sense of our findings?"

"For the most part," Samharin admitted. "Though a lot of it went over my head."

"It's all right," said Reeve. "We're all in the same boat. This is entirely fresh territory. We are having to develop a whole new language, not just for communication but in order to categorize our findings."

Samharin considered her words. He doubted they could be in the same boat at all. Not unless Reeve had faced Narthians in combat. If she had she would find little joy and excitement in studying one.

"Narthian physiology is more complex than I would have expected," said Samharin judiciously. "We have thought of them as insect-like, but I see they have characteristics of reptiles and even marsupials."

"Precisely. And the simplicity of it all," said Reeve. "They reproduce as efficiently as a virus and just as mysteriously."

Samharin nodded. Viruses were scarcely alive by some definitions and yet who could deny their pervasive powers of replication. "I could spend a lifetime with just what you have given me so far, Doctor—Reeve."

"That will be for someone else," said Vadar. "We've been told you can help us here and now with our telepathic links."

This was the part Samharin dreaded. "Sir, I must tell you I am not extraordinary in my ESP scores."

He wanted to add that he had no idea why he had been sent at all. He might have questioned the High Councilor Nyssa and her idea of him bonding with Abe as a fellow outsider, but that would lead to other inquiries, such as why she had seen him as a Guardian candidate in the first place.

Nyssa worked by intuition. She was known to be impulsive and bold. Theron, solid and stalwart, was her balance, her check in life. Together they had guided the Earth Federation through myriad crises.

"You are open, Samharin," said Reeva, clearly speaking from her own extrasensory side. "You are the bridge. Your pain will touch Abe's."

Samharin had no idea how to respond. He waited silently.

"Right now we are working on taste," Vandar continued. "We are translating the sensations between the brain structures of the two races."

Reeva grinned enthusiastically. "Abe has been sampling ice cream, or at least the molecular breakdown of ice cream. He is about to tell us his favorite flavor. That is why we've all stuck so close to the Interface Chamber this morning."

Samharin tried to picture a Narthian sampling the traditional frozen confection of old Earth. Which mouth would it use, how would it apply its complex tongue structure?

Of course, it was being done at the molecular level. No messy dripping cones.

Vandar put his hand on Samharin's shoulder, the grip was strong, eminently primale. "You ready to meet Abe?"

"Yes Sir," said Samharin, marveling that a Guardian, never mind such a high-ranking one, was actually treating him with something close to affection.

There were indeed interesting things afoot at the Gettysburg Project and he couldn't wait to learn more.

* * * * *

Deyna found Penya combing out her long, shimmering blonde hair. She was seated in front of her old-fashioned glass mirror applying her antique horsehair brush.

Penya was a born romantic, which was a shame, because as yet no knight in shining primale armor had come along to claim her.

At one time she had loved Commander Vandar, but his destiny lay with another. The Commander had encouraged her submission to his young lieutenant, Guardian Sordon, but Sordon was too much of a confirmed bachelor like Vandar had been.

Deyna hated to see her friend pining. Frankly, she didn't think males were worth idolizing. Most of them had only one thing on their minds when it came to females. For mems it was about copulating with as many as possible, wooing and seducing and such nonsense.

Primals wanted immediate compliance and they weren't afraid to punish females who were slow in coming around to their point of view. They satisfied their women exceedingly well because it pleased them to do so, the insolent beasts. Hearing a woman moan and writhe in orgasm, one wrought by their hands, utterly under their control, was the ultimate rush.

A few times she had tried to explain such things to Doctor Reeva. The psychosensologist was endlessly curious about obedient psychology, probably because she had found herself mated to a primale.

It was crucial that Reeva shared this bond. Deyna had not even wanted to speak with Reeva until she was sure the fem woman was open to understanding and accepting submissive experiences.

"Does the Commander spank you?" Deyna had asked point blank.

The doctor's cheeks had turned nearly as red as her silky locks but she answered nonetheless. "Yes," she had said, her eyes straying to her hands.

"Frequently?"

"Whenever he likes," Reeva had admitted.

"So you are not equal in the confines of your bed chamber?" Deyna had asked.

Reeva had shaken her head no. "He pushes me almost as hard as he would an obedient."

"And you accept this?" Deyna had asked.

"My body belongs to him," Reeva had replied. "He does with it as he wills. I love him, I love all that he does to me."

They had gotten on well after that. Deyna knew she could trust Reeva even if she was a fem.

Deyna had to admire her, actually. It was easy for fems to talk about wanting to be with a primale and plenty did in a giggly sort of way. But Reeva had put her heart...and her ass on the line.

Vandar was the kind of primale who mated for life. Some did, some didn't. A lot of Guardians considered themselves mated to the Corps. If that was the case, then women like her and Penya were the slaves of the Corps.

Their bodies, their asses, their orgasms belonged to the detachments they were assigned to. Guardians came and went, new faces all the time, but with every new lover came the same expectations.

Absolute submission.

Complete self-sacrifice.

The man spanking you today or ordering you to your knees might die at the front tomorrow.

Best not to remember anyone, best not to get attached.

Penya had a heart and that was bad.

Commander Vandar had brought her here, taking her from the pleasure ship that had served the base he had formerly commanded. It was there he had met Reeva and Abe too. Sordon had come here as well, as part of the Gettysburg Project's military detachment.

Sordon did not use any female but Penya. Yet he steadfastly refused to make a commitment to her beyond the moment.

Penya was falling for him as she had for Vandar.

The Commander had as much as ordered her to do so, hoping she would find her true love and get over her broken heart.

One couldn't order love, however. *Best to avoid it all together and hope it doesn't come one's way*, Deyna thought.

Without asking, Deyna moved behind Penya and took the brush from her hands. "You're going to wear yourself out. How long have you been combing?"

Penya sighed. "You know me."

Indeed Deyna did. The pair had met at the beginning of the Project. They were sister servants, pleasure girls. Such bonds were important.

"I never know what to do with my hair," Penya fretted.

"Please, we would all kill for hair like yours," said Deyna.

"I would give every strand of it for your eyes," Penya quipped back.

Deyna didn't think her eyes were all that special. Overall, she saw herself as average. It was better to think this way, not putting on any airs. "You could have my eyes and then I wouldn't have to see some of the visitors I've been getting to my chambers lately."

Penya giggled, putting her hand over her mouth. "Oh Deyna, you're terrible."

Deyna shrugged. "I know it is heresy not to swoon over every primale they send to us, but honestly, doesn't it all get a bit routine after a while?"

Penya sighed, taking back her brush to resume her combing. "I know what you mean. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a lifemate, live in a grand house somewhere, servants and all?"

"And a grumpy Master to be on me night and day? No thank you, I will take my round-robin lovers."

All routine...except for the new one she had met today. She had come to Penya specifically to talk about Samharin but would she be able to broach the topic?

Never mind, Penya was reading her mind.

"Out with it, girl," said Penya, sitting straight and proud in her long, white silk chemise. Her pink nipples tented the material. There was no mistaking her perfect genetically designed body shape.

If Penya looked like a man's sex dream it's because she was. So was Deyna. Though she clung to her average idea of herself, so as not to go out on a limb and expect too much.

Penya expected things and look how sad she was most of the time.

"It's nothing, really." Deyna counted Penya's brush strokes in her mind. Before she could stop herself, she was thinking of the brush in Samharin's hands. She would be

draped over his lap, whimpering, counting the disciplinary strikes to her throbbing buttock cheeks, naked and helpless.

Samharin was a mem though. Mem didn't spank and dominate their women, they played silly sex games, they wrote poetry. They did not put women in their place as pleasure objects.

"I met the new arrival, that's all."

"You mean the mem Guardian?" Penya's eyes brightened in her reflection. "What's he like? He's quite a hero, you know. He saved a whole space station from the Nartians. They say he made some kind of a weapon, sustained all kinds of bug stings and acid burns before the Guardians came to relieve him."

Deyna frowned. She did not need to be hearing heroic things about Samharin. It was difficult enough the way he looked, all chiseled and hard and masculine. Not to mention how he kissed, his lips utterly commanding, his body smelling of deep, sensuous musk.

It shouldn't have been a big deal. Deyna's lips were made for kissing, literally. She was available for use by any Guardian. The genetic engineers had been thoughtful enough to make sure she enjoyed it even, wetting for penetration, panting and coming upon command.

But Samharin had upset her. She didn't want him kissing her. He was a mem. It was embarrassing. He knew she didn't like his kind, but he had gone ahead and done it anyway. He made her enjoy it too. Compelled her in a way no Guardian had ever done.

For those few seconds, however long it was, Deyna had truly felt like the man's slave, like she was intended to belong to him and no other. His possession. His property.

How had she managed to live as an obedient this long without feeling that way before?

She obeyed every day. She took spankings because she wasn't doing things fast enough or slow enough or simply because it turned her Masters on. She knelt when told. She extended her wrists for binding, always, and she opened her legs and mouth wide, always every time.

She *was* a slave.

But she had never truly felt like one until now.

"Mems should not be Guardians," Deyna decided. "They are too weak."

"This one isn't," said Penya. "He is a hero."

"You just said that," Deyna replied. She was instantly sorry for snapping at her friend. "I must be overtired."

Penya's sapphire-blue eyes were piercing as always. "You don't seem tired."

Deyna sighed. "If you must know, he kissed me."

"Really?" Penya was making it sound like a good thing.

"I was merely escorting him to the Interface Chamber," Deyna elaborated. "He had no right."

Penya's eyes widened. "You didn't try to refuse, did you?"

"No," said Deyna with disgust. "How could I? I'm communal property like you."

"It's our glory to serve the Corps with our obedience," Penya reminded.

"Don't quote the Pleasure Slave's Oath to me, Penya, please. I'm kind of...confused right now."

Oh great, she was blinking back tears.

Penya rose, turning to face her friend. She set down her coveted brush. "Deyna, what is it?"

"I-I don't know." She sniffed. "He made me feel...strange."

Penya smiled, brushing stray hairs behind Deyna's ear. "Sounds to me like my Cleopatra has found a lovmate."

"Don't be ridiculous." Deyna bristled at the very thought. "Do you know how insulting that is? He's a mem, Penya, a mem!"

"He's also a man," Penya pointed out. "Men are our natural Masters and for every obedient there is one heart destined to rule over her, chaining her forever to his side."

Deyna restrained from indicating the obvious, that Penya had no such man in her own life. That would be cruel under the circumstances. "I shouldn't have bothered you with this, Penya."

"It's not a bother. You are my best friend. I know we have only known each other a short while, but it's felt like a lifetime."

Deyna felt the same. Life went that way sometimes, especially for obedients, owning nothing of their own and being forever at the whim of others.

"I don't know if I would have been able to hold anything back from him," said Deyna, recalling how she had obeyed Samharin, turning her body for his visual pleasure.

Not to mention the way she had touched her nipples, showing him the lust burning in her soul. How had he felt so comfortable to treat her like this after just meeting her? Wasn't he worried about her refusing? Mem's were supposed to be insecure around women, weren't they?

"Why should that bother you?" Penya asked. "Our ability to submit is a beautiful thing, it's sacred."

Deyna shook her head. "I wish I were as strong and noble as you. For me it's just annoying sometimes. I am not about to kneel for a mem. Period."

Penya's door slid open at that very moment. Sordon was on the other side. He had not buzzed to request entry. The right to privacy was not accorded to obedients.

Were Deyna a fem she would feel the sting of violation at every such intrusion. As it was, she moistened between her thighs automatically at his audacity. She and Penya

were sexual property and Sordon could command one or both of them to do as he wished.

Penya knelt. "Master," she said softly.

Deyna held her place, walking the fine line of disobedience.

He had not specifically told them to go to their knees.

But he could.

He could order them to take their clothes off as well and compel them to come to him on hands and knees.

He could also spank or whip them, for the scantest reason or none at all.

"Deyna, you are to report to A-147," said Sordon.

A-147 was a room in the Guardian's quarters. Why would she be sent there? Invariably the men came here to the pleasure girls' own chamber areas to make use of them.

"I don't understand," said Deyna.

She should have called him Master. Every Guardian was her Master. She had dropped the title when addressing Samharin and for some reason it was hard to pick it back up again.

Sordon raised a brow. He was several years younger than she, but he was primale and she was obedient, that was all the difference in the world.

Deyna lowered her eyes.

He regarded her. "You need taming, slave girl," he asserted.

"Yes, Master."

"Do you know which Guardian is assigned to A-147?" he asked.

Her stomach clenched. "No, Master."

"He is new here. He arrived today."

"Who is he?" she whispered, feigning ignorance.

He smiled. "I think you can guess. We don't get many new arrivals."

Deyna swooned. The mem, Samharin.

"Master, no, please don't make me go there."

"You are with him for the duration. He must have some pull. None of the rest of us get our own wenches."

Deyna whimpered. How could this be? She hated being a slave, she hated it.

"He's a mem," said Sordon with a wink. "Guess you'll get a chance to be on top for once."

To Deyna's amazement, Penya spoke up. "Master, please don't say that."

Sordon looked at her, shock and fire in his eyes. His lips tightened. Not taking his eyes off Penya, he said, "You have your orders, Deyna."

Deyna felt horrible. What if her friend got punished because of her? “Master —” she began.

“Go,” Sordon said sharply. “Now.”

Deyna stood and moved to the door without further argument.

It was her breeding and her genes that made her flee so quickly. She wished she could stay and help, but how could she help obeying a Master, taking no risk for *Penya’s* sake?

What if genetics could be overcome though? Samharin had found it in himself to behave as a primale and saved a space station. Now he was at the Guardian Academy, going toe-to-toe with supermen. How in the world was that possible? What kind of perseverance would a man have to have?

Maybe she was underestimating Samharin. Maybe she was afraid of his power. Maybe she was afraid of having to really submit for the first time in her life.

Not in the automatic way her body knew, but in some deeper way known only to her soul.

A-147 held the answers.

Her feet carried her, though her mind was numb.

In short order, she found herself in the Guardian housing section. She passed a pair of them in the hall. She lowered her eyes, feeling small and almost naked in their presence. They continued their conversation, paying her no notice.

She took a deep breath as she reached room A-147. It was at the end of a long corridor. She held off pushing the door button as long as she could.

The door slid open with a smooth, nearly silent rush of air.

She looked inside at the simple furnishings, so appropriate to the Spartan tastes of the average primale. The colors were gray and white and black. The walls were unadorned. There was a single hover bed, low to the ground, a sanitizing chamber in the corner, a holo projector and an objectifier. It was a full-service model, the kind that could manufacture anything molecule by molecule, from a formal evening unisuit to a bouquet of flowers.

And a whip. It could also be used to make a whip.

Stars, where had *that* idea come from?

There would be no whip making while she was in this chamber.

Sordon had said something about her having to stay here. Surely that was not the case?

Closing the door behind her, she drew a breath of relief. Samharin was not here yet. He would come at his leisure. And she would wait.

Deyna was his, assigned to him.

She trembled with anticipation.

It would be so easy to run away at this point, but she was an obedient. She had been ordered here by a primale and here was where she would stay. This room was her world, her cell.

And Samharin...he held the key to her fate, like it or not.

Her best chance was to fight him.

He would back down. He was mem.

At least she hoped he would.

Correction, a part of her hoped he would back down.

There was another part, a secret part she dared not admit to herself. What if Samharin did not back down...and what if she enjoyed it?

Chapter Five

Samharin stood his ground in the white-walled Interface Chamber, but just barely. Seeing the Narthian was proving far more difficult than he had imagined.

He had broken into a cold sweat. His head pounded, the sound silencing the hum of the various diagnostic machines manned by a small, almost invisible team of scientists.

Memories flashed like holos, split seconds of fractured nightmare, the bugs—so many of them—pouring through the broken side of the station, limbs cold and frozen from the dead void of space, hundreds of them, thousands, multiplying, thawing right before his eyes in the docking bay.

He had sealed off the bay, buying himself enough time to complete his invention, the redaction gun. A combination of sprayed acids, an idea he had been playing with based on the descriptions he had heard from some Guardians of the spurting glands on the bugs' exoskeletons.

From the wreckage of a destroyed Guardian ship, he had taken a sample of the Narthian acid. He had managed to duplicate it in the months prior to the attack.

Talk about perfect timing.

The gun was not effective at long range though. It was also subject to decay and pretty damn dangerous to use. There was a fifty-fifty chance it could have blown up in his face.

Such a death would have been far preferable to dying in a web though, or being digested in the belly of a Narthian Queen. That form of torture could take days, even weeks.

Tomaran, the station's maintenance officer, had not been so lucky. He and two of the security men had been trapped in the bay when the bugs came in.

Samharin had had to seal them in with the bugs.

The bugs were crafty, using their acids to dissolve the main hatch, in preparation for taking the station by force. It was a buffet to them, loaded with human flesh.

Samharin could have muted the speakers and spared himself the sound of the men screaming in the bay but he felt he owed it to them to hear their deaths. Samharin had nearly given in and opened the doors, but Tomaran had continued shouting at Samharin, telling him he would kick his ass if he did.

The impulse was natural to try to save his fellow humans. But the bugs would have swarmed in too and it would have been over for all of them.

Samharin also needed the incentive. He had to feel in his bones the pain that awaited failure as he worked on his gun, sixteen hours straight. Twice he fainted, slamming his head on the floor.

Seeing double, he finished the gun just in time.

It was a miracle he had that long to work. The Narthians were unable to dismantle the internal defense system any faster. They had sacrificed dozens of their own to shut down the lasers once they had broken through the bay doors.

At thirteen hundred hours, twelve minutes, two seconds, all hell broke loose.

The fifty -six occupants of the station huddled in darkness in the commissary as the power went out. Samharin left them behind, the six laser guns distributed among the men.

Unbeknownst to the rest of the occupants, their purpose was not to fight off the enemy but to ensure a merciful end should the Narthians get that far.

So much fear. Raw, naked paralysis.

Samharin could have given in. He was no different, no less scared. It just didn't feel like an option.

Life is choices. If you have a choice to survive, you do it. If heroism is the only perceived option, then you play the hero.

Samharin hated that word. It meant nothing to him. Tomaran was a hero if anyone was and all the others were dead. But the dead don't speak and you can't pin medals on them.

Any other choice...

If he had an option today, now, he would take it, anything not to be standing ten feet from a Narthian preparing to make small talk.

The only good bug is a dead bug. How many times had that been drilled into him at the Academy?

He thought of Deyna. Her image in his mind brought him strength. Her sweet smell, lilacs in spring on Earth, soft surrender and pattering rain. But she was fire too, thunder and ice. Anything and everything a man could want.

They were made that way, the obedient. Sex goddesses, a million fantasies rolled into one.

She was his to do with as he pleased. When he finished here he could go back and fuck her. Or punish her arrogant ass.

Maybe both.

"You are not like the others."

Samharin startled. The voice was in his head. Where was it coming from?

"You know the answer to that question."

He beheld the creature in front of him. It was approximately nine feet tall. Its body had three segments. The first was purplish, the second red, the third a kind of sickly

yellow. It had eyes, a dozen or more, and several mouths, or rather openings that passed for mouths. On each side were three arms, black tendrils ending in rounded pads, sticky looking.

The details were at once comforting and horrifying.

A nightmare delineated is never quite so frightening.

"You are Abe."

Samharin had thought the words rather than saying them. He was taken aback.

"Your abilities in telepathy surprise you?" Abe asked with a wave of his tentacles.

"If you mean do I resent having my mind invaded, the answer is yes."

"I can know nothing that you don't want me to know," Abe replied.

"It doesn't feel voluntary," said Samharin, trying to shake off the feeling of electrification throughout his brain.

"That's because you are fighting me. Why do you resist so? Clearly, you aren't afraid."

Samharin laughed. *"Only fools aren't afraid."*

"You are wary, there's a difference."

"They tell me you have come to help us," Samharin said, tiring of the word games.

"You doubt me." It was a statement, not a question.

"I don't see any motive," said Samharin. *"That makes me suspicious. You must be getting something out of this."*

"Why can't I be altruistic?"

"No such thing."

Abe was probing, piercing. Samharin stood his ground.

"You have died," said Abe. *"More than once."*

"Am I supposed to be impressed by that? What are you, a fortune teller?"

"I speak thoughts of yours. Does that make you uncomfortable?"

Samharin wondered about something. *"What about the others? Can they hear us now?"*

"Do you want them to?"

"I have nothing to hide."

"You cry inside, when no one sees," said Abe, continuing his probe.

"I won't keep asking," said Samharin. *"What's in this for you?"*

"An end to the war," he said.

"You Narthians like war, I thought."

"Some of us," he acknowledged. *"Then again, so do some humans."*

"I won't argue the point. But how can one being stop a war this big and this old?"

"I can give you technology for parity. We will have a balance."

"A balance of terror?"

"I can give you my soul."

"Narthians have souls?"

"I use the word for lack of a better one. I can commune with your kind. We can become...better than we were, something new."

"Our race is fine as it is."

"Why do you want to be a warrior?" Abe changed the subject. "That is not your type."

"A man can be what he wants," he bent the truth.

"I was an attendant of my Nest Queen. I no longer serve my function. I am dead to my kind. Are you dead to yours?"

"To my race? Of course not."

"But you aren't being what you were made to be."

Samharin held his temper. *"I hardly consider you an expert on humanity, with all due respect,"* he retorted.

"Strawberry," he replied. *"With all due respect."*

Samharin cocked his head. *"Excuse me?"*

"I have sampled all the ice cream," Abe explained. "And I like the strawberry best."

Chapter Six

Samharin was exhausted by the time he reached his quarters three hours later. The communing with Abe, as the NARTHIAN called it, had knocked the wind out of him. Unlike the primales who needed little if any sleep, Samharin's mem body required restorative periods on a daily basis. He had studied various forms of restorative self-hypnosis to keep up with his classmates but there were times he simply had to give in to biology.

This should have been one of them.

There was nothing he wanted more in the world than to collapse into a warm bed. Except his was already occupied, and by a pleasingly curved, dark-haired wench, no less.

Blast it, he had nearly forgotten about Deyna. The Commander had sent her here. Had she been waiting all this time?

He tapped her on the shoulder. "I need my bed. You'll have to make yourself a cot with the objectifier."

She was on her side. The hem of her garment had ridden up, baring one lovely leg and thigh. She still had her sandals on and the snake bracelet on her arm.

Stirring only a little, she mumbled something.

It sounded like "Go away".

Samharin tapped her a bit more vigorously. "I'm not going anywhere, woman, this is my bed."

She waved him off, her full lips pouting. "Sleep on the floor or something," she complained. "I'm tired."

"This is your last warning, Deyna."

She ignored him.

He leveled a single blow, right in the middle of her left ass cheek. "There's more where that came from, obedient, now get up."

Deyna squealed. "You bastard, how dare you touch me."

He wanted to do more than touch her.

And why not, wasn't she here for his pleasure?

"I'll do as I please with you, Deyna, as long as you continue to behave in such a churlish manner."

"You're looking at me again," she accused. "I warned you about that."

"Should I shut my eyes in your presence?" he asked.

"No, just don't look at me like...like I am a pleasure slave," she said.

"You are a pleasure slave, Deyna, why on Earth wouldn't I look at you as one?"

"I am for primales," she said proudly, scooting backward on her freshly punished rear end. "My body isn't for your kind."

"Commander Vandar says otherwise. You belong to me for the duration of my stay."

"Not if I have anything to say about it." She attempted to rise but he held her arm, pinning her.

"You don't have a say," he declared bluntly. "That's the whole idea of being a pleasure woman."

She smiled with utter contempt. "Go on then, use me. I bet you won't even satisfy me."

Something shifted in Samharin. He was not angry so much as determined. "You will respect me," he said. "Like it or not."

"Good luck with that." Her eyes flared.

He raised a brow as the next move occurred to him. Clutching her garment between her breasts, he pulled hard.

"Let go of my dress," she said. "It's not your property."

"No," he agreed. "But you are."

The material tore in his hands, the sound eminently satisfying.

She squealed but was unable to prevent him from stripping her bare.

"Not bad," he admired her body, from naked heaving breasts to wiggling toes.

"I hate you," she exclaimed.

"Do you now?" He had in mind an experiment. Slapping her hip lightly, he ordered her to spread for him.

"Never," she vowed.

He took her nipple, clenching it between his thumb and forefinger. He was going on sheer instinct but it seemed to do the trick. "Spread," he said again.

Deyna winced and opened her legs. "You have no right," she protested as his hand moved up her leg.

Her hands blocked her pussy.

"Do not shield yourself from my view," he said firmly.

Slowly, reluctantly, she moved her hands away.

Her sex was glorious. She was clean shaven, her lips a lovely pink. He took his time, undoing the straps of her sandals. She shuddered as he bared her feet.

"What will I find?" he wondered aloud. "When I touch you?"

"None of your business," she said petulantly, though she made no effort to inhibit him as he moved his hand slowly up her leg.

She was biting her lip. His cock throbbed, knowing how he was dominating her.

Deyna closed her eyes as he touched her just above the knee.

"Keep your eyes open," he commanded. "Look at me."

He saw they were moist, conflicted.

"We are going to be spending a lot of time together, Deyna, we shall have to get used to one another," he said. "There is no place for hiding."

"I thought I wasn't your type," she breathed.

"I never said that."

"Let me please you," she said quickly as his hand approached her pussy. "You can enjoy my mouth instead."

"You shouldn't be in such a hurry," he chided. "All in good time."

She frowned, her attempt to divert him defeated.

Deyna suppressed a moan as he pressed his finger to the ridge of her sex.

He felt the liquid oozing in response.

"I do not think you hate me after all," he said.

"I do," she vowed.

"All the more difficult for you then, given what your body wants."

"I am made to respond. It is strictly biological," she said.

He sank his finger a little deeper into her honeyed glory. She opened for him, quite automatically, just as she had said. "You said you respond only to primales," he reminded.

"Why do you insist on toying with me like this?" she spat. "If you want something, take it from me and leave me be."

"Pleasure women are made to be toyed with," he said.

He found her clitoris, brushing it with his fingertip.

She moved against his hand, shameless.

He let her work up a rhythm before abruptly denying her.

"Puh-please," she whispered as he stopped.

"Please what?" he said. "Call you a primale to finish the job?"

She regarded him, open-mouthed, trapped.

Samharin laughed. "I never thought I would enjoy this so much. I cannot wait for the next round."

Deyna gulped. "What are you going to do?"

"What would you do," he threw the question back, "if you were me?"

She shook her head. "You can't make me answer."

Samharin punished her other nipple, inducing cooperation.

"Okay," she squirmed. "You win. I would spank me."

"Good," he said. "Then that is precisely what I won't do."

She looked at him, her face registering something between awe and shock.

"I might not be an expert on domination," he reasoned. "But if I do what you want than I am being your slave, not the other way around."

"You are tricking me," she accused.

"My sole objective is to get some sleep," he explained.

"Then let me go," she said. "Release me and you will never have to see me again."

"I have been ordered to keep you."

"Fine, just let me do what I want while I'm here and I will tell everyone you are a phenomenal Master. You will appear to be a thorough-going dominant and no one will challenge you again."

He marveled at her arrogance. It was adorable, enraging and sexy as hell. He wasn't sure if playing with an obedient's mind was part of the game, but he aimed to make it so.

"I think I would rather see you dance for me."

Her eyes betrayed momentary surprise and lust. "Dance?"

"That's right. Perform for me, naked, while you tell me what it is the primales do to you."

"What they do to me?" she said, wary.

"Yes. There must be particular things that get to you, things that make you feel most like a slave?"

She shook her head. "I think it is best we get you another obedient. There are a lot of pleasure women here."

His fingers moved into her hair, forming a fist. It felt natural, instinctive. "I want you, Deyna."

"But I'm not right for you," she protested.

His features hardened. "You were given an order, slave girl, are you refusing it?"

"No..."

"No what?" He tightened his grip.

She whimpered, fighting.

"No *what*?" His touch on her breast was light, caressing, designed to make her feel sexy and full, like a soaring bird.

It was a mem's touch, designed for a free-loving fem, and under the circumstances it was bound to drive her mad.

"Oh stars..." she groaned, writhing.

He held her fast by the roots of her hair.

She looked like she might come on the spot without any contact to her pussy. "Yes, Master," she relented.

"Sir will do just fine," he decided.

He released her, feeling triumphant, exultant...dizzy.

"Begin," he ordered, pointing to a place on the floor just in front of the bed.

His head was swimming. Could she sense that he was on the edge of his abilities, barely keeping a step ahead of her? Whatever made a primale invincible in bed, he didn't have it. He could as easily be her slave if she had the will to tease him, to deny him her body.

But she didn't and maybe that was the difference.

Deyna seemed just as entranced. Standing in front of him, hands in her hair, holding her lovely locks aloft, she began to move. His cock throbbed painfully in response. Did she have any idea the effect she was having on him, her hips slowly rotating, her breasts thrust out, her pelvis blatantly displayed?

"Talk," he said throatily. "Tell me what they do to you."

"I-I don't know what to say." It wasn't willful resistance this time.

"Tell me the last time, the most recent man who had you."

She shuddered. "Varenyos," she recalled. "He is one of the Guardians. He has short, bristled dark hair. He is built very powerfully across the chest, very broad shouldered, though he is a bit short for a primale."

"Yes and what did Varenyos do to you?" Samharin sat on the edge of the bed, legs spread wide. She was close enough to touch...or punish.

Deyna was breathing heavily. She ceased moving her hips. He delivered a slap to her thigh, admonishing. "Keep dancing. I didn't say to stop."

Deyna was desperate and beautiful, pure sex, begging capture and conquest. Sleep was beginning to feel like a slim and distant possibility.

"He likes me to make a collar, a new one each time," she confessed. "I use the objectifier. I put my name on it, with a small 'd' to indicate my place as a submissive. I have to be waiting for him at the door, naked, kneeling, with the collar in my teeth."

Samharin opened the top of his cadet's uniform, pulling it over his shoulders. He bared himself to the waist, taking an extra few moments to expose his aching cock. "And is that how he found you?"

"Of course," she whispered huskily. "Varenyos isn't the kind of man you defy, not when you're born obedient."

Samharin grasped his shaft, squeezing with his hand. "What happened when he arrived?"

"I had the collar between my teeth. I was back on my heels, my knees wide apart. He stepped immediately between my open thighs, establishing dominance. He has large hands. He ran his fingers over my head, stroking my hair. I breathed hot and fast, whimpering. My erect nipples brushed his uniform. I was so helpless."

"He took the collar from my mouth and gave me his knuckles to kiss. I pressed my lips, kissing, licking. My head was down, my hair forward. I was his to do with as he wished.

"'Neck,' he commanded and I leaned my head back so he could put my collar on me. He has me trained. A single word command is all it takes. He buckled the collar on my throat, slowly, decisively, Deyna with a small 'd', his pet. Out of the corner of my eye, against the wall, I saw the cane where I had left it for his use. If I did not obey him, I knew he would beat me, or perhaps he would do so only for his pleasure.

"'Look at me, girl,' he ordered. I shuddered, barely able to meet his gaze. It was so very intimate and powerful as always. I could scarcely breathe. What would he tell me next, what would he desire? My own desires were naked to him, bare as my flesh. I longed to be subjugated, to be made to perform for him and crawl. I wanted to be used on the bed, taken from behind or else possessed by mouth, sucking him with all my energy until he came, filling me with his semen, so much of it, thick and hot."

"Yes..." Samharin grazed his hand over her hip. He had plenty of his own semen and he was ready to burst.

Instinct told him to hold back. Deyna's arousal was a flower and it had not yet bloomed in its fullness. Besides, he must make it clear he was the dominant, able and willing to make her wait on him.

"Go on," he told her.

"I-I can't," said Deyna.

Samharin stood.

"You must," he whispered, towering over her, his hand running through her silky tresses. "You are an obedient, my obedient for the time being."

Deyna moaned softly, the unwanted reality washing over her. "Please, Sir..."

His finger found her nipple. He flicked it idly, gently. She reacted as though struck with the whip, back arched.

"Don't keep me waiting," he said.

"Yes Sir..." She was panting.

So beautiful, this natural submissive, ever on the brink of surrender. How sad, though, that no man had seen fit to love her enough to make her chains permanent.

"Varenyos seized me by the ring on the front of my collar," she continued. "He hauled me to my feet like a rag doll. Three times, reaching behind me, he struck my naked ass with the palm of his hand. My bottom was on fire, though he used only a tiny portion of his primale strength.

"'I will have perfection,' he told me. 'As always.'"

"'Yes, Master,' I answered. 'Deyna is your pet and slave, she will be pleasing.'"

"'Kiss me,' he ordered. I put my lips to his, tremoring like a sparrow in a hurricane. The heat of his mouth nearly burned me to a cinder. He took the breath from my lungs. I was then ordered to move against him, as a slave girl. My nipples burned, I opened

my legs, pushing against his thigh, I held nothing back. My lust was his as I offered my body with absolute, abject surrender.

“‘Remove my uniform,’ he ordered next.

“My fingers trembled as I pushed the release button at the top of his neck. At once the uniform fell away, baring his magnificent primale chest. He pulled the uniform to his waist, signaling for me to kneel again. Desperate to expose him, I grabbed the material. Were I stronger I would have torn it.

“His cock made my belly weak. Whimpering, I took his boots off as he lifted his feet one at a time. I wanted to suck him, I wanted my mouth fucked hard.

“‘See what I have for you, girl?’ he said, showing me his magnificent shaft. ‘You will serve me in my fullness.’

“‘Yes, Master,’ I whispered, awed at the sight. Right before my eyes it thickened, as thick as it had ever been. Do you know what that means?”

“As a primale he could control the size of his erection,” Samharin acknowledged.

“Yes,” Deyna said. “It is an unspeakable honor when a primale gives you all that he has.”

Samharin had no such powers. His erection was limited to a single size. As for his ability to control it, he had none, at least where Deyna was concerned.

“How many times did you please him?” Samharin wanted to know.

“He conquered me in every way,” she said with awe and pride. “Six times did he spill himself inside my unworthy body.”

“You are more than worthy, Deyna,” he felt compelled to say. “You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. You deserve respect.”

Deyna stiffened, uncomfortable. “Why talk this way to me?”

He could not help but smile. “Do you not think you are beautiful and worthy? I think that you do.”

“My opinions do not matter. Nor do yours,” she said firmly.

“And why is that?” He pulled her close, hands at her waist.

“Because.” She tried to squirm free. “I am a pleasure woman. My value is in the eyes of the primales who use me.”

“I think you are much more.”

Samharin did not elaborate. The morsels of her breasts were too tempting. He took the left into his mouth.

“You say I am more,” she said. “But you use me like the others.”

She had a point. Releasing her, he shifted his approach. “I can appreciate you in many ways at the same time.”

“Just fuck me,” she exclaimed. “Forget I said anything. Put me in my place and be done with it.”

Samharin smiled. She did not know what she wanted. Good, he was getting to her. "Is that an order?" he teased.

"No, damn it," she retorted with precious little submission in her tone.

He promptly treated her other breast to the same torture. She tried to resist. He smacked her ass.

She gasped in surprise as though it had not occurred to her he would be controlling her from this point forward.

"I already warned you about depriving me of your body," he said.

Releasing an exasperated sound, she gave in. He played liberally with both breasts, now using hands and mouth and tongue.

They were wet and springy and hot. The best he had ever enjoyed.

"Oh stars," she cried. "What are you doing to me?"

"This is mem sexmaking," he said. "Like it?"

"No. It is torture," she complained.

He chuckled, checking between her legs.

"You seem to enjoy it," he said, noting the increased slickness of her sex.

"But it's so maddening..."

"You aren't used to being teased?"

"Not like this."

"Lie down," he ordered.

She promptly climbed onto the bed.

He raised a brow, noting her position, spread-eagle on her back.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she demanded.

"You look as if you are ready to be sacrificed to some ancient fire god, not made sex to," he said.

"Shall I lie ass up?" she said, not cracking a smile. "I can put a pillow underneath me to give you easier access to whip or fuck me."

"What I want is for you to relax." He put his hands on his hips. "Suppose you were alone. How would you recline?"

"Alone?" She blinked, confused. "But I'm not alone, you are with me."

Samharin frowned. "Is this how obedients behave? Because I must say I am not impressed. And I don't think the Commander will be either."

A look of dismay crossed her lovely face. "You wouldn't tell on me, would you?"

"If you aren't cooperative, what choice do I have?" he said.

"I will try to do as you tell me," she said. "Though it is difficult, please be patient with your slave."

His heart raced. She had acknowledged herself as his. How had the shift occurred? He knew it was likely temporary, a function of the immediate situation, but still he was deeply thrilled.

What would he do with Deyna if she was his forever?

What need had he of a slave?

He was a mem. Memes enjoyed sex with multiple partners for pure fun. They did not settle down, certainly not with obedients.

Drawing a deep breath, Deyna closed her eyes.

His cock leaped as she licked her lips, a quick, fervent gesture.

"That's it," he murmured. "You are alone. Now think of something pleasurable, something sexy. Show me how you touch yourself."

Her deep-green eyes popped back open. "I cannot," she said.

He noted the look of genuine alarm on her face.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I belong to my Masters," she said. "My body is not for my own pleasure. Sordon makes Penya do it sometimes, but no one has ever made me."

Samharin pursed his lips. "It gives me pleasure to see you masturbate. It is my will that you play with your pussy."

She bit at her lower lip. "You...you command this?"

"I do, Deyna. In fact," he said with rising confidence, "I will punish you if you disobey me."

Deyna swallowed. "Yes...Sir."

With that she opened her legs for him, giving him a full view of her splendid sex, the lips puffy and glistening.

Her breathing was shallow. She clenched her teeth, as though afraid her actions might bring about some cosmic disaster.

Tentatively, with one finger, she brushed the skin of her inner thigh, trailing a line toward her clitoris.

"You will have to do a lot better," he chastened, "if you are to come for me."

Deyna regarded him open-mouthed.

"That's right," he said. "You will bring yourself to climax while I watch."

"What if I am unable?" she asked.

"We'll work together," he assured her. "And so what if it takes awhile? I'll be enjoying the view."

Deyna's eyelashes fluttered shyly. For all her sexual experience, she lacked the boldness and confidence of a fem. Samharin found her innocence to be incredibly charming and arousing.

"We'll work together," he repeated, stepping out of his uniform.

Her eyes widened at the sight of his body, fully naked.

She was focused particularly on his cock. Off and on she had been looking at it all along, pretending not to.

"I can't do much to change the size," he said with a grin. "But one thing's for sure. This is all for you. It's what you do to me, Deyna."

Her cheeks turned from white to pink. "It's perfect, Sir," she whispered.

He closed his fingers over the swollen, throbbing shaft. "By the Guardian Code," he muttered. "You're the one who's perfect."

Holding back was going to be a challenge. At this rate, he would be climaxing in minutes.

How did the primales do it? Curse their superhuman biology.

Deyna pressed two fingers inside herself, lightly probing. She sucked on her lower lip. "Like this?" she asked.

"Yes," he encouraged. "That's it. Touch your clitoris too. That will give you what you need."

Deyna moaned, arching her back.

"You like that?" he asked.

"It's...it's amazing," she said. "Do fems really do this on their own?"

"All the time, whenever they want," he said. "They own their own bodies."

Deyna shook her head. "I have never understood how that can be when they are smaller and weaker than the mems who make sex with them."

"Fems have rights," he said. "And they aren't designed to enjoy submission quite the way you are."

She continued to stroke her pussy. "I do not understand orgasm without surrender."

"Touch your breast," he said. "Pinch your nipple."

"Like this?" she said, squeezing the tiny nub between thumb and forefinger.

"Do it as hard as you like," he said.

"You must tell me," she insisted. "I take the pain you give."

"But I want you to enjoy."

She drew a sharp breath as if stabbed. "You do strange things to me."

"Tell me what you feel."

"I am...confused. I want to hold on. I want to let go." She winced, punishing her nipple.

"You like the pain," he said.

Deyna writhed. "It's not supposed to be about me," she insisted.

"It is. This is your experience," he said.

"No." She thrashed her head. "You...you must command me to your pleasure."

"My pleasure is watching you, Deyna, masturbating."

"Give me orders," she said, her voice a low hiss. "P-punish me, do something to me...please."

"I will not, Deyna. You have one order. Bring yourself to climax."

Deyna's eyes were wild. Sweat beaded on her forehead. She looked like some jungle cat, ready to strike. "Master, shove your hot cock in me, we can come together."

He shook his head. "No, Deyna, I am not going to be your Master right now. And if you ask again, I will gag you."

She whimpered, knowing herself trapped. "I-I understand."

"Good girl," he said, once more noting the paradox. Was he freeing her to be more like a fem or helping her find a new depth of obedient submission?

Did it really matter?

"You are close?" he asked.

She was shivering, feverish.

"Yes, oh stars, yes."

"Lift yourself," he ordered. "Show me."

Deyna raised her pelvis in the air. She shuddered, releasing a low groan. "Samharin...Sir?"

"Yes?"

"I need you to say it again, tell me I have to come. I need the...domination."

"You will come," he said, recognizing the request as borne out of her submissive genetics. "I command it."

A mere invitation would not do. She no more owned her orgasms than she did the clothes on her back or her own luscious body.

"Oh gods," she cried out. "Thank you."

Samharin held back his own orgasm, just barely. Deyna was racked with the power and energy of her own climax. The pleasure surged visibly through her as she tossed to and fro. He smelled her scent, thick and fragrant in the air. She groaned again and again, the boundaries of her first orgasm leaking into another and then another.

She continued calling out in sweet bliss, her pussy clenching at her own fingers. His cock wanted more than anything in the world to be there in place of them, but he knew he must see this scene through to the end.

"Use me, please?" she asked when the last of the waves had passed through her. "Thrust your cock inside me and conquer me."

Samharin beheld the damp, flush Deyna, obedient to the core.

"Hold your tongue, girl," he ordered. "I will decide how to use you."

"Yes, Master."

He frowned but did not correct her use of the word. It was too deeply ingrained, he suspected.

Samharin climbed astride her. She smiled and purred in anticipation of being mounted, though he had something else in mind.

"I will use your breasts. I will let you see what it looks like when a mem climaxes," he said. "He gives his everything, all the semen his body can manage at once. Nothing can be held back."

Deyna compressed her breasts. "Yes, Master, please come on your slave's body."

Samharin thrust his cock into the warm pocket of flesh. The pressure was heavenly, hot smooth breast on either side of him.

"Yes, fuck my breasts," she begged.

Samharin slid his ass up and down her belly, creating the friction needed. She was holding him so tight he knew he would not last long. A couple of good thrusts and he was ready.

Samharin groaned, the lust in her eyes pushing him over the edge. The semen squirted, thick and white, jets of it across her breasts and neck and face.

She moaned deliciously, arching her back, his captive goddess, his beautiful prisoner.

How amazing, thought Samharin, that she did not realize her natural power and grace. Her slavery was not about weakness at all.

As she released her breasts, Samharin pulled back and collapsed on the bed next to her.

"May I?" she asked, touching her cum-covered chest.

He nodded, catching her meaning.

"Thank you," she whispered, lightly grazing her skin, taking a bit of his come with her finger. His cock twitched as she placed it on her tongue, her eyes heavy with desire.

He watched her lips, her smile.

"Go on," he said.

"Yes, Master," said Deyna, commencing to clean his semen from her skin.

She did not stop until she had swallowed every drop.

"May I clean your cock now?" she asked sweetly.

"No. Stay as you are."

Deyna obeyed, though her lips pouted. "Yes, Master."

His cock twitched in reply, almost like he was a primale, capable of erection with no refraction time.

"I am going to fetch a cloth to clean you," he explained.

Her eyes betrayed her confusion.

"Yes, Master," she said.

"You are not pleased?"

"It is your will. That is all that matters."

"Your feelings also matter, at least to me. Kindly share them."

She sighed. "You tend me like I am a fem, that's all. I should not be languishing on my back, I should be serving."

"You are serving me in the way I want," he said. "That is enough."

Samharin went to the wall to the objectifier. It was a small, built-in model with controls and a small door that opened into a pristine white recess, roughly the size of an antique wall safe.

Samharin programmed the controls for a warm, moist cloth...and a pleasure rod.

"Are you making chains?" she asked hopefully. "Or a whip?"

"Nothing so nefarious, Deyna."

He returned to the edge of the bed. "Hands over your head," he said. "Palms up."

Deyna complied. "What is that?" she asked, looking uneasily at the pleasure rod.

Could it be she had never seen one before?

Fems used them constantly, often in the midst of the sex act itself. It was for magnifying pleasure.

"You'll find out soon enough."

She gasped as he touched her with the cloth.

"Why?" she moaned as if struck by lightning. "Why are you waiting on me like this?"

"Is it bad as all that?" he mused.

She nodded in the affirmative.

Samharin chuckled. "In that case, just consider it torture."

"I will," she said fervently, missing the irony of his statement.

Obedients are complex, he thought, at least this one is.

How long would it take to figure her out?

Longer than Abe, probably.

And with a lot more mixed results too, unless he missed his guess. What a journey it would be though.

"Here," he said, handing her the glowing rod. "This is for your pleasure. I think you can come up with some ideas from the shape of it. Use it as you will. I am going to lie down next to you and get some sleep."

The look on her face was priceless.

Samharin could devour her with kisses.

Not a bad idea. He would put it on the list.

* * * * *

Dear gods, this Samharin was driving her mad. Deyna didn't know whether to fight him or try to make him push her harder. What did he want from her? He showed signs of mastery, commanding her desires as well as any primale. So why did he insist on giving her so much freedom?

He would not bind her, he would not properly beat her and now...and now he wanted her to use this artificial device between her thighs like she was some kind of arrogant fem getting off without the benefit of a man.

"Please, Master," she begged. "Do not make me..."

Samharin put the device in her hand. It was warm and tingling. "It will do you good. Just use it the way you would want a man to be inside you."

Deyna cringed at the thought, the insolence of her trying to simulate the domination of her own body, acting as if it were like her own Master.

She could just imagine Varenys' reaction at such a sight.

"Is your pussy that lonely, girl?" he would growl. "Let me give you a hand using it properly."

But Samharin expected her to pleasure herself. He had been aroused seeing her touch her pussy and now he wanted her to use this...this thing.

How like a mem.

Lazy and undisciplined.

But Samharin didn't fit that description. His face was hard. His eyes showed the pain he had seen. His heart bore the scars of battle, like a primale.

He had withstood the hell of a Narthian attack. He had protected the lives of innocent men, women and children.

He was a hero.

He was her Master, at least for the foreseeable future.

So why didn't he take her?

She looked for clues in his expression as she placed the rod gently against her inner thigh. At once, ripples of pleasure raced through her.

"Not a bad little toy, eh?" Samharin grinned.

Deyna lowered her eyelids, strangely shy, strangely possessed.

"Keep going," he coaxed.

She took it as an order, compelling herself forward into unknown territory. Using her fingers was one thing, but employing an artificial cock-like device was quite another.

Her pussy jolted at the contact.

She cried out, retracting the wand.

Samharin laughed.

"It isn't funny," she said petulantly.

"It seems so to me," he said.

She shot a fierce glance. "If you were any other mem —"

"What would you do?" he asked curiously. "Attack me? Walk out?"

Deyna had no idea. Truly, it was most annoying being female at times.

"Your pussy is waiting," he said. "And so am I."

She growled in frustration, even as she returned the device to her sex.

Another jolt of pleasure mixed with a sharp sting, edgy. She pushed the rod between her lips, parting them. "Oh stars," she groaned.

The rod zapped at her nerve endings, drawing the blood to the surface of the skin.

"Try it on your pussy," he said.

She did so, sending herself exploding halfway to the ceiling.

It was a lightning-fast orgasm, turning her inside out. In seconds it was over, leaving her wasted.

"Did that just happen?" she murmured.

"Trust me," he said, transfixed. "It did."

Feeling bolder, Deyna experimented, moving the device to and fro and then in and out.

It was good, very good.

A female could get used to this.

Samharin was liable to spoil her if he wasn't careful.

His hand strayed to her cheek. "You are so beautiful, Deyna. You took my breath away the first time I saw you."

She was overwhelmed. At the same time she was distinctly uneasy. "You aren't supposed to admit your vulnerability to a woman."

He laughed. "You think it makes me less of a man?"

Deyna had never thought of it in such terms. "A primale wouldn't do it," she said, pulling from only her experience.

His finger went to her mouth. She opened to suckle it. "Then perhaps primales are not as invincible as they seem," he said.

He winked as he said this, sending a chill down her spine.

Greedily, her pussy muscles clenched at the device. She had sunk it several inches inside her. "You're sure," she moaned. "This is all right for me to use?"

"It's my will," he said simply.

She relaxed, trusting.

"S-Samharin," she said his name, her body shaking. "S-Sir."

"That's it," he encouraged.

He lowered his head, touching his lips to hers. She came as they kissed, his body steadying and focusing hers. The waves washed over her body, dissolving all resistance. She luxuriated, feeling like a queen in its wake.

She was fresh and new and naked in a way she had never known. Inviting, she held out her arms. He entered her embrace, wordless. His cock finding the folds of her pussy as he pulled the wand aside and tossed it onto the bed.

It rolled downward, against her hip.

The heat pulsed, reminding her of the whip or cane.

At once she began to writhe.

Samharin sank into her with a groan. His fingers entwined with hers, pinning her arms above her head.

"Yes, oh yes," she cried, tears in her eyes.

They began a synchronous motion designed to bring them both to a quick and satisfying conclusion. There was a communion, a connection. Samharin seemed to be listening to her body, tuning in. Primals didn't do that.

They followed their own bliss and let her do the work to keep up. She had never minded, really.

His gift of passion and intuition more than made up for his lack of superstrength. Little had she known what a turn-on it could be to have a man care about her pleasure.

She had thought it was not possible for her to feel anything except as a byproduct of her desire to serve. Now she saw that her flesh had its own cravings.

Could it be she had a right to seek and imagine her own pleasures apart from the male she was with? Was she capable of being anything more than a male toy, a kind of fancy, living, breathing sex wand?

Such bizarre questions for an obedient to ask, such a strange road she was on. Clinging tightly to Samharin, she tried to anticipate his next move. Would he banish her to the floor or throw her in heavy chains for the night?

To her relief, he was content to hold her tight against him as they both fell gently to sleep.

Her dreams were full of wild visions and passions, a strange tale of freedom. It frightened her as much as it exhilarated.

Was this what it felt like to be a fem, with one's own thoughts and powers?

In the morning she would ask Samharin to help her understand.

Samharin...her Sir...maybe even her Master.

It had a certain ring to it.

There was no suppressing the smile.

Chapter Seven

Reeva had awoken with a sore bottom, well loved and in no doubt to whom she belonged, body and soul. Vandar was her lord, her champion and her best friend too.

She called him Vandarsaurus Rex for his stubborn dinosaur ways, but she loved him with all her heart, indeed she worshipped him as much as a fem could be said to feel such things for a male.

Her lifemating with a primale had raised more than a few eyebrows among her friends and colleagues. But she was proud of their relationship and quite grateful too, for the backing of High Councilor Nyssa.

Now there was a woman of vision and courage, a pioneer in every way. Her union with Theron had represented the first time a primale had ever mated with a non-obedient.

Granted, theirs was a special bond because they had been given a genetic predisposition to fit hand in glove with her mate. Still, nothing could be taken for granted. It's a lot of hard work in any relationship.

Reeva considered all these things as she checked the overnight data from the sensory recording machines. Abe had been active, filling several holodisks with the equivalent of Narthian thoughts.

More like pulses, code-like, corresponding to eruptions on the human color spectrum.

Contrary to everything she had been trained to believe, the Narthian neural net was in no way simplistic or inferior to that of a human's. If anything, their thoughts were more complex.

Perhaps this had to do with the age of their species, some hundreds of millions of years older than humanity. Their social lives were more complex too, organized around the lives of their Nests.

What if they were too different? What if telepathy was the only way to communicate? They needed a language if long-lasting peace was to be achieved, not to mention the kind of scientific breakthroughs they were looking for.

One thing Reeva had not shared with her lifemate, or anyone else, was her increasing concern for Abe's state of mental health. He remained sharp enough, but she detected a kind of melancholy in him. Was he missing the life of his Nest? He had sloughed off her concern, saying the matter was not important.

Reeva was by nature an optimist. When her thoughts turned dark, Vandar was there to focus her.

Samharin arrived at the Interface Room just as she was setting up a new disk to record the next hour's work.

"You are up bright and early," she said approvingly.

He had a spring in his step, a smile on his face. She knew the look well. It was that of a well-satisfied male.

"I wanted to get right to work," he said.

"You managed to tear yourself away from your new roommate?" she asked, a light tease in her voice.

Cadet Samharin's brow pinched slightly, indicating discomfiture. "She is still sleeping," he offered.

"I see." She avoided an all-out smirk. She could read his thoughts a mile away. They had shared phenomenal sex. He had dominated her to her heart's content.

"Woman, stop pestering the man," Vandar chided, entering the room. "A Guardian has no wish to discuss his sex life with a fem."

"Why not?" she said, unable to resist. "You do."

"You are not *a* fem," he said, gaze narrowing. "You are *my* fem."

Reeva secretly thrilled at Vandar's heavy-handed ways. What woman wouldn't want to be loved so passionately by such an uncompromising primale? She knew beyond a doubt that he would kill or die for her.

While not a jealous man, he was most certainly possessive, and it was well known among the other males that Reeva was to be treated with kid gloves.

"So what do you say, Cadet," Vandar asked, taking a little jab at his lifemate. "Is that little sack of potatoes I sent you up to par?"

"I have no complaints, Sir."

"Better not," Vandar said. "Or she will get the spanking of her life."

"Not from you," said Reeva, who was just as possessive as her husband. "And where do you get off talking about sex when you told me not to?"

"I said Guardians don't discuss their sex lives with fems. That doesn't mean they don't do it with each other," Vandar declared.

Reeva rolled her eyes. "Sometimes I think you take a little too much delight in tormenting me."

Vandar's lips angled upward, the closest he came to a smile outside of their quarters. "Enough small talk. What do the overnight results look like?"

Reeva heaved a sigh. "We don't lack for quantity, that is for sure."

Vandar looked over her shoulder. His proximity, the deep musky smell of him made her think of being alone with him, their bodies intertwined as they had been earlier this morning.

He had held her down lovingly, his fingers interlaced with hers, his thighs pushing between her open legs, his cock moving up and down with such slow, sweet precision it almost drove her out of her mind.

All the while she could see the black whip on the wall, the riding crop. He had promised to use it soon, but when? Must she commit some greater offense?

Reeva tingled at the thought, the way Vandar maneuvered the thin device, lightly applying it, the stinging effect over hips and ass and breasts, even her pussy if the mood struck him.

"Can you make heads or tails of it?" Vandar asked.

Reeva shook her head, resisting the impulse to lean back against him. He was a wall of strength.

Sometimes he would let her peel off his clothing and nibble at his flesh to her heart's content. The choice was his, though he seldom objected.

"No, Vandar, I've been over it and over it. I had hoped the ice cream experiment yesterday would give us something new, but I'm afraid not. Nothing shows on the scan report, nothing at all we can use."

"That's because Abe didn't taste the ice cream by himself," said Samharin.

Reeva and Vandar looked at him.

Samharin seemed as surprised by his statement as they were.

"Explain yourself, Cadet," said Vandar, making it an order.

Samharin ran his hand over his face. "Forgive me, I spoke out of turn."

"We don't stand on politeness," said Reeva. "Your intuition is telling you something, what is it?"

Samharin looked thoughtful. "It occurs to me that Abe made his choice of flavors in the middle of my conversation with him. He is part of a hive intelligence, a communal creature. Perhaps he needs the social aspect?"

Reeva moved to one of the holo screens to check the engram records. "He may be right, Vandar. Come have a look."

Vandar put his hand to her waist. Her pulse quickened automatically.

He made a few grunting sounds and nodded. "Cadet Samharin, you need to get back in there with Abe. Now."

Samharin nodded, his military training too deeply instilled for him to offer objections.

Reeva wasn't sure she understood it herself. Abe had shared telepathic unions with several people including herself. Something was different about Samharin.

How fortunate he had come along during the last experiment.

Vandar was already at the partition, opening the door for Samharin. He proceeded in without another word.

Closing the door behind Samharin, Vandar turned to face her.

Their eyes met one another. She knew the look well.

You are very fortunate, Missy, that we have work to do or I would take you back to bed right now...

He would not have to ask twice, that was for sure.

* * * * *

Deyna was lying dreamily in the bed, Samharin's bed. He had been gone only a short while, but already her body was aching for his touch. Idly, she fingered the pleasure rod. She had strict instructions to use it as often as she liked.

Imagine that, being able to have an orgasm when she wished, without a man. She could choose the time and exactly how to administer it to herself.

She sighed softly, cupping her breast. The flesh weighed in her hand, pushing against the confines of her fingers. She squeezed tight, allowing herself the slight tingle of pain.

Samharin had loved her body well. Once more this morning—before leaving to report to the Project—he had made sex with her, this time taking her from behind. She had begged him to hold her hair tightly, pulling at it as he pounded with his cock. He had obliged as he slammed himself home again and again.

There was definitely something different about his mem cock. It was not as large and, just as he had said, he had no power to control it. She liked the idea that its function was directly dependant on his desire for her.

It made her feel good having such proof of her own abilities. With a primale you never quite knew. He could hold back an erection to tease or punish, or else create one simply by willpower.

Either way it was up to him. The obedient was left to submit, to go along for the ride.

It was this aspect of primale biology more than any other that made them the Masters of their women.

Samharin was masterful too though. He had made her follow his instructions and take her pleasure his way.

When he had come inside her this morning, roaring his satisfaction, she had wanted to weep with joy.

She would happily have stayed with him all day, experimenting, talking, playing.

She had a million questions about mems and fems and how they made sex. Did they act out Master/slave scenarios on occasion or was it always equal? Were they ever jealous of each other's lovers? What if a mem wanted to settle with a single mate?

Deyna pressed the tiny activator on the rod, causing it to ignite. At once it began to pulse and throb in her hand. She licked her lips. Where to put the device first?

How about her breast...

She moaned as the tip pressed to her nipple, sending instant ripples of heat through her body.

Arching her back, she began to rub the rod over her chest, from one breast to the other and finally down her belly to the apex of her thighs. She was poised, whimpering, ready to impale herself when the door to Samharin's chambers opened.

At first she thought it was Samharin returning, but it was another, a most unwelcome visitor.

She sat up quickly, reaching for the sheet to cover herself.

"Hiding something?" growled Varenynos, the lines on his forehead creased in heavy suspicion.

"No, Master."

He snatched away the pleasure rod before she could put it behind her back.

"What is this?" he demanded, though clearly he knew very well its purpose.

"It's...a pleasure rod, Master," she said in a small voice.

"You know pleasure women are not permitted to use such things." He held the rod in the air.

"It was given to me by...by Samharin," she said, exercising care not to call him Master.

Varenynos laughed. "Is that the only way the mem could get it up with you?"

"No," she said, defiant in spite of his bad mood. "He was able to please me many times."

"Please you?" He spoke the words with contempt. "And what are you?"

She lowered her eyes. "I am a pleasure woman."

"That's correct, you little bitch," he snarled. "You are a vessel. A primale puts his cock in you and he has a good time."

Deyna had never been spoken to in such a way before. She had endured spankings, whippings and long sessions of bondage. She had been taught her place in countless ways, but no man had ever made her feel like less than a proud and special woman.

"Master, please do not be angry with me," she pleaded.

Varenynos snapped his fingers and pointed to the floor.

Deyna leaped from the bed, kneeling at his feet.

"Memorize this view," he said, his finger beneath her chin. "It is the only one you should have."

"Yes, Master." Her eyes were misting over. She fought back the tears.

"This mem is a bad influence. What should we expect, though, in a base full of freaks?"

She did not understand.

"This so-called project is a farce, an abomination. The Commander kowtows to his fem wife while a mem runs around dressed in Guardian clothes. Meanwhile the whole lot of them are worshipping a filthy, stinking bug. Have you any idea what it is they have in that so-called Interface Chamber, slave?"

"No, Master," she whispered, giving the answer he wanted.

"It is a disgusting, crawling piece of space slime. Its kind slaughtered my family and millions of others," he said. "The Council President and her cuckold husband, the General, want to make peace with their kind. You know what that means? It means death, slave girl. An end to everything."

"Y-yes, Master."

"You should be ashamed of yourself," he said. "You copulated with a mem. That is forbidden."

"I-I thought I was supposed to," she tried to defend herself.

"Obedients don't think," he barked.

"S-sorry, Master."

Varenyos extended his hand.

She pressed her lips in the universal sign of obedient apology.

He had her kiss and lick for a long time. Her heart pounded.

"That's enough." He raised her head at last, fist in her hair.

His eyes were dark, unreadable.

There was something wrong with the man she could not put her finger on. He was acting like...some kind of zealot.

"Did you come for him, Deyna?"

She knew better than to lie.

"Yes, Master."

"He fucked your pussy?"

"Yes, Master."

"And your mouth?"

"Yes, Master."

Varenyos bent over, his teeth clenched as he spoke. "Listen to me, wench. You will not let the mem touch you again. Your ass belongs to the primales."

"Yes, Master."

"Close your eyes now, contemplate your sins," he said.

Deyna thought it an odd request. She heard him moving nearby and sensed something wrong.

Opening her eyes, she caught him half bent over the bed in the act of attaching a small disk underneath.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

He smiled in reply. The expression chilled her to the bone. "You shouldn't have seen that, Deyna. Now you are going to be sorry."

She tried to run for the door. He intercepted her, cupping his hand over her mouth. Her scream was turned into an impotent whimper.

"We are going to take a little trip," he told her.

Like hell, she thought. Whatever Varenayos was doing against Samharin, she intended to stop him.

Pretending to be aroused, she pushed her body against him.

He chuckled. "I knew you couldn't resist me, you little beast."

She would show him resistance, all right.

But first she would lure him into her trap.

Chapter Eight

Samharin settled himself into the console chair. It was well padded and wired to allow for full diagnostic communication.

At the moment, none of that mattered.

He was going to talk to Abe brain-to-brain.

If you could precisely correlate the neural nets of the two races.

"Did you have a good sleep?" Abe asked.

Samharin's eyes were closed. He didn't need to see Abe to know what he looked like, the impression he made on Samharin's senses. *"I didn't sleep much, but you probably knew that."*

"The female," Abe supplied. *"You feel affection for her."*

"She is obedient. What we have cannot last."

"Do you want it to last?"

"I want to fuck her again, that's all I know."

"This fucking," said Abe, the word forming carefully in his thoughts. *"It is central to humans. Better than...ice cream?"*

"If it's done right, yes. What about Narthians? Do you feel something similar?"

"We do not connect in pairs. We are...we Nest." Abe was struggling for the right concept.

"You feel pleasure from the union of all of you together," Samharin speculated.

"Yes," Abe agreed. *"But that is not like sex. It does not match what you are feeling about your female right now."*

Samharin wondered what he could be feeling at the moment that Abe was picking up on. Certainly he tuned into the idea of Deyna being his.

"That is it," Abe confirmed. *"A sense of belonging and possession."*

"Yes. Her kind of human female, the obedients, bond sexually through submission. I am not sure I can explain it any better."

"And your kind dominates, yes?"

This was more complicated. *"Technically, I am not of the dominant sub gender."*

"Yet you want this female for your own," Abe pointed out. *"You want the right to command her. You are stimulated at the idea that she must wait for you in your quarters and when you return you will have sex with her as you wish."*

Samharin felt his cock stirring as he thought of the beautiful Deyna, in bed where he had left her. Was she masturbating at the moment, using the rod as he had instructed?

She had been sweet as honey this morning as he came inside her. Her submission had been absolute. He could scarcely believe it was happening, an obedient yielding in this way. It was not destined to last. She was submitting because the Commander had ordered her to. The real sexual charge came from the yoke the primales still placed on her.

"It is also pleasurable to punish your female, isn't it, Samharin?"

"I spanked her, yes, it was a great aphrodisiac."

Abe considered. *"This exchange of power between human lovers, I believe I have something analogous."*

Samharin focused, eagerly anticipating. He did not yet know what Abe was about to transmit to him but he had a sense it was going to be big, very big.

Perhaps it would even be the breakthrough everyone had been looking for.

Either that or an explosive, messy end to both their neural nets.

* * * * *

Deyna's mind was working at lightning speed. In order to turn the tables on her brutish captor she had to keep focused...on saving Samharin.

Whatever happened, Varenynos could not be allowed to leave that disk behind, be it some kind of bomb or false evidence.

Deyna could only imagine what crime Samharin would be framed for. The very idea that a Guardian like Varenynos could operate so deceitfully was almost unheard of.

Again the word zealot came to mind. He was operating out of misplaced loyalty to some cause. Abe was a threat to this cause and so was Samharin.

His very name coursed through her veins. Her job was to serve him alone, such a gorgeous man, his skin so smooth, his cock so natural and simple with its mem nature.

She wanted it again, the feeling of penetration, knowing herself possessed by a man who could not control his erections around her but could still control her.

She wanted to kiss him and be kissed. She wanted another day, another night.

Excellent. Her thoughts were sharpening. She was seeing step by step what to do.

She was going to have to trick Varenynos. A risky proposition for a helpless, naked obedient.

Standing on tiptoes, she boldly kissed Varenynos. He gripped her ass possessively. His hard cock pressed her pelvis.

"Master?" she asked in her smallest, most submissive voice.

"What is it, wench?"

"I am in heat. Beat me, please?"

"Not now. I have no time."

"Master, please, this girl needs to feel the sting of leather, delivered by the hand of a real man."

Appeal to the ego, that's it, girl.

"When you came in here, it woke me up," she explained. "I was so weak letting that mem have me. I feel so...so lost. Please, Master, make me obedient again."

"There will be plenty of time later," he assured. "When the New Order comes to pass, all women will learn their place, fems included."

Deyna felt a chill in her spine. What this man was speaking was madness. Who would dare enslave the fems? The High Councilor was a fem.

"Master, show me now. Beat my ass," she pleaded. "I beg you. I have never known a man so masterful. Your words excite me. Let me use the objectifier to make a belt."

Varenyos snorted. "Very well. Make the belt. But I warn you, I will use it like no other man. You will not sit down for many days."

"I don't want to sit, Master, I want to be at your feet."

Oh brother, was she laying it on thick.

She hoped Samharin was appreciating this performance, whatever he was doing.

Varenyos snorted indifferently, though she knew she had him.

"The slave will obey," she said cheerily, springing to her feet.

Off to the objectifier to make the belt.

She was going to make something else too, something that Varenyos would not enjoy, at least not if she used it right.

A quick glance over her shoulder showed he was occupied, attempting once more to place the disk.

Deyna knew she had only a few seconds to dream up the perfect poison and then to create it from the objectifier. She must then conceal it on her naked person so she could administer it to him later without arousing any suspicions.

Deyna opted for a capsule of sleep serum, heavy, guaranteed knockout dose, the kind used on large rabid animals or for quick surgery on the battlefield.

She was going to have to get it down his throat.

No mean feat given the man was a hundred times more powerful than her.

His only weakness, aside from his obvious insanity, was his colossal male ego.

If he could be distracted in his sexual usage of her, he might let his guard down.

Her plan was to transfer it mouth to mouth.

Once he was knocked out, assuming she didn't knock herself out at the same time, she would make a run for it, straight to the nearest Guardian.

Hopefully it would be Samharin. Or Commander Vandar.

"Hurry up, girl, I haven't got all day."

Deyna punched the buttons.

Stars, he was done already. The objectifier beeped, signaling the fulfillment of the order.

One antique leather belt and one not-so-antique knockout pill.

"I'm coming, Master."

She yanked the door open and snatched up the leather belt. The capsule was beside it, gleaming silver, just small enough to fit in her mouth, between her cheek and teeth.

Could she really manage enough wind power to force it down his throat?

He didn't wait for her to lay the belt on the bed. Moving forward, he snatched the belt from her hand. He had been too preoccupied looking at her full heaving breasts to see her insert the pill.

"You'll take your whipping on your breasts, girl. You may thank me in advance."

"Master is kind, Master is a real and true primale," she assured.

"In the New Order, no woman will lose her way. All will be allowed to worship the primales, naked in a communal pen, the fems with them, wallowing in their servitude."

Sounded like a blast, Deyna thought cynically.

Listen to her, silently mocking a primale. Even if he was crazy, he was still her natural superior.

Or was he? Penya did not call her Cleopatra for nothing. It had to do with her natural temper, her petulance and stormy anger. She might be as docile as any other obedient in bed, but she had always had a strong mind outside it.

Secretly, she had her doubts about the current world order, like why some women could be made as fems and be allowed to run free while ones like herself had no rights, no existence outside of the men who fucked them.

"I can't wait for it, Master," she said softly.

"Kneel on the bed," he ordered. "Hands behind your neck."

Deyna had nearly forgotten how intense a breast whipping could be, especially when administered by a man as ruthless and thorough as Varenys.

"You will hold still," he counseled, wrapping his hand with the leather.

"Yes, Master." It occurred to her now that it might be useful to know his plans. Would he be so arrogant and overconfident as to tell her?

"Master?" Her voice was a soft, feminine moan, aimed to seduce.

"What is it, girl?"

"I-I was just wondering. What are you going to do to Samharin?"

He scowled darkly.

Had she gone too far?

Varenys leaned in, his face inches from hers.

"You think the plans of men have anything to do with creatures like you?"

"No, Master."

He shook his head. "You truly are a fool, aren't you?"

"Yes, Master."

"You and every other woman. That half-breed bitch Nyssa included."

Nyssa a half-breed? How could such abominations reside in a man's mind? Had he gone mad from combat?

"I'll tell you, why not? Our plans are simple, really. There are three of us all together, we will work in concert."

Deyna hoped desperately that Sordon was not among the three traitors. That would kill Penya.

"Vandar, the fem lover, will never know what hit him, nor will his glorified pleasure bitch of a wife. A neural neutralizer has been planted in one of the main computers. It will attach itself to the Narthian's neural impulses, scrambling them. The thing will die most horribly. Naturally everyone will look for the culprit. The prototype for the virus will be found here in Samharin's room. He will be arrested for the crime."

"That is...brilliant," she breathed, careful to make it appear she was preoccupied with his masculine presence. "Oh Master, may I feel your cock inside me? No more talking, please? I can't bear it?"

He smiled cruelly, falling for her trap. "I think I will tell you the rest. It will be good punishment for you. Besides, what can you do to stop it?"

"N-nothing, Master."

Or so the man thought...

"Exactly right," he approved. "Perhaps there is hope for your inferior female brain after all. Here is what is going to happen. After Samharin is arrested, there will have to be an investigation. Operatives higher up in our organization will see to it the Council gets involved. It will be shown that Nyssa and Theron were responsible for allowing Samharin to come here. There will be demands for their removal from office."

"Also brilliant," she acknowledged.

To her it sounded farfetched, absurd, though perhaps he had more in mind. "To defeat one as strong as Master Theron...I am in awe, Master —"

"Do you doubt me?" he growled. She could feel his breath on her face.

"No, Master, never," she assured him.

"There is more to the plan," he said. "Much more. The people will be shown just how little they can rely on their current leaders. Think of them as a disease, slave, and we are to provide the inoculation. Do you know how that is done?"

She shook her head no. With that he pressed her back, laying himself on top of her, all thoughts of whipping her gone. His weight on her was harsh.

"Inoculation means infecting the body with a small sample of the disease, in a safe form. The body learns to adapt to it," he explained.

Deyna did not know where he was going with this, though it sounded very, very dangerous to her ears.

Commander Vandar has to know about this. And I have to tell him.

"I should fuck your mouth," he said, sending dread to her heart as she imagined the pill going down her own throat instead of his.

"Oh yes, Master," she replied cagily. "What an honor for my poor mouth. May I beg a kiss first though? May I show with my lips that I love all you have done to me and that I am appreciative and that I live to serve you?"

He eyed her, his brow furrowed. "Not me, the New Order is what you will serve."

"Yes," she said eagerly. "Let me kiss a man of the New Order, one who will make all things right."

"The mems will all die," he volunteered from out of his scattered thoughts. "Or else they will be slaves. It depends on whether they are useful or not."

"You are so brilliant...kiss me, Master."

"Beg me," he smiled in sheer cruelty. "Beg for Master's attention."

"Please, give it to me," she said softly, piteously.

"Beg for all of it," he prompted. "For my cock and mouth to give you purpose in life."

Deyna wanted to be nauseous and not just from his chest squashing her.

"Oh yes, I want your cock and your mouth," she added.

Especially your mouth, you psychotic bastard.

To think Deyna had taken this man into her bed, serving him so many times, never knowing what he was capable of. It was a frightening thought. Not all primales were strong, courageous and good.

And not all mems were weak and spineless.

"You are a hot one," he said. "I might keep you for my own in the New Order."

"Oh how wonderful —"

Varenyos lowered his mouth to hers. This was it. *Steady now, wait for it, girl.*

She molded her lips to his. She could not show too much initiative, though she had to control the motions of their tongues to allow her to deposit the capsule in his mouth.

Varenyos paused to bite her lower lip. She stiffened, heart racing. The capsule was being pushed hard against her own teeth. She was going to knock herself out.

Taking a colossal risk, she reached for his chest, massaging his pectoral, lightly, just enough to draw his attention. He eased up slightly and she moved in. Lifting her head, pushing against him, she thrust her tongue between his lips.

He was mildly shocked, though he seemed to be enjoying it.

What a joke, she thought, for all his tough talk he was going passive. He was more a mem than Samharin. Why hadn't she ever been able to do this to Varenys before?

Because she had never tried, that's why.

Taking a breath, she made her silent count, one, two, three.

She flicked the capsule into his mouth. He coughed, resisting.

She would never get it down his throat.

On a last second whim she shoved his jaw upward, causing his teeth to crash together, breaking the capsule.

He gurgled slightly as the contents spilled out into his mouth. Varenys gave her a shocked, angry look. *This sure as hell better be fast acting*, she thought.

The drug was already affecting him. His eyes went wide. He reached for his own throat as if he could choke the poison out.

"You little fool," he groaned as she rolled him off her and onto his back. "You are too late, too late, too...late."

"It's never too late for justice," she said, recalling something Samharin had taught her this morning as they lay in one another's arms. "It's from the Guardian Code, something you obviously have forgotten completely."

He growled, reaching for her. She backed away and his hand fell back limp onto his massive chest. His eyes slid shut.

Sleep tight, sucker.

Deyna wasted no time. She was off like a shot.

Running down the corridor, she thought she heard screams.

Whether in the external world or in her imagination, she could not tell.

Chapter Nine

The breakthrough was coming.

Samharin steadied his breathing, tingling all over, his body tightly buckled into the console, waiting for the computer to help with the deeper mindlink. A journey to the new frontier, human and Narthian.

It had something to do with sex. A mysterious analog between the two races and how they loved one another.

Abe had promised to take the lead in translating and at last, with his help it came.

A complete alteration of perception, even thought itself.

Opening his inner eyes, Samharin beheld the change. He was no longer hearing words but seeing visions, feeling thoughts from within.

The very environment had changed. Instead of the bland Interface Chamber, they were now inside a tunnel, speeding forward in the pitch dark.

It was very warm and damp. Samharin had the feeling the walls were not rock but some other material, a living one.

"You are right," said Abe. "We are about to enter my Nest, such as it was prior to its death. Prepare yourself, we will enter from the top."

Sure enough the tunnel opened abruptly into a huge spherical cavern, stretching hundreds of feet below them. Along the side walls were crystalline honeycombs and brilliant, glimmering gems. The gems were moving, slithering and Samharin realized they were some kind of larvae.

Far below he could see structures, the Nest built up like some kind of mechanical ant's lair. There were all different kinds of bugs, some crawling, some flying. A pair buzzed past, momentarily inspecting.

Samharin felt sick. He imagined himself back on Capellius, choked in bug juice, surrounded by the horrible horde, his weapon nearly extinguished.

Had the Guardian relief force come just a few minutes later, he would never have made it and neither would the other inhabitants of the station he had been protecting.

Samharin would never forget the look on the Guardian Commander's face, the cool half smile as he clasped Samharin's hand, helping him up from the rubble of the fire fight.

"Somebody call for an exterminator?" he rasped, his other hand holding his own Earth weapon, still smoking.

It was that look and that comment more than anything that made Samharin overcome all his fears and doubts and follow Nyssa's invitation to enter the Academy.

One day he wanted to be that kind of soldier, saving lives.

This, however, was not in the plan.

For a moment Samharin thought he would fall headlong into the dank, pungent abyss, but something held him suspended. He looked for his own body and saw nothing.

He was invisible.

Beside him he saw Abe, in a slightly different form, with wings. His body colors were different too, yellow and blue stripes for each segment.

"Our kind sheds its outer layers, resurfacing itself for different occasions, purposes," Abe explained. "On this occasion I am going to share a memory of bonding with my Queen. You will be inside me, Samharin. Are you prepared for this?"

Before he could say no, he was summarily absorbed.

Samharin screamed.

A nightmare locked inside another nightmare. Being buried alive inside one's own terrors. Didn't Abe realize that Samharin had survived only by fighting absorption, by resisting?

This was different though. Abe was telling him that.

Samharin had to trust.

He had come too far to retreat.

Abe was echoing loud and clear in all he was thinking, only now the words may as well have been Samharin's own.

"Fight the fear," Abe encouraged. "That has been your real enemy all along. You fought it on Capellius, you stood your ground and now you must do so again. First, though, release everything, lose everything to keep it."

Samharin's scream broke through. Like a baby, kicking and screaming, he punched holes in his filmy covering, spilling wet into the birth world.

The world of the Narthians.

Nest Truth.

He blinked, his eyes many times multiplied, focusing with a cool alien detachment. Not so entirely dispassionate though, for there were new urges, new sensations. Tentatively he stretched. Flapping wings, shaking legs, snapping tentacles.

He was flying.

More than this, he was crawling, inching on his underbelly, burrowing in a thousand places at once.

The Nest is one.

He wanted to cry from the beauty of it, the pulsing. One huge heart, a billion, billion chambers. Not blood flowing but the hissing flight, the choreographed sonar dance, the burping of larvae, millions at a time into creation.

Samharin gulped the air, gulped the energy, gulped the buzzing cloud of truth. Flashes of lightning, rolling clouds of purple thunder—all of it intelligent—laying out the plans, the orders, the timeless rhythms.

And at the center of it all, her tendrils stretching through to every drone and every scout dispatched light-years away, was the Queen.

“We are hers.”

Samharin spoke the words, bled the words, white, clean blood.

Eyes misted, but not really.

A longing built, a crescendo of ache and pain and need, emptiness such as he had never dreamed.

A pining for her, to be by her side, basking in her will.

“We are hers.”

Abe descended down into the vortex, Samharin with him. They were on the way to seek their audience.

His flight was complicated, circuitous, much buzzing and near collisions with others.

Samharin sensed there was ritual in this, crucial communication too.

As they neared the central structure, tall and spindly, several warriors approached, their wings streaked in red and black. Deadly guardians of the Queen. Seldom did such as these ever venture from the Nest to fight in battle.

If they did, or so Samharin had learned in his strategy classes, it was a sign that a whole Nest was on the move and approaching fast.

In such a case, one had better have half the fleet at one’s back.

There was a whooshing sound, a rushing of air. Abe hovered briefly. Samharin now understood his function as the warriors began to crawl over him. He was a special servant of the Queen, a messenger who brought back data especially for her.

This meant a certain intimacy with her.

Abe lived for this connection.

That he had not perished when she died with the Nest was something of a miracle, a testament to the possibilities of survival.

Samharin panicked for a moment as Abe squeezed through an opening in the structure wall. He could feel the cloying, warm film touching his tendrils, coating his exoskeleton.

It was almost impossible to breathe inside.

Abe pushed his way through to the other side. There was a popping noise as they emerged into the inner sanctum. The walls were amber, dripping liquid gold, gleaming like sun fire.

Some kind of gel bubbled from the floor, if you could call it a floor. It was more like a porous, living sponge. Insects hissed around them. Abe pushed his way in, his feelers touching those of the others.

Samharin felt the contact like a series of electrical charges. There was a sense of familiarity, something primal, a kind of remembering.

Finally the other insects backed off and Samharin saw her, gigantic and half burrowed, covered in eyes, with receptors and tingling needles of connection, serviced by a school of drones, a court of ladies and lords-in-waiting, insects all.

So this was the Queen...

He was almost...disappointed.

"Look again," Abe's thoughts echoed in his own.

Samharin blinked through Abe's eyes. Pain ripped through his skull, the human skull he no longer had.

In a flash he saw her again.

This time she was human.

Female to be precise.

Samharin drew a breath. He had never beheld such a sight, not beautiful but something beyond. Something majestic, immortal.

Divine too, and utterly, completely overpowering.

Samharin recoiled.

"Let it occur. This is the...bonding," Abe's wisdom told him.

Samharin understood. He would understand Abe's relationship to his Queen by perceiving her in his own form.

"You are not entirely stupid for a human," spoke a voice.

It was not coming from his head.

It was the Queen.

Samharin beheld her splendor. Dazzled. Beautiful did not begin to describe her.

He struggled to see through the light that surrounded her. Not a bright Earth light, but something more subtle, an almost invisible yellow.

Focusing was difficult, especially as the details of her form seemed to be changing, ever shifting.

Her hair was black like Deyna's, only a hundred times darker. Too dark for the light to penetrate. It hung down her back. He blinked once and it was braided. Another blink and it was long and loose.

Bizarre.

"I am more than your mind can comprehend at one time," she declared. *"Your senses are pushed beyond their limits."*

Shimmering, she proved her point.

At once she was a young East Indian beauty, smooth teakwood skin, and then she was Asian, with exquisite sculpted lips. Then she was African. Then white, pale as alabaster.

She remained in this final form, which was closest to Samharin's own ethnic origins.

Her body was clad in black silk.

Or was it leather?

Strips of material across her breasts and hips, tantalizing. Long nails trailed her perfect sculpted thighs, a million times purer than marble.

He looked down at himself. He was back in his own body again. He was wearing his uniform. Everything was perfectly detailed, though at the same time it was all surreal.

One thing that was undeniable was his lust.

His cock throbbed. It was the Queen's doing. Samharin looked longingly at her.

She wasn't really human, but he wanted her like crazy. In reality she was a bug.

Or was this some deeper reality?

Who was she, really?

"I am a goddess," she answered the question in his mind. *"I am that which you have sought to worship all your life."*

Samharin was understandably skeptical. "I'm not a Narthian to fall at your feet," he told her. "And besides, you are quite dead, nothing but a memory."

"As long as you are here, your mind linked with this servant of mine, you are Narthian enough," she said. "As for my existence, it is not as you understand."

"You have no existence. Your Nest was destroyed."

"I live inside the one you call Abe. His cells give me life. I live too, in the spores transplanted to other Nests. So long as one Narthian lives, no Queen may die."

Samharin's heart thudded in his chest. He wished nothing more than to serve the Queen, to be noticed by her and to please her. It was acutely emotional, profoundly sexual.

The essence of Narthian being.

Or was there something else going on?

Why would a Queen take on this form?

The Queen brushed aside his suspicions. "Do you know, human, how many of my slaves die in one rotation of your Earth sun simply to pleasure me? The number is in the billions. They swarm, gather and land upon me and I suck them dry, letting them perish in a bath of liquid pleasure. Were I human, they would die on their hands and knees between my legs. I draw the life from them, they give to me."

She pointed a single finger in his direction. The tip glowed green, pulsing.

There was a zap of energy.

Samharin writhed in pain, struck. He fell to his knees, groaning, holding his chest. The torture lasted barely a second, though it felt like a lifetime.

"Worship me," she ordered.

He was on his hands and knees, panting, spasming.

Now what?

He wanted to resist, but he could not.

The very thought of disobedience brought a pain of its own, a longing, an empty aching that threatened to tear him apart.

Samharin delayed a moment, which cost him another dose.

"All right," he groaned. "You win."

For the moment at least.

"Good slave," she soothed.

His entire body screamed out as she penetrated his surrendered flesh. His mouth was beyond dry. He could barely see in front of his face. What sort of fever was this?

It was as if his entire body was one huge erection. He felt like he was going to explode.

She refused to leave his mind alone. "What do you want to do, slave? Tell me your impulse," she pressed.

"To...to please you," he gasped. It did not sound like himself.

It was as if he were answering for the billions, the trillions of insects in the Nest.

"Yes..." She hissed her approval. "That is your first lesson, slave. Your body is my toy. Your will is nothing."

Samharin moaned.

She was the Nest. She owned...everything.

"Now crawl to me," the Queen commanded. "Kiss and lick my boots."

Like an obedient on her way to a primale, he padded to her on hands and knees. His lips trembled as he lowered his head, ready to press it to the material of her boots.

At the last moment he hesitated.

Paradise was waiting.

An end to the hunger, the longing, the itching and burning. Perfect peace lay in this single, simple act of submission. It would be like feeding, filling himself with peace and purpose and happiness.

Just one little token and he would be sated...forever.

"That is right, slave, I alone can feed you," she coaxed. "You exist to please me, you have nothing, you are nothing, you die without me."

Fascinating, thought Samharin, desperate to keep his rational, scientific mind functioning. All this time the humans had thought of the Narthians as sexless, cold to

the ways of erotic power, but here he was learning that they organized their existence around it, albeit in a very different form from that of humanity.

They understood the concepts of erotic power. They even seemed to have some sense of the masculine and feminine.

Or was he stretching the definitions too far?

The Queen laughed. "You think you can dissect me or put me off with your pathetic brain? I will own you, one way or the other."

He felt a tapping on his shoulder blade. Looking up, he saw her. She was holding a whip, a thin riding crop.

Where had it come from? Come to think of it, where did anything come from in this place?

Whatever this place was...memory, dream, illusion?

"It is all of those and none. Think of me as your own personal objectifier," she supplied. "What is needed I alone make. That includes the reality in which you operate."

So she was like the machine too, capable of rearranging matter. How could he not be awed by her? How could he not need her...in all the ways a male needed a female?

He wanted her hard and fast, his shaft pumping between her legs. He wanted to come inside her, fill her, know her.

To initiate, to presume, however, this would be sacrilege.

"You are stalling. Kiss my foot and then prepare to be taken, on your back, spread your legs, human."

Something was amiss. The Queen wanted this too badly.

Resistance suddenly seemed very, very important.

Samharin must not obey her, no matter what.

He clenched his fists, eyes glazed.

He was drunk on her power but he could not give in.

The Queen recognized his resistance.

"Why fight what you enjoy?" she said, teasing him with her hair, long enough now to reach her knees. "You make yourself suffer so needlessly."

For the first time he realized her power had limits. She could not reach him if he did not will it.

So long as something else occupied his mind...

Submission was a right, a gift. He had a choice. Just like the obedient.

Samharin thought of Deyna and how she derived her meaning and purpose from being in the orbit of a primale, reflecting his light, finding her peace in service.

Such worship needed to be earned.

Imagining Deyna and all the wonderful things they had done last night seemed to galvanize him.

"Why do you push me so hard?" Samharin asked. "Are you not able to win me with love, or whatever passes for love in your world?"

"There is no love in my world. Only...duty."

The word was wholly inadequate for what she was trying to convey. It was lust, obligation, the torment of shared biology and mission, but it was hardly love.

"I think we humans might have something you don't," said Samharin.

"No," she uttered. "That's a lie."

Samharin focused once more on the question of her origin. "I still do not see how you can speak to me as anything real. You're nothing but Abe's memories and maybe his fears. But you don't exist in the here and now."

The Queen made a sound, like a hiss and buzz put together. Her eyes filled with rage. She bared her teeth.

"I am immortal," she said. "And that is why you will never defeat me."

Something in the "I" was shrill, overly insistent.

Would a Narthian Queen need to prove herself?

Samharin was rolled to his back, quite against his will.

He groaned as she touched his cock with the tip of her boot. Arching his back, he withstood the pain, such a fine line to pleasure.

"You are not like the others sent to fight," she said.

He shuddered, wanting to blast his semen into the air, a submissive fountain of surrender. "I am...a mem."

"Mems are like drones," she said, translating into terms she understood. "Primals are like warrior insects."

"I am a mem," he said proudly. "And also a warrior."

The Queen pressed the tip of her spiked boot into his belly. "You will call me 'Your Majesty'," she declared. "You worthless worm."

"A man could get used to flattery like that," he quipped.

The Queen snorted at his plucky sarcasm.

"If you were one of my drones," she observed, "I would fuck you to death."

Samharin was pretty close to begging for that very thing, just to end the anguish. Somehow he had to turn things around.

If there was one thing mems were good at, it was pleasing the ladies. Even if they were bug queens in disguise.

"Let me please you, Your Majesty," he said. "Let me lick your —"

"Silence!" Her eyes flashed, emitting a strong blue ray that stopped him mid sentence. The ray zapped in the air and terminated at his crotch, causing him to writhe in agony.

After a few moments she relented.

"You do not speak of any part of my anatomy," she declared. "You do not put the name of my glorious being on your filthy lips."

"Forgive me," he moaned, making a mental note not to repeat the mistake.

"I forgive nothing and I will make you sorry you ever asked," she said.

Oh yes, he remembered now, she had spoken of dying between her legs too.

The Queen bent down to pull Samharin by the hair. Her strength was easily that of three or four primales. She moved him into place, pushing his mouth between her thighs. The Queen's sex, source of being and creation for the Nest.

To say he wasn't curious, desperately so, would be a lie. Tentatively, he dabbed his tongue. Thick, slow, smooth liquid dribbled over the surface. Oh god, this was good stuff. The real thing... Did he dare take more? It was only a dream, right? What the hell...?

Samharin took a deep breath and began to lap at the source of her life, the sweetest nectar trickling between his lips. It soothed and coated his throat and then all at once it began to burn.

Like ancient whisky.

If I do die like this, he thought, I won't be complaining.

"Come on, slave, faster." She pressed his head into her crotch, burying him, choking him until he could breathe nothing but her.

He was helpless and she knew it.

Then again...

Samharin flicked his tongue over her clitoris. She gasped, her body quaking.

She sounded surprised. Could it be she was not entirely familiar with this dream body she had taken for herself?

It was an advantage he could well exploit.

Cupping her ass aggressively, he rolled his tongue, applying it strategically. She was quivering, like a woman struck with an arrow to the heart.

Her fists pounded his shoulders though she no longer seemed capable of pushing him away.

Interesting.

The Queen gasped and then moaned.

Samharin had no clue where this was going.

As if on cue, his mind was shredded open. The contents spilled out, or rather other things spilled in, millions of twisting bodies, armless, legless, larvae, filmy and glistening, covered in pleasure sensors, a single mass of pulsing need and desire.

The smell was putrid, acrid, but strangely pungent. Like something sickly sweet, rotted but still unbearably attractive.

Ancient, decadent.

The larvae were pulling at Samharin, bleeding him, sucking him. Lips on lips, slithering bodies across his belly and cock. And then abruptly they were all human, an orgy of flesh and fire, breasts brushing by his nose, dangling like cherries, fingers over his nipples, inserted into his bottom, around his cock, everywhere.

Samharin held fast to the Queen.

This was a trick to get him to let go.

His sole objective was to destroy her with pleasure.

Whatever she was.

Her body bucked against him and she screamed. Thunder roared in the dank chamber. He thought she might let go.

Then, abruptly, she pushed him away.

"Human fool. You have no idea what my orgasm would mean, though you will...all in good time."

Samharin gazed up at her from his knees.

Whatever she was talking about, it didn't sound good.

"For pity's sake, what do you want?" he asked.

She loomed above him, nearly eight feet tall now, perfectly shaped like a statue, hands on her hips. Her smile was like that of a cat, pleased with its imminent kill. "Pity is a word that has no Narthian translation, little slave. I had thought you might be of use to me, but now you will die with the traitor, your precious Abe."

With that she lifted him, her hands on his upper arms. Her strength was back, he felt like a rag doll as she raised him for a kiss.

The press was no longer lip to lip, but something wholly insectoid.

Everything went dark.

Samharin heard Abe scream somewhere in the distance, a high-pitched wail.

He knew at once it was a Narthian death cry, though he had never heard it before.

"Abe!" he cried.

It was too late.

Samharin was back in the console chair, his mind once more returned to his body in the Interface Chamber.

He knew he must free himself, but he couldn't move his arms. Raw energy was zapping along his skin, eating at his brain.

It was a trap.

This chair would kill him. It was linked to the computer.

And whatever the hell was in it, diabolical, supremely dark.

The Queen.

Fire ate at his brain.

"Samharin, can you hear me?" called a feminine voice, warm and familiar.

Hands were working the straps, trying to free him. There were many people in the room but he heard only Deyna.

"Keep talking to him," Reevea was urging. "He's responding."

"Samharin, fight it. There's some virus in the computer, something infected your mind and Abe's."

Samharin fought back, screaming in pain from within. He could not surrender. He had to live, had to see Deyna again.

He blinked, waking. Deyna was over him, her dark hair hanging down. She looked worried, tired, but was she ever a sight for sore eyes.

She gathered him into his arms.

"What happened?" he asked groggily. "How is Abe?"

Commander Vandar was in the room by now along with Reevea and two Guardians, weapons drawn. Commander Vandar was down on one knee next to Abe, looking for signs of life.

The Commander shook his head. "I'm sorry. He didn't make it."

"Deyna was right," said Reevea, busy at the computer banks. "The system has been compromised. Some kind of neural neutralizer has been added. If she hadn't alerted us to come in when we did, we would have lost Samharin too."

Samharin tried to focus on Deyna. It took him several moments to be able to speak. "How did you know?" he asked.

Her look was deadly serious, although she had a twinkle in her eye. "Deyna has been a busy pleasure slave. You might want to look in your cabin. It will explain a few things."

* * * * *

Deyna led Samharin and the others straight to Samharin's quarters. She had decided it would be much easier to show them the evidence than explain it.

She was most pleased to find Varenyos still there where she had left him on the bed.

"By the Code," declared Vandar, seeing the unconscious Varenyos. "What treachery is this?"

Deyna did her best to explain things, all that happened and all that Varenyos had told her about the plot and the New Order.

Vandar's look became more and more somber the further she progressed in her story.

"We must pass this information along to headquarters at once," he said when she was done.

Samharin was looking at her with great intensity.

"What is it?" she said, feeling more than a little self-conscious.

"What do you mean, 'What is it?' You have done a great thing," Samharin declared. "There is no telling how many lives you may have just saved, beginning with mine."

Vandar was programming his comm link, the one attached to his wrist. He was lining up a personal link to General Theron. At one point he stopped long enough to acknowledge the point. "It is true, we owe you a great debt, Deyna. All of Earth does."

"I wish I had learned more about the plotters," said Deyna, chiding herself. "I know nothing specific about their plans or even who they are."

"We will get to the bottom of it," Vandar assured. "We have our ways."

Samharin took Deyna's hand. "Thank you again," he said.

Deyna attempted to shrug it off, embarrassed under the watching eyes of the two primale guards. "It was my duty," she said.

"It is appreciated, nonetheless." His voice held genuine emotion, a kind of gratitude Deyna was not used to hearing from primales. Primales were certainly excellent in communicating what they wanted and taking it, uncompromisingly, though they would not want to express anything to a woman that might smack of dependency.

Vandar excused himself, presumably to speak directly with General Theron. "If the traitor awakens, see to it he goes under again," he ordered the two guards.

They nodded, their expressions dark.

Deyna could not imagine treason being tolerated lightly among the Guardians.

Likely Commander Vandar would want to take the lion's share of the blame himself for not detecting the plot sooner.

He was that kind of man.

Unlike Varenys, who was male in name only.

"Did he hurt you?" Samharin asked softly so only she could hear.

"I'm tougher than I look," she replied, though it warmed her to feel his concern.

"We'll see later if you're as tough as you look," he murmured, his mouth just brushing her ear.

Deyna shivered. She could not wait. "You must remember to punish me," she said. "For leaving your chambers without orders."

He chuckled. "Indeed, wench, indeed."

Commander Vandar came back into the room, all business. "Remove him to a holding cell," he ordered the guards. "I will attend to him presently."

The men lifted Varenys at both ends.

Deyna wanted to spit at him on the way out.

Samharin touched her arm, steadying her.

He was quite good at reading her emotions.

"We have been ordered to interrogate the prisoner," Vandar explained to Samharin and Deyna once Varenys had been taken away down the hall. "We are to discern the rest of the plot. The General does not wish to raise any general alarms at this point. So far we believe we have the element of surprise."

"Thanks to Deyna." Samharin's hand was at the small of her back. She felt a lump in her throat. She wished she could kneel to the man, show her gratefulness.

What of tomorrow, though? Was there a bond beyond the immediate sexual burning? Could there be anything here for her like Penya had felt once for Vandar and now for Sordon?

Vandar nodded. "I spoke to the General of your courageous actions, Deyna. You will receive a commendation from the Council."

"That is not necessary."

"It will be done in any case," said Vandar.

Reeva walked into the room now, looking pale and drawn.

"Is it true?" asked Deyna. "Is Abe really dead?"

"I'm afraid there was nothing we could do," Reeva said.

Deyna felt Samharin stiffen to alertness beside her.

What was the tricky mem up to now?

Samharin cleared his throat. "Begging your pardon, but that may not be entirely true."

Vandar narrowed his gaze. "What are you talking about?"

Samharin ran his hand over his hair. Deyna wished it were her hand. He was so handsome, especially when he was obviously thinking hard about something.

"I'm not sure I can explain it, Sir. When Abe and I were linked, we touched on certain memories of his. They had a life of their own. I have no proof of this, but it keeps running through my mind, what if the memories I have now, or even the ones we have computerized, contain...Abe's essence?"

Vandar shook his head. "You mean well, son, but that sounds like you are grasping at straws. We have no idea what is left of Abe, in the computer or in his flesh."

Reeva touched his arm. "Hold on a minute, darling, he may have something. Narthian reproduction is not like ours. Their DNA is able to contain not merely instructions for growth but also memory engrams. The new creature is everything the old was, including its experiences. We simply need the right...host."

"You mean we could make a new Abe?" said Deyna.

"It's only idle speculation," Reeva admitted. "We have none of the science or the technology."

"Other than that," Vandar muttered, "it's a piece of cake."

With that, something ruptured deep inside of Deyna.

She felt faint. Her hand went to her belly. "I—don't feel well..."

She reached out for Samharin, who caught her as she fell forward, knees buckling.

"Deyna, what's wrong?" asked Samharin.

She opened her mouth, but no words came out.

Only buzzing, a high-pitched insect sound that terrified her to the core.

She looked at the others, they did not appear to be hearing it.

What was happening to her? She felt like snakes were crawling over her, in her. Or was it spiders?

"Your body is mine," hissed a voice in her ears. *"I claim it."*

Deyna forced her thoughts to another question.

"I am the Queen," the voice answered her. *"I am your Queen."*

Chapter Ten

Samharin was seated at Deyna's bedside in sickbay. He was holding her hand. She felt cold to the touch. Her sudden lifelessness filled him with a terror he could not explain. He had faced death before and never had it seemed personal.

Deyna did not deserve to die.

No one even knew what was wrong with her.

Diagnostics were being run, tests taken. It made no sense. She had collapsed for no reason.

At first they thought it might have been the chemical she used on Varenys to knock him out, but they found no residue in her system.

Various infections were being considered, perhaps some unknown virus delivered airborne via Abe. From what Reeva had told him they had been so very careful to ensure that there was nothing in the Narthian's system humans couldn't handle.

It wasn't an exact science though.

There were too many unanswered questions. Varenys' plan had been to have Abe killed and set up Samharin for the crime, but the Queen had first wanted to absorb him by making him submit and barring that, she had tried to kill him.

One thing Samharin knew, if he had kissed her boot in that vision he would have been lost. Who was this Queen in reality? Was she an electronic expression of the neural neutralizer, working in Abe's mind to destroy him?

That was the most likely answer, but Samharin couldn't help feeling she was more than that, with a life all her own.

She spoke with intentionality and she had plans. Very dangerous ones it seemed.

What, if anything, could the ghost of a Narthian Nest Queen have to do with the New Order and its plan to foment some new dictatorial government hell-bent on preventing peace with the Narthians?

Something flashed in his brain at this point. He wasn't sure where it came from or what it meant. Suppose he hadn't been dealing just with the Queen's ghost? What if something else was involved, something not from the past but another kind of being, intent on the future?

An imposter, an invader against Narthian and Earth people alike.

Again, his thoughts turned back to Deyna. She was the key to all this. He felt responsible for her. Connected.

He had been ambivalent about making sex with an obedient, but now they had bonded.

She had saved his life.

Deyna must not die.

Samharin squeezed her hand.

He felt helpless and it was not a pleasant feeling. Commander Vandar had insisted he not return to duty yet, which he would have done simply to feel of service.

Vandar had wanted Samharin well rested and ready to proceed later on, however.

Samharin was afraid the Commander had lost confidence in him, but Vandar had assured him it had nothing to do with him being a mem.

"I know you can handle anything," he had said, putting his hand on Samharin's shoulder. "You may well teach me a thing or two before this is all over."

Samharin doubted this and said so.

"You have character," Vandar had said. "You have the courage to pit your mem biology against overwhelming odds. You have done what no one else has, first on Capellius and now here."

Samharin just wanted Deyna's eyes to open again. He wanted to see the warmth, the affection, the defiance even.

What would it be like to wake up with her, making sex anew morning after morning? How soon would he grow tired of her? Most mems were unable to stay exclusively with a female beyond a week or two.

He could not imagine growing tired of Deyna.

Such beauty and passion and talk about courage.

If Vandar thought it was a stretch for a mem to stand toe-to-toe with primales, how about for an obedient?

Water welled behind Samharin's eyes.

By the Code, he could not cry. Men, primales did not cry.

He squeezed his eyes shut tight, thinking of his hopes, his fears.

He turned everything into a single vow.

As soon as Deyna was recovered, he would seek his revenge. Her sickness, Abe's death, it was all connected to this twisted New Order, he was sure of it.

Samharin would not rest until it was destroyed.

No matter the price.

If it meant fighting and dying as a Guardian, he would, on the other hand, if he must wage a private crusade, then so be it.

Indeed, if he could fight better alone than as a Guardian, then he would resign his commission.

"I will do it for you, Deyna," he whispered. "You have my word."

* * * * *

Deyna's mind stirred, though her body was as yet paralyzed.

"That's right, slave. You are not permitted to move."

Her eyes popped open.

She was seeing a vision, or was it a dream?

Deyna had a new body, one that belonged only to this interior world. She tried to move her limbs, but they were fixed.

She was attached naked to a cross, x-shaped. The cuffs were made of leather, soft but unbreakable.

"Go on, struggle, I like the sight of you so helpless."

Deyna saw the woman, strolling into view out of the white fog. She had long, long black hair, smooth and silky, and dark eyes. Her lips were full though her face was a little thin, Deyna thought. Her body was lithe, flatteringly covered in a black dress made of some very soft, see-through material.

She had on high-heeled shoes, antique ones. Her walk was practiced, nearly perfect though Deyna knew instantly she was not really human.

"You are perceptive for a slave," the woman acknowledged her thoughts.

"You are the Queen," Deyna said aloud. "You spoke to me before in the Interface Chamber."

The Queen laughed, the sound was cold. "I did not speak to you, dear, I took your soul."

Deyna reacted. "Only a god could do that."

"That remains to be seen," she purred, running one long fingernail over Deyna's cheek. The feeling sent a chill down her spine and left her angry and violated.

"Don't touch me, you...you...alien."

The Queen's smile darkened. "You will learn to beg for my touch, little slave, you will see."

"I'm not your slave."

"Of course you are." The Queen dug her nails into Deyna's breasts, forming circular patterns. The sharp sting was both hot and cold, pleasure and pain. "And I will treat you as such."

Deyna thrashed, helpless. "You are insane. This is...insane."

"This is your brain, Deyna." The nails trailed over her belly, toward her bare, exposed pussy. "I am inside you. There is no point in insulting me, you only destroy yourself."

Deyna whimpered as the Queen played with her clit. "Do you like that, my pet?"

"N-no," she lied.

The Queen teased her a little and then slapped her face.

"Yes," Deyna corrected herself. "I-I enjoy it."

The Queen chuckled. "You think you have known slavery to your human men. You have experienced nothing. In the Nest you will live and breathe...for me."

"You can't have me, I'm not a Narthian."

The Queen moved in as if to kiss her. She made Deyna's heart stop as she held herself, poised, millimeters from her mouth.

The Queen licked her lips. Black and bloodless.

Hadn't they been red a moment ago?

"You will be immortal, my pet. Once you are taken."

Deyna turned her head. "I am not buying this. I don't even know what you are or where you come from."

The Queen caressed her breasts and then lowered her head to suckle. Deyna screamed in pleasure, toes curling as her nipple was possessed, tweaked, sucked lovingly.

"Can a primale do that, my pet?"

"No." Deyna panted.

Samharin might be able to though, once he got to know her body better.

Deyna's thought earned her another slap. "Do not insult me with the memory of that human," the Queen said.

Interesting, thought Deyna. I have touched some nerve. Could it be she was unable to control Samharin as she had wanted?

"He was not worthy of my efforts," the Queen replied directly to her mind.

Something didn't sit right with Deyna. "I saved him from you. You might have intended to kill him but you couldn't."

Pain came from nowhere and everywhere. Deyna's body writhed and contorted.

"You are strong," the Queen approved. "Your mind lets you take more than most of your human males.

"F-fuck you," Deyna managed.

"Oh no," the Queen crooned. "It is I who will fuck you, again and again for all eternity."

Deyna moaned. Something was filling her, or rather emptying her. Instinctively she knew what it was. The longing. The secret weapon of the Queen who kept every creature in the Nest as her slave.

"You are clever as well," said the Queen. "You have potential. Through you I will most certainly advance to the next step."

"Wh-what step?" Deyna took the pain, wrapping her mind instead around the need for information. Lives depended on this, particularly Samharin, whom this Queen hated so much.

The Queen shook her head. "Don't think you can play me like you did Varenynos. Oh yes, I know his name. He is mine, though he thinks he serves his own interests. I

have been speaking to him for some time, using the one you call Abe to relay my thoughts. He takes them for his own, the arrogant fool.

"He thinks he will use me, bring me out as a bogey man to scare the rest of your pathetic race into giving him power, but the door he opens is mine...and I will come through in force."

Deyna had to keep her talking. "The Guardians can close any door you open. You are wasting your time."

The Queen scoffed. "Arrogance, such a thorough-going human trait. Your Guardians have grown soft and complacent. They want to keep fighting the last war, not the next one."

"I don't understand."

The Queen pressed her hard, hot body against Deyna. "Show me you want me first and I will teach you."

Deyna was playing with fire, molten lava even, but she could not back down. The stakes were too high.

"You do things to me," Deyna confessed. "I have never before thought about women in this way."

"I'm not a mere woman. What we have here transcends all you know and believe. I am Nest...and I will be Narthian and human."

Deyna's belly flipped, hot and fluttery. As dangerous as the Queen was, she was holding out the temptation of submission, some kind of ultimate surrender.

Deyna had to keep the sexual part separate in her mind from the rational. "I-I have to block you."

"Can't be done, my little obedient pet," the Queen dismissed. "I play you as my instrument. I am ahead of you and in you."

The Queen's finger brought Deyna to the edge of orgasm and left her there.

Deyna whimpered for more.

"You will take pain first," said the Queen.

Deyna pushed out her breasts. The Queen fixed clamps to her nipples, silver, elegant, tight and biting, biting, biting.

Where the fuck had she gotten clamps?

The Queen kissed Deyna, light and torturous.

Deyna pushed her chest, agonizing as it was, toward the Queen.

Bonding them, sealing them in her agony.

Narthian and human.

Not in friendship, but in some kind of slavery, under the Queen's command.

This was not good, not good at all.

Deyna tried to put the pieces together. The Queen was talking of the next war, something the Guardians were missing. Varenys had his New Order, but he was a dupe. What did that mean?

Shit. She had to get this right.

First she needed to come though.

She needed the relief more than air.

"Puh-please," she croaked.

The Queen stroked her hair. "Please, Your Majesty," she prompted.

"Please...Your Majesty."

"Good girl, good pet," the Queen soothed.

Deyna melted in the praise. It was like when a primale gave her approval only deeper, more soulful.

"I would like to give you a gift, Deyna, what would you like?" The Queen's voice had turned seductive, melodious, like honey poured over her heart, sweetness in her veins.

Deyna shook her head, fighting to keep the image from her mind.

"Don't be afraid, my pet, let me in, yes, that's it."

It was too late. The Queen had seen.

Deyna shut her eyes tight. The Queen told her to open them again. Deyna did so. The woman was gone.

In her place stood Samharin, naked, proud and erect.

"I'm going to take you, sweetheart," he said. "In the ass."

Deyna swooned.

Anal sex had always made her feel most submissive, though it was a secret she tried to keep. When primales demanded it, she held back her reaction as much as she could, never wanting to let anyone in too close.

"Would you like that, my love?"

Deyna nodded, hating herself because she knew it was the Queen behind this. She was too weak to resist though.

If it had been any other man.

"Tell me, pet, say it."

"I want to be fucked in the ass," said Deyna. "I want to be taken. Come inside me..."

She could not bring herself to pronounce Samharin's name.

The Queen laughed, her own voice mixed with Samharin's.

"It's very special here," she heard them both say. "You will feel it as if it was your pussy. You will come."

Mindfuck, thought Deyna.

And with it absorption into her damn Nest.

Did she have any hope?

No pills to manufacture out of thin air this time.

No arrogant primale blowhard to outwit.

The Queen was mighty arrogant though, and maybe she could use it.

It would be a little hard with her thoughts being spied on, but she didn't really have a choice.

She would do her best.

Somehow the Queen had jumped inside her and she could be expelled too.

It was war, the beginning of a new kind of conflict.

She felt that, surely as she felt the need to be possessed, hard and fast in her narrow channel.

She felt something else too.

Earth was going to lose...unless she did something to stop it.

Chapter Eleven

Samharin met up with Vandar and Reevea in the conference room. They were seated at the table already, along with several of the Project's scientists. Vandar's second-in-command, an officer by the name of Sordon, was also there.

They were all waiting for the holo link to commence with General Theron and High Councilor Nyssa back on Earth.

Reevea was holding Vandar's hand. Samharin sensed she was drawing strength from her primale husband and he was making a great exception in allowing such a public display of affection between them.

Samharin sat in silence at the end of the table. The holo screen lit up almost immediately in the back of the room. Theron and Nyssa appeared, life-size in all their splendor.

"We thank you all for being here," Nyssa began the meeting. "And we also thank you for your hard work in the initial stages of this galactic crisis."

Samharin stiffened to hear it called such.

Who could argue the seriousness though?

"Commander Vandar has filled us in on the initial incident," General Theron proceeded seamlessly. "We must now fill each other in with what we have learned."

"I am concerned first of all to learn how Deyna is," said Nyssa.

"I just left her," Samharin took the liberty of reporting. "She is still unconscious."

One of the scientists proceeded to give a medical report. When he droned on too long, Theron said, "So you don't know what is wrong with her then?"

The doctor frowned. "No," he admitted.

"What about Abe? There has been mention of cloning him?"

"Not cloning exactly." This from Reevea. "More like re-growing an entire lizard from a tail instead of the other way around. So far we have little to go on. The neural neutralizer fried his brain pan pretty good."

"Vandar, what can you tell us?" asked Nyssa.

"The interrogation of former Guardian Varenyos is complete," he said succinctly. "All that was in his mind, we now know."

"And?" Theron pressed.

"This New Order, whatever it is, operates in cells," said Vandar. "Each unit knows its own members and one contact from another, higher-up cell, though not the leader. The other members of Varenyos' cell have been arrested. Both are Guardians. Their

outside contact to the larger organization is someone whose code name is Telemond. They communicate by holo link. He is in the Rigelian System."

"Very good. We will track him down," said Theron. "And through him the others. What more can you tell us of their intentions?"

"The plan was as Deyna told us," Vandar said. "They intend to scare the population into submission with some kind of fake bug attack, though we could get no further details from any of them. Sir, may I make a personal remark at this time?"

"Affirmative," said Theron.

"The responsibility for Abe's death is mine. I hereby offer my resignation," Vandar declared in clipped tones.

"Resignation not accepted," Theron answered in the same tone.

Vandar frowned. "Sir, I respectfully ask that you reconsider."

Theron would not hear of it. "Blame is not going to be placed with anyone other than the traitors, Commander. I need my officers, you most of all."

"Yes Sir," Vandar said. "I withdraw my request."

"May I say something?" Samharin interjected.

"By all means," said Nyssa.

"I am concerned that there is more here than meets the eye," he said.

"Oh dear," said Nyssa. "That is not encouraging considering how much already does meet the eye."

"Agreed," said Samharin. "And I hope I am wrong. I wish I could convey what I went through, what the Queen was like."

"The Queen?" Theron's brow arched.

Samharin took a breath, realizing he had yet to divulge the details of his experience during the mindlink. "Abe took me to his Nest," he explained. "As he remembered it, at least. He introduced me to his Queen so I could learn their ways. The idea was to form a basis of communication, an analogy between Earth sexual dynamics and those of the Narthians."

"Fascinating," said Nyssa, her eyes lighting.

"How is this relevant?" Theron cut to the chase. "Abe's Queen, like his Nest, is dead, destroyed by the Narthian High Command in the rebellion."

"Yes, I know this," Samharin said. "I said as much to the Queen. She told me that she is immortal, that she lives on through any survivors of her Nest and perhaps even members of other Nests if I understood her right."

"Sounds like a nice ghost story," said Theron bluntly.

Or an opportunity for invasion.

Samharin was not sure where this idea had come from exactly. The Queen had spoken of an orgasm that would change everything.

How to explain *that* to a man like Theron?

"We need to move on," Theron said. "Abe is dead, which means anything operating in his brain is dead, including his Queen. Her ghost, assuming it had some reality, has nowhere to operate."

Samharin was unconvinced.

"You have more to say, Cadet?" Nyssa read his skepticism.

"Yes. There is still a loose end here. Why has Deyna been affected as she has?"

"There are any number of possibilities," Theron dismissed. "None of which have to do with ghost queens."

"Why haven't we identified any then?" This from Nyssa.

"I'll give you the reason," Theron declared. "She is an obedient, overwrought."

"A weak woman, you mean," Nyssa said sharply. "Unable to keep from fainting? Funny, she was plenty strong awhile ago."

"You know what I mean," said Theron.

"Yes, I do know, and you are speaking like a primale, not like a reasonable person."

Samharin, like the others, felt more than a little awkward being present for this borderline lovers' quarrel.

From everything Samharin knew, this couple was not known for fighting.

The current stress on these two must be phenomenal, he thought.

There was no telling how high the stakes were. Traitors among the Guardians, a conspiracy and a deadly end to the Gettysburg Project on which both these leaders had staked so much credibility.

"I am a primale, Nyssa," he agreed. "Which is why I am going to take matters into my own hands."

"What is that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"I am hereby placing the Earth Federation under martial law, Nyssa. We are going to meet force with force."

Nyssa, like the others, looked for some sign Theron might be speaking in jest.

Clearly he was not.

"There is no precedent for this," said Nyssa.

"This will not be debated," he said simply. "Vandar, you will implement a Code Seven at once."

Vandar rose from his seat, the same deathly serious look on his face as his superior. "Yes, General."

"Darling, what's going on?" Reeve asked.

"You are confined to quarters," Vandar told her. "Along with all other non-military personnel."

He signaled for the guards to escort her.

She clung to Vandar briefly.

He whispered something in her ear, calming her instantly.

"Yes," she replied softly. "My Lord."

Samharin could feel the primale testosterone pumping around him. He had no doubt of the men's courage and fortitude. But what did they intend to accomplish?

"Sir, with all due respect," Samharin said. "You do not know what you are fighting. This Queen works in ways we do not understand."

Theron seemed momentarily surprised that Samharin would talk back to him. Perhaps it was Samharin's mem nature or his experience with the Narthian Queen.

"We will know the enemy when it shows itself," said Theron. "We will flush it out."

"Commander Vandar, we need Doctor Reeve," Samharin said, addressing his second concern. "I feel we must continue trying to resurrect what we can of Abe. His knowledge would be invaluable."

Vandar looked to Theron, who nodded in the affirmative. Nyssa was standing beside him, silent.

"Very well. You will be confined to the lab," said Vandar. "Take any of the scientists you need."

"Yes," said Reeve.

"And Deyna," Samharin added. "She must be attended to as well."

"See to it, Vandar," Theron said, more than a little impatient.

With that the holo transmission ceased, cut off from Theron and Nyssa's side.

With that, Vandar and Reeve left the room, the group of scientists close behind him.

"Sir, what is Code Seven?" Samharin managed to ask Vandar on the way out.

Vandar was tight-lipped. "It has a number of facets," he said. "To begin with, we execute the prisoners."

* * * * *

Deyna was on hands and knees, her palms pressing deep into a pile of plush, red velvet pillows. The bedding underneath was equally soft and luxuriant...and completely unreal.

So was her body for that matter and the man who was about to possess her.

Correction, the man was really the woman who was the bug who was about to possess her.

The Mother of all Bugs, to be precise.

"You are not concentrating."

In the dream Samharin struck her bare bottom with a paddle. She grunted in reply as the hot sting pervaded her body.

"Does that feel like an illusion?" he asked.

"No," she admitted.

He struck her again. "Call me Master."

"Yes, Master."

Samharin slapped her bottom, ordering her to open her legs. She widened her knees as best she could.

"You are a sloppy, undisciplined slave," he said, fingering her clitoris.

Deyna cried out, digging her nails into the pillows.

"You need ass fucking. You need mindfucking."

She shook her head no, but the word that came out was yes.

"Yes, Master," she corrected as he pinched the soft, punished flesh of her bottom.

"You have held back from your Masters for too long, but you won't hold back any longer."

"No, Master."

The paddle whizzed through the air, claiming her.

He struck her twice in succession, leaving her breathless.

"Are you ready to give me your ass?"

"Y-yes, Master."

"That doesn't sound enthusiastic," he chided.

Leather cuffs appeared around Deyna's wrists and about her ankles. A collar materialized about her neck.

Through each nipple, a tiny gold ring.

Samharin reached around and tugged one of the rings, creating raw, precise pain, mixed with a layer of hot pleasure.

In and out went his finger, testing her sopping cunt.

He moved her to the edge of orgasm and held her, cruelly toying.

"Oh fuck," she screamed, her will shattered. "Take my ass, Samharin, do it."

Abruptly Samharin was gone.

She called out for him.

A female's voice rang with laughter.

Her blood chilled as she recalled in whose power she really was.

The Queen kissed her from behind, her hot smooth body pressing. "You will not resist me," she whispered. "You will give me the thing I want."

There was something in the words that held a clue, if only Deyna could understand. She still had some choice in this some control.

"You have no control," the Queen read her mind. "You are helpless and I will use you. You will even beg for it and in time you will know only the reality of slavery to me, the only true slavery."

"Wh-what do you want from me?"

Another laugh, deceptively light.

"Just your ass, my love."

"You don't have a cock."

This was where Deyna would learn she was wrong, or rather the latest of many places she was wrong.

And why shouldn't the Queen have the ability to sprout male anatomy as needed? It wasn't like she was really human flesh and blood.

"I advise you to relax," said the Queen. "You might even enjoy it."

Deyna felt hot penetration, a spear like a primale cock, only this was pointed, focused like a beam. It zeroed in on her nether opening, burning a trail, leaving sizzling need in its wake.

Her ass felt like her pussy, needful, pulsing.

The Queen was doing a number on her head, all right.

The beam cooled and Deyna felt the motion, in and out, solidifying more definitely.

"You should consider yourself privileged," the Queen told her. "It's not every subject I fuck in the ass."

Deyna tried to imagine this was Samharin, the real one, doing what he wanted with her, playing with her, enjoying himself, but still wanting for her to feel the pleasure.

That was a mem thing, letting the woman feel her own thing, letting her have her experience in her own way without being threatened.

Mems didn't micromanage the sexuality of their partners like primales did.

Or was it just Samharin? She knew no other mems.

Samharin was attentive, creative, thoughtful, exasperatingly so.

He had made her masturbate, left her to do it on her own with a pleasure rod.

She had a rod in her now.

It could have been Samharin.

Or Varenys. Or anyone.

"I own you," hissed the Queen, breaking through the distractions. "You'll feel as I wish, remember as I wish. You will beg for the pleasure, the right to feel, to remember and you will love it. But first you must know emptiness."

A void opened at once, a swirling hole beneath her.

Deyna fought to keep her footing. She was slipping. The Queen kept on her, fucking her ass, in and out, clouding her with lust, singeing and burning, like an animal, clinging to her body and soul.

"Let go," Deyna cried out. "You're dragging us down."

The vortex swirled, cold as death.

It wanted her soul, her identity.

"Don't worry," said the Queen. "I will keep it safe, just let go."

The Queen's tendrils were at the base of her brain, trying to wrench it free. Deyna saw in a flash her future, no independent existence, nothing but endless absorption.

"You'll still have everything," the Queen countered. "And more. I will let you have what you were. You may beg for it and we will taste the memories I save for you, I will let you crawl inside your former hovel of a soul, as a reward, every now and again when you've been good. Better a thousand years groveling, waiting for a moment of my personal attention than a million as your own mistress."

This seemed a poor bargain, but the vortex had logic.

Ice-cold death, sucking, and above the talons, ripping away her being.

The Queen continued to fuck her like an animal, her female, bestial body ramming again and again into her hindquarters with its sprouted cock.

Deyna was collared and cuffed. Nipples pierced. A slave.

Falling.

The memories were being pulled away, like garments ripped from skin. How sad to see it go so easily. Was her life so mundane and forgettable as all that? A string of primale cocks satisfied, endless orders obeyed for others' good?

What a pathetic obedient she was to question everything.

But she did.

Deyna couldn't breathe. The wind roared in the vortex, or whatever passed for wind. She felt nauseous.

This at least, seemed familiar, almost comforting.

She had been nauseous before.

In Samharin's quarters as they stood discussing Abe's murder.

Samharin had grabbed hold of her, concern thick in his voice and worry. She remembered collapsing against him, knowing it was safe to do so, that he would protect her with his life.

She could trust him.

Even if he wasn't primale.

"You trust me," the Queen demanded, increasing the pace.

Deep in what was left of her mind, Deyna wondered if the Queen had not miscalculated. She was trying too hard, forcing something that could only be given.

The Queen was not invincible.

Abruptly everything changed.

The vortex vanished along with the bed with the pillows and even the collar and cuffs.

Instead Deyna found herself standing in a room, a large bedroom decorated in gold and blue. The hover bed was magnificent. There were holo paintings on the wall, depicting scenes from planets in the galaxy.

Deyna sensed this was a real place.

She jolted as the door slid open.

She did not want to be discovered.

Two people walked in. They did not see her.

They began to talk as if she weren't even there.

Was this some form of astral projection?

The pair looked familiar. Presently their identities became all too clear.

"Theron," said the woman. "We're alone now and we have to speak reasonably."

Theron's face was dark. Deyna knew the look well. It was pure primale. "I have already spoken on the matter. You have two options, remain here willingly or be restrained."

She stiffened. "I'm still Head of the Council and your boss."

"Martial law has been declared," he replied. "As Head of the Guardians, the final say-so is now mine."

"That declaration was made by you," she said. "Without consulting me."

"This isn't a time for consultation. We don't know what we are facing. The traitors could be anywhere. And if this Samharin of yours is right, we may be facing another Narthian attack as well."

"All the more reason to deliberate over the matter in an emergency council meeting."

"No meetings. We need lockdown," Theron said.

Nyssa's lip trembled. She attempted to stare him down. When this failed she tried to walk past him.

He held her arm. "Where do you think you are going?"

"To call the Council." She pulled at him. "Let me go."

"No, Nyssa."

"You cannot order me about," she said, fury in her voice.

"I can," he said. "And I will. As for your continued defiance, I warn you it will wind up with you over my knee."

Her eyes lit up. "You wouldn't dare."

There was no bluff in his eyes. "You are my female, Nyssa, and I will have your obedience."

Nyssa was breathing more quickly. "This isn't about sex, Theron, you are taking advantage."

He pulled her toward the bed. "You have had your last warning."

Theron sat himself on the hover bed, easily maneuvering his protesting, wriggling mate onto his lap. "This will continue," he said, "until you acquiesce."

"You can spank me until hell freezes over, you brute," she vowed, "and I won't yield."

Theron rained the blows, efficiently, steadily, one after another. Deyna watched hotly, mesmerized by the sight of the High Councilor's pert buttocks succumbing to primale discipline.

Nyssa struggled admirably but Theron was persistent. After twenty blows or so he paused. "Are you prepared to yield, woman, or shall we continue, this time on your bare ass?"

She started to tell him off again then held her tongue as he lifted her skirt. "All right, you win," she exclaimed.

"You will obey me?" Theron asked. "Without question during this time of martial law?"

"I have no choice, do I?"

He rubbed her bottom. "You can always choose more pain."

Nyssa did not appear to be in pain at the moment. A soft moan escaped her throat as Theron continued his attentions.

Theron's voice was throaty. "You drive me wild, woman."

"Take me," said Nyssa brazenly. "I need it. Fuck me and clear my head."

Theron tossed her to the center to the bed. Deyna's hand strayed down between her legs. She parted her naked thighs, touching herself. Was it right to take pleasure from such an act of voyeurism?

"Oh gods," groaned Nyssa.

Theron looked possessed. He did not bother to undress her but tore at her clothing, exposing her breasts, belly and pussy. He pulled his uniform down over his shoulders to the waist, revealing his cock.

Deyna had to restrain herself. She wanted to be on the bed with them, submitting along with Nyssa.

Or did she want to take charge?

How peculiar.

Not even fems were dominant during sex, let alone obedient.

Deyna wasn't alone though, was she? There was another in her head, manipulating her.

Except this scene was real, albeit distant.

Theron pinned Nyssa's wrists above her head, one of his hands easily holding her. With the other hand he positioned her legs to take what he wanted.

In one single motion, smooth and decisive, he slid his shaft inside her. From the ease of entry it was clear she was wet and ready.

For all her dominant abilities on the Council, she was Theron's submissive. A little spanking, some strong words and she was putty in his hands, even in the midst of a political crisis like this.

"Oh Theron," she gasped, thrashing her head. "I love you, more than life, you know I do."

"I love you too, my insolent mate," he replied, his voice thick with affection.

"Tell me," she said. "Tell me we are going to be okay. The galaxy will be protected."

"No harm will come to you," he vowed. "Not now or ever. You have my word."

Theron's strokes were steady and measured. She lifted her pelvis to increase the pressure. "Do it," she urged. "Stamp your ownership...again."

"Come for me," he said. "Come with me."

They writhed together in mutual orgasm, their bodies rolling over and over across the hover bed. They looked like two wild beasts. Where one left off, the other began. Sweat bathed them. Groans came from both their throats.

Deyna touched herself, absorbed in the moment.

"You are watching history," the Queen whispered in her ear.

All at once the Queen's hands cupped her breasts from behind. Deyna trembled all over, unable to push her away. Softly, she began to moan, her cries in tune with those of Nyssa.

"Wh-what do you mean?" Deyna asked.

"You are witnessing the beginning of the end. Primale power, human power is to be defeated."

"The conspiracy you mean?"

The Queen chuckled. "There is no conspiracy, my pet."

Deyna could not have been more confused. "Varenyos told me..."

"Varenyos was a fool, weak-minded, easily dominated. He thinks what I tell him to, believes what I want him to. I planted in his mind the notion of a conspiracy. In truth, there are but three involved. All of them captured."

The Queen turned Deyna, about to kiss her lips. Deyna wrapped her arms about the Queen's neck, accepting the caress of her mouth. Between tiny nibbles, nipple to nipple, she continued.

"Sometimes the illusion of a thing is as good or better than the real thing, pet. I have manipulated Theron into declaring martial law. He will now disperse his forces almost certainly in the wrong places, to the wrong end. The human race will be left in a state of exquisite vulnerability."

"How?" Deyna wanted to know. "What new kind of attack are you planning?"

"I told you," said the Queen throatily. "First you join me and then you learn my plans."

"Fine, tell me what I have to do."

"You are giving in easily," the Queen noted.

"Not really. You've been at this some time."

"It is barely a few hours," the Queen countered. "This is not much time."

Deyna sensed the Queen was suspicious. She was going to have to be more subtle. Then again, couldn't the Queen read her thoughts?

"Of course I can," said the Queen, but Deyna sensed something was missing.

The Queen lacked something crucial...and it had everything to do with Samharin.

"Samharin is not important, pet. You should pay closer attention. You are not important either. Your whole race is replaceable in the end. My power is unstoppable. Even now, the mighty Theron dangles on my string. Why else do you think he is afraid, on the edge of panic?"

"He is only being careful."

"He is being stubborn. Soon he will be reckless, fighting shadows."

"If you have him, then why bother with me?" said Deyna.

"You're a tool. I want you reliable."

"A tool for what?"

Agony ripped through Deyna's mind. She put her hands on her skull.

"You cannot guess the ways of a god. I am amusing myself with you, passing the time until I bring down the Guardians."

Deyna didn't think that could be completely right, but there was no mistaking the sudden surge of energy in her limbs.

"I-I can't move."

"You'll move when I tell you and you'll go where I tell you."

They were no longer with Nyssa and Theron.

She was back in the sickbay in her bed.

The Queen, invisible, crawled on top of her, hands around her neck. "Here is the new game, pet. You are going to fuck a man, one I have chosen. You will seduce him with your slavery, you will induce his cock inside you...and you will give him to me."

"Wh-what man?" she choked.

Damn it, how was the Queen operating? It was like she was everywhere and nowhere at once.

The Queen smiled. "His name," she said, "is Vandar."

Chapter Twelve

"We see no alternative to surgery," said Reeva, concluding her initial experiments in conjunction with the biologists. "We must remove a sample of your brain tissue and analyze it for memory residue of the mindlink. There is no place left to search for Abe."

Samharin listened to the psychosensologist's recommendation, though his mind was on Deyna, back in the sickbay. It had been hours now and she had yet to show any signs of consciousness.

If anything, she was weakening, her heart rate slowing down, her blood flow decreasing. The scientists were even beginning to talk about the feasibility of life support if she were no longer able to breathe on her own.

How could this be happening? Nothing should be wrong with her, not by any laws known to human science.

What about Narthian science though?

The Queen. It all came back to her.

"Cadet Samharin, are you listening?" Reeva asked.

"Sorry, Reeva," he said. "I was preoccupied."

Reeva put a hand on his arm. "You were thinking about Deyna. I know you care for her. This must be very difficult for you."

"I barely know her," he said.

"It is not about the length of time," said Reeva. "Relationships are born in an instant, they proceed faster than light. They defy physics."

Samharin smiled halfheartedly. "No one could accuse you of a lack of optimism and imagination."

"You either," she said. "It was no small leap for you to mindlink with Abe, especially given what happened to you on Capellius Station."

"It's a funny thing," he said. "Capellius is so remote to me now. I might as well have been another person and yet in some ways I never left. I still wake up sometimes in a cold sweat, fresh out of some dream in which I am still fighting them."

"Are you familiar with that saying of Nietzsche's?" she asked. "About dragon fighters?"

"Those who fight too long against dragons become dragons themselves'," Samharin quoted.

He thought of Nietzsche often and his attempt to awaken people to what he saw as a fundamentally shifting world.

"Do you think I am going to become a dragon?" Samharin asked.

"No. I think it is the primales who may well be in danger," said Reeva, surprising him with her answer.

"I will consent to the surgery," Samharin said, noting the drawn look on her face.

There was no mistaking how shook up the non-primales had been by Theron's announcement of martial law. As a mem he was sensitive to such feelings. The primales on the Project, by contrast, had moved into near combat mode, barely speaking except to each other.

All of this had stemmed from Abe's death, Samharin thought, and his resurrection might be the only way to reverse it.

"I expected no less, Cadet Samharin," she said. "Your reputation for bravery is well earned."

He could not resist a bit of black humor. "Are you trying to tell me in a roundabout way that I am not likely to pull through?"

Her lips angled upward in an attempt at a smile. "We will prepare the operating room," she said. "This won't take long at all."

A short while later he was being wheeled into the room. The gleaming robo surgeon awaited, laser scalpels affixed to its multiple arms.

"Here goes nothing," he muttered. "And everything."

* * * * *

Deyna awoke from her deep sleep. The two medics in the room were fretting over her, but she did not have time.

Correction, the Queen did not have time.

Sitting up, she clutched the two men by their shoulders and pushed them back. She was as surprised at her strength as they were. "Do not interfere," she said. "Or I will destroy you."

The words were not her own, though they were coming from her mouth.

Warily, the medics moved away, giving her a wide berth as she sauntered to the door. She padded on bare feet, her body clothed in a short gown.

Deyna ripped it from her skin and punched the button to open the door.

"It is locked," said one of the medics. "There are guards outside."

Deyna put her hand to her mouth. "Oh dear, I am so scared."

Laughing, she punched a hole through the metal.

The two Guardians on the other side of the door were well trained. Though they could hardly have expected the sickbay's comatose patient to burst through the metal partition like it was paper they did not panic.

"Halt," ordered the first, drawing his weapon.

The second followed suit.

Deyna spun, kicking the pistol from his hand, using combat skills she did not possess. A second kick to the solar plexus landed him on his knees, groaning.

The second guard fired. The beam bounced off Deyna's skin. She grasped him by his primale neck and lifted him off his feet.

"How...is this possible?" the Guardian grunted.

"I use your own strength," said Deyna, the meaning of her words again escaping her. "Your force is my force."

She threw the primale to the opposite wall. He bounced off it. She commenced to striking him, several well-placed blows until he was down, unconscious.

After this, Deyna found herself walking down the hall toward the command center. "What do you need Vandar for anyway?" she spoke aloud to the Queen.

"I don't," came the reply. "You are all...bugs to me."

"So squash the lot of us," Deyna said.

"You talk too much, pet."

The Queen treated her to a warning blast of mental discomfort. Deyna kept her mouth shut, though the questions persisted.

Something about the Queen's remark about appearances being as good as reality.

How much of this was bluff?

Again, she had the distinct impression the answer had to do with Samharin. He was in the way somehow.

* * * * *

"Here you are," said the surgeon, delivering the sample to Reeva. The tissue was invisible to the eye, carefully sealed in a wafer-thin disc. It had taken only minutes to complete the procedure. Even now the robo surgeon was applying the healing beams to the incision on Samharin's skull. In under a half hour he would be awake, none the worse for wear.

Hopefully by then, Reeva would have an answer.

She was not a geneticist by profession, though she did have some training. As a psychosensologist she had been required to make studies in all the major fields impacting on human physiology.

"We will run this at least twice, Doctor," said the technician by her side.

She nodded, smiling tightly. "Hopefully we'll catch something the first time."

Reeva, like Samharin, was preoccupied. She was worried about Vandar. Seeing him stubborn and grumpy was one thing, she was used to that, but this was different. Something seemed to be eating at him.

From her end, Nyssa had seemed just as concerned about Theron. Reeva's psychosensorial intuition was yielding little in the way of details. It was almost as if the Guardians were afraid of something, something they themselves could not see.

Never in all her years, with all her study of stress on primales, had she seen any of them succumb to strong emotion.

Something didn't add up. This New Order had come out of nowhere, what was it about? Could such a conspiracy really be afoot galaxy-wide?

If she had some time to be with Vandar, she could try to break through the resistance. He was shut off from her though, busy with his Code Seven.

And she was hardly in a position to strong-arm him. The testosterone had certainly been pumping in the conference room and unfortunately, the effects had gone straight to her pussy.

She had gone weak kneed when he told her that she must obey him with perfection in the crisis, submitting herself to him without question.

She had wanted to kneel before him and hug his waist.

After that she would have sucked his cock too, drawing it deep into her mouth. Pleasuring her mate was her dearest joy in life and while she was not an obedient female, she was definitely Vandar's woman.

Anyone who doubted that could ask Vandar himself.

Samharin acted the same way when it came to Deyna. He was protective and fearsome, which was singular for a mem.

Times were changing, the sub genders mixing in new ways.

A doorway opened to the Narthians.

Hopefully that door would stay open.

They must find a way to bring Abe back.

His physical body had been preserved. His brain functions had been recorded perfectly.

What was lacking was the spark that separated life and death.

"Reeva, look at this," said the technician.

Reeva examined the screen. What she saw could roughly be described as a miniature electronic firestorm. It was captured synaptic activity from the cerebrum. In most respects it was human, there were anomalies.

"You've checked for error?" asked Reeva.

"I've crosschecked it against Samharin's records and those of about half the galactic database. This is outside statistical norm."

Reeva drew a breath. "Hello, Abe."

The screen continued its little show, the tiny specks dancing across a cloudy background.

Somehow, against all odds, they had captured something in Samharin's brain. A residue of the mindlink with Abe that had somehow altered Samharin's synaptic functioning.

There were implications to this.

Enough data to spend lifetimes studying.

They didn't have lifetimes though.

"What can we do with it?" Reeve asked, as much of herself as of the technician.

"Not much we can do," he said. "Not without about a trillion credits worth of equipment. Hell, even if we had the money, it would take a fleet of cargo ships to fly it out here."

"What if Samharin just did the mindlink again?" Reeve wondered aloud.

The technician looked at her. "Slight problem. Abe's dead, remember?"

"Maybe Samharin could give his brain a jump-start."

He shook his head. "There's no basis in science for that and you know it."

Reeve eyed him. "You going to start worrying about what's possible at this stage of the game? After everything we've seen and done?"

"Good point," he agreed.

Reeve liked his style, his can-do attitude.

Chalk up another victory for the mem team.

"I'll go get Samharin," he volunteered.

"And I'll start praying," Reeve quipped.

It was at this point the alarms started going off.

"What do we do?" said the technician.

They were coming from the hallway. The door was locked from the outside, like all the others. This was for security purposes. There were supposed to be at least three guards out there protecting them.

"We keep going," Reeve said over the persistent buzzing. "Nothing stops us, not now."

* * * * *

Deyna continued her casual sashay down the hall, alarms wailing around her. A dozen or so Guardians were following, guns aimed. Another dozen were in front, moving slowly backward, weapons trained on her chest.

If the fools opened fire, they would cut each other to ribbons, leaving her unharmed.

She had never actually seen Guardians sweat before.

It was mildly amusing.

Except that what was happening signaled a breach of security beyond imagining. No wonder these primale protectors bore such pained expressions. They were fighting something they could not beat.

Sometimes seeming a certain way is as good as being so.

Damn it, what was Deyna missing?

Something like a whip, invisible and raw, fell across her back, reminding her who was boss.

"Get on with it, pet."

The command center lay just ahead.

Vandar and Sordon, his second, were barricaded inside, protecting the main computer and weapons banks.

Deyna knew this without looking.

Using both hands, she ripped open the sliding doors.

"Vandar, tell the others to go," Deyna said. "It is you I want."

Vandar stood facing her, fearless. "Sordon, take the men, fall back."

"Commander," said Sordon. "Please, let us stay with you."

"That's an order," Vandar said.

"Yes Sir."

Sordon moved past Deyna, his eyes dark and narrow.

Breathing deep, she smelled fear on him.

Since when could she sense such things?

Since when were Guardians afraid in the first place?

"You wanted to speak to me?" Vandar said dryly after the others were gone.

"We wanted to speak to you," Deyna corrected.

"Yes, I assumed there was someone or something involved here besides the Deyna we know."

"The Deyna you know would grovel at your feet. One look and she would tremble. It would be your right to spank her, to give her to any man you desired."

"That is what is done with obedients."

"So say the primales, who make the rules."

"If you have a point," said Vandar, "get to it."

Deyna approached more closely, looking up into his eyes. She reached for his chest. He snatched her wrist and held it in mid-air.

"You have a death wish?" Deyna cooed softly.

"Today is as good a day to die as any."

"You are not like the others. Even Theron reacted to me from the first instant," said Deyna, channeling the Queen.

"Who are you?" Vandar asked. He released Deyna's wrist, though he did not back away.

"I am your mistress, your goddess. Your Queen."

"I have no Queen."

"That is a pity." Deyna ran her hands over her hips. Her sexuality was augmented a hundredfold. She was pulsing, glowing. "So many others have chosen me."

Vandar arched a brow. "Such as?"

She touched his crotch. He did not resist, on the other hand he did not grow hard either.

Deyna was impressed with his discipline and so was the Queen.

"You don't expect me to tell you such things before you have joined me?"

"Can I take a guess?" he said. "Varenyos?"

"Very good." She inclined her head.

"And what did you give him for his loyalty?"

Deyna knelt, kissing Vandar's crotch. "I gave him fulfillment, purpose."

"Lies, more like, and death," he said.

Deyna shred his uniform with her nails. She pulled his cock free. "You gave him death, you and your executioners."

"I acted under orders."

She licked at his shaft. It began to stir.

"That is what makes you a slave, Vandar."

"You mistake duty for surrender," Vandar said.

Deyna bit down with her teeth on the tip of his cock.

Vandar clenched his fists.

Deyna felt a surge within her, a hunger, like a she-wolf.

"You will not use me," Vandar grunted. "I will die first."

Deyna chuckled, running her tongue along the base of him. "Of course I will use you. Noble and honest men are the simplest to exploit."

"Reeva is my mate. I will have no other."

"Reeva," Deyna said the name with contempt, "she is not worthy of you."

"She is the one I love, the one I have chosen."

"You trust her that much? A fem?"

Vandar pushed her back.

The Queen had to adjust. The man was strong, even by primale standards.

She pressed Deyna's body back into service, utilizing more feminine wiles.

Vandar struggled, the kiss catching him off guard. Deyna melted, her obedient's loins doing as they were programmed to do.

"Master," she whispered.

He held her upper arms. "Deyna, if you can hear me, if you are able to fight whatever is in there with you, you need to do so now. Before it is too late for both of us."

The Queen cried out in anger, temporarily deprived of her puppet body. "Don't you dare fight me, you little bitch."

Deyna felt her legs buckling. "Vandar," she croaked. "Help me..."

"You are useless," the Queen told Deyna. "Though I already told you, I can't lose."

Deyna felt the Queen jumping out of her, crawling out from beneath her skin. She felt like her body would explode. Pain ravaged her along with a blind terror.

Abruptly it stopped. She blinked, looking up from the floor.

Vandar was looming above her, though he was not alone. Something deep in his eyes reflected, cold and all too familiar.

"You," Deyna gasped.

The Queen laughed, trying Vandar's vocal cords on for size. "Good guess, my pet. Now how would you like to watch your beloved owner plant a little more fear in Theron's heart?"

Deyna didn't need to know the details. The Queen intended to tell him lies, dangerous ones. And there was not one thing Deyna could do to stop it.

Chapter Thirteen

Samharin was in no mood for another speech extolling his bravery. All hell was breaking loose outside in the corridor and it was only a matter of time before it found its way inside the Interface Chamber.

Whoever the Guardians were fighting out there, either Narthians or conspirators from the New Order, they were not likely to take kindly to any efforts to bring Abe back from the dead.

Reeva had explained the results of the brain extract. The tissue sample indicated something fishy was going on in Samharin's synapses. The big question he had, which he would have to reserve for a later time, was whether he was going to turn into a bug at some point.

For now, it was mindlink time.

Samharin had insisted on locking himself in the inner chamber. This would buy time if enemies broke in. It would also decrease any temptation on Reeva or anyone else's part to cut the experiment short.

If this was going to prove fatal to Samharin, so be it.

The way he saw it, life wasn't going to be very pretty anyway if someone didn't stop the Queen and reviving Abe seemed their best hope.

If anyone could fill in the blanks, it was Abe.

"Here goes nothing," Samharin muttered.

There was no strapping himself into the console chair this time. They were not using the computer either. This would be a hands-on contact, with Samharin kneeling at the side of the fallen Abe, his palms flat against Abe's head.

The burning and scarring were heavy on Abe's exoskeleton. Samharin had no clue what sort of wounds could be overcome on a Narthian. Perhaps this was the equivalent of trying to do CPR on a man with a ruptured heart.

Only one way to find out.

Samharin took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He felt a slight tingling in his palms as he placed them down on the curve of Abe's oversized brain pan.

The poor guy never had a chance, thought Samharin.

Where to begin? How to call a Narthian back from the great beyond?

Reeva said the key was in his own head. His memories of the mindlink had transformed his brain, leaving an echo.

Abe was cool to the touch. They had been keeping him in a kind of stasis. Samharin began to shiver. The heat was leaving his own body.

It occurred to him there must be trigger thoughts, something to get his own mind in the right place.

Abe had found the connection before. It was the sexual impulse. Both species had it and functioned off it.

Samharin's brain went immediately to Deyna, so beautiful and alive and passionate. The best sexmaking of his life, the way she had responded to him, devoting her body, surrendering her flesh to his every need. And he had met her caress for caress, kiss for kiss, spinning their lust into a living, breathing thing, a white hot flame that clung to their skin.

So much left to explore with her. He burned for her touch. Emptiness gaped inside him.

All at once, he felt what Abe had felt.

The longing...that consuming hollow that existed within every creature of the Nest when away from the Queen, when not being used and taken and taunted by her.

That was the commonality.

Human lust as over and against Narthian lust.

Samharin opened his mouth to speak. Sound and liquid heat spilled forth, like he was losing his own soul. It was illusion at this point, the beginnings of a mindlink.

Samharin tried to key in on everything he had shared with Abe. Every detail of their conversations, the way the Narthian had reacted, the way Samharin himself had felt the first time they laid eyes on each other.

"I'm not as ugly as all that."

"Abe?"

"Yes...I believe so."

"You're back? You're alive?"

"I do not feel so well if I am."

Samharin frowned. "I've gone insane then, hearing voices in my head."

"All humans seem insane to me," he teased.

"You should talk," Samharin quipped. "You picked strawberry over chocolate. Even vanilla would have been better."

"I thought chocolate was for your women?"

"Real men like it too."

"Samharin," Abe said now, speaking mind to mind. *"You must listen to me. There isn't much time. I cannot keep this up long."*

"I do not even know where you are. Are you a ghost, a dream?"

"I am both and neither. What we are doing between us takes energy and I don't have that much of it. I will...burn out."

Samharin felt the pull of sadness. Death could not be defeated, it seemed.

"We must speak of what happened during the last mindlink, Samharin. We went to my Nest, I showed you my memories, what it was like each and every time to fly there."

"It was incredible, yes, all those forms your species take, flying, crawling, and the structure of the Nest, like a city in a cavern. And then we met the Queen."

Abe recoiled momentarily, as if running the experience through his mind. "That...was not the Queen."

Samharin went on high alert. "What do you mean? What else could she have been? She was in the Queen's chamber, she looked like her and everyone treated her like she was."

"Something took hold of my memories, Samharin, and supplanted itself in the place of the Queen. It was her, but it was something else too. Something alien."

"I don't understand."

"We are under attack," said Abe. "Your race and mine."

Samharin tried to understand the words. The very concept was without precedent. "Nothing in the universe could threaten both species."

"There is more in the universe than we know, Samharin, by far."

Samharin could not argue with this. Life could never be contained in the neat little categories devised for it. He was living proof of that. "Fair enough. So tell me, what are we dealing with?"

"You know this better than I do. I can tell you that the real Queen would never have had any interest in human sexuality. Your thoughts, your lusting would have been an abomination to her, no offense."

"None taken," he teased, "bug boy."

"Touché. What you must understand is that a NARTHIAN Nest Queen is entirely self-contained. She does not seek beyond herself, except to destroy that which threatens. The entity that dealt with you seeks to control, to manipulate."

A million questions ran through Samharin's mind. First and foremost was how to stop it.

"How much power do you think this thing has?"

"You know the answer better than anyone, Samharin. You felt it. This thing does not know limits as we know them."

"It spoke of an orgasm," said Samharin. "It...she warned something terrible would be unleashed."

"Its power is sexual. I do not think it has physical form as we know it."

"Where could it have come from? How did it find us?"

"It may be the mindlink between us attracted it. There was unprecedented energy. I can only speculate though."

"She wanted to absorb me," said Samharin. "If I can call it a 'she'."

"That label is as good as any. While you were linked with her, I sensed her reaching out, attempting to influence others. She is able to use fear to twist others. She can also subvert their sense of loyalty if it is too rigid."

"She did say to me I was different than others she had encountered. If she was dealing with primales, she would have found that they are quite rigid."

"Also there is little fear in you. I sensed this myself."

"Guardians are a pretty fearless lot," he dismissed.

"You have had to face many things, Samharin, do not underestimate yourself. I can talk no more. My time runs short. You must do something for me, Samharin."

"Anything."

"A message must be brought to my race. The Nests must know before it is too late."

"You're the one to do it, Abe. We will get you patched up."

"That isn't going to happen. My consciousness is a mere flicker...contained in your brain."

Samharin saw where this was going. "You can't expect me to go and talk to your people."

"Who better?"

Anyone, Samharin thought.

"I'm human," he dismissed. "Even if they could understand me, why would they trust me?"

"They will believe the message itself. I will teach you how to encrypt it in a form digestible by the Nests. They will consume it, incorporate it and devise ways to fight back."

"I gotta admit, Abe, I'm not liking the odds here."

"They are not high," Abe agreed. "If you do not try, however, the odds decrease to zero."

"What about my own species?" Samharin asked. "They are in danger as well."

"You will have to be two places at once."

"Thanks for the advice," Samharin said sardonically.

"It was a pleasure to know you and to share with you, Samharin."

"Even if you have no taste in ice cream," Samharin replied.

"I am going to encrypt the data within my own body. There is a membrane sac, just below my mandibles. You will have to reach inside my body after I am gone. Pull out the sac, the information will be inside."

"You couldn't put it on a holo disc, huh?"

"Afraid not."

"And I suppose shipping the thing by galactic courier is out of the question."

"It must be done by hand, I am afraid. I apologize in advance for the smell."

"Apology accepted," said Samharin.

He felt something snap inside his brain like a cable and suddenly he was alone.

Wasting no time, he lifted Abe's head and began to feel for the membrane sac. The odor made him gag.

Holding his breath and looking away he dug his fingers through the broken exoskeleton. Inside was soft and cold and wet. Instinct told him where to find the sac. He reached it, pulsing, like a heart.

Jiggling it left and right, he pulled it free.

The color was sickly green. Yellow veins covered it.

Could this really be the key to defeating the Queen?

Fists pounded on the door. "Samharin, are you all right? What's going on in there?"

He rose to his feet, weary and woozy. Silently he undid the lock. Reeva and the others burst in. They stopped short when they saw Samharin covered in the green fluids and holding the sac.

"What have you done?" gasped Reeva.

Samharin did not want to go into details that he would only have to share again with others in a short while. "Abe is dead," he said simply. "Give him a respectful cremation."

"What are you holding?" Reeva wanted to know.

"We'll talk in a minute, in the presence of Commander Vandar. I will also require a holo link with Theron and Nyssa so they may be included."

Reeva and the technician exchanged glances. "That may not be so easy," she said. "Vandar is...occupied."

"Occupied with what?"

"More like who," said Reeva gravely. "It's Deyna."

"She's awake?" Samharin's heart skipped a beat.

"Yes, but something's happened to her. She is not herself, not by a long shot."

Samharin did not need to hear more. It was the Queen. She had gotten hold of Deyna somehow, taken up residence in her brain. Could he have been the one to allow the Queen to transfer over?

He couldn't think about that right now.

"Take me to her," he said.

"It's too dangerous, Samharin. You don't know what she's turned into."

"Yes," Samharin said, his voice flat and toneless as death. "I do. And I am going to save her."

Chapter Fourteen

Theron sat at the console, overseeing Guardian operations. The screens were alive, Code Seven having been elevated to a Code Eight.

And not a moment too soon.

Theron could not say he was pleased to have been vindicated in his earlier vigilance, though in hindsight, it was obvious his decision had been right.

Vandar's comm link had confirmed all his worst fears.

Narthian ships had been spotted on their way to the planet where the Gettysburg Project was located. There had also been explosions, sabotage to the main generators and most unbelievable of all, Deyna, the obedient, had woken up with superpowers, handily throwing guardians about like play toys.

As an immediate response, he had dispatched the fleet.

There would also be precautionary detentions on Earth in an effort to root out the conspiracy. Every weak link had to be contained. Better to arrest a hundred innocent men to get to one guilty one.

Nyssa had become unusually silent. He sensed she was disturbed, though she would not speak about it.

He had attempted to comfort her, and barring that, to offer her firm discipline. She had submitted to another spanking, though something was missing.

He had to believe it was the nature of the threat they were facing. Never before had the Guardians dealt with two enemies at once, each posing an unknown threat.

Things weren't making sense. Varenyos had revealed that the New Order would use some kind of ruse to make the Earth think it was in danger, but now there was a real attack.

Was the New Order responsible for the explosions at the Project or was it the Narthians?

And what about Deyna? Samharin had spoken of encountering something very insidious, a Queen with unknown powers. Was she able to control minds?

Obedients did not strong-arm primales.

They were not more powerful than Guardians.

And Guardians did not commit treason.

There were things that were not meant to change.

Narthians and humans should never mix.

Theron had himself to blame. He should not have permitted Nyssa to commence the Gettysburg Project. All the trouble could be traced back to it...and to Abe.

Not that Theron had wished him dead.

Abe had made a contribution, he had served the Earth cause.

That was worthy of thanks at least.

Theron felt a stirring in his crotch. This was not good timing to be aroused. Strange that he was feeling such lust of late.

He wanted to be inside Nyssa's body, he wanted that closeness, that intimacy, the unspeakable domination that could only come through love.

Perhaps it would do him good to relieve the stress. Rising from his seat, he turned over command to General Paronhos.

The man nodded crisply. "Yes Sir."

Theron could not walk quickly enough back to his chambers.

Nyssa was sitting crosslegged on the floor, eyes closed in meditation. She looked up at him, serene, though slightly sad. "You are troubled," she whispered.

"The galaxy is troubled," he said. "I am..."

He could not supply a word.

Nyssa rose to her feet. Did she intend to renew the debate over her temporary exclusion from government?

If only she could understand his intent to protect her and everyone else too. He would die to save her.

If it were only that simple, his own life for others.

This fighting ghosts was more than a warrior could bear.

"Theron, you must let me help you," she said. "This has gone on too long."

She was on tiptoes, her palm gently caressing his cheek. Her touch nearly melted him, strong as he was. "Do not go there, woman."

"There are other ways to help," she whispered.

He groaned as she nibbled his ear lobe. "I trust you, my love, I submit to you. You are the Master right now and I am your slave."

"You are slave to no man," he said.

She shook her head. "You are my world, Theron. I would follow you to hell. You are my god."

"We may end up in hell yet."

She put a finger to his lips. "No more politics. Tell me what your obedient slave can do. She begs to please you."

Theron wrapped his arms about her. "Let me feel your heartbeat. Tell me without words that all will be well."

"Yes, my love." She let her cheek rest against his chest.

He reveled in the warmth, the feeling of absolute meaning and purpose that came from protecting Nyssa. All of life should be so simple.

Damn, what was wrong with him? This was bordering on self-doubt.

Gripping her ass cheeks and making her gasp, Theron issued orders. "I want you in bed. You will crawl for me on your hands and knees."

"Oh yes," she moaned. "Master."

Nyssa lifted her lips for a kiss. He neither encouraged nor denied her. She shivered as their mouths touched. He pushed her away. "Were you given permission, girl?"

Her eyes were moist. "No, Master," she whispered.

"What do you need, slave girl?"

"Punishment, Master," she rasped. "Sweet punishment from my Master's hand."

"Come here, girl."

She approached again, licking her lips. He seized them, kissing her hard, the way she was meant to be kissed. Her moan was buried as his tongue explored, re-taking that territory he loved so well, her beautiful mouth that talked and sucked and kissed so well.

With his fingers, he found her nipple, lightly taking and then pinching it. The pressure tightened her body. Thrusting against her, he let his cock expand to full size so she could feel it.

He would have her with that cock.

Releasing her mouth, he moved to her neck. Nyssa panted as he suckled his away to her earlobe, finally capturing that soft bit of flesh between his teeth.

This gave full opportunity to caress her breasts through her silk top. After a few moments he pushed the tiny release, causing the material to fall away. She had no bra on. He allowed her to rub her chest, her burning nipples, against his uniform tunic.

Their hands worked together to remove her skirt. She had no underwear on.

He could not wait to get her to the bed. Undoing his own uniform, pulling it down to his waist, he exposed his cock. With ease he lifted her onto him. She wrapped her legs about his waist, locking her ankles. He pushed his cock deep inside all the way to the hilt.

She was in a perfect position to be spanked.

He alternated long, lazy swats with movements of his pelvis, in and out. She clung to him, digging her teeth into his shoulder. For variety he pinched her ass here and there, inducing delighted squeals mixed with groans.

Nyssa was his all right. He knew how to control her completely and also how to release her, freeing her to express the deepest part of her sexual soul.

"Do not come," he ordered.

This would be punishment, having to endure his orgasm with none of her own.

Though he would remedy the situation quickly enough.

In some ways it was a treat for her, or so she had told him. To be able to focus herself solely on his pleasure, to know herself as the vessel of his orgasm.

Theron breathed deeply, withdrawing to the halfway point and then pushing back inside her.

His semen was a steady spray, primale strong and hot.

He continued to come as long as possible. She clung to him, digging her nails on the glorious precipice, her body far too disciplined to betray his orders.

Theron loved her so much for how she found it within herself to be an obedient for him.

For his part of the bargain he gave her the kind of autonomy no primale ever gave his mate.

There was a balance in things and he was acutely aware that he was not keeping his end of the bargain right now.

She had been reduced to a slave, deprived of the right to do her job. It was a matter of safety, he had told himself, and galactic security.

Primals did not make mistakes about such things, did they? Especially not generals?

Theron walked to the bed, carrying Nyssa, still inside her. He laid her down, settling himself on top of her. Her face betrayed nothing but love and adoration.

"I love you too," he said and she smiled.

All will be well...it must be well.

* * * * *

A gag had silenced Deyna during Vandar's communications with Theron. The Queen had done the talking, using the Commander's voice. Once or twice as he spoke, the possessed Vandar had looked her way to where she was bound on the floor, a twinkle in his eye.

Deyna had thrashed about, helpless.

The Queen had enjoyed her misery, as she enjoyed the misery of all creatures. Theron did not seem in the least suspicious. He questioned none of the report, not the accounts of Narthian ships or of bizarre explosions.

The one part that was true was about her. She had awoken from her coma with super strength and taken on the entire contingent of Guardians. Perhaps it was this nugget of truth that made the rest of the story more believable.

For Theron's part, he had seemed on edge, predisposed to believe the worst. Could that have been the Queen's doing? Might she have the power to influence minds over a long distance?

Again, it came down to choice. She could not force anything, only create situations where things could more easily go her way.

"What do you say, my pet?" Vandar asked. "Isn't your Queen the most amazing thing in the universe?"

Disgusting, more like.

"You look so unhappy," Vandar fretted. "And I thought we were getting on so well. You aren't going to make me kill you, are you?"

You can't kill me.

There was an interesting thought. Where had that come from?

"Oh come on, Deyna, don't be foolish. In your body I could tear Guardians limb from limb. What do you think I could do in this body that is ten times stronger?"

She could have torn them limb from limb, but she didn't.

She could push people around a little, sure, but her host had to want to kill.

And Vandar would never want to kill her.

There was a possibility he might even fight the Queen if he had a chance.

Deyna wriggled on the floor, trying to free herself. She was bound in tape, impossible to break.

She might be able to roll though.

The door was open even.

Vandar laughed. "My pet, you are delusional. I will hurt you, you know I can."

Pain stabbed in Deyna's brain.

She turned it, twisted it from fear into anger.

Fuck...you...bitch!

Gritting her teeth, she rolled herself toward the door. The pain continued to bombard her brain.

Vandar was doubled over.

Deyna could hear the Queen trying to move him on her behalf.

"Kill her, kill her," the Queen shrieked in Vandar's brain.

Vandar would not obey.

He collapsed to his knees. He would die first.

"You are useless," the Queen cried. "Utterly useless."

Deyna had made it to the doorway. She was stuck, looking back into the command room. Vandar was stumbling toward the energy core. He looked like he was walking headlong into hundred-mile-an-hour winds.

"Oh no you don't," the Queen hissed.

Vandar was going to expose the core and kill himself, along with her.

"You fucking human bastard!"

Vandar's hand trembled as he pulled down the lever on the wall. A tiny panel slid aside. He moved his fingers in slow motion. At the last second, a blue light flashed and Vandar recoiled. Smoke poured from his body as he landed hard on his back, thrown like a doll.

Sordon was in the doorway and several others. He rushed to Vandar's aid.

"Hold her down," Sordon commanded the men, obviously thinking the Queen was still inside her body.

All of them jumped on Deyna, immobilizing her. She might as well have had a ton of bricks on her.

Vandar struggled to sit up and speak.

Deyna heaved a sigh of relief at his words. "I'm fine. The thing is gone. Let Deyna up," he said.

Or could it be a trap?

What if the Queen was still hiding in Vandar's skin?

Deyna shut her eyes tight, trying to sense the Queen's whereabouts.

The core...she had moved through the core.

"Are you all right?" Vandar asked her.

"I should ask you the same question."

"What the hell was that?" Vandar wanted to know.

Samharin stood in the doorway. "I might have a few answers."

"Samharin," Deyna cried.

He helped her to her feet. "I was supposed to save you," he said.

"You did," said Deyna. "In fact, I think you saved us all."

Deyna was not ready to explain herself. In time she would.

"We need to get to the conference room," said Vandar, accepting an embrace from a very relieved Reeva. "I for one am sorely in need of a briefing. Sordon, we will need a comm link to Earth."

"Commander," said Deyna. "May I respectfully ask that we not contact General Theron just yet?"

Vandar's eyes narrowed. "What are you saying, Deyna? If you have some accusation to make—"

"It isn't that, Commander."

Not entirely, she thought.

"Deyna has a point, Sir," Samharin stepped in on her behalf. "The General should have our best intelligence, thought-out, organized answers."

Vandar frowned. "You know I have no memory from the time you walked in here, Deyna until now. Why is the core lever down? And who was using the comm link?"

"All the more reason to have our own briefing first," Deyna said gently.

The Commander shook his head. "Out of the mouths of obedients..."

Reeva gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Come on, Vandarsaurus Rex, let's get you cleaned up and then we'll talk."

Samharin leaned in to Deyna as the group left the command center. "You know how serious this is, right?"

"Do I ever," she quipped. "Do I ever."

* * * * *

"Allow me to begin," said Vandar when they were all settled around the table. "What the hell was that inside me and how am I going to track it down and kill it?"

Reeva touched his arm from her place beside him at the head of the table. "Darling, it might be good if we took a more scientific approach."

"Actually," said Samharin, managing as much respect as possible, "the Commander is on the right track. He and I have dealt with this thing and once you have, trust me, you don't feel very scientific."

"May I speak?" asked Deyna.

"Yes," said Vandar. "In fact, I wish you would. To start with, why don't you explain how you managed to toss my men around like a bunch of toy soldiers?"

Samharin was all set to defend Deyna, but she spoke up for herself.

"I was possessed by the Queen," said Deyna. "That's what she calls herself. She jumped from me into you."

"Before that, she was in me," Samharin supplied. "And prior to that, she was with Abe."

He felt a tinge of sadness at the mention of Abe's name. More than anything he regretted that he would not get a chance to know that extraordinary being better. Nyssa had been right, there was something fundamentally similar between he and Abe and it had to do with the trails they had blazed.

Samharin's trail had only begun. The next step would take him to the Narthians as a messenger.

What was it they said about killing messengers with bad news?

"So who is she?" asked Vandar.

"We know what she isn't," said Samharin. "She's not human and she's not Narthian. She is in fact a kind of energy being unlike anything we have encountered before."

Vandar scowled. "That's a pretty roundabout way to say you don't know a damn thing."

"We know she can possess minds and she can project herself across the galaxy," Deyna said. "And if she has her way, every creature in the universe will be her slave."

"That's not going to happen," Vandar said flatly. "We have managed to stop her cold so far and we will continue to do so."

"Begging your pardon, Sir, I think we've, on the whole, been lucky. We seem to have driven her from here, but we have no idea where she's escaped to."

"She was able to possess Varenyos and the other conspirators and drive them mad," said Deyna. "Some minds are very susceptible. I am concerned about General Theron."

"The Old Man?" Vandar scoffed. "That's preposterous."

"The decision about martial law was a little...heavy-handed, darling," Reevea pointed out.

Deyna cleared her throat. "There is another problem."

"What's that?" Vandar asked.

"While the Queen was...um, in you, you made a call to General Theron."

He glared. "I did no such thing."

"That's why the comm link was open," Reevea realized.

"Yes. She made you say some things, Commander, about Narthian attacks and further sabotage. It seemed like he was going to react pretty strongly."

"That's good," said Vandar. "All the better to expose the conspirators."

"Commander," Deyna said bluntly. "There aren't any more conspirators."

He gave her a look.

"It's true," continued Deyna. "She just made Varenyos think there were. A lot of how she operates is by illusion. She says that if something seems to be that is often as good as it really being that way."

"Perception is reality," said Reevea. "That's an ancient Earth saying."

"It would explain why we had no intelligence about the New Order," said Vandar, warming to the idea. "If it was a delusion though, it was implanted very deep within Varenyos and the others, deep enough to stand up to torture."

"This Queen has powers we can't imagine," said Samharin.

"But she can't take hold of everyone. You resisted, correct? And Deyna, you too? I myself felt able to fight her at the end."

"We worked together," Deyna acknowledged. "Once Samharin walked in the room the tide was turned."

"She fears you," said Reevea.

The expression on her face, serene, almost mystical, indicated she was speaking from her psychosensorial intuition. "And you," she addressed Deyna. "You cannot be used by her in the presence of strong men. You draw strength from them. You shift your focus off her."

"And what of her reaction to me?" Vandar asked.

His wife minced no words. "You are susceptible. She is able to manipulate the primale brain. In Varenyos' case, he was prepared to kill for her."

Vandar's expression darkened. "We killed him and the other two. We did not know they were only possessed."

"Darling, you followed orders, you cannot blame yourself. And who knows what might have happened if she still had access to their bodies."

"So where is she now?" asked Sordon, entering the conversation. "How can we capture her before she possesses anyone else?"

Seated at Sordon's side was Penya. At Reeve's insistence, she had been allowed to sit in on the briefing. Reeve had felt the emotional connection to an obedient he obviously cared for would keep his emotions in balance, something the primales desperately needed right now.

She held his arm, her hands wrapped about his biceps. She was obviously completely content just to be with the man.

"The first thing to be done is to make sure the primales stay in close contact with at least one female," said Reeve. "Preferably one they are close to."

"We don't need babysitters," said Vandar, irritated.

"No, you don't," she agreed. "You need companions. This is not a time to act like lone wolves."

"We know how to take care of things," said Vandar. "We don't need to be setting any precedents here for female meddling."

"Was Deyna meddling when she saved your life?" said Reeve. "Or Samharin's?"

Samharin intervened, sensing the onset of a debate like the one between Nyssa and Theron earlier. "Sir, we should also consider that the women must be protected from an invisible threat. Wouldn't they be safer with us?"

Reeve offered an appreciative smile. "You have a point, Cadet."

Vandar considered. "I will agree to it, but there is no mistaking who is in charge. Any female, obedient or fem, who does not follow instantly the instructions of the Guardian she is with will find herself severely punished."

"You will not need to punish me, Master," Penya promised.

"I know, my sweet girl." Sordon leaned down to give her a light kiss.

The touch of their lips, full and eager, made Samharin's cock swell in his pants. He would like to be alone with Deyna right now.

"We must also be careful about holo links," said Deyna. "I think that was how she got to General Theron. She made some connection with him and now she can spy on him."

"We'll have to send someone to him," said Vandar. "To tell him what we know. Samharin, you will take one of the scout ships."

"Sir, I must decline," said Samharin.

Vandar's face tightened. "That was an order, Cadet."

"Abe has given me a task, Sir," Samharin explained. "I think when you hear what it is you will see what I mean."

Samharin gave him a rundown about the membrane sac and the warning message for the Narthians. Reeve interjected here and there, supporting him.

Vandar listened, expressionless. When Samharin was done he said, "My decision has not changed. You will go to Earth immediately."

"But the sac," Reeve said.

"The Narthian object will be placed in my custody," he said. "For later study."

"Vandar, the Narthians are vulnerable. Abe wished us to help them," exclaimed Reeve.

Vandar rose to his feet. "I have no standing orders to help our enemies. Sordon, see to it Samharin makes it to the launch pad. Reeve, follow me."

She looked up at him, defiant. "No, Vandar, I won't go."

Vandar took hold of her wrist, dragging her to her feet. "I was not asking you, I was telling you."

She continued to protest until finally he scooped her into his arms and tossed her over his shoulder.

"Put me down," she cried, thrashing her legs.

He carried her from the room in silence.

Samharin knew the moment was at hand, the time in which he would face his fate as a protector of humanity.

At one time he had thought he might need to leave the Guardians in order to ensure the Narthians were not given support. Now he was going to have to risk court martial for the very opposite.

"You heard the Commander," Sordon said to Samharin when Vandar was gone. "Let's go."

Samharin cast a glance in Deyna's direction, hoping she would grasp his meaning.

Giving a little half smile, she went to Penya, pulling her aside. "Girl talk," said Deyna to Sordon, allaying his suspicions.

"Exactly how fast are your scout ships?" Samharin distracted Sordon. "Do you have the new XE models here?"

"We still use the old XA," said Sordon. He started giving the technical details as Deyna gave Penya a few instructions of her own.

A few moments later, Penya came up from behind Sordon, kissing his shoulder blade. "Not now, woman," he complained.

"Master," she purred, moving around front of him. "I need you."

He grasped her long blonde hair, bending her neck back as she tried to touch him. "Keep those naughty hands where they belong."

Samharin was banking on that extra edginess the primales were displaying of late. What he needed was for Sordon to stay here in the room and let him slip away.

"The way you handle me," Penya breathed. "I could be your slavemate."

Samharin doubted she was acting. The affection seemed genuine.

"The way you're behaving, you need to be whipped like one," he said.

"Punish me now," she said, "with your cock."

"Trust me, I am sorely tempted," he said. "If I didn't have orders to take Samharin, I would do something about it."

"The Commander didn't say you had to go immediately," Deyna pointed out sweetly.

"Do you hear that, Master?" said Peny. "You could fuck your slave first."

"Silence, both of you. Samharin, let's go," he barked.

"I told you," said Deyna to Samharin, the remark clearly designed to draw Sordon's attention.

"What did you tell him?" His nostrils were flaring.

The Queen must be close, working her mischief in the air.

Did she know he and Deyna were using her power against her?

"That Varenys was the only real man left. The rest of you don't know what to do with a woman anymore."

"I know what to do," he growled.

"He told me that in the New Order men would do as they wish," she taunted him. "If a woman was insolent, he would put her on her knees and fill her mouth so she could use her tongue for something useful. And it wouldn't matter who was watching."

"You think I won't use this slave's mouth?" he said. "You think I won't put her in her place?"

Deyna shrugged. "You have orders."

"Down," Sordon commanded, his fingers still entwined in Peny's golden locks.

She bent her legs, her knees finding the floor. "Kiss," he ordered.

She pressed her lips to his crotch, showing him that his shaft was her world.

"Still doubt me?" Sordon asked.

Deyna was silent.

Sordon chuckled, savoring impending victory. Opening his uniform, he exposed his cock. Peny opened her mouth wide as he fed her, pushing himself steadily and quickly to the back of her throat.

As a trained female she would not gag.

Deyna felt moisture between her legs. For a split second she looked at Samharin and blushed.

He was hard as a rock.

Did he want Peny?

He damn well better not.

Peny was not for others, just Sordon.

"Take it, slave," said Sordon, his voice softening a little. "Oh yes, take it."

Samharin enjoyed the sight of the woman, submitted, servicing her primale Master. He could not forget though, he was not here to watch the blonde head bobbing, the full, lush lips caressing in selfless pleasure.

Penya's fingers were interlaced behind her neck. The position lifted her full breasts. Most likely she had been trained to perform this way in order to accentuate her helplessness.

If she were not obedient and pleasing she would be punished.

Primals were ruthless in bed, unbendable in will. Samharin himself was capable of having his heartstrings tugged and occasionally giving in to a pretty female.

These men did not know the word compromise. Women obeyed them...and enjoyed it.

Mems had some fun of their own, though, when it came to sex.

Nodding at Deyna, he indicated it was time to go.

Sordon took no notice as they left.

Had it even entered into his head that a fellow Guardian would disobey and attempt escape?

It should have, given what Varenys' men had shown themselves capable of.

"Don't get any ideas," said Deyna as they made their way down the corridor to the Interface Chamber where they would retrieve the membrane sac.

"About what?" he said, as if he didn't know.

"Thinking you can make me get on my knees any time you want and satisfy you so you can impress people."

"You are an obedient," he pointed out.

"True," she said. "Though I'll admit the Queen has made me rethink some things."

Indeed.

Waiting until they were at the door to the Interface Chamber, he took her lips for a kiss. She was caught by surprise. At first he thought she would yield like a good obedient but after a few moments she pushed him back.

Cleanly, crisply, she smacked him.

He held his cheek, bemused. "What was that for? We're already lovers."

"You'll have to work for it now," she said.

"You belong to me," he reminded. "Vandar gave you to me for my sexual relief."

She smiled sweetly. "That order doesn't hold in space, only here, so get used to it."

His brows shot up. "What's gotten into you, girl?"

"It's woman," she said. "And I think you know what's gotten into me."

He could do nothing now but watch as she turned up her nose, preceding him, buttocks swaying haughtily.

He wanted her, a million times more than before.

Bad timing.

Hopefully handling the putrid membrane sac—no offense to Abe's memory—would get his mind off sex.

They had a mission.

In all probability, a suicide mission.

If by some chance they got lucky and stayed alive, there would be a nice court martial waiting for him.

Come to think of it, maybe he should mate with Deyna again.

It's not like he would get another chance.

Chapter Fifteen

Reeva was dumped most unceremoniously on the bed.

Blowing strands of unruly red hair from her face, she stared down her mate. "Are you pleased with yourself, you big...bully?"

"I am doing my job," he said, hands on his hips. "Which is more than I can say for you."

She reacted with quick fury. "Don't you tell me what my job is, Vandar. I am not one of your men and I am not some obedient..."

Reeva had almost said *twit*, which would have done a disservice to the poor women. It wasn't their fault they were born and bred to cater to the lusts of egomaniacs.

"And don't you act like you know my job. I let you talk me into letting you run free before and no good came of it. This time you stay put."

"You can't keep me prisoner," she said.

"If you are referring to your ability to escape, that can be reduced to zero," he replied.

"Yes, you would like that," she shot back. "Locking me in here, tying me up."

"If you give me your word you won't leave, I won't restrict you in any way," he offered.

"You can't have my word," she declared, hoping in vain he might back down.

Yeah, right, like that would ever happen.

"Very well," he said. "You will lie on the bed on your back."

"Yes, you would like that. That way you can think of me back here, trussed up like a sex slave waiting for you."

"The bed is the most comfortable place," he said.

"Like hell it is." The bed made her burn, the bed made her yearn and need.

She was going to end up begging him pretty quick here, the way her pussy was dampening.

It never failed, the more obstinate and bullheaded he got, the more she was turned on.

What sense did that make?

Reeva sat down on the edge of the bed, indignant. She made a show of folding her arms over her chest.

"On your back," he said, ignoring her display. "Legs spread."

"Ah ha," she said. "So this is sexual."

"That is the most relaxing position," he said. "For a female."

Reeva could not help but snort. The gall of the man. "How the fuck would you know what makes a woman comfortable?"

"You will also be naked," he said.

"Don't tell me," she said acidly. "I'll be more 'comfortable' without clothes."

"No, that last part is for me," he admitted.

"Vandar, seriously, you know this is crazy, right? The best chance we have is to work together, side by side, until this Queen is apprehended."

"We would do better affirming our natural places," he said. "Mine is military defense and command."

"What does that make me?" she said.

Vandar approached. She did not resist or back away as he pulled her to the center of the bed and laid her flat. "It makes you my beloved, the one I fight, and if need be, die for."

Reeva was filled with a sudden dark fear. "Vandar, don't talk like that, no one is going to die."

Bending over, he kissed her, strong, deep and reassuring. "No one is going to die," he said. "No one human, anyway. Fear not, my love, I will return."

"I'll be here," she rasped, filling him with thoughts of living. "When you are done. Your prize for a battle well fought."

"I will be satisfied to leave you untied," he said. "If I know that my will binds you."

"To this bed I stay confined," she said without hesitation. "Your woman always. On my heart are chains, freely chosen."

He gave her a wink. "You may get up to use the sanitizing chamber."

"Much appreciated," she said, nibbling at his lips with her own.

"I must go," he said.

"Please, be careful," she replied.

It was well past the point of speaking of his errors or those of Theron. It would have to be done this way. Primales were primales and truthfully, Reeva would have it no other way.

She had a biology of her own, greedy and demanding.

If she were of some higher form of being, she might not be aroused by primitive male behavior.

Being a fem was complicated. There was much that was free about her, but in the hands of the right man she was more slavish than any slave, more obedient than any obedient.

And more happy than any saint.

She was already dozing by the time the door closed behind her.

Not having a choice was the greatest choice of all.
In the same way, giving up all her strength from time to time was true strength.
The rest was up to her mate.
And the rest of the Guardians.

* * * * *

Sordon was still stroking Penya's hair, letting her lick his cock clean when he looked over and saw Samharin was gone.

"By the Code," he declared.

He had been tricked.

"You little witch," he growled at Penya.

She lowered her head to the floor, palms down, hair in a golden splay about her.
"Forgive me, Master."

"I will deal with you later," he said. "You will wait for me in your quarters, on the bed on all fours. I expect to find you naked and ready for punishment."

"Yes, Master."

"Do not call me that," he said. "You are undeserving."

He heard her choke back a sob. "Yes...Sir."

Sordon exhaled, his breath heavy. He did not wish the beautiful Penya to be unhappy. Breaking her heart was not his desire. He could not understand her behavior though and he was confused at himself for lacking the will to banish her forever from his sight.

"I-I am so sorry," she sniffed, looking up at him now, tears pouring from her eyes.
"I am such a bad slave girl. I love you and now I have ruined everything."

"We will speak of this later," he said. "Go to my quarters now."

There was a tiny spark of hope in her eyes. "You will find me as you ordered. Naked, my body ready to pay the price for my disobedience."

Sordon felt a surge of lust. He would like to take her now.

Damn it, what was wrong with him? He was compounding dereliction of duty to the point of treason.

"Go." He snapped his fingers. "Run."

She sprang up, a smile breaking through her tears. Such bliss to be an obedient with a fresh set of orders.

He should have felt the same sort of fulfillment in his own.

When the crisis passed, he would resign his commission.

Sordon drew his weapon and headed for the launch bay.

A second later he heard the alarm.

By the gods, he was too late.

* * * * *

"By the Code," growled Vandar as the launch bay alarm sounded in the corridor. "Now what?"

Sordon came running, sweat on his forehead. He was holding his pistol.

"What is the meaning of this?" Vandar demanded.

Sordon put the weapon to his head. "Sir, by standing order of Code Eight, I hereby perform this act, exterminating a traitor."

Vandar had no patience. "Stand down, Sordon, stop spouting nonsense or I will knock some sense into your head."

Sordon frowned. "It is not permitted to strike a fellow Guardian."

Vandar snatched away the pistol. This was shaping up to be the longest day of his life and it was far from over.

"I wish you hadn't done that," said Sordon.

"Go on," challenged Vandar. "Give me the reason I should consider you a traitor."

"I allowed Samharin to escape," he said. "I became distracted by a pleasure woman."

Vandar lost it. "You fucked a slave's pussy instead of putting Samharin on that ship like I told you?"

Sordon straightened his back. "Actually, it was her mouth, Sir."

"I don't give a damn if you fucked her big toe," Vandar shouted. "Get yourself in a fighter ship and go bring Samharin back here!"

Sordon saluted so hard his arm nearly dislocated. "Sir yes Sir!"

The two men went in opposite directions, Sordon for the launch bay and Vandar for the command center.

It was time to talk to The Old Man again.

Vandar looked forward to the prospect about as much as facing an entire Nest single-handed.

Ghosts, that's what they were dealing with.

Some kind of absurd comedy that was turning more and more tragic by the minute.

He made it as far as the door to the command center when the alarm stopped.

In its place he heard the beeping of his comm link.

It was the launch bay.

"Sir, we have a visitor."

"Tell them to go away," Vandar fumed. "We have a crisis here."

"Um, we can't do that, Sir," said the voice at the other end, one of the technicians.

"Why in hell not?" Vandar demanded.

"It's the Old Man, Sir. In his personal shuttle."

Vandar's heart gripped in his chest.

Theron. That's all they needed.

* * * * *

Theron barely returned the salute of the guards. "Where is Commander Vandar?" he demanded.

"We don't know, Sir," they said in unison.

He was about to go off on them when Vandar showed up at the landing dock, looking more than a little contrite.

Not contrite enough, Theron thought, *considering the mess he has made out here.*

"General. We weren't expecting you."

"I am sure you weren't, Commander. By the way, I couldn't help noticing a few things missing on my way out here. Like the Narthians who are supposed to be attacking you and the damage from the alleged explosions."

"I know you have lots of questions, Sir. Would you like to go to the conference room to talk?"

"What I would like," Theron exploded, "is to be home with my mate, enjoying her sweet company. What I am, is halfway across the galaxy, my teeth still jarring from having broken the hyperspeed records. So how about you dispense with formality and tell me right here and now?"

Vandar took a deep breath. From experience Theron knew him to be one of the most levelheaded officers in the Corps. If not for his stubborn refusal to accept promotion, he would be a general by now.

Whatever was going on, it was for real.

"In all honesty, Sir, I can't explain much of anything. From what we have been told, and I don't expect you to believe this any more than I do, we have been under attack by some kind of entity that is able to control thoughts and create delusions. It convinced Varenysos that he was part of some New Order in order to get him to help kill Abe. It intended to use him and the others to stir up paranoia and force us to start some kind of civil war. It is also intending to attack the Narthians, so they say. We are led to believe the only hope is to form an alliance with them."

Theron could not immediately respond.

What did one say to something so patently ridiculous?

Still, something was going on...

"Who is this 'we', Vandar? Who is telling you this?"

Vandar frowned. "Samharin," he said, obviously biting a bullet. "And...one of our pleasure women."

Theron's brows shot up. "A sex slave and a mem cadet? This is where you are getting your intelligence from?"

Vandar stood at attention. "Sir, I respectfully ask to be relieved from duty."

"And leave me to deal with this nightmare?" Theron snapped. "Not on your life."

Vandar's lip angled upward on one side. "If you would like to hear my own experiences, I can tell you firsthand, there is something to it. I met this thing myself. It...she calls herself the Queen."

Theron proceeded to listen to Vandar's account of his brief possession, terminating in his pushing it out of his mind into the energy core.

"So you killed it," Theron said, knowing such a simple solution was far too good to be true.

"I don't think so."

Theron detected a slight shiver in the man. This Queen had shaken him up, that was for sure.

"There is still a presence here. We are all...short tempered."

Theron scowled. "You had better not be including me."

Vandar was silent.

It was true, he had been on edge. Nyssa had felt it. He had sensed something himself and assumed it to be pre-combat anxiety. "How do you know the New Order is not real?" Theron asked, not expecting an answer.

"We don't, Sir."

"And how do we know this isn't some Narthian trick?"

"We don't know that either," said Vandar. "I'm afraid there's more as well. Samharin managed to escape, heading for the Narthian frontier with some kind of membrane sac. It is something from Abe, a kind of message for the Narthians warning them about this Queen."

"Stolen intelligence more like," said Theron. "I knew we should never have trusted this Abe."

"Frankly, I don't know who to trust anymore, Sir."

Theron nodded.

"One thing is sure though," said Vandar.

"What's that?"

"If this is all a plot devised by the Queen to confuse us and set us at each other's throats, so far it's working perfectly."

Chapter Sixteen

The fighter was hot on their tail.

Samharin continued his evasive action while the computer worked on the hyperdrive coordinates. Basically it was throwing an old time dart at a wall map. Somewhere in Narthian territory, that's where they needed to go.

Pick an angry hornets' nest to dive into, anyone would do.

"Can he catch us?" asked Deyna.

Samharin stole a glance at his gorgeous companion. She had taken a fem flight suit for the launch though he would have her naked again soon.

That was his incentive to escape.

"You better hope he does, girl," Samharin rasped. "Whatever the Guardians do to you won't hold a candle to the plans I have for you."

She smiled, inflaming him further. "You crossed a boundary, mem, I had to show you your place."

"We'll see who goes in what place," he said. "There's an objectifier onboard and I intend to use it to produce a full array of slave management equipment."

She brushed her hand over his crotch. He could not avoid his response, a hard, needful throbbing. "Seems to me I have you in control, maybe I should be the one operating the equipment."

"You want to crash us?" he growled.

"What are we going to crash into? Even a mem should be able to keep from bumping into the stars."

"Wench. You'll learn to worship again, like you did before."

"We'll see."

"Hyper coordinates prepared," interjected the singsong voice of the computer.

"Finally," Samharin exclaimed.

"Do you think whoever's in that fighter will follow us into hyperspace?" she asked.

"They can certainly try, but they won't get far. Hyper coordinates are individual and there are about six trillion possibilities for every arc degree of space."

"That's pretty good odds on our side...for once," said Deyna.

"Brace yourself," said Samharin.

Deyna leaned back in her co-pilot seat. Not that she had done any co-piloting. "Yes Sir," she said, a distinct note of irony in her tone.

Oh yeah, she was gonna get it.

And they were both going to love it.

The ship lurched and then slid forward. Deyna reached for his hand. He took it, heart soaring.

No matter what she said, she needed him. And trusted him too.

If that didn't make a man's body sing, what did?

* * * * *

Sordon had lost him. Samharin had managed to evade him long enough to make the jump to hyperspace. Finding a needle in a haystack would be infinitely simple in comparison to tracking down the coordinates.

His only option was to return to base in defeat.

Another failure, this one irreparable.

Briefly he considered not returning at all. Certainly that would save the trouble of a court martial.

It was Penya who made him go back. Ostensibly it was about punishment for her act of blatant trickery.

There was more going on though.

Penya was a loyal, intelligent and caring obedient.

She would never do anything to harm him.

She must have believed she was acting for a good cause.

As for inflaming him the way she had, Sordon had the most peculiar sense she was trying to get his attention.

It must be tearing her apart, he thought, this kind of misbehaving.

Naturally she would have to be punished. Beyond that, though, they would need to talk.

He had to know honestly her feelings.

Or did he know them already?

Was he simply afraid to face the truth that Penya was devoted to him and wished to be his lifemate?

Sordon had no wish for such a commitment and yet he could not recall the last time he had been with another woman. Nor could he abide the idea of another man touching her, possessing her.

What did it all mean?

Not much if Commander Vandar didn't let him live long enough to see Penya again.

Ironically, he would have to take his punishment before Penya got hers.

Even now she was waiting for him, naked on the bed on all fours where he had sent her.

Sordon did not entertain the possibility of her being elsewhere. She was an obedient, his obedient.

Then again, maybe he should.

She could well be disobeying him yet again.

Such things were possible with pleasure women. They did not have a bond to a single man. If Penya was his, truly his, it would be different.

His commands would be her life, his will, the blood that flowed through her veins. By the Code, he was mad with desire for her. He wanted to ram his cock home, hard, decisive, from behind.

Sordon got clearance now and landed his ship. Much had changed in the short while since his departure. Elements of the Guardian fleet had arrived. There was also a specially marked command ship, the flag ship, that of the Old Man himself.

Perfect. Now his incompetence could be aired in front of General Theron. Could court-martial be far behind?

"You are to report to the command center," said a soldier, one of two waiting for him as he stepped outside the ship.

"Doubtlessly, you will escort me," said Sordon dryly.

The soldiers said nothing. They were part of the arriving fleet, battle hardened veterans like himself.

Escort duty was beneath them, though they offered no complaints.

"Thanks for the company," Sordon quipped as they arrived at the command center. "Stick around, they may be looking for volunteers for a firing squad."

Neither of them cracked a smile.

Inside the room, Theron and Vandar were standing side by side, discussing an image on a screen, a lighted star layout.

Sordon came to attention, awaiting their attention.

"At ease," said Theron.

Sordon complied. "Sirs, I wish to make my report."

"You let him get away," said Theron, sounding surprisingly calm. "Spare us the gruesome details."

"Sir."

"Did they appear to be heading in the direction of Narthian space?"

"Yes Sir, rather a deep penetration too, I should think."

Sordon thought of Penya and how he would penetrate her body, thrusting his cock between her pink lips, making her toss her blonde head, moaning.

Theron turned to Vandar. "Whatever the damage, it's done. We will have to make our best guess as to the information that might have been stolen. In the meantime, I want all records and data collected from Gettysburg. We're moving it to a safer location."

"May I ask how you intend to use it?" said Vandar.

"We are going to make weapons," said Theron. "Like we should have in the first place."

"Deyna was with him," Vandar told Sordon. "The technician saw them board together."

"I'm not surprised, Sir."

"I still don't see what a woman like that sees in a mem," said Vandar. "Not that he isn't extraordinary."

"Sirs," said Sordon. "If I may prevail on you to deal with my case. I am prepared to face court martial."

"We don't have time for that nonsense," Theron dismissed. "We are busy."

"You may consider yourself returned to duty," said Vandar.

"Thank you, Sirs. I don't know what to say."

"Just get to work," Theron told him. "As I understand it, you have something to attend to in your quarters?"

Sordon's pulse raced. "I...yes Sir, I do."

"Dismissed," said Vandar.

Sordon almost forgot to salute.

He was halfway to his quarters at a full sprint before he remembered to breathe.

* * * * *

Vandar suppressed a smile as his second in command left the room. Ever since he had chosen Reeva as his mate, he had been trying to find a love match for the broken-hearted Penya. Though Penya had never been his mate, they had enjoyed a relationship of exclusivity as primale and slave.

Sordon was a good young man, he would be a fine Master and lifemate. The beautiful Penya would serve him well.

Assuming the pair of them managed to survive.

Everyone's life was at risk now.

Admittedly, having the Old Man here was a comfort. It granted Vandar a sense of philosophic acceptance.

As Guardians they were trained for life and death threats. Nothing was ever guaranteed, nothing promised beyond today.

"So you see the dilemma," said Theron, addressing Vandar as an old friend more than a subordinate. "We can position ourselves across the Narthian Neutral Zone in anticipation of attack or we can reinforce interior bases in case of rebellion."

"You still think the New Order could be real?" Vandar asked.

"We have to assume so," said Theron. "We can't rule anything out."

"In that case, we might do as well to disarm as reinforce," Vandar said.

Theron exhaled. "Damned if we do, damned if we don't."

"No," said Vandar, with sudden determination. "We aren't damned."

"How can you be so sure?" asked Theron.

"Because," Vandar replied, recalling his agonizing moments under the Queen's influence. "I've seen hell...and we are nowhere near it."

* * * * *

Sordon found her where she was supposed to be.

All's right with the world, he thought, drinking in the sight of the curvaceous Penya patiently awaiting her fate.

He did not address her immediately. Going about his business, he got a drink of water from the hydro machine and paused to read the holo sports updates.

Every now and again he glanced at Penya, who was trembling slightly.

Once he caught her trying to catch a peek at him over her left shoulder. "Eyes front, slave girl," he said from his place at the table.

Her head snapped back frontward.

"Tell me, Penya, what is in your heart?"

"I want only to be yours," she said boldly. "Sordon's girl."

"You think I want a slave, a lifemate to take care of?"

"I would care for you, Master, I would be your everything, your servant, your confidante...your fuck toy."

Sordon felt the pain in his mind, the darkness. "You love Vandar," he said contemptuously.

She hung her head. "I did once."

"You still love him," he accused.

"No, Master. I love you. Own me, Master, keep me in place, chain me."

"Are you giving me orders?"

"No, Master, I am begging. This slave begs you, for pity's sake, free her by taking her for your own."

Sordon felt his heart clench.

"Come to me," he murmured.

She rose to her knees and crawled to the edge of the bed. The tears were flowing, matching streams over her cheeks and breasts. Already her eyes were puffing.

"You are too beautiful to cry," he chided.

"I am...nothing," she sobbed miserably. "Without you."

He stroked the back of her hair. He could not bear her pain. "Hush, my Penya."

"But...but I'm not your *Penya*," she choked. "I'm...no one's *Penya*."

He took her chin between thumb and forefinger. "I do not think you know what you ask."

"Lifemating," she said without hesitation. "To you."

He frowned. "I am not an easy man."

She smiled, impish through her tears. Did she think she was winning?

"I would not want a Master to be easy."

"I am moody," he warned. "Solitary and coarse."

"What primale isn't?"

"You have never been mated, you might not like it."

"I need it, I crave it," she countered.

"I am a jealous man. No others will be allowed to look at you. And I am controlling."

"Yes, Master..." She was dreamy eyed.

Why wasn't his message getting through?

"I have never seen you like this," he said.

"And I've never seen a primale like you, afraid to take a chance on life."

"I am afraid of nothing, *Penya*."

"In battle, no, but what of your emotions?"

"I love you," he said, fearless.

"And I love you, *Sordon*. My only wish is to please you."

"You do and you will, always."

"As...your lifemate?"

"Yes," he declared. "As my lifemate."

"Oh Master, I am so happy."

"Me too." He stroked her hair.

He had been afraid of love and now he was not.

Being with *Penya*, confessing his feelings had given him peace and also a sense of control.

The fog, the confusion was gone.

That was it.

Love had dispersed the effect of the Queen, wherever she was.

Could they turn this gentle but powerful emotion into a weapon to use against her?

"You must sleep," he said to *Penya* as he rose to his feet.

"Where are you going?"

"I have something important to attend to."

She smiled, her eyes slid shut. "You are my hero."

He stopped long enough to kiss her rosy cheek and then got dressed.

If there was anything to Sordon's insight, then he was going to be a hero for a lot of people.

Perhaps the entire universe.

Chapter Seventeen

The trip would take the better part of a day, even at hyperspeed.

Samharin had programmed the computer to take them deep into Narthian space to discourage anyone from following them.

Only a suicidal maniac would do such a thing.

Either that or a man on a mission, an attempt to honor the dying request of an alien he had barely gotten to know.

"You may unbuckle your safety harness," Samharin announced to Deyna when the ship had leveled off.

"I never had it on," she said.

"Yes," he said dryly. "That would explain how you managed to be all over me during the initiation sequence."

"Whatever." She flipped her dark hair. "I'm hungry. I'm going to get something to eat or maybe take a nap."

He watched her stretching, insolently arching her back. The movement emphasized her full bosom and tight waist. "Are you trying to drive me crazy?" he said. "Or is it accidental?"

"Oh, am I bothering you?" She looked pointedly at his erection, ill concealed.

"Not half as much as I going to bother you."

Her nose lifted into the air. "I don't know what you mean."

"It's simple." Samharin unbuckled his harness, standing to face her. "You and I are going to spend some quality, erotic time...as Master and slave."

"I don't want to," she said.

"Did I ask you?" He was an inch from her face.

"This isn't the time. We're on a mission."

"We need to be relaxed," he said. "Focused. Sex will do that."

"Fine." She licked her lips. "I'll call the shots."

"You? You're an obedient."

"I learned a few tricks," she said, reaching for his chest. "From the Queen."

He seized her wrist, holding it in mid-air. "Ask forgiveness," he said. "For slapping me back there."

"I'm sorry," she said, "that I didn't do it harder."

He suppressed a smile. "If I didn't know better I would think you are goading me into dominating you."

She pursed her lips. "It's a good thing you know better then."

Samharin moved fast, catching her off guard as his teeth clamped her lower lip. She exhaled in protest, wide eyed.

Much as she wanted, she could not move.

Samharin kept his eyes riveted to hers. He did not need to see what his hand was doing. It was sheer instinct, undoing her flight suit, brushing aside the open halves.

Releasing her mouth, he took her nipple, biting it just hard enough.

Deyna whimpered. She grabbed his upper arms, totally ineffectually.

Samharin nibbled for a few moments and then suckled, taking the whole of her breast into his mouth.

She threw back her head, moaning.

"That was only the beginning," he said when he had taken his fill. "Before I am done, you will beg me to use you."

"Doesn't it intimidate you?" she asked huskily. "Knowing the power I had inside me? I could have taken a hundred Guardians, maybe a thousand."

"Do I seem intimidated?"

She cried out as he moved his hand between her legs, quite without warning, quite without permission.

Deyna squeezed his hand between her thighs, locking them tight as she could for protection.

He eyed her, deadly serious. "Do not deny me access, Deyna."

"Or else what?" she blurted.

"Do you want to find out?"

Her lips pouted. She reared back her hand and slapped him. He let her do it, so she could see the results.

Leering, cheek stinging, he winked.

Deyna seemed taken aback.

She opened her legs once more.

He thrust several fingers into her immediately, making her cry out. She was wet and receptive.

"Move against me," he ordered. "Come on my hand."

She whimpered piteously.

"I gave you an order, obedient."

Deyna complied, teeth gritted, pushing her pussy forward, impaling herself.

He made her do all the work.

Several times he denied her, making her wait. She cried out in frustration, eyes moist.

"What...what do you want from me?"

"What I want is what I will have," he said cryptically.

"Oh yes," she exclaimed as he touched the tip of his finger to her clitoris. "Oh yes, please."

She shuddered against him, building to explosion. She tried to outmaneuver him, but he held her fast yet again.

"Puh-please," she sobbed, locked in the mystical world between pleasure and torment.

"Pinch your nipple," he said.

She did so, little more than a rag doll.

"You can do better than that."

Deyna groaned, squeezing the tiny pink nub, distending it deliciously.

"Does that hurt?"

"Yes...please may I stop?"

"Why should I be nice to you, Deyna? You haven't been nice to me."

"I'll be nice, I swear."

"You'll act like the obedient you're supposed to be?"

"I will."

"How? Describe it to me," he coaxed.

"I'll submit to you. I'll submit to your authority."

"You will do as you're told, no more no less?" He stroked her mons, featherlight, reminding her of her central need for release.

"And sexually? How will you be sexually?"

"Docile," she promised. "And pleasing."

"What are some things I might expect to enjoy from you?" he asked, enjoying himself immensely.

"Anything you want."

"Be specific." He took his finger, glistening wet, and rubbed it over her half-parted lips. She shivered, catching hints of her own taste.

"I will give you my mouth," she said, panting slowly. "I will take your cock, very, very deep. I will caress it with my tongue. I'll swallow all that you give me."

"And your pussy?"

"It's yours." She thrust out her pelvis to show him. "Snap your fingers, tell me where and how and I will spread for you."

"Like a Queen?"

"Like a slave girl, hot and needful, whimpering, begging, and my ass," she continued. "It's yours too. Come on me or in me. Conquer me with your cock, make it so I can't think of any other male, make me want you and only you."

"Dangerous words for a slave. You will want me, though I may not want you."

"I don't care..."

"You are saying this because you are overwrought with lust," he teased.

She did not seem in the mood to play any longer. "I am about to explode, yes, but that doesn't mean I can't talk or think. You do things to me no primale ever has. That has to mean something."

"Maybe any mem could do that."

"I don't want any mem," she insisted. "I want you."

"Why?"

"You...you challenged me, you took me seriously. You trusted me."

"Trusted you with what?"

"Vulnerability," she breathed.

"Indeed." Samharin offered mercy now. "Finish it, my pet."

She went wide-eyed as if struck. Her body convulsed against him. The orgasm was violent and hard, like a waterfall pushing back. He held firm, masturbating her to completion.

Over and over she cried out, belly undulating. At last she threw herself against his chest, silently begging his protection.

He wrapped her tight, feeling a surge of masculinity and tenderness. "Deyna, what is it?"

"I-I felt something. Like a ripple."

"What was it?"

"I don't know. When you called me pet..." Her voice trailed off. She looked up in his eyes. "Why did you do that?"

"It came to mind," he said.

"It was her," Deyna said. "The Queen."

Samharin tensed, senses on alert. "I don't feel her."

"She isn't in this ship," Deyna explained. "She's somewhere at the Gettysburg Project. Something has changed."

"Changed?"

Deyna nodded. "She is afraid."

"Afraid of what?" he prompted.

Deyna's eyes had a faraway look. She took his hand, squeezing his fingers. "Of love," she whispered.

With that she knelt, humbly kissing Samharin's crotch. "I want to suck you, please?"

He opened his uniform, releasing his shaft to the pleasures of her mouth. She began with a flick of her tongue across the tip. It was like a whip stroke of pleasure through his flesh.

Grasping her shoulders, he felt himself come to life, not only in the flesh but in his spirit. Life was different since he had met Deyna, and not just because of the Queen. If anything, Deyna's influence had made him stronger against the Queen, able to resist her influence.

What if he had never met Deyna? Would he have withstood the Queen's mental assaults? He did not wish to imagine such a thing. The important point was that he did know her and more than anything in the world he looked forward to knowing her better, to sharing anything and everything with her.

"Deyna," he called her name as he prepared to come, her mouth caressing him, her head gliding forward and backward.

She made a mewling noise indicating she wanted what he had.

He gave it all, every last mem drop. And when he was done he felt peace like he had never known.

Peace in the midst of the greatest crisis in Guardian history. Peace in the middle of a hyperspace trip across the neutral zone into Narthian space.

If that kind of effect wasn't worth noting, he didn't know what was.

Samharin helped her to her feet. "You ready for that meal now or a nap?"

Her eyes were lit, impish. "I would rather a fuck," she said. "If it's not too much trouble."

He grinned. "The heart is willing, but the body will need a little recovery time."

She treated him to a smoldering look. Wrapping her fingers around his flagging cock, she said, "Lucky for you I'm a bona fide sex slave, trained in all the arts of male arousal."

Samharin groaned, feeling the familiar stirrings. "I don't think it will take anything fancy, angel, just you."

Standing on tiptoes, she kissed him, deep with passion and feeling. He understood her better in those few seconds than he had in all their previous interaction.

Deyna was lively, creative, mischievous, born into an obedient's body, but with all kinds of potential far beyond her expected role.

Not unlike himself.

Together they might well need to blaze an entirely new trail in the universe.

Then again they already were, weren't they?

Samharin didn't need super powers to scoop Deyna off her feet. Just regular male muscle and an indomitable will.

How natural it felt to have her against him, head turned inward, cheek pressed to his chest. If she were a cat she would have purred.

As he set her down on the bed, she slid to one side, beckoning him to lie beside her. He took his place, on his back, head settled on the pillow.

"This is perfect," she said, pressing her body close, shoulder to knee.

He couldn't agree more. His cock didn't mind either.

At this rate he would be hard again in a couple of minutes.

"Tell me, Samharin," she said, clearly in wistful mood. "What was it like, fighting the Narthians on Capellius?"

"It wasn't like anything," he evaded. "Why would you worry your beautiful self?"

"You think I can't handle it?"

"I don't want you to, that's all."

"I think the primales are jealous of you," she said thoughtfully.

"Jealous? What on Earth for? They can do anything."

"That's just it. It all comes too easy. They would give anything for the adrenaline you must have felt, the sense of danger."

"Primals are an insane lot," he grumbled.

"Tell me about it."

"Deyna?"

"Yes?"

"I don't like you talking about them."

"Who? Primales?"

"Yes, them."

"Why not?"

Because they own you, he thought. Because you are made to worship them, love them, submit to them.

"You're here with me, that's all. I'm your man right now."

"Yes," she whispered, her voice thick. "Sir."

Samharin's cock swelled to attention.

"That seemed to do the trick," she murmured, taking note of his renewed erection.

"Apparently so." He helped her up, urging her to climb across his lap. Obediently, eagerly, she took him between her legs, easing down on his throbbing inches until she was fully impaled.

"Oh fuck. Yes Sir..."

Samharin took hold of her breasts. "I don't know how a man is supposed to keep his hands off you."

She arched her back, beaming. "I thought we weren't talking about other men."

"Fine, I don't know how *I* am supposed to keep my hands off you then."

"Why should you?"

"Don't know, you tell me."

She raked her fingers over his chest. "I say what a man wants, he should have. Although I warn you, I do seem popular of late. First you, then Varenys and then the Queen." Realizing her error, she said, "Oh, sorry, I mentioned primales again."

He smiled. "You may fuck me for penance."

"That is a torture I can live with," she said.

Biting her lower lip, she began her motions, up and down, designed to bring the maximum friction to her red hot pussy.

"Yes, that's it," he encouraged as she clenched her vaginal muscles tightly. "Give us both what we need."

Deyna emitted shrills of happiness as the pleasure coursed through her. He watched her closely, paying attention to her body's signals. When he sensed she was very close, he told her to surrender to the feelings.

She cried out, obviously delighted at being controlled in her orgasm like this. Moaning and moaning, she spasmed, her climax matched to his own, the spurting semen coming in blast after blast.

He felt like a primale, he was so hot and explosive.

Deyna was certainly enjoying herself.

When it was over they fell into each other's arms.

Samharin listened to the soft beating of her heart. It was hard to believe how much danger they were in.

Would the Narthians even give them time to talk or would they blast them out of the sky as soon as they appeared?

Likely the Guardians would do the same if a Narthian ship materialized over a human planet.

However little time was left, it was enough.

As long as he spent it with Deyna.

* * * * *

"I think it's worth a try," said Reeve in response to Sordon's idea. "Emotions are much more powerful than we give them credit for in the psychosensorial realm."

Vandar could not have been more unconvinced. "Love is not going to stop a creature that leeches onto brains and murders in cold blood. Or have you forgotten what happened to Abe?"

"I remember all too well. And I can tell you fear and anger certainly won't stop the creature either," Reeve said.

"That's true, only blasters can do that," Vandar retorted.

It was Theron who put an end to the conference room debate. "We are wasting time and that's what the enemy wants us to do. Sordon has suggested that this creature cannot deal with the feelings unleashed by loving affection. If there are opportunities to

produce them without interfering with the security and discipline of the Corps, than we ought to make the attempt."

Vandar thought he was hearing things. "Sir, you can't be serious. We are under martial law, we can't all abandon our posts and fornicate like rabbits."

"It's not the sex act, Sir," Sordon insisted. "It's the emotion felt in the presence of those we care for intimately."

"I have noticed since the crisis began," said Theron, "that I am a good deal calmer and more focused in Nyssa's presence."

"Yes Sir," said Sordon. "That is what I felt with Penny."

"Vandar, what about you?" Reeve asked.

Vandar scowled. Was it not enough the woman had gotten herself released from quarters for consultation with Theron and the others?

Now she wanted him to reveal his emotions to his commanding officer.

"What about me?" he obfuscated.

"You know perfectly well what," she scolded. "Do you feel more at peace, less influenced by the Queen when you are around me?"

"I already showed my mettle with the Queen. She cannot take my mind, clearly."

Reeve rolled her eyes. "Do you have to be such a Vandarsaurus all the time?"

"We'll pass the word," Theron decided. "All Guardians will make an effort to think of their mates."

Vandar exhaled. It was one thing after another these days.

Reeve moved alongside him, as if sensing his anxiety.

At once he felt a sense of ease and security. He was more ready to handle anything.

She cast a glance, obviously looking for signs she was right.

He remained stone faced, though secretly he was glad, more glad than he dared admit to himself that he had her for his own.

Chapter Eighteen

As the hyperdrive disengaged, Samharin and Deyna's ship materialized in a reddish sky, crackling with green energy. At once, pulling on his Academy studies, Samharin recognized it as a Narthian Nest world, an entire planetoid that had been taken over by labyrinthine hive structures.

Perhaps it was the High Command itself.

Certainly there would have been few places with a higher concentration of bugs in the universe.

Deyna cried out as something hit the side of the ship. From the lurching, it was something heavy.

Almost immediately, they were hit on the opposite side.

Samharin opened the view screens and quickly wished he hadn't.

"Fucking bugs," Deyna exclaimed, practically leaping into Samharin's arms. "Kill them."

Samharin eyed the giant drones, nearly as large as the space vehicle they were in. "What would you like me to do, swat them?"

"You would if you loved me," she insisted.

A third bump came from underneath the ship, knocking them hard to the side. After this came a series of clinking sounds on the roof.

That couldn't be good, thought Samharin.

"What's happening?" she asked, increased desperation in her voice.

"Hopefully they are just trying to get our attention."

"What's the alternative?" she asked. "Wait, I don't want to know, do I?"

"No," he agreed. "You do not."

Samharin pictured slow digestion in the belly of one of these creatures or maybe in the middle of a larval womb. Their death could stretch on well past the point of endurance, not to mention the brink of sanity.

"This is terrible," she said. "How did you endure it on Capellius?"

"Didn't have a choice," he said.

"What are you doing?" she asked as he proceeded to shut down the engines, effectively disabling them.

"Resistance would be suicide. There's millions of these bugs out here. The only hope is to let them see we aren't a threat."

For several moments they hung in mid-air. Below them, Samharin could see a concave surface, grey and extremely rough. There were holes of all shapes and sizes. Different types of bugs were crawling in and out.

It looked similar to what he had seen in Abe's memories, though much, much larger. Presently, they started to descend.

"I think we're getting a free ride," he mused.

"Doesn't feel very free to me," she said.

Out the front view screen they could see more bugs. These were of a different type, sleek, with multicolored bodies and stingers.

"Warriors," said Samharin.

"Are they going to destroy us?"

"I don't think so. If they had wanted to they could have blasted us out of the sky a million times over."

Samharin noted a commotion at one of the Nest holes. A group of bugs with sharp jaws was chomping away at the edges. Several more were scraping.

They began to pry up the crust of the Nest, effectively widening the hole to fit the ship.

"They're making a special door for us," he said.

"How fucking kind of them."

He put his arm around her and squeezed. "It won't be as bad as all that."

"You're lying through your teeth, Samharin," she said. "You have dealt with these creatures before."

"Abe was one of them and he was very nice."

"I thought these were the ones who tried to kill Abe?"

He frowned. She was too damn smart. "Technically, yes," he admitted. "But I think it was a misunderstanding."

Wholesale slaughter was more like it, he thought glumly.

"Misunderstanding my ass," she grumbled.

"Leave your ass out of it," he said, punctuating it with a crisp spank. "Or we'll involve it in a way you may not care for."

"Mmm," she said. "Actually a spanking doesn't feel so bad. I could use a little tension release."

"You have released all the tension I can handle, woman," he grumbled back.

"Some Master you are," she teased.

The ship stopped momentarily as the renovation bugs completed their work. They broke off a few final chunks of material and then the ship began to descend again.

Samharin's pulse raced as the light through the view screens was replaced with a cloying, semidarkness. Various colors pulsed, a kind of brownish-pink and a yellow-green.

Above them they heard the bugs working.

"If they are sealing up that hole," said Deyna, "I will absolutely freak."

Samharin knew they were sealing it up, but didn't say.

"I'm sure they're just widening it a little more so we can get out easier."

"Bullshit," she said.

Samharin smirked. "I've been meaning to ask you, what exactly did the Queen do to you to make you so...plucky?"

Deyna reached behind him, shocking the hell out of him with a pinch. "She showed me a trick or two about domination."

"Is that right?"

"Yep. It's not a big deal, really. Mostly smoke and mirrors."

Samharin laughed. Talk about releasing tension.

"Oh fuck," said Deyna.

The ship had set down on something hard. A moment later they heard a sharp scraping sound.

"Now what?"

"I think they are cutting open the ship, Deyna."

Samharin double-checked where he had placed the membrane sac on the console. It was time to pick it up and tuck it under his arm. The sac could well be their lifeline.

Or a death sentence.

"Couldn't they use the doors?" she quipped.

He kissed her on the top of the head.

Love might be a little strong a word, but he certainly adored her.

"Take my hand," he said. "Whatever happens, we are in this together."

"Damn straight," she said. "If I go back home without you, I'll catch hell."

"I'm sure you'll take good care of me," he said dryly.

The Narthians were quite industrious. They actually managed to cut the entire top off the ship. In one piece they lifted it, exposing its human occupants.

"Looks like we will have to hitchhike back home," said Deyna.

"Luckily this bucket of bolts is insured," Samharin added.

The ship started shaking. It was like water rushing over the edge, only it was bugs, crawling larvae. The bugs were filling the bottom of the ship.

"I will not scream," Deyna vowed.

"Oh fuck it," she said a moment later. "I've changed my mind."

* * * * *

Deyna let loose with a bloodcurdling cry. "Get off me, you motherfuckers!"

She kicked at them and flailed with her arms. They were the size of snakes, only much thicker. They were slimy to the touch and they made a most disturbing hissing noise.

"Hold tight," Samharin called out. "They aren't going to kill us."

Deyna was not so sure.

Drop kicking bugs left and right, trying to keep them out of her hair, her mouth. Oh stars, now they wanted to be intimate, rubbing up against her backside and pushing up between her legs.

Gods help the first one that tried to kiss her.

There was a surge underneath her. They were lifting her off her feet. Samharin held out a little longer but soon he was aloft too. They were passing her along. Quite a sensation, drifting on a sea of slimy, prickly, hissing creatures.

Had Deyna not already faced the obnoxiousness of Varenys and the demented Queen, she might well faint or something.

Samharin was hanging tough. Good man. This was probably nothing compared to what he had been through already.

If he could handle this, so could she.

The moving bug carpet carried them up and out of the ship.

Deyna nearly gagged at the stench.

They were in a cavern of some kind. Gems sparkled on the walls. A greenish slime dripped from the ceiling here and there. Eyes stared at them, sets of five or six on oblong heads. Antennas clicked. Deyna had no idea there were so many kinds of Narthian bugs.

Some of the larger ones were breaking through the sea of larvae. They were clicking their mandibles, almost like some extraterrestrial form of Morse code.

She looked over to make sure Samharin was still beside her. He was sitting up, holding the membrane sac in his lap. He gave Deyna a thumb's-up.

She managed a tight-lipped grin. "Hell of a first date," she called out.

"It's going to be hard to top," he agreed, calling back.

The larvae mass began to dissipate. They were carried a little farther and finally deposited upon the ground.

It was an unceremonious ending as they landed on their rear ends, their bodies sinking into about six inches of ooze.

Lovely, she thought.

The larvae crawled away and several drones approached. They were a slightly different kind with stingers. When Deyna took too long to get up, one of the bugs delivered a light jolt with his needle-like appendage.

"Son of a bitch," she snarled.

"Are you all right, Deyna?" said Samharin, coming to her aid.

"Yes," she said, adding, "I really, really don't like creepy crawlies, did you know that?"

"What woman does?" he quipped.

Samharin stayed by her side as the bugs urged them forward. Once or twice when a tentacle got too close to Deyna, he made menacing gestures.

She didn't give him much chance of defeating them, though it was nice to have her own personal hero.

She wondered how he would feel at this point about her being with other men. Would he be okay with her working as a pleasure woman?

Personally she was ready for a career change.

If they ever got out of this place alive.

Samharin tensed as they approached a round opening in the wall.

"What is it?" she asked. "Or don't I want to know?"

"If this place is like the Nest in Abe's memory then that is the Queen's chamber we are about to enter."

She squeezed his arm.

Not the Queen...again.

Deyna braced herself for mental assault.

None came.

"She's not here," Deyna whispered as they entered the small cave-like room. Inside it was a bit brighter. An orange hue came from the ceiling. The light pulsed like a heartbeat.

There were numerous insects, types Deyna had never seen. One was spindly long with a bulbous head, almost translucent. Another had triple wings, fine and silvery.

By far the biggest attraction was the creature in the center of the room. The other insects were crawling over it, attending. It was very large and did not appear capable of motion.

"That is the Nest Queen," Samharin told her.

"First the Queen who attacked us and now this," Deyna gasped.

"Yes. We were attacked by an alien entity. The entity we dealt with came to us through Abe's memory of his Queen, using the energy of that memory to take mental form."

An unpleasant thought occurred to Deyna. "What if this entity is possessing this Queen right now? Or some other part of the Nest?"

"We'll find out soon enough."

As if on cue, a high-pitched buzzing sound cut through the air.

Samharin and Deyna were forced to grab their ear drums and fall to their knees. Samharin dropped the membrane sac. The ghostly, spindly bug came over to pick it up. Using a dual set of antennae, it began to rub the surface.

The sac turned a bright red, like blood.

The insect quickly popped open its mandibles and swallowed the whole thing down. Deyna could see the red mass passing through its body. Moving quickly, it scampered over to the Queen.

Many of the insects moved aside as the Queen began to stir. An opening appeared in her side, like a slow, oozing wound. The ghostly insect approached her...and walked right through.

The insect was promptly sucked in. The hole closed over as if it had never been.

"What the...?" Deyna was at a loss for words.

"I think that is how the Queen absorbs information," Samharin speculated.

"Remind me never to bring her any holo news," said Deyna, imagining herself drowned alive in bug slime.

For a split second the Queen's entire body turned red, just like the membrane sac. Then it returned to its previous color.

Deyna awaited the Queen's reaction with bated breath.

Presently a voice filled the room. It was not like the other Queen. This one was melodious, if not a bit hard to follow because it sounded like a million voices put together, a kind of high-pitched chorus.

"Why have you brought this to me?"

Deyna did not sense megalomania in this Queen. Her way of thinking was alien, highly protective, but she was not looking to control human minds.

"I won't tell you that we are here out of altruism," Samharin replied honestly. "I am here to fulfill a promise."

The Queen's response was delayed. "The one you speak of betrayed us. Was he your friend?"

"Friendship with your kind would be stretching it. We did, however, stand together against a common foe."

"What do you know," the Queen said, "of our foes? Nothing threatens us more than you."

"I wonder if that's true," said Samharin. "If it were, I think you would have destroyed us both instantly."

"Perhaps I want to drag out your suffering."

"Perhaps," Samharin acknowledged.

The Queen paused again. "The one you call Abe is responsible for your current predicament, not us. His mindlink with you opened a doorway, a very ancient one, sealed before the time of remembering."

Deyna was impressed. As she understood it, the Narthians were way older than humanity. If something was old to them, she could hardly imagine the age of it.

Something occurred to Deyna. "How can you speak to us? How do we understand each other?" she asked.

"The membrane sac," the Queen said, "contains a language translator."

"Abe was a busy fellow," Samharin mused.

"Tell us more about the doorway," Deyna urged.

The Queen made a hissing sound. Two more of the ghost insects approached her.

"They must touch you," said the Queen.

Deyna allowed it, a brief, ticklish rubbing of whip-like appendages over her clothed skin.

Suddenly the insects ran to the Queen to be eaten.

"You encountered the Rah-Thee," said the Queen, assimilating her data. "And so have you," she added, referring to the untouched Samharin.

"How come you didn't get felt up?" Deyna grumbled to Samharin.

Samharin was intent on business. "What is this Rah-Thee?"

"Before this universe came to be, there was Rah-Thee. That which feeds, that which kills and destroys is Rah-Thee."

"You're speaking in riddles," accused Deyna.

"Rah-Thee is mother, Rah-Thee is father, your unholy alliance released it. Humans and Narthians must not mix. When they do, evil is unleashed."

"You're talking to us now," Deyna pointed out. "What's that about?"

Samharin elbowed her, signaling for her to tone it down.

She did so, irritated.

Being put in her place was not so easy anymore, not nearly so automatic.

"I speak to you because you came to me," the Queen answered her anyway. "You showed...bravery."

The word seemed foreign to her. Perhaps it was in a world where every creature did only what it was programmed to, no more, no less.

"We need your help," said Samharin. "To put this creature back behind the door or wherever it belongs."

"If Rah-Thee consumes humanity," she said bluntly, "is that not to our advantage?"

"In the short run. But she was passing herself off as Narthian. She has designs on running the perfect Nest. She wants it all."

"We can defend ourselves," said the Queen.

"Obviously you have so far. If Rah-Thee comes back at you, having absorbed all human power, won't that tip the balance?"

Another period of silence.

"Humans are weak," the Queen concluded. "They cause only misery."

That sounded more like a reluctant giving in, Deyna thought, than a rejection.

"I'm not here for politics. We could go tit for tat until the universe winds down," Samharin said.

"We will give you the tools to return Rah-Thee to us," the Queen said. "We will attend to her."

"And let you use her as a potential weapon against us? Sorry, no," said Samharin.

"What choice do you have, human?"

Samharin straightened himself. "We can die with dignity and let you fend for yourselves."

Deyna's heart swelled to see him so strong, so proud.

She longed to kiss him and touch him.

"There," said the Queen. "There is your weapon."

"I don't understand," said Samharin.

"The female," said the Queen. "She loves you. This is the word, yes, for the absolute bond of trust and loyalty among your race?"

"Yes, it is," Samharin said. "But I don't think—"

"You feel the same," the Queen interrupted. "You would die for this female, you would suffer anything to stay by her side."

Deyna was blushing furiously. "We barely know each other. These things take time with humans."

"Love does not know time," said the Queen.

"I don't see how this has anything to do with fighting Rah-Thee," said Samharin.

The Queen hissed again. "You have us inside you," she pronounced, quite thoroughly changing the subject. "Your brain bears the seeds of the Nest. It is from your time with Abe."

Deyna had heard enough. "If you're trying to say he's going to turn into a bug or something, you can save it, we don't scare easy. And if he is, you sure as hell better tell us how to stop it."

"You see?" the Queen said to Samharin, exhibiting something rather like human smugness. "She loves you."

"Quit talking like I'm not here," Deyna snapped. "And stop telling me what I feel."

Samharin steadied her. "We must have perspective. Individual lives don't matter," he said, presumably to both of them. "The future of two races is at stake. Tell us what to do, Your Majesty, and we will do it."

Deyna was alarmed. "You aren't going to blindly follow her orders?"

"No, but I will trust that in this case, our interests coincide." There was a light in Samharin's eye, a strange glint.

Deyna did not like it. "If you are playing us, *Your Majesty...*"

"There are ancient ways," the Queen said, unperturbed. "From before the time of remembering. Words to be spoken, words that can be translated from our language to yours."

"And these words bind the Rah-Thee?" asked Samharin.

"Yes."

"Why does it work?" asked Deyna, suspicious.

"No one knows," said the Queen. "Some call it religion, others science."

"I call it a lot of nonsense," Deyna said.

"The Words of Closing will be transferred," the Queen continued. "You will each be given one half."

Deyna snorted. "This is ridiculous. I'll bet she doesn't even know what she is talking about, Samharin."

"It must be done this way," the Queen insisted. "You must confront the Rah-Thee as one. You must recite the words as one, you must be perfectly centered when you do."

"Oh, is that all?" said Deyna acidly.

"No," said the Queen. "There is one more thing. In order to drive the Rah-Thee back behind the door, you must confront her in perfect love, having committed yourselves to one another, body and soul."

Deyna wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

Samharin said not a word, which made her wonder what was going on in that Guardian mind of his.

Did he know in his heart that he could never love her?

She shouldn't care, but she did. More than she wanted to admit. Was it humanity she was concerned for...or the state of her own heart?

Chapter Nineteen

Rah-Thee, she who had taken many forms, occupied many bodies, including that of a dead Narthian Queen, was not pleased. Resistance among the humans was mounting. They were guessing too quickly how her power worked and somehow they had stumbled onto a defense.

The emotion they called love. That most elusive of feelings that could mean nothing or everything.

Rah-Thee did not comprehend it. She knew only that it weakened her influence. Particularly when lovers were in each other's presence.

Almost anything else could be twisted her way, fear, anger, even loyalty if taken to the wrong extreme. The primales were ideal victims. Super powerful, but woefully unbalanced in so many ways.

The so-called obedients completed them and they were only happy with one to love, though they might not admit it.

The mems posed a challenge of their own. They were mercurial, given to passions, quickly dispersed. They were natural lovers and far more devoted than they themselves realized. At any given moment they showered deep affection on the woman they were with and barring that they loved life itself.

Once upon a time she had taken on humanity, but it was different then. They were male and female, no sub-classifications. They were easily manipulated. She fanned the flames of their hatreds and used them for her pleasures.

They were slaves, bathed in their own blood and misery.

Eventually she grew bored and looked for fresh meat.

At first the Narthians seemed an ideal target. They were centralized, hierarchical, ruled by Queens, much like herself. It should have been a simple matter to absorb them. They were too quick to adapt however, producing constant new variations. Eventually they outstripped her abilities.

Then the war began. An onslaught from every side.

The Queens freed themselves and devised a trap.

The doorway into nothingness, isolation, eternal prison.

Rah-Thee could not prevent her own exile.

For millennia she waited for an opportunity to escape.

She monitored the depths of space, looking for some mentality to exploit, some change in the mental order of things.

She had nearly given up hope when she detected the Gettysburg Project as the humans called it.

At last, a psychic entry point.

The Narthian, Abe, and his human allies had no clue that the mindlink they were creating was capable of ripping open the psychic continuum.

Before her Narthian jailers could take notice, she followed the rip, projecting herself to the Project. From there it was a matter of scanning for weak links, Varenynos, for example. She used him to eliminate the Narthian, Abe, before he could get any message back to the Narthian High Command of her escape.

The mem Samharin had been an interesting challenge, a temporary setback. The obedient Deyna had saved him, or rather their passion for one another.

She did make use of Deyna though. Her influence had been furthered and the groundwork laid for future attacks.

At present, she was in hiding in the energy core that powered the entire base. Shortly she would cut power to all but life support to get their attention. Then she would begin to work on them, isolating them, playing on their fears.

Quickly enough they would forget love.

Not only those at the Project, but all the Guardians manning the military ships.

This was Theron's great miscalculation. He had delivered his fleet into her hands.

They would soon be her toys and she would use them against the populated human worlds.

Soon every human would be afraid, dependant and dying to be led and dominated.

Then she would reap her harvest. From there it would be a simple enough matter to turn the massive power of the Guardians against the Narthians.

It would be an interesting fight. There was no telling who might win. Either way, she would prevail, seizing control of the winning force.

Child's play.

If you could apply such an expression to a million-year-old creature.

Rah-Thee enjoyed a small jolt of pleasure as she contemplated her own deviance. Soon they would pay, each and every one of them, human and Narthian too.

* * * * *

Deyna couldn't have been more ready. At last, they were leaving the Nest. The captured Earth cruiser the Narthians had given them to travel in was a little out of date, but serviceable. Fortunately the Narthian technicians had not dismantled it during their tests. Deyna was particularly pleased to find clean, dry uniforms and a sanitizing chamber to remove the various layers of slime from her and Samharin's skin.

She felt worlds better once she had cleaned up.

Definitely, things could be worse.

They weren't dead yet, and as long as the ship held together for the trip back to the Gettysburg Project, they would stay that way.

In retrospect, Deyna had found the implanting process for the Words of Closing to be annoying rather than painful. It had taken only a few minutes for the serum to be injected into her jugular vein.

Serum being a euphemism for icky green stuff.

To top it all off, the words were nonsense syllables, untranslatable according to the Queen, part of an ancient mystery language, whatever that meant.

All in all, the process had seemed incredibly dangerous to Deyna, but they had survived it. So far.

Samharin had been tight-lipped as they entered the ship, a parting gift from the Queen.

She had taken her place in the cockpit beside him, equally silent.

Programming the slightly archaic guidance computer took awhile. Deyna sat, staring out the view screen into space. So many things to think about.

Where to begin.

She tried to ignore Samharin's presence next to her. He was unbelievably sexy as he concentrated on his work, alternatively grimacing and frowning at the computer. She loved to see a capable male, particularly this one. It was like the whole world disappeared to him except his job.

And what else did he have to concentrate on? Her?

Not likely.

A few moments later they were accelerating into hyperspace. As soon as the ship leveled off, Samharin unbuckled his safety harness.

"That's that," he said. "I'm off to get some shuteye."

She watched dumbfounded as he rose to his feet. "How can you sleep at a time like this?"

"I'm exhausted," he said. "What better time is there? I'm not a primale, you know. My body needs REM time."

"Mine does too," she said. "But I don't go running off on my responsibilities."

"What responsibilities?"

She followed him to the small, clean white ship's bed secured in the back corner of the ship. "How about your responsibility to me?" She folded her arms. "We have some serious talking to do. Or did I miss the place where we confessed everlasting love to each other and became lifemates?"

He lay down on his back, hands folded behind his neck. She tried not to drool at his crotch. "You didn't miss anything," he said. "It didn't happen."

Her hands went to her hips. "Well, it's supposed to happen, otherwise the human race dies, right?"

He closed his eyes. "Something like that."

Unbelievable.

"You are really going to sleep, aren't you?"

"I'm certainly trying," he said dryly.

Deyna marched up to the bed, looming over him. "Well, I'm not letting you."

One eye popped open. "Would you like to spend this trip bound and gagged?"

She felt a stirring in her belly. As a matter of fact, yes...

"Stop trying to shut me up," she accused. "You're always doing that and this time you need to listen."

"When do I try to shut you up?" he asked.

"When you dominate me."

"But you like me."

"No," she lied. "I don't. And the worst part is you use the bondage as a way not to talk about feelings."

"You make it sound like we've been together for years," he complained.

"I have aged that much since I met you," she quipped.

Samharin exhaled. "Look, Deyna, I know this is stressful for you. If you need me to take control here, force you to relax, I can."

Deyna went through the roof. "Stop being such a fucking mem, will you? If you want something from me, take it."

"Deyna, we are both exhausted. Whatever we need to talk about can and should wait," he said, his voice slightly strained.

"I can't wait. I need to know. Do you love me? The Queen said so."

"The Queen said a lot of things."

"Just answer the question."

"A lot has happened very fast," he said. "This isn't the time."

"You're a coward," she spat. "I bet you don't even want to know if I love you."

"Whatever answer you give would be too colored by emotion."

"I don't love you," she answered anyway. "I hate you."

"I forgive you," he said with infuriating calm. "You don't mean what you are saying."

"You're right," she goaded. "You aren't important enough to hate. I have so many lovers, you know how it goes. They snap their fingers, I come running. 'Deyna, kneel.' 'Deyna, spread.' 'Deyna, crawl.'"

"That's enough," said Samharin.

"Do I embarrass you? Can't take me anywhere, not even a stinking Nest. That's what you get though, associating with pleasure women. You know what we're good for, right? Any port in a storm, a nice warm hole for Master's cock."

"You will not talk about yourself that way," he said, his voice taking on a dark edge.

"Why not? When we're done I will go back and be the same little fuck-toy I've always been. And you'll go on and take the galaxy by storm."

Samharin was on his feet, too quick for her to back away. He had her by the upper arm. "I said enough, Deyna."

"Let go of me," she squirmed.

"Kiss me," he ordered.

"No fucking way. I don't want to," she spat. "Stars, you are so messed up. You want to be all soft and sweet to me in the middle of everything."

"Who says I intend to be soft and sweet?" he rasped.

His lips angled upward. His eyes had a predatorial glow. Her knees went instantly weak. Her pussy flooded.

"Kiss me," he repeated.

Deyna stood on tiptoes. Her lips fell into his, commanded. He stole her breath, searing her with the heat, instant, engulfing consumption. Splaying the fingers of one hand across her back, he drew her even tighter.

His other hand touched her waist and she moaned. The kiss lasted and lasted, time spinning away until she couldn't think straight, couldn't even feel her own flesh except for the steady, hot pulsing of her pussy and the tight pulling of her nipples.

He certainly had her attention now.

And her complete obedience.

As he pulled his lips away he left her moaning, aching all over.

"Whatever is between us, Deyna, is what it is," he said. "We cannot manufacture it or deny it. When the time comes we will face the Queen together...and we will live or die."

Talk about gambling everything on love. If the bond was there, they would be able to recite the Words together, if it was not then it would be a million times worse than if they had done nothing.

That had been the Queen's final piece of scintillating news. The Words apparently could be used only once every thousand years and if they failed then the Rah-Thee would be guaranteed freedom for another millennium.

While the two of them might personally stay immune from the Rah-Thee's power for a while they would be dealing with a snowballing effect as the creature strengthened with each new mind it absorbed. At a certain point it would be too much for anyone to fight.

And then a new dark age would begin.

One thing Deyna had wondered was why the Queen was not saving the words for the Narthians to use themselves.

Perhaps she thought the humans stood a better chance.

Or else she knew they were doomed to failure.

"Do you understand, Deyna?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, moist eyed, awestruck and adoring.

Samharin was a hero all right, a natural leader who always knew the right thing, and also the courageous thing, to do.

In Deyna's mind the two would forever be the same.

Samharin was a man she would be proud to stand by for the rest of her life, one she would trust with everything and give everything to. Did she love him?

Such a hard question. Her blasted obedient's nature made her so susceptible to strong, dreamy men.

Of course, he was a mem and maybe that made it all the more special.

He stroked her hair, brushing back idle strands of black. "It will be all right," he said and she believed him. He had been in tough spots before. He was a survivor. So was she. She had learned that of late.

"I..." She couldn't get any more words out. What would she have said anyway?

He kissed her again, this time it really was tender.

Her eyes were definitely misting over. She told herself only the moment was guaranteed, but her heart was thinking forever.

"Samharin," she said, finding her voice again. "Please, may I submit to you?"

"Yes," he replied, his tone so incredibly rich and appreciative.

Never had a woman felt so wanted, she thought.

He scooped her up and took her to the bed.

Ever so gently he laid her on her back and sat down on the edge of it beside her. She let him do it all, unbuttoning her flight suit and parting the halves of it. She had only to lift her limbs on cue as he removed it, baring her overheated, lust-filled body.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured.

She flushed. "I'm a bred sex slave, Samharin, what do you expect?"

He shook his head, touching her cheek with his knuckle. "No, you are beautiful inside and out. That is you, not breeding."

Deyna sighed, completely at his mercy.

If he should cast her aside or reject her now, she would wither and die. How terrifying to be that much in a man's power.

Talk about bravery. This was the real frontier. Trudging naked as an obedient into the arena of love.

She would do anything to be his now, follow him anywhere.

So this is what it's like to really be a slave, she thought.

Had Penya felt this too, sweet and succulent thing that she was? Is this why she had pined so for Vandar, and now for Sordon?

A wave of panic and disgust hit her. Penya was incapable of being free. She must have a man over her, a Master constantly controlling her. She had no shame, she had no pride. She must belong and submit and if the men wished they could make a game of it, tease her, force her to humiliate herself, begging to be shackled and abused as a pet.

Deyna's disgust turned to rage and indignation. "No," she said, trying to push him off. "I don't want this, I changed my mind."

His face was expressionless. "If I get up now I will never touch you again."

Her mouth dropped.

"The choice is yours. Give yourself to me without reservations or send me from you," he pressed.

"Must it be so...absolute?" she croaked.

"Yes it must, Deyna."

"That's not fair," she said. "I need time, I need —"

"I offered you time, I strongly urged you to take it and you refused," he declared. "Now you will accept my terms."

"I-I can't."

"Very well."

"Wait," she cried. "Please..."

He ignored her as he rose from the bed. Absolutely desperate, beside herself with misery, she followed him, throwing herself to her knees. Crying out, she grabbed his waist from behind.

"You are acting hysterical," he said.

"I am hysterical. I have to have you inside me. I have to feel you conquering me."

He clenched his fists. "No woman has ever driven me crazy like you have."

"Fuck me," she begged. "Fuck me on the floor like an animal, show me, show me what I do to you."

"On all fours," he growled.

Deyna complied instantly, going to her hands and knees. "Samharin, Samharin..." She called his name, pushing out her ass.

She was scarcely aware of the time he was away. Perhaps a minute or two, no longer.

He returned with a riding crop, freshly made from the objectifier. She heard the whistle in the air and felt the kiss of leather on her buttocks. She felt the heat, like fire. She imagined the welt.

Samharin struck her again.

"Oh god," she groaned.

"I will fuck you, slave, my pelvis pounding your whipped ass, my cock plunging into your pussy."

"Yes, yes, Master."

He leveled another blow. She marveled at his technique, as good as any primale who had ever whipped her.

"You are wonderful," she cried. "Perfect."

He whipped her again and again. She convulsed, writhing, pushing her ass out at him.

Finally he stopped. He came at her fast, decisive, clamping her hips and sinking himself in her hot, wet sex. She took him one thrust, no foreplay.

"I need to come," she moaned.

"Yes," he said, giving her release.

She could not have held back. The orgasm came like a silent, wet explosion, slow motion, heat and light and sweet passion. Her senses were overwhelmed, her body was transported away from the ship, away from all danger.

Samharin's hands were on her shoulders. His own orgasm was hot, fast, intense. She took him inside her, squeezing her pussy muscles, reveling in the feel of his semen spurting hot and thick.

Their mutual climax went on and on until they collapsed together in a heap on the floor.

They passed out this way together, limbs twisted. Neither of them stirred until the ship emerged from hyperspace, back at Gettysburg.

The ship went on automatic pilot for docking.

It was Theron and Vandar who found the two of them.

To say they awoke embarrassed would be the understatement of the millennium.

Chapter Twenty

Deyna scrambled for cover behind Samharin. She really shouldn't feel embarrassed being nude in front of primales, as it was their right to look at her as they wished. Something about being with Samharin made her feel different though.

Like they had something private that no one else should intrude upon.

Samharin was on his feet, saluting Theron and Vandar. She pressed her hands to his back, looking sheepish.

"Sirs," said Samharin, sounding relatively normal considering he had been caught in a sleeping, bare embrace on the floor of a space ship. "Cadet Samharin reporting for duty."

Deyna suppressed a giggle, imagining what his cock looked like at the moment. Was he close to another erection?

"What is the meaning of this, Cadet?" demanded Vandar, grumpy as always.

"I think the meaning is clear enough," said Theron. "Cadet Samharin, Obedient Deyna, you will dress and prepare for debriefing in the conference room."

"Yes Sirs," said Samharin.

"Yes Sirs," Deyna echoed as the two officers turned on their heels and left the ship.

"Do you think we will get in trouble?" Deyna asked when they were alone.

Samharin retrieved her flight suit and handed it to her. "I think if we save the human race they will let it slide."

"Oh great." She rolled her eyes. "No pressure."

* * * * *

No one spoke as Samharin and Deyna completed their report on their meeting with the Narthian Queen. Samharin reached instinctively for Deyna's hand. He was pleased as she grasped it unquestioningly.

Everything was up to Theron now.

The final decision as to whether to attempt to employ the so-called Words of Closure against the Rah-Thee would lie with him alone.

Being the wise General that he was, he opened the floor. "Comments?" he said, in the most understated manner possible.

It was Reeva who spoke first. "There's an obvious question we must ask."

Deyna squeezed his hand tighter as if she knew what was coming.

"Deyna, Samharin, you have shared with us that to your knowledge, the Narthian attack plan requires that the two of you be in love—"

"Reeva," said Vandar. "This is a military briefing, not a counseling session."

"Our problem isn't strictly military," Reeva countered. "Emotion, love is crucial."

"She's right," said Theron. "We have to know."

"I have never been in love before," Deyna said, answering first. "I'm not sure how you can tell such things."

"I have never known love either," said Samharin. "It is my belief that it can only be seen in action. If we have what we need with each other to face the Rah-Thee we will only know when the time comes."

Reeva smiled knowingly. "More is revealed than you both realize."

Samharin frowned. As a psychosensologist she would be capable of discerning things intuitively.

"May I ask you, Reeva," said Deyna. "Do you think we can do it? Can we really meet this thing head on?"

"We don't even know if the Narthians were for real," said Vandar. "This could be a trap."

"That is true," Samharin agreed. "I, as much as anyone here, have reason to hate and mistrust the Narthians. On the other hand, I have connected with the mind of Abe. I know there is more...humanness in them than we know."

Vandar scoffed. "Bug loving...that's all we need."

Theron exhaled. "I am prepared to authorize any attempt by Samharin and Deyna to go after the Rah-Thee as they call it. I will not order it, however. They must make the choice. Furthermore, they must both understand that we will do what we must to protect ourselves." He looked directly at them now. "If we sense that they are being possessed, we will have to terminate them."

Deyna's grip tightened another notch. "I'm prepared to die," she said with admirable quickness, "by Samharin's side."

"And I will do anything to protect her," Samharin added. "We are prepared, General, to accept your terms."

Theron nodded. "Very well."

Reeva looked satisfied with their answers.

Vandar's face was drawn. He looked worried for them both.

"We are going to have to find the Rah-Thee again," Samharin reasoned.

Just then the lights went off. This was followed by the sound of the main power generator winding down.

When the backups failed to activate, Theron said, "I don't think that will be necessary. It appears the Rah-Thee has rejoined us."

"Emergency stations," said Vandar into the comm link. "Prepare for combat."

"We must make contact with the ships," said Theron. "The Rah-Thee cannot take possession of any of its officers."

"We'll keep her here," said Samharin.

Deyna was in his arms.

He had not even remembered rising to his feet.

The light returned, though it was not human. The two of them were surrounded by a glow of indiscernible color. Perhaps it had no color at all.

The room was spinning.

It was the Rah-Thee, attacking them, taking them both.

Samharin clung tighter and tighter to Deyna. He heard her screaming somewhere in the back of his brain and then everything went silent.

He was dimly aware of collapsing to the floor, helpless.

That was the last thing Samharin remembered before passing out.

* * * * *

Deyna awoke with the mother of all headaches.

"Fuck," she exclaimed.

Sitting up, she found herself on a large white expanse. The ground was gritty underneath her, a very, very fine sand.

She was naked, her nipples erect.

Between her legs she felt the familiar moisture.

"Where am I?"

Had she said that aloud?

Something cracked in the air, whistling.

The whip landed on her back, not a small crop like the primales liked to play with but a long snake of a thing, the kind used on large animals.

"Silence, slave," growled the man on horseback.

Correction, it was more like a camel, though smaller and sleeker than the Earth variety.

There were several others, each with a male rider wearing leather boots and colored robes, complete with turbans.

Her back was in agony. "What the hell is wrong with you?" she glared. "You sadistic prick."

"Watch your tongue," the man whipped her again. "It serves but one purpose."

Just then she saw Samharin behind her, naked as he was, and lying facedown.

She turned him over. He was lifeless, a deep gash in his chest.

"Samharin!" she cried.

She tried to control her breathing. This wasn't real. It couldn't be.

"I'll show you what's real," said one of the men, reading her mind as he dismounted.

He pulled a thick, stubby cock from his robe.

"No, keep away," she protested.

"You want it," he grinned, stroking himself. "You are only a slave, you live for dick. Your coward lover is dead, your escape failed, time to pay the price."

The other men dismounted and came for her. Hands grabbed her arms, pushing her back.

"Get the fuck away!"

"You want it," the first man breathed. "Aren't you ashamed? You are incapable of loving. You are a dick receptacle. You come when you're told, suck when you're told, you follow cock like a trained dog, sniffing."

Deyna was aroused, she couldn't help it. She wanted them inside her, fucking her, more than one at a time. "This is all a lie, it isn't true. You hear me, Rah-Thee? That's right, I am calling you by name."

Filthy hands pawed her breasts and she arched her back.

"I'm sorry, Samharin, you know I—"

A hand thrust rudely between her thighs, parting them. "Can't finish the sentence, can you? You were going to say you loved him but you don't. You love being fucked and dominated. You love to be had, abused."

No, not abused.

Not from this bitch of all bitches.

The Rah-Thee laughed, the sound echoing in the white desert. "Your anger won't work, you need love. Poor little slave. You'll never use the words. Give them to me, let me take care of them and I will give you all the humiliation you crave...forever."

"I don't want humiliation," she said aloud.

She tried to fight back. "Samharin's not dead," she said. "You can't trick me."

"He is dead, because you don't love him."

"I do, I do."

"Empty words, too little, too late. Now lie back and take what you have coming."

Deyna moaned as one of the desert men penetrated her. The others were holding down her wrists and ankles, though she was no longer resisting.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes."

The Rah-Thee laughed again.

"That's it, almost home. Just come for me...we'll come together."

Deyna was temporarily saved by the Rah-Thee's sickening arrogance. She would be damned if she would hand over her soul this easily.

Maybe there was another way if she couldn't be sure about love? What if she expressed how she felt in her own words? What if what she needed was there, evident as Reeve had said?

"Samharin, do you hear me?"

"Wasted breath," the Rah-Thee hissed.

"I tested you so hard, I hated you when I met you because you scared me. It was so easy to be a slave to primales, they took my body, made me want them. I didn't have to give more. But with you, I sensed it would be different. You didn't have the same power, I wasn't supposed to want you, though I did. It was this strange inner magnetism. I was drawn to you. I enslaved myself.

"That terrified me, the way I needed your body. And the way you kept challenging me, pushing me away, making me take responsibility for my pleasure. You made me want to keep coming back. The chains were invisible.

"And you inspired me too. When Varenys came to me, I was able to fight him in part because of you. And later when I thought you might die, I was beside myself. All I could see was that loss and nothing mattered. For the first time in my life I was really acting like an obedient. And yet you weren't really treating me like one.

"You make me laugh, you make me feel equal but you can take me in bed, make me wet with your voice. No primale has ever owned me so much, and stars help me, even wading in bug slime was okay because we were together.

"So wherever you are, don't you fucking die and don't you give up on me."

The sky cracked open, flashes of purple lightning across the orange expanse.

The ground began to rumble, an earthquake far below the white sand. The men in the robes fell away from her. Thunder roared. They hopped on their mounts and took off.

Deyna rolled over, shielding Samharin's body with hers. "Kill me, kill me," she told the Rah-Thee. "I'm not budging."

The ground was shaking violently, the sand was opening beneath them.

"Then you will be swallowed whole," said the Rah-Thee.

Deyna began to chant, repeating the words as she had learned them. The blank spots between each could only be filled by Samharin and she had to believe that he would do that.

He had to.

"Little fool," the Rah-Thee hissed. "You are giving me half of the Words of Closing for nothing. You are wasting them. You are handing me another thousand years."

"If that were true," Deyna reasoned, "then you would be happy for me to continue, but you're not."

Over and over, Deyna chanted, each time believing more and more. The sand gave way completely. They were dropping as if down some gigantic hourglass.

Time's up...

Bullshit.

"Don't leave me, Samharin, say the damn words." She clung to him as they fell, her head buried to her chest. He was the man...her man.

Abruptly she felt him stir.

They froze in mid-air.

Samharin's voice joined hers. He was reciting his own words.

Deyna continued, shouting her half. Their voices blended, faster and faster, the words spinning together.

The sand flew away. The very air seemed to explode.

The Rah-Thee was losing.

So they loved each other after all...

Their voices deepened. They fell into a cadence not entirely human. Deyna thought she heard the slight sound of buzzing, high-pitched and sweet. Were the Narthians joining somehow?

"Back through the Door, terrorize life no more, back to sleep, into Death's keep..."

The words were understandable now. Were they reciting in English or understanding the ancient language?

"Be stilled by bonds of care, the bonds of life, now is not your time, be gone with all your strife..."

Love, yes, powerful, simple, ancient love.

The Rah-Thee was being pulled away, incredibly powerful forces sucking her across dimensions, behind the portal to be shut away again.

Moments passed, lifetimes.

Wow, thought Deyna, Samharin and I are going to have a lot of talking to do when this is done.

* * * * *

Samharin was on the sand, real sand this time, on a beach. The water was cobalt blue, the energy of the alien sea lighting it to the brightness of a sapphire. Twin moons glowed above, one gold, one silver. Deyna was beside him, her hand in his. Ahead of them, Sordon and Penya were walking.

Samharin watched as the pair stopped. Sordon was kissing his mate. She returned the kiss eagerly on tiptoes and then, playfully, she tweaked him on the nose and ran off. He followed, laughing. They ended up rolling together, the pink, warm waters gurgling and rushing over them like champagne.

It even tasted sweet.

You had to love artificial pleasure worlds.

He had to love Deyna, more to the point.

How many times was she going to save him?

He had tried to tell her it was all self-interest but she had insisted on talking once and for all about his feelings.

For hours straight they had talked in his quarters after they had woken up. The Rah-Thee had been gone and it was time at least to deal with each other.

Samharin had followed her lead. Instead of worrying about whether he could say he was in love, he had confined himself to a detailed description of what she had meant to him each step of the way. The way she had captivated him, challenged him and made him rise to the occasion to be the kind of man even a primale could envy.

He did not, in the final analysis, wish to face tomorrow without her. She was pleasing.

"Will you be my pleasure woman?" he had asked coyly.

She had raised a brow.

And so they had ended up here, companioning with Sordon and Penya who were so much in love it hurt to watch.

It was Deyna's turn to stop now. She turned to face Samharin.

"Are you sorry you are here with me and not somewhere else?"

"I don't want to be anywhere else, you know that."

"You won't even want another female?"

"I am quite sure you will entertain me."

"You're a mem," she reminded, though they had discussed the matter at length already. "You will get bored with me."

"I am a man," he told her now, as he had told her before. "I am my own person. I choose what to be, I know what makes me happy. Before you, I survived, I don't feel like I really lived."

"You just like tormenting me," she said.

"That too," he agreed.

Her face glowed. "Order me to kiss you," she said.

"If I do so," he pointed out, "I will only be following your orders."

"Please," she said softly. "Kiss me?"

Samharin held his ground. "Is that how you were taught to beg, pleasure woman?"

"I am asking," she said. "As your mate."

"Very well." He seized her hair in his fist, his heart swelling with pride and wonder, his mind abuzz with the possibilities of life with this incredible, unique female. "Then you will beg as my mate."

Samharin maneuvered her head, allowing her lips to barely brush his. She closed her eyes, gasping. "Please..." she panted.

"Please what?"

"Please...Sir...take my lips."

"Will it be worth my while?"

"Oh yes," she rasped. "I will be good, I will be hot, oh stars, it will be the best you've ever had, I will try so hard."

Samharin smiled, brushing the stray hairs from her damp forehead. "You need not try, love, just be yourself."

She moaned as he pressed his lips, an instant seal, communicating volumes, all their experiences, hopes and longings, a language brand new and evolving and yet as ancient as any mystery in the universe.

Their bodies, gloriously nude, touched, chest to chest, pelvis to pelvis. He was hard and she was soft. He lifted her, sliding himself into her, his long, aching shaft finding its home, the only real home it had known. She clenched at him, holding him with her pussy. Her ankles locked behind his waist, her arms around his neck. They moved together, rocking in mid-air, a timeless rhythm.

Neither of them wanted to come. They wanted to make it last.

There was no holding out though. The orgasm rocked them even as the sea rose, lapping at their ankles.

He would never tire of this, never tire of her.

Always another adventure, another tomorrow.

Somewhere above, in the silky sky, lit with stars, he thought he felt the presence of Abe, who had done more to bring them together and to save the human race than anyone would ever know.

I love you, said their bodies to one another.

I love you, said their hearts and their orgasms.

I love you today, tomorrow and always.

* * * * *

Penya was lost and found in Sordon's embrace. He was inside her, under the stars, holding her so very tight. The sand was their bed, the roaring waves their audience. She nearly wept from the beauty of it, the pleasure. It was everything she had ever dreamed of, all she had ever wanted to be.

The mate of a primale she could love honor and respect and who would feel the same for her. He might not be a general or a commander, but he was a god to her. He was devoted and he would never leave her.

And one day he might well be a general, perhaps even the highest ranking officer of all.

"My angel," Sordon murmured into her ear as he moved within her, possessing her completely.

"My hero, my Master," she said, clinging to him with abandon.

They moved as one, she was perfectly receptive and he was perfectly poised.

"Sordon," she sighed.

"Yes," he replied to the unasked question. "Come, my love, come with me and show me that you are mine."

Penya cried out, arching her back, digging her nails into his primale back. She was his all right and she could not have held back that truth if she had tried.

Nor would he have let her.

The orgasm stretched on and out, outward across the sea and down the beach. She thought she could feel Samharin and Deyna climaxing with them.

It was a night for loving, a night to celebrate the defeat of an ancient dark force and the beginning of a new age of peace.

There was talk of peace with the Narthians.

Was it truly possible?

The way she felt now, anything at all seemed in the realm of possibilities.

Whatever happened, if she died now, she would do so a supremely satisfied and happy woman.

* * * * *

"I suppose you are satisfied with yourself," said Vandar.

Reeva, behind closed doors with her mate at long last, offered a coy shrug. "I don't know what you mean."

He put his hands on his hips, emphasizing his lean waist. She tried not to drool.

"I'm sure you feel the way everything turned out has validated the importance of the emotions, the psychosensorial realm over the practical, primale one," he said.

"You said it, I didn't."

"Are you being sassy with me, woman?"

"No."

Read 'Yes', with a capital Y, and please put me over your lap ASAP.

"Martial law may be over but I am still the Commander of this base."

"That's nice. Why don't you go order some troops around?"

He moved in front of her, inches from her face. "I don't have to, I have you."

"I'm not a soldier," she reminded.

"Too bad for you," he rasped. "If you were a soldier you would have rights."

"I have rights now."

"The right to get your ass on that bed, you mean, for the spanking of your life."

Reeva fought the betrayal by her own body, the hot weakness, the fire between her thighs. She was supposed to be a fem, damn it.

She tried to hold her ground. "Even you have to see that times are changing. Deyna is the first obedient to be so feisty, but I predict there will be more. Men and women are evolving, the signs are everywhere."

"I'm not interested in evolving," he said. "I am primale and no one will tell me otherwise, least of all my own woman in the privacy of my quarters."

His arrogance thrilled her though she continued to fight. "These are our quarters and I am my own person."

His fingers balled slowly into fists in her hair. He leaned her head back and there was nothing she could do about it.

"Out there you are your own person," he said. "The most extraordinary woman I've met. But in here you are private property."

"Everything has limits," she suggested, her throat dry and hot.

He pushed his pelvis against hers, letting her feel his cock. "Do you know what that means, Reeva?"

It was hard and thick, very close to its maximum size.

"You had anchovies for lunch?" she teased.

"It means that I want you as much as a primale can want a woman. And as a primale, I will have you how I like, for as long as I like and the only thing I want to hear out of your mouth is 'Please, Sir, may I have some more'."

"You're incorrigible," she complained, though she was unable to keep the awe out of her voice.

"That's right, Red, I am. No apologies for that."

"Are you still going to make me go to bed for a spanking?" she asked.

"Absolutely, and just for asking, you get to crawl there on your hands and knees."

"Vandar, no, please."

She squirmed as he ran his hand over her backside. "Tell me you hate it."

She couldn't lie, not when he could so easily spank her for any lies. "No...I don't."

He used his tongue as a whip, dabbing along her neck, tracing a line to her earlobe.

"You are my life," he told her. "My sun and moon. If anything had happened to you—"

"I know," she said gently. "You would do anything for me. No one could love me more. And I always forgive you for being a Vandarsaurus Rex. In fact, I wouldn't have it any other way."

"The greatest privilege in my life is to dominate you."

"And mine is to submit to you."

He gave her a spank.

She was panting. He had the kind of hand that made a woman know she had been disciplined.

"I won't ever go easy on you," he said.

"I don't want you to."

Another spank and then another, more heat poured on top of heat until she was stinging and on the verge of tears.

He did not bring her that far. Instead he took her in his arms, lying down beside her. She snuggled, close enough to feel his heartbeat on her body, close enough to feel like the other half of him.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you too."

And then he showed her just how much he loved her, sliding his cock deep into her opening, all the way to the hilt. He wrapped his hands around her, clasping her breasts.

"Yours," she said.

"Mine," he concurred.

They came together, exploding into a slow motion storm, a twisting whirlwind of desire.

It was all so clear, second by second, she could feel it all. It made her alive, more clear-headed than she had ever been in her life.

This was more than sexmaking. It was the meeting of souls. With her head on his chest she shared with him her ideas and plans for the next stage of Gettysburg.

It still required Council approval but Reeva was hopeful. Naturally, things would have to proceed very carefully, but after the human-Narthian cooperation in dealing with the Rah-Thee, there seemed no limits to the possibilities.

Whatever happened, she would do her work side by side with her mate where she belonged.

Now and forever.

* * * * *

Nyssa stood chained in the middle of the bedroom, barefoot on tiptoe, her hands manacled above her head. She was wearing the black lace nightgown, though not for long.

"You are not reading any holo records," Theron observed, walking a small tight circle about her.

"No," she whispered.

"No Sir." His hand cracked on her ass, jiggling her flesh through the lace.

"N-no Sir," she repeated.

"And why aren't you?" he asked, enjoying the interrogation with immense primal satisfaction.

"Because my hands are chained, Sir," she said.

The answer had been childishly simple but she gave it any way. No wisecrack remarks, not when Theron was in this kind of mood, with this much control of her body.

"And why did I chain your hands, woman?"

Several answers were possible here. "Because you wanted to?"

"True." He combed his fingers down the locks of her long dark hair. "Though perhaps I wanted to teach you something as well?"

"You wanted me to know that in this bed chamber you are in charge."

As if there could possibly be any doubt.

"And do you believe I am in charge at this moment?"

"Yes..." She braced herself as he licked his lips, making eye contact. She shivered, wondering where that devious mind of his was going. She held her breath.

He took one finger, just one, and touched her nipple.

She moaned. Oh how well her body had been trained to respond. She was the woman he had always wanted, responsive, sweet, seductive...and infinitely passionate.

"You will respond perfectly," he said. "You will be obedient and hot and pliant...or you will be punished."

"I will..." Actually punishment sounded pretty good right about now.

"No Council meetings tonight," he reminded. "You're all mine."

Theron delivered another smack to her ass. She made a small gasping noise. The Council would meet again, but not until tomorrow. Theron had already pledged his support to her plan to re-instate the Gettysburg Project this time with the help of the Narthian Queen who Samharin and Deyna had met.

The common alliance against the Rah-Thee might well prove the opening needed to galactic peace.

For now Nyssa had a more humble objective, namely being the object of Theron's pleasure. His devoted slave, his treasured possession.

She had seen him in so many facets over the years. They had gotten off to such a rocky start with him as her bodyguard. Her own mother had authorized him to employ spanking and domination to keep her from endangering herself.

The results were sexy and explosive. Passion was interrupted by danger from enemies. She had nearly been killed and Theron's wrath against the would-be assassins had known no bounds. In the end she knew that he loved her and that, in fact, she had been biologically programmed both to love him back and submit to him as if she were an obedient.

From there she had created a child with him. Together they had raised the precocious and strong-willed Theryssa. She had gone to the Academy and become a Guardian. On her first mission she had posed as a courier, allowing herself to be captured by Azar, the Pirate King.

The two had waged a private war in which Azar had brought about her romantic submission. In the end, Azar had taken her as mate and joined in the NARTHIAN war.

Nyssa had seen her husband through all these things, public and private. Never did she doubt his commitment to her. Never did she regret following her heart and her destiny.

The best days still lay ahead. She was sure of that. Never would there be a dull moment.

"I am...all yours," she echoed his words breathless.

"So is this infernal, teasing garment."

She held her breath, beholding him, every bit the magnificent god as when she had met him, only now with the telltale marks of age, distinctions from life's battle scars.

"You are so gorgeous," she said.

He smiled wryly in reply, half god, half wolf.

Oh how she loved him.

Love. The most powerful weapon, so it turned out, in the entire universe.

And also the most fun.

About the Author

Reese Gabriel is a born romantic with a taste for the edgier side of love. Having traveled the world and sampled many of the finer things, Reese now enjoys the greater simplicities; barefoot walks by the ocean, kisses under moonlight and whispers of passion in the darkness with that one special person.

Preferring to remain behind the scenes, cherished by a precious few, Reese hopes to awaken in the lives of many the possibilities of true love through stories of far off places and enchanted lives.

For the sake of love and hope and imagination, these stories are told. May they be enjoyed as much in the reading of them as in the writing.

Reese welcomes comments from readers. You can find Reese's website and email address on the author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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