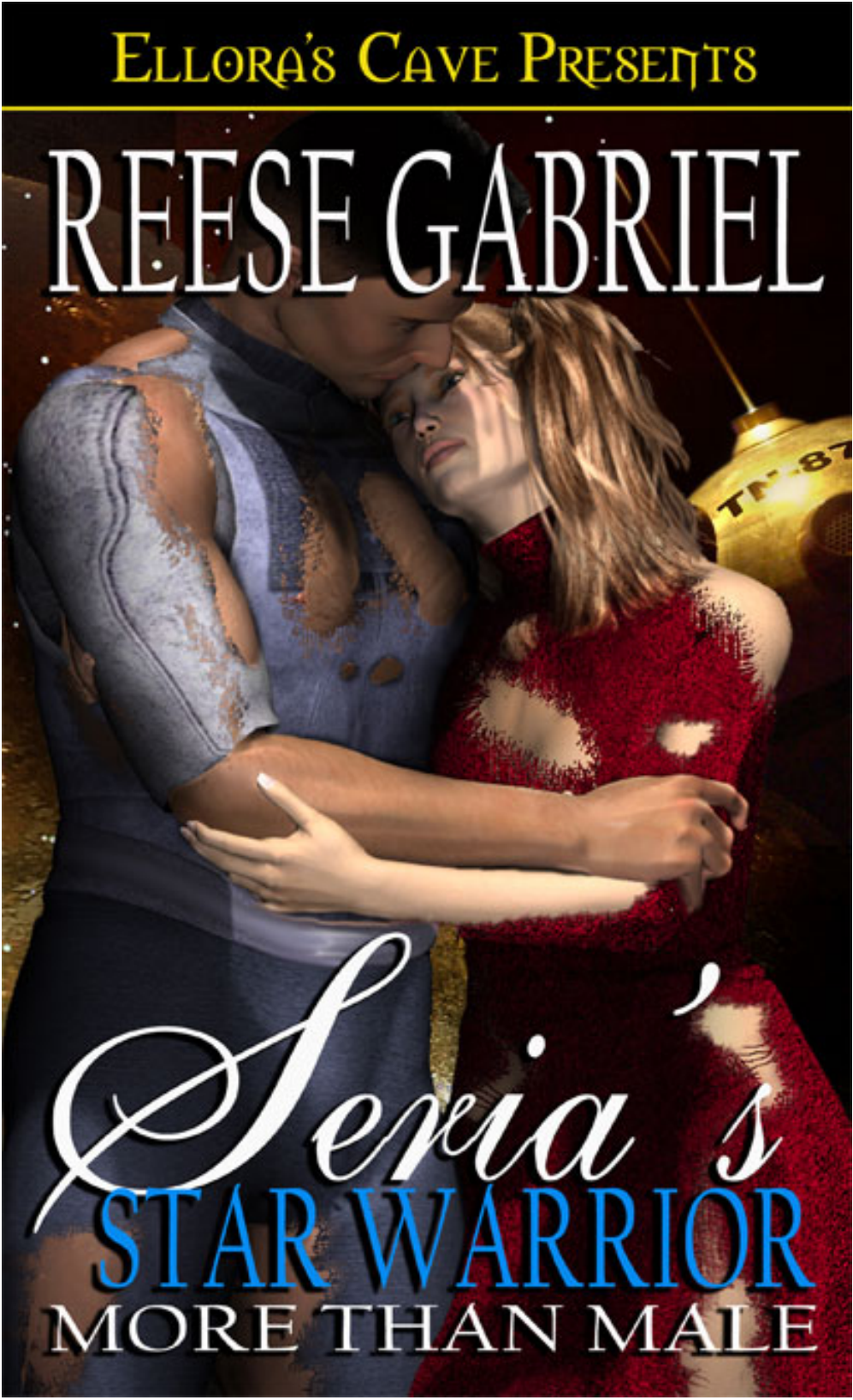


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

REESE GABRIEL



Seria's
STAR WARRIOR
MORE THAN MALE

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Seria's Star Warrior

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SERIA'S STAR WARRIOR

Reese Gabriel

Chapter One

Seria was lost the moment she saw the Guardian's image, larger than life, floating before her face in holoform. Even in a society of genetically engineered people, flawless and beautiful, the man was in a class all his own.

He was just that breathtaking and captivating in his pale blue Guardian Corps uniform, the one-piece coveralls revealing a firm, hard body with well-defined muscles, perfect-sized shoulders and a narrow waist. His eyes were hauntingly blue, a shade nearly as light as the robin's egg hue of his uniform.

"He's so..." Seria lacked the words. Her twenty-five solar passings had done nothing to prepare her for such an experience.

"He's quite a specimen," agreed the mysterious woman with the blue and yellow feathered dress and mask who had invited Seria here to this super-luxurious dwelling unit, five thousand floors up in one of the finest anti-grav cylinders under the dome of Arcos City.

Seria found her voice way too familiar. Was it off the Hologrid, maybe? Was she one of the special class of entertainers who broadcast themselves over the galactic virtual reality beams? Could that explain all the secrecy? It had all happened so fast. She had been trying to stay awake for a briefing at Diplomatic Corps Headquarters on the social customs of Borian Slime Worms, when her supervisor had handed her a digigram, requesting her presence at this unknown address.

The woman with the holostar voice was right, of course—there was no mistaking the Guardian's handsomeness, the perfect cut of his features. He was a primale, after all, part of that special class of men designed to be superior in every physical and mental aspect. But it was the intensity of his gaze, the haunting quality of his expression that caught Seria's attention.

Though he appeared to be about her own age, there was something very deep and ancient about him. Something that kept him apart from others. Had he ever been in love? she wondered.

Unlike the mems, that more easygoing, less intensely engineered type of male, primales were incapable of casual relationships. They knew only possession. One woman. For life.

The main group of females, called fems, could not bear this kind of relationship. The fems, of which Seria was one, were genetically engineered to create sexual harmony through polyamorous relationships. A different kind of woman was needed for the genetically superior primales. These were the obedient, designed for beauty...and submissiveness to their single partner whom they often addressed as Lord or Master.

Seria had mixed feelings thinking about this particular Guardian having an obedient of his own. On the one hand, it was right and fitting, because she could never be all the things a man like that needed. On the other hand, a part of her was a little jealous, thinking how she could never even have a chance to try to please such an interesting-looking man.

The idea was nonsense. Primales were only happy with complete, mindless surrender. The only way an obedient got the last word with her man was by opening her mouth to say, "Yes, Sir."

Seria's fem girlfriends all liked to make fun of primales, because they were so serious and really so naïve when it came to dealing with the deeper complexities of womanhood. A fem worth her salt would bring the toughest primale to his knees in a matter of minutes. Or so they liked to tell themselves. The way Seria saw it—the obedients these men claimed were not exactly doormats. Many a mem, for example, would try his hand at claiming one of the special little beauties only to find himself shut out in the cold. Obedients might seem weaker, but that was only because they were engineered to walk straight into the fire. Would a fem be any less consumed by such fiery male heat?

Every now and then you heard tales, tall tales, perhaps, of fems who got a little too close and ended up falling for primales. It was a sad sight to see a woman begging for something she could never have.

It was the same now, looking at this Guardian—twin impulses to either find him and bare her soul completely or else run like hell.

"You'll forgive me." Seria shook out her long, golden curls. "But I'm still not sure what all this has to do with me."

The woman's eyes smiled a little behind the mask. The look seemed more ironic than anything else. "Suppose you begin by telling me what goes through your mind when you look at Raylar." She turned off the holoïd projector.

Raylar. His name was Raylar.

"A lot of things," she tried to keep her voice steady. "Mostly I'm just trying to figure out why I'm here."

"You're here, Seria, because you've never quite fit in. Never been like your fem girlfriends. Relationships mean more to you. You want to please men, too, don't you, in ways they don't understand?"

She didn't do a very good job of hiding her shock. "Who are you?" she demanded. "You don't know me. Not at all."

"I'm someone who cares. You needn't be embarrassed," the woman soothed. "Have you ever heard the story of the ugly duckling?"

"No," Seria said, reeling.

The woman was right about her, absolutely right. She was far too weak-kneed for a fem. Males got to her. They did things to her belly that took away her strength. Dealing

with regular males, the garden-variety mems were hard enough, but the few times she had crossed paths with a primale, she had suffered near meltdowns. Her girlfriends—engineered with one-hundred-percent fem blood—were able to laugh it off. Sure, they wanted to go to bed with the primales—as if any female in existence could resist the appeal of a sub-gender of human male bred for super strength, desirability and beauty—but they hadn't been drawn like moths to a flame.

Behind Seria's own joining laughter was pain, and a good deal of confusion.

"A mother duck has a brood of ducklings," the woman explained. "One doesn't quite fit in. Always a half-step behind, never quite on key. Then one day it finds out why—it's not really a duck at all, but a swan."

Seria blinked, still thinking about Raylar, wondering if she could do anything for him, to ease that pain in his eyes.

There it was again, the desire to soothe and please, to know him to his core, to let him touch her own, just like always, only more so—so much so that she could barely contain her whirling emotions. Comets and stars, was she falling in love...with a holoïd?

"You, Seria, are a beautiful swan. A creature totally unique in the world. A work of genetic art, half fem...and half obedient."

Seria snapped from her dreamy passions. Surely she had misheard? "No one can be...half anything," she gasped, unable to imagine such an act of social sacrilege. "The sub-genders were designed pure."

"Ordinarily, yes," the woman agreed. She was obviously beautiful, with her silver sandals, legs crossed on the hover couch. Seria felt awkward and ugly by comparison in her own plasticite chair. "The Council made an exception in your case. Your genes come not from the harvest pool but from two specific donors."

Seria had to get out of here. The woman was mad, she had to be. "I've listened to all I care to," she declared.

Before she could make a move to leave, the woman took off her mask. Seria's jaw dropped. It was Nyssa. Not just a holostar, but also the newly named Head of the Council. If anyone could be in a position to know of the Council's secret activities, it was she.

So it must be true. All of it...

Seria tried to keep her voice steady. "If I believe you then that makes me a freak. The victim of some kind of a horrible joke on the Council's part."

"Not a freak." The beautiful Nyssa shook her head. "A new kind of human being. An experiment, yes. But hardly a joke. The basic idea, Seria, is to create new types of people, individuals whose DNA comes from the intermix of two specific genetic parents, and not a general formula."

This was the topper. "What do you mean genetic parents?" she demanded. "Are you talking about some kind of...of *natural* birth?"

The very idea that she could have been fertilized in the body of a woman and delivered like some kind of animal in this day and age was beyond disgusting.

Nyssa, her hair short and straight and neon blue, shook her head. She had blue eyes to match her hair and pink highlights in her bangs. "No, you were grown in a lab like everyone else, don't worry. It's just that your DNA was chosen deliberately so as to create a hybrid offspring. In your case, you had an obedient mother and a primale father. The resulting balance makes you most similar to a fem, though you have some submissive tendencies, too. Perhaps you have already discovered this for yourself."

Now there was an understatement.

The reality slammed Seria hard as she thought of how hard her life had really been when it came to the opposite sex, how dangerous it was for her to be kissed or touched by males. Even the look of a man upon her could stir the deepest feelings and needs, a desire to bond with him, to find his deepest heart—to belong to him. Seria's friends had rolled their eyes at how dramatic she seemed to be and how easily she became entranced. Most of the mems in her cluster became afraid to date her, claiming she was too intense. They just wanted to have fun—she was looking for much more.

Seria had never been able to figure out what was wrong with her. Everyone else seemed to handle the aspects of sex-making so easily, moving blithely from partner to partner. But once she became interested in a mem, she wanted to be with him exclusively, until she lost all sight of reality. Sadly, there had been mems who had taken advantage, allowing her to pour endless amounts of love and attention on them while they had happily continued their polyamorous ways, so she had never been able to commit to the sex-making. To experience what everyone else had taken for granted.

That was the thing—fems and mems were engineered to love multiple people, to spread sex-making wherever they went. Seria, by contrast, had always been obsessed with finding just one all-consuming relationship. Having never found it, and upon reaching the age of twenty-five this year, she had made a decision. Since the only men who took women monogamously were primales, and since they basically took their women as slaves, she would no longer pursue that elusive dream. She was left with only one possibility.

Celibacy.

Which is why she'd made the decision to sign up for the Diplomatic Corps. Three years schooling followed by one year of protocol work at Headquarters. Nothing really exciting yet, but these things took time. She had a bright career ahead of her, by all accounts. Only now she wondered if there was much point to anything. She scarcely knew who she was anymore, much less what her life's goals should be. "If it's all the same to you," she said, "I'd like to go now. I need to spend some time...thinking."

"Of course," said Nyssa. "But there are a couple more things you should know first."

Wonderful, thought Nyssa glumly. As if enough damage hadn't been done already.

"I didn't drop this bombshell on you with the intention of leaving you to deal with it alone, Seria. As it so happens, there is an added side benefit—if you could call it that—of having individual progenitors. You, my dear, have an actual biological family. Beginning with me. Your elder sister. By five solar passings."

Seria stared blankly. The concept was so foreign. She tried to compare it to the notion of being related to her girlfriends in their common cluster. It was like a family, but there were no blood ties. Everyone's genes came from the computer. "My...sister?"

"I was as surprised as you are, trust me. Technically, we are half-sisters. We share the genes of Morax, the former Commander of the Guardians. My mother is Dekalia, recently retired Head of the Council. As you probably know, my mate Theron is the new Commander."

Seria did know this. The fact that a primale would take a fem for a lifemate, and that a fem would agree to such a thing, had astounded everyone.

"I am half-fem, half-primale. I'm designed for leadership. You—you have a different destiny."

"But wait!" Seria exclaimed. "Who is my mother?"

Nyssa's lovely features grew troubled for a moment. "I'm sorry to tell you, Seria, your mother is no longer alive."

Seria felt a lump in her throat, suddenly mourning the life of a woman she never knew. "But she couldn't have been that old..."

"No," Nyssa agreed. "She wasn't. She died of a broken heart, to put it bluntly. I wish I could tell you more. In time it will all be clear. I promise. For the moment, I have to talk to you about the Guardian in the holoïd."

"Raylar."

"Yes, Raylar."

Seria braced herself. "Don't tell me he's our brother?"

Nyssa laughed. "Oh, stars, no. Not by a long shot. Although you were worried he might be off-limits, weren't you?"

Seria flushed red. "Is it that obvious?"

"It's written all over your face, actually."

"I never have been good at playing it cool," Seria sighed.

"That's the obedient in you," Nyssa reminded. "It's a charming characteristic, especially mixed with your fem spunkiness."

"I always thought it a curse," Seria mused.

"That's ugly duckling talk. You're the swan, remember? And Raylar, by the way, to borrow another old story, is your prince."

Seria's blood surged. "My...prince?"

"Raylar is your lifemate," she confirmed as though the information were quite matter-of-fact. "You belong to him. Soul and spirit...and body."

Her nipples tented under the loose silver top. She shifted on the seat, the heat building between her thighs. "But I don't even know him."

"That doesn't matter. The Council stacks the deck for us hybrids. We are designed ahead of time with mates, like pairs of shoes. That's part of what makes us strong. That and the DNA pairing that occurs in our own offspring. We are even experimenting with having direct contact and influence over our progeny to further the effect of hybridization. Theron and I are quite involved in the life of Theryssa, our five-year-old daughter, for instance."

By the stars—now there were children being raised outside of clusters? *Biological* children? Seria was trying her best to absorb it all. The holoïd, the sister she never imagined having, their little girl, not to mention the biggie—the idea of her producing genetic reproductions with a primale, their DNA in exclusive combination, like the animal kingdom. And not just with any primale, but with one who was destined to be her lifemate.

"Your own daughter," Seria said, her voice a little strained. "You must be very proud."

"We are, thank you. Theryssa is quite a handful, but rather adorable just the same. You'll have to meet her. She is, if I recall the term from the historical lexicon, your niece."

"Yes...thank you." There was one question in all of this that begged to be asked. "Nyssa?" she ventured.

"Yes, Seria."

"Does he know?"

Nyssa pursed her lips. Her brow wrinkled a little. Damned if she didn't do that herself from time to time, in just the same way. Was that a trait of their father's? "Raylar is not, in our opinion, in a good position to hear the truth, start to finish."

Like Seria was?

"So when *will* he be told? Before the wedding, I hope."

Nyssa smiled wryly, presumably appreciating the wit of her little sister. She was so gorgeous, thought Seria. Maybe she ought to be jealous?

"That's where you come in, Seria. We are rather hoping you will be able to convince the man on your own that you are the one for him."

Seria laughed. "You can't be serious? I can scarcely accept it myself."

"You will. You both will. I saw how you reacted to the holoïd. He makes you wet, doesn't he? He's under your skin already. And I promise you it won't get any better. I know. I went through this with my husband. You're already Raylar's, and he is yours."

Seria drew a breath, trying not to think of Raylar in the flesh, his hand reaching to touch her, his lips uttering the magic words "You are mine". How would her body respond? His image alone managed to so unnerve her. She pushed the possibilities back in her brain. It was too much to think of. "No offense, Your Honor, I'm not sure you

have the right to make anything happen between us. Just because we were engineered and manipulated does not make us robots or slaves.”

“Please, call me Nyssa. Yes, what you say is true. But you are both under Council orders, you by virtue of your pledge to the Diplomat Corps and him by his oath to the Guardians. Call it unfair, call it what you like, we intend to engineer your lives one more time, putting you both in a confined situation which will lead to your making sex, frequently and steamily. This will result in bonding. And life mating.”

Seria couldn’t believe it. A half-hour having an honest-to-goodness sister and already she hated her. “I won’t do it,” she fumed.

“You won’t have a choice, Seria. You’re not programmed to resist such a serious command, even with your partial nature. Besides, this is a matter of galactic security. Raylar is being groomed to lead the next war against the Narthians. He has just twenty-six solar passings, but he has been given special genes that will make him a warrior as great as or greater than my husband, who at thirty-eight solars is looking to retire from combat. But Raylar is brooding at the moment, blaming himself for the death of some of the men under his command. The fact that what happened was not his fault and that he defended the rest of them, saving them against overwhelming odds, consoles him not at all. Unless he has the love of his woman to sustain him, he will fall into depression, or worse, into treachery.”

Nyssa’s words rendered an invisible swath across Seria’s heart. So that was it—she knew she had seen something in Raylar’s face. He had held life and death in his hands. He had faced the impossible. And lost. But it was more than just what Nyssa was talking about. There was something else troubling the man’s soul, something she could not put her finger on. She wasn’t sure even Raylar himself knew what it was, but there was no mistaking its reality.

All of a sudden, backing away was not an option for Seria. She didn’t think it was her genetics compelling her into service, or even her own patriotism, truth be told. Rather it was him. A man she already knew without knowing. Whose true soul and spirit, she believed, were hidden behind an expression of worry and self-blame.

She had to go to him, help him. The only question was, what did the Council have in mind? What sort of mission required repeated steamy sex-making? It sounded contrived to her, not to mention a good recipe for disaster. Even assuming she held up through the command performances, how would he react? A man like that would not take well to being cornered, or forced to make sex with any half-breed obedient.

Then there was the deeper problem of what to do if she actually succeeded? Suppose he did want to make her his forever? Then what?

“Let’s say I did agree,” Seria ventured. “And let’s say you make Raylar do this...this thing with me—whatever you have in mind. What’s to stop him from just rejecting me? No matter what genetics you gave him, he is a primale. One look at him tells you how strong his will is. He would die first.”

Nyssa smiled. "Your view of him is already colored by passion and personal devotion. That's a good thing," she said approvingly. "But you needn't fear. Your sexual submission will work its charms on him. Once you have given yourself over to his power and mastery, completely and helplessly, body and soul, he will not have it in his heart to reject or betray you. He will stand by you. Until his dying breath."

Seria felt the crimson burning up and down her chest. "You speak as if it's a certainty," she balked, "and yet you only just met me."

"In one sense, yes, I have only just met you," Nyssa agreed. "But in another sense, I have always known you. I see parts of myself in you. And this Raylar of yours, I have met him a few times and he is my husband all over again. Trust me, woman, you are about to be drowning in a sea of testosterone...and loving every minute of it."

Seria still wasn't sure. "It's just so much to absorb. There's so much I don't understand. This situation, as you call it, that we are going to be put into. What is that all about? You do realize, don't you that I am scheduled to take a posting on Alphas Six, as Assistant Ambassador?"

Nyssa nodded. "I know, you are leaving tomorrow. Raylar has been assigned to take you there, as your military escort. That is all he will know. It will be your responsibility to take advantage of your opportunities."

Seria's sex pulsed. "You mean seduce him," she said flatly.

Nyssa winked. "Just think of it as doing what comes naturally."

Tempting a primale into sex? That wasn't "natural". That was like considering jumping into a slag hole full of NARTHIAN egg bearers. Down right dangerous.

"He won't like having to do this," Seria predicted.

"No, he will hate it," Nyssa agreed. "That will make things all the more challenging for you."

Seria sucked on her lower lip. Her confusion and doubt and indignation were giving way to another emotion, far more primal. She fought it hard, for what it represented – not strength and fem independence, but obedient dependence. "Nyssa?"

"Yes, Seria?"

"What if..." She steeled her courage to make the hardest statement of her life. "What if I can't do it right?"

"Do what right?"

"You know," she hedged, "the submission part. What if I can't make him want me? A man like Raylar could have any submissive he wanted. Or a hologrid star, for that matter."

"Oh, sweetie," Nyssa cooed, sounding more like a mother than a sister. "How could he not want you? One look at you and he will be slain. Don't you realize how lovely you are?"

"Not exactly."

Nyssa laughed. "Well, you are. You are positively gorgeous, though you don't seem to know it. I promise you, he will be hard as a rock the moment he sees you. And once he tastes you, he will be hooked forever."

Seria lost eye contact. She focused on her bare, sandaled feet, which were now as red with embarrassment as the rest of her.

"There!" exclaimed Nyssa. "That's the expression we want. Approach him with that look on your face and he will never want another woman again as long as he lives."

Good, she thought. Raylar didn't need to want other women. He needed to want and pursue her. Wait a minute, though. By the Moons of Vega, what was she really saying? If he put his mark upon her and claimed her that would satisfy her obedient side, yes, but what about her fem side? Wouldn't that entail an inevitable backlash and rebellion on her part?

Presumably time would tell. That's how it went with impossible government missions. Or so her teachers at the Diplomatic Academy had warned her. It's just that she hadn't expected hers to be quite so...personal.

The Diplo Corps was supposed to get her away from sex, not get her thrown headlong into it. With a sexy as hell, downright irresistible primale no less.

"Yes, I'll do it," said Seria, though she hadn't a clue what she was agreeing to.

"That's the spirit. I guarantee, Seria, you won't be disappointed."

Disappointed? No. Devastated – that was another story.

"Thanks," Seria managed to say.

Nyssa breathed deeply. "Well, that's a relief. Now, do you still want to go, or would you like to come with me and meet the rest of our family first...such as it is?"

A relief for one of us, thought Seria, pasting on a smile. "I'd like that, yes."

Nyssa took her hand, pulling her close for a hug. "Oh, I know I am being too pushy. And you probably hate me by now, for what I'm telling you, and for not telling you sooner. Just know that the Council and our father kept our identities secret for reasons he felt were valid. I only learned who I was a few years ago, when I was close to your age. I only discovered you existed a week ago."

"It's okay," Seria assured her.

Nyssa laughed. "You're lying through your teeth, and you're sweet to do so. Just trust me, if you hang in there, it will get easier."

Seria didn't see how it could, but she had no alternative but to trust Nyssa. She was family. Whatever that meant.

* * * * *

Raylar frowned at the invitation to sit down. It was his preference to remain standing at attention in the presence of the Guardian Commander.

"Sit," Theron repeated more firmly. "That's an order."

Raylar obeyed, conforming his body to fit the austere, thinly upholstered olive green seat in front of the Commander's desk. Raylar was a well-built man, six feet, two inches tall and extraordinarily fit, even by primale standards. He maintained himself in top form through a regime of extreme discipline. When at all possible, he slept on the floor, ate simple, uncooked foods and maintained a regimen of six hours a day of exercise, in addition to his already demanding daily routine. To his way of thinking a soldier was never truly off duty, but should be in a state of combat readiness at all times.

He had always been this way, but he was even more so now, following his experience on Rensus Nine. He was technically in post-combat restorative period, and while he was meticulous in following all the required programs and procedures, he took the liberty of filling every free moment with hard discipline. The psycho-combat doctors had urged him to rest more, to play, but with all due respect to their profession, none of them had been there that fateful dawn on Rensus Nine to see what these new Bug Hordes could do. How they could obliterate a young officer's command, taking down a dozen fine men with a single spray of their hideous poison juices.

In short, no one in the history of the Guardians had experienced quite the failure and agony that Raylar had. Losing his men in the field was only the beginning. The pain stayed and ate at him. Though they were Special Forces and therefore had no lifemates to bring the news to, still, all felt their loss. The entire Corps had suffered. Because of his errors in judgment.

"So," the General began, laying his palms flat on the clear surface of the plasticite desk, "Colonel Mazrat informs me you have kept yourself...occupied during your restorative period?"

"Yes, Sir." Raylar noted the careful choice of words. Mazrat had probably passed along the reports of the therapists, chiding Raylar for not letting his guard down, for remaining so much on edge. "Sir, permission to speak freely?"

"Certainly."

"I am already fully restored, Sir. I know myself better than any doctors or therapists. I would like to be returned to the front. As soon as possible."

Theron studied him, his expression unreadable. The General was a good man and a fine soldier. He was obviously making the best of having to sit behind a desk and tend to administrative duties. Raylar admired him all the more because he did it from sheer duty.

"You do know, Lieutenant Raylar that the post-combat restoration program is an injunction directly from the Council? All Guardians must participate. You are only halfway through your scheduled time."

"Yes, Sir." The General's wife was head of that body. Raylar did not envy the man having to balance the responsibilities of running the Corps and submitting to the authority of his own lifemate. There were some among the Guardians who questioned

why the General was mated to a fem in the first place. They did not understand why he had not taken an obedient, to serve and delight him and make his life easier.

Raylar was not among them. In his opinion, it was contrary to the principles of the Corps to question the wisdom and judgment of a superior, except under grave life-and-death circumstances, and even then there were procedures to be followed, by which a man might be relieved of command.

Theron exhaled, steepling his fingers. "I know you are frustrated with having to wait to go back to the battlefield. Frankly, as a soldier, I do not appreciate the delays myself at times. But I recognize the Council's wisdom. They take things into consideration that we cannot. Certain aspects of psychological functioning and so on. The bottom line is we are not a military dictatorship, Raylar. We take our orders, too."

"Understood, Sir."

The General was pursing his lips, like he wanted to say something else, something harder and more personal. "Raylar, your commanding officer has reported to me that you have refused to accept the Star Cluster for your heroism on Rensus Nine."

"Yes, Sir."

"Would you mind telling me why?"

"I don't deserve it, Sir. I lost twelve men. Fifteen more wounded. I led us straight into a Narthian ambush."

"You also saved fifty more. Including the fifteen wounded you pulled one by one from the bug nets, facing a constant barrage of fire."

"I did my duty. Too little too late."

The General leaned back in his seat. Despite the relaxed position, it was obvious he was a man of great strength and power. "So you question the judgment of your superiors in giving you this recognition?"

Raylar tensed. He hadn't seen it that way. "Sir, I meant no disobedience. I only sought to not dishonor the Corps any further."

The General sighed. "Son," he addressed him, "I am not insensitive to what you feel. But I am going to remind you of some things, and they will not be pleasant to hear."

"Yes, Sir." *Good. The more unpleasant the better.*

"You are not the first officer to lose men. I don't have to tell you that. Can you imagine what would happen if they all reacted as you have? Pulling into yourself, displaying stubbornness bordering on insubordination? The fact is, officers sent back out too soon, officers with chips on their shoulders, officers with too much too prove are useless officers. There isn't room for ego in the Corps. You're a perfectionist, Raylar, and that's as bad or worse as being a slacker."

"Is it perfectionism to want to keep my men alive?" The words came out of Raylar's usually guarded mouth before he could stop them.

Theron's response gave good evidence he was Commander and not Raylar. "No," he said evenly, not reacting to the younger man's sudden anger. "Perfectionism is trying to turn yourself into some kind of wooden idol instead of learning to accept and work with your inevitable imperfections as a human being. When your men are under fire, they must turn to the real you, and they must know you well—good and bad. Otherwise they will never trust or respect you."

Raylar felt warm with shame. "Forgive me, Sir."

"Apologies aren't necessary. Being a goddamn pain in the ass perfectionist is part of what makes you who you are. Tempered, your character will make you a fine soldier. Far better than you can even imagine yourself capable. That's the other problem with perfectionism. It is the surest way to prevent actual growth."

Raylar's admiration for the man only grew. "I think I understand, Sir. I will work on this. With every ounce of my strength."

The General laughed. Seeing Raylar's concern, he said, "Don't worry, I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing at me, about ten years ago."

"Yes, Sir."

"Raylar," he smiled, "I'm prepared to make you an offer. I think it's one any Guardian officer would relish."

"Sir?" Raylar was wary because frequently the treats enjoyed by others proved tedious to him.

"How would you like to get out of restoration limbo and back on active duty? Not combat, but vital nonetheless?"

"Sir," he sought to contain himself, "anything, Sir."

"It involves escort duty. For the Diplomatic Corps."

"Yes, Sir." Raylar wasn't thrilled with diplomats, but he'd take a bunch of gray-haired eggheads over another hour in therapy any day. "I would be honored. Is it the new delegation to Sarsus?"

"Alphus Six, actually. You'll be escorting a special envoy to the embassy there. We'll outfit a small cruiser for you. A two-seater."

"Alphus Six?" There couldn't be a more remote, unknown point. Nothing of any cosmic consequence had ever happened there and likely never would. As far as he was concerned, the native intelligence on the planet, in the form of sentient fungi, hardly qualified as life at all. Basically, it was an embassy for rock collectors and frustrated biologists who enjoyed talking to rotted plant matter. "I wasn't aware there was any pending diplomatic activity on that planet, Sir," he noted dryly.

"You'd have to ask the Diplomatic Corps," he shrugged. "Apparently there is a message of some sort to be delivered there, in person. Here's the diplomat you'll be escorting, by the way."

Raylar looked to the right. The wall disappeared, transforming itself into a three-dimensional image of a blonde woman in her mid-twenties, wearing a low-cut formal

turquoise gown, sewn with miniature sparkling crystals. The gown hugged her narrow waist and accented her perfectly proportioned hips. Not to mention what it did for her bosom.

"Sir, *this* is the diplomat?" he questioned, his pulse racing.

"That's correct."

"But she's female."

"You noticed that as well?" quipped the General. "Indeed she is. And a rather well put together one, don't you think? Her name, incidentally, is Seria. She has no mating attachments and she's into health foods and exercise like you."

"Sir, surely there is some kind of mistake here?"

"A mistake?" said Theron innocently. "What sort of mistake?"

"Sir, you can't possibly mean for me to travel through deep space alone with...with a *female*?"

"Why not, my good man? She's had her shots."

Incredible! The General was making light of it. As if this weren't a violation of a half dozen Guardian Corps regulations, at least. "Sir, I respectfully remind you of Section Eight of the Code, forbidding prolonged, possibly stimulatory contact between active duty personnel and—"

"I know the regulations, son. I helped write them."

Raylar shifted in his seat. There was no getting around what he had to say next. "Sir, permission to speak freely once again?"

"Granted."

"Sir, I must recuse myself from this mission, regulations or not."

"Why is that, Lieutenant?"

"Because," he managed with as much dignity as possible. "I find her attractive. In a...physical way."

"You'd like to make sex with her?"

Raylar's primale cock was awakening from a very long slumber, in spite of his best efforts to keep it at bay. He was known as the Iron Monk by his comrades for his ability to resist sexual urges, but this little honey-haired blonde, with her bright eyes, perky smile, expressive lips and button nose, the way she carried herself so gracefully, yet confidently, the very epitome of femininity in his estimation—might change that. Who was she? She had to be fem to be in the Diplo Corps but he had never before found a fem even remotely attractive.

"Lieutenant, I asked you a question."

"Yes," replied Raylar, responding stiffly to his superior, "I would."

"You're afraid you'd fuck her in deep space, is that it?"

By the Code—what had gotten into the General? This was hardly the way for a man of his station to speak. Still, there was no evading the truth of his words. Yes, he was

afraid of precisely that. "Sir, things happen to a man's mind out there, you know that. Inhibitions are lowered. Judgment can be impaired in the middle of all that blackness, so far from Earth."

Theron inclined his head. "Fair enough. Suppose I told you, though, that the Corps would look the other way? That whatever happened consensually between you and this Seria would never be held against you? That it would be considered part of your restorative therapy?"

"Sex-making with a *fem*? While on duty?" Raylar attempted to keep his voice steady. This couldn't be any more wrong. Under no circumstances should a primale touch a fem, much less when both were in service. "Sir, is this some kind of a test? To see if I am worthy to stay in the Strike Force? Because if that's the case, I can assure you I am committed to maintaining the required celibacy."

"I don't doubt your commitment, son. But celibacy isn't right for everyone. Especially not for commanders and generals. Great warriors need women. Mates to go home to."

Raylar's confusion continued to mount. He was anything but a great warrior. "Are you ordering me to mate, Sir? Am I being transferred from the Strike Force? If so, than why do you not send me for an obedient?"

"Slow down, Raylar. Your mind is racing too far ahead. All I am saying is that I want you to let nature take its course. If Seria does nothing for you, then there is no harm. But if you do feel something, if you find someone to be happy with, what loss can that be?"

"Sir," he pleaded, "I already feel things. Inappropriate things."

"I'll bet you do." He smiled. "Ah, to be young as you again, Raylar. I can tell you the things I would do to Seria in your place. I would sweep her right off those pretty feet of hers. I'd make love to her like there was no tomorrow until she couldn't even think the name of another male. She's something special, son. I've met her. She's sweet, smart as a whip, loyal as hell. Has a lot in common with my lifemate, actually."

Raylar's eyes kept drifting back to the holo. Life-size, perfect, and sexually appealing. Just the kind of body he'd always had a weakness for. Willowy, lush, but not too lush. Shapely, but lean at the same time. And fit—she looked very fit. Like she could make sex for hours at a time. Or run through a jungle, nude, the dew and sweat collecting on her perfect skin. He'd always had that fantasy, of tracking down a female for capture and sex. Running her to the point of collapse, or wrestling her to the ground, pinning her panting body underneath his.

His primale eyes and primale erection letting her know he meant business. One word on his lips.

Submit.

His pretty, naked capture, spreading her legs, wet and ready to take him, on his terms...for their mutual pleasure.

"Sir, I really don't think I'm right for this."

"I think you're perfect, Lieutenant." The General's tone brooked no argument. "You will leave in the morning. You may consider Seria formally in your charge, as of this moment."

His cock throbbed at the possibilities. "In my charge? Now?"

"That's what I said. She will be meeting you in the lounge of the Comestitorium, along with Nyssa. I'll join you presently. They will be late of course because they're women. We'll all have dinner and then you will take Seria out dancing on your own, show her a nice time. A room has been reserved for you in Cylinder Prime. You'll leave from there first thing tomorrow morning for the rocket port. Any questions?"

Yes, he felt like replying. *Why are you suddenly acting like a sorry version of a primale matchmaking robot instead of a Guardian?*

"No questions, Sir."

"Good. You may consider yourself dismissed."

Raylar saluted crisply and spun on his heel. He was grateful for this simple action to perform, rote and military and predictable. So unlike the situation he was about to be plunged into.

"Lieutenant, one more thing."

Raylar spun back around at the door, at attention. "Sir?"

"You'll have fun with Seria, but when it comes to the mission, you're in charge. You're security liaison. She takes orders from you, start to finish."

He tried to imagine a fem taking orders. Never mind, the General had said his piece—the rest was Raylar's problem. "Yes, Sir."

"And you have my permission to do what you need to enforce that."

"Sir?"

"She's a woman, Raylar, use your imagination."

"I prefer not to, Sir. It gets me in trouble."

"Blast it, man, must I spell everything out for you?" the General growled, his eyes still lit with a sparkle of mischief. "If the lassie gets out of hand, you put her over your knee."

Spanking. He was talking about spanking an officer of the Diplomatic Corps.

"Ten or so good smacks will get a woman in line. Works wonders on my Nyssa—makes her hot as hell, too, but I'll have you court-martialed if you repeat that to a living soul, got it?"

"No, Sir. I mean yes, Sir."

This was a dream, that was it. Any minute he would wake up on his bunk at the restorative center, fresh and ready for a ten-mile cyber resistance run.

There wasn't only the dream of the crazy General to contend with, though. There was the other dream, centered on that holoïd, smiling at him from where the wall was

supposed to be. The image of beautiful Seria, whom he would soon meet in the flesh, and who would soon be in his charge. Under his command and subject to his discipline.

Sexually available, too, if he could manage her seduction.

How easy was the General making this? He was practically ordering him to make sex with her, throwing in every kind of tantalizing enticement. Her ass, no doubt as gorgeous as the rest of her, literally was his. If she did not conform to mission requirements, as he defined them, she would find it reddened, and promptly.

He would spank her until she said she was sorry and promised to do better.

Seria...over his knee, his hard-on raging, pushing up against her pelvis, letting her know of his power and his desire. Ten strokes, the General had said. She would probably beg him to stop before then. She would squirm. That would feel good. Athletic Seria, lean and healthy, a good, fit woman, finding her place. Under his hand.

I'm sorry, Raylar. I'll try to do better.

Those sweet lips, offering a humble apology. Would he dare to order her to kiss him? Primales were magnets for women's lips. She wouldn't resist him. That was a fact, not a boast. Fem or not, he could have her. The question was why? Was he supposed to find happiness with a woman who could be his equal or superior?

His cock was going in and out of her hot, open sex in his mind. Seria was moaning to him, and none of the rest mattered. His teeth were sunk into one of those nipples, hidden under that turquoise, slinky dress. What would she sound like in orgasm? Better even than she would sound being punished.

"All right, then," Theron nodded, "off with you. Your woman is waiting. And put on something appropriate, like your dress uniform."

"Yes, Sir." *His* woman. What was the General saying? And why did he feel like he had just been hit by an iceberg—a conversation where only ten percent of what was really going on was actually being said?

Here he had been summoned for what he'd thought was a simple debriefing with the CO on the new Narthian weapons and instead he would be playing babysitter to a female diplomat and going to dinner with the Head of the Council.

Talk about a strange turn of events.

Things had gotten so strange, in fact, that he was beginning to wonder if he wouldn't be better off back in therapy with the nagging doctors at restorative care.

Then again, he could look at all this as punishment—part of what he deserved for being such a poor officer. Even worse than he'd imagined, according to the General.

But the General didn't want him punished. He wanted him having a good time. With a blonde named Seria who had managed to do something no other woman ever had. Namely give him a full erection without physical contact.

And in a meeting with the highest of his bosses, too.

That might not be the stuff lifemating was made of, but it sure promised some good times in bed. If he actually got her that far without taking her.

Maybe he would get lucky and the holoïd would prove old or out of focus. Maybe she would look like a Narthian queen up close.

Yeah, and maybe primales would learn to beg their women for sex instead of seducing them with utter dominance.

Either one was a complete and utter impossibility.

By the Code, he prayed to the ancient Spirit of the Guardians, let me get through this mission alive. And back to the battlefield. Where I belong.

Chapter Two

Seria felt naked in the ruby gown. She was not entirely sure it would even be legal in every star system. With every breath she feared the crossed swaths of material that constituted the front of the thing would slip to the sides, exposing her breasts. There were also the slits to be considered, and the plunging back that exposed her nearly to the buttocks.

"Now *that* will make Raylar sit up and take notice," Nyssa approved as her newfound sister emerged for the tenth time from the auto-dresser.

So far Nyssa had rejected every outfit she had chosen for herself out of the dressmaking machine, claiming it was too "blah" or too "camp", or too something else. Finally she had gotten Seria to agree to let her design one and this was the scandalous result.

It would never do. Clearly it was too sexy, and therefore far too dangerous to wear around a primale. Red-blooded and single.

"What do you think?" Nyssa asked, as Seria looked herself up and down in the mirror.

Seria turned redder than the gown at the sight of her own reflection. What kind of woman would Raylar think she was? He might think she wanted to please him with her figure, or even entice him into sex-making with his hard, muscular, perfect primale body.

"What I think, Nyssa, is that I am going to change again or else have the machine make a wrap to go over this."

"Where's your sense of adventure?" Nyssa pouted.

"I don't have any. I'm in the Diplomatic Corps. We do things by the holobook, remember? I don't see why I can't just wear my dress uniform, anyway."

"Stop being such a prude, sis. You're not trying to wow him with career skills, you're supposed to be making him want to have you naked at his feet, your hair balled up in his fist—a hot, needy little obedient."

"That's a disgusting image," said Seria, though it made her pussy warm and tingly and turned her spine to mush nonetheless. "Besides, I'm only half obedient, so we definitely don't want to go getting the man too riled up."

Nyssa re-crossed her legs over on the nearby grooming seat, allowing the small pedicure robot access to the toes of her other foot. "Don't we, sis? So you can honestly tell me it doesn't arouse you to think of Raylar so out of his mind with desire for you that he pushes you against a wall, rips that fabulous rag off your trembling body and has his way with you, right there in the restaurant?"

Seria's pussy clenched. She was overcome with a wave of pleasure so intense it was as if Raylar had his hands all over her, imprinting, marking. Owing. Hastily, she scooted back under the dome of the machine and ordered a wrap to cover her trembling skin under the provocative garment.

"And don't think a primale wouldn't do it," warned Nyssa when she came back out. "I may rule the Council, but Theron rules my body. To love he must own and when he wants me, I am his. Anytime, anywhere. Raylar will be no different. In bed you'll be his slave, Seria, so you might as well get used to it. But it's worth it, trust me. The way he will look at you, the way he will touch and possess. He will revere you, cherish you, and oh, stars, will he turn you on. I resisted the full depth of primale treatment at first, but my man broke me down. Trained me. I know, it sounds animalistic. But trust me, on the other side of your shattered pride, in the heat of your sexual humiliation there is an ecstasy beyond words, like all your deepest fantasies come to life as he makes you feel like the only woman in the galaxy. The only one he's chaining and disciplining, anyway."

"Disciplining?" Seria's cheeks turned a shade paler, inducing the miniature hovering makeup robot to spray on a little more rouge.

Nyssa laughed. She had two drinks in her hands, rainbow sparklers—a whirl of bubbly colors in fluted glasses. "Primals are hands-on with their women, sis." She handed Seria one of the flavorful, intoxicating beverages—something Seria desperately needed. "I can argue until the cows come home and sometimes I win, but when it comes to matters in our personal sphere, my hubby won't hesitate to take me over his knee. I've been paddled and caned on occasion, too, but that's pretty rare. Still, I know he won't hesitate if he thinks I deserve it."

Seria's jaw dropped. The fluted glass nearly went with it. "But that's...so demeaning for a woman in your place."

Nyssa offered a catlike grin. "I know. And it turns me on like hell. He takes advantage of that, too, the rogue. He's really a big pussycat, but all he has to do is say my name in that certain tone of voice, and I'm totally helpless, space putty in his hands. I know he's gone totally primale on me and there's nothing to do but obey the man completely and perfectly and hope he will give me relief without teasing me too terribly first."

Seria gulped down her drink and pushed images of herself submitting to Raylar from her mind. She hadn't even met the man. She didn't even know what he looked like in person or what it might be like to shake his hand. How could she think about having to obey him as his sexual possession—cherished and adored, but still owned nonetheless? What if she didn't want to be taken anytime or anywhere? What if she didn't want to have to be accountable to his will? What if she couldn't bear to be spanked, or stars forbid, paddled?

Never mind that she was practically squirming thinking about Raylar having that kind of power over her and wanting her so much as to accept nothing less than her ownership.

Something occurred to her. "Nyssa, you have primale blood. Doesn't that make it hard for you to be in the role of sexual obedient?"

"It makes me fight harder, sure. Theron loves the challenge. He also says it makes it ten times sweeter when he conquers me. And it's something he gets to do again and again, too. I'd be lying if I said I didn't love it. Drives me right out of my mind. The most excruciating thing is when he tells me ahead of time what he's going to do. Like when we're sitting or standing there, engaged in some high-level meeting or negotiation and he will lean over and whisper in my ear that in half an hour I am going to be naked, bound and on my knees sucking his mammoth erection. I know how much he wants it, and how he loves that power and I just get off on it. And stars, if he ever says what he intends to do to me while I'm bound up, well, I don't even want to go there."

Seria didn't either. "Another drink, please, Nyssa?" She held out her empty glass.

It was a good thing they were alone right now in Nyssa's specially reserved apartment getting ready for this dinner. Seria really couldn't face anyone else now. Least of all Theron, or precocious little Theryssa. The child would have way too many questions about why she was shaking and flushed and so on and she would have no answers to offer that were appropriate to her age.

As it was, from the very first introduction earlier today, Theryssa had talked her ear off about how they were related and how there was going to be a mating ceremony soon for Seria and "a very handsome Guardian". Could she be a flower girl? the five-year-old had wanted to know, and could she dance with the bride *and* the groom?

"Don't pester your aunt," Theron had said with an attempt at paternal sternness, his tone indicating that his daughter probably had him wrapped around her little finger. "She's only just met us and she hasn't even met her fiancé yet."

Theryssa grinned mischievously and jumped into the arms of her tall, uniformed father. "Okay, Daddy. Can I pester you?"

Nyssa, who had finished her own drink as well, produced two more from the objectifier on the wall. It took but five seconds for the machine to produce the beverages, glasses and all, using nothing but raw molecules.

"My relationship with Theron has been unique," Nyssa speculated, offering Seria the replacement. "His love for me has meant he has had to compromise like no other primale in history. I worry sometimes, if I truly give him all he needs, but he tells me he would have no other woman on the planet. If I am not satisfied, he says, he would die. And I have no reason to doubt him."

"He must really love you." That much Seria could envy. She had always wanted a man who would put her above everything. Who would love her so much that he would move heaven to see to her fulfillment. Even as he had his way with her...ravishing her very soul.

Nyssa glowed like a bride on her wedding night, all this despite her sophistication, worldliness and wit. "I like to think so. I'm kind of fond of him, too. Even when he's being a sadistic bastard, pulling his little primale mind games on me."

"Mind games?" Seria's nipples tightened under her dress. This was an area that turned her on and frightened her at the same time. Though she had shared this with no one, she frequently had fantasies where boyfriends and older men took control of her in certain ways. Manipulating, and teasing.

"They all do it, the primales do," explained Nyssa. "Although I have no clue how Raylar's tastes go. I suspect you'll learn a lot together, as he discovers your vulnerabilities, your hot buttons. Mine is loss of sexual control. I fucking hate it, but I need it. Theron's developed this absolutely diabolical way to control my orgasms. I like to think it's my gift to him, because I love him, but he makes me acknowledge that I have been trained, like some kind of freaking pet osilox. I can't even come when I masturbate, even if I wanted to, because he's inside my head so much making me need him.

"I can be right there on the edge of the biggest climax of my life, and I'll be stuck, without that little nod of approval. On the other hand, he can make me climax without touching me, whether or not I happen to want to at the time. It doesn't matter what I feel—once the trigger word hits his lips I am down for the count. And don't think he won't do it to me in public, either. I have had to get real good at hiding them. I've often wondered over the years how many people have seen me squirming in my seat at meetings wondering what was the matter with me."

Seria was laughing in spite of herself. She couldn't help it, all the emotion of this incredible day was catching up to her. "Oh...god..." she exclaimed, on the verge of hyperventilating.

"What is it, sis?" Nyssa asked, a bit concerned. "Are you all right?"

"I'm...fine," she cried, the words coming in short bursts. "It's just that...here you are telling me...I am about to be thrown to a wolf...and you are making me look so sexy. But the truth is...I'm a..."

"You're a virgin," Nyssa finished the thought. "I gathered as much."

"Yes...that's it." She was practically in hysterics, though deep down, her belly was roiling and she was more eager, scared and lightheaded than she had ever felt in her life. "Isn't that silly...at my age?"

It wasn't the artificially composed alcohol getting to her, either. It was him. Raylar, the gorgeous, intense as a supernova Guardian, who somehow had managed to plant himself in her mind. And loins.

Nyssa gathered her sister into her arms. "You are such a delight, you know that, Seria? And of course it's not silly. It's your destiny. Raylar is to be your first. And your last. Now how about we finish getting you ready? What would you say to a new hair color? Something a little more daring?"

Seria nodded, stunned. Why not? What did she have to lose?

Just her independence, her virginity...and her heart.

All in one night, too, if Nyssa and Theron had their way.

"I have another idea, too," said the mischievous, matchmaking Nyssa. "The perfect accessory designed to send the perfect message."

Seria looked at the beautiful gemmed necklace, a fortune in cut stones of every color fused together into a breathtaking whole.

"You like?" Nyssa asked.

"Like" didn't begin to cut it. "It's...it's gorgeous," she said. Seria did have one question, though. The length of it was far too short for a conventional necklace. "Is it what I think it is?"

"Lift your hair," said Nyssa, coming up behind her.

Seria held her breath as her newfound sister encircled her throat with the fabulous choker. Her blood raced at the implications...

So like a collar, marking her, bonding her. She let her fingers stray to her throat. Her pussy spasmed as if she had touched herself there instead.

"Let me see." Nyssa had her turn around.

Seria reddened under the woman's gaze. Nyssa was seeing her as Raylar would, or any other primale.

"Yes, that's just what we needed," Nyssa concurred. "Raylar won't be able to help having ideas for you after seeing you like this."

Seria shivered ever so slightly in anticipation. *That's just what I'm afraid of*, she thought as Nyssa took her to the grooming machine for her promised hair change.

* * * * *

Raylar could barely breathe. Seeing Seria walk into the lobby of the Comestitorium was like a sucker punch to the heart. He had thought seeing her ahead of time in holoform would protect him to some extent from the effects of her beauty, but he was dead wrong. She was ten times the woman in person, and a hundred times more dazzling.

She had certainly gone to a lot of trouble for the occasion. Her hair, changed from gold to shimmering silver and swept high on her pretty head was like a goddess's and that dress—it was like something off a hologrid play. She was wearing a choker, too, giving a subtle but very real indication of what she might look like in a collar.

Any man would kill for a woman like this—that was the bottom line.

He did not read her as a femme fatale, however. If anything, she was shy as hell, completely vulnerable. In fact, he was virtually certain the dress, incredibly sleek and revealing and red, was someone else's idea. Which would explain why she was hugging herself to death, trying to hide everything under that wrap.

Well, it wasn't working. She could be wearing an old sack or a tarp and still raise the dead. In fact seeing her try to conceal her sexiness so much only made him want to grab her all the more, to sweep her into his arms and try out those pouting red lips.

"Lieutenant Raylar," the General said in introduction. "This is Fem Seria, of the Diplomatic Corps."

"It is my honor to serve, Fem Seria." He took her hand, offering the standard greeting.

Seria was redder than her dress. "The service is mine, Primale Raylar," she murmured.

By the Code, she was as timorous and exciting as an obedient. He found himself holding onto her warm little hand, so very vibrant and alive. She offered no resistance as he held onto her hand just a little too long. Was he only imagining this lightning zap in their interchange—a deeper meaning in her reply that went beyond mere formula?

The service was hers...

Exactly what service was she prepared to render and for how long?

"And this other beauty is my wife," said the General. "The Honorable Fem Nyssa, Head of the Council."

"I don't think your young officer is much interested in me at the moment," teased Nyssa. "He seems otherwise occupied."

Raylar tore himself from Seria's gaze. She had the most complicated and alluring expression he had ever seen on a woman. She was a wide-open holobook, her beautiful cobalt blue eyes totally defenseless and yet their depths were so great he doubted he could sort it all out in a hundred years.

What was going on? She wanted to be here...then again she didn't. She seemed to be debating spilling her guts about something or running away to the nearest deep tunnel. The pieces didn't add up. Had she been given the same sort of bizarre instructions about the mission as he had received? Was she supposed to be looking at this as a sex-making opportunity, too?

If so this was going to be one long, hopelessly mixed-up night. Not to mention the space flight tomorrow.

"It is my honor to serve, Fem Nyssa." He took the slightly older woman's hand. No spark now, only the firm, polite grip of a fellow citizen.

"The service is mine." She smiled cheekily. "Now, how about we get right to dinner so we can get it over with and let you and Seria move on to the fun stuff? Theron, I trust you have a table ready?"

Raylar winced. Obviously the General's wife was as direct as he was. Looks like the dinner battle would be fought on two fronts, he thought grimly.

The robot *maitre d'* led them to a fine corner table, right against the window. They could see the entire bottom of the city from here, clear across to the far side of the dome. The dome was just settling into twilight colors, yellow swathed with red and orange.

The stars would be up soon, a complete laser replica of the Earth's sky at night. There was no telling the difference with the naked eye, though Raylar always felt a little trapped beneath these domed cities. It might have been the effect of having spent so much time in the freedom of deep space or maybe it was just his personality.

The table was a floating disc, the latest piece of autoserve technology. The chairs floated up silently behind them to relieve their buttocks and push them underneath. Raylar was next to Seria, close enough to touch her.

"Welcome," the table said in a smooth, ringing baritone. "Would you like to start with some drinks?"

Nyssa ordered first, selecting a glass of wine. She convinced Theron to order the same. Raylar went next, choosing a simple glass of cran-beer instead. The desired beverages appeared instantly in front of them. Autoserve tables had objectifiers built in, which meant you could have absolutely anything, no waiting.

"I'll have a cran-beer, too," said Seria, declining to follow Nyssa's choice of wine.

Raylar's cock, already half aroused, stiffened a little more. Whether she realized it or not, this fem diplomat was sending out strong submissive signals. Her gestures, the way she carried herself and now this—effectively deferring to him for her choice of drinks.

"A toast," pronounced Nyssa. "To fate...with a little helping hand."

All four held up their glasses in tandem. The High Councilor really was a beautiful woman, he thought, with her slinky black dress and jet-black hair. General Theron, sitting in his gold-buttoned dress uniform with more medals than he could count was certainly a lucky man. But Nyssa didn't do it for Raylar, not like Seria.

Raylar observed Seria stiffen, subtly, but perceptibly at the toast.

"To fate," they all repeated.

Raylar was doing it again. Reading Seria like an open holobook, seeing below that incredible exterior to her hidden soul. She was decidedly uneasy. Wrestling with something. Once again, he had the distinct feeling there were things she knew about this mission that he did not.

He didn't like that feeling one bit. If she intended to hold out on him, leave him dangling while they traveled through the dark depths of space, she was sorely mistaken.

Raylar felt a little jolt at the word sorely. Theron's injunction came to mind. He could take this woman in hand if need be. Seria was his. To punish. That pert little bottom, no farther away than the range of his own breath, could be rendered as red as that tantalizing dress of hers anytime he designated.

"Another toast," declared Theron.

Seria's glass was still touching Raylar's. Their fingers were nearly in contact, so close to intertwining. He couldn't take his eyes off them, so slender, and that delicately extended wrist, too, so different from his own, so dainty. What would it look like, along

with its companion, bound in leather or locked in polysteel? At his mercy, along with the rest of her, every incredible curvaceous inch of her fem-flesh.

"To duty and to service."

"To duty and to service," they all agreed.

The rest of dinner went smoothly. Theron ordered on their behalf, choosing a selection of delicacies from across the galaxy. Nyssa was clearly proud of her husband's ability to orchestrate such a feast. Raylar made a point of complimenting the general on a job well done.

"Oh, yes, I agree," said Seria, softly echoing his words.

Raylar clenched his teeth. If she had any idea how much her acquiescence made him want to throw her down over the table this instant and have his way with her...

Did she want that at some level, he wondered, despite her initial shyness and reticence? It was definitely puzzling. Seria obviously had a mind of her own, carrying on a wonderful conversation with them, but why did she keep throwing off these signals to him, casting little glances to determine his reaction to things before reacting herself? And why the hard nipples, which seemed to be ending up more and more aimed in his direction as the cran-beers disappeared and the wrap slipped imperceptibly down over her creamy shoulders?

At a certain point, Nyssa – who had partaken liberally of her wine – announced her intention to go to the "little fems' room" and inquired as to whether Seria would like to come. Women always went in packs, so he was hardly surprised when she said yes. What caught him off guard was how she said it.

"Okay, sis." She grinned. "Sounds like a plan."

Theron frowned heavily as soon as she said it, confirming Raylar's suspicions that it was no mere idle reference to their common gender. "I didn't realize they were in the same cluster as children, Sir," Raylar said as soon as the ladies were out of range.

"Their backgrounds aren't important," he said, ending the conversation. "Just focus on the present. And what you intend to do with your lovely date before morning."

Or do to her...

"Yes, Sir," he replied, fearing that he might be blushing as much or more than Seria had.

He had ideas, all right. The question was would he be bold enough, or foolish enough, to carry them out.

* * * * *

Nyssa was playful and randy all the way home from the restaurant. Theron gave her leeway, allowing her to kick off her shoes and sidle up against him in the two-seater aircar, though he denied her contact with his already straining cock. Blast the woman and her deviously sexy ways. How was he supposed to remain stern and give her the punishment she deserved?

"Don't Raylar and Seria make a fabulous couple, baby?" she crooned, nibbling at his neck in that way that always drove him crazy.

His hands stiffened on the wheel. Theron was one of the few officers, not to mention one of the few citizens, who insisted on driving his own vehicle. He took it as a point of independence. Nyssa claimed he was just stubborn. "Obviously, they do, Nyssa. The geneticists intended it that way."

She ran her hand over his chest. "Why so grumpy, General?"

"That's enough," he said sharply. "Put your hands in your lap and we will discuss the matter."

Nyssa complied, though she was anything but chastised. "Did I forget to line up your socks again this morning?" she teased, the most delicious pout on her face. "Is the big bad primale going to spank me?"

"You know perfectly well I have the domestic droids line up my socks, woman. This is far more serious. I want to know what you told Seria about her background."

"Just what we talked about," Nyssa said. "More or less."

"I'm thinking more," he grumbled, angling the aircar to the right, cutting an invisible path through the quiet, cool pseudo-night blackness. He had a detour in mind, one he would keep to himself. "In particular, the part about you being her biological sister."

Nyssa, too tipsy to notice the deviation in course, moved to kiss him again, her wicked female hands back out of her lap and looking for mischief. "It might have slipped, honey. But I thought she had a right to know."

Theron resorted to a simple but effective primale technique. "Hands in your lap, woman." He found her nipple through the sleek black dress out of sheer instinct. "Now."

Nyssa gasped. It wasn't just the immediate pressure he was applying, but all the sense memories it evoked from their long, complex history. The domination, the impressing of his sexual will on hers, the intimate connection they shared that no other would ever understand.

"Theron..." she sighed, leaning back in her seat, back arched, her body paradoxically lax and tense at the same time. Her eyes were liquid and wild. He could smell her heat, like an alley cat. His very own tigress, tamed as much or as little as he desired.

"We agreed to tell the two of them only that there was an opportunity being presented, if they wished, to mate," Theron confirmed. "I followed my part of things, but you went further, in direct violation of our agreement, you let Seria know our secret plans."

"I did," Nyssa moaned as he rolled the nipple between thumb and forefinger, keeping his eye on the open air in front of them. He knew from the feel of her, from the sound of her breathing she was close to coming already. He also knew she would wait.

Because she belonged to him and him alone. "Remove your dress, Nyssa."

"Yes, Theron." There was no place for argument or debate here. A primale's woman, Council Head or not, remained clothed only by his whim. If he wished to display her beauty, stripping her in an aircar a quarter mile above the city or in a crowded robo-ball stadium, that was his affair.

So were all matters of punishment, corporal or otherwise.

Nyssa wore no undergarments. Theron didn't allow it. He wanted her accessible at all times, her mind as close to the idea of being taken, as was her body. She balked on occasion, but what woman really hated knowing that she was being outfitted to match her mate's constant, uncompromising sexual desire for her?

And want her Theron did, night and day, near and far. He wanted her when she was good, and even more when she was bad and willful. Like now. Oh, she had her reasons. They had gone over this before. Nyssa had felt that for Seria to be an effective seductress she needed to know the full score. She also felt it wasn't fair to completely blindside both of them.

As a matter of public policy, the decision would have been hers, but he had trumped her, citing the matter of blood connection. This was ultimately a family matter and as such, the sway was his.

Or so he'd thought.

His vixen pulled the black dress up to her waist and lifted it over her head. He nearly crashed, so distracted was he by the sight of her lithe body, contorting deliciously in the process. Nyssa was as enticingly fit as the day he had met her. Each added year only brought out her beauty more, like a fine wine. He could not wait to see her reach her prime. She would be truly regal, like her mother, the Former High Councilor Dekalia.

"Throw it in back," he instructed as she held out the slinky piece of cloth.

She did so, rendering herself completely exposed and helpless. Never had she looked so stunning in his eyes, so soulfully lovely and erotic.

"What are you going to do to me?" she asked, her eyes a mix of trepidation and wild eagerness.

"I'm going to remind you who is the male in this relationship and who is the female."

"Yes, husband." Her lips curled, just at the corners, as if to say, bring it on.

Theron did not need any further encouragement. He peeled the opening in his dress uniform trousers, the one covering his crotch. His primale cock emerged, hard as polysteel. Nyssa sucked her lower lip as she saw he had expanded it to full size. Admittedly, the ability to control the size of his erections was not one of the most noble of his primale superpowers, but it was one of the most fun to use.

"Suck," he commanded.

"Yes," she whispered, devotion and awe in her eyes. "My husband."

Nyssa rarely applied this title to him. It was an old one, not often used anymore. She had chosen it herself, as a way to convey what she felt at times like this—not the full slavish attachment of an obedient, but something much more intimate and biological than the mere mating of equals.

Theron groaned softly as she applied that silver tongue of hers. One long lick around the head of his cock, like an ice-cream cone. He knew how much she loved this, so it was a little hard to justify it as punishment. If anything it was a reminder of his power. Nothing put a woman more quickly in her place than reddening her behind and putting her on her knees in front of a monster hard-on, one she could never dream of taking fully into her throat. Sometimes she would beg him to get this big, so she could worship at his temple, as he called it. Mostly, he kept to a more moderate size, so he could get deeper.

The oral sex was not one-way, of course. Primales also had excellent tongue muscles and a capacity for muscular control that was capable of blasting any female into orbit and keeping her there.

Nyssa applied herself well, her belly heated by the wine and her mind heated by the anticipation of some devilish new torture ahead. He had to be careful not to come too quickly and spoil the fun. He let her lick him up and down, nibbling along the vein on the underside. He caressed her silky hair, long and black for the occasion. Tomorrow it might be short, blue, or gold, depending on her mood. By the Code, how he adored this woman. So very alive and fiercely proud and smart.

He would never admit it, but if Nyssa's instincts had told her she should tell Seria about her lineage, than she was right to go with them. Nyssa was a wise woman. Though he would by law have to obey any Council Head, he sincerely believed she was the best qualified, the one person worthy of following.

Frankly, this whole business between Seria and Raylar had him a little uneasy. He was supposed to be running a military Corps, not a matchmaking service. But Raylar was an important man, much more important than he realized, and his happiness was vital to his ability to utilize his unique gifts as a battlefield commander. Like it or not, having Seria as his own would make all the difference.

If only there was some more open, straightforward way to introduce Raylar to his destiny. Theron's own mentor and superior General Morax had had no such qualms, of course, in setting him up with Nyssa. Was he sorry for that? Of course not. Would he have mated with Nyssa otherwise? Probably not. He had planned on military celibacy, like Raylar. Obviously, they had done him the best favor of his life, but the ethics still troubled him a bit.

Even more disturbing was the fact that he had actually enjoyed himself in dealing with Raylar. The young man really would be lucky to have Seria and it was fun to have a bit of a helping hand. In effect giving the straight-arrow lieutenant permission to play the part of predator.

Were he a different sort of general, he might simply order the Guardian to mate for life. He had suggested this, but Nyssa had pitched a fit. She'd called him pigheaded, unimaginative and insensitive to Seria's feelings.

So telling her everything was better? Giving her the blunt, almost cynical truth that she would never really have a choice as to who to feel for in life?

There was the fact of Seria's hybrid background to consider, though. This was something only Nyssa could truly understand. Theron had been specially engineered from anonymous donors, but the mix was a standard primale one. Seria was a combination of sub-genders, just like Nyssa.

Theron had taken much time with his lifemate, helping her to feel fully secure in this. He would never permit her to feel like a freak. He had single-handedly hunted down the members of the secret society opposed to hybrids, eliminating all except Malthusalas himself, the ringleader. This one failure on his part haunted him, night and day.

It was a reminder of several things, including his own imperfection. No, he could not fault his wife for going against their agreement and revealing herself to her sister. She had suffered the loneliness of being the only one of her kind too long. And she could not bear to see another suffer, even if only out of ignorance of her true nature.

Still, he had his authority to consider.

Besides, if he backed down on punishing Nyssa now, she would kill him.

"We are going to the woods," he told her.

She shivered slightly. Her mouth slackened and she took him deeper. They had been to the woods—in various locations—many times before. As much as anything it was a metaphor for that part of their relationship where she was most in the position of slave and he in the position of Master. Things happened in the woods. Primal things. Sexual conquests, sweating and heaving in the dirt, heavy bondage over rocks and hanging from trees, and the delicious sting of the switch, the fresh, whiplike branches cut down with Theron's own knife.

He had seen Nyssa go half mad with lust in settings like this, breasts heaving as she begged to be thrown down and taken. Hard—primale hard.

Theron moaned, letting her know she was pleasing him. Taking hold of her mane of hair, he balled it up lightly, lovingly. Up and down, the rhythm passionate, intense.

He resisted climax, holding out until landing.

Theron set the aircar down in a dirt clearing, surrounded by tall pine trees. Small branches crunched under the flat pads of the landing gear. An owl hooted as he slid the bubble open, exposing them to open air.

Nyssa stopped sucking his cock and cuddled against his chest. There was a light chill, perfectly in keeping with the climate of a deciduous forest in springtime. Everything here was synthesized, of course, though it would take a damn fine biologist or molecular physicist to tell the difference.

This particular mini-forest was reserved for Council use. He gave the verbal order, announcing to the unseen computer that it was now occupied. Anyone else flying overhead would see only gray clouds.

Theron thought of Seria and Raylar again. They would be out right now, enjoying the awkward thrill of first meeting. Would passion ignite there, under the bright lights of the Dome, before morning? Or would it occur in the depths of space, as they found themselves unable to resist entwining, mentally and physically, until ultimately, they combusted, as he and Nyssa had.

Maybe they would be strong enough to resist all that. In which case, they would resort to more desperate measures. The backup plan involved a false stranding at their destination, a created situation of Adam and Eve type isolation. For as long as needed, the two would remain in splendid isolation until they had bonded.

Did Seria know every detail? He would have to ascertain this. He doubted Nyssa had gone that far. One thing he was sure she would never divulge was the real cause of the urgency of getting these two together.

It wasn't just about true love and happiness—it was a matter of galactic security. They needed Raylar sharp and ready to go, cured of his trauma. For unbeknownst to all but a select few, the small Narthian force Raylar had encountered on Rensus Nine with its super-weapons was the vanguard of a new attack army. A test force, designed to probe the humans' weaknesses.

Raylar's force had fought them off, but they would be back. And if the Guardians were not ready, they would have a new war on their hands that they might not be able to win.

Theron shut off the aircar and climbed out of the driver's side. Nyssa was waiting for his direction, eyes imploring. He knew how badly she wanted to touch herself right now, almost as much as she needed to be denied. Helping her from the vehicle, he allowed her to plant her feet, one by one on the dirt. The earthiness always turned her on. It was a part of the package.

"Fuck me," she begged, pressing her bosom against his chest. "Right here on the ground. Use me."

"No." Theron spun her about, pinning her arm up behind her back. "Not until I say."

"Yes..." she hissed, her own subjugation arousing her all the more.

He pressed her over the hood of the machine, smooth and warm. "Spread," he ordered, giving her a firm smack on the ass.

She inched her feet apart, exposing her pussy and delicate anal opening. Unable to resist himself, he slid a finger against her clitoris, maneuvering it to erection. "You'll take my hand, Nyssa, against your ass, then you'll take my cock."

"Oh, god...yes, please," she groaned, extending her arms in front of her, palms down on the metal. "Do it."

"You disobeyed me." He cracked his hand hard against her firm flesh. "You need discipline."

"Fuck, yes...discipline me," she egged him on.

What a glorious creature she was. How utterly suited to meet his every need, and challenge his every male impulse. He never tired of this, never tired of her. Each time was like the first as he probed ever deeper into her infinite, incredible soul.

She squirmed hotly as he continued his lover's assault, warming her posterior, his spanking intermixed with teasing of her dripping pussy. By the tenth smack, she was twitching, her ass pushed out in delightful confusion, unable to distinguish pain from pleasure.

"Oh, Theron," she begged penetration from his cock, "put me in my place. Teach me obedience."

He had to smile at this. His Nyssa would never obey. She was fem and primale, in a most volatile mix. Defiance was in her nature and he would have it no other way. His job was to protect and encourage her bold femininity. But there would always be this between them, too. The dance, the endless play. The give and take. They needed each other, their bodies, and their different wisdoms.

Each without the other would be lost. Nyssa needed to feel the power of a strong man, but it had to be one who loved and cherished her absolutely and understood her uniqueness. And Theron needed to know his was the finest woman in the universe, the most wonderfully delightful and exasperating. The only one truly worth having.

"You are my world, Nyssa," he sighed, falling into her. "You and Theryssa." Theron's cock was hard and ready and magically exposed from the work of his fingers. He had barely been aware of what they were doing, not until he had found his way to her labia.

"You're mine, too, baby." She turned her head back, reaching for him.

Theron slid commandingly and satisfyingly into the depths of Nyssa's sex. She took him straight to the hilt.

"Am I good for you, baby? Am I good?" She needed to know.

He pulled her upright, encircling her breasts from behind. "You please me very much, sweetheart."

Nyssa melted against him, as enveloped as she was impaled. He knew how she never tired of hearing those words. To the rest of the world she was the strong leader, doing what suited her own will and judgment and requiring others to follow. But with Theron she was free to express that other part of herself—the flesh and blood woman who wanted to turn her man on, who wanted to be the little sexual toy who provided him endless amusement.

He cherished this side of her, as he did a million others—childish, proud and selfish, generous, silly, and all the rest.

"Come inside me, husband?" Her arm snaked behind his neck. He was inhaling her fragrance, tasting the silky hair at the back of her head.

"Yes," he hissed, swelling his cock in anticipation. "I will come inside you, my love. And you will come with me. At the same time."

Even were she not trained so completely to the lead of his voice and body, she would never have been able to resist. Nyssa said it was her love that made her this way now, though he sometimes wondered if some of it still wasn't about his powers.

That was one of the drawbacks of being primale. Always wondering if a woman is subdued truly by you, or only by your abilities in bed.

Nyssa would help him with this, telling him often how she loved him. Thus did they work on each other's insecurities. They were breathing so tightly against each other, their heartbeats so frantic, he didn't know if he would be able to let go of her long enough to establish a rhythm. He might just spill his seed this way, with no strokes at all.

But no, she was starting to move her body, just enough to pass the hint. Still standing, front to back, he retracted his cock, to the halfway point and then a few inches past that. She moaned at the emptiness. Quickly, feverishly, he filled her, once more burying his shaft in the sweet heat of her pulsing depths. It was the kind of sex that only came with practice, with knowing intimately the motions and intricate realities of the other person. It was mutual fantasy made reality.

Their bodies talked to one another, telling what each would like next, the spaces to be filled, the little aches to be created and dissipated.

Their sighs merged as he maneuvered himself into just the right position, comfortable and true and then drove himself home. With measured strokes he brought them to the point of combustion.

A dozen times he penetrated, in and out, until he could no longer hold back his climax. With his thick, familiar spurts came the rivulets of her own ultimate pleasure. Nyssa screamed out as she orgasmed. He cried out with her, the male equivalent. The artificially projected moon above them, nearly full, seemed to shine just for them. So, too, the glowing stars.

As the passion subsided, he held her close, nibbling at her neck. He waited for the telltale sigh, indicating she was passing over the threshold into that post-coital state of sweet vulnerability that inevitably followed their lovemaking.

At this point he swept her up into his arms. She nuzzled close, sleepy-eyed. His woman. Theron looked to the artificial sky, his primale blood surging. He would kill a thousand men barehanded to protect her. He would guard her to his dying breath, suffer a million wounds, or crawl across a desert of fire or a continent of ice to be by her side.

She was what made him whole. Without her, he could no longer be any of the things he was—or even be at all, for that matter. Could he begrudge the younger Raylar from having this experience with Seria?

Of course not. No more than he could ever deprive her of the experience of having the love of such a good, strong man. They deserved one another and once they were settled – once the Narthians were repelled yet again – there would be the experience of child rearing to share.

A baby, produced from their shared genetics. The ultimate sign of their unity and friendship and love. If their child were half the miracle for them that Theryssa was for him and Nyssa, they would be blessed indeed.

But first there were the Narthians to quell. Clutching his naked, well-ravished and sleeping wife to his chest, Theron breathed deep of the night air. The Guardians must succeed. Raylar must succeed.

And succeed they would, he laid her gently in her seat, covering her with the blanket folded in the backseat. The alternative was quite simply unthinkable.

He kissed her forehead before getting back in the driver's side.

What was it about being with his wife that made each time more familiar and comfortable than the last but also more exhilarating? Almost frightening in a way, when he considered how much more he needed her with each passing day.

Once he had thought battle to be the final frontier, the ultimate challenge. But now he knew better. The real courage in a man's life came from daring to love.

Nyssa, mother of his child and his mate for life, murmured in her sleep and put her head against his shoulder. The emotions overwhelmed him as they frequently did since Theryssa's birth. He wiped the tears away as the aircar lifted off. Guardians were not supposed to cry. Especially not Generals.

But this one did.

And he wouldn't trade it for the world.

Chapter Three

Up to the last possible second, Seria had hoped he might chicken out, or otherwise tell her the whole thing was some kind of a joke. The very idea of a man like Raylar trying to dance was like imagining a group of obedients going out on strike for the right to control their primale mates.

"This really isn't necessary," she told him yet again as he held out his hand to lead her onto the dance floor, center stage of the starlit floating disc known as the Mandollo Yummy Happy Waltz Emporium.

It wasn't that she didn't want to dance. She just didn't want it to feel so horribly awkward, what with him just marching them over here from dinner without a moment of get-acquainted time. Another part of her was scared, too, of how she might react, if she were in the man's embrace, locked there, albeit in the guise of dancing.

"It is necessary, Seria," he countered. "Very much so." The look on his face was one of pure military determination. She could see there was no way he was going to back down.

"Raylar, be honest with me," she queried, the cran-beer making her unusually bold. "Are you dancing with me because you want to or did someone put you up to this?"

By someone, of course, she meant Theron, because she had gotten the distinct impression a couple of times at dinner that the older man was coaching him.

Raylar raised a brow. "I could ask you the same about that dress."

Seria's cheeks heated. "What's wrong with my dress?"

"Nothing. I just don't think you designed it yourself, that's all."

"Really? And what about that getup you have on?"

"This? It's a standard dress uniform for a Guardian lieutenant."

He did have a point there. But Seria was not ready to give in yet. "So? I bet you only wore it because Theron told you to."

Raylar's mouth moved slightly. She'd scored a direct hit, she was sure of it.

"That's enough talking," he grumbled. "Let's dance."

Seria felt a wave of heat as he took her hand. It was like the first time, when they'd been introduced, only much more potent. She was floating, her body lighter than air.

Her pulse quickened as he took control. He wasn't supposed to know she was half obedient, but was he picking up signs from her and acting on them? She wasn't even sure what she was transmitting. She was crazy desperate to please him, but mostly that was nerves.

Deep down, she was just confused. Who was this man and why was she supposed to like him? For that matter, who was she, now that she had a sister and a secret mission? Should she really expect to be commanded like a slave—induced to absolute sexual surrender at his whim? Would he expect her to obey, and to face the consequences if she could not?

Beneath the terrible scandal of the red dress—the dress she hadn't wanted to wear—Seria was wet, her thighs slick and open. Raylar was so damn attractive and manly in that dress uniform. All through dinner she had to fight to keep control of her senses. With his every move, she wanted to reach out and grab him, to touch him and rub against him.

What must he think of this outfit? She was embarrassed...but also titillated. Was he aroused? Did he want her body? She didn't think of herself as especially attractive, but Nyssa had begged to differ, calling her a knockout.

"Trust me," she had told her. "Raylar will lose control and that primale blood will take over quick enough."

Seria had never had the experience of being swept into a man's arms, though she had dreamed of it, like every other young woman. Raylar certainly did not disappoint her expectations as he quickly assumed the lead, moving them artfully into the center of the circle of dancers, gracefully waltzing to a piece by Thromodius Bach, the classical Martian composer.

A dozen or so couples surrounded them, mems and fems mostly, with a few uniformed Guardians mixed in, each of them clinging tightly to an adoring obedient. The others had eyes only for their dates, but Raylar's concentration seemed divided, like he was simultaneously competing with every other couple.

He was beating them, too. His pacing and posture absolutely perfect, like some sort of computer program.

"Have you danced often?" she asked.

"Never," he replied.

Seria blinked as he dipped her. "Then...how —"

"I studied the others, while you were freshening up. Using primale absorption powers, combined with intuition, I obtained the level of a grand master in under two minutes."

Seria looked at him, waiting for the punch line. When none came, she decided to laugh anyway.

"Is there something funny about that? I am actually pleased with my accomplishment," he said.

She had to stop in her tracks. "Oh, Raylar, I know you are...and that's what's so funny." She put her hand on his chest, steadying herself. "Please forgive me, I don't mean to laugh. It was so kind of you, really."

"I just don't see the point of doing something if you aren't going to do it correctly," he said. "It's how I'm built."

Seria stood on tiptoes and touched his cheek. There was something so darling about the way he furrowed his brow. So very serious and grumpy. Not to mention the fact that he had taken the time—albeit a scant two minutes—to learn something just for her. "I know that," she said softly. "And I thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for doing this."

"It's not that big a deal," he shrugged.

Seria was fighting the urge to kiss him. "Can we sit down? I'm feeling a little woozy."

"You had too much cran-beer," he said, taking her hand protectively.

She let him lead her to a small table, liking that he was fussing over her. She was curious, though, what would happen if she pushed her limits. "Two champagnes," she called to a passing serving robot.

Raylar helped her sit down and took a seat across from her.

"So...am I as easy to figure out as the waltz?" she wondered a few moments later, fingering the fluted stem of her champagne glass, newly delivered by the spindly, multi-armed auto-robot in his antique tuxedo.

Seria should have known better than to expect sly, witty banter. As with the dancing, he went for the jugular.

"You're lonely, deep inside," he told her. "You pour yourself into your work to take away the pain. You're ambivalent about your body, about sex, about me. Plus you are burdened with a dark secret that threatens to upend all that you know and believe."

"Is that all?" she retorted, hiding the sting of his unwanted analysis. "Gee, with that act, you should be a traveling robo-psychic."

"You've never made sex with a man, have you, Seria?"

Seria squirmed slightly. Damn, talk about being made to feel naked.

"No," she attempted to fend him off. "Only women."

"That's a lie," he shot back.

Seria licked her lips. She'd gotten a little emotion out of him that time. "What makes you so sure?"

Raylar's voice took on a slight edge now, barely perceptible...except to her pussy. "Because you are far too passionate in your responses to men. Your body is curious...and overdue."

"You have a vivid imagination, Primale."

"I have even more vivid environmental preceptors...*Fem.*"

Seria shivered inwardly. She'd forgotten that these super-male types could sense a female in heat, like a lion senses prey. Was that what she was to him now? "So I'm horny." She gulped the rest of her champagne. "What of it?"

"No more drinks for you," he dictated, his jaw firm and full of resolve.

She promptly raised her hand to order another.

"I said no," he repeated, speaking in a tone that made her want to open her legs for him right there at the table.

"All right." She tried to clear her head. "How about if we play a game instead? We'll tell each other fun things about our childhood. I'll go first. When I was a little girl, I used to tell everyone I could talk to the dog in our cluster house. I would run around pretending to translate for it. I guess that's why I ended up a diplomat. Okay, now it's your turn."

"There isn't anything fun about me," Raylar said.

"Oh, come on. You must have done something cute when you were a wee lad. Trying to attack Narthians in your closet, or rescue princesses from pretend pirates?"

"I'm a primale. Primales don't play silly games, not even as children." Abruptly, he shifted back to sex. "We need to talk about your hormones, Seria."

"My hormones?" She laughed at the absurdity. "What on earth for?"

"We're going to be in tight quarters in space," he explained. "I need to know what to expect from you, sex-wise."

"Not much," she quipped. "If this is your idea of charm."

"I'm not trying to be charming."

"No shit."

"It's a matter of biology. You'll be responding to my primale testosterone. Even as a fem, you will have strong desires to submit for copulation. If we're going to be dealing with specific desires and sexual fantasies you have about me, we have to discuss them up front."

She couldn't believe her ears. How had this perfect gentleman managed to turn into such a complete prick? "What you're dealing with, you arrogant bastard," she let him have it with both barrels, "is a flesh and blood woman with feelings. Not some interstellar bimbo who airs out her dirty laundry for you."

Raylar remained placid, incredibly oblivious both to the outrageousness of his words and the ferocity of her reaction. "So you'll keep yourself under control?" he pressed. "I will be able to count on you not to distract me with overt bodily displays?"

"You mean, will I come on to you like a two-bit whore?" She picked up his glass and took aim, splashing it into his chiseled, gorgeous face. "Does that answer your question, Lieutenant Raylar?"

Raylar didn't flinch. "Seria, I am not going to tolerate that kind of disorderly behavior under my command."

Anger mixed with arousal. A most dangerous combination when it came to maintaining one's rationality. "What command?" she snorted. "I'm not in your stupid army."

"But you are under my protection. You must follow my orders, and submit to my discipline until we reach our destination."

Discipline...damn, he'd used that word that meant spanking. And paddling. It was a damn good thing they weren't going to be sexually involved, or her ass would be in serious trouble pretty soon.

"Well, you can kiss my fucking ass before I follow any orders from you," she fumed.

"I don't allow profanity, either."

She glared at him in disbelief. The man was unreal. "You can't be serious? What are you going to do to stop me? Give me a court-martial?"

"General Theron offered a much more straightforward approach," he said meaningfully.

Seria saw that look in his eyes and knew at once what he was talking about. "Oh, no," she exclaimed. "You can't do that. We're not mates, or even lovers."

Yet...

"As your temporary commanding officer, under the Guardian Code, I must administer discipline according to the leeway I am given. General Theron was specific in including corporal punishment as part of the regimen. That means spanking. The paddle if need be. You may also be put in bondage at my discretion."

"Like hell." She tried to rise, but her knees were far too weak for her own good.

"Don't test me, Seria. This may seem harsh now, but in space, following my orders could mean life and death. What if we encounter pirates, for example? Or Narthians?"

"In that case, I will be only too happy to go with them to get away from you."

"You don't mean that." He looked slightly ridiculous, the champagne dripping from his face. This would be a really poor time to laugh, she decided.

"Why not? They couldn't insult me any worse than you already have."

"My words might be blunt," he acknowledged, "but they are intended to protect you. Pirates would seek only your abuse and degradation."

"So? I'd probably enjoy it, right? According to you I'm just a sex-seeking, manipulative little wench."

"I said no such thing."

It was true, he hadn't. Why was she putting words in his mouth like this? He was stirring things up in her, things she couldn't control. "You don't need to say it. It's written all over your face—you're not the only one who can read minds, you know."

"Really?" He arched a brow. "What am I thinking, then?"

Seria felt a chill down her spine. The challenge of the gesture made her squirm in her pants. It was a toss-up whether she would shoot off a smart-aleck reply or beg for his touch. The man was just so infernally desirable. She could lick and kiss every inch of

his naked body. She could tear those clothes off and devour him whole, worshipping at the temple of that fine, primale body, beautifully bronzed and so very powerful.

Stars...if he was just toying with her, why didn't he claim his prize? She stood no chance against him, and they both knew that. Damn the man and his apparent sense of duty.

"What was it I heard before from Swami Superman? Oh, yes, you're...deeply lonely. You're conflicted. About sex. About me."

"We're nothing alike." He rejected her effort to turn the tables on his earlier analysis of her. "Primals don't experience emotional conflict."

Yeah, right.

"You're a terrible liar, Raylar. I've never seen someone as uptight and unavailable as you. It's like you're an iceberg, nine-tenths of you hidden, so tied up in emotional conflict it's gone. Where is it, I wonder? Back in combat someplace?"

His face tensed. Finally, she had hit him back. "You need to be taken over a man's knee," he told her. "Followed by a night of gagging to teach you how to better use your tongue."

She pictured the various ways he might gag her, including with his cock. "You're not man enough," she spat, not sure if she was trying to put him off or goad him.

"Seria, I told you already, don't challenge me. You'll lose."

"Prove it." This time she made it to her feet. She had no idea what she was doing, except that she was about to play the rabbit, wagging its cottontail in front of the wolf.

Raylar caught her wrist from behind, his grip like polysteel as he whipped her back around to face him. "Where do you think you're going?"

Her heart was pounding. She could feel the adrenaline surging through her body. She had awakened the beast, all right. "Wherever I bloody well please," she defied.

His hand crashed down on her ass. Hard. "You will go where I decide, Seria, as long as you are assigned to me. Is that clear?"

Her head was swimming. She had been spanked—*spanked*. "That hurt," she whimpered.

He smacked her again, harder. "The next time will be on bare flesh, Seria. I swear it by the gods."

"All right," she yielded, the fire surging through her body. "It's clear. I go where you tell me."

"And you take my orders."

She swallowed. Here it was, the moment of destiny. She could scarcely believe this was happening, in a public place, with onlookers calmly dining and dancing. Seeing his uniform, they no doubt took this as a standard primale domestic situation. She was his little obedient, being dealt with in the manner she was genetically designed for.

Except she wasn't an obedient at all. At least not completely.

"Raylar, please don't make me..."

His hand moved to the back of her dress. Would he really tear it off her?

"Wait, don't! I'll take orders! Please, I promise!"

His breathing was heavy, his eyes glazed, his nostrils flared. She could tell she had pushed him to some other place, with its own rules. Rules she could neither control nor fully understand. One thing was certain, it was a place of domination and submission, where a man's emotions...and his will were not to be toyed with by the likes of her.

Seria's response was as deeply erotic as it was instinctive. "Please," she whispered. "Sir?"

It came as a hot and tiny plea, scandalous, with a power all its own. What had possessed her? Did she not know what such a concession would mean to a man like this?

Raylar made her wait, as exposed in her affirmation of him as if she had slipped her dress from her body and offered herself for his sexual pleasures. Each second was like an eternity, pulsing between her legs, making her burn for his answer, for his hard, hot hands, and his equally hard cock.

Seria could understand now, just a little of what Nyssa had meant, about how she fucking hated to lose sexual control, but how she needed it so desperately at the same time.

Fucking giving me an order, she wanted to scream. Call me a bitch, tell me you'll fuck me or not the whole damn trip, or lock me in a cabin, whatever the hell you want, so long as I get the message...you're in charge and not me.

She had nearly fainted from the tension, when he seized her lips for a kiss so fierce it stole her breath and nearly sucked the life from her.

Being kissed by a primale, it was said, was like being branded and Seria believed it now. He didn't just make contact with her lips—he morphed them into the absolute shape of his desire. There was no mistaking as his tongue bid entry into her mouth that she was to be what he desired, no more, no less. She would be allowed to hold nothing back. There would be no protection, no pretense. He would have her naked, here and now to the core.

Seria melted to his lusting purpose, reforming against him, her body molded to his. There was no mistaking what was happening in her mouth, as he explored every inch of her curious softness. It was sex-making. And she was yielding, every bit as much as if he were working himself down below, cock between her legs.

She had no more strength to stand. His powerful chest and heartbeat were her world. She was a mere moon, glowing in orbit. He was the planet. And the sun. His hand moved to her neck, caressing her hair, teasing the skin beneath with his fingertips. Her back arched, her nipples peaked in instant response. He could kiss them, too. He could pinch them, or if he wished, slap them.

She was his.

Another hand moved over the small of her back and now she was moaning blatantly into his victorious mouth. Signaling her own vanquishment, her own readiness for more. Whatever he desired.

Did he want her on the floor? Spread wide? Would he push her to her knees? Order her to strip? Strip her himself? Nothing was impossible. Nothing would be denied him. Everything about her said “fuck me”, everything said “my virginity is yours”.

Oh, stars, she was shaking, shivering, her pussy releasing little waves. Was she going to come this way —just from a kiss?

He released her before she could find out. She was terrified to let him go and begin breathing her own air again. “Raylar,” she said, pronouncing the only words that felt right on her lips, “I’m yours.”

“What you are is drunk.”

“Only a little.” She pinched two fingers together. “See?”

Before he had a chance to object, she kissed him, offering him the fullness of her female charms, her barely covered breasts against his chest, flat smooth belly against rock-hard abdomen, recessed delta against protruding hardness.

He did not resist or cast her aside. She proffered herself, licking, nibbling with her lips. The only thought in her mind was of the space in the Star Ring Hotel that Nyssa had said was reserved for them tonight. She had dreaded being alone with him, but now she craved it more than anything in the universe. “I really am yours...all night,” she reiterated, her leg provocatively moving between his. “Take me to our room...make sex with me.”

She thought his shaft would burst free of the smooth, gold material of his tight trousers—he was that aroused. But his face still showed imprisonment and torment. She would drop to her knees right here and now, unfasten his pants and rub her face over the entire surface of his erection if that would tip the balance.

If only it were that simple. In truth, only Raylar could do the freeing. And that would not happen until he had the chance to redeem himself. She could not imagine the ransom he had set on his own soul. A normal male, even a primale would never meet it. But Raylar was not any other man. He was a man who could dance after only two minutes.

And be the best at it to boot.

He’d redeem himself, all right. And when he did, the world would tremble at his feet. Then they would see, he was no martyr, no masochist. Seria wondered if even Nyssa and Theron knew this much about him.

Certainly there was no reason she should, after such a short period of time.

Unless she really was the key to his destiny.

“Seria...you don’t know what you’re saying. You’re a virgin.”

“You make it sound like a disease.” She put her hand to his chest, like a moth to the flame, full of crazy confidence, never more certain of anything in her life. “And it

doesn't matter, because I know that I want to be in your arms. I know that I want you...to be my first...please?"

The frown and crinkled brow returned with more intensity, but this time he took her hand. "Come with me."

Was it the tone of her voice, she wondered, the imploring in her eyes, or maybe just the implications of her pleading that had tipped the scales? Whatever it was, it was happening, he was taking the reins.

"Yes, Raylar," she sighed.

Stars, yes.

Raylar stopped on the way out just long enough to instruct an auto-server to charge their drinks to the Guardian accounts. Hailing one of the egg-shaped bubble transports lined up in front of the restaurant, he helped her in. As she slid across the smooth, luxuriant seat to make room for Raylar, she got a new idea.

A devilish one at that.

Seeing as how their room was minutes away in the cross-dome traffic and the bubble transport was here and now, incredibly cozy and intimate with its rounded, smoky roof, why not take advantage? So what if they would be zipping past thousands of other bubbles, not to mention the countless rockets, aircars and ped floaters? Why not sex-making suspended, as it were, above the entire population? This little bubble could be their own little world. And unless she missed her guess, the seat in a transport bubble reclined pretty far.

"Destination?" inquired the mechanical voice of the bubble's guidance computer as Raylar took his place.

"The Star Ring Hotel," he said, his voice husky.

"Destination acknowledged. Estimated time of arrival will be twenty-one minutes."

Actually, she planned to be arriving a lot sooner.

Seria waited until the bubble top slid over them, hiding them, partially at least, from the rest of the world.

"Please secure yourselves in a safe position," chimed the mechanical voice of the bubble's guidance computer.

Seria chose Raylar's lap.

The sudden move caught him off guard. "What are you doing, woman?"

"I'm getting in a safe place." She squirmed, her giddiness half from alcohol and half from him.

"Safe for who?" he growled.

"For me," she beamed. Her hands found the opening to his uniform. Hungry, starving, she pulled at the material, baring as much of his chest as she could manage. So much skin and so much powerful, primale muscle. Her small fingers did their work,

sliding with electric intensity over his pectorals and down to his rock-hard abdomen, outstandingly ribbed.

Stars, he was like a drug. She could barely keep from biting as she leaned in and pressed her lips to the hollow of his neck. She wanted to be touching, licking, consuming him everywhere at once. She wanted inside his mind. She wanted him inside her body.

Curious, she dabbed her tongue at his nipple. He jolted. "Ooo, did I hurt it?" she exclaimed.

"No, they're just sensitive."

"Oh, good." She dove in to bite it.

"Hey, easy." Raylar seized her hair, pulling her head back.

"I'm sorry," she cooed. "You want to get me back?" Her hands moved to the front of her dress, fumbling for the opening.

The material gave way, allowing her breasts to spring free. Ready. Nipples erect, swollen with desire. "Do you like them, Raylar? Nyssa said I have very nice ones."

He responded with a lionlike growl, immediately taking one of the morsels into his mouth. She cried out in soft, deep affirmation as he suckled, working his tongue greedily over the nipple, clamping deliciously with his teeth. She kept on saying "Yes", her fingers running through his short, bristling hair.

"Darling, darling..." moaned Seria. "Don't make me wait. Fuck me now."

She was wriggling, trying to pull her dress up to her waist.

"Seria, not in the bubble. Are you crazy?"

"Why not now?" She thrust her breasts against him, rubbing her hands over his cock. Artless as she was, she had the right biology to get the job done.

In a moment or so he was groaning, ready to rip the thing off her.

"Here, let's try it like this." She tried to guide his hands. Lifting her ass, she pulled at the hem of the thing, hiking it higher and higher. Her breasts posed a tempting target, especially with all the movements she was making. He kept reaching for them. His actions were a two-edged sword, because as good as it felt it was also slowing things down.

"Ow," he grumbled, bumping his head on the roof.

Seria couldn't keep from laughing. It was a nervous habit.

"It's not funny," he insisted.

"Oh, baby, I'm sorry," she breathed.

Gathering the material at her waist, she managed to bare her pussy and her ass both. Now there was Raylar's uniform to contend with. The opening at the crotch was one of those micro-magnetic mini-locks. His cock emerged completely erect, larger than any she had ever seen on the hologrid. Her heart skipped several beats. It was reddish-purple with veins protruding. At once beautifully smooth, there was also a kind of

primal roughness to it. A hardness, like super-metal. From anatomy lessons she knew his balls would be tight and full, containing the semen that a male shot into the female upon ejaculation.

Oh, stars, was she ready for this? Was his cock really going inside her? *Her first one.*

Raylar saw her nervousness. "We should wait," he grimaced, his hands at her waist, attempting to keep their sexes from fusing.

She could see in his face how it was hurting him to hold back. She could also see how he would do anything in the world not to hurt her. This one expression, more than anything, sealed her confidence. None of the rest, not Nyssa and Theron's great speeches, not even her supposed destiny mattered compared to this.

"It's all right," she assured him. "I don't want you to hold back." She was so wet already, and so hot. She could no more keep this tide at bay than she could stop a sunrise. Whatever abyss they were plunging into, they were fated to do so together.

Raylar mouthed a mild curse. There was no resisting her power, no fighting the call of raw lust. The bobbing transport bubble provided them a cushion of sheer air even as he lowered her down onto the tip of his red-hot cock. He moaned, his head thrust back with the sheer male joy of a warrior. She sucked in a breath, her body trembling all over as he filled her, inch by inch, a glorious, slow-motion descent. It felt like eons, her heartbeats stretched to eternity. At a certain point she felt a slight tearing, the rupturing of her hymen. There was a trickle, warm and wet. For barely a second, it was uncomfortable, but then the pleasure came back with a vengeance. Down the slippery slope into a cool jungle valley. A million times yes, a million tiny explosions up and down her spine. *So this is what it's like*, her mind kept telling her. *I'm making sex...making sex...*

It was all so very exhilarating, almost frightening, but she knew she was safe. Raylar had perfect control of her body. Indeed she had never felt safer and more at home than she did now in his grip, her weight effortless in his powerful arms. She could scarcely believe they had only met today. The way he handled her body was amazing, like they'd known each other all their lives. Or maybe before. It was as if instinctively he knew how much she could take and how fast.

"Got to...go slow," he grunted, the sweet tension evident on his handsome face.

"Yes, lover. Yes." She didn't mind him dragging it out. His cock felt so good. It was as hot as fire, but it caused no pain, it occupied every open part of her, but it did not overfill her.

"Oh, Seria," he said her name, the reverberations extending all the way to her pussy.

She clawed at his bared chest, wanting to be in his skin and under it. "Raylar..." she said his name back, the single time a down payment on the million times she wanted to pronounce it.

He took her down, all the way until she was fully impaled. Her pelvis touched his. She couldn't believe she had taken so much of him inside her. It was at this point she

remembered the power primales reputedly had to control the size of their erections. Was he being merciful and keeping his to a minimum? If so, what would he be like fully expanded? The very thought made her head swim.

She was at his mercy. And she had put herself there, freely.

Seria looked at him, the awe obvious in her eyes. He cupped her cheeks in his hands, drawing her in close to deliver a kiss. His lips burnt, like parching her soul, and yet he was the water, too, the cool liquid she needed to survive. She gave access to her mouth, allowing him to probe. To explore. To possess. It was all so silently beautiful, their hearts attuned, connected, excited, and sublime.

Meanwhile the bubble continued to purr along, like a tiny star hung on the firmament of the dome heavens. Its computer, oblivious to the lust being enacted by the craft's occupants, kept on plotting their course, a plodding, miniature electrobrain operating the engines that would take them to their hotel.

And more sex-making.

The city was oblivious, too. A pulsing mass of millions outside the bubble, a teeming host that might as well have been a galaxy away.

"We won't consummate here," Raylar declared, releasing her lips at long last. "We must build the anticipation."

His level of control both inflamed and frustrated her. She didn't have it in her to wait, though she secretly marveled at a man who could. "But we can do it again when we get to the room," she offered. "Can't we?"

He freed her hair from his grip, allowing it to cascade over her shoulders, shimmering, artificially altered to silver by the machine. She liked it better than her own color. She wondered if he did, too.

"Yes we can," he agreed, running his fingers through it. "But the first time—your first time—must be perfect."

Seria felt a surge of frustration.

Why? Why did he care so much about the quality of her experience? Anyway, that was up to her to decide. It was her body, after all.

"This is perfect already." She rocked her hips, reminding him that he had already breached her hymen, making this the first time, here and now.

Raylar took hold of her shoulders, his fingers pressing firmly, not painfully. "Be still, woman."

Seria felt the gush in response to his touch, warm and fresh from between her thighs. Something in her body kept responding to this man. It was an instant link, almost primal in its heat. "Yes, Raylar."

She was not in control.

The implications were sexy, a little unnerving, but totally exciting. She wanted him now. She wanted *it* ten times as bad. But it would come at his pace. Her body's deep pleasures would be unlocked at his discretion, according to his timetable. She ought to

rebel, but that wasn't what she felt. Instead she had this insane desire to offer herself even more, to seek to make him want it, to want her to the point of losing control.

Was this a means to sexual power, though, or just a road to further weakness and helplessness? Stars, did it matter? It certainly felt good. She decided to play her hand, to see if she could push things further along.

"Does it arouse you," she whispered, making sure not to move a muscle, "when I obey you?"

His eyes narrowed. He was obviously too smart to fall for any feminine trap. "Obedience is a prerequisite, Seria. It is understood."

Seria felt hot tingles. Something in the tone of his voice. Not threatening, but quite firm. The question was begged, of course, what would he do if she did not obey? She knew what he *could* do, at least with regard to issues of ship's discipline. But was she subject to spanking for sexual peccadilloes?

Her pussy was spasming, still occupied, and conquered. Clenching and unclenching on its own. There was the distinct possibility, strange as it might seem that she could come right now, just like this, filled with cock, not the least bit of actual fucking going on. If she wasn't careful to stop turning herself on with this conversation...

"If you had a mate," Seria speculated, wondering for the millionth time what to do with her hands, how to keep them off his body, so luscious and strong and touchable. "She would have to obey you...in bed, I mean."

"And outside of it," he replied, not one sign of sexual strain showing on his face. "But I don't have a mate, Seria. And I am not looking for one."

Amazing. The more worked up she became, the more sexually consumed, the more self-possessed he became. She could see this was his element. Domination.

"I'm not either." She was painfully aware of her breathing and what it did to her breasts. Her rapid intake of air made them rise and fall quickly, rendering them very tempting targets.

Or so she thought. He couldn't keep his hands or mouth off them a few minutes ago. Why wasn't he itching to touch and grope and suckle her now? And how could he endure being inside her without needing to move, to come?

"Raylar?"

"Yes?"

She knew it was a losing proposition, asking questions that only highlighted her own growing insecurity and weakness, but she couldn't help herself. It was part of the deal somehow. "Do you find me attractive...really?"

"Why are you asking me?"

There. He'd done it. Pinned her to the wall, leaving her no choice but to reveal her weakness. And she did not have it in her to do anything but squirm. And hope he would enjoy the show. She could hate herself for all this later with her more dignified

fem half. For now she was just another obedient, though, offering up everything for scraps of male pleasure. "I...I've not been able to tell before, that's all."

He eyed her suspiciously. Her behavior was aberrant and he knew it. No fem should ever doubt that. No fem should ever care. Fems looked out for what they could get *from* men, not what they had to receive in order to feel whole.

"You're a beautiful woman," he said simply. "That's obvious."

Her heart sang. "I'm not looking for flattery," she offered quickly, trying to hide the surge of emotion.

It was too little, too late.

"You're not like the others." He shook his head.

He seemed worried, concerned. For a split second she feared he was going to change his mind about making sex with her. "I can be like them, though. I can be like anyone you want, if you teach me."

Stars, what had made her say that? That was downright mentally unhealthy, taking that kind of attitude.

"You must be you and no one else," he said firmly. "I have no say in the matter."

She shook her head. That wasn't so. What he said, what he felt and what he wanted did matter to her. Much more than she wanted to admit. He must know that, too, so why wasn't he going to take advantage? Tears formed in her eyes. So many strange feelings. Where were they all coming from?

"You're pretty thin-skinned," he observed, "for a diplomat."

When it came to romance, yes, she thought, though ironically enough, she was considered quite skilled at her profession. She had graduated top of her class and finished her trials in record time. Looking at it now, she wondered if it wasn't that half-obedient mix that didn't make her such an effective, yet humble negotiator, ideally suited for interplanetary affairs, where being overly thick-skinned was a definite drawback.

"I'd say in your case, I didn't do a very good job staying objective," she teased.

Raylar lifted her, removing her from his cock and setting her back down beside him. He did so in a single motion—smooth, effortless and efficient. "We will be landing in a few moments," he said. "We need to prepare ourselves."

He meant they needed to remove the sexual evidence and cover themselves. She had to smile a little at his tact. He would make a pretty good diplomat himself, she decided.

"There's a little blood," she whispered, looking down at her thighs.

"I know. I'll take care of it," he said, removing the small, handheld molecular cleaning device from the door panel of the bubble. All vehicles, and most residential rooms, had these. They were designed to remove stains, by molecular zapping.

"Open," said Raylar, indicating her legs.

Seria's pulse quickened. Her thighs parted, baring her sex, glistening and throbbing. Zappers didn't emit any sort of energy a person could feel, but Seria swore she could sense the charge nonetheless as he skimmed the small nozzle gently over her thighs.

There was no mistaking the symbolism. Fems did not spread their sex blindly for primales, giving them full and total access, no matter what the purpose.

The blood was dealt with easily, but to her shame they found they could not dry her sex. With each removal came fresh liquid, from deep inside her needy pussy.

"I feel so cheap and tawdry," she blurted.

"Nonsense," said Raylar, putting her instantly at ease. "You're a normal, healthy female. Look at me. I can barely control my reactions around you – and I'm a primale."

She smiled weakly. He had no idea the infinite gratitude he had just won.

His hand was gentle on her shoulder, though it sent rivulets of white flame to every nerve ending. "Put your clothes back on, okay, Seria?"

Seria nodded, her belly in flames. He had phrased it as a request, but as she sought to pull the skimpy gown back over her heated breasts, she was exquisitely aware that he was in charge here, by her own wishes. Which meant that everything he said was an order and every response on her part would be an act of obedience, pure and simple.

The idea struck her fancy, though at the moment, she wanted different orders to follow. Sexual orders. Things she must do to him, and for him. To give him pleasure, ultimately leading to orgasm. And through this, to find her own release in the very acts he commanded.

Her fingers trembled as she tried to work the complex straps. She was useless at the task of dressing. "Raylar," she whispered, her voice painfully feminine and sweetly naked in the tiny metallic bubble. "Will you..."

He didn't need her to finish the thought. "Sit forward," he said.

His hands were so gentle, his fingers so amazingly delicate. She swooned as the tips of them brushed her skin. How could the same touch be like fire and ice and soothing water all at once?

She felt her eyes sliding closed. Trust. That was the word that came to mind. Unbidden, her parched lips opened for him, forming a tiny circle. Like a baby bird, she arched her neck.

"No more," he denied her silent request for a kiss. "Until we are in the room."

Request? Who was she kidding? She had thrown herself at him and been denied. Put in her place. Raylar was in charge here, and he had earned that right, by virtue of his superior willpower. Not to mention his inherent manhood, sexually explosive yet beautifully, powerfully contained, like the jungle cat on the prowl, in total lordship over its surroundings.

"Yes, Raylar." She wanted to call him something more. Something befitting their relationship—nebulous, yet hierarchical. Were she a mere obedient, a hundred percent submissive, it would be ever so much simpler. She would call him Lord, or Master.

"Raylar?"

"What is it?"

The bubble was setting down on a landing platform, on the lip of the saucer-shaped hotel. "Destination achieved," the computer told them. "Please enjoy your night and don't forget to use Dome Bubble, Incorporated in the future for all your transport needs."

"Never mind." She couldn't share her dilemma. He seemed suspicious enough about her nature already. She would have to muddle her way through. Continuing to fool him into thinking she was a fem, even if an awkward, uncertain one.

Hopefully he was chalking it all up to her virginity.

His brow crinkled as he studied her. She felt naked to her soul. Was he catching the blush, all the way to her cleavage? "Suit yourself," he said as the bubble top lifted automatically to reveal a busy landing area, with robot doormen scurrying to and fro to help the various guests from their vehicles.

The curved surface of the attached hotel glistened in the dim light of the night, rising up to the stars. They were still floating, halfway between the top of the dome and the ground, though motion could no longer be felt. Seria's stomach knotted a little looking up at all the tiny lights along the outer walls. They represented private rooms, one of which was reserved for her and Raylar.

To sleep in. Together.

She made no effort to move as he hopped out and came around to the passenger side. She doubted her legs would work no matter how hard she tried. As for the prospect of walking into the hotel, through the lobby past hundreds of people, in her present state, she would as soon try and negotiate a treaty with a batch of hungry Delorian bloodsuckers.

Fortunately, Raylar had no intention of overextending or exposing her. "A blanket, please," he ordered a hovering sphere-shaped arrival robot. "The lady is a bit overtired."

She had her wrap, of course, but to Raylar's primale mind, you could never protect a female too much.

"Certainly, Sir." A series of lights flashed on the display monitor and a door panel slid open. A folded blanket lay inside. It was one of a thousand or so simple items the machine could generate from its atomic memory bank.

"Thank you," said Raylar as though it were human. He proceeded to wrap Seria, covering her completely in the smooth, soft material—silver like her hair. Next he scooped her out of the seat, cradling her limp body.

It was instant heaven.

She pressed her cheek to his chest, relishing the sound of his heartbeat and the feel of his strong muscles. She could stay like this forever. Except there was so much else she wanted. Most of it she only knew by name or visual images. Before this night was over, she wanted it to be real.

By dome's dawn, she vowed, she would be Raylar's. And he would be hers.

Whatever that would mean exactly, she wasn't sure. A good part of her brain was quite aware that he was the fire and she was the moth. Fortunately or unfortunately, that part of her brain had been outvoted.

It was the other part that ruled now. The part connected to her body. Her inquisitive, starving, desirous body. A body that would never know peace—until it knew him.

Chapter Four

Raylar carried Seria across the threshold into the hotel room, his mind whirling with activity. He had been a fool not to see it earlier. There was definitely something suspicious going on here. General Theron would never put him into a situation in violation of the Code without having some greater scheme in mind. This was no ordinary woman he was being asked to fly across the galaxy all by his lonesome.

He could not put his finger on what it was about her exactly, nor could he fathom what the General's motives might be in wanting the two of them together. Was he supposed to mate with her? If so, for what purpose? He was a warrior. It was all well and good the General had a happily-ever-after life with High Councilor Nyssa, but he could hardly expect that for Raylar.

Looking about the room, he decided on an optimum strategy. The décor was set to default—sterile, hyperspace-age white on the walls, floors and ceilings. The bed was disc-shaped, covered in a white artificial fur. His cock strained at the sight of it. The way Seria fit against him in his arms, the way he had fit inside her in the transportation bubble, he wanted her so badly it hurt. Not taking her right now on that bed was going to be one of the toughest things he had ever done in his life.

But this was not the time for sex-making. As a matter of fact, there would never be a good time to make sex with this woman. What he needed was information. Who was she, really, and why did Nyssa and Theron want so badly for him to be in her company in such tight quarters?

It occurred to him that he was likely going to have to interrogate her. Damn. How was he supposed to do that? Any form of physical discomfort or abuse was out of the question. He would have cut off his own right hand before allowing any harm to come to the mysterious little female.

Strange to feel such a bond to her. And yet he did not know her not at all, nor could he trust her to tell the truth of her own accord. It might be she was a victim here, like he was, but it was also possible she knew a hell of a lot more than she was letting on.

Raylar looked about for inspiration. The holograph on the wall, a nude goddess swinging a golden lariat representing the power of spinning Creation gave him an idea. "Décor arranger," he called out to the computer responsible for changing the room into whatever its guests desired. "Give me a Moorish sultan's bedroom. Equip it for slave-keeping and disciplining."

"Certainly," said the disembodied voice.

Seria trembled in his arms. Raylar felt again the contradictions in her. The fem part was there, the stiffening, the bodily rejection, but there was that other response, too—hot, almost welcoming.

"Does this meet your requirements?" The machine had transformed their surroundings. The bed was of intricate carved wood, four posts with a silk canopy. The walls were sandstone, painted with images of mounted, turbaned warriors fiercely wielding long, curved scimitars. The floor was pink marble, with cushions cast here and there along with several sturdy iron rings to which long chains could be attached. A rack of whips and long, thin instruments of discipline stood beside one of these.

Raylar noted the rings at the four corners of the bed, as well. A woman could be chained there, spread-eagled, conveniently secured for male penetration.

A woman like Seria. He thought of her, there, her eyes limpid pools of anticipation, her sexual heat so plainly evident in the heat of her skin, the motions of her breasts, the swollen nipples. Never had he known this kind of desire, this kind of raw, mindless need.

"This is good," he confirmed, attempting to keep his voice calm. "If you could do me one more favor, though."

"Of course, Sir."

Raylar was sometimes teased for his habit of treating computers and robots like they were people. He preferred to keep things simple. By acting courteously toward any voice or being, he need not ever make mental adjustments in his head, as to when to be polite or not. In his mind it would be all too easy to take the next step and treat people better or worse based on career or function. As far as he was concerned, all were equal, the more so for their particular differences.

This Seria was a real puzzle, though. A part of him wanted to accord her the fullest respect, but another part wanted to treat her...differently. Not disrespectfully, but with the inherent domination born of a primale.

In short, he was troubled by visions of her kneeling at his feet. And him enjoying the experience most thoroughly.

"I need a chain from the ceiling and shackles," he told the décor maker.

"You wish to secure the female?"

"Yes." The objective tone of the machine's question and his own reply sent a little charge down his spine. It was true and real. He was going to put Seria into bondage. Not for idle sex-making, but for purposes of information collection.

He had no choice, after all. There was deception afoot. His training was to trust nothing implicitly, not even the word of his highest superior. There was always the higher loyalty. To the Code. And behind this the implicit purpose of fighting for justice, and for the survival of the human race against the Narthians.

Raylar stood Seria on her feet. She was wobbly, unsteady. "What are you going to do?" she wanted to know.

"We need to get clear about some things. Lift your arms. Hands above your head."

She obeyed instantly, showing a grace and submissive beauty that nearly cracked open the seals of his tightly riveted heart. *This was no fem.* Raylar reached for her wrists,

to secure them in the cuffs. With her heels on, the fit was perfect. Barefoot, however, she would be forced to stand on tiptoe.

"Have I done something wrong?" she asked.

He beheld her beauty. His now, until such time as he saw fit to release her. For a moment he confined himself to memorizing every detail, silently drinking it all in, her hands limp in the polysteel bonds, her breasts rising and falling lightly, the current state of bondage increasing the fullness of her cleavage. "So far? No. To keep it that way, however, you will need to cooperate."

She licked her lips, the action of her tongue quick, snakelike. "I will," she said, her voice husky.

Raylar frowned, his cock once again treated to a jolt of unsatisfied lust. Were she aware of the effects of her behavior in tantalizing him he would punish her quite soundly. As it was, he was quite convinced of her innocence.

Just another of the anomalies in the sexy, silver-haired woman.

"Don't make promises you aren't equipped to keep," he warned.

"I'll face the consequences, Raylar." Her eyes were trancelike. "After all, you're the sultan, right?"

"Forget the background, it's incidental."

Was it, though? Why had he chosen something with such strong connotations of female submission when he could simply have asked for the chains, the cuffs and been done with it?

"Yes, Raylar."

Blast her docility.

In a single motion, he tore down the front of her dress, baring her breasts. "You play with fire, woman, do you know that? Have you any idea what a primale can do? The effect he can have over a female? I could ruin you for any other man."

Seria didn't flinch. "I am in your chains." She met his bluster. "At your mercy."

He took hold of her nipple. "Primals have no mercy. Haven't you heard?"

Raylar did not relent until she was whimpering. To her credit, she did not beg him to stop. "Who are you?" he demanded, shredding the remains of her dress.

"I'm Seria." Her dress was at her feet. She was naked and her voice held no defiance. He had asked her name and she had told him.

"Don't toy with me." His hand moved between her legs. She had no clue to the kind of torture she was in for. "There's more to this. You're hiding something."

She gasped as he parted her sex lips, penetrating at will with his fingers. She gushed in reply, her hot opening more than ready for his attentions. "Raylar, I swear."

Raylar found her clitoris. Did she think she was dealing with some kind of amateur here? He was a Guardian, and a specially trained one at that. He knew everything about

the human body and how to drive it to utter distraction. "Have you ever been held at the brink of orgasm, Seria? For five minutes? A half-hour? A whole night?"

She shook her head. The look on her face indicated she was not ready for so much as five seconds.

"You will tell me everything," he informed her. "You'll start at the beginning, and you'll go to the end. You'll leave nothing out. Every fact, every detail. Even the things you thought you forgot, the things you didn't even know you knew. Are we clear?"

Seria was shivering. "Y-yes."

"Step out of your shoes," he commanded.

She did so, planting her bare toes on the cold marble. As predicted, she could not touch the heels of her feet to the floor. Her calves flexed beautifully, naturally. She looked born to be this way. Bound according to his whim, her body at maximum display, for maximum pleasure.

"From this point forward," he told her, "you may consider yourself my slave. Until I say otherwise."

Where had that come from? Surely not from any tactical rationale? It wasn't even remotely true. She was neither slave nor technically even a prisoner.

"Yes, Master."

The words on her lips, spoken without hesitation nearly derailed him. Did she really see him that way? Did she have deep and abiding feelings? No, it couldn't be. She was speaking this way because he had her helpless. She would agree to anything, her body as vulnerable as it was.

"You do know something more about this mission," he said, removing his soaked fingers and putting them to her lips. "Don't you?"

"Yes, Master."

He pressed the glistening tips to her lips. She did not have to be told what to do. His cock pushed outward, nearly rending the material of his trousers as he felt her sweet, dabbing tongue. Slowly, methodically, she licked him clean, taking back her own inner moisture.

He pushed his fingers deeper, making her suck. She was a natural. He could only imagine how glorious it would feel to feed her his cock, letting it swell in her mouth to its natural proportions. Why did he feel like his cock was made for this? For this and everything else where Seria was concerned.

But that couldn't be the case. He was not born for any woman. Not with the job he held, not with what his eyes had seen. In truth, that part of him had already died, back on Rensus Nine. He could no longer feel in his heart the deepest things. The things of life and love. He was a warrior now and nothing more.

Impulsively, he touched her clit, just to see the look on her face, the expression, half angel, and half fire-demon. She was hot, this one, in more ways than one. He was more

than a little tempted to punish her for teasing him all night. "Let's start with your outfit tonight. Who picked it out?"

"Nyssa," she replied in a small, soft moan.

He wanted to make her come, but he had to hold back. "And the change in your hair? That was her idea, as well?"

"Yes...Master."

"Why? For what purpose?"

"To...to please you. To make you...interested."

Now they were getting somewhere. "And why would High Councilor Nyssa care if I was interested in you?"

Her thighs were slick with fresh emission. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead. Her tight, firm belly was undulating. He wanted to break the chains with his primale hands, bring her to the bed and lay her down. Slip inside her, sheathe his cock in her deep warmth, allow her to surrender herself. Completely.

"Please." She shook her head, more pitifully than defiantly. "Don't make me tell."

"I will make you," he retorted, without malice. "I absolutely will."

She gave a little cry of frustration as he took his hand away. Denying. Helplessly, she pushed out her pelvis into the air, begging. "Oh, don't stop."

Raylar bent to take one of her perfect nipples in his mouth. The sudden pressure broke her resistance. "I...I will tell you." She writhed in her bonds.

He bit down, just hard enough to push her along.

"They want us together. Nyssa said we were...made for each other."

Reluctantly, he released the little nub—rubbery, swollen and so very delicious. "What do you mean? Made for each other?"

"It's...complicated. I don't know how it all works. Supposedly we were engineered. Given compatible genes."

"Impossible."

"I thought so, too."

"If you are lying..." He looked at her sternly.

"I swear." She shook her head earnestly. "Raylar...Master...I'm telling you what I was told."

He ran a hand over her smooth, creamy breast, and across her taut, sweet belly. All this magnificent female flesh. Could it really be his?

"Have you ever been spanked, Seria?"

"N-no," she replied.

"Of course not. You're a fem." He spoke the word with slight irony. "Fems don't get spanked by males. Unless they want it, for sex-making. Obedients, on the other hand, are subject to discipline. On their lovely asses."

He paid attention to her breathing. The slight increase in her heart rate measurable with his extra senses. The extra micro-motions of her eyelids. The almost invisible twitching of her lips. She was hiding something, most definitely.

The tremors in her body as he rubbed her behind, only confirmed it.

Extending two fingers on his opposite hand, he poised them at her labia. "Impale yourself," he ordered.

Seria moved against him, her expression a mix of dread and need. She was hot and wet, her pussy incredibly tight and greedily grasping. If he were to move his fingers just so, she would come at once. But she had a long way to go to earn that privilege.

She managed to take him inside her to the second knuckle.

"More," he told her.

"I...I can't."

"Do you want a spanking?"

She looked at him, her smoldering eyes belying the expression of shock. The little vixen did want it. And badly.

"No, please." Struggling, she surrendered further to the invasion.

Still he was not satisfied. "All the way. Take them all the way, like a cock."

Seria hesitated for a second. All the time he needed to administer a swat, clean and crisp, to her shapely buttocks. She reacted like lightning had hit her, though she had nowhere to go but deeper into her temporary slavery.

"Look at me."

She was fully speared, at the utter mercy of his fingers. Her eyes dripped wonder and lust.

"Who are you?" he repeated.

"They told me..." she said huskily. "They said...I'm a hybrid. Master, I need to come."

"No. That will have to wait. Who told you that you were a hybrid? Nyssa? The General?"

"Yes. They said, I'm not...I'm not pure like everyone else."

"What the hell does that mean?" This was making less sense by the minute.

"I'm half..." she said, her brain largely preoccupied by what was happening to her sex. "Half one, half the other."

The truth hit Raylar like a sunrise on Mineus Two. Fast, explosive and world-changing. *Half one, half the other.* "You have obedient genetics mixed with your fem nature," he supplied.

She nodded her head. Raylar considered the matter. She was speaking of an utter impossibility, and yet it all made sense if you looked at the evidence. Her odd behavior and the inherent contradictions within her. Not to mention the conflicts she stirred in

him. On the one hand, he wanted to steer clear of her like a Narthian Mother Nest, and on the other, he wanted her collared and chained, yielding to him. Absolutely.

"What you speak is tantamount to treason," he pointed out. "The Council could bring you up on charges for spreading such lies."

"That's how you know I am not lying. I'm telling you what they told me. The Council itself is behind all this. Nyssa is a hybrid, too. Fem and primale."

He clenched his teeth. Now there was a piece of news. So Theron didn't just have a fem wife to contend with, but one who was half primale.

"You mustn't tell," said Seria. "I would be in so much trouble."

"You are in trouble now," he reminded, moving his fingers just enough to make her squirm.

She suppressed a moan, halfway between pleasure and agony. "Yes, Master."

"Why would the Council make...mixed people?" he continued the interrogation. "I see no rationale. Society is perfect."

Seria thrashed her head. "Something about needing new types, to face new crises. New mating bonds, new...flexibility."

He thought of the Narthians, and what he had seen on Rensus Nine. If their enemy was evolving, shouldn't they be as well? Could it be their leaders had foreseen this need years ago?

"What about me?" he asked, seeking to poke holes in her story. "If what you say about us being made compatible is true, then shouldn't I be some kind of a mixture, too?"

"No, you are a hundred percent primale. You had to be that way to fulfill your function. You've just been given a predisposition to be attracted to me."

That was an understatement.

"If all this is true," he asked, "then why wasn't I told?"

"Nyssa said you wouldn't go along with it. You had to fall for me." Tears dotted her eyes. "It's too late now, though. Everything's ruined. We'll never be...we'll never be mated like we're supposed to."

He felt a little stab in his heart. So this was about matchmaking...

"You mean your little ruse failed," he retorted, covering over the pain.

"I didn't want to trick you," she said. "Honestly."

Raylar believed her. Still, he wondered how long she had been carrying secrets. "Have you always known who you are?"

"Not until today. I met Nyssa and she told me everything. She's my sister, you know. With chosen genetics, there are specific biological sources. Our father is Morax, the former head of the Guardians."

Raylar was momentarily taken aback. Morax was one of the finest generals of the last century. "You can't have finer genetics than that."

He looked at her with fresh eyes. The old General's daughter. Could such a thing really be possible?

"Our mothers are different. Nyssa's maternal genetics belong to Dekalia, the former High Councilor. My mother was an obedient, no longer living. I never knew her."

Raylar tried to comprehend that kind of loss. To be separated forever from a part of oneself, even a part one never knew existed. Was it anything like losing brothers in battle?

"I am sorry," he told her. His hand reached for her cheek, to wipe away the tear that was trickling down her face. He knew nothing of comforting females, but she seemed to derive comfort from his touch.

"Raylar," she whispered his name, as though it had never before been pronounced on human lips.

Indeed, it had never sounded that way before. Sweet, meaningful. Richly complicated, too, with everything rolled into it, from the title of Master he had had her use earlier, to many other things he could not yet begin to imagine.

He knew he *shouldn't* try and imagine it, either. What he ought to do was to unchain her, put her to bed and head straight to the General for reassignment. The last thing he could afford as a die-hard warrior was a romantic attachment. He had a fate, a destiny, far in space, and he would likely never return.

And even if he did, this woman needed more than he could give. The Council might know his genetics, but he knew the reality of the man he had grown into. He was no lover. No caretaker or potential mate.

Walking away, though, that was going to be hard. As hard as his cock.

Seria must have been reading the struggle in his heart. "Don't leave me," she implored. "Stay. Make sex with me."

That was the trouble, he thought grimly. There could easily be more here than sex. "That's not possible." He removed his fingers from her soft, yielding opening. "I'm sorry."

"It is possible," she defied. "If you want it to be."

"You are supposed to be half obedient. Obedients don't argue."

"The other half of me is fem," she reminded. "As if you haven't been enjoying that part of me, too."

He suppressed a smile. She was far too engaging for her own good.

"Teach me, Raylar." She was pushing herself, reaching and stretching. "You've already been the first inside me...finish what you started."

She felt good against him. Breasts and belly rubbing. Too good. "It's not that simple. There are implications when a primale takes a woman to bed. It's not bragging to say she is changed. So is the man—it is often difficult afterward to disengage."

"Are you saying you are too weak?" she challenged. "Is my poor little body too much for you?"

"Hardly." It was as close to a lie as he'd ever told. "It's you I'm worried about."

"I can handle myself."

Damn, if she wasn't egging him on. "You weren't handling yourself a little while ago," he reminded. "You were quite beside yourself as I recall."

"You have me chained up. Let me free, and see what I can do."

"It's almost worth it," he mused. "Just to see you try."

"You can make sex with me tonight," she tempted him, "and get it over with. I will be out of your system and then you won't have anything to worry about when we're in the spaceship together."

"That's female logic."

"The only kind there is..."

"More likely I would only want you again."

Her eyes twinkled. "So you're saying you can't handle it, after all?"

"I've never backed down from a challenge in my life."

"In that case, I'm waiting...Warrior."

His hands moved to the shackles above her head. Not bothering with the keys, he snapped the metal. "You may be sorry," he warned, scooping her into his arms.

She felt good there, natural and comfortable. Exciting, too, in ways he couldn't begin to describe. Now it was his turn to feel desire mixed with dread.

Someone would be sorry, all right, but it could as easily be him.

A lump formed in his throat as he laid her down on the plush, red silk of the conjured Sultan's bed. What a beauty she was. How incredibly irresistible. Not wishing to take his eyes off her for a second he tore off his uniform, baring his primale body.

Compared to Raylar's genetically perfect, exquisitely developed form, the finest statues paled. His was a chiseled male strength, unadulterated masculine delight, from his well-formed biceps to the smooth pectorals and muscle-ripped abdomen. Not an ounce of fat, not an ounce of waste, skin bronzed and squeaky clean, his cock rock-hard, his nipples tight, his jaw set with powerful need.

The air between them came alive. Desire and lust danced in the open space, and...memory.

Almost as if she were no stranger at all, but his oldest, most trusted friend.

Pushing the notion from his head, he pressed on with the challenge at hand. "Prepare to submit," he declared, "my little slave."

Seria grinned impishly, indicating that she was more than ready to give him a run for his money. "Whatever you say." She winked, head on the pillow, hair luxuriously spread, her body in irresistible repose. "*Master*."

Raylar flipped her over, eliciting a squeal. It was time to get the upper hand. Literally.

* * * * *

Seria knew she had pushed things just a little too far. One just did not tease a primale about his dominance. Especially when one was a naked, desirable female, lying completely available in his bed.

"Raylar, what are you going to do?" she asked, though it was all too obvious why he had put her on her stomach, her bare ass exposed.

"The one thing a woman understands," he said. "At least an obedient one."

She wanted to remind him about the fifty percent deal, and how half of her would most definitely *not* respond to the punishment of a man's hand, but she didn't think that would help things any at this juncture. Instead, she aimed for a more general form of mercy. "I've never been spanked," she reminded him.

"That's about to change." He struck her firmly, sending a wave of fire through her behind and up her spine.

"Ow, that hurts," she complained.

He struck her again. Harder. "You have forgotten to call me Master," he reminded.

She was still twitching. She could feel a line of glistening moisture forming along the crack of her clean, hairless pussy. What a view he must be enjoying.

"This isn't fair," she attempted to squirm free, "Master. I didn't do anything to deserve this."

He pressed a hand to her lower back, holding her fast. "You don't need to have done anything. Primales behave as they will toward their women."

Waves of indignation rose, combined with soul-searing desire. "You said I wasn't yours. You didn't want me. I'm just...an innocent bystander."

"That's not so. I hold you partially responsible for all this," he informed her. "You knowingly deceived me. At no point did you resist the plans of your so-called sister, nor did you volunteer the truth to me."

It was true, and yet the whole thing seemed so unfair. How could she have gone against Nyssa—even if she'd wanted to? "I didn't mean to hurt you, Raylar. You have to believe me." She pleaded her case as best she could in her current predicament. "I just didn't know what else to do."

"That I do believe," he conceded, his firm voice resounding with just enough mercy to give her hope. "But the results of your actions are the same regardless of intent."

Seria felt a flash of temper. Would she ever get a break from this man? "So I'm guilty no matter what. Why even ask me questions, Raylar? Why not just beat me and get it over with?"

"Because," he slipped a finger between her pink pussy lips, still exposed, still engorged, "it is my will that you surrender to your punishment. Like a good obedient."

Seria moaned, the desire flooding her all over again. In a few seconds he managed to rekindle all the earlier heat and more.

"Had you not considered," he inquired, "the effects of your earlier appearance on me? Your body, scantily clad before my eyes? The scent of your cunningly applied perfume? Did you not realize what you would do to my primale blood?"

Seria squirmed, trying to avoid the truth.

In theory, yes, she knew what he meant. She had seen the hard-on to back it up, too. As for what it felt like to be him, she had no clue. As a diplomat, she should have immediately sought to reflect on the matter empathetically—instead she had played it differently. Dreading, and yet at the same time almost relishing, her position as femme fatale.

His finger snaked inside her, flicking over the surface of her engorged clitoris. Waves of deep pleasure surged through her, one after another, tight and hot. With each one, she generated more liquid, the essence of her female surrender, trickling from her gaping sex.

Stars, he knew how to play with her anatomy better than she did. "I-I didn't think about it."

"Really?" The finger disappeared. A second later her clumsy lie was met with the hot crack of his palm—hard, efficient and masculine. She trembled from the sudden humiliation of being dealt with like an errant pet. Not to mention the sting of the blow. "As thoughtful a woman as you are? I find that hard to believe."

"All right," she blurted, her toes curled in anticipation of what he might do to her next, "I did know. A little. I knew you were...aroused."

"How did you know I was aroused?" His finger was back between her legs, along with two more, working her, opening her up.

"Because I saw your...your cock," she confessed, wishing desperately as she said the word that he would put it inside her, finishing the work of her sexual conquest.

His smile was sly, infuriatingly masculine, as she looked back at him. She hated the way it accentuated his dimples so charmingly. "Drooling over it would be a more accurate description."

Arrogant bastard, she thought. Even if he was right, it was hardly the thing to point out to a woman. "So what if I was?" she shot back. "I saw you looking at me, too."

"My behavior is not at issue. Yours is."

"That's a fine double standard," she spat.

"I have one standard. The primale standard." Raylar pinched her behind, holding her sensitive ass flesh between thumb and forefinger. "We will now continue the questioning, and you will resume calling me Master."

She loved how he took control of things, how he steered her back on the path he wanted, over and over. Then again, she hated it, too. "Yes," she winced, "Master."

He released her ass cheek, only to spank it. Three times in succession, the strongest blows yet. Her skin continued to burn, even after he was done. "You were looking at my cock," he reiterated in conclusion.

"Yes, Master." Her breathing was erratic. Her ass twitched, her pussy twitched.

"You wanted to see it. You were curious."

"Yes, Master."

"You hoped I would be seduced," he further concluded, "just as Nyssa said I would be."

"I-I don't know, Master," she replied honestly. "I wanted it, but I was afraid, too."

"What did you want?" he demanded.

She couldn't spell it out. Not in so many words. "I wanted... I wanted..."

"Did you want this?"

Seria exhaled, wide-eyed. He was moving on top of her, covering her body from behind. She could feel the tip of his cock, at the entry to her sex. "Oh, Master..."

"I asked you a question." He took hold of her hair, tugging firmly so as to leave no doubt of who was boss. The pressure was just enough to excite her, enough to prick her dark lusts, but not enough to cause real pain.

"Yes, oh, yes, I wanted this, Master."

"Even if you had to deceive me?"

"Yes, Master," she hissed through gritted, pearl white teeth. "I wanted it that bad."

The response had been inevitable, given his sensual torture methods. Still, to hear it from her own lips cut her to the quick. He had her now, in every sense of the word.

"That was a mild spanking, Seria." His cock pierced her as he spoke. Just the head was penetrating, though already she felt full and overwhelmed. "It could easily have been much worse."

"Yes, Master." She wanted to feel more of him. She wanted him pressing himself inside her to the base, impacting her body with his own, forcing his front against her back.

The decision had been his, how much, how long to punish her. He was letting her know that, in no uncertain terms. It was a possession thing, a primale thing.

"You may thank me," he sank an inch deeper, "for your discipline."

"Thank you for spanking me, Master." Each word came charged off her lips, mini zings tensing her nipples and racing down to her belly.

"I'm going to fuck you like an obedient, Seria. You may thank me for that, too." He breathed the words, a searing wind, melting her very soul.

"Yesss... Thank you, Master, for fucking me." Just saying the words made her feel free and horny, which was ironic, because what it symbolized was her own possession and captivity. In truth she hadn't a clue what she was acknowledging. She'd never made sex at all, let alone with a primale.

The fact that he said fuck, though, and not the usual "make sex" meant something more animal was going to happen. And stars help her for wanting it as badly as she did. She could easily become addicted to this. Having the man swallow her whole, the scent

of him thick in her nostrils, sweet man-scent—musk, lightly scented with the perspiration of his efforts. And his muscular flesh, touching, pressing, demanding. His thighs at the back of hers, his abdomen at the small of her back, his mouth closing in at her earlobe, within nibbling range.

“But I won’t hurt you,” he added, the tender vow melting her heart at once. “I would never hurt you. It must feel as good for you as it does for me. If there is pain, you must tell me and I will stop. Is that clear, Seria?”

“Yes, Master.”

The tone of his voice was complicated. She could feel him tensing, measuring her perhaps. Maybe he was studying her body, making sure from her motions and her breathing that she was truly all right. She hoped he wouldn’t ask the question outright. She was all right, she was ecstatic and out of her mind with lust, but she was half terrified at the same time.

“Seria...” he sighed, his voice tightening to a rasp as he pushed himself deeper, their bodies closing the gap, reaching the inevitable point of total union.

Seria nearly screamed out the question in her heart. It was scandalous, and a total violation of fem ethics. Was she good? she wanted to know. Did her cunt please him and would he deign to ejaculate inside her when clearly he could have any woman on the planet, obedient or fem?

“Oh, Raylar, yes!” She confined herself to encouraging him to take more from her, as much as he wished. “That’s it...all the way, baby.”

He made a deep groaning noise, primale to the core. His earlier words came back to her. He would never hurt her, ever. He would bring pleasure, equal or greater to his own.

Their bodies made contact at last and Raylar drew a sharp breath. They were linked now. Their sexes hand in glove. She tentatively clenched on him. Could she handle the heat, the fury he was likely to engender?

Of course not. She had but one hope. Mercy.

It was a quality she knew he had, as much as she knew anything about any male in the universe.

Raylar moved his mouth to her neck. At first he kissed and then he nibbled. Finally he bit down, just hard enough to make her feel possessed. At the same time his hands clenched on her waist. She was not going anywhere now. Not until he was through with her.

“Do you know what some primales are capable of?” he asked.

“No, Master.”

“Multiple orgasm. One climax after another. Two, three, maybe four in a row. It’s been a long time for me, Seria. I will come inside you many times before dawn.”

Her fingernails clutched at the bedcovering. Her ass pushed against him. Blatantly begging, craving, advertising her desperation, her conquest. “Yes, Master.”

"This will be the first."

She began to shudder, her body exploding against the relative cool of the sheets. She was there already. Without his even moving.

Raylar took hold of her hair. "No, woman. You may not come without permission."

His sudden act of forcefulness was itself a wild aphrodisiac. She moaned, her nipples threatening to explode, her pussy like a volcanic tunnel. "I-I can't help it," she whimpered.

Raylar whacked her ass with the palm of his hand. "Obey, girl."

Seria sniffled, humiliated, all the more so for how he kept heating her up further with everything he was doing. Still, she had to find a way to obey. She did not want to be a bad girl. Oh, stars, the very words were like a tickle to her clit. Her, a grown woman, having to act like a slave girl, having to please a strong man.

"Yes, Master."

Raylar withdrew his cock, leaving her empty.

"Master," she cried, fearing rejection. "What are you doing?"

"Making sure you understand that I mean business."

"I do," she promised. "I do understand. I swear."

"You will remain in this position until I say otherwise."

Seria felt his weight leaving the bed. "Yes, Master." It was all she could do to keep from saying something, to keep from getting up to argue. But she knew that would only make things worse.

This was a lesson she was being taught and she would have to endure it. Naked, facedown on a bed. She strained to hear where he was and what he might be doing. She prayed to the gods he wouldn't leave the room. She absolutely could not bear to be alone.

Thankfully, she could still hear him breathing. He was on the other side of the room. The slight hum of the objectifier told her he was making things. Things to use on her, no doubt. This would be a really good time to get up and run out of the room, but that was not going to happen.

She might as well have been glued in place. She was here for the duration. Waiting for sex. On Raylar's terms. Her entire body his plaything—her sex, her breasts and belly, her backside, even her mouth, open to his will.

Oh, gods, what was he making over there? He must be using the keypunch instead of the verbal controls. If she could only take a peek. Just one little look. She would feel so much better. Seconds ticked by and the wicked idea became reality. She stole her little glance, only to find him staring right back. Against the wall by the machine, arms crossed over his magnificent chest, his stiff cock pointed straight at her. Blast, it was almost as if he'd been waiting.

Too late, she jerked her head back around. *Damn it.*

"Blindfold," said Raylar, verbalizing his amended order. "Ball gag and butt plug."

That did not sound good. Not good at all. *What an idiot I am*, she thought. *Not only didn't I see anything, now I've let myself in for more punishment.*

"Raylar...Master, I can explain."

He towered over her, gag in hand. "I'm sure you would try, but I'm not interested. You will put your head back and open your mouth."

Seria obeyed. Raylar promptly popped the ball between her teeth and told her to bite down. She did so, tensely. He fastened the leather straps behind her head and neck, fixing it in place. Piteously, Seria whimpered, making a last-ditch appeal against the degrading bondage.

Raylar delivered a fresh spank. "Silence, wench."

He seemed rather pleased with himself, downright jovial. The bastard. She made a fresh noise, more indignant.

"Keep it up," he said, "and we'll get some nipple clamps, too."

Seria bit down hard on the plastic ball. She was not about to have anything on her nipples, thank you very much, let alone anything as nasty as clamps.

"This should take care of your being such a nosy little slave girl," said Raylar, putting the blindfold over her eyes.

Seria's world was instant darkness. He rested his hand on her back. "I'll be right here," he said. "All the way through."

She needed to hear that. How had he known?

The hand moved down her spine—gentle, teasing, but full of male energy. She tensed at every place he reached, micro-explosions going off until at last he reached her ass. Still warm from his spanks. "The butt plug will be inside you," he explained, "while I am taking your pussy. It's a form of double possession. Triple, if you count what I have done to your mouth. Count yourself fortunate I didn't order up a penis gag. You'd be biting on a rubber cock now instead of a ball."

Seria experienced a tiny zap of shame. A part of her wondered hotly what a penis gag would taste like—to have it thrust between her lips by Raylar's hand, fixed in place and left there as long as he wished.

"You should relax." He patted her round cheek. "It will go in easier."

Seria stiffened. But what if she didn't want a plug in her ass?

"I want you to feel the size first."

She felt something cold, plastic against her thigh. It must have been a good five inches long. Stars, she'd never take it all! Raylar continued to allow her to "feel" the device with her flesh. Slowly, he rolled it up her hip to her waist and then around to her belly. She gasped as he pressed it to her belly button.

"Don't fight it," was his advice. "Give in to all of it. You have obedient blood... I can see that clearly. Just respond naturally."

Seria's breathing became a mild form of undulation as one after another he taunted her nipples with the plug.

"You'll be lubricated," he said. "And then inserted."

She wished it would be her pussy—that portion of her anatomy was more than lubricated enough.

All at once, the plug was gone. She held her breath. It was time.

His fingers were cold and slick at her opening. He smeared the cold gel deep inside, readying her for invasion. For anal conquest.

At first she tried not to react. It was too shameful. Then, abruptly, as his fingers filled her, she found herself reacting, clenching unwittingly.

Taking advantage, he worked his way in and out. She tried to free herself, but it only resulted in her becoming more impaled, more hot and more aroused.

"Hold still," he ordered. "Submit."

Seria relaxed her body.

Raylar took prompt advantage, moving deeper inside her. She tensed involuntarily, earning a punishing smack.

"Submit," he repeated.

Her ass and ego both smarting, she surrendered once again. Were she being treated as a fem, he would be responsible for pleasing her and making her want to receive anal attentions.

As an obedient, her ass was property like the rest of her. Withholding from the Master meant punishment.

Raylar took his time exploring. Twice more he found her resistant, twice more she was rebuked with crisp spanks to her bared behind.

Eventually his fingers were withdrawn. She was left confused, throbbing and empty.

Moving swiftly, he removed her gag and blindfold. Seria squinted, adjusting her eyes.

"Are you ready for further anal training?" he asked, his voice dark and seductive.

She shivered at the very notion. Anal training. How could any man do this to a woman? Was she little more than a beast to be exploited?

In her heart she knew the answer.

Just like she knew that, for her, being treated this way was the biggest turn-on in the world.

"Please, Master, make sex with me," she cried. "In my ass, my pussy, however you want me."

He pulled her hair. Hard. "No one's making sex with you, you insolent woman. You are being trained, like the slave you are."

"Yes." She felt her will crumbling to his. "Oh, stars, yes, Master."

"Ask me to continue your training," he dictated.

"Please, Master," she complied, "continue my anal training."

A few more seconds elapsed, and then she felt the device, poised—hard and unyielding.

"Fuck me with it, Master," she groaned. "Take me in the ass."

"Yes," he encouraged, "that's it."

His voice encouraged her, making her want to do this for him. She actually did feel her muscles relaxing, though it was still a tight fit.

"If it hurts too much," he said, stepping for the moment out of his role as ravisher, "you must tell me and I'll stop."

"Yes, Master," she acknowledged. That was good thinking on his part. If she got too carried away, she might not tell him if it got to be too much. Thank the universe he was thinking clearly, because she certainly was in no position to do so at the moment.

Raylar pushed the plug deeper, creating in her a sensation of incredible, tingling fullness. Not pain, but a kind of edge she was slipping along, a razor blade that would lead straight to orgasm if she breathed too deeply.

"Damn," he sighed when he was done. "You look incredible like this."

Seria glowed, imagining him admiring his work—admiring her.

"Hell," he corrected himself, "you look incredible, period."

"Fuck me, Master" she rasped, unable to resist begging yet again. "Fuck me like you own me."

Raylar didn't punish her for the outburst. Instead he touched her last remaining opening. The one that had been waiting so desperately.

"So wet," he muttered. "So hot."

She looked back at him, with deep, moist, pleading eyes.

"Yes," he answered her unspoken request. "It's time. To do what I wanted to the minute I saw you. Seria, do you know how hard it was to hold back? Not to whisk you off to some alcove in the restaurant? So I could have you right then and there against the wall? But I knew it wouldn't be enough. Especially when I figured out you were a virgin. I knew then I had to have you in submission. In bondage. And so I will. And it will be good for you, I promise."

It was better than good.

Stars, he was so hard. Harder and bigger than she remembered on the transport bubble. She wanted him at full size, so he could maximize his pleasure, and hers, too.

Raylar wasted no time. His motions were studied and disciplined as he penetrated her, beginning with the tip and proceeding in the tiniest increments, each little movement setting off chills up and down her spine and igniting tiny firestorms within her.

It took him forever to impale her completely. She felt slain by the man, pegged and completely overwhelmed. And yet she was more alive than she had ever felt in her life.

And this was only the beginning...

No sooner had he sunk himself to the hilt than he pulled back for a second thrust. Harder, faster this time. *Yes. Yes. Yes. Finally...at last.* Her virgin body was being fully claimed at last. By the one man on this or any planet who had earned the right.

His cock was throbbing with each push. She could feel him burning, heating up her insides. In and out, in and out. Stuffing her, ever more of him, ever hungrier, ever more passionate. His breathing kept her focused. The butt plug continued with its own little reminders. She was a prisoner here...a slave for the night, albeit with her permission.

A primale's wench, filling the role of an obedient. And loving it. He was coming at her with incredible force now, bone-to-bone, lust-filled, their bodies seeking pure fusion, with all its promise of supernova. Raylar bore down on her, grasping for her breasts. Seria felt them explode into his hands, craving the crushing, hot grip. Sweaty, she arched her spine like an alley cat, seeking to maximize the contact. Their rhythm was that of wild beasts, with sheer grunting, melting and moaning.

Her heart soared. He wanted every bit of her, he'd said, and indeed there was nothing she could hold back. She was going over the edge and he would have to hold her tight or else she would dissolve entirely. His forward lunges were increasing in energy. What a perfect specimen he was, and such a perfect fit, too.

They fit together, that was it. Was all sex-making like this, or was there really something special about their genetics, just as Nyssa had said?

"I'm going to come," he declared, his voice like the growl of a lion. "Come with me. Let me hear it."

"Oh, stars, yes!" she cried, the very command causing her body to give itself over to the climax so long pent-up inside her. "Yes...yes!"

Raylar's cock expanded just as he released his semen. She could feel the heat of him, too. Enough to burn whole worlds. She could only imagine how long it had been for him. His semen came in tight, hot blasts. She felt the fullness even as she was overcome with a hurricane of fulfilled desire, swirling waves of orgasm perfectly counterpoint to his.

Again and again he plumbed her, reaching depths no man would ever find again. And she was letting him. Allowing this complete and total possession of her being. Just as he had promised, he gave what he took, ensuring her pleasure. On and on it went, until she lost track of the number of spurts inside her, and the number of her own explosions, invisible and body-shaking.

At last he was done. Unable to hold herself up any longer, Seria collapsed onto the bed, vanquished. She could sleep a hundred years, but it was obvious he had other plans.

“An excellent beginning, wouldn’t you say?” His hand moved over the curve of her ass to grasp the plug and slowly, teasingly remove it. He then turned her over onto her back, moved her legs up and out and just as slowly pushed it back into her.

She focused on his handsome face, and his strong, unshakable presence. He was more beautiful every time she saw him.

She might offer a response to his question, but at the moment, she was unable to say anything at all. The best she could manage was a dreamy half-smile, filled with wonder. His own expression was subtle. There was moisture in his eyes.

She caught herself caring again, wondering what he thought and how he felt. Did a man like this know loneliness? If so, she would not want him to feel that ever again, not as long as she was alive.

Strange thoughts for a fem. She was supposed to be happy with her freedom, craving an endless variety of self-sufficient, pleasure-loving mems. But she was only half-fem, wasn’t she? In the end, she had this other part of her, newly discovered, which needed its satisfaction as well. Would she ever learn to strike a balance? And even if she did, would Raylar come to accept both parts of her, even when they contradicted each other?

An excellent beginning he’d said. But where were they going? Did he know the answer to that himself? She could only hope that he did, because she was along for the ride. To the very end.

Chapter Five

Seria took stock of her situation. She was lying on her back, in the wake of their first effort at sex-making. Her ass was still filled with the plug, her pussy was thrumming, full of his endless emission, feeling him as if he was still there. Raylar, meanwhile, was poised above her. More god than man. His eyes lit with power, his body like a panther's, sinewed, lean and perfect, fully prepared for a fresh strike. The sight of his tireless cock made her swoon. Just moments ago he had come inside her and here he was, still hard as a rock and ready for more.

It was just like he'd said. There was to be one orgasm after another, sex according to his superhuman pace. Could she keep up with him? She was determined to, that was for sure. She might die trying, but it would be a worthy cause.

"Wrists crossed," he ordered, setting things in motion, "over your head."

Seria complied, her muscles deliciously weak, her pussy freshly oozing in response to still more delicious and wicked control. What a dominant he was, putting her into further submission, as if she weren't helpless enough already. The new position accented her breasts, not to mention how it emphasized his mastery over her.

With a single hand, he grasped her wrists, pinning her. "Resist me," he said.

Seria swallowed. She might well have been ordered to hold back a sunset on an undomed world. "I...I can't, Master."

His lips thinned, indicating his level of seriousness. "Resist me," he repeated, this time leaving no room for refusal.

"Yes, Master," she replied, the words spilling forth slavishly.

His blue eyes were bright and razor-sharp in anticipation. She could see how her obedience pleased him. What a complicated creature he was. She saw the killer in him and also the lover. She would not want to be an enemy of his—that was for certain. As for being his lover, she could only hope she would meet his expectations.

Resist...

She made an effort, puny and futile. Quickly she realized what it was he wanted. Her squirming body, so much weaker than his, glistening in sweat, entertaining him with its contortions, and arousing him with the knowledge of just how enslaved she was.

"You cannot free yourself," he observed after a time.

"No, Master," she replied, sensing that this, too, was part of the ritual.

"You are mine," he concluded.

Her voice was a hot whisper. "Yours..."

But what did that mean? For how long? And how deeply? Was it only about the sex or was he claiming her as his mate, forever? To be treasured and cherished, stripped and spanked and loved and pleased at his whim, bound and unbound, controlled utterly, and yet free beyond the dreams of any fem...

"Arch your back," Raylar commanded.

Seria complied, offering her breasts in the process—swollen, needy and gently trembling.

"More."

The contact made her shiver all over. Her sex clenched at the empty air. Her nether cavity, occupied by the plug, did some clenching of its own.

She wanted his cock, more than she had wanted anything in her life.

"Your lips," he said. "Open them for a kiss."

He made her wait like that for what felt like an eternity. Parched, like petals ready to blow away, totally ineffective guardians for her mouth, so vulnerable and thirsty.

"Close your eyes, Seria."

She did so, still waiting for his kiss. It came from out of the blackness, with overwhelming gentleness, a brand upon her skin, conforming to every tiny little crevice and line. She could not help but mold herself, moving and pressing, encouraging him to go as far as a man could go.

His tongue took possession of her mouth, moving with the confidence and symbolic power of a cock. If a mouth could orgasm from the sweet, exciting motions of a man's invasion, hers would.

It was a foretaste of another round of sex-making, and her sex reacted accordingly, erupting with its fragrant need. She heard his indrawn breath—her response had not gone unnoticed by the man.

Without releasing her mouth, he moved a single hand down her torso. The electricity in his fingertips made her whimper. Her every muscle tensed, the nerve endings on high alert, and yet throughout her body she felt this magical slackening, which she could attribute only to his power over her.

His hand settled at her mound. He applied a tiny bit of pressure, compelling her to spread. His first touch was along the ridge of her moist lips, and then to her erect little bud of a clitoris. He had her splayed, completely exposed.

Releasing her lips, he spoke a simple word, fiercely whispered. "Come."

Seria cried out. He had caught her off guard, leaving her no choice but to erupt on his hand. She was a mess of writhing, overheated feminine passion, the liquid gushing from her, her body undulating, seeking relief with every possible contact. It was a mindless act of subjugation to his will.

The orgasm seemed to last for hours. He had his finger directly on her clitoris, ensuring maximum release. It was like having her body taken over, lifted aloft to the

heavens and then plunged into a deep, cool sea. It felt like heaven. If only this man wasn't so capable of putting her through hell, too.

Seria felt shame as soon as the last wave subsided. She had responded as little more than a trained pet. Her body's deepest mysteries reduced to a reflex action, elicited on command. So why did that make it feel even sexier and hotter? Why was she relishing having him see her like this, knowing that her climax only made his cock harder?

Seria cried out, biting her lip. He let her ride the rapids and over the edge. Plunging down, and then back up, soaring under his protection. There were no words for how it made her feel. She wanted it to last forever, and yet she was afraid. If she became dependent on such experiences, if she came to need this man too much, she would surely have her heart broken.

"Lick." He placed his fingers to her lips.

Seria cleaned her own cum from his hand. She could see this turned him on. The servility of the act, the proof it entailed of his supremacy over her. There was nothing she would not do for him. No order she would not obey.

"Open your legs," he said. "Wide."

"Yes, Master." Seria did her best to accommodate. There was symbolism in this, too, for he could easily enter her without saying a word. After all, she was not likely to resist him. But he wanted this extra step, the assurance of her slavery.

Raylar pushed his cock into her slick, pink opening even as she attempted to widen her thighs even farther. Sighing expectantly, she wrapped her legs around his backside. She wanted him closer, in her as deep as he could be. "Can I take your full size this time, Master?"

He shook his head. "No. Not yet."

"Please, Master?"

"You aren't ready."

"But I want to try."

"You're a stubborn one, aren't you?"

"That's what you like about me." She smiled.

Raylar grumbled. "You asked for it."

At once she felt him growing within her. Longer and thicker. And hotter, too. Her canal sought to accommodate him. She suspected he was trying to get her to back down, but she was determined not to give in. "Is that the best you can do, Primale?"

His eyes lit up—she had definitely ignited something in him this time. It was like his cock was going to explode inside her, and not just the semen from the tip of it, but the entire thing. Gods help her if he moved an inch or tried to fuck her like this.

"Had enough yet?"

"No, Master."

Was she crazy? Of course she'd had enough. What was she trying to prove here?

He narrowed his gaze. It drove her crazy when he did that. It was like he was reading right into her soul. "Stop looking at me like that."

She had forgotten the "Master" part, but that was the least of her worries at this point. Her first concern was being split wide open.

Whether out of mercy or just for the sake of further torture down the line, Raylar reduced his size for the moment and bent to lick at her breasts. The motion was light and soft, though in her heightened state of arousal it was prickling, almost painful.

She was on the verge of a fresh orgasm.

"You are not given permission to come," he informed her, gauging perfectly her body's inflamed state.

Seria held herself back, barely. "I hate you," she blurted.

He smiled in reply, his eyebrow slightly raised. Would she escape punishment for her outburst or would he deliver a fresh round of stings?

"I am not responsible for this set of circumstances," he reminded. "You are."

"Don't try to pin this all on me!" she exclaimed. "You're the one getting your jollies here."

"And you are not receiving the least bit of enjoyment?" he quipped dryly.

Seria had no good answer to that one, though she was sure there must be some defense she could muster.

"Should I take your silence as an admission of surrender?" he wanted to know.

Seria clamped her teeth tightly, determined not to give him the satisfaction. Raylar responded by expanding a little further, just enough to make her ready to throw in the towel.

"All right, I give up," she cried, her body screaming out for sexual mercy.

"Wise choice."

Seria was sorely tempted to stick out her tongue, but she knew that would only get her in worse trouble. She would have her chance to get even, but this was not it.

"It really isn't a good idea to play with a primale's affections, you know." His hips lifted. His pelvis rose and then fell. The slight up and down motion of his cock left her a writhing mass of need.

"I-I didn't mean to..."

"You should take this lesson to heart." Raylar withdrew his cock to the halfway point. The shaft was glorious and glistening, the veins sticking out, thick and purple. "A primale takes what he wants. Had I been any other primale, one not committed to lifelong service in the Guardians, you would have found yourself in a state of considerably greater subjugation at the moment."

Seria could not imagine how anyone could do more to her body than he already had. Of course she was glad she wasn't being dominated in even more strict ways...wasn't she?

"A woman like you is going to need to be very careful," he counseled. "You will need protection. From yourself most of all."

"But not protection from you," she breathed, seeking to draw him back inside her more deeply.

"No. I've already told you where I stand."

"Yes, you have your ethics or whatever. But you are fucking me now, aren't you?"

He frowned a little. "That isn't the point. I am talking about your future."

"With your cock in me?" she challenged. "That doesn't sound real objective to me."

"Don't twist things," he warned. "Don't read in what isn't there."

She pulled at him, grasping his strong shoulders, his pecs, his delicious crotch. "What should I think, then? What should I make of this? Why aren't you just screwing me and getting it over with?"

"I should put the gag back in your mouth."

"If that's the only way you can control me."

"You aren't calling me Master – yet again."

"You aren't acting like one."

He slammed home, hard, pinning her beneath him. "What about now?"

"Yes," she gasped.

"Yes, what?"

Seria couldn't breathe – not without taking him inside her soul, not without melting down, completely and utterly. "Yes...you are acting like a Master."

"I'm not a mem, Seria."

"No...no you aren't."

Talk about stating the obvious.

"Mems make sex, primales possess."

"Let me be your possession, Raylar." She could scarcely believe the scandalous words she was whispering in his ear. "Let me come for you."

His teeth grazed her neck, once, twice, nibbling. "They shouldn't have put us together."

"It's too late, Raylar...Master. You've stripped my defenses. You have me."

"This is one night," he reminded. "The dawn will come."

"To hell with dawn. What we have...is now."

Raylar began to establish his rhythm. "It will be harder this time," he said. "Bigger. More semen, too."

"I want it, oh stars, I do."

His eyes burned fiercely, the color of a blue star deep in space. "Beg for it," he hissed. "Beg for your orgasm."

"Please, let your slave come. Master, let your woman climax."

Seria's declaration was all that Raylar needed. Arching his neck, crying out with passion, he plunged to the hilt. "Now," he roared. "Come...now."

Seria felt her body splintering underneath him. Raylar was driving into her sex and into each one of her nerve endings. He had her split open, and at the same time wrapped tightly in the coils of his own unleashed power.

His second orgasm was indeed far greater than the first. From what she understood of mems, they grew tired easily, but Raylar only seemed to pick up steam. His body was hot and hard against her, she felt his every muscle, sensed the release of his tension, and also the tension yet unreleased. There was more inside him, more that needed to come out than could be contained in these fresh spurts, prodigious as they might be.

She sought to take it all in. She was so slick and wet. She was made for this, for giving him pleasure and getting it back. Sinking her teeth into his shoulder, she released her own sigh of delight. Countless orgasms racked her body, one after another, until she thought she would explode from the ecstasy, die from it. And still, he was surging, in and out, his pure male energy translating into yet more releases for her.

Her body begged mercy. But she didn't want it to stop, either.

It could go on a hundred years, or maybe it already had. She thought she was in love with him, then again, she was real sure she'd never be able to handle this kind of sex-making again. The evening whirled through her mind, all the events between them, every word and touch and gesture, translated into this one shared primal release—bodies bucking, sweating on the hotel bed. Their little Eden reserved until daylight.

Finally, there was nothing left but their heartbeats. The frenzy past, they collapsed together, entwined. A perfect silence, all the questions unasked, at least for now. All too soon the complications would arise, much greater than before. But for now, they were simply a man and a woman who had just made phenomenal sex.

Correction. One man who had possessed a woman for sex and who was not done with her for the night. Not by a long shot.

"What next, baby?" she heard herself ask, the shy virgin gone and transformed into the wanton sex goddess.

Raylar gave a small laugh. "You're determined to go toe to toe, aren't you?"

"It's not your toes I'm interested in." She reached boldly for his cock.

"Easy, angel." He grabbed her wrist.

"You aren't tired, are you?" she teased.

"Actually I'm just getting started."

"Me, too," she bluffed.

"Liar."

"Just try me. I'm ready for anything."

He met her head-on with a kiss. A few seconds of his lips on hers and she was a puddle of liquid. Okay, so maybe she wasn't ready for *anything*.

She wasn't about to back down, though—not after coming this far. Kissing him back, she gave him a moment's surprise, her mouth showing some strength of its own. A moment later he locked her tight in his embrace, however, indicating it was all over but the count.

Seria sighed, praying the night would never end.

At the same time, she feared the dawn, not knowing what it would bring. Would it mark a terrible end or some new beginning, perhaps equally dread and uncertain?

The answer lay in their beating hearts and in the ticking seconds.

Not to mention in the intricate secrets of their genetic codes, which they had only just begun to unravel. Would their lives intertwine into one, or fly apart in a fiery explosion?

Chapter Six

Raylar came to, the scent of Seria deep in his nostrils. She was breathing softly against him, sleeping the deep sleep of a fem. Her body was soft and naked and inviting. His cock hardened at the feel of her thigh against his. He wanted her again.

Gently he extracted the plug from her ass and moved her aside, lifting her head from his chest and onto the pillow. How had this happened? He had actually managed to slip into unconsciousness. Only once or twice had this ever happened to him before. As a primale, he ought to have maintained alertness, keeping his brain engaged even as his body rested. Instead, he had gone into dreamland, like some foolish mem.

It was her fault. The woman, Seria. She had managed to have some kind of bewitching effect on him. Look at her, though. You couldn't blame his body for succumbing. She was so incredibly breathtaking, her small body lying there in repose, so perfectly curved, her skin so smooth and pale, just made to be touched. And those lips—he could not get enough of their flavor.

But that was precisely the problem. Every time he looked at her he wanted to possess her. To sample her charms—hell, to devour them outright. How many times had they performed together? He had lost count of his orgasms at ten. She must have had double or triple that number.

Could it really be true, what she'd told him about her nature? Could there be the DNA of an obedient mixed in with her freewheeling fem self?

Her responsiveness was certainly incredible. Her body seemed made for loving. Lush, alert and vibrant. Incredibly sensitive to his countervailing male energy. Such was the very hallmark of a female obedient. But she was not entirely submissive. At times, there seemed a delicate, subtle balance to her, at other times she seemed at war with herself. The combination was volatile, challenging, but for Raylar, at least last night, it had been well worth the reward.

Seria was like a wild horse, waiting to be ridden. Promising loyalty, devotion and love to just the right person. Regardless of her real genetics, she would never find a mem to satisfy her, that was for sure. No primale was likely to take her either. Most of those he knew were a rather humorless lot. They expected military-like precision from their mates.

They did not want to be challenged or surprised, and they certainly did not want to ever be left in a state of near speechless awe as a result of sex-making, which is exactly what Raylar was feeling at the moment.

A kind of dark panic gripped him as he thought of the rest of what Seria had told him. Not only was she specially designed, so was he. And together they were supposed to form a unit. There was a conspiracy to bring them together, devised at the highest

levels, by Nyssa, who was supposed to be Seria's sister, and by Theron, his commanding officer. It certainly would explain why a combat officer such as himself was being sent on such an obscure mission. But Raylar could not wrap his mind around the totality. He was a Guardian, born to fight. Why would any geneticists care if he had a mate at all, much less one made to order?

One thing was certain, whatever the long-term future of Seria, it must not include him. The same went for the short-term. He must not be sent into space with her. And he would tell General Theron this at once. It would be a huge mistake, one that might put both their lives in danger.

It was a question of safety. He could not be trusted to remain objective enough to protect her as a soldier should. He was a lover now and that was very different. There was also the question of free will. Whatever genes he bore, he had the right to choose his destiny.

At least in an ideal world.

Raylar dressed quietly so as not to disturb the slumbering Seria. He would go out into the corridor and speak with General Theron using his pocket holo-ball. Naturally, he dressed in his full uniform. Hopefully the General would release him from his assignment and send a replacement quickly, so that he could leave before Seria woke up. In that event, he could leave her some kind of note, but really, what could he say? Better to just leave things as they were. She would wake up, find him gone and move on with her life. No hard feelings. Or at least fewer hard feelings than if he allowed this situation to go on any longer than it already had.

One night was already like a lifetime with Seria. They had clicked so completely in sex-making, and in their conversations between, and in their dancing, and in the communication contained in their every little touch. Being with her just felt so natural and comfortable. Indeed, he could scarcely remember what it was like before he'd known her. Such a strange reaction for him to have. And in such a short period of time, too. She was hardly the first woman he had been with. He had known many intelligent, desirable females.

It begged the question of what was different about her, and about them together. Liking none of the answers, he dropped the internal dialogue. With that, Raylar tapped the release button on the wall, waiting for the door to slide open with its standard whooshing sound. A moment later it closed behind him, leaving him in the corridor.

Pulling a small, round object from his pocket, he tossed it into the air. It stayed aloft, at eye level.

"Guardian Command Headquarters," he addressed the small hovering holo-ball, no bigger than a marble.

"Certainly, Sir," hummed the machine, immediately configuring the needed coordinates.

If only the rest of life could be handled so simply and with so little conflict.

"Objective obtained," the holo-ball announced.

Raylar watched as the empty space in front of him was filled with a small pyramid-shaped tower, representing the actual Guardian building in the center of the city. It was a sight he never grew tired of beholding. The star and rocket emblem of the Guardians was emblazoned in gold on the side of the black onyx structure, a thousand stories high.

At the very top, the building glowed silver, indicating that the commander was present in his office. Raylar's pulse quickened just a little as he thought about confronting Theron. The General might not be happy. It had to be done, though. For Seria's own good.

Not to mention the good of his heart—which had suddenly found itself under siege from a most unlikely source. "Put me through to General Theron, please," he declared.

A moment later he saw the General's face, as robust and vibrant as in real life.

"Raylar, my boy, what is it?" he asked, a definite trace of a twinkle in his eye. "Don't tell me the little lady's too much for you to handle already?"

Raylar drew a deep breath, wondering just how deep he would have to go into the details of last night's extraordinary sex-making, not to mention the nature of her bizarre allegations against General Theron himself. "As a matter of fact, Sir..."

* * * * *

Seria floated gently on the edge of wakefulness. Warmth dawned in her bones as she remembered. Melting at a man's touch, capturing his heart and being captured in return, her body his ultimate fantasy, to be played on, again and again. A quiet orgasmic "Yes" as he locked the chains of possession on her. The chains of forever...

Lazily, her eyes popping open, Seria reached across the bed, feeling for some bit of wonderful, confirming male flesh. Had she really accomplished her mating mission, or was it all a dream. "Raylar?" she mumbled, still half asleep. There was no answer and after a few moments, she realized she was alone.

"Raylar?" she repeated, sitting up and gathering the sheet about her naked breasts.

Her nipples were tender against the fabric. Between her legs, she tingled. The air was filled with the scent of man, the smell of conquest. She'd been taken, all right, loved to the point of puffy lips and tousled hair and a still twinging pussy.

Stars and comets. Where had Raylar gone off to? He was supposed to be watching over her. Besides, they were lovers now. And that was supposed to mean something, wasn't it? She ought to be able to wake up with her head on his chest, or better still, feel herself stirred to consciousness by his wanting, a glorious morning erection poking her thighs.

Open, my love...

Yes, Master...

Seria slipped from the bed and lowered her feet onto the floor, which was cool and smooth and surprisingly erotic. Her entire body ached deliciously, every portion of her

being echoing the events of last night. Raylar had stretched her, helped her body to move in all kinds of amazing ways. And he'd been insatiable. None of her girlfriends had ever spoken of their mem lovers being like that. Raylar was like a glorious beast, a gorgeous, sexily dangerous cat.

Had he really been a mem, of course, it would be no big deal if he just up and left this morning. That was what mems did and fems didn't mind. But he wasn't a mem. And she wasn't fem. Not purely, anyhow.

Blast it, where could he be? She was not going to get upset here, no matter what.

She would not feel alone, she would not feel empty inside, and she would not...panic...like some silly obedient without a Master.

Damn it, where is he?

Seria resisted the impulse to call Nyssa. Raylar was supposed to be here with her and she didn't want to get him in trouble. He'd be back in a moment, she was sure of it. In the meantime, why not treat herself to some time in the sanitizing cylinder? With some extra high-powered beams, the soft and sensuous ones that always went straight to her core.

She never had been one to masturbate very much, but when she did, it was always in the cylinder. Where she could be most alone and free. And naked. She programmed the chamber for a full cycle at maximum intensity. Standing beneath the circular pulsing lights, she inhaled happily. At once she was bathed in soft hues, shades of pink and green and blue. This was a luxury model, all right. Small sonar ticklers activated at the sides of the cylinder giving her the sensation of a mild breeze on her bare skin.

Closing her eyes, she imagined herself at the bottom of a waterfall, on some primitive planet. Her hair, long and loose, her body bronzed from the sun, well used to nudity as a member of some primitive tribe. Stretching her arms overhead she felt the full swell of her breasts. As a diplomat, she hid her femininity, but with Raylar around, she wanted to advertise it.

The imaginary waterfall continued to pour over her skin, even as the beams purified her body and worked away all the microscopic bits of dirt. She thought of strong warriors, bare-chested savages, watching her from the banks of the stream, enjoying the view. These were the sorts of males who took as they wished from a woman, demanding that she succumb to the depths of her feminine being. They would be like primales, only without the restraints of their own overly refined society.

Raylar was like that. She could see him, with that band of warriors. His rippling muscles, his piercing eyes, his narrow waist, the swell of his cock, the obvious power in his stance. None of the other men would dare to challenge him.

"I want her," he would say, pointing to the nymph in the river.

Seria ran her hands slowly down the front of her body, her eyes closed to foment the fantasy. Her nipples were hard, as they would be for him. One look from Raylar, one word from his lips and she would be helpless. So wet and open. So ready.

Seria cupped both breasts, imagining the primitive Raylar coming to her, wading through the water, his cock rock-hard, sticking out proudly, lifting the material of the tiny bit of cloth he wore at his waist.

He was coming for her, wading through the water. She was prey, small and pretty. She would be in his hands. At his mercy. He seized her arms, gripping them like hypersteel. She was drawn into the kiss, her lips instantly opened as his tongue plunged.

He took her mouth. Plundered it. She moaned, all too aware of what he was conveying. He would do the same with his cock. To her sex. He kissed her until he had his fill and then he pulled her still tighter, scooping her up and onto him, using her ass cheeks for leverage.

He impaled her instantly. Her pussy shoved full of cock. One breast swallowed by his mouth. He nibbled at the tender flesh, making her cry out with the need to come. Already. He pumped her, slow and sure, with the confidence and arrogance of one who owns his females.

She locked her ankles behind his muscular, powerful ass. He thrust all the way in, obliterating her with cock, overwhelming her with it. He was ready to come, his semen about to fill her, she could feel it...

Seria's fantasy came to an abrupt halt. She opened her eyes to see the flesh and blood Raylar standing there, right outside the transparent wall of the cylinder. Fully dressed in his uniform. Frowning. Looking so incredibly handsome, with that crease in his brow and those little lines beside his lips.

"Raylar..." She should probably be angry but all she felt was relief...mixed with lingering emptiness. "Where did you go? I was..."

"I had to speak to the General." He cut her off, precluding any show of emotion on her part. "It's not important. We need to be leaving for the spaceport. I need to use the beams as well before we go so you'll have to get out."

"Oh." So he wouldn't be coming in with her. For that matter, he wouldn't be saying so much as a good morning to her. It was no longer anger she was flirting with but tears. This was it, then. No continuation of their role as lovers, just an abrupt shift back to their professional roles.

Did she say abrupt? How about flat-out rude?

"I will be right out," she assured him, keeping her voice steady. "If you'd just give me another few moments of privacy first...if it's not too inconvenient?"

Raylar seemed uncomprehending. Was he really that oblivious to her feelings after last night? What was wrong with him? Could this possibly be the same man who had so completely possessed her, conveying her to the stars without benefit of a rocket ship?

Nyssa had to be mistaken. There was no way this man could have been designed to be her lifemate.

"As you wish," he acknowledged at last, not a trace of emotion in his voice.

Suddenly, she felt her nakedness again. "Stop looking at me," she demanded.

"I'm not," he said gruffly, though she'd been feeling his eyes, burning hotter than the beams.

Seria watched him turn about, trying her best not to get worked up at the sight of his fine buttocks in motion as he exited the sanitizing chamber. If he could turn off his passions at the flip of a switch, so could she.

Talk about a bizarre turn of events.

Maybe this was her fault. Maybe she just brought out the worst in males on account of her bizarre split genetics. All the more reason to hurry out to deep space where she could live sex-free, dealing with entirely different species from her own. Looking down, she realized she was glistening, moist, the fluids still trickling down her thighs.

Wonderful. Raylar must surely have known she was in here masturbating.

This has nothing to do with you, she wanted to shout. But that would only give him satisfaction.

Speaking of which, wasn't that an erection she had seen in his pants a moment ago? And why had he come in here in the first place, knowing she was naked? Strange, coming from a man who was acting like everything was all business again. Could it be there was a chink in his armor? Or maybe a full-blown hole to be exploited.

Time would tell. The deeper question, though, had to do with whether this was a battle she wanted to fight in the first place. Raylar was like a lion, sated now, returned to sleep. If she should awaken him again, they might both regret the results.

* * * * *

Raylar would give anything to be back on the Front right now. Taking on a Narthian nest single-handedly, wading through thick, viscous fluids, the stench unbearable as he fired his weapon again and again into the mass of pulpy larvae guarding the queen's chamber.

Or maybe hacking through flesh-eating webs, his skin on fire, hotter than the sun.

Anything would be better than this.

Standing outside a sanitizing chamber, his cock hard as a rock, needing so badly to make sex with Seria that it made him want to scream. And all the while knowing she was the one woman in the universe he could not afford to touch.

Not if he wanted to keep his sanity. His independence. His unique sense of integrity and duty.

And unique it was, because apparently no one else cared that he had broken the Code by having intercourse with Seria and that he was likely to again. Certainly General Theron did not.

Not only had his superior failed to relieve Raylar of his predicament, he had actually seemed amused by it.

"You're both healthy young people, my boy," Theron had told him. "You can't expect to fight nature like you do the Narthians. My advice to you is to lighten up. There's nothing here you can't handle. And don't worry about updating me constantly. It's strictly a 'don't ask, don't tell' situation from here on. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir," Raylar had replied glumly. What else was he supposed to say to his commanding officer? That he was afraid of forming an emotional bond that he wanted nothing to do with? That he feared becoming entangled hopelessly with a woman who wasn't appropriate for his sub-gender? That he doubted he could keep from making sex with her for five minutes let alone the six days the trip would take? That this tiny, feminine creature was threatening to blow his carefully laid-out life plan wide open?

Not that he wanted to be unfair to Seria by implying something was wrong with her or that she was in any way trying to hurt him. She was amazing—an incredible blend of personality traits. She was a unique individual. He just didn't want a unique individual to love, or any other individual, either. He wanted to be alone. He wanted to be a soldier. To fight Narthians. To the death.

But soldiers followed orders, and frequently the toughest ones to follow were those that kept a man out of danger rather than in it. And for the time being his assignment was routine, boring old escort duty. For Seria. Beautiful, intoxicating Seria.

The woman he had led on last night.

He didn't want to hurt her in any way, just let her down easy. Was there a good way to do this? Probably not. Women were complicated. Strong—but sensitive. Even the densest Narthian queen's nest paled in comparison to the complexity of the average female psyche.

Perhaps it was time to pray.

Would the god of war hear him? Or should it be the goddess of love? No—the love goddess was definitely biased. It would have to be war. Strength was what he needed. And the power to resist. From here to their destination. Which just happened to be on the other side of the galaxy.

That was a long way at this rate.

Especially if he was going to keep on acting like such an idiot. Barging in on her in the sanitization chamber was the worst thing he could have done. It was boorish. Unprofessional. And dangerous. What was he thinking, setting himself up for a fresh look at Seria's naked body? They were damn lucky he had not followed his natural impulses and taken her right there under the beams. She had looked incredible under the colored lights, her body so incredibly lush, her curves perfectly inviting, her lips full, and her eyes bright with desire.

There was nowhere a man would not journey to hunt down a female like this. No limit to the lengths he would go. And that was just from looking at her. He had gone deeper, felt the pulse of her soul, homed in on the intelligence of her mind, the fineness of her wit.

Why exactly had he gone in there? To prove that he could handle the sight of her, maybe? To make it clear to both of them there would be no more physical attraction between them, that he could see her naked and feel nothing more than he might in the presence of another male? That the space journey ahead was going to bring no opportunities for romance? That the tight quarters of deep space would pose no challenge to his iron will, none at all?

All he'd accomplished was to get worked up and frustrated.

Not to mention how he'd shaken up poor Seria. Surprising her like that. Right in her face, but not with any sort of intimacy. A woman needed a little debriefing after sex-making. Even he knew that. She needed to know there was some continuity, she needed to see where the relationship stood, wherever that might be.

Well, he'd certainly made it clear, hadn't he?

A cold slap in the face. That's what he'd delivered.

Just one more reason why he was not suited to have a mate. That was so clear to him. Why in blazes did no one else seem to see it?

Sighing, he looked down at his hard cock. He was going to have to deal with that erection. Willpower wouldn't do it. He would need to masturbate under the beams.

Under no circumstances would he imagine Seria. With her sweet belly and full breasts, her silky soft hair, her sweet scent and passionate lips. He'd think of something else, something safe and remote.

"Yeah, right," he snorted. Like that was going to be possible.

Change of plans, he thought. No masturbating. No feeling anything remotely sexual until Seria was safely delivered.

* * * * *

Seria yielded the sanitizing room to Raylar. She kept her nose slightly uptilted as she brushed past him, indicating that she, too, was to be all business from here on. He made no acknowledgement of her as he moved past. She attempted to do the same, though it was difficult the way her pulse was racing. She couldn't help it. Just having him near her affected the way she breathed, and how she thought, and how she felt as a woman.

It was so much more than the sex-making. His presence alone, everything about him made her ache and hunger and whirl. She craved every part of him—his voice, his lips, the way he walked and talked. Even when he was being stubborn and seemingly indifferent.

Wasn't he even going to offer to talk about last night? Didn't it mean anything to him that he had made love to her? That he had been her first? She'd be damned if she'd bring up the topic, though.

As far as she was concerned, it was a closed holobook. She could not care less about the man anymore, so long as he did his job getting her to her new assignment. And that was something which could not happen a moment too soon.

She wouldn't say goodbye to him, either. She'd just walk off the ship, say a curt thank you and disappear. Back to her humdrum life of predictability and duty. In the meantime, she would work out her frustrations in the sanitizing cylinder. There she could masturbate to her heart's content.

Once she made sure to lock the door, that is.

* * * * *

Raylar's cock ached under the beams. He was feeling hot, confused. Seria was right outside the door of the sanitizing chamber and he couldn't touch her or talk to her. Not if he wanted to keep his mind together. It was the right thing to do, cutting her off emotionally. But what about his erection? There was no getting rid of it and he couldn't possibly walk around hard all the time. Seria was bound to notice. She had already spotted his state of arousal this morning. There was no mistaking those pretty little eyes of hers, furtively darting up and down, stealthily observing. She probably thought he hadn't noticed.

That was one of the adorable things about her. She was so very disingenuous. On the outside, that is. Underneath, she was like a volcano. The most passionate woman he'd ever touched. No one had ever kept up with his desires before. She was more sexually charged than any of the pleasure women on Tarsus Minor. And they were bred for such things.

She didn't know this about herself, of course. She was much too gracious and modest. And a bit naïve, too. The gods help any male who ever took advantage of that and hurt her. Raylar would not hold himself responsible for his actions. He would hunt such a man down. And kill him.

This was not a matter of choice. It was his primale blood. He had been with Seria, intimately. Her soul, her scent, her being were mixed with his. Though he would never touch her again, though he would force himself to walk away, he would never be able to forget.

Groaning, he wrapped his fingers around his erection. He needed to come. Images competed as he imagined himself making sex with anyone but Seria. There were all sorts of women he'd had or dreamed of having. Sex sirens across the galaxy. None of them had staying power, though. They barely registered.

Grinding his teeth in frustration, he gave in to the inevitable reality of Seria.

What was the use, after trying any number of times to fight off her memory—the smell and feel of her, the way she moved beneath him and on top of him, the way she moaned in his bonds, the way she looked at him in awe as he took her, showing her the wonders of sex-making?

There was no escaping the impact of their union. On him, and on her, too, judging by the pain and longing he'd seen in her eyes as she left the sanitizing chamber.

Too bad for her...

She had been a virgin. She deserved so much more than him. It ought to have been some mem taking her the first time, showing her the wondrous journey of her body's magic. Primales lacked the finesse, the subtlety.

They were far too focused of consuming beauty, on mercilessly bringing forth the power of the female. He clenched his fingers tightly, forming a fist. His cock throbbed, the veins pulsing. He let himself expand to full size.

He was in her. Deep in Seria's hot, wet sex. He was fucking her in his mind. In his heart. His fingers moved up and down, the muscles battling those of his cock. Flesh pressed against cock.

Another groan, pure primale. He clenched his buttocks and pushed forward, fucking Seria again, having her. Demanding she take him inside her, demanding she look into his eyes and see her own destiny.

To be his woman.

His one and only.

You will never be touched by another, Seria.

By the Code, where did that come from?

Raylar pushed the thought from his mind and concentrated on the sex dream, so vivid in his wakeful state. It was like Seria was right there in the cylinder with him, her body up against the wall, no pain, only explosive, body-grinding surrender. She could take it. She wanted it. The full power of a man. A real man. In and out, in and out. Her ass cheeks flattened against the wall, her breasts flattened against his chest. Their bellies tight together, lean female flesh against corded masculine muscle.

So real, he could almost hear her hiss the words into his ear as she greedily nibbled at the lobe... *Take me, yes, let me feel your heat...*

Raylar put his free hand against the wall, fingers spread to brace himself. His semen blasted against the smooth, beam-heated surface. Spurt after spurt of milky white, sticking in gobs to the wall. Ten full pumps, each depositing a fresh layer to cover the old, his cock reverberating as his balls emptied themselves, his whole body tensing from the effort. Every muscle strained, from the sinews of his neck all the way down to his calves.

Son of a bitch.

It had been the most powerful masturbatory release of his life.

And it had been focused entirely on one female. The wrong female. The woman he had allowed to get far too close to him already. Damn it, he had gone so far as to have her call him Master. That was over the line. Was it enough to just step back now, or did he owe her something more?

Raylar considered the results of his ejaculation that was plastered across the wall. Incredible. And his cock was still hard. Hard enough to fuck. Hard enough to be sucked. Hard enough that he could march outside this room, grab Seria and throw her down on the bed.

So much for getting her out of his system.

Sighing heavily, he wiped away the evidence and finished his cleaning.

It was going to be a long space flight, all right. The longest of his career.

* * * * *

Waiting for Raylar to emerge from his suspiciously long time under the cleansing beams, Seria sweated out the crucial question of wardrobe. What exactly was appropriate for an interstellar space flight cramped in a small ship with a man who had seduced, used and spurned her in less than a day?

The dressing machine was patiently waiting for her command, the red light on the display indicating the need for human input. She ought to pick something practical. Pants. A jacket. Something suitable for space travel. Something unsexy, something to discourage Raylar and make it clear she had no interest in attracting him. Maybe a nice old-fashioned burlap sack. Or a suit of space armor.

She tried several different options. Including a baggy utility jumper and an oversize woolen habit favored by nuns of the religious orders of Sithios Ten. Each was more ridiculous than the last.

She settled on a midnight blue vylar top and slacks with the golden emblem of the diplomatic corps embossed on the right breast. The material was a bit too clingy and formfitting, but it was regulation and at least she wouldn't have to worry about a skirt.

The idea of having a hem made her more than a little queasy. Hems could be much too easily flipped up, baring the behind for spanking or other forms of naughtiness.

She opted for short hair, in her standard auburn color. Borderline mousy is what Nyssa had called it. Nyssa wouldn't like this outfit at all, but then her sister wasn't the one about to be locked in a hyper-light mini-spacecraft with a sex-crazed primale.

Even now she could feel him inside her. His cock plunging and thrusting. Just a little bit of touching and rubbing and she would be in orgasm all over again.

The test for how well she had done in underplaying the sexiness of her look was going to come soon enough. As soon as Raylar came out of the sanitizing chamber, freshly cleaned and back in his uniform. She felt so damn horny, thinking of him in the cylinder, naked, the sanitizing rays beaming down on his fine body, all those muscles flexing as he made sure every bit of his healthy, bronzed skin made contact. She wanted so badly to go in there, to join him in that tiny space, to push her body against him and beg for his touch.

She would do anything to get it, including dropping directly to her knees to suck that magnificent cock of his. Thick and long, covered in purple veins, splendidly erect,

born to fill a woman's glorious sex. Created to make a female moan and scream and come. Just as it had done to her all night long. It pained her to think she might never see that shaft again or feel the indescribable heat he had kindled deep in her flesh.

Stars, but the situation was confusing. She was supposed to be seducing him. Making him want her forever. But he was giving her the brush-off, reminding her distinctly of her responsibility as a diplomat. And he was right. She couldn't deny it. She did have a duty to be professional and asexual.

It was a duty in complete conflict though, with the imperative her newfound sister Nyssa had laid upon her.

She was supposed to make Raylar want to mate with her. Forever. Never mind what she might want for herself. How could she want a man like that? A man who sent such mixed signals? Which set of behaviors represented the real Raylar? Those from last night, passionate and compelling, or the countervailing ones from this morning, off-putting and frustrating and aloof?

Either way, it was hardly fair. He was playing with her emotions, whether he realized it or not.

The man needed to be brought up short, frankly. If he thought he could gaze freely at her body, he had another think coming. She would dress and act the part of aloof fem.

Even if it did make her hot and weak-kneed thinking about how he had come into the sanitizing room, showing no regard for her modesty. His will had been paramount. His desire had superseded hers.

Talk about a dangerous and slippery slope. Suppose he had come in there looking for sex? Suppose he had commanded her to service him? The fucker had caught her with her hands between her legs. What if he'd told her to keep masturbating? What if he'd told her to push her fingers in and out, making the liquid drip down her thighs? What if he'd ordered her to taste herself, right in front of him? What if he'd made her talk about it, telling how horny she was? What if he'd made her confess that all that was for him? What if he had made her tell him what she really wanted, what she needed, more than the air she was breathing?

I need to be fucked, Raylar...Master...

That word, there it was, reborn from the ashes of last night's fires. Like a flaming ghost on her lips. So very potent and charged. And dangerous. Quickly, Seria made a vow to herself. She could never call him that again. It had been a mistake the first time and the next time...well, there couldn't be a next time.

She told herself it was all up to her. She controlled the situation and it didn't matter what he did. The truth was a little trickier, though. Assuming Raylar remained aloof as he was now, showing no interest in her as an object of sex-making, there'd be no problem. But what if that changed back again, the pendulum swinging once more?

If he were to give her one of those looks. If he were to call her his little slave girl, what would happen?

She wouldn't stand a chance, that's what would happen.

"Seria?"

She nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of his voice. Raylar was standing right in front of her. Fresh and clean in his uniform. The Guardian emblem emblazoned on his chest, the line of medals – tiny blue and green star-shaped jewels – representing his various exploits in combat.

He had killed many Narthians. And seen many of his own fall in the process.

A defeat haunts him...a loss that no human could have prevented. He refuses to see his own heroism, how many he saved...

That's what Nyssa had told her. Would Raylar ever share these things with her? Would she ever dare to ask him?

"You startled me."

His lips curled downward. His thoughts, as usual, impossible to read. "We should be leaving. It's best to reach hyper-launch point before noon."

"You really are incredible, you know that?" The question came from Seria's lips before she had a chance to censor it.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You...you're just..." Damn it, what the hell could she say without revealing way too much of her own feelings. "Oh, never mind."

Raylar regarded her. "For a diplomat you are decidedly inarticulate at times."

Seria's eyes narrowed. "And you're pretty much of an asshole...for a Guardian."

"You're entitled to your opinion."

"And you're entitled to be an asshole, right?"

He remained placid, infuriatingly so. "We need to be –"

"Leaving, I know," she interrupted. "Our precious schedule must be maintained."

Seria stormed out of the room ahead of him, determined to give him a good look at her posterior. It was one ass he would never have again.

Chapter Seven

Raylar eyed the spaceship warily. It was a simple Z-wing with a ball-shaped living compartment. Two chambers, one for sleeping and one for eating. Plus the sanitizing area and the cockpit. The construction gave new definition to cramped.

"There must be some mistake here," he said to the spaceport officer, a portly man in red coveralls. "This vessel is much too small."

"The requisition is clear." He checked his autopad. "Orders came straight from the top."

Raylar scowled. He should have figured. As much as Nyssa and Theron were trying to push the two of them together, why not send them across space in this glorified transport bubble?

"The ship will do fine," Seria supplied icily. "So long as you stay on your half."

"That's just it. We won't have halves. We'll barely have eighths compared to what full-grown adults are supposed to get."

"That's life, isn't it, Raylar. People don't get what they're supposed to. They get disappointed. Other people lead them on...and then fuck them over."

It didn't take a skilled diplomat to realize Seria was venting about this morning.

"Look, Seria, if you're trying to drop some kind of hint here about you and me —"

"There is no you and me." She cut him off, returning a dose of his medicine. "All I want to do is get on this ship and get going. Just like you said."

The spaceport agent looked warily back and forth between them. "Sir," he said to Raylar. "If you would initial this requisition?"

Raylar scribbled on the pad with a light pen. The man snatched it back and beat a hasty retreat, no doubt fearing more fireworks.

"Watch your step." Raylar held out his hand to help her climb the stairs. "It's a tricky climb."

"I'm not a child." She refused the help. "And I'd really appreciate it if you stopped pretending like you gave a flying fuck about me, while you're at it."

Raylar sighed. It was obviously payback time, and he had a feeling Seria was going to deliver with interest. His passenger safely aboard, he made the final outside checks on the ship. For its size, it was a good, sleek model. Silver hypersteel, reinforced with the latest in shielding technology, a little something called intel-mesh, a kind of renewable polymer which was capable of regenerating itself in the event of attack.

Of course this was unlikely in the lanes they were traveling. It was a straight shot to the interstellar launch ring at the edge of the system, where they would pick up the

hyperspace link. This would push them into a nice, quiet wormhole. At the other side of that, they would travel through just one well-defended star system before reaching their goal.

Seria was fortunate in her new posting. The Narthians had not yet penetrated that region of the galaxy. Though the situation could change in a few solar passings.

Raylar read the fuel indicators. A full reservoir of hydrogen augment and a complete charge on the tachyon drive. Double the energy needed for the journey. A proverbial piece of cake, that's what this mission ought to be.

Except that I'm falling in love with my passenger.

Raylar looked about, startled. Had he just said that aloud? No, it was only a voice in his head. A foolish one which needed suppressing, and fast.

"We'll take off in two minutes," he called out to one of the launch technicians.

"Very good, Guardian." The thin man in yellow coveralls saluted.

Raylar retracted the automatic stairs and sealed the door behind him. They were locked in together now. For the long haul. He found Seria already strapped in the passenger seat of the cockpit. The way the belts crisscrossed her breasts and cinched her waist reminded him of bondage. A strap for each wrist to the armrests and she would be totally helpless.

Great...just what he needed to be thinking about right now.

Beads of sweat were forming on his forehead. The computer was already sequencing the countdown from launch command. They were under a minute and counting. He took his place beside Seria. Close—too close. With primale speed, he checked the interior gauges, his fingers flying over the complicated controls arrayed in front of him.

"Hold on tight," he told Seria, as if she could do anything else.

The engines hummed to life. The floor of the ship shook slightly as the thrusters lifted them from the landing pad. Retracting the spider leg landing gear on each side and grasping the control stick, Raylar engineered their ascent, higher and higher, up to the roof of the open spaceport.

In under a minute they were outside the City Dome. That delicate, yet impermeable layer protecting so many millions of humans and robots from the elements of Earth's atmosphere. It was a stunning sight from outside. Lights reflected off the beveled surface. The sun's rays were shining on it, making it sparkle like a huge diamond.

"It's so beautiful," exclaimed Seria, momentarily forgetting her anger.

No, he thought, you're beautiful.

"You're right. I never get tired of seeing it," he concurred. "Each time it looks brand new."

She looked at him, so piercingly that it made him ache.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing." She looked away quickly, though he sensed she'd been trying to peer into his soul.

That's a mistake, he thought, for both of us. "There are things no man should look at, Seria – let alone a woman."

"What are you talking about?" she asked him.

Raylar startled. Had he been talking out loud? "It's nothing," he replied, throwing her own denial back on her.

Her lovely mouth formed into a pout. "I know more than you think I do. I know what you hide from me."

"I'm not hiding anything," he declared a little too vehemently.

"No? What about your last mission? You're still blaming yourself, aren't you? Still punishing yourself, denying any happiness you might feel."

Raylar was genuinely stunned. "How could you know about that?"

"It doesn't matter how I found out," she said. "I know and that's what's important. And if you'll allow me, I might be able to help. I could at least listen."

His temples began to throb. The very idea of unleashing that kind of hell on this woman, so kind and gentle and undeserving, tore him apart.

"Don't go there, Seria," he warned, his tone measured but intense. "I know that you must be a brave woman, taking on a posting all by yourself on the edge of known space, but there are things you could never handle."

"That's a convenient excuse, isn't it," she challenged, "for not sharing your feelings with me."

Raylar was wishing badly that he could express himself in a less confrontational way. But what could he do? He knew one thing, and that was combat.

"My feelings are beside the point, Seria. I have a responsibility to get you to your assignment safely and that is all." He tried not to sound cold, but it had to be said, for both their sakes.

"Yes, your precious duty," she said acidly.

"Exactly," he ignored her sarcasm. "Now in the interest of...smooth operations, I propose we do things in shifts. I'll eat while you sleep or else sit up here. This thing flies itself, but I enjoy piloting manually. I think if we are careful we will be able to avoid having much contact with each other. What do you think?"

She was glaring at him, her lip quivering. He had hurt her with his casual distancing, but she would thank him in the long run. Sex-making had to be avoided at all costs. Neither of them could afford to have a mate and that was what would occur between them, given their biological combination of primale and half-obedient.

"I think the same thing I did before," she declared, "only more so. You are an asshole."

Raylar let it roll off him, like the soldier he was. "Spoken like a true diplomat," he quipped, unable to avoid a bit of sarcasm of his own.

Seria flipped her middle finger and began to unbuckle.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"Away from you," she spat. "That's your plan, isn't it?"

"You will remain buckled in until we are in deep space. That's an order."

Seeing the heat in her eyes made him want her all over again. He was sure she would be exquisite in bed right now, with all that fire and anger.

What a pleasure it would be to tame her afresh, make her moan and squeal in spite of herself.

"What are you going to do, spank me?"

"I will lock you up," he said. "As I would any crew member or passenger who is a danger to him- or her-self."

"You would like that." She folded her arms over her chest.

"And you wouldn't?"

"Not in the least."

"Good, because I do not wish to be led on," he informed her.

"In your dreams," she snorted.

Indeed, yes...he would long for her, in dreams and in his every waking moment. He could not, however, afford to tell her that, under any circumstance.

Raylar turned his attention fully to the controls, seeking a few moments' respite.

They rose through the atmosphere in silence, the blue-white of the sky giving way to the phantom black of space. In place of a single big yellow star, there were now many tiny cold dots, distant and infinitely quiet.

Raylar looked across at Seria. She had closed her eyes. She looked so lovely, so damnably unapproachable. "I know you are faking sleep," he said.

"Go to hell," she snapped, eyes still tightly shut.

"You will have to watch your language with me," he said. "And your tone."

His heart was pounding. Why was he badgering her like this? What possible difference could it make? It was like a part of him didn't want to let go of her.

"Just leave me alone," she said.

"It's just that this will be a long trip. Sixteen hours, cold space time to the hyper-link and then six days of total interstellar grayness. The wormholes...can play tricks on people's minds."

"Thanks for the tip," she said with maximum disdain.

"You don't have much respect for authority, do you?"

Raylar wanted to take her over his knee. Either that or hold her in his arms so he could kiss her over and over and tell her...

Tell her what?

That was the problem, wasn't it? There was nothing he could say. Nothing he could do either, other than making sex again with her, which was easy as breathing. Beyond that, they were completely incompatible. Sure, they could converse a little, dance and laugh. But they couldn't really *relate*.

Whatever the hell that meant.

"Sure I respect authority," she said. "Just not yours."

This remark hit him right in the primale ego. "For someone's who's supposed to be half obedient you sure don't bring much comfort to a man," he struck back.

"Good." She smiled cruelly. "I hope I never bring you a moment of peace or comfort as long as I live."

Raylar felt the firestorm within. A wall of melting ice. Unspeakable liquid pain. A deep, open wound. His fingers trembled ever so slightly as he returned his eyes to the instrument panel.

Quite simply, he did not trust himself to say another word.

"What's the matter?" she taunted. "Am I causing too much stress for the big, bad warrior?"

Stress was right. And conflict, too. He wanted her. He needed her—or at least he needed something she had. At the same time, he couldn't afford her. She was too much. She was a danger, a risk to everything he had. She made him let go, she made him look too deep, and she made him question things.

Why had General Theron put him in this predicament? Was Seria right about the mating thing, or was this really just some kind of test to see what he was made of? Did he have to show he could resist the temptation of Seria before he would be allowed to fight the Narthians again?

A new layer of resentment began to kindle as he considered this possibility. What if Seria was keeping him from his real duty? He knew he shouldn't blame her, but she was the only available target.

This wasn't good. He should not be feeling these things. He should not be thinking about the woman so much, period. He should not be so...consumed. With an effort of supreme will, he pushed it all down. Down deep with the rest of the untouchable stuff. The things he didn't have time for. Not in this lifetime.

He must shut her out. Completely.

"I'm talking to you, damn it. I won't be ignored, Raylar." She was unfastening her seat belt.

"Don't do it, woman."

"Stop me, then."

He was trying to execute an acceleration maneuver. With one hand on the board he grabbed for Seria with the other. She was on him, grabbing at his uniform. She kissed him, hard.

"Am I getting through yet?"

Raylar held her at bay and finished the maneuver. This achieved, he pushed back his seat and swung her over his lap. He slapped her wriggling posterior hard.

"You will not disobey me again," he said.

Seria whimpered, a disciplined female.

"Are we clear?"

"Yes," she pouted.

He felt the heat of her through her pants. He could smell her. She was as excited as he was. "That will be all." He let her up before he got himself in trouble. "I want you to go and lie down for a while. The ship is stable enough."

Seria climbed off his lap. Her face was filled with a passion bordering on hatred. Without warning she reared back and slapped him across the cheek.

Raylar absorbed the mild sting, feeling it more in his heart than anywhere else. "I suppose you think I deserved that."

"No, what you deserve," she said, "is nothing."

With that she turned and walked out, her freshly spanked posterior wiggling indignantly.

Raylar clenched his fists, resisting the impulse to follow her. She needed to be put in her place. Taught a lesson. She needed a good stern whipping. A hard fucking.

But wasn't that what she wanted? To keep him engaged, to involve him in her ridiculous mating plan?

Correction—Theron and Nyssa's plan.

Raylar muttered a curse. Once again, he was fighting to keep control over his emotions. This is only a job, he told himself. And she is only a woman. One among many. It was a lie, of course, and he did not believe it for an instant.

Raylar decided to put himself into primale meditational mode for a bit. Dividing his mind, he put part of it to the task of monitoring the ship's instruments. The other part, his higher consciousness, he lowered to a quasi-dream state, one unique to primales. It was a combat technique, one that allowed them to push themselves far beyond normal human limits in times of extreme stress.

He had nearly succeeded when he picked up a perplexing sound with his supersensitive hearing. It was the beating of a human heart, the pace faster than normal.

It was accompanied by breathing, tight and heavy, on the verge of panting. The sounds were coming from the sleep chamber.

His pulse raced as he realized what it was. Seria, pleasuring herself. His cock swelled in his pants as he pictured her, lying there under the covers, her hand pressed between her thighs. Was she naked? Was she touching her breasts? Was her small pink tongue peeking out from between her lips? Were her eyes heavy-lidded with desire, closed and lost in fantasy?

What was she thinking, the little beauty with the exquisite body, the marvelous creature he so yearned to hold and protect and possess? Did she think of him or some other male? Was she trying to drive him mad with primale jealousy? Hadn't he made it clear enough that he wanted nothing to do with her sexually?

This was too much. Having to be on the ship with her was bad enough, but having to put up with such blatant sexual enticement was more than any man should have to bear, even a disciplined primale such as himself.

Putting the ship back on autopilot, he rose from his seat, determination burning in his gut.

It was time to set his lovely passenger straight.

Once and for all.

* * * * *

Seria had never been so angry in her life. How dare he put his hand to her bottom like that—again. Had he not just made it abundantly clear he was through with her physically?

How could he reject her like that and then inflame her all over again? He was a cruel man, insensitive to the core. She stripped off her clothes, seeking to reject any reminder of his touch.

Her bottom tingled where he had spanked her. She put her palm against her skin, shuddering. She had been disciplined. The fem part of her sought to maintain outrage, but the obedient part craved to yield—on her knees, begging Raylar's forgiveness. Begging him to take pleasure with her wretched body. Her open mouth, submissive and ready to receive his cock. Her legs parted for penetration.

She had disobeyed...she must be put in her place.

Her hand strayed to her breast, caressing. Her nipples were full and hard. They ached from the cold emptiness of the room, the dire emptiness in her heart and between her legs.

It wasn't fair, any of this. Why had Nyssa and Theron sent her out here like this, to face her destiny with Raylar all alone? Why should the responsibility be all on her shoulders, to make or break this union between them? Here it was supposed to be fate, and yet she had been appointed official catalyst to the fireworks. Wasn't Raylar the primale, the dominant? He should have been the one to whom the secret was revealed.

He should have been ordered to seduce her. To overpower her with his romantic dominance. Leaving her no choice but to accept.

This is how it is, Seria. You were not born free. You were born with my mark stamped on you. You were born to submit, and you will do so...now.

The words made her pussy pour forth. How trapped she felt. Raylar had made her wet from the first moment she'd seen the holo. So why did she have to keep acting like she had a choice? Her genetic engineers were cruel, she decided, and so were Theron

and Nyssa for putting them together. Maybe it would be better if Raylar never knew how much she had been affected by the union. It was personal for her now, in a way that cut to the very core of her being.

I shall never tell him, she vowed, though I'll burn alone for the rest of my life. Nor will I accept his touch ever again. Even if he begs me. I am through with him, she told herself, even as her body beckoned, desperate to quench the fires. Never again will I prostrate myself...

Seria's legs parted before the invasion of her own hand. Her knees went weak. She clenched the muscles of her pussy, greedily taking in her fingers.

The orgasm came at once, quick and dirty. Enveloping and strangely shaming. She could not help herself and she was not supposed to.

Seria felt a chill down her spine, hot and tickling as she remembered Nyssa's words concerning her devious plans. *You will be put together in an environment where sex-making will occur. Tight, steamy quarters.*

That's what this ship was, an incubator for sex.

Sex with the man who most aroused her in the universe. The one who was supposed to be her lifemate. The one her body had already called Master. The one with the magic touch and the magic cock, the one who had owned her once and who could again at his mere whim.

Seria collapsed onto the bed, crawled under the covers and lay on her back. No power in the universe could have kept her on her feet. She was steaming, the liquid oozing from the opening of her puffy lips.

"Yes," she moaned, ever so softly, spreading her legs wide, arching her back.

Touching...

I must hurry, she thought. He must never catch me doing this again.

* * * * *

Raylar stood at the hatch to the sleeping compartment. Seria was huddled under the sheet. Only her face was exposed, but it was clear enough what was going on. The small, subtle motions, so quintessentially feminine. The closed eyes, the look of bliss behind pink cheeks.

And the unmistakable scent in the air.

Seria was masturbating, all right. His fists clenched in a torrent of emotion. His already tormented cock thrust itself against the material of his space uniform, threatening to rend it.

By the Code, this had to stop. He had to nip this in the bud.

Raylar yanked back the covers. Seria gasped, apprehended. Her eyes revealed the depth and conflict of her emotions. She whispered his name, as though there could have been someone else on the ship.

"Raylar...what are you doing here?" she questioned.

"You know very well," he replied.

Raylar rolled her promptly to her belly, shielding himself from the temptations of her sweet, swollen breasts, the nipples tight and pink, formed to hard nubs. So, too, did it hide away her trembling belly.

Unfortunately, there was still her quivering ass and the all-too-tempting slit, glistening with feminine fluids.

"You will not do that on this ship," he ordered. Pulling her hands together behind her back, he administered a punitive smack, right to the center of her ass cheeks.

Seria howled. "That hurts!"

He spanked her five more times, just as hard. "So does having to watch you play with yourself."

"So don't watch," she spat.

"That is not the point. You are deliberately inflaming my primale blood. Do you wish me to enslave you entirely? To reduce you to a pleasure toy for the entirety of this journey? I could do that, you know. I could fuck you hour after hour, day after day, until you moan for mercy, until your body begs for respite. But that would only be the beginning. I would keep on making you come, exploding against your will, like some kind of she-beast, a zithrian tigress, consumed with sex-making, endless mating. Some diplomat you would be then."

Raylar punished her with another trio of blows, thankful she could not see the strain on his face, the intense anguish his own words brought him.

The fact was, he did want to do those things to her and not just for the trip. He wanted the right, the complete access to her body – and her soul – forever.

How could he not? He was a primale and she was an obedient. They had made sex and like it or not, bonding was occurring.

"You don't know the first thing about what it takes to be a diplomat," she fought back, "or a lover, either."

Raylar's primale ego bristled over that last remark. "Don't talk back, Seria. I'm in command on this ship and you will either obey me or be put in irons."

"If that's what it takes for you to be in charge..."

"It doesn't, but apparently you won't be satisfied until you are. A woman like you should be crawling at a man's feet, not negotiating treaties."

"I'll never crawl to you!" She squirmed.

The challenge was more than he could take. Fingers flying, he opened his trousers.

"What are you doing?" she screamed. "You fucking bastard."

His cock slid home decisively between her pussy lips. She was open and wet and hot.

Raylar sank himself to the hilt, pressing his body down on top of hers. Seizing her hair, he fiercely hissed a single word into her ear. "Submit."

Her moan began in protest but quickly turned to acquiescence as Raylar expanded his cock, sending more blood to thicken the round, veined shaft.

Seria stopped struggling, her body recognizing the natural mastery of a primale. Her primale. Still, he knew her mind remained unconquered.

Which in some crazy fashion was how he liked her best.

"I hate you," she said, her cheek pressed to the pillow.

"Duly noted. You will however, follow my orders."

"Why should I?" she snapped. "When you don't follow them yourself?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your cock in my pussy, Ace. That's hardly keeping out of each other's way."

Raylar frowned. "I warned you about leading me on." He attempted to cover his slip.

"Yeah, right."

"Clearly you leave me no alternative," he pronounced, attempting to sound as authoritative as possible under the circumstances."

Raylar turned his head toward the ship's objectifier on the wall. "Shackles. Full wrist and ankle. Female size," he ordered the silver, mirrorlike surface of the machine. "Make them old-fashioned steel."

The silver mirror flashed red and then green. Raylar reluctantly withdrew his cock and went to the wall and opened the drawer underneath. The shackles were gleaming, connected by thick chains. He lifted the metal in his hand. It was heavy. Substantial.

A strange, unspeakable bliss flowed through his being. A rush—deep and primale. He was about to put Seria in bondage. The symbolism was almost overpowering. The naked flesh of the female, constrained in steel. At his mercy.

His every primale instinct was to possess her once more, to stake his claim. Filling Seria with semen, with cock. Not fucking her was going to take every ounce of willpower. As it was, his cock was throbbing with life, wet and glistening with Seria's fluids.

He should have ordered the chains for himself. Except that there wasn't a set of shackles strong enough to hold him. At least not that the objectifier could make.

Seria had taken the opportunity to turn back over. Scooted against the bulkhead at the head of the bed, knees gathered to her chest, the sheet gathered about her, she made her last stand. "If you think you're putting those on me, you're crazy."

Raylar ached to thrust his tortured dick between her lips...silencing her protests once and for all. "It's for your own good. And mine, too."

Seria snorted an obscenity, indicating she did not believe him.

"A lady does not talk that way," he said.

"I'll talk however I fucking want to talk...you bastard."

"Lower the sheet, Seria." His heart was pounding. His pulse racing. "Get back on your belly. Wrists and ankles crossed behind you."

"I'm not your slave," she defied.

"You want me to treat you like one, though, don't you?"

Seria flushed. Her eyes darkened. "I want nothing of the sort," she demurred, just a second too late to hide her body's desires.

"Lower the sheet," he repeated, his voice a rasp. "You may not hide your nakedness."

She licked her lips. A quick darting motion. Her breasts were rising and falling. There was heat in the air, a pungent thickness between them. The feel of power in the air. And submission.

Seria's hands moved, weak and trancelike. The material slipped from her hands, the sheet dropped to her waist. Her hands fell limply with it to her sides, giving him an unencumbered view of her bosom.

"Arch your back."

She followed the command. It had nothing to do with ship's discipline anymore and they both knew it. This was about a woman displaying herself to a much stronger and more powerful male. A male who desired her. And intended to have her.

"Touch your nipples. Make them harder," said Raylar.

Seria obeyed. She pushed at the nubs, up and down and sideways, using her index fingers. He rubbed his cock as he watched. It was blatant on his part. What was there left to hide?

"Pinch."

Seria whimpered as she followed the new command. Far from moving him to pity, her predicament only made him want more power. More control.

"Harder. Both at once."

She sucked on her lower lip. The pain was erotic to behold. He knew it well, from previous experiences. With women unable to hide their responses from his augmented primale sensory apparatus.

He drew a deep breath as her nipples turned from pink to red. They were swelling visibly, enticing him to push her further.

"You disobeyed me," he reminded.

"Yes..." She nodded her head, acknowledging.

"What should I do about that?"

"P-punish me..."

"I already spanked you."

"Yes..." She was in a kind of mist. The liquid heat of a woman deep in sexual submission. "It...it hurt."

"So it did. Remove the sheet, Seria."

She cast it aside, exposing herself completely.

"On your knees. Thighs apart."

Her easy compliance only made him want more. It was a dangerous game they were playing. Was it too late to fight the pull of biology? If he were to take her now in his present state...

"Look at this," he demanded. "Look at my cock."

She did so, hunger and awe in her eyes as she beheld his erection, full and thick, proudly defying gravity. His balls were hurting, so full they felt on the verge of bursting.

"You do this to me. And don't take that as a compliment, it's not. You are putting me in a damn difficult position, do you know that? This is a mating hard-on, Seria. Mating hard-ons are for keeps—not like what we had last night. Take a primale's semen in your belly when he is in the fever and you are his. Never mind that pregnancy is no longer possible in our society. You will be his property, as surely as if you were in the days of the cavemen."

"I don't care," said Seria. "I don't care if you do that to me—"

Storms erupted inside him. The woman played with fire. She had no clue. "Enough, Seria."

"Why do you fight your own impulses? I thought you were primale—don't you take what you want?"

"We are men of discipline. We live by the Code."

"Did your Code tell you to display me like this?" she challenged. "Did your Code tell you to make chains to put on my body?"

Raylar's jaw set tightly. She was pushing him to his limits. "Fingers interlaced," he said curtly. "Behind your neck. Henceforth you will speak when spoken to."

Seria moved into position with the ease of an obedient. Behind her eyes, he could see it, though, a most distinctive, I told you so... *I told you that you want to own me.*

"Is this what you want, Seria? My masculine control over your life? You want to eat and drink as you're told? To provide sexual service at my whim? To wear clothes of my choosing, or none at all if it pleases me? You want to submit to my authority—in bed and out of it? Daily spankings, restraints...the whip?"

Seria stayed in place. "I want what you want..."

"Eyes down," he commanded, unable to bear the soft intensity of her stare, the sweet seduction of her words.

Seria broke the silence that followed. "Raylar?" she whispered. "Master?"

His cock expanded a full inch in her direction. "What is it?"

"Suppose you came in my mouth instead? Would I still be...branded?"

"Woman," he growled, "why do you persist in this?"

The answer was no, probably not.

Still, the risks of being so close to her, naked and in heat like she was would be very high indeed. He was in the grip of primale fever, after all. If he were to plunge his cock between her legs at this stage, there would be no turning back. Indeed, it would be seriously unlikely that another man's touch would ever mean a thing to her. Not after such an experience.

"Don't deny yourself. Possess my mouth..." Her voice was an erotic rasp. The wench had chosen the words carefully, no doubt.

Possess my mouth...

What male wouldn't want between those sweet lips? To plunder them of any last vestiges of innocence, to render her into the flaming, fatal beauty she was intended to be.

"Possess me...Master."

He nearly succumbed. More than anything he wanted to give in—to yield himself to her passions, to entrust his raw manhood to her feminine designs. But he had as yet one scrap of will. Pushing aside the anticipated sensations, the glorious fulfillment that would come from the act of fellatio, Raylar wielded the chains.

Swift as lightning, causing her no discomfort, he locked her wrists behind her. Lowering her forward, gently onto the bed, her cheek on the silk coverings, he took hold of her trim ankles. He secured each one and then pulled the chain taut.

He employed a common hog-tie, wrists to ankles. Seria gasped in frustration. Stunned no doubt from the swiftness of his action.

"Raylar, why won't you let me?" she exclaimed.

"You don't understand now. You will later. You'll thank me for it, believe me." Raylar wasn't so sure, but it was the only thing he could think to say.

"Fuck you," came her reply. "You hear me?"

He was at the doorway. "I'm sorry, Seria. It's the only way. Try to get some sleep."

"You can't leave me like this." She squirmed.

Raylar sought, unsuccessfully, to stuff his cock back into his pants. "I can and I will. And if you do not calm yourself, I will gag you as well."

Seria released a sound of protest. She probably intended it to be something formidable, but to Raylar it came across as hopelessly adorable and strangely soothing to his animal desires. "Sleep," he urged, "little one."

"I'm not your anything," she cried as he closed the hatch behind him.

Raylar attempted unsuccessfully to extinguish the smile on his face. It was about as easy to eliminate as this accursed hard-on. Heading straight for the ship's stores—in the back beside the engine compartment—he did something he had never done before on a space journey.

He broke open the emergency bottle of brandy. Every ship carried one, by Guardian regulations. Ordinarily drinking on duty was prohibited, but Guardians were

known to face situations that required extreme measures. This was one of those situations if ever he'd run across it.

Not bothering with a glass, he opened the ancient brown bottle with the gold label and hoisted it directly to his mouth. The hundred-year-old alcohol burned hot and smooth, opening a pathway right to his belly. If only he could open a path that clear in his head. Taking the bottle to the kitchen, he collapsed in one of the two chairs. He set the bottle on the table.

He had a sneaking suspicion he was going to be finishing it before all was said and done. Whatever it took to calm his passions. And to forget. Seria. And himself, too. At least that part of him that was betraying his own ideals.

No matter what happened, he would not go back there. He would not touch that chained woman. He would not kiss her, or love her, or possess her.

Oh, hell. He swallowed deep from the bottle. Talk about a lost cause. Two minutes and it felt like a lifetime. He couldn't leave her in there. Alone. Chained. He told himself he was doing this for her safety and protection.

The fact that he was feeling desperate and sick from being alone and apart from her meant nothing. Nothing at all. He was a Guardian. And he could not afford to be dependent like this on a female.

He'd unchain her quickly, and then leave the cabin again.

One more brace of the brandy and he was off. On the most dangerous mission of his life.

* * * * *

Seria was in bondage.

She pronounced the word in her mind, wrapping her head around the reality. A man had done this to her. Raylar, to be precise. This was his will and not hers.

The chains, the enforced nudity. The near sexual possession. All of it was his doing.

Her body couldn't help but respond, her nipples ached to be touched or pinched or bitten. Her pussy, dripped profusely onto the bed, her belly was so hot with need that she was unable to stop shifting, trying to get off in her state of total confinement.

What he had done to her...

The way he had gone inside her, eliminating her petty resistance. Nothing had prepared her for that feeling of total possession. His action in one fell swoop had stilled and calmed her, framing her reality even as it inflamed her body.

With that single act of penetration, Raylar had taken her in the deepest meaning of the word...

What would have happened if he had ejaculated inside her?

With a mating erection? The kind that released the semen of marking and branding. He had said, without boasting, that she would have been his. Forever.

A close call, indeed.

And where was her head? She had urged him on, as angry as she was at him.

But that was her mission, wasn't it? To allow herself to become his mate.

His sex slave.

Shivers passed up and down her spine. She pulled in futility at her bonds. She couldn't play with herself now, she couldn't touch or satisfy. Her body was off-limits. Her pleasure...and her pain were up to him.

Was he teaching her a lesson or what? What did he intend in the long run? He was fighting his mastery over her, that was clear.

She wished she could make it better for him.

She wished she could comfort him.

She wished she could scratch her nose properly. And have another orgasm.

Seria startled as she heard the door slide open.

Raylar was back.

Visions filled her tormented mind – being turned over, his hand taking its fill of her flesh, exploiting her bondage. He would work her to exquisite simmering, make her curse and beg and cry, all in the same breath, force her to shatter into a million pieces before finally putting her out of her misery. Unchain her, put her on her back, legs apart, enter her, pin her arms over her head, move in and out, perfect his rhythm for that one perfect release.

The release of possession. And enslavement.

His...by right of his semen. His by right of primale conquest.

Raylar sat on the bed beside her. "I'm releasing you," he announced, abruptly ending her fantasies. "We must act as though this never happened."

She could smell the brandy on his breath. He'd been drinking. Why in the blazes had he done a thing like that?

"Act as though it never happened?" she exclaimed. "That's easy for you to say. You're not the victim here."

Raylar sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, Seria. For all of it. I wasn't...thinking clearly."

He undid the chains, freeing her limbs. "What do you want?" she demanded, sitting up and rubbing her wrists. "Why won't you tell me what you want?"

"I want to do my duty. To take you to Alphas Six and never see you again."

She moved to slap him. He made no effort to stop her. "If you think you can hurt me," he said dryly, "trust me, I've seen more than you could dream of in your worst nightmares."

"But you won't tell me. Why won't you tell me?"

"I don't want to make things worse. We have our separate lives...why complicate it?"

"Get out." Tears stung her eyes. She couldn't bear to see him like that, sitting there so placid, looking at her like none of this even mattered.

"As you wish." He stood up, straight and tall. "We will continue with our original plan. Taking shifts, keeping out of each other's way the rest of the trip."

"I was already doing that," she pointed out rightfully. "You're the one who barged in here and forced yourself on me."

"You were behaving in a sexual manner, Seria and I responded by instinct. We both made a mistake."

Seria's mouth hung open. She couldn't think of anything nasty enough to say.

If only she were the stronger one. She'd make him feel submissive for a change—chain up his fine body and force him to accept a place of subservience. Naked and helpless. For hours she would tease and torment that cock of his, until he begged for release. And then she would torture him some more just for good measure.

"I am going to get something to eat," he said, changing the subject. "Are you hungry? I can prepare something and leave it for you."

"Why should I eat anything, Raylar, I'm a mistake. You probably wish I didn't even exist."

"I never said that."

"You might as well have."

"This is getting us nowhere, Seria. I am leaving."

"Good."

He nodded, oblivious as always to her feelings. "In that case, I'll leave you alone."

She made no reply. Less than a minute after he was gone, she was crying, weeping uncontrollably into her pillow. It wasn't fair. None of this was fair.

* * * * *

Raylar heard her sobbing. Blast it, what was wrong with her? Why were women so sensitive? He debated leaving her be, but the Guardian inside him couldn't let her suffer like that.

Or was it some other impulse calling him back? Something personal...

It was true he felt things for Seria in particular that no other woman had ever triggered in him. It was like she had become the template, the very model for femininity in his mind. Compared to her, every other member of the gender paled to insignificance.

He had never meant to cause her pain. And yet it seemed like the more he tried to fix things with her, the worse he made it. Wasn't he doing what she wanted? Respecting her privacy? Damn it, he was just a complete imbecile around her. He couldn't make firm decisions. He kept changing his mind, second-guessing himself.

Was there any way out?

She seemed to pay no notice as he came back into the sleep chamber. She was facedown, her beautiful head pressed into the pillow. Her fists were clenched in futility. She was the very picture of feminine frustration.

Never had he seen a more incredible sight on any of the worlds he'd visited.

Paralysis almost overcame him. Did he dare to touch her, to interfere in her sorrow? His own breathing felt like intrusion. At last he bent down, lightly resting his fingertips on one creamy shoulder. Seria stiffened in reaction. She didn't want him there...she didn't want him.

"Seria." He said her name, feeling so very lost. "Don't cry...please?"

Seria rolled onto her back, reaching. "Raylar...make love to me."

Her body beckoned. He craved it in a way he had never known. It was like a part of him, half even. Would they have to make the connection—male to female—in order to soothe the anguish?

Raylar's clothes tore away in his hands, his primale strength making a mockery of the material. Her eyes lit with need as she watched his flesh come into view. He would touch her everywhere, he would rub their bodies together creating heat and fire and liquid magic.

Her arms were outstretched, she had one leg up, the knee bent enticingly. She was pure invitation, back gracefully arched, her pussy lips peeking out like petals clothing her wondrous sex beneath.

His eyes riveted, his mind and heart focused like a laser, he crawled on top of her, his every motion designed to bring them together.

They fit. That was the only proper word to describe it. One single movement put them into instant harmony.

Make love, she had said, not sex.

Raylar clung to her.

Inside her. Trembling. His cock aching, stretching, finding its home deep, deep in Seria's sopping wet, though incredibly tight, pussy. Their flesh was fused. Neither spoke. They just clung. To each other. Two bodies. Alone. Deep in space. No right or wrong, no tomorrow. Just the now.

He let her cry against him. He was holding on for dear life, himself. This made no sense. It was a great, great mistake, all right. This was not the sort of universe for lovers. Least of all when you were a soldier, pledged to fight the likes of the Narthians.

Raylar wanted to come. More than once. He wanted to fill Seria with his semen. Mating semen. Not to give birth, that was impossible, but just to feel that bliss which others spoke of. The moment of primale truth. When one's mate has been identified. And claimed.

"Yes, Raylar," she read his mind, "I need it..."

"I can't." He shook his head, the anguish pouring into his voice.

"You can." She pressed her belly to his, arching her back, offering herself. "I'm yours...Master."

The way she said it, with such confidence...

"You don't know what you are saying, Seria."

"I do," she breathed. "I'm...nothing...without you."

Raylar groaned. He could not hold back. "Seria..."

"Let it go," she urged, clutching his shoulders. "Let it all go."

Raylar felt the release surging up from his toes, shooting like lightning to his cock. A single zap, expending him, like a switch flipped, a dam released, a star collapsing. The semen just poured out, spurt after spurt. He wasn't even moving, just holding tight to Seria, listening to her sighs and her endless sweet whispers of "Yes".

"Can't stop," he told her as the orgasm went on.

"Don't stop," she said. "Keep going. Come on my belly. My breasts."

Raylar withdrew, sending a white warm spray across Seria's torso. She cupped her breasts, smiling ecstatically as he bathed them in his cum.

"My face...my mouth," she exclaimed, extending her tongue.

The target proved irresistible. Pumping his cock, taking aim, he squirted over Seria's perfect face, covering her cheeks and landing a dab right in the middle of her tongue. He went for her hair next, then back to her breasts.

She was shuddering, moaning, and rubbing his cum all over herself.

Suddenly, he had to have her from behind.

"Get on all fours," he said huskily.

Seria put herself into position. She was woozy, but more than eager to obey. Raylar's first orgasm had nearly subsided, but he was still rock-hard, well on the way to a second one.

Seria grunted as he slammed himself home, filling her. Adrenaline surging through his system, he clamped his teeth down on Seria's neck. Not hard enough to break the skin, but just enough to make her feel possessed. He felt her spasm in reply. Her pussy contracting against his cock, rapid-fire.

She was coming.

He replied by pulsing his cock, adding to the heat of her pleasure. She gripped the bed, crying out with soft, feminine mewls. Finally, he pushed her, belly down, squashing her breasts. One hand pressed to her back, he pulled his cock out halfway. Seria was screaming, but not from pain.

"Say it," he hissed.

"Master...fuck me!"

Raylar descended, hard. Immediately, he withdrew and pounded her again. She cried out for more, prompting him to seize hold of her hair. "Submit..."

Her pussy opened for him, every fiber of her being moving into deep surrender mode. She was relaxed, her body was open. She was his.

He took her. With lightning thrusts. Powerful, primale thrusts. She was no longer able to control the orgasms. He made them happen, in his time, by his will. In and out. Tireless. He could do this for hours if he liked.

Or...he could come now.

"Beg." He slapped her ass.

"Come inside me, Master. Fill me...again."

Raylar cried out, a lion's roar of an orgasm. Seria took it all, shaking and writhing beneath him. They were at the center of a storm, a swirl of fire, invisible, but melting hot. He was scarcely aware of where he left off and she began.

At a certain point, he flipped them over, holding her above him. Like a rag doll, he teased her on the end of his dick, rubbing the tip of it against her engorged clitoris. She cried one minute, laughed the next.

Finally, he let her sit, allowing her to slide down the length of his cock, taking it inside her. All the way.

"Move," he commanded.

Seria planted her feet on the bed alongside his hips straddling him. Lifting herself, she exposed his cock, almost emptying her pussy, but not completely. A twinkle in her eye, keeping him waiting as long as she dared, she lowered herself, sheathing him fully in her sweet sex.

She repeated the motion several times, greatly adding to his pleasure in the process.

"Hold your breasts for me," he said, enjoying the fine sight of her, moving so wickedly.

She did as she was told, clenching her swollen globes. Her belly undulated as she lifted herself, again and again, only to descend once more, her pussy filled to capacity.

"Come for me," he ordered, needing to see her in the throes of possession. "Now."

Her face slipped into angelic ecstasy. The helplessness suited her well it seemed, at least in the bedroom. Closing her eyes, she leaned back, allowing the sensations to wash over her. He was in charge of her body and she was willing to accept it. He could feel himself in her, and not just in her pussy. He was in her head, too. Not to mention every muscle and nerve ending.

Once the orgasm subsided, he flipped them over, pinning her wrists over her head. Slow and deep, he had her again. With each downward motion she came for him. With every upward one, she whimpered for more. Twice more he orgasmed like that, until at last she was exhausted.

Not that she didn't want to go on.

"Don't stop, Raylar." She was slurring the words, barely able to stay conscious.

"Sleep," he soothed, brushing the hair from her face. "You need sleep."

She was shaking her head, attempting to give him some sort of argument even as she conked out, her conscious mind giving in to the inevitable human need for rest. He was smiling down on her, feeling such satisfaction and appreciation.

For all of her. The incredible sexiness. And her brain and courage, too.

Such a very dangerous combination.

He should leave. Right now, getting as far away from her as this tiny ship would allow. Escaping all the way to the bottom of that brandy bottle if he had to.

Raylar was just getting to his feet when she called for him, from somewhere deep in a dream it seemed. "Don't go." She reached for him. "Don't leave me."

"Seria," he protested.

She had hold of his arm. Wrapping her arms, she rested her head against it. "Um hmm..." she murmured, a smile of satisfaction on her face.

Raylar felt the stab of anguish in his heart. He desired nothing more than to give in to his mating urges. Lying down with her, allowing her to snuggle her head on his chest. Cuddling, comforting and protecting until the fever hit them again.

The beginning of a lifetime's pleasure. A lifetime's adventure.

But that was not his fate. He could never leave a female behind to weep over his absence, to mourn his death in battle. Especially not a woman as talented as this who needed to be living her own life of service to humanity.

There was irony in this, really.

Now that the two of them had shared bonding sex, they could not partake of the flesh of others. Which meant they would have to be celibate.

Good. He had had enough of sex-making as it was. It was energy better put into his work.

Seria would find the same. She would be stronger for this. She would rise to great heights in her career.

He would be proud of her.

Yes, this was really a stroke of fortune.

So why did he feel so miserable?

His lips were quite dry as he touched his fingers to them, preparing to transfer a kiss to her cheek. One last gesture of affection to her in her sleep. Her skin was warm and soft and inviting.

Desperately, he fought his urges. The die was cast.

No longer would he treat her as lover, as Dominant or Master.

No longer would he touch her, hear her sigh or enjoy their mutual ecstasy.

He retracted his hand, as if from fire.

Rising, he turned on his heel, squared his shoulders, and left her. Peaceful in her dreams.

His thoughts turned to the brandy, wondering what he would do when it ran out.

Chapter Eight

Seria stared blankly out of the view port. They were just one day into hyperspace—one day out of six—and already she was feeling the weight of the oppressive grayness. Hyperspace was creepy as far as Seria was concerned. There was something unnatural about it. Oh, she knew the physics well enough, about the wormholes that wound their way through the curvatures of space and time allowing shortcuts that saved months or even years over conventional space travel, but there was no getting around how it made her feel.

Like maybe people really didn't belong out there.

At least not lonely, hopeless people without any sense of their future. Desperate people. Like her. And Raylar, too, whether he knew it or not. Maybe he fooled himself, but not her. She could hear the roughness in his breathing. And she could see the pain in his eyes, the way his brow crinkled and his lips pressed and twitched as he put himself in those meditative states of his.

Did he know she was spying on him when he did that? She felt a little guilty, but it was the only time she could get close to him. With his stupid separation policy that didn't even let her be in the same chamber with him. Why was he so afraid of her? Big, tough Guardian that he was.

Did he think he was protecting her? He had done nothing so far but leave her with a terrible empty place in her heart. Such a cruel twist. Bonding with her so passionately and then ending things with brutal, efficiency, abandoning her in bed without saying a word.

And he didn't seem affected in the least.

If anything he'd seemed pleased with himself as he had explained to her where things stood.

An opportunity for celibacy he had called it, a mutual agreement to ensure they would both be able to devote themselves fully to their careers.

Oh, goodie.

She had half a mind to pull the rug out from under his efficient, equanimous self. Then again, she knew better. How he was hurting underneath. Everything had come out already. There was no faking the way he had made love to her, the way he had touched her cheek just before he'd left, when he'd thought she was still asleep.

There was no mistaking the tenderness, the vulnerability behind the usual suit of armor.

But there was no getting through to him again it seemed.

So much for his being her natural-born partner and mate, she thought glumly. How could the geneticists have bungled things so badly? Environment must indeed count for more than DNA in determining a person's adult nature. Maybe in theory he was to be her hero and protector, but in real life, he was just another Guardian, doing an assignment he obviously resented the hell out of.

"One hundred hours, ten minutes hyperspace time left," Raylar announced crisply, popping his head out of the cockpit.

Something in her snapped. "You really hate me that much, don't you? You actually have to count the minutes you're stuck with me."

He frowned. "That isn't it, Seria. I just thought you'd be interested."

"Well, stop thinking," she exclaimed, letting it all out. "And stop with your little updates. Letting me know how wonderful and fine things are. Maybe they aren't fine. Maybe it's not just about the numbers on your precious dials and displays."

Raylar stared, assessing.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm fine. There's nothing wrong with me. I don't have any stupid space madness. I'm just...fed up."

"I didn't say anything about space madness."

"If anyone's acting strangely," she persisted, not really sure where her thoughts were coming from or where they were going, "it's you."

"Me?" He blinked. "What's strange about my behavior?"

"You're cut off from your emotions, for one thing."

"I was not aware of that." He shook his head.

"No, I suppose not," she shot back. "I guess fucking isn't an emotional thing for you. Just love 'em and leave 'em, right?"

Raylar pursed his lips. "You are referring to our sex-making activities?"

"No, Raylar," she replied acidly. "I meant the big chess tournament we've been having."

"I don't think sarcasm is going to help us, Seria."

"Why not? Nothing else has."

"We need to regard the matter with some maturity. And objectivity."

"Sex isn't objective. It's passion," she countered. "And cutting another person off without so much as an explanation is just plain cruel."

"What is there to explain? We succumbed to biological attraction. Bonding occurred, leaving us the possibility of mating or mutual celibacy. Clearly the latter is in our best interest."

Fury and boundless frustration bubbled inside her. Did he have to be so damn arrogant about everything?

"How do you know what's in my best interest or not?" She was on her feet, a mere six inches from his face.

"I am aware of a diplomat's responsibility." He stood his ground. "And I know the Guardian's Code. My responsibility is to get you to your destination and proceed to my next mission while you get on with your assignment."

"You don't know a fucking thing about responsibility, Raylar!" The strength of her reaction was surprising even her.

"Seria, you have no cause to say such a thing."

"I do...I do, Raylar."

"You are overwrought," he decided. "You need rest."

"Fuck you – you don't know what I need. Stop acting like you do."

He took hold of her upper arms. "Seria, it's the effect of hyperspace. It can feel like you're drowning the first time out. Trust me, I've been there."

"Oh, no," she laughed, without humor, "you haven't been here, not where I am."

"I have. Trust me."

She wanted to shake him up, like she was shaken up. She wanted him as insecure and unsure as she felt. And there was only one way to do that. By daring to open her heart, tearing it if need be.

"You want to walk in my shoes? Try waking up one day and finding out your whole life has been a lie. That you are really some kind of half-breed freak and that you have a sister who's head of the Council and that you're supposed to marry some impossible pigheaded Guardian so he can become some all-wise general and save the human race."

A dark cloud passed over his face. He was struggling to keep control. "I told you, Seria, no more. You are letting the madness talk. I am not going to be a general, and we are not going to marry."

"Ask Nyssa if you don't believe me. Or your precious General Theron, who you know damn well has been setting you up this whole time."

"I am going to have to give you a dose of calming serum, Seria. For your own good."

"Go ahead, it won't change the truth."

"The truth, Seria?" Raylar seemed as close to genuine emotion as she'd ever seen. Was she breaking through his shell at last? "You have no clue..."

"Really? Then why don't you go ahead and enlighten me, Raylar?"

"Truth is duty. You have yours and I have mine."

"My duty is to Nyssa and Theron. And so is yours. And they put us together on this mission for only one reason. To mate. You will obey your General and have me."

"I'm going to get the serum," he decided.

"Coward," she hissed. "Why can't you be a man and just deal with things?"

"What things?" he demanded.

"Sex for one. You want it, I want it. Why do we deny ourselves? And don't say it's because of the bonding business. We can make love all we want now and still walk away at the end of this trip. Unless you're afraid of becoming attached."

"I am afraid of nothing."

"Prove it."

"Very well." Raylar responded with a searing kiss. Hot and punishing. She felt the pent-up desire, the frustration he must have been enduring. So she wasn't the only one suffering for lack of making sex these past hours.

He took his fill from her lips, stealing her very breath. By the time he released her, what felt like a full interval later, her nipples were hot beads and her crotch a pool of liquid need. He let a single hand linger on her hip, his large, capable fingers pressing the firm flesh, a powerful reminder of what he could do to her.

"You really want me to deal with things?" he challenged, his voice a low rasp.

Seria could feel the primale energy, emanating from his body. "Yes," she whispered, knowing how much she was in over her head.

"So be it. But you must be prepared to go to my core. You must call upon your obedient side. In ways you never have before."

Seria nodded. Her only hope was to follow her instincts.

His gaze was fierce, unlike any she had seen in him before. And yet she felt no fear, only wanting.

"This will change nothing." He confirmed her earlier words. "When you are delivered to your destination, we will part ways...forever."

"For pity's sake, Raylar, stop talking, and just do it."

"Undress me," he ordered.

With trembling fingers, she moved to unclasp his uniform. All the way to his waist. He stood stone still. Observing, evaluating. There was no mistaking his calm and absolute control. She was on trial now. She must prove herself...by pleasing him.

Parting the halves of the material, she put her palms on his magnificent chest. Such a beautiful man, a living statue, a human god. Reverently, she touched him, enjoying the slight sigh he released in reply. Unable to resist, she moved her mouth to kiss the tip of each nipple. They were hard. Blood-filled.

In a moment she found herself licking his smooth skin. Dabbing her tongue across the well-developed pectorals and down his ribbed abdomen. And lower...

The words rang in her head as she pressed her lips again and again, dampening his skin. *Prove it...Prove you're half obedient.*

There was only one place to go, only one action to take. With all the ease in the world, Seria lowered herself to her knees in front of him. Raylar offered no assistance at this point. It was up to her to open the fastenings and take out his stiff and ready cock.

She felt her pulse race at the sight of it. Stars, how she had missed it...missed him, too. She wanted it all. Every kind of sex-making, her every opening filled, her body pushed to its very limits. But first, one small taste...

Raylar took her head in his hands, preventing her from applying her lips to the tip of his cock. "Obedients do not initiate in sex-making. They follow orders."

Seria licked her lips, dry as any desert. "Tell me." She looked up at him. "Tell me what to do."

His lips angled into something of a smile. Was he mocking her? Lording it over her, or was it some other primale emotion, too deep to read?

"Tell me what you want, Seria."

She swallowed hard. He wanted her pride it seemed, more than her lips. "I want to...please you."

He shook his head. "You'll have to be more specific. You talk like a diplomat, not an obedient."

"I want to suck you," she said blatantly. "I want to suck your cock."

"Are you telling me, or asking me?"

Seria hesitated. It was different now than in their earlier encounters. This was not a matter of her initiating submissive behavior out of a sense of playful irony. This was the real thing. "I'm...asking," she said.

Raylar gave no quarter. "Obedients don't ask for sex. They beg."

Seria's belly clenched hot and tight. Floodgates opened between her legs. Far from gaining strength to resist, she felt herself falling deeper and deeper. He had her right where he wanted her.

But did he know any better than she where this was leading?

Seria looked up at him, blinking moist eyes. "Please," she whispered, putting the power and the responsibility squarely in his hands. "May I suck you?"

"You will do so as an obedient." It was as much a warning as a pronouncement.

"I understand."

"No," he shook his head, "you do not."

Neither do you, she was tempted to say. Because in as much as she was risking getting deep into his world, he was also risking being trapped in hers. For as much as she risked falling for a man who would accept only submissiveness, he risked falling for a woman who was not fully submissive and never would be.

Or was it too late? Were they already in love, just each of them too stubborn to admit it? There were signs of that, but she was hardly objective. All this genetic destiny stuff was playing with her head. Cloying, kind of like this horrible hyperspace, enveloping and sucking the life from her.

"You will take off your clothes," he told her.

She sought to rise, but he put his hand on her shoulder. "You will stay on your knees."

The fem part of her thought him an arrogant bastard for that, but the obedient side clamored to obey, to bare her skin in as servile a manner as possible.

Seria peeled her spacesuit down over her shoulders and down to her waist. Her naked breasts popped free, cool and tingly in the cabin air. Her nipples craved attention, as did the rest of her. Squirming, she removed her clothes, baring her legs and kicking off her slipper-like shoes.

"Is this acceptable?" she asked. "Master?"

"Kiss it," he ordered. "The tip only."

Seria planted her lips, delicately as rose petals, upon the end of Raylar's cock.

"I am going to come in your mouth," he said. "You will swallow my semen. Kiss along the underside." He returned her attention to his cock. "Find the vein, run your tongue along it."

Seria had been reminded of her place. She was there to please. Like a contract girl or some other sort of pleasure wench. She was also there to obey. As she started to put her tongue to Raylar, she was nearly panting. How could he have such an effect on her? Stirring her passion so deeply, but also making her dream of him and yearn for him in other ways.

If only he knew how she worried for him. How she sensed his pain and wanted to ease it. And how she longed to draw out of him the joy and laughter she knew was there, below his somber, self-punishing exterior.

It wasn't your fault, she wanted to shout at him. You didn't kill your men in that battle. You saved as many as you could. No one would ever deny that, not even the Narthians.

Raylar's cock swelled under her soft kisses. The feel of him was silken smooth. "Mmm," he groaned, guiding her head to the right place. "Rub your cheek on it next, like so."

Seria clenched her pussy, her libido surging as he laid his cock against her face. Slowly, he began to slide it lengthwise. He smelled strong and pungent, like a man should. Its proximity drove her wild. She wanted to devour it whole, the silky exterior flesh encasing a center harder than any space metal.

"Yes," he praised. "Yes, my pet."

The wickedly demeaning praise made Seria's blood surge with newfound need. "Master," she exclaimed. "Fuck my mouth...please come inside it."

"Things will happen in my time," he declared, taking her by the hair.

"Yes, Master."

"You will lick me first, slave. You will worship every inch of me. Then, when you've earned the right, you will receive the whole of me."

Seria immediately went to work on his throbbing, blood-filled shaft. She lapped eagerly, covering it with her glistening saliva. Every last inch, just as he had

commanded. His cock seemed ready to explode and yet she knew he would hold back, using every opportunity to lord his power over her.

"You missed a spot." Raylar's voice contained more than a hint of irony now as he pointed to his balls.

That was more than a spot he had in mind...

"Do a good job, woman," he encouraged, "and we will see about fucking your mouth."

"Yes, Master," she said, reveling in the erotic power of his wickedly demeaning words.

Slavishly, she tended to them, one by one, licking them clean of any sweat. They tasted slightly salty, but not unpleasant. Stars, but they were full. She could only imagine how much semen he had stored up, even in one day.

Raylar ran his hands through her hair. His sighs were those of a purely satisfied male. Feeling bold, she made a play for him, capturing the tip of his cock between her lips.

"Insolent little thing," he rasped, feigning displeasure.

Seria took her cue to gobble more of him down, sucking his cock to the back of her throat. He felt so natural there, such a perfect fit.

Humming lightly, vibrating her lips, she sought to maximize his pleasure. Raylar rewarded her with a deep moan.

"Seria." He said her name with a warmth and devotion that made her heart swell.

At a moment like this she could almost believe things might yet work out between them.

If only a mating relationship could be as simple and straightforward as an act of sexual pleasuring.

"Seria..." he repeated her name like music, his hands bracing her shoulders.

He sounded as if he wanted to say more, or was she imagining things?

She looked up at him, her eyes a study in patience and openness. She was not afraid of him, not afraid of whatever might happen should nature take its course between them.

Let him come in her mouth. In her pussy. In her ass. Let him do as he wished, use her as he wished.

She offered him encouraging noises, pressing and suctioning with her tongue to get him to spill his thick, warm semen in her mouth.

Remembering a particularly arousing position he had put her in earlier, Seria put her hands behind her neck, arching her back in total submission.

If she could just swallow his come, she was sure she could change things between them. He would want her, he would be bound to her, finally...

Raylar seemed to sense the tension, the need she had to draw him into her world.

"No," he said, putting his hands on either side of her head, "I won't make it this easy."

"I don't understand, Master."

"Slaves don't need to understand." He snapped his fingers, a different man, one less willing to be swayed by her displays of will. "On your hands and knees," he commanded. "Crawl."

* * * * *

Raylar had his slave stop in the doorway to the sleeping chamber.

He made her wait there, on all fours, small and naked and submissive as he ordered a simple, nearly harmless flogger from the objectifier. He had no wish to hurt Seria in the least. In fact, he would die before he ever harmed a hair on her head. But he was not above a little sexual torture. For education's sake.

Seria had challenged him to treat her as a true obedient, and that meant thwarting her will completely.

She had wished him to come in her mouth, she had desired to take command of his body in that way. He could not allow such a thing.

He must teach her a lesson. Make her realize she could not handle being a true submissive.

The objectifier yielded him a beauty of an instrument. Genuine black leather, about a foot and a half long, braided, with a flat, soft end. The device could not break skin, but it could leave tiny red marks, and it could sting, too. Not to mention tease.

Was he making a mistake going back on his no-sex plan? Probably, but he was still, at base, only human.

At least he was not going to fuck her anymore. That just couldn't be. Things were confusing enough as it was. Ever since this ship had taken off, it was like Seria had gone inside his head and he could not get her out. He was obsessed with watching her, listening to her. Even when he tried to ignore her, she was there.

Mostly he wanted in her head. To guess where she'd been in her life and where she was going. Above all he wanted to understand what made a woman like her accept a life in the Diplomatic Corps. She would make an outstanding celibate diplomat, but she would be making a huge sacrifice.

A woman like Seria was far too passionate to live without love. And not just the pale, pathetic variety offered by mems, either. She needed the full devotion of a primale, who would worship the very ground she walked on even as he dictated the limits and confines she needed so very much in her own life.

She couldn't be caged, though. She was like a bird. And she needed to fly. Her man would have to dominate her in a very careful way, so as not to squash her spirit. And he would have to let her fly when she needed.

Not that it mattered. By making love with her as he had, he had spoiled her for any man but him—the one male in the universe she was guaranteed never to have.

They did have the present, however...

And right now, it was her passion he wanted more than anything in the universe. The deepest yielding of her nature. And he would bring it out with the flogger.

Standing in front of her, he tapped her shoulder with the whip. "Rise," he ordered. "To your feet."

She did so, timid, her body alert and charged. He smiled at her, enjoying the rising and falling of her breasts, the goose bumps up and down her arms.

"It's time," he said. "Put out your hands."

Seria obeyed, glassy-eyed.

Gathering her wrists, he wound fiber he had gotten from the objectifier around them and attached it to a protruding pressure nodule in the doorframe over her head. He raised her to tiptoes, leaving her in a perfect state of helplessness.

She was such a darling, the way she kept looking at the flogger in his hands. Such innocence mixed with obvious desire. "You want it," he observed.

She shook her head no, frantic to disguise her lust.

Raylar dipped his fingers into her delta, removing a sample of contrary evidence. "You want it," he repeated, holding his glistening fingers up to her face. "Say it." He took her chin between the thumb and forefinger of his other hand.

"I...want it," she breathed, red-faced.

He gave her his fingers to lick. She cleaned the evidence of her own arousal, all the while producing more, in the form of a thick fragrance that filled the air.

"You want it," he said again. "And you need it."

Seria sucked in her lower lip. He was sliding the flogger down her side, from under her arm to her waist.

"Tell me how much you need it."

"I need it," she said hoarsely, her body writhing ever so slowly in anticipation of the unknown. "Oh, stars, I need it."

Raylar flicked the tip of the flogger across one engorged nipple. She cried out. It was shock, not pain. He did the same to the other, making her moan. "When a female obedient has been naughty," he observed, "she can be made to fetch the flogger on her hands and knees, naked, carrying the flogger between her teeth."

Seria clenched her teeth. He slapped her belly with the flogger, watching the smooth, tight flesh jiggle ever so slightly.

What a woman she was, so incredibly delicious and desirable. He would never tire of making sex with her, though he be with her a hundred years. Just as he would never tire of looking at or touching her. The way she responded to him, too, was so amazing.

As if he were discovering some new itch on her body with each contact and scratching it all at the same time.

It was time to watch her dance. At least as much as a tethered woman could dance.

His first pass of the flogger barely grazed her sex. But it made her cry out nonetheless. Very soon she would be screaming and begging, the receptors for pleasure and pain confusing themselves in her brain.

Raylar moved the flogger to her hip. He gave her a taste. A crisp smack. Enough to make her body go rigid for a moment. In its wake he watched the pink spot rise to the surface of her skin.

She was now officially a whipped female.

He lashed her again harder. "There are some primales, you know, who are able to be aroused only by the sight of a woman in heavy submission. They keep their mates collared and even shackled. I suppose I am a bit more liberal. Don't you think?" Raylar swatted her breast, enough to make her jolt.

"Y-yes," she winced.

He laughed. "Liar. You'd as soon spit nails at me. But your body still responds. Suppose we play a little game," he decided. "The object is to make you come. How would you like that?"

She nodded eagerly.

Raylar laughed, giving her a nice, soft caress with his hand. Beginning at her belly, employing the tips of his fingers, he moved them downward, across her pelvis, circling about her sex until finally he grazed her labia, light as a feather.

"Oh, Master..." Seria leaned her head back, enjoying the feel of his fingers along the crease of her pussy, almost but not quite penetrating.

"There's only one catch," he said. "I'm going to do it by whipping your pussy."

Seria struggled against her bonds. "Raylar, please, no."

"I will, Seria, and I'll make you beg for it in the process." He tapped her thigh, emphasizing his next point. "Open your legs."

Seria struggled to widen her thighs, given her current position on tiptoes.

"Wider," he commanded, forcing her still further into painful vulnerability.

Seria was breathing hard already, a fine sheen of sweat on her body. "Look at me," he commanded, slipping the flogger into place.

She struggled to maintain eye contact as he masturbated her with the whip. Just a few more seconds and they would begin. He needed her to be close to release first. Good and hungry for it.

He waited until she was on the brink before cutting her off.

"Raylar. Master," she cried predictably, "don't stop."

He showed her the braided leather. "If it comes back, it does so on my terms, slave."

"Yes, anything."

"You'll take pain." A statement, not a question.

"Yes, Master."

Raylar raised his arm, taking careful aim. Seria released a loud cry as he landed the flattened end right over her mound. Before she could mentally sort out what was going on, he bent to kiss her poor, captive lips. She moaned, opening beautifully for him. He worked her with his tongue, plying the soft, velvet insides of her mouth.

"The whip," he said when he'd slain her sufficiently. "Beg for it."

Seria hung, coated in sweat, utterly defeated. But completely sexually charged, too. She had no choice now, no way out but further down, into the dark depths of submission to Raylar's will.

"Whip me, Master. Whip my pussy," she croaked. "Make me come."

He delivered a series of strokes, building her to the very edge of climax. He stopped one short. It was time for another kiss. Soft and sweet. Lingered. And infinitely cruel.

"No, no, Master," she kept saying.

"What's wrong, angel?"

"I'm on fire," she confessed. "Please, let me come? Please, use your whip on me?"

Raylar grabbed one of her breasts, feeling the silky flesh compress in his hands. "So fucking beautiful," he hissed. He stopped short of saying the next thing on his mind.

It wasn't lust consuming him, but something else. Something much deeper and more pervasive.

"Raylar..." She pushed her body into his, willing him to go further.

He slapped her pussy with the whip, enjoying the fresh round of tremors up and down her spine.

All the way this time, no turning back.

"Yes," she began to call out in a steady chant. Her eyes were glazed over—she was at the brink and nothing would hold her back now.

A few more carefully placed strikes with the black leather...

"Come," he commanded at the fourth blow. "Come now, my angel."

Seria cried out, as if he were inside her, filling her to the depths. The sight of her transfixed Raylar. Her incredible eyes, her lips murmuring, her chest rising and falling. She was like some kind of drug, intoxicating, addicting.

He wanted her. Wanted her happy, wanted her ecstatic. Above all he wanted her near him. Close enough to touch. Always.

To hold and possess.

And love.

Damn. Had he said that aloud? She didn't seem to be reacting. Good. He'd be sure not to reveal himself. For one thing, he didn't know what he was talking about. He

could not love Seria. He could not love any woman. He was a soldier. His heart, whatever heart he'd had, had been left back on Rensus Nine, with the bodies of his fallen comrades.

"Raylar..."

She was calling him. He blinked. Had he drifted off? Thinking of the war?

"Take me down," she urged, the fever of her climax passed. "Make love to me. Right now."

He couldn't help but smile at her. The small, chained woman dictating to him what would happen next. "I'm supposed to be in charge," he reminded.

"So prove it," she challenged. "In bed."

His smile broadened to an out-and-out grin. Untying the binding fiber, he scooped her up into his arms. Her body was warm and soft. Fragrant and very female. She felt so very natural against him. The way she snuggled, the way she sighed.

Damn it, why were his eyes tearing up?

He laid her on the ship's bed. The bed he'd been avoiding since their last coupling. They were in hyperspace now. Nothing around them but emptiness. Gray sponginess, unfit for human habitation. Men and women went mad out here, if they weren't careful. All this loneliness was the perfect breeding ground for ghosts.

Raylar fell on top of her, filling her sex in one smooth motion. His arms wrapped around her. He would not be able to let go of her again, not until they reached their destination. "This...is temporary," he reminded them both.

"After this, it's celibacy," she confirmed. "For both of us."

He sealed the deal with a kiss to her lips. The last lips he would ever touch. The last woman he would ever know. Would she give him a small holo-disk, he wondered, to take into battle with him? Or maybe some other memento of their time together?

Better not, he thought. Better to make a clean break of things for both of them. A burdensome past would only slow them down, bogging them in the perpetual sadness of that which could never be. At least not in this universe.

Raylar moved in and out of Seria's tight, hot pussy, relishing every inch of her. He must give it his all now, creating and destroying in one fell swoop their unborn love. For indeed, a relationship this fiery was by definition made to be all or nothing.

A shooting star in the heavens.

"That's it," she urged, sensing he was close. "Come, come for me."

Raylar obeyed her, yielding to his deepest feelings. It was a bittersweet climax, a torrent that carried him into a place of dark forgetfulness. Pleasure, all too soon ended. Clinging limbs, desperately holding to what time could not promise.

Hyperspace romances, it was said, were always doomed to failure. Theron and Nyssa should have thought of that, Raylar mused, when they set about trying to make a love connection between the two of us.

Just goes to show you, the biggest brains in the cosmos don't necessarily know anything more about love than the rest of us. It all comes down to a throw of the dice. The vagaries of fate.

And above all, the tides of war.

Raylar clamped his eyes tightly shut.

"Don't let go," she was saying, or was he saying that himself?

Funny how the mind plays tricks this far out...

He just needed to get her safely to Alphus Six. That's all that mattered. After that, they would go their separate ways. Her to a prosperous life and him to his duty, back to the battlefield.

With any luck he would die quickly, taking as many of the enemy with him as he could. Nothing else mattered now. He had no home, and no prospect of happiness. Everything he might have been lay here, with Seria.

He whispered her name, even as his cock grew hard again under her touch. The words stuck in his throat. So very close to being released and yet so very impossible to say.

I love you, you gorgeous little half-ling...more than life itself.

Chapter Nine

Raylar came up behind Seria at the viewing port. She had been watching the rust-colored surface of the planet, glowing gold under the influence of the rising pink sun. It was Alphas Six. Her destination.

The place where they would part ways forever.

After a whirlwind time in the wormhole, filled with wonder and sex-making and magic. He had taught her so much, about her own body, and about his. He had taught her to open up, to share, to come and scream with abandon. And to give in to dark desires, while soaring to unimaginable heights.

Like all good things, however, it had reached its natural end. The ship would land, and it would all be history, memory, etched in their life blood. In joy and sorrow.

"I managed to whip up a batch of this." Raylar offered her one of two polysteel cups in his hands.

"Thank you." She forced a smile, taking the cran-beer.

"You drank that," he reminded, "the first night."

She felt a lump in her throat. What a sweet thing to do for their goodbye. "Yes," she quipped. "And way too much of it at that."

"Yes," he agreed. "You know, you are very easy when you drink."

She punched him on the arm, having little impact on his iron biceps. "I am not."

"You're right. You're easy all the time."

"Only for you," she quipped.

He smiled, bittersweet. "Yeah."

Was that emotion under there? Could it be he was learning to let out his feelings, to trust just a little? If only they had more time.

In a different universe, she thought, maybe it would have worked out differently.

"You know," Raylar cleared his throat, studying his cup. "I've been thinking, and I may have an answer for you."

"To what?"

"The question you asked our first night. You know, the game about things from our childhood?"

"Oh...I'd nearly forgotten," she exclaimed eagerly. "What did you come up with?"

"Promise you won't laugh?"

"Diplomat's honor." She held up her palm.

"I used to make shadow puppets on my wall. I made a lion, I called it Leo. I've never told anyone that."

"I'm honored you picked me, Raylar," she said somberly. "I will treasure your secret...and Leo's forever."

"Thanks. Now I want to ask a new question, Seria."

She finished her cran-beer for fortitude. "Go for it."

"If you could change one thing in your life, Seria, what would it be?"

"I should have guessed," she shook her head, "that you'd go straight for the jugular as always."

Raylar smiled slyly. "I've been studying up on question games. You know how I am."

"Yeah...I know how you are." She took a deep breath. "The truth is, I don't know what I could change, without changing myself in the process. Everything I am now is a product of where I've been. I wear my pains and scars with all my other memories. It's there for anyone to study, if they want. I guess that's why I'm a diplomat. I think we all have to be that way with each other. No matter where we come from. How about you, Raylar, what would you change?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

"The battle," she said flatly. "Where you lost so many men."

"There should have been a way out. I just didn't see it."

"You know there's nothing I can say..."

"I know. And thanks for not trying."

"I respect you too much, Raylar."

What she could do was take him in her arms...damn him for not letting her. And damn her for not being strong enough.

"We're hitting reentry," he said. "We should prepare for landing."

She offered no argument. It was as good an ending to things as any.

* * * * *

"Well, I guess this is it," Raylar announced.

"Yeah." Seria nodded. "I guess so."

They were standing outside the spaceship, parked on the circular, silver landing platform, each postponing the inevitable. For his part, Raylar was fighting the urge to take her in his arms for a goodbye hug. The trouble was, he didn't know if he could let go again. No matter how much he knew he should.

"Would you like to come in the embassy?" she asked hastily. "For a drink? Something to eat?"

"Thanks," he smiled awkwardly, "but I really should get going. I have to get back to my base."

"Yeah...and I should get inside and meet the ambassador," she agreed.

"Okay, then...so this is it."

Damn it, man, you're repeating yourself like a blithering idiot. Just say goodbye and get on the ship.

It was Seria who made the move. Lifting herself on tiptoes, she delivered a peck to his cheek. "So long, Raylar. And thank you."

Just like that, she took off running toward the small group of gray and blue domes constituting the Earth embassy on Alphas Six.

He watched her, hair flying, her delicious little behind swaying after her. He would miss that behind and all the rest of her more than he could ever say. For what felt like the millionth time since meeting Seria, Raylar felt the hot welling of tears behind his eyes.

He held them off long enough to smile as she waved a last goodbye from the doors to the main dome. Extending an arm, he waved back. One final acknowledgement, one last contact with the woman who had touched him in ways he could not explain.

His hands were shaking just a little as he made the final launch check and climbed back aboard the small cruiser. Fuck, it was going to be lonely in there now. Way too goddamn big and empty, despite its narrow confines.

Concentrating on the takeoff, he double and triple verified the instruments. Twice he calculated the wormhole differential, using mental arithmetic. He also played the variations of a hundred of his favorite chess games.

None of it was enough to hold him together. He had barely gotten the ship off the ground when the dam broke. Not tears but a seething fit of rage. His scream was bloodcurdling.

At the last second, he had the presence of mind to put on the autopilot.

He clenched his fists, reaching for something to smash. There was nothing on hand but parts of the ship. To destroy them would be to end his life. Overwhelmed, he buried his head in his hands, unleashing sobs as dry as a desert.

Thoughts whirled in his brain, the same old laughing ghosts. The usual party of self-torture. But then something new happened. He thought he felt hands on his shoulders. The hands of his fallen comrades. The men who had died under his command.

Had they come back from the dead to forgive him?

No. There was no point to that, not in the place where they lived now.

Theirs was a different purpose. A living purpose.

They were trying to get his attention...pointing to something out the front view screen.

Raylar looked up. He was in space by now. Everything was black, speckled with silver stars. There was nothing out there he could see. But the ghostly hands were pointing, persistently, to one little area.

A stinking little patch of darkness right above Alphas Six...

Suddenly his heart seized up. Little as the area was, there should have been stars. The only way an area could go dark like that was if a wormhole were opening up.

Grabbing the controls, he put the ship in full reverse. He only prayed he would get back there in time, before the wormhole opened completely.

Because unless he was very mistaken, it was not a Guardian ship that was going to emerge, but a Narthian one.

And that would spell doom for the inhabitants of Alphas Six.

Including Seria.

* * * * *

Seria sat waiting for the Earth ambassador in the antechamber to the main conference room. Ambassador Trelor had been occupied in a meeting since her arrival. To an uninformed observer, it might have seemed that the man was at a table talking to a couple of petri dishes full of fungus, but actually he was communing with the Grand High Vizier of the planet's dominant intelligent species, which was in fact, fungus-based.

The conversation was made possible with a special machine that translated fungi speech into human and vice versa. The ambassador had seemed quite animated when Seria had poked her head in the door a few minutes ago, though she thought the proceedings frightfully tedious.

Maybe it was because she was still so distracted, thinking about her time with Raylar. Things felt so damn out of kilter. It had ended way too abruptly, for one thing. True, they had agreed that after the trip was over they would go separate ways. But it hadn't been a reality at that point, and now that it was real, it hurt like hell.

Oh, sure, she still knew it was right, for the sake of both their careers, but that didn't mean she wouldn't mourn the loss.

If she had one real regret it was not telling him to be careful. In his next battle, wherever that might be. Living without him was bad enough. But if she were to ever find out he had been killed, she could not bear to live.

Just then, the door to the conference room opened, Seria stood, relieved. At last she could get down to work. "Ambassador Trelor," she said. "I am so pleased to—"

Trelor was wobbling in the doorway. The irises of his eyes were rolled up into his head. He had his mouth open, but nothing was coming out but a sickening, crackling sound, like a death rattle.

Something was wrong with his chest, too, under his long, gray tunic. All at once the material tore open, revealing a single black tendril-like arm with prickly red thorns.

By the gods...it was piercing him like a skewer.

Seria screamed. The sound was immediately drowned out by a rattling hiss. Straight into the air went the ambassador's body as the owner of the black arm emerged from the shadows behind.

The bug stood eight feet tall, like a spider, with half a dozen mouths, filthy and dripping green fluids. The fluids were like acid, and as they touched the floor a horrible smell was emitted.

Seria didn't wait to see the Narthian eat the ambassador alive. She was already turning, running for her life. She made it through the door into the corridor. To the left, she saw two more bugs approaching rapidly, crawling on their black legs. They had a dozen apiece, maybe more, and every one of them was covered in the horrible thorns.

Each of the legs made a chilling, clicking sound on the floor as the creatures made their approach. Dozens of legs, terribly ugly and horrible.

The creatures hissed as they advanced, spitting green acid out of their mouths. All those mouths. With teeth ringing the insides. And completely inhuman eyes covering the tops of their hairy heads.

Seria went right, praying the way would be clear. She didn't know this building. She had no idea how many of the Narthians there were. Dear god, how had they gotten in? She hadn't heard a thing.

Her pounding heart squeezed off an invisible and impossible plea.

Please, Raylar, save me...

Seria felt a surge of heat to her right. Something was on her arm, dissolving her uniform. They were shooting the acid at her! From out of their mouths.

She stumbled, trying to remove her singed clothing. The acid was going to burn her alive. Just in time, she got it all off. She couldn't stop, though. She couldn't let them catch her. Seria picked herself up, stark naked, and ran on. The corridor was coming to a T junction.

She had always heard that Narthian attack bugs were limited in intelligence. They might not think to split up. Maybe they would both go the wrong way. She darted around the corner. It was lined with small rooms, the doors white and windowless. She picked one midway down.

Leaving the light off and locking the door behind her, Seria hid under a table in the corner. She gathered her knees to her chest, not daring to make a sound, even though her arm hurt so much.

Tears poured down her cheeks. She had never felt so alone, so scared, so doomed in all her life. It was all her worst fears brought to life, all the things people had warned her about, why she should not go into space and be a diplomat.

But here she was, and fuck all of them.

The only thing worth thinking of now was Raylar, and how she'd felt inside the first time she'd seen his holo. All weak and giddy and alive. That feeling had been

reinforced when he'd taken her in his arms and danced her across the floor. And again, when he'd kissed her and loved her, showing her all the pleasures of the universe.

She held herself tightly as the images played in her mind and heart. Counting seconds and heartbeats.

This is it, she thought. My destiny...

Filling her mind with images of Raylar, she did her best to tune out the sounds just outside the door. Scratching. Clicking. And hissing.

* * * * *

Raylar's mind had moved into a place both unspeakable and dark. There was no space now for doubt, no room for hesitation. Only killing. It was said a Narthian could smell fear on a man and it was true in his experience. They were primitive, simple beings, but ruthless and much to be respected.

To overcome them, a man must have a singularity of purpose that overrides all else.

He must have no fear, least of all of death.

And he must have rage within him. A seething will to fight. To protect, to hold something much more dear than his own existence.

In Raylar's case, he had Seria.

Slipping the knife into his belt, Raylar pulled the laser rifle from the rack on the wall of the ship. He had never been calmer in his life. Never more certain.

Never more dangerous.

Every Narthian in that attack ship would die. That was his pledge. His bond.

He had set the cruiser down on the far side of the dome. The Narthian ship was a Class-One Patrol. Lost from a Nest Fleet, most likely. There would be four, maybe five bugs on board, soldier drones. Not as bad as nesters, but bad enough.

Raylar wasn't sure how he knew Seria was still alive, but he did. She wouldn't die like that, not now. It wasn't her destiny. Besides, if she were already dead, he would know it in his gut. He would be keeled over. Ripped apart by fear and guilt and self-blame. But he wasn't. He was mad as hell. And he was going to blast every one of those motherfuckers straight to hell where they belonged.

He found the first of the bugs waiting in the ship. The dumb fuck. Raylar popped open the hatch and fired a single blast. Closing it back up, he let the laser do its thing, bouncing off the walls until the bug was nice and fried.

A couple more shots destroyed the ship's external propulsion drive, making sure the rest would stay here permanently. Not that they were going to have to worry about going home again.

Eschewing the front door of the main dome—never a good mode of entry when you had bugs around—Raylar went in through the ventilation system above the ceiling.

Sure enough, two of them were chowing down on some embassy technicians in the lobby.

Seria was nowhere to be seen.

Raylar used his knife on one of the bugs, tossing it down, right smack in the eye. Eye number fourteen, that is. It was a good choice—that being the eye which collected light on the normal color spectrum.

The fucking thing started screeching, running around like crazy, spewing its green vomit all over the other bug, which was minding its own business, trying to clean bones from between its teeth.

Pretty soon, they were going at each other. Raylar jumped down about two feet away.

“Boo,” he said, opening fire.

They went down hard and fast in a fury of red laser lightning.

Not bad for pyrotechnics, but he had to keep moving. There were one or two left and they were probably hot on Seria's trail.

Luckily, they left a trail of their own. He followed the green acid down the corridor. His stomach hardened like a rock as he saw the familiar uniform lying on the floor, half-eaten away.

It was Seria's.

Had the bugs gotten her? There was no sign of blood, and it was strange for just her clothes to be left. Generally, the Narthians did not undress their victims.

Raylar pressed on, until the corridor came to a T juncture. He scanned in both directions, looking for signs of life, Narthian or human. There, to the right, a hundred meters down, he saw them. Two bugs, large and nasty, sniffing under one of the doors lining the corridor. Seria was in there, he felt it. Taking aim with the laser, he pulled the trigger.

The rifle made a popping noise, followed by a shower of sparks.

The gun had jammed up on him. He was going to need a new weapon.

Raylar spotted the heavy hypersteel tubing, just overhead, by the air ducts. Jumping, he reached with both hands, tearing out a large section. With primale strength he snapped the tube in half. He now had two sections about six feet long.

Getting a good running start, he headed straight for the pair of bugs.

One of them was squirting acid to dissolve the door of the room. Raylar cried out, getting his attention. As soon as the Narthian made eye contact—with half its eyes, anyway—Raylar let loose one of the pipes.

A flying projectile, a death javelin, zero to sixty in under a heartbeat.

He hit the bug in the belly, driving it backwards and onto its back. Still alive, it spun in circles, flailing its legs to right itself. The second bug, alerted by now, turned its attention to the attacker. Drawing a full breath, it prepared to unleash its venom.

"Not today, you cockroach from hell!" Raylar leaped right over the mouths and landed on the bug's back. Now it, too, was spinning around, trying to dislodge its unwanted passenger. Raylar held tight, using one of the thick hairs as a handle. He bided his time, waiting for the insect to slow down so he could get the right angle for his attack.

Twice the bug nearly flipped him, but Raylar held on.

He stabbed straight into one of the vulnerable side air pockets with the improvised spear. Three times more he struck at it, until it collapsed right on top of the other one. Raylar hopped down. It was time to finish off the one flopping on its back, but first he needed to make sure it was the last one.

Grabbing the brain box, a tiny nodule on the underside of one of the legs, he cracked it open on the floor. A series of white gems fell out. Raylar dropped to his knees and put his palms down on top of them. They were memory crystals. Raylar's hands burned for a moment, as he absorbed the information from within. They contained not only the original orders this bug had ingested back in the nest, but also the data he was supposed to bring back home.

All Raylar wanted to know was how many were left.

Originally, there were five. Which meant this was the last one. Not only that, but the ship was a lone vessel, lost in the wormhole, just as he'd suspected. Breathing a sigh of relief, Raylar finished the job, killing the final bug with another stab wound.

Only one thing remained now. To let Seria know she was safe.

Raylar didn't bother with the door button. He knocked it down, with a single kick of his foot. "Seria?" he called.

She didn't answer. But he could hear her breathing, in the corner, under the table.

"Seria, it's me, Raylar. It's all right. The bugs are all gone. I'm going to turn the light on, okay?"

"N-no light," she whispered.

Raylar left the light off. "Seria, it's okay," he soothed. "You can come out."

She started to crawl from under the table. He went to her, lifting her into his arms. She was nude and trembling. "Baby, I've got you," he rasped. "I've got you and I'm not letting go."

"I knew it." She squeezed him tightly, her bare breasts against his chest. "I knew you'd come back."

"I don't know how I ever left you," he croaked. "I swear, by the Code, I love you, Seria, more than my life, more than anything."

"Oh, Raylar, I love you, too." She put her lips up to his, craving a kiss. They went at each other, all the pent-up tension released in a single explosion.

The intensity was fierce. Seria was panting, pressing her naked body against him. Her hands were all over him. "Raylar, make love to me, please? Right here..."

Their hands worked in the dark, both of them taking off his uniform, stained with sweat and bug blood. She gasped at the feel of his cock. "Oh, baby." She tried to impale herself, crawling up his body.

He grabbed her right thigh and left hip, helping her pussy to sheathe his throbbing cock. Half lifting, half pushing, he put her on the edge of the table. She grasped the edge of it and leaned back.

"Ohmigod, Raylar, fuck me..."

He took control of her waist and began pistoning, hard and deep and fast into her dripping wet pussy. Her nipples were hot and sweet as he took them, one after another between his teeth. She screamed out at the mild pain, pounding his back, locking her ankles around his pumping ass cheeks.

"F-fuck me..." she hissed. "Make me...come."

Raylar exploded his semen into her, inducing her own cries of victory. The orgasm was simultaneous, world-shattering, and totally mind-blowing. Planets detonating, years of guilt and sadness shaken off, life restored.

By the time they'd both subsided, relaxed and peaceful in each other's arms, there was no question of what lay ahead.

"I can see," he teased, gently stroking her hair as she sat on the edge of the table, his cock still inside her, "that I am going to have to keep a closer eye on you. How long did I leave you before you created a diplomatic incident?"

"I wasn't counting the time," she replied. "But if you're looking to report me to the ambassador, I'm afraid he's been...um...eaten."

"I'm sorry for that. Did you have to see it?"

"Yeah." Seria shivered. "I hardly even knew him, but seeing that expression on his face was so horrible. I can't imagine what it was like for you, losing men you were close to."

Raylar shook his head. "It's okay now. Really."

Her smile lit his world. "I'm glad, Raylar."

Raylar kissed her again, happier than he'd ever thought he could be in his life. "Do you know what this means?" he said. "I have actually found a lifemate...who makes me a stronger soldier."

"It's not luck," she pointed out. "It's genetics."

Raylar shrugged. "Either way, it's a pretty good deal, don't you think?"

"I suppose," she teased. "As long as you throw in some cran-beer from time to time."

"Sure." He swatted her behind. "And some of these for good measure."

"Ooo," she wriggled enticingly, "now that *is* an offer I can't refuse."

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.

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