

A futuristic landscape with a bright sun, a large moon, and a smaller planet in the sky. The scene is set on a rocky, cratered terrain with snow-capped mountains in the distance. The sky is a deep blue, and the overall atmosphere is one of a distant, alien world.

DESTINATION ALARA

S.Y. Thompson

Also by S.Y. Thompson:

Under The Midnight Cloak

Now You See Me

Fractured Futures

Destination Alara

by

S.Y. Thompson

Silver Dragon Books

by Regal Crest

Texas

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Dedication

In Loving Memory:

Donna Pawlowski

Epigraph

We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark.

The real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.

~Plato~

Chapter One

SHE AWAKENED WITH thoughts of breakfast on her mind. Eggs over medium beside strips of crisp bacon, along with a mountain of hash browns. The hash browns would be crisp, too, and nestled alongside a slice of deliciously buttered toast. Best of all would be the large mug of hot, black coffee. Kona. She could almost smell the slightly bitter aroma and feel the punch of the caffeine that would kick-start her day. For long moments, she explored the indulgent fantasy and her smile grew. Then reality set in. Breakfast in space was a bad idea, a real breakfast anyway. Unless of course you enjoyed synthetic protein and bread so tough you had to cut it with a plasma torch. Personally, Vanessa Swann didn't.

The mechanically modulated tones of the computer-generated alarm clock sounded seconds later and she slapped it off as the overhead com burst into life.

"Captain Swann to the bridge. We're under attack."

Her ship, *Falcon*, shuddered just as Commander Byra hailed, punctuating his statement by listing heavily to port. The sudden shift in angle threw Van out of the rack and she cracked her elbow on the unyielding deck plating.

"Dammit."

"Captain, are you all right?"

"Worry about the ship, Commander."

The small scout vessel heeled dangerously in the opposite direction and Van's teeth clenched down hard as she fought to maintain her balance. Kneeling on all fours, balancing should have been an easy task. By the time the stabilizers finally kicked in, she was already cramming her body into a uniform. What she lacked in stature, she made up for in determination.

"I'm on my way."

Falcon was a Coalition Sector Patrol ship, and its beat was the outer perimeter between the Triangulum and Andromeda Galaxies. The Earth Coalition allied with the Andromeda system inhabitants, but territories won during the Border Wars allowed them to patrol out so far. Captain Swann's crew walked a fine line so near to enemy territory that they required vigilance to stay on the proper side.

Fast and light, the spacecraft possessed more firepower than was obvious at a glance. With shields of reinforced pulse-ionized particles, it was rare for an enemy shot to penetrate. A panel next to her exploded as she jogged down a corridor and Van ducked as she realized that someone had indeed made it through. Debris littered the corridor. At least the uniforms were form-fitting and didn't catch on any of the detritus.

Ignoring her burning cheek and the smell of singed hair, she strode onto the bridge and surveyed the scene through the large frontal viewport. Three smaller unmarked vessels dipped and darted among the backdrop of stars.

Pirates.

Van took a quick glance around the chaotic scene with her fists planted on her hips. She felt the eyes of her crew upon her and sensed that they drew comfort from her commanding presence.

"I assume you are shooting back."

Byra vacated the captain's chair just as she dropped into it and Van quickly assessed the situation. "Yugi, attack pattern Omega." Her voice was calm.

Be confident, she thought, remembering command school. Let the crew think you have everything under control. Yeah, right.

The navigator sat directly forward of her and Van saw some of the tension leave the young officer's shoulders, proof that maybe there was something to command theory. The pilot threw *Falcon* to port and then into a barrel roll as she followed her orders. In the wash of emergency lighting Yugi's pale blue skin looked sickly gray and blended with the slate-colored Coalition uniforms.

Falcon ended up just where Van wanted, directly beneath the vulnerable underbelly of one of the marauders.

"Fire everything we've got."

Lieutenant Commander Ozal, a Human-Thuban hybrid, manipulated her weapons panel like a conductor, hands flying as she fired pulse cannons and plasma bombs in a deadly concerto. Full-blooded Thubans sported four arms but Van wagered her Lieutenant was more talented with just the two.

The pirate vessel sheared neatly down the middle, all weapons striking her keel from stem to stern. Secondary explosions fired as both halves fell away exposing all decks to the vacuum of space. They were no longer a threat.

"Captain?"

The panic in Yugi's voice drew Van's eyes to another craft on a direct collision course. Her fingers dug into the chair arms as *Falcon* lurched to a halt, shuddering against the sudden shift. As the pirate vessel loomed closer, she swore she could see the enemy commander's eyes as wide and shocked as her own.

"What are you doing? Evade." Van felt sure she had screamed the last word.

Yugi didn't seem to hear the command, pinned in place by fear and inexperience. It would be the last time Van took a greenling on board as a navigator.

Van had always heard that time was relative, but it was the first time she experienced the phenomenon for herself. She saw the small ship grow in the forward viewer as the distance quickly dwindled between them. At the same time, Van was aware of the small drop of nervous sweat that tracked from her hairline and down her left temple. She felt the breath burst from her lungs as she took control of the helm with scant seconds to spare.

Not designed for short bursts of speed, a ram-jet fusion engine's sole purpose was to hurtle a crew from the Triangulum Galaxy to the Andromeda Galaxy in a few weeks, a distance of about seven hundred and fifty thousand light years. Van would have preferred to run a simulation. Unfortunately, there was no choice.

Van pressed her thumb into the control so hard she split the nail. She felt the vessel gather in on itself, trembling with built up energy as the engines roared to life. Everything on the bridge shimmered like heat off of hot pavement in summer and then they jumped forward, hurtling through space. Van gave the engines a solid one-count and then she hit full stop. *Falcon* trembled hard and the groan of tortured metal shrieked in her ears. A few seconds later, the aft viewers kicked on and she saw what little remained of the enemy vessels drifting harmlessly in space.

The ion fusion explosion from the engines had reduced the pirates and their ships to nothing more than twisted bits of metallic alloy and vaporized particles. Acrid air made it difficult to draw breath. Sparks showered and main lighting failed, replaced seconds later by an unhealthy glow from the emergency generators. Someone coughed. Another spoke.

"My God."

Van realized she was standing, staring dumbly at the total devastation. The rebels hadn't just been defeated. She'd annihilated them. *Falcon* was adrift, systems overloaded or destroyed by her impulsive decision.

She'd demolished her own ship along with the pirate vessels. The *Falcon* was a Coalition vessel on its maiden flight on Van's first stint as a ship's captain. If she were very lucky, Headquarters would assign her to the reclamation units on the farthest outpost in space for the rest of her life. Van thought such a fate far less appealing than outright incarceration.

Wow.

"Captain, we have a proximity alert. A vessel is approaching."

Van looked at her second with something akin to surprise. "You mean one of our systems is working?"

Byra looked away and suppressed a grin as the forward view screen activated. A face Van never wanted to see in a situation like this stared back at her. Black eyes glittered dangerously. Thick, dark hair, cut short and rakishly parted fell across the woman's forehead to frame intelligent features. The high collar of the gray Coalition uniform, piped with deep purple, indicated the rank of a Vice Admiral.

"Identify yourself," Vice Admiral Cade Meryan of the Coalition Flagship *Gauntlet* ordered.

Van's career was over. Not known to be the forgiving kind, Vice Admiral Meryan held sway with the Council Government on Alara Prime as well as the ruling house of the High Queen. Van had no illusions on how much credibility she carried as a junior captain.

"I'm...totally screwed."

Unbelievably, there was a hint of laughter in the dark eyes before it disappeared. "At least we agree on something. I'll send a jump ship to collect you, Captain, while my crew assesses the derelicts for anything salvageable."

"Collect me? I don't understand."

The admiral frowned. It was amazing how the woman could project so much into such a simple expression and Van felt her ears burn. Too bad she was a full-blooded Human. Any other species would have been able to hide the telltale sign of embarrassment.

"I'll have to debrief you, of course."

"Of course." Van coughed to clear her throat. "May I bring a second?"

A dark eyebrow went up. "Expecting me to execute you on the spot?"

"Never can be too sure."

Her humor fell short and the admiral's response was terse. "You may bring your exec. Be in the loading bay in fifteen minutes. Meryan out."

Minutes later, Van stood in *Falcon's* main cargo bay with Commander Paul Byra. She sucked on her sore thumb where the nail had cracked down to the quick while he updated her on the ship's status.

"We got lucky, Van. There were no major casualties, just some bumps and bruises. One of the engineers broke his wrist."

Normally, a second in command wouldn't address his captain so informally but they had been friends for a long time and they were alone in the loading bay.

"And the *Falcon*?"

Byra sighed and she realized she'd guessed right about the vessel's condition. She might be a newly commissioned captain, but she knew what a healthy ship felt like. "She'll need to be towed to space dock," he told her unnecessarily.

"Great. That's just what I need." Van rubbed a hand over her face, tired already and the day was just beginning. "What do you know about Meryan?"

She could see she'd surprised him with the question, but Paul answered readily. "Just what everyone else does, I suppose. She's the youngest fleet commander in the Coalition."

"I'm sure that doesn't have anything to do with being heir to the Ellerton Empire, right?"

He looked like he wanted to slap Van against the side of the head. Even though he was probably within his rights, she knew he wouldn't try it. "You might want to lay off the sarcasm, Captain. I don't think Meryan has much in the way of a sense of humor and for what it's worth, I don't think she got her rank through nepotism."

"No. Probably not," she finally conceded, surprised he even knew the word. "Isn't she supposed to be an Alaran hybrid?"

Paul started slightly. "I hadn't heard that. She doesn't look like an Alaran to me. She's too dark. Alarans are blonde with blue skin and wrap-around ears, like Yugi."

"She's a hybrid, half Human. I guess she took after her father's side of the family."

"You seem to know an awful lot about Meryan, Van. Been doing your research?"

"Not in the last fifteen minutes," she snorted. "Seriously, though. The Ellerton and Meryan families are required study at the Academy. Where were you during that course?"

Her exec flinched and Van remembered he hadn't attended any formal schooling. Nice way to put her foot in her mouth. Paul's family had been simple farmers on Celestas, the third planet from the Andromeda sun, during the occupational wars with the Triangulum Galaxy. Orphaned by invading nomads, he'd joined the Coalition military the old-fashioned way. They drafted him.

With the Gothoan invaders eventually defeated, Earth's tentative placement in the Coalition solidified. Paul had done well to move from the enlisted ranks to the officer corps without the required training.

"Well then, fill me in. We're going to meet her in a few minutes and I'd like to know what we're up against."

"She's not the enemy, Paul. At least I hope she isn't," Van added in a softer voice. "Still, it wouldn't hurt for you to be up to speed. I'm sure you know basic Earth history. During the third planetary war Earth's atmosphere was polluted and the population started dying off in droves."

"Nuclear fallout and an artificially induced ice age. Go on."

"Ellerton Aeronautics was the leader in space technologies. I'm not just talking about satellites. They had it all; major observatories, space-capable vessels, you name it. The only thing they didn't have was a launching system or engines that would make any serious space exploration possible."

"Right." Paul nodded. "I'm with you so far."

"In 2372 one of their satellites discovered a system of five planets that orbited a normal sun, much like the planets in the Milky Way Galaxy. A slight wobble, just a subtle shift, in the star Upsilon Andromeda allowed them to make a major breakthrough. All five planets neared the mass of the Sol System's Jupiter."

Paul suddenly became excited. "That's right. People on Earth thought Andromeda would be a great substitute for a home planet."

"Too bad they discovered Andromeda was nothing but a gas giant. However, the second planet from the sun, Alara, was another story. It was practically a paradise. All individual Earth governments funded Ellerton Aeronautics after that, pouring what resources they had into the development of engines that made it possible for the Andromeda Galaxy to be colonized by us."

"And they did it. Ram jet fusion engines that were hydrogen powered."

Van nodded. "That's what I was told, not to mention the space-folding technology that came later. Admiral Meryan is a direct descendant of the Diplomatic Envoy dispatched to make contact with the Alarans after they discovered the galaxy was already inhabited."

Rumor had it that David Ellerton single-handedly paved the way to peace and cooperation with the Alaran people and the Coalition, but Van wasn't much of a fan of rumor. It was more likely that he just got lucky when he met and married the future Queen of Alara. The Andromeda Galaxy was matriarchal so the Ellerton name faded into history, but the family flourished.

"In any case, the new corner of space that we wanted to call home had been under siege from aliens in the Triangulum Galaxy. They were trying to conquer Alara and the other viable planets. We just happened to come along in time to pull their butts out of the fire."

Paul considered the information. He was a thoughtful man who took time to consider all possibilities before responding. It was one of the reasons he filled the position of Van's first officer and was the only person she trusted.

"Sounds like Earth got lucky. We found a place to live and helped our new friends repel an invading army."

"Don't sugarcoat it, Paul. Earth would have been the invaders themselves if Alara hadn't already been at war."

"You don't really believe that."

"Yes I do. We were desperate. This galaxy was just close enough for us to make it and we wouldn't have gotten any farther. We may have helped save the Andromeda planets from invaders, but make no mistake, we would have taken them ourselves if we'd had to."

He chose not to comment on that information, and said instead, "The Meryans are the wealthiest family in the Coalition and they've been around a long time. They're also royalty."

"And Cade Meryan is the heir to the empire. She's a military commander but she's also a politician. I don't trust politicians."

Paul smiled and the scar tracking from his right eye to his lips turned white. "You don't trust anyone, Van."

A jolt informed them that a jump ship had just connected with the outer doors of the loading bay. Seconds later the decompression cycle began and the doors opened to reveal four armed soldiers swarming into her ship. Two took up immediate flanking positions just inside the hatch and two more came straight for the command officers. They wore the familiar padded gray uniforms, but with riot helmets in place, Van couldn't identify gender or species.

"You'll come with us," a female voice ordered brusquely, drawing a glare from Van that most people had told her would peel paint. Through the face shield, she couldn't tell if it had been effective.

"This is still a Coalition vessel and I am still captain. I'll thank you to remember that, Lieutenant." Van enunciated the soldier's title with all deliberation, attempting to drive home the point.

The second soldier raised his face shield and she saw a neutral expression on the man's face. "Apologies, Captain. Admiral Meryan sent us to retrieve you. If you'll accompany us, Ma'am?" Although he was polite, it was obvious that he hadn't made a request.

Van didn't speak to Paul on the quick ride over. The weapons held by their escort weren't normal fare and neither were the riot helmets. Four officers in addition to the pilot sent to retrieve *Falcon's* captain seemed excessive. Something was going on and she didn't think it was just about her having destroyed a few pirate vessels.

As soon as they landed in *Gauntlet's* loading bay, the officers shuffled them off and led them through several long corridors. The Coalition flagship was an older model, obviously in service

for several years. Still, Van relished air untainted with the smell of burnt circuitry. She recognized the design and wasn't surprised when they were ushered into a conference room moments later.

"Commander Byra, you will remain here. Captain Swann, please come with me." It was the same officer that requested they accompany him onto the jump ship.

"Wait a minute." Her temper flared and a bit of panic swam in her stomach. "Admiral Meryan said I could bring my exec with me."

"She said you could bring him. She didn't say he would be there when she spoke to you. Sorry, Captain." He stepped aside and indicated she should move along.

"What's your name, anyway?" Van asked as soon as they started walking.

"Lieutenant Argante."

Not much of a talker.

"You're Thuban, aren't you?"

Rather than ask what gave his species away, he looked at her with a sidelong glance and grasped his rifle tighter with three of his arms. The fourth swung relaxed at his side.

Thuban citizens weren't technically part of the Andromeda family, nor were they official members of the Coalition. The planet, Thuba, was independent and located out past the wastelands of the Lantass Asteroid Belt. They shared precious metals such as copper, lead, and trinium with Andromeda and the Coalition in exchange for protection from anyone wanting a piece of their small planet.

Lieutenant Argante stopped next to an unmarked door and pressed the chime.

"Come in."

A second later, Van stood at attention in front of Vice Admiral Cade Meryan and she was very much alone. Lieutenant Argante wisely stayed in the corridor. Meryan ignored her for several seconds. She perused documents on her computer and pushed a few reports around. Van didn't know if she was really busy or just pretending to be. Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Van took in the stylishly appointed office. Silver and blue seemed to be the theme. All the furniture gleamed with a utilitarian quality that seemed cold, emotionless. The only other color was the green of enormous potted plants strategically placed in the corners of the room.

Subtle.

Plants were expensive in space and hard to come by. Such a casual display hinted that she had money and class. Van was already bored.

"You've been busy, Captain Swann."

Her eyes came back to the front and she wondered how long the admiral had been watching her. At least Admiral Meryan knew her name now. The fifteen minutes of delay must have been to give her time to pull up Van's record. Since she didn't know exactly how much trouble she was in, Van stayed quiet. Meryan stood slowly and walked around to the front corner of her desk, less than a foot away from where Van waited. She perched one hip against the curved edge and folded her arms. Meryan towered over her, placing her somewhere in the neighborhood of six feet. Van masked a discreet visual inspection of the admiral's figure with a blink. The close-fitting garments looked good on her. The low-slung blast pistol strapped to Meryan's upper thigh made Van wonder if someone had turned off the environmental controls.

She struggled not to gulp in nervousness. She focused on the wall in front of her but her skin sang with the heat of the admiral's proximity. The scent of cinnamon and cloves teased her nostrils and her libido stirred. Van wondered if she was out of her mind.

Here she was about to receive the dressing down of her military career and she was lusting after the person about to deliver it. Van could feel sweat begin to break out on her forehead as Meryan studied her. Then the admiral began reciting her service record.

"Thirty-two years old and a veteran of the Tokar Perimeter Wars. Twice decorated with the Silver Medal of Valor and a Coalition Citation of Honor. Impressive. Please tell me how you go from that to destroying a Scout class vessel less than six months out of space dock."

Her voice was deceptively calm; a tone Van was very familiar with having used it herself on occasion. She chose not to respond and apparently, that was the right answer.

"You are Vanessa Swann, aren't you? I don't mean to sound unsure, but you just don't seem to be the person I've read about in your service jacket. That person single-handedly held off a squad of Gothos invaders on Tokar after seeing the rest of her team slaughtered. Was that really you?"

Meryan was baiting her and it was working. Desire vanished. Anger and grief swirled in Van's gut making her clench her jaws together so hard they ached. She was fully aware of how people saw her. Van was short and well tanned with clipped auburn hair and possessed a quality frequently referred to as elfish. She was often underestimated and Tokar was a sore subject even eight years after the fact.

"Explain, Captain. Tell me how such an officer manages to recklessly cripple her vessel so quickly."

Van frowned thinking the answer should have been self-explanatory. "We were attacked by pirates, Admiral."

"That much I figured out." Admiral Meryan was shouting now. "*Gauntlet* does have sensors, Captain Swann. Surely, you had weapons that could have dealt with the smugglers. You did have a fully functional ship, didn't you?"

"Yes ma'am, but one of the vessels was going to ram us. I...we...I didn't have time to formulate a battle plan. We only had seconds to respond."

"And you decided that firing hydrogen-based engines in the direct proximity of other space craft was a good idea? The explosion from those ships could have vaporized the *Falcon* and your own crew."

She was right but Van couldn't tell her Yugi had frozen at the helm and that she'd taken over. She couldn't bear to witness the end of the Alaran's career before it really got started. Better for Meryan to think her crew was just following orders.

Standing up straight she said, "I accept full responsibility for my actions, Admiral."

"Well, your actions have caused me a lot of trouble, Captain. You're lucky the *Gauntlet* happened to be here or you'd be left drifting in space."

Why was *Gauntlet* in the area? The Coalition flagship should be patrolling Alara or shuttling dignitaries to fancy meetings, not wandering around the outer perimeter of the galaxy.

She took a deep breath. "If you could just tow us to the nearest star port you could get back to your mission, Admiral."

Meryan paused and chuckled a beat later. "Nice try, Captain. Don't worry. I'm going to tell you exactly what we're doing here since you've just become a part of my crew."

"Excuse me? Our orders are to patrol this sector. To my knowledge they haven't changed."

"Consider yourself duly informed. Our mission is time critical and we don't have the luxury of towing a damaged ship to port. *Gauntlet* will set course for Tokar. You should be familiar with the planet. We'll scuttle the *Falcon*. "

"It's a brand new ship." The shock of such a proposition finally propelled Van to look the admiral in the eye. It was a breach of military protocol, but Meryan didn't seem to mind. Or at least she didn't kill Van on the spot.

Obviously, something big was happening. Border skirmishes were common, but this had the earmarks of something much more serious and Van was enough of a seasoned officer to recognize it. Still, that didn't mean she was going to fold her crew into this one.

"Look, Admiral, I'm sure all we need is fuel. *Falcon* can make it to a maintenance hub in a few weeks as long as we have hydrogen."

The admiral looked stunned by the suggestion. "You're not a scientist, are you Swann?"

The honest curiosity compelled her to answer fully, not as a military officer but as someone who'd seen entirely too much violence for one lifetime.

"No, I'm a warrior. I know my ship and what makes it run, but I leave logistics to scientists. I fight. Those Goths you spoke of? They killed everyone that ever meant anything to me. I froze on that ice-ball for months and the Coalition never bothered to send any reinforcements even though they knew we were outnumbered. Well, I survived and I killed every fucking one of them that I could. I made it off Tokar and I'm not going back."

Meryan studied her through narrowed lids while the words echoed in the air. When she spoke again, her tone was conversational, low and measured. "Nice speech. However, you are still a military officer and you will follow orders. We're going to Tokar."

"Then I hereby resign my commission. Please leave me at the Sector Six mining outpost as you continue with your mission, Admiral." Van was about to find out just how good a poker player Meryan was. And if she'd call her bluff.

"All right, if you want to take your ball and go home that's up to you but I won't jeopardize our schedule to appease your temper. I'll drop you off after we complete our mission. Sit back and relax, Captain, because until this is over you're a part of *Gauntlet's* crew whether you want to be or not."

Damn. Van really hated being cold.

Van could see from the twinkle in her eyes that Meryan knew she'd been bluffing. "Do you think we could at least get breakfast?"

The admiral smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. "I'll see what we can do. Lieutenant Argante will take you back to the *Falcon* and set up the schedule for transferring your people over here. I'll try to let you know before we have to trigger the self-destruct."

"You'll try?"

Meryan started at the hint of a growl in Van's throat. Although this woman outranked her, Van was still a captain and had the ego to go with it. She saw a hint of respect in the midnight eyes. "I'll make sure."

She started to leave but the admiral stopped her once more. "Captain Swann, you could have just told me that your navigator froze."

"How did you..."

"I may be a Meryan, but I have been in the military my entire life. Our sensors indicated you rerouted helm control to the command console. You took over seconds before you would have been destroyed."

"Then why the interrogation?"

Her eyes softened. "I wanted to see if you would defend your crew. I can't have an executive officer who doesn't protect her own."

"Don't you have a second?" Van asked.

"I told you we have to integrate the two crews. You're a captain and I can't see you taking orders from my exec."

A grin tugged at the corners of Van's lips. "How does your exec feel about it?"

"Commander Bosk actually follows orders, Captain."

Her ears burned again for the second time in less than an hour when she heard Meryan's husky laugh as the door slid closed.

Chapter Two

Falcon EXPLODED AND Van felt the shockwave on the observation deck five thousand kilometers away. The sight was visible via the overhead view screen, courtesy of *Gauntlet's* long-range sensors. If one ignored the significance of the blast, it was even pretty. Multicolored bits of blue, yellow, and red showered outward from a single point, a breathtaking pyrotechnic display.

"And so, another fine career comes to a close." Van heard Paul snort but Admiral Meryan didn't share his appreciation for her humor.

"Your career is hardly over, Captain, merely sidetracked. You know we can't let technology fall into enemy hands."

She could have replied that she fully understood the destruction, but the words stuck in her throat. *Falcon* had been her first ship. "Do you mind if we get on with the briefing, Admiral?"

Their eyes met and Van felt her temper rise. What was it about this woman that so effectively got under her skin? She pushed the question away, considering the vacuum-packed split pea soup had done little for her mood.

Only four of the *Falcon's* crew was present in the conference room, Captain Swann, Lieutenant Commander Byra, Lieutenant Yugi, and the weapons officer, Lieutenant Commander Barnit Ozal. The former executive, Uther Bosk, and Lieutenant Argante attended Meryan. Of course Bosk was still technically Meryan's second. Van's position as executive officer aboard *Gauntlet* was merely a courtesy in deference to her rank. Van was the only pure Human that she knew of though she suspected Commander Bosk but it was hard to tell. His iron gray buzz cut and stubby, once muscular body reminded her of an ancient toy she'd seen on a computer data disc. She thought it had been called a G. I. Joe.

Meryan was half Human and half Alaran though there was nothing of the light, angelic features Lieutenant Yugi sported. Yugi, of course, was a full-blooded Alaran. Argante was Thuban, complete with the olive complexion and he was a multiped. The junior commander, Ozal, was half-Thuban. She had the coloring and two really cute little antennae above her eyebrow ridges, but only two arms. Sometimes Van felt she was missing out on a rich cultural background by being so boringly Human.

"Fine. Have a seat."

Van was aware of more than one person grinding their teeth as they settled at the large conference table. Commander Bosk did indeed follow orders but that didn't mean he liked it.

"We're going to Tokar because the Coalition has received intelligence that a rebel attack is going to be launched from there. We're not sure yet where their allegiances might lie."

For an instant, there was stunned silence before sounds of disbelief sputtered from the *Falcon's* officers. Van didn't join in with the others. Meryan would be disappointed if she expected her to react.

"Settle down," Van said quietly, not releasing the admiral's gaze. Her crew complied quickly and waited for her to ask the questions she knew they would have. "Tokar is a frozen planet with no nearby trade routes, no natural resources and is so far from the nearest outpost that it would be foolhardy to plan an extended stay."

Meryan's eyes narrowed as Van deliberately paused.

"Sounds like the perfect place to establish a resistance cell of some sort." Her crew reacted again, caught off guard by the unexpected response.

"My thoughts exactly," Meryan said once the murmurs died down.

"Who's the target?"

Van's palms were flat against the conference table's simulated wood grain surface. She felt like she and the admiral were engaged in a subtle game of chess, each exchange a play on the tactical battlefield. Arousal began again, a low burn in the pit of her stomach. War always had that effect. The push and pull, each exchange a sensual dance that was almost erotic.

"The Royal Senate."

Her breath escaped in a rush. So much for the dance. "Then what the hell are you doing here?"

"Watch your tone, Captain."

She looked at Bosk in surprise. "So he can speak. I was beginning to wonder." Van turned back to Cade, the former first officer already forgotten. "The point is that you are a member of the royal family."

"Very good," Bosk smirked. "You picked up on the family name."

She was really beginning to dislike this person. Fortunately, Admiral Meryan came down on him before Van had the chance.

"That's enough, Commander. You're being insubordinate and I won't tolerate it, regardless of the circumstances. Understood?"

"Yes ma'am." Bosk turned to Van without any sign of resentment. "My apologies, Captain Swann. It won't happen again."

That was unexpected. Apparently, Meryan ran a tight crew with a strict adherence to protocol and if Bosk was big enough to admit he was wrong, Van could be gracious.

"No problem, Commander. I'm not sure I could be as understanding if our positions were reversed."

Paul made a noise and leaned forward. "Not to interrupt, but she makes a valid point, Admiral. As a member of the royal family it stands to reason you might be a target."

Meryan shook her head, momentarily distracting Van by the highlights in her hair. Just a touch of red. She wondered if Cade would be a fireball in the rack.

"Indications are that the threat is against the Senate. They are the ones who hold the planetary alliances together. If the Senate falls the result would be chaos, rioting."

"What about the Council? Surely they would take over," Paul offered.

Van looked at him and frowned, her mind back on business. "They're just the law-givers. The Council doesn't represent individual planetary issues. If the Senate falls it could mean civil war since it's made up of all the ruling queens from each individual planet."

She met Meryan's gaze again. "You still haven't answered my question. Why are you here?"

"You forget your place, Captain." Admiral Meryan's tone warned her to back down but she wasn't scary.

Sexy as hell, yeah.

"I don't think so. As the ruling house of Alara, your mother is part of the Royal Senate. That leaves you next in line to inherit the throne. You. Are. A. Target."

"I thought you were just a simple warrior, Captain. What was it you said earlier? You leave the logistics to others?"

"Close enough, but this falls right into my area of expertise."

Meryan leaned back in her chair and tossed her data file on the table. "I'd really like to hear how."

"Tactics." Van shrugged. "Take out the heir apparent to the ruling sovereign house. Alara houses the High Queen. All others defer to her. Then again, you already knew that. With all due respect, Admiral, cut the crap and tell us what's really going on."

She glared at Van for a full minute before relenting. "Very well. The Royal Senate is the target, but I can't just sit at home while someone attacks our way of life. As the commanding officer of the Coalition flagship I'm in the position to do something about it."

That was something Van could get behind. Admiral Meryan wouldn't be worthy of the crown if she let others fight her battles.

"All right, we're with you. What's our plan, go in with guns blazing?"

"Hardly." Cade's tone was dry.

"Is she serious?" Bosk directed at Paul.

They sat around for another hour while Meryan and her senior advisors outlined their plan. Much of it had obviously been adjusted at the last minute to allow for *Falcon's* crew, but it seemed solid. Van suggested several modifications and Byra added a few more. The admiral weighed each carefully and incorporated more than Van would have expected. At no time did she get the feeling they were being humored.

After hours of hashing out every little detail, Van had about all she could stand. She felt like she was about to pee all over the conference room floor.

"All right, I think that's enough," Meryan finally said. "We have two days until we reach Tokar. If you think of anything else in the meantime please bring it to my attention."

Van was never more thankful to hear a briefing come to an end. She stood carefully and realized Meryan was watching with an amused smile.

"What?"

"Lieutenant Argante will show you to your quarters, Captain. I'm sure you'd like to freshen up."

"That'd be great." The sarcasm was a little thick but the day was beginning to take its toll, and there was something about the admiral that made her want to be difficult.

"After that, feel free to join us in the officer's mess. I'll have Argante give you the details."

"Is that a request?"

"No."

Great, no early bedtime for her.

Van usually slept very little but her muscles were screaming from the earlier battle. At least *Gauntlet* was the flagship so it should have a decent mess hall.

"Fine, as long as I don't have to eat anything green."

VAN PACED HER quarters, unable to sleep. The bed was comfortable enough and the rooms nicely appointed considering it was a spaceship, but she had too much on her mind. Finally, she stopped to look out at the stars with her hands clasped behind her back. Not for the first time, she wondered how she'd ended up here. Not on the *Gauntlet*, but as a Coalition officer. Maybe if she'd had a family like everyone else, things would be different. She might not be a soldier.

The priests found Van, like a bad cliché, inside a basket outside a church as an infant. No one wanted her then and as it turned out, that was just fine. She liked being alone. No commitments meant no disappointments. That didn't mean she'd turn down physical pleasure if it was offered. Women loved women in uniform and that was something she was happy to take advantage of.

Midnight-colored eyes swirled through her mind and a grin took possession of her mouth. Did Cade Meryan like to sample the female form, too? It was worth speculating about. The door chime broke into her happy fantasy and the grin evaporated.

"Come in." The object of her musing entered and Van felt an eyebrow climb to her hairline.

"Sorry to bother you. I know it's late."

"It's no trouble, Admiral. Can I offer you a nightcap?" The question was impulsive, but what the hell, she couldn't deny Cade was hot.

"Uh, no thanks." She looked uncomfortable and shot a look over toward the food dispenser, no doubt wondering how Van could offer a drink when she didn't have any liquor.

"Okay, would you like to sit down?"

She sat in the armchair adjacent to the sofa leaving Van little choice but to sit next to her. Cade's uniform was rumpled and she looked like she hadn't slept in a month.

"What can I do for you?"

"You can answer some questions, if you don't mind."

"Questions about what?" Van asked. If she'd expected anything, this certainly wasn't it.

"You've been on Tokar before, not just in passing, but for an extended amount of time. By all accounts, you had little in the way of provisions. I need to know how you survived."

"Why?"

"In case we run into a similar situation again and we have to improvise. I would have thought that was obvious. We don't really know what we're going into."

The comment stung. Van didn't appreciate someone calling her stupid or even making the implication. "Well, obviously, this is a different situation. *Gauntlet* has a lot of firepower and plenty of soldiers. Then there's the fact that you're a princess. If you get into trouble the Coalition will send out a fleet to cover you."

She couldn't keep the heat out of her voice and watched as confusion settled into Cade's stormy eyes. Her earlier anger had caused Van to say more than she ever intended about Tokar and she wouldn't let the admiral catch her off guard again. It wasn't something she liked to talk about.

"I didn't mean to offend you. Was there something that happened to you that wasn't in the official reports?"

"No ma'am. From what you read in my service jacket, I'd say that was about it. They outnumbered my unit and picked us off one by one. I managed to stay alive until a patrol ship wandered through the sector and locked onto my communicator signal. End of story."

"You had a communicator? Then why didn't you call for reinforcements? The Council knew the Fifth Infantry was fighting the Goths and I'm sure they would have sent troops if they'd known you needed them."

Van stared at her in disbelief. Didn't she think she'd tried that?

"Never mind," Cade finally said as she stood. "I'm sure our plan is sound. Just have your people outfitted and ready to join the teams day after tomorrow."

Cade rubbed a hand over her face in exhaustion and Van couldn't help but ask, "Are you going to bed?"

Cade took a breath so sharply Van heard from across the room. Their eyes met and held.

"Hey," Van said holding up her hands. "It wasn't an invitation. You just look like you're about to fall over."

"I'm fine, Captain, but thank you for your concern." She was gone a second later.

"Sure. No problem."

Van took off her jacket and dumped it in the reclaimator. It pinged a few moments later and she took out the freshly cleaned garment and hung it in the small closet.

The admiral's visit troubled her. There was something she wasn't saying. Had she come by to confide something and then changed her mind? Was she just worried about the inhospitable terrain? Fighting in the snow and ice was much different from an encounter in deep jungle. There wasn't much to hide behind. It took skill and determination to battle not only an enemy but your own body as well. Meryan had all but admitted her people had no experience in such an environment.

Thinking about Tokar caused a shiver to travel the length of her spine. Cade had asked if there was something that hadn't been in the report. Wasn't there always? But seriously, who would have believed in phantoms anyway?

Van pushed the memories away and tossed the rest of her uniform into the reclaimator unit. After a quick shower, she climbed naked between the sheets. She refused to think about the frozen planet again and what would happen there as she willed sleep to find her. It was a long time in coming.

"YOU'RE UP KINDA late aren't you?"

Cade flinched in surprise and looked over her shoulder toward the familiar voice. Normally deserted in the middle of the night watch, her executive officer had still managed to track her down in the mess hall. Cade flashed him a friendly smile, gestured at the empty seat across from her and indicated the almost full pot of coffee.

"Join me?"

"Glad to. You know I can't sleep without a good jolt of caffeine in my system."

Bosk rummaged under the cabinetry for a mug and then sat down with a grunt. He didn't speak as he poured his drink and Cade finally rolled her eyes. "Okay, Uther. Out with it."

"What?"

The feigned innocence didn't fool her for a second. "Let me guess. You asked the computer where to find me and now you're trying to make it look like you just wandered in here."

Commander Bosk sipped his coffee for a moment, his eyes quietly assessing. Finally, he placed the mug on the table.

"Why are you in here, Cade?"

"Excuse me?" The question caught her off guard and she knew the discussion was about to become personal.

"Why are you up? It's the middle of the night and we reach Tokar in a few days. You should be asleep."

"You're not my mother." Her eyes flashed.

"No. I'm much better looking."

Her irritation disappeared as Cade snorted coffee through her nose. She coughed for a moment before wiping her mouth with the palm of her hand. "I'll be sure to tell her you said so."

"Don't you dare." Uther grinned, but the smile quickly faded. "It's Captain Swann, isn't it?"

Cade sighed. She hated being transparent. "I just don't know what to think about her."

"Professionally or personally?"

Cade raised an eyebrow and intended that to be her only response, but eventually relented. She needed another opinion on something that bothered her about Captain Swann's prior service. "Eight years ago, Swann's unit was under attack by Gothoan invaders. They were outnumbered and being slaughtered one by one. For months they froze on Tokar but no one ever called for reinforcements."

"Maybe they didn't have working transmitters."

"No, that's not it. It just doesn't make sense. When I asked her about it, she just deflected me. There's something she's not telling me."

"What's the big deal, Cade? That was ancient history. Swann would have been a junior officer. It probably wasn't her choice to make, not until the end anyway."

"Hmm, maybe."

"Why is it so important that you're losing sleep?"

"I don't know," Cade admitted. "I just have a feeling that it is."

After a sip from her coffee, Cade stared down into the dark drink. She couldn't look at Bosk when she asked in what she hoped was a casual tone, "So, what do you think of her personally?"

A hairy eyebrow elevated. "You're kidding, right? You have heard of her reputation?"

"I didn't mean it like that." A fire-red blush across her pale cheeks proved otherwise.

Cade couldn't ignore the attraction she'd felt as soon as she saw Vanessa Swann. The short auburn hair had caught the overhead lights and nearly blinded her. When she looked into the forest green eyes, Cade saw passion and determination and felt her tongue cleave to the roof of her mouth. Later, When Van asked her about going to bed, Cade's nipples had tightened even as she reacted in surprise.

Bosk must have read something in her expression. "Uh huh."

Face burning even hotter, Cade squirmed in embarrassment. "Besides, she's so little, I'd crush her."

The commander was smiling now, obviously enjoying her discomfort way too much. "Uh huh."

"Uther!"

Bosk laughed and held up a hand. "All right, all right. Not that I blame you, really. She is very cute."

"Very."

"She's also good for morale."

Cade froze with her mug halfway to her lips. "What do you mean?"

"Word has it she's started an illegal still on the lower deck."

"Is there any other kind?" Cade raked her fingers through already disheveled hair. "Honestly, in one day? It seems like Captain Swann deliberately does things that fly in the face of protocol. Who in their right mind thought she'd make a good commanding officer?"

"Cade, let it go and get some sleep."

Shaking her head, Cade put the mug down. Uther was right. She needed sleep and there were more important things to worry about. "It's good for crew morale, huh?"

"Yep. Seems like the crew think they're getting one over on the legendary Cade Meryan."

She smiled at Bosk and shrugged. "Fine. Leave it."

Chapter Three

VAN BUTTONED THE oversized parka and tried to ignore the slight trembling in her hands. As general military issue, the cold weather gear was pretty much one size fits all. At the moment, Van wasn't concerned about the lack of fit. Fortunately, no one else was in the loading bay to see her weakness. Just the thought of traveling back to Tokar's frozen surface brought up some very unpleasant memories, memories that had long since turned to nightmares. The terror of a repeat performance made her feel sick. She'd arrived first, but that didn't mean she was eager to join Meryan and her merry band on this mission. When the double doors parted, Van looked over her shoulder and smiled in relief.

Her executive officer met her with his typical greeting. "Miss me?"

"Not as much as you might think. Sleep well?"

"Not bad. Are you ready for this?" The look in his eye told her the question wasn't casual.

"Of course, why wouldn't I be? It's just a simple recon jaunt. Admiral Meryan says it shouldn't take more than forty-eight hours to find out if there's anything to their intelligence reports." Van suppressed the urge to continue babbling.

"Speaking of her Royal Highness, you two seem to be getting along well. I heard she was in your cabin the first night we were here."

"I'll never cease to be astounded at how fast rumor travels on a space vessel."

"So she was there."

Van frowned, not liking where this conversation was going. "It was about the mission. That's all."

"Oh come on. I saw the way you looked at her in the briefing." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively and Van couldn't help but laugh despite her nervousness.

"Not at work, you know that. Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't mind finding out what's under that uniform but I don't mess with my shipmates."

Paul gave an undignified grunt. "You won't mess with a subordinate, but that doesn't mean you won't let the admiral bag you."

"Bag me? You make it sound like I'm easy."

She tried for indignant but Paul laughed. "Who are you kidding? No female is safe when you make port, Van."

"This isn't port and what's wrong with having a little fun?"

The loading bay doors opened and the rest of the team came in followed by Admiral Meryan. She really could make cold weather camouflage look good. The faux fur lined her dark hair and pale skin and her eyes glittered like a beacon. Van tore her gaze away and felt her face burn at the sight. Paul chuckled knowingly before he drifted away.

As they boarded the shuttle, Van discovered she was no longer quite as scared. Paul had his uses and one of them was being a great distraction. The jump ship lifted off and in seconds, they headed for the surface. Cade stood up to address the crew and Van couldn't help thinking about what Paul had said.

Was she really that bad?

Looking at Meryan, she had to admit he might have a point, but who in their right mind wouldn't find her attractive? The admiral was tall, lean, and muscular in all the right places. Her hair was so thick it just begged to have someone run her fingers through it. She had a presence that oozed animal magnetism and command control.

Unexpectedly, Meryan turned and their eyes met. Van realized she had missed most of the briefing. Fortunately, her sense of recall, even when she wasn't paying attention, was pretty good. She caught only the last few words but it was enough to bluff her way through.

"The Southern Mountain range is the most hospitable area on Tokar," she said, responding to the admiral's last question. "Temperatures range from minus four Celsius in the day to around minus twenty-one at night."

"That's hospitable?" Ozal asked in disbelief. She caught Van's look of disapproval and quickly apologized for the interruption.

Hers was the only comment but Van noticed uncomfortable looks all around. Only Admiral Meryan appeared unfazed. Unusual considering Alarans had a low tolerance for temperature extremes.

Hybrid, she remembered.

"I know it sounds rough, but if there is any kind of rebel activity that's the best place for it. Drilling into the mountainside to create underground bases should be pretty easy to spot," Van added.

"Depending on when they were drilled," Byra offered.

"Or if."

The admiral sounded like she wasn't so sure any such terrorist camps existed. Van really hoped she was right. Fighting on Tokar again wasn't her idea of a good time. Meryan turned to face the teams and Van felt the loss of eye contact like a low throb. She pushed the disconcerting feelings away and concentrated on the last minute information.

"The jump ship will drop alpha team off four kilometers from the eastern edge of the Southern Mountains. I'll lead that team. Commander Byra, Lieutenant Argante, Ensigns Jameson and Sanders are with me along with security team one.

"Captain Swann will lead beta team with Commander Bosk, Lieutenant Commander Ozal, and Lieutenant Yugi. Security team two will accompany them. Beta team will lead off from the north side of the mountains. That should prevent any crossfire problems between the two parties if we encounter any resistance. Questions?"

There weren't any.

"Helm to Admiral Meryan." The communiqué came from the ship's internal public address system.

"Go ahead, Ensign."

"Approaching coordinates. Drop alpha in three minutes."

"All right, people. Gear up."

With that, Van stood and started putting on the rest of her cold weather gear. Her heart was pounding and she felt the sting of adrenaline rush through her veins. Having Commander Bosk along on the team didn't sit well with her, especially going into an unknown situation. She would much rather have an exec she knew and trusted even if she understood Meryan's reasoning. Integrating crews and building trust were important goals, but Van wasn't sure a recon mission with so many unknowns was the best time for such an adjustment. Then again, perhaps the

admiral just wanted someone to keep an eye on her. At least Van would have the rest of her crew on her team.

"How are you, Captain?"

Van started. Meryan was standing inches from her right shoulder. To the casual observer, the positioning might seem almost intimate.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

Somehow, Van didn't believe her. "I'm fine, Admiral. Why do you ask?"

A hint of a smile touched the corner of Meryan's mouth and she reached up to fix the mismatched straps Van had just fastened on the para-thruster pack. Having Cade so near and performing such an intimate act made it difficult for Van to breathe. She finally told herself to relax. Meryan's touch didn't mean anything.

"I'm not sending Bosk along to spy on you. He's familiar with the way I think in a conflict and if anything should happen, say we lose contact, he'll be able to advise you what my response is likely to be. Commander Byra will be able to do the same for me."

"That's all? You're not worried I'll go rogue on you?"

"No." The laughter in her voice made it clear she hadn't considered such a thing. The grin faded and she pinned Van with an intent look. "I haven't said anything to the others, but I have a feeling this is the real thing, Swann. I need you to stay sharp."

"Why wouldn't you tell the rest of the team if you felt that way? They could be walking into a trap or worse." Anger made the question much sharper than intended and the admiral's expression froze.

"Because it's just a feeling. I trust my instincts, but it's hard to convince a crew to follow a gut feeling."

"And where, exactly, does this gut feeling tell you we're going to walk into trouble?"

Cade frowned a second before she shrugged. "I don't know. I just know that something is off."

Okay, at least she was being up front. Van nodded. "Suggestions?"

"It should take a few hours for beta team to reach the mountain range. Once you're there, we'll go to radio silence unless one of us gets into trouble. Scout the outer perimeter and look for signs of a way into any hidden tunnels or entrances. We'll meet back at the original jump coordinates at nightfall and compare notes."

"And if we do run into trouble?" Memories of her previous trip slid through Van's mind. They'd had a backup plan then, too. A good one. Unfortunately, it hadn't worked out so well.

"Call for reinforcements. Two units will be standing by on *Gauntlet* just in case. We should also be close enough to cover each other once we reach the mountain range."

"Sounds easy." Too easy. Even if they called for reinforcements, it would take time for them to reach the surface. The fighting would be over before they ever arrived. "You're the boss."

She looked like she wanted to be reassuring, but Van wasn't quite at the point of needing it. In fact, anger propelled her to say, "Look, Admiral, I realize you're a master tactician."

"But?"

"But you're not used to leading ground troops into hostile territory. I know, it's just recon," Van said holding up a hand. "My point is that anything can go wrong after the plans have been drawn up. Your people need to know everything, not just hard facts but the stuff that's not in the intelligence reports. They need to know what you think, how you feel, and any hunches you might have."

"I thank you for your opinion, Captain, but I think I can handle this end of things."

All the previous warmth was gone from her expression and Van felt strangely empty, like she'd just gotten a glimpse of something important but it was gone before she could bring it into focus.

"Your call," she said simply, and walked over to stand with her team.

Meryan held her gaze with narrowed eyes. Finally, she ordered, "Alpha team, take positions. And keep your eyes open down there. I suspect there's more to this story than we've been given."

It was as much as Van was going to get and it was enough. She hadn't expected that much. The team lined up at the hatch of the jump ship with para-thrusters in place. Parachutes would deploy as soon as the personnel cleared the ships. Once they were in the drop zone, small thrusters would be engaged on the power packs to guide each person to an optimal landing area. Unfortunately, the small booster packs were useless for ground operations, usually ditched upon landing.

The hatch opened and a burst of icy air shot through the cabin. Alpha team along with their security personnel began to leap from the small shuttle without hesitation. Meryan went last and when those dark eyes briefly met Van's, she felt her heart thud against the wall of her chest. For some reason, she had a very bad feeling about this. Then Meryan was gone and Van's team was up next. When the site for beta squad came up, her people exited as efficiently as the previous team. As she leapt into the frozen night, she wondered if they'd all lost their minds.

CADE GLANCED BACK and met Van Swann's verdant gaze. She didn't know why she felt compelled. The woman was irreverent, insubordinate, and infuriating. From all accounts, she was also fiercely brave and loyal. Nevertheless, there was more to it than Cade could put her finger on. Resolutely, she pushed anything remotely personal away and leapt into the frigid atmosphere of Tokar. The updraft caught her squarely in the chest and threw her several yards backward. When the resistance gave way, Cade automatically launched the chute and began directing herself toward the ground some nine hundred feet away. The rest of the team was already in place before she hit the snow.

"You all right, Admiral?"

"Fine, Commander Byra. Let's get organized and head out. Daylight should break in the next hour and I'd like to be well underway by then."

"Aye, ma'am."

Cade gave an internal shudder. Already, her feet seemed like frozen lumps of ice and her nose felt numb. She pulled her muffler into place over the respirator and set off toward the head of the formation hoping they would find nothing and be back on the *Gauntlet* in a few days. The earlier conversation with her cousin drifted through her thoughts.

"Be careful, Cade. Don't take any unnecessary risks."

Saral was always so protective. Cade grinned behind her respirator. Military service was a tradition with the High Queen's family, but Saral was no soldier. For that reason, she became the Commander of Military Communications and Logistics within the Coalition. She was more diplomat than military, but it suited her.

"I always am." Cade had tried to assure her without sounding condescending, watching her reaction from the personal viewer in her quarters.

Saral rolled her eyes. "You are still half Alaran," she pointed out. "I don't know why you insisted on leading this so-called mission yourself, and you know what the cold does to your metabolism. You could be in real danger here."

"As you just pointed out, Cousin, I'm half Alaran. I'm also half Human and I'll be fine. A little slower, maybe, but fine. Oh, by the way, I forgot to tell you we got some unexpected company for this little trip."

"Oh, who? Is it some big dreamy military type with bulging muscles?"

Cade laughed at the excited look in the dark eyes that mirrored her own. "You wish. Her name is Captain Vanessa Swann. Heard of her?"

"Swann, Swann...I don't think...Wait. Isn't that the one that survived on Tokar all those years ago? The rest of her unit murdered?"

"That's her. I'm impressed you know so much about it."

Saral shrugged. "To be honest, that's about all I know. What do you think of her?"

"She's a huge pain in the ass." Saral laughed and Cade went on. "Seriously, there's something about her I can't put my finger on."

"You don't trust her?"

"No, quite the opposite. I've just met her and I think I'd trust her with my life."

"Ah," Saral said in a knowing voice. "You have a crush."

"Do not." Cade protested as she remembered Swann offering her a drink the night before in her quarters. On the heels of that, Van had innocently asked her if she was going to bed and Cade took the question in an entirely inappropriate way. "I don't, but she is something else. She's gorgeous, but if I tried anything, I'd probably pulverize her. She's tiny, all of five feet."

"Again, sounds like you have a crush," Saral insisted.

"Maybe a little one, but it's probably just the result of having heard so much about her. She's young, but she was a hero during the Border Wars. Anyway, it doesn't matter. Tomorrow we're going to find out if there is anything to these rumors and then it'll be back to Alara. I'll probably never see her again."

"Just keep your eyes open, Cade, and let this Captain Swann prove what a great soldier she is. Let her keep you out of trouble."

"Are you saying I can't do that myself?"

"I'm not saying a word," Saral teased in a singsong voice before she laughed. "Just get this over with and come home. You know I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you."

"Nothing's going to happen. I'll see you soon. Tell my mom I send my love."

The sun had just cleared the distant horizon when Cade called a short halt to rest. Clouds were thick overhead, promising heavy snows in the near future. With luck, the blizzard wouldn't hit until after they completed their assignment. Checking her wrist chronometer, she decided it was time to move on. Alpha team walked another hour before closing in on the eastern base of the Southern Mountains.

What an original name, Southern Mountains. Even Cade could have come up with something better. Of course, on this little ice ball it wasn't like it really mattered.

"Hold up in front, Sanders."

The lieutenant came to a skidding halt on a patch of ice and almost landed on his rear. Cade affected not to notice as she keyed her communicator. "Meryan to Swann."

"Swann here."

"We're at the pass leading to the base of the mountain range. What's your location?"

"Still about twenty minutes from our destination. We haven't had any problems or seen another living soul. It's pretty quiet."

"Same here. Even the weather is working in our favor." Tokar was infamous for its horrible winds, but today all was calm. Cade thought the landscape would make a great holo-pic. "Maintain radio silence from here unless you run into something you can't handle."

"Understood, Admiral."

Captain Swann sounded a little miffed, but Cade couldn't seem to refrain from reminding her to call for help if she needed it. The incident on the planet eight years ago had her screaming to know why a soldier, seasoned or not, wouldn't radio for backup. While waiting on her people to assess the area, she chewed on an unsettling thought. What if Swann panicked during the brutal assaults? That still didn't explain why she'd maintained a communications blackout. Cade realized the question wouldn't leave her alone until she discovered the answer, but Captain Swann didn't seem very forthcoming. Maybe Cade would have to have another talk with Van soon.

Lieutenant Argante had been scouting ahead while Cade spoke with the captain. He returned with a scowl on his dark features.

"Something wrong, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Admiral. It looks like there's been a recent avalanche here. Part of the pass is blocked and what's still there is barely more than a suspended ice bridge."

"Define suspended." Heights didn't really scare her, but ice wasn't notorious for good footing.

"It's only about four meters above the valley floor, but it goes across at an incline. Also, there's a lot of snow piled up around the peaks and it wouldn't take much to set off another avalanche."

"Can we take the lower access across the valley? The snow might not be very pleasant, but it beats breaking a leg if someone falls from that height."

Argante shook his head. "No good, ma'am. The snow is really deep. Even with the snowshoes, it would be tough going. Too bad we didn't bring a glider."

Cade didn't respond to what the lieutenant intended as a witty remark. A glider would have made too much noise. If it didn't give their position away to hostiles, it would trigger another avalanche.

"Recommendations?"

"The bridge looks solid enough, but I wouldn't suggest more than two people at a time crossing, just in case."

Cade nodded. "See to it. I want each team member paired with a security guard. Ensign Jacobs and I will bring up the rear."

Argante acknowledged the order and moved away to implement the instructions. Cade held her breath as the first pair made it across. When they reached the other side without incident, she relaxed a little and watched the others navigate the bridge. Finally, it was her turn. Cade and Ensign Jacobs stepped out onto the ice platform. The slick soles of her boots slipped a little and she automatically tensed. When nothing happened, she started slowly across with the security guard by her side.

Halfway to her destination, Cade heard a creaking noise from under the bridge. It sounded like ice fracturing. She hesitated briefly but the structure held steady. Concern for the young security officer made her turn to look back at him. Jacobs was pale under his tan. He resembled a scared little boy, which wasn't far from the truth, she realized.

"Come on, let's get across this thing."

"No argument from me, ma'am."

Cade took one more step and the landscape around her erupted. She caught a glimpse of white as something large and powerful burst through the ice. Pain exploded in her sides as claws punctured her cold weather gear all the way through to her skin. Then something lifted her into the air as the crushing weight of the grasp drove the oxygen from her lungs. A nightmare spray of red arced through the air and she saw Ensign Jacobs fall. With the disabling pain, she wasn't sure if the blood came from the security guard or herself. Distantly, she heard the shouts from her team come over the com.

"It's got the admiral!"

"What the hell is that thing?"

"*Gauntlet*, we need help!"

"Jacobs is down."

Then her world went white and she heard nothing more.

ARGANTE IGNORED THE shouts for assistance as creatures he'd never conceived of burst from the snow. He counted at least five, maybe more. White powder filled the air where they emerged from their concealment. Combined with the fog created from the energy weapons discharge, it was hard to tell. What he did know was that one of them held Admiral Meryan by the waist in a single massive paw. The creature leapt from snow-covered crag to outcrop without disturbing the heavy powder and without any indication of hindrance from the woman's weight. Argante could barely keep his eyes on Meryan as the beasts jumped around.

"Argante," Byra shouted. "They're trying to distract us. Focus on Meryan."

The lieutenant heard and obeyed, sighting in on a white blur. All he wanted was to hit the beast and force it to drop Meryan. Unexpectedly the creature stopped and looked directly at him. Argante froze at the terrible sight.

The thing was just a shade darker than the frozen tundra, huge and shaggy. Two yellowish tusks curved from the bottom of its jaw and rested on either side of a single red eye. Covered with thick, white fur, the creature wore nothing but some kind of collar around its throat. Argante barely registered a light blinking on the collar because his attention fixated on the admiral. He could see blood dotting Meryan's cold weather garments where ten-centimeter long claws dug into her. She dangled in its casual grasp, her boots a meter from the snow on which it stood. One snowshoe was missing.

"Shoot!"

The word startled Argante into moving but Byra wasn't waiting. A confined energy bolt from a pulse rifle struck the creature in the center of the hairy chest. Argante was certain he saw blood spread out over the wound but he blinked and the creatures were gone. All of them seemed to vanish like a bad dream. They took Admiral Meryan with them.

Chapter Four

"CAPTAIN SWANN, YOU have to go back to *Gauntlet*."

"I don't have to do anything of the kind, Bosk. We're going after Meryan and that's the end of it."

Her heart pounded with anger and outrage. The jumbled cries of terror and shouts for help that she'd heard from Meryan's team an hour before still held her in their grip. Added to that what Byra and Argante told her about their attackers and it was more important than ever not to waste time. She was the only living person, that she was aware of, to see one of those creatures and survive. If they were what she thought they were, Cade was in serious trouble.

Her executive officer leaned down to speak privately. "Van, think about this." His voice was soft and reasonable, just the sort of tone he used to get her to do something she didn't want.

"Paul, she needs our help."

"Yes, she does. But this is a rescue operation now and we're not equipped for it. We need to go back to *Gauntlet*, get reinforcements, and advise HQ what's happening."

Van wanted to argue, but couldn't. Not only was it protocol, but it was good common sense. They needed trackers to scan for the homing signal in Admiral Meryan's wrist communicator, they needed the proper equipment for an extended search instead of a forty-eight hour recon, and she had to apprise Coalition Headquarters that the crown princess of Alara was missing.

She nodded at Bosk. "Call for the jump ship." To Paul she ordered, "Establish a base camp here. Set up a perimeter and make sure no one goes anywhere alone. All teams check in by radio every twenty minutes. Get Ensign Jacobs's body ready for transport. I'll have medical take him to the morgue when I get to *Gauntlet*."

"What about radio silence?"

"That was before all this, when we thought we might be sneaking up on someone. They know we're here now, so it doesn't matter."

"Captain, I hate to say it, but what if there is no one to worry about us being here? What if those things that grabbed Meryan were just a bunch of animals looking for a meal?"

She shook her head. "No. They don't work like that." Her voice was low and Paul had to lean down to hear. Van fervently believed what she told him; she had to. Just the thought of Cade's death made her want to throw up.

"You've seen these things before?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me," he asked, a note of desperation in his voice. "What are they after?"

"I don't know. But if they didn't tear her apart, just carried her away like you said, then something else is going on. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Van saw the jump ship beginning its descent and had no more time to explain. Instead, she climbed aboard as soon as the hatch opened and left Paul with a look that promised more later. How could she explain that these beasts didn't kidnap people? The Phantoms ripped humanoids apart and ate the raw, bleeding flesh. Why then, would they take Cade? Someone else had to be controlling their actions. Her biggest questions were, who could that be and how? How could they communicate with or control a beast that had no known spoken language?

An hour later, she sat at Admiral Meryan's computer terminal no closer to leading the rescue team than she had been on the planet.

"No, you're not listening to me. I need to speak with a member of Coalition Headquarters concerning Admiral Cade Meryan."

So far, Van had talked with one lackey after another and was getting the usual political shuffle. She didn't have time for this. She saw Cade's patient midnight gaze in her mind and tried to draw strength from it. After staring at a blank vid-link for another ten seconds, she decided she'd had enough. No one could say she hadn't tried. Van had just pushed back from the desk and stood when a female voice came over the link.

"This is Rear Admiral Saral Barab of the Coalition Fleet Liaison Office. Identify yourself, please."

Coalition Liaison? Another pencil pusher?

Van sighed heavily, barely containing her frustration and sat back down. "This is Captain Vanessa Swann aboard the *Gauntlet*. I'm trying to reach someone in Fleet Headquarters on an urgent matter involving Admiral Meryan."

"You may speak with me."

Of all the arrogant..."Look, Rear Admiral, no offense but I think I need to speak with someone with a little more rank to advise them of ongoing rescue operations."

"Rescue?" Her inflection changed radically. Before the rear admiral was politely bored, now she was just short of frantic. "Please, if something's happened to Cade you must tell me. She's my cousin."

Great, Van thought, slapping herself mentally. How could she have missed the resemblance? The same dark eyes and basic facial structure? Even though this woman had the expected blue skin and ears of an Alaran, otherwise she could be Cade's twin. "My apologies, Admiral."

"Just tell me what happened."

"I don't know how much you know about why we're here, but we were just closing in on our objective when Admiral Meryan's team was attacked."

"Attacked? By whom?" Her stormy black eyes were dangerous.

Van swallowed hard. "Phantoms."

"Excuse me?"

"That's all I know to call them," she said, pushing the memories away. "No one has ever seen one up close before, just brief glimpses, but I recognize their handiwork."

Briefly, she outlined the attack to the rear admiral and gave a description of the creatures. She explained the way Jacobs died and the appearance of the wounds.

"And you've seen this before?"

"Yes ma'am. Eight years ago my team was wiped out one by one on Tokar by these same creatures, those that the Gothoans didn't kill."

Barab's face was set like stone. "I don't recall mention of any creatures like this in any military reports, Captain. Are you saying you've withheld vital strategic information?"

She felt anger beginning to stir. "No, of course not. We never really saw them up close. It's hard to report something if you can't describe it. Look, I think we're getting off track here."

"Yes, we are. Where were you when all this was happening?"

"What?"

"Cade mentioned you when I spoke with her earlier. She trusted you. I thought you would keep her safe."

That was news.

"I was following orders, Admiral. I was leading the second team and was too far away to do anything. It was over before we got there."

Emotions were running high and both of them were breathing hard, but the admiral recovered first. "I'm sorry, Captain. I'm sure you did the best you could. I'm just very worried."

"So am I," Van surprised herself by admitting. "But I'm going to do everything I can to get her back safely."

"Thank you." Saral released a breath. "When are you heading out?"

"Just as soon as we end this transmission."

"I won't keep you then. Oh, and Captain, be careful. These Phantoms sound dangerous."

"Scary dangerous," Van confirmed, not really seeing the woman on the screen. "They're huge and they're quick. Killing machines that show no mercy."

"And yet you say they took Cade. They didn't kill her. Why?"

"That's what I intend to find out. I'll contact you as soon as I have her. Swann out."

She realized she'd essentially hung up on a member of the royal family after she left Meryan's office. Van had other things to worry about and didn't give it a second thought. Four squads of heavily armed reinforcements were waiting for her in the loading bay and it would take two shuttles to get them all down, but the troop count was more for show than anything. The crew needed to know they were doing everything to get the admiral back. Van couldn't take that many people into the mountains searching for her. They'd be better off with a heavy perimeter and a core of handpicked soldiers to sneak in and find Meryan.

Thirty minutes later, she was on Tokar and both executive officers agreed with her decision.

"It's easier to hide a handful of people than a whole regiment," Bosk eloquently pointed out.

Argante nodded. "I agree, but I'm coming along."

"No, you're not." There was no room for compromise in her tone. "I heard what happened and I can't risk someone who might freeze up under stress."

"That thing just caught me by surprise," the security chief argued. "It won't happen again."

"I'm sorry, but you'll stay here and coordinate the perimeter defenses. If we need you we'll call."

Argante's face darkened, but he closed his mouth. Van just hoped he wouldn't do something foolhardy and put everyone in jeopardy later by trying to prove his loyalty. She didn't really know the man, but there wasn't any time to babysit him. Either Argante would follow orders or he wouldn't. Honestly, she hoped she could trust the lieutenant. A loose cannon or unknown element during any type of operation could result in the loss of life.

"Please, Captain. I really want to come with you."

"I know you do, and I find that...bizarre," Van remarked, thinking of the hardships they would endure and the possibility of failure. "Commander Bosk, I'd like for you to stay as well."

"Now just a damned minute..."

Van interrupted before he could really get going. "I'm sure Admiral Meryan would be touched that so many people want to come to her aid, but I have my reasons. Commander," Van swallowed hard, hesitant to speak the words aloud. "In the unlikely event we fail to retrieve her, you will become *Gauntlet's* acting captain. Protocol is very clear on this. You cannot come with us."

Bosk frowned heavily and his lips compressed into a thin, hard line. Van thought he might be ready to argue, but he replied by saying simply, "Understood."

"You can't be serious," Argante said to his superior. "How can you sit by while someone we hardly know goes after our commanding officer?"

"Watch your tone, Lieutenant," Commander Bosk snapped. "I don't like it anymore than you do, but she's right. Besides, the fact that she is unbiased gives them that much more of a chance at succeeding."

Unbiased, Van considered. Her stomach was roiling in worry for Cade. She pushed unpleasant thoughts away and turned back toward her team.

"Let's go."

Chapter Five

CADE SHIVERED AND clasped her arms tighter around her chest. The bitter cold on Tokar's surface was hard enough to deal with in full cold weather gear, but this deliberate exposure felt like torture. Unconscious after the blizzard-colored creatures attacked, Cade awakened minus her fur-lined parka inside a bitterly cold chamber. She guessed exposing her to the frigid temperatures was a deliberate maneuver. Someone was fully aware of how the cold affected the unique physiology of a half Alaran. Pain seared through her midsection and she vaguely remembered the attack by something enormous, white, and hairy.

Lying huddled in the corner of a darkened room, Cade only registered the freezing temperature of the cement floor and the alu-metal walls where they formed a corner. She struggled against the sleep tugging at her willpower, urging her to give over to torpor.

"No," she whispered desperately. "I won't give in."

"That's where you're wrong, Princess Meryan."

Cade fought to open her eyes and her vision swam. The lights were on and when her sight finally cleared, she thought she imagined the being standing directly in front. The specific gender was indistinguishable considering the individual wore a long black cloak. Complete with a deep hood and sleeves that came down past the hands, Cade couldn't see any features. The voice sounded digitally altered, routed through an electronic synthesizer. Lighting in the room had increased substantially and she thought she should be able to see a face. She couldn't. Where the features should be, under the cowl, Cade was sure she saw what appeared to be the shimmering surface of a pond.

Either the temperature combined with her injuries was affecting her more than she first surmised, or this person had deliberately masked their identity with some type of hologram. Such

a thing was necessary only if they planned to keep her alive. Despite the current situation, Cade felt a glimmer of optimism.

"Whoever you are, you have committed an act of war against the Royal House of Alara and the Earth Coalition Charter. I recommend you release me at once." She tried to make her voice as strong as possible, but feared that her teeth chattered too loudly for her words to be clear.

"You, my dear, are in no position to make demands or issue ultimatums. I give you my word that if you do exactly as I say, you won't be harmed."

Somehow, she found that unlikely.

"Look, if you have some kind of grievance you should have petitioned a forum with the Senate. I'm sure they can help you settle any disputes..."

"Save it," the kidnapper snarled and the synthesizer squelched.

The device experienced a momentary loss of signal, Cade assumed from being far underground, and she was convinced the person was male. He turned toward the exit to her cell and nodded. Half a second later, two soldiers entered the room and headed straight toward her. They wore black body armor encasing them from head to foot. Equally dark helmets with full-face visors completely obscured their features, though she couldn't find any insignia that might indicate a planetary loyalty. Menace rolled off these newcomers and she expected them to show no quarter.

The soldiers seized her by the upper arms and dragged Cade to her feet. She gasped and bent forward to keep from reopening her wounds, but sensed they were already closed and didn't appear to be life threatening. The arctic chill was another matter. Strength sapped by the numbing temperatures, she sagged and would have fallen had the two not held her upright.

"Bring her."

Cade allowed the troopers to bear her weight to conserve energy, but she attempted to memorize everything she saw. They were definitely inside the planet. Stalactites speared down from the low ceiling, threatening to lose their grip and impale her on the spot. In other places, towering walls of rock and alien minerals reached so high overhead that they disappeared into inky oblivion. Narrow, damp corridors blasted through solid rock made her feel almost claustrophobic. Heat generated by artificial means warred with the natural environment, causing mist to rise like revenants from the rocky floors and scent the surroundings with the tang of mildew. Though heating devices were clearly present, they did little to alleviate conditions and seemed to make things more eerie than strictly necessary.

Overall, Cade preferred the biting elements on the surface.

Light from another doorway loomed near and she held her breath, wondering what new tortures awaited. When she finally saw the room she blinked, sure her Alaran physiology had cracked due to the harsh environment.

It was her office at Coalition Headquarters on Psmanth, Andromeda's fourth planet. Someone had recreated every aspect of her workspace down to the last detail. Sunlight glinted from gallium buildings and large panes of flerovium crystal. From her twenty-story office window, she experienced the sensation of looking down on the city of Yurt. Yet the star's light cast no warmth, advising Cade of the deception.

More projections.

"What is this?"

"A stage. Please, have a seat."

Her captor waved Cade toward a well-appointed gallium desk. The metal was abundant in this sector of space and useful in creating structures impossible to destroy in the strongest natural disaster.

Cade gratefully slid into the office chair. She closed her eyes briefly, for an instant taking refuge in the familiar. Like the projection on the wall, it was an illusion, but her courage wasn't. She opened her eyes, straightened her spine, and pinned him with her fiercest glare.

"What do you want?"

The hooded figure shrugged and walked over to stand in front of the desk. His henchmen melted away to the corners as in a well-rehearsed script. She realized no one had even offered to harm her, touching her only for support. Cade gained confidence from that fact.

"So, what should I call you?"

He froze in reaching for the desk surface and Cade thought she'd surprised him.

"Call me...Nemo."

She chuckled and sat back, folding her arms again. Cade was still dangerously cold, but moving around had helped her circulation.

"You want me to call you Nemo, a name that literally means nothing'?"

"Have a care, Princess. You're in no position to taunt me."

One of his men reached for the blast pistol on his thigh, but Cade refused to show any fear. "Then shoot me, already. You're going to kill me anyway so stop playing games."

"Actually, you're wrong. We're not going to kill you because that's not what the client wants. All you have to do is make a small recording."

It was too easy. The proposition was so startling that she completely overlooked the mention of a client and focused on the details. What possible recording was so important that these people were willing to risk an attack by the Coalition Fleet? Whatever it was, it didn't bode well for Cade.

"Just like that?"

"That's all."

"What am I supposed to say?"

Nemo reached forward and touched a red button recessed into the metal desk surface. A computer interfaced monitor slid up and locked into place in front of her. Cade saw a small light come on near the top left corner, indicating that the device was working.

"You are going to renounce the throne of Alara."

"You can't be serious," she growled automatically, outraged by the idea.

"I'm very serious. Here is the script from which you will read." Nemo placed a small data interface screen in front of her, out of sight of the built in camera. "It says that you pre-recorded this message from your office to be delivered while you're on mission. That is, of course, so no one can talk you out of your decision."

"And why would I want to renounce my birthright?"

"You Meryans are all the same. Looking down from your ivory tower on the rest of the world," he indicated the artificial window. "Well, you're going to be the more grounded of your ilk. You're going to show the galaxies that you prefer your life as a simple military commander."

"You still haven't answered my question. Why?"

"Because that's what my client wants and I intend to deliver." His voice rose angrily and he added, "Personally, I think humiliation is too good for you. You're nothing but a mutant half-breed from a line of sludge crawling Humans and unworthy Alaran females who call themselves Queen."

"How dare you? Just from what you say and the cowardly way you conceal your face I'd say you're Gothoan. How can someone from a bloodthirsty race of humanoids question my mother's worthiness?"

"She is a woman," Nemo said sharply, the disgust in his voice clear, "fit for nothing but child rearing and domestic chores. It takes a man to lead."

Astonished by his statement, Cade felt her ire evaporate, replaced by contempt. "Get over your ego, Nemo. It's been hundreds of years since anyone thought that way."

"Your kind, perhaps, but then what can a more enlightened species expect from such a mongrel heritage? However, all of that is about to change. This is just the first step."

"Oh, I understand now," Cade taunted, attempting to goad Nemo into making a mistake. Even if he did she wasn't sure how she would get past the guards, but she had to start somewhere. "Even if I do what you want, you have no intention of letting me go. Otherwise you wouldn't tell me any part of your plans."

"I'll keep my word to my client, you can be sure of that." He sounded calmer now and she wondered if she'd missed her opportunity. "You won't die, but I never bargained to release you. As I said, this is only the first step. When I'm finished, all of the planets of the Triangulum and Andromeda Galaxies and every world in between will be ruled by Gothos."

"How does your client feel about that?"

"What they don't know won't hurt them."

Cade realized Nemo hadn't a clue who was calling the shots. Obviously, he cared only for the money and how he could turn the situation to his own advantage.

"It won't do any good." Her voice was strong and sure with her convictions. "If by some attack of utter insanity I agreed to your terms, my mother is the High Queen. I have no power. Besides, anyone who knows me knows that I would never do such a thing, even if you tortured me."

"Yes, I'm well aware of your reputation for valuing responsibility above all else."

He sounded pleased that she refused to do as he ordered. Unaccountably, that worried her more than anything else. "You don't care if I make the recording or not."

"You're right. In fact, I knew it was a waste of time, but I did promise to try."

Nemo actually giggled a little and she felt the hairs on her arms rise. Cade's heartbeat increased, adrenaline driving up her body temperature and preparing her to do battle. This was all leading to a crescendo and when the final notes fell, she was sure they would culminate with her death. He was a psychopath and in her experience, such individuals were notorious for lying.

"Something tells me I'm not going to like this."

Nemo raised his arm and pushed one of the long, black sleeves back from his wrist. Cade saw a metal bracelet round his wrist and a series of multicolored lights. He touched one of these lights and a few seconds later the door opened.

Cade thought she'd lost it. Her brain had succumbed to the cold and now she was really hallucinating.

A woman who wore the Coalition uniform of a Vice Admiral entered the room. She stood straight and tall. And she wore Cade's face. She couldn't be a clone; such technology didn't exist regardless how scientists tried. However, there was no denying the truth. Nemo had her doppelganger.

Chapter Six

VAN HAD LED the men through the deep snow toward the Southern Mountain range. She projected an air of calm confidence, but inside she was worried. After checking the area of the admiral's kidnapping and finding nothing, she didn't have any idea what to do next. She squatted in the snow and analyzed the patches of blood with a micro-scanner, unhappy with the results.

"It looks like you guys completely missed the...creatures. These bloodstains are all Human. Are you getting anything on Admiral Meryan's life signs?"

She hoped Cade's wrist communicator, which doubled as a bio-signs detector, would give them something to work with. If it didn't, she was open to suggestion from anyone on how to proceed. To her dismay, Commander Byra shook his head.

"I'm not reading anything out here but us. I can't even find the base camp," Paul shouted through the respirator that shielded his face from the wind.

"There must be a weather system moving in. This planet is famous for them and it'll definitely interfere with our equipment."

"Perfect. How long do you think we have before it hits?"

"No way to know without contacting *Gauntlet* and I'd prefer to not to give away our position by using an open comm channel. Our personal communicators use a much weaker signal, so I doubt anyone could pick those up."

"And if they can?" Paul shouted.

Van perceived a note of worry in his voice. "Then we jump off that bridge when we come to it." Byra stared at her for a second, but she couldn't see his expression through the dark black goggles.

"Any idea where we go from here?"

"We look for her," she stated, thinking the answer should be obvious.

"Captain, I don't mean to rain on your parade, but we don't have any clue where to start."

She couldn't argue. Van stood and looked around the area. There were no obvious signs of tracks, digging, or construction. The pristine planet boasted meters of snow to the surface and a brisk breeze threw blasts of shrapnel-like ice. Van could hear the sound as it hit their all-weather gear and it reminded her of sandblasting. She fully expected to find her goggle lenses scratched when she returned to the ship.

Van concentrated on relaxing, allowing the concern to stop surging and her higher reasoning to take over. It was a tactic she'd used many times over during her military career. In the distance, she watched a Tokarian snow rabbit bound across the terrain before it darted into a concealed underground burrow. For a moment, she watched the animal without any clear thought to its actions. Then the answer came to her.

"Where did you say you last saw the beast holding Meryan?"

Paul turned and pointed. "Up there on that ridge."

At that point, it was more hunch than fact, but Van trusted her instincts. With the lack of other evidence, there wasn't anything to lose by trying.

"Heliosius, Yosef, keep your eyes open and prepare to join us at the top," she ordered through her wrist com. Though the security personnel were only a few yards away, they wouldn't hear if she shouted. "Let me know if you even think you see something move that doesn't belong. Ozal, spread your team around the perimeter. Nothing gets past you, understand?"

They responded immediately.

"Aye, Captain Swann."

"Understood."

"Nothing will get by us," Ozal assured her.

Confident in her tactical officers' abilities, she headed up the hill without a second thought. "Paul, come with me."

Van trudged over the small dips and rises before heading up the steepest hill in their vicinity. Her snowshoes made the trip arduous. Her thigh muscles burned from wearing them for so long, but it was preferable to sinking into the white powder. She followed the crimson trail leading away from the sight of the original attack, but the droplets were rare farther away from the initial encounter. Regardless, she knew it belonged to Cade and the thought made her feel nauseous. She'd made a promise to the admiral's cousin to return with Meryan and didn't relish coming back empty-handed.

The trail led over the top of the hill and partway down the other side where it suddenly vanished. Van squatted down again to get out of the worst of the wind. It was more abrasive because of the elevated terrain and she wanted to eliminate as much interference with her scanner as possible. At first, she was baffled. The device still didn't detect anything out of the ordinary.

"Now what?"

"Don't you do that," Van snapped, looking at him on hearing the defeat in his voice. "Don't you dare give up on me...or her. She didn't just magically disappear off this frozen snowball, and *Gauntlet* didn't measure any energy output from orbit indicating a ship to surface transit. That means she's here and we need to get our heads out of our collective asses and find her. Is that clear?"

For a long, tense moment, his only answer was silence. Then he nodded once and said, "Right. Okay. Let me take some readings over there."

Byra indicated another small ridge a few meters away, but Van didn't respond. She pretended to concentrate on her scanner, but she was really waiting for her heartbeat to return to normal. They couldn't afford to lose Admiral Meryan. Her loss would open the entire galaxy up to civil war as ruling houses jockeyed for position to replace the high queen. Cade's mother didn't have another heir. Van realized Meryan had a younger brother, but males did not take control of the throne.

If some type of internal struggle for power happened, the entire system would be ripe for an attack. It could come from the Gothoans or any one of a number of other rebel factions that existed. Though the Gothoan soldiers were defeated during the Border Wars, Van wasn't ignorant enough to think they simply returned to their own planet with their tails between their legs. It would be an opportunity that would be difficult to ignore. They had to find Admiral Meryan and then Van would personally see to it that she never left the safety of Alara's palace again.

Sure, because Meryan was really going to listen to her and because a possible war was the only reason it was so important to Van.

A peep from the micro-scanner pulled Van out of her depressing thoughts. She saw a very slight irregularity on the screen, but it had already disappeared since her hand had been moving while she took readings. Carefully, she drew the tip of the instrument back the other way, rewarded by another small sound. This time, she trained the scanner on the area and increased the sensitivity as high as it would go. Her mouth went dry as she studied the readout. She couldn't believe what she'd found.

"Paul, get back over here," she shouted over her communicator. "Lieutenant Heliosius, Chief Yosef, I need you up here on the double."

Commander Byra dropped into the snow beside her. "What have you got?"

"I think I just found where Alice went down the rabbit hole."

"Huh?"

"Forget it. Ancient Earth reference."

Van was content to leave Paul in the dark while she waited for the security personnel to arrive. In the interim, she took more readings for mineral composition, thickness of the shoring material she'd discovered and any unexpected life signs. They didn't need Phantoms sneaking up on them now.

She heard the panting of the other two men long before they arrived.

"What is it, Captain?" Lieutenant Heliosius asked. He wasn't as winded as his companion was, and Van thought it wasn't just because the lieutenant was from Duval, the farthest planet out in the Andromeda sector, which boasted notoriously lower oxygen levels than most humanoids found comfortable.

Everyone leaned in close to hear her response. "I'm showing a small shaft, possibly leading to a tunnel or some other kind of underground structure, but we need to find the entrance. It'll be standing upright to keep any snow from building up on the surface. I'm betting this is where they took Admiral Meryan."

"Who do you think it was what got her, ma'am?" the chief asked.

"That's what we're about to find out."

"Here it is, ma'am." Lieutenant Heliosius had walked around to the side of one of the larger rises and held his micro-scanner aimed toward the front of what looked like nothing but a pile of snow.

A heavy film of powder covered the entrance, obscuring it from the casual observer. Van reckoned someone had painted the door white to blend in, but Tokar's sometimes scouring winds would help camouflage the entrance by blowing fresh snow against the side of the hill. Now they had to figure out a way inside without alerting sentries, or her personal favorites, the Phantoms. Commander Byra didn't seem to share her concerns for stealth.

"Laser torches? I doubt anyone left it open for us. Plus it'll be the fastest way to get inside without being caught at the entrance to a secret, underground hideout."

Chief Yosef answered quickly, attempting to stop the commander before he could act. "It won't work, sir."

Van interrupted before the two could debate the pros and cons of laser cutting. In her experience, seasoned military men rarely conceded their point of view without exploring every minor detail. They didn't have time for that. The Phantoms could show up at any moment and

she wanted to miss that reunion. The threat of humanoid enemy forces surprising them with overwhelming numbers wasn't nearly as frightening, but neither outcome would help the situation.

"He's right. The heat from the torches will set off any sensors on the hatch, assuming there is a hatch. Break out the shovels."

All four removed packs, took out the tri-fold military shovels, and went to work on the spot where Van took the first spade full. The winds had done the job of concealing the entrance well and it was five minutes before her tool hit something solid. She quickly tossed the shovel aside and started using her gloved hands. The men joined her and soon they cleared the portal. A large metal door approximately a meter in height and width faced them. As thick as the breadth of her hand, she worried it might be too heavy to pull back.

"Chief, see if you can dig around the edge enough for us to get a handhold."

"Aye, Captain."

Meanwhile, Van adjusted the settings on the scanner and began checking for any kind of perimeter alarm. She didn't find anything. Considering the cold on the planet, such measures probably wouldn't work anyway. Temperatures could plummet unexpectedly when storms rolled in and electronics didn't fare well here.

"Finished, ma'am."

"Great, stand ready, Chief. I don't want any surprises when we open this thing."

He nodded in acknowledgment and pulled out a blast pistol while the other three grasped the edge of the door. Even with all of them pulling together, moving the cover wasn't an easy task. They slowly worked until there was a small breach through which Van could hardly get her fingertips. Grunting and straining, they worked it wider. She watched Paul use the toe of his boot to shove the buildup of snow from the base of the hatch and from there it moved abruptly, sliding open wide enough for them to enter. A dark hole on the other side offered up a belching plume of steam rather than murderous troops.

"Guess they weren't expecting any trouble," Paul said. "At least we don't have to worry about hairy white demons popping out and tearing us limb from limb."

"I'm so glad you felt I needed to hear that," Van responded with a growl of disapproval. "Now my nightmares will be even more vivid."

She heard Lieutenant Heliosius snicker, but chose to ignore him. In hushed tones she said, "Make sure your sidearms are holstered and break out the pulse rifles, boys. We're going in. Hand signals from here unless it's an emergency."

Van led the way with her rifle at the ready. They entered a small antechamber, just big enough to allow the four of them to stand tightly together. She didn't see any electronics on the walls or anything else, just the plain, circular room. Other than that, a few heavy-duty hinges held the portal in place. Additionally, two thick cables ran from the wall into the rear facing on the hatch. She assumed they kept the exit warmed internally, enough to keep it from freezing in place. The entrance didn't require locking because no one would expect anyone to be here who didn't belong.

A single feature stood out and the quartet stopped in front of it with rifles raised as though they expected an enemy to burst forth at any second. Convinced that the large door concealed a lift capable of carrying them to the lower level, Van started looking for elevator controls. She quickly scanned the outer frame, worried that at any second they'd have company, but she didn't see any obvious instruments.

Chief Yosef reached around her and pressed what Van thought was just a crack or blemish. The door recessed into the jamb and she restrained the urge to jerk backward in surprise. She barely managed not to embarrass herself and stepped into the empty conveyance.

"Keep alert," she whispered urgently. "Try to make as small a target as you can. We're sitting ducks."

Van and Paul squeezed to one side of the lift near the control panel and the security officers did the same across from them. Van studied the alien script on the wall, attempting to decipher the words but couldn't make heads or tails of the markings. Finally, she decided that since there were only two buttons the choice wasn't that hard. Pressing the bottom one, she held her breath when the hatch slid closed. Van said a small prayer for luck that the car would stop and there wouldn't be an entire garrison of rebels, Phantoms or miscellaneous other forces waiting for them at the bottom. Unfortunately, war meant there were always disgruntled individuals banding into various-sized forces to promote their own agendas. She didn't know who'd taken Meryan, but their purposes probably weren't benevolent.

Van nervously wiped the moisture from her gloves one at a time and then secured her two-handed grip on the rifle. As soon as the car started down, she experienced a moment of panic that she'd be so hindered by all-purpose gear that she wouldn't be able to move. She quickly jerked the respirator down around her neck and tugged the glove off with her teeth. Her dark goggles and the glove went into a pocket and she pushed back her parka's hood. It took moments to make these preparations and her men followed suit. The cold immediately numbed her fingers, but it was preferable to the alternative.

The elevator slowed, indicating it would stop soon. Van felt her senses heighten as she readied for battle. She could hear the minute ticking of metal retracting from the cold. She could smell Chief Yosef's uneasy sweat and wondered if it would be an Achilles heel, alerting Phantoms to their presence. She'd never actually heard of such a thing happening but these beasts seemed to be something out of a nightmare, almost supernatural. It wouldn't surprise her to learn they had paranormal abilities to go along with their appearance.

She blinked as the lift hit bottom and suddenly she was back on Tokar, eight years before. The darkness of the elevator car became the inky blackness of a stark, cold cave. Snow blew in sporadically on the wind, but she hadn't been worried about the weather. Something was out there, prowling the moonlit planet and illuminated only by the shadows cast if light happened to encounter them.

"You'll be fine, sir," then Junior Lieutenant Swann encouraged her commanding officer.

He lay in a pool of his own blood, the left arm all but severed at the elbow by a Gothoan shrapnel pulse. Commander Frazil only groaned. His eyelids fluttered but nothing more. Suddenly, a monster flew out of the darkness and into the ring cast by Van's wrist beacon. It struck her, a glancing blow that tossed her across the cave to impact solidly with the wall. When she managed to open her eyes and focus on her commanding officer, part of him wasn't there anymore.

Van shuddered and returned to the present just as the portal to the underground structure began to open.

Great, perfect time to start having flashbacks.

Tensed to fly out on the defensive, she discovered only more emptiness. Van stepped out, followed closely by her men. They swept their rifles in all directions, seeking concealed snipers that might attempt to eliminate them. A narrow walkway lay ahead, surrounded closely by rock walls. Moisture covered the stone's face and mist rose eerily from the floor. Under her boots, the surface felt rough yet slippery. The air was noticeably warmer than the surface but Van didn't believe it could be merely from the lack of wind and direct exposure. There were definitely artificial heating devices in operation. Already, she'd begun to perspire from the abundant layers of specialized clothing.

Abruptly, the passageway terminated at the commencement of a cavernous bay. She thought the chamber could effortlessly accommodate the Coalition's flagship with room to spare. From what she could tell, the stronghold was natural, forming around a sizeable underground spring near the center. The sight of liquid water, instead of ice, indicated subterranean volcanic activity. Tokar's geothermal properties might become an issue thousands of years in the future, but Van didn't care about that now. She was just grateful whoever constructed this base of operations chose to leave the internal structure of the mountain largely intact. Boulders and unexpected outcroppings provided cover and lessened the fear of discovery.

Peeking over the top of a particularly substantial pile of rock, Van saw soldiers everywhere. Many pushed hovering carts loaded with equipment while others were clearly present for security. Considering the riot helmets and full faceplates, not to mention the heavy sonic pulse rifles, these people were serious. The lack of insignia or planet designation didn't mean anything. Van recognized the black on black colors worn by the Gothoan military and her blood flowed like ice water. Apparently, they'd come in through a back entrance and it was only blind luck that they hadn't been discovered. She swallowed hard and looked away from the soldiers. So far, there wasn't any sight of the Phantoms, but she did see several smaller paths leading away from

the central chamber. Most of them looked indigenous to the locale, but two were clearly artificial. Excavation with heavy equipment, pneumatic rock hammers, and scaffolding would take years and someone would have noticed. Additionally, the floors were too smooth for hand blasting. She suspected the use of Hokaran crystal tunneling.

Van frowned. HOKAR, the pleasure planet near the Andromeda wastelands, was famous for the crystal technology. The crystals were rare and the prices for them exorbitant. Whoever financed this operation had deep pockets. That usually meant contacts in high places. Something clicked and connections she'd previously never considered began to look like possibilities.

It would have to wait. Admiral Meryan was the priority. Van could get back to her original mission after this was over. She'd have to be careful, though. Dealing with Alaran royalty meant rubbing elbows with the politicians of the system and they couldn't know why she was really out patrolling the badlands.

Van remembered a narrow, rocky ledge that started a half meter above the deck a short distance back the other way. She backtracked and led the way up the incline. It wasn't very wide, but it traveled in the general direction they needed. The walkway constricted more as she progressed until Van needed to hold on to rock protrusions around her. Stalagmites jutted from underneath, jabbing her legs through the heavy trousers, but she ignored the pain. After only a few steps, Van had to sling her rifle onto her back. She needed both hands for support.

The ledge stayed close to the inner walls of the cave system. By doing so, it would lead them farther from the center of the chamber and consequently the guards. Additionally, there were many obstacles to provide concealment. She'd lost sight of the soldiers and if she couldn't see them, they couldn't see her. Van thought that was a very good thing. If she tried to hold a weapon just now, she figured she'd probably fall and impale herself on one of those things.

Halfway across the narrow precipice, Van stopped and indicated for Chief Yosef to take up position to guard their flank. He nodded once and dropped onto a knee, pulling his rifle into place. Van winced, imagining the sting of kneeling on sharp rock, but the security officer never flinched. She noticed his weapon was set to heavy stun. Good. A stun blast was silent.

Darkness gathered the farther they moved from the man's position and Van figured they were nearing the outer perimeter. At least she hoped they were. She pulled her goggles back up over her eyes and for a moment, she couldn't see a thing. Then she pressed a small button on the top of the frames and the night vision feature activated. The illumination had a greenish cast that could be confusing so Van moved more carefully. It wasn't long before she discovered the ledge suddenly ended.

She could see the cave floor from here and if anyone happened to look up, they wouldn't fail to notice three people clinging six meters above them. Now they had a problem; how to get down. Paul tapped her on the shoulder and she turned to see him holding a rope. He'd retrieved it from his pack, but Van didn't intend to climb down like a spider on a length of silk.

Shaking her head, Van pointed at Heliosius and through a series of gestures impressed on him to guard their backs. Then she started down, holding onto anything that offered any sense of security. She could hear Paul behind her, huffing slightly. Near the bottom, another sound reached her ears that caused her to stop without warning. Byra bumped into her, but Van had tensed so completely that she barely moved from the collision. Quickly, she raised a hand for silence. Paul moved up beside her and frowned, a clear indication that he wanted to know what the problem was. Rather than attempt a response, Van trained her eyes on the figure moving toward them on the passageway below.

Both squatted down to make smaller targets of themselves. The sound she heard was humming and the person in the corridor was a woman. Even with the ghostly light of night vision, Van recognized her. Paul impulsively started forward, his mouth open to speak. Swann reacted instinctively, reaching out to grasp the commander from behind. One arm went around his waist, pulling him back, while she clamped the other over his mouth. Something was wrong.

This woman looked like Admiral Cade Meryan, but Van knew she wasn't. For one thing, Meryan was the serious type. Van couldn't imagine her humming, or for that matter, sauntering along through subterranean grottos with Gothoan militia as if she hadn't a care in the world. Clone? Doubtful. What then? Reconstructive surgery or holo-projection?

In a whisper so quiet Van wondered if she only imagined it, she said, "It's not her."

They waited for the woman to pass and she noticed other differences, so minute they would go unnoticed if one weren't paying attention. This person slouched slightly, relaxed and obviously comfortable. Meryan would be freezing down here. The only humanoids Van knew of who were accustomed to harsh temperatures were the Gothoans. Regardless of the answers to her many questions, she was an imposter.

After the stranger with the familiar face moved on, Van lingered to ensure she and Byra were alone. When no one appeared, she motioned for Byra to move. She wanted to pounce on the woman, to demand what she was doing here and where Cade was. Instead, she followed quietly, trying to determine those answers without giving away their advantage. Van allowed enough distance to stay out of sight in the twists and turns of the corridor. Her goggles went back into a pocket since artificial lights along the floors here rendered them useless and extraneous. Rifle back in her hands, Van was ready if things suddenly went south.

The false Meryan turned and entered a room. She left the door open and Van wanted to shout in relief when she heard the admiral's voice.

"What the hell is this?" Her words trembled, but Van doubted it was from fear.

"It was your decision not to cooperate, Princess. My friend here will make the recording for you while my guards take you to the shuttle."

"What shuttle? Nemo, if you think I'm going anywhere but back to my ship, you are sorely mistaken."

"Brave words, but you're too cold to resist my soldiers. Even now, your eyes droop as you fight to avoid hibernation. I must say, it was incredibly foolish for an Alaran to willingly make planet fall on Tokar, even a half-breed such as you."

Van recognized the sounds of a small scuffle then heard Cade grunt. Booted feet started in her direction and she pressed back hard against the rock wall. The man Meryan referred to as Nemo continued speaking, presumably to the doppelganger.

"Sit down and let's get this over with."

Two men came around the corner, dragging the admiral between them. Van didn't hesitate, taking the first high in the chest with a stun blast. He sighed and crumpled to a heap. Paul shot the other soldier and he would have flown backward, alerting Nemo to the ruckus, if Cade hadn't shouldered him aside at the same instant. The trooper bounced harmlessly off the wall before falling down. Van realized there was a smoking hole in the second man's chest. Paul's weapon wasn't on stun and the sudden discharge of a pulse blast made her ears ring. Without support, Admiral Meryan slumped onto her knees, but her eyes held stunned disbelief.

Moving low and fast, Van tossed her rifle to Paul who caught it in a one-handed grip. She unbuttoned her parka and threw it around Meryan's shoulders before helping the woman to her feet. "Come on."

Silently, she encouraged Cade to walk back down the passageway, but a few feet along Van heard a shout.

"Stop!"

It was the look-alike with Nemo right behind her. Van couldn't see his features through the dark hood, but they had more pressing issues. If either of them managed to sound an alarm, none of them would make it out alive. Nemo fiddled with something at his wrist and she worried it was too late.

"Paul."

Commander Byra's shot caught the doppelganger in the face. He'd used his own rifle and the woman's head disintegrated in a spray of blood and bone. He raised the second weapon and fired at the man who called himself Nemo, but the stun wave passed harmlessly around him. He had a personal defensive cloak. Still, he tapped commands into an unseen wrist device and moments later shimmered out of sight.

"He's gone," Van said in a stage whisper. "Transit beam. We have to get out of here before he sends in the reinforcements."

"Why didn't he do that already?" Byra questioned.

"Too worried about his own hide." Van spoke into her wrist communicator to contact Heliosius and Yosef. "Chief, move out of here the same way we came in. Lieutenant, get down here now."

"What next?" Cade asked.

Van was worried the woman was in shock. From the description of the attack, Cade was injured and she looked like she was ready to fall over. She huddled into the parka and obviously deferred to Van's leadership. Sparing a thought for Chief Yosef, she knew she'd made the right decision. He was closer to the elevator and would probably make it out before them.

"We get this nice man to tell us another way out."

Van knelt beside the guard she'd stunned and tugged him into a sitting position with one hand fisted into his jacket. Releasing the chinstrap from the helmet, she pulled it off and dropped it on the ground. Van slapped the man a couple of times and his eyes fluttered open. For a second he looked dazed but then his eyes cleared. He opened his mouth to shout for help but had second thoughts when Paul thrust the muzzle of a rifle between his teeth.

"Be very quiet," Van advised softly, "or you'll join your friends. Understand?"

He nodded, eyes wide in fear when he looked around.

"Good boy. Tell us how we get out without setting off the alarms?"

"I can't tell you that," he said defiantly. "I'm no traitor."

"And I'm not asking you to be. No one needs to know about this but us, and if you don't my first officer will make sure you never say anything to anyone again. It's your choice."

Byra made a show of adjusting the setting on the rifle and the trooper capitulated. "All right, but the general will make sure you never leave this planet alive."

Heliosius arrived just as Van finished acquiring the information she needed. "Thank you. Shoot him, Commander."

"But you said..."

Van was relieved when Paul used her rifle with the stun setting. She really believed he'd forgotten to change the settings on his own rifle, but part of her couldn't find fault with his actions regardless. The Gothoans would have done the same. Without remorse, Van removed the soldier's coat and put it on. He'd be cold, but he'd survive as long as he didn't venture onto the surface. Right now, she needed it more than he did.

"Ma'am, not to rush you," Heliosius said, "but we need to get out of this passageway."

Van nodded, taking her weapon from Byra, and led the way down the hall. At the end of the corridor, she found the room the soldier mentioned. It was Nemo's office and as such, equipped with an emergency escape portal. She hesitated, looking toward his desk. How much could she find out about this guy and what he was up to before guards captured them? An alarmed shout from the tunnel answered her question.

"Swann, let's go." Admiral Meryan ordered.

The others stood on a ringed platform. Near the center were the controls to close a dome around the disc for transition to the surface. It connected to a thick metallic pole leading into the ceiling. Quickly, Van jumped onto the surface just as guards swarmed the room.

"Punch it."

Cade's fingers flew over the panel while the others returned fire. Van smelled scorched material from a parka, but no one cried out. Instantly, a transparent trinium barrier encircled the platform and cut off the ruby beams of laser fire. She felt the deck tremble beneath them and the disc rose into the air. Looking up, Van discovered the pole was really a cable that extended all the way to the planet's surface. They climbed through endless meters of rock before nearing the termination point. Some type of barrier prevented the elements from entering the chamber, but it slid open as the lift approached. Frozen precipitation poured into the shaft, briefly obscuring her vision until the vessel penetrated the exit and stopped smoothly.

She looked up at Cade and they shared a triumphant smile. Then the protective dome retracted and the full force of the wind struck. She saw the admiral's grin turn to a grimace. Cade hunched over and pulled the parka closed. The truth hit her as quickly as the wind. Van realized they'd emerged onto the surface just as a blizzard prepared to dump a ton of snow. With the absence of the dome, she could barely see the others standing beside her. Whiteout conditions were already very near.

She stepped forward, grabbed the edges of Cade's parka without thinking, and started buttoning the coat. "We need shelter," Van shouted to Byra. "Have the men break out the tents and set up the survival gear."

Barely, she heard his acknowledgment but focused on Cade. Bad guy or not, Nemo was right when he said she wouldn't survive Tokar's conditions for long. Van wrapped her arms around the admiral and shouted in her ear. "Stay on the platform and raise the dome. I'll come for you when we have the tents set up."

"Why don't we all just stay here?"

The barrier would protect them from the wind and snow, but it wouldn't help for long. "We'd freeze to death. We need the tents for the heaters."

Van looked up at Cade and for a split second, felt the urge to press their lips together. She wanted to believe she saw the same desire in the stormy eyes, but stopped herself and stepped backward off the disc.

"I can help."

"Stay. That's an order. I didn't come all this way just to lose you."

Cade look dumbfounded, presumably that a captain would order her about, but Van didn't find the situation humorous. Just the fact that Admiral Meryan thought all of them staying on the disc was a good idea indicated she wasn't thinking clearly. She wasn't about to let the woman help set up survival gear when they had minutes before they wouldn't be able to see more than a foot in front of their faces.

Dropping down into the snow beside the platform, Van doffed her pack and removed a rope. She shoved her rifle as deeply into the fresh powder as possible and tied the rope off before looping it around her waist. Then she walked until the rope was taut before she removed a bulky square package from her carryall. Thankfully, the days of pounding in tent stakes and raising a shelter by hand were over. Van pulled the restrictor tab from the button that would keep the refuge from inflating by accident.

She sat the packet on the ground and pressed the control. Quickly taking a half step back, she barely avoided a massive blow to the head when the sides of the red lodging shot upward. Claws at the bottom erupted and struck deeply into the snow. Programmed for the frozen terrain, they penetrated far into the powder, held in place by the sheer weight. Heating elements built into the sides automatically kicked on as the shelter formed. Van couldn't hear them, but trusted it was true.

With the tent ready, Van glanced around but didn't see any of her people. In fact, she could hardly see anything. Her heart pounded in her ears, defeating the volume of the wind. Ice peppered her face making her blink away the pain and moisture. The urgency of the situation had prevented Van from donning her goggles or respirator and her face burned from the numbing onslaught. She turned her back to the wind and grabbed hold of the rope, thankful she'd put her gloves on while the platform rose from the underground base. She removed it from her waist and tied the end to a corner of the haven.

Her limbs felt frozen, sluggish, but she forced her body to continue moving. Cade was counting on her. Van grasped the rope between both hands. She could hardly feel the line and pulled against it so that the pressure reaffirmed her hold. She followed it back toward the platform and sank up to her hips in the powder. Without the snowshoes, locomotion was dangerous.

Van kept one hand wrapped around the rope and struggled to free her feet. Winded before she got out of the hole, she forced herself up. If she stopped now, she'd freeze to death and so would Cade. Alara would lose the heir apparent and, on a personal note, the whole idea of losing

Cade terrified her. Moving now by sheer willpower, Van made her way to the platform. The dome was up and the snow so heavy she didn't know if Cade could see her.

Panting in exhaustion, she dropped to her knees and pounded on the trinium with her fist. Weakened, she didn't have the energy to strike very hard but Admiral Meryan heard. The shield dropped and Van felt strong hands grab her by the shoulders of her jacket and yank her onto the disc. While she lay on her side trying to protect her face from the driving snow, Cade left her. When the dome reactivated, she felt like she'd transported to Nirvana. Suddenly, the wind and snow stopped. Van could hear her panting breaths and she felt chilled to the bone.

"Captain Swann, are you all right?"

Van wanted to say that of course she wasn't all right, but her teeth were chattering too hard. She tried to pull herself together and sat up. The black jacket she'd taken from the soldier was now solid white. "We have to reach the shelter."

"You need a minute."

"Let's finish this," Van shook her head. "It's warm in the tent and that's somewhere I want to be. I'm going to hold onto your waist, but you need to keep your hands in the pockets to keep from getting frostbite." Cade's captors had taken her equipment and all she wore for protection was Van's parka.

Sniffing loudly against a runny nose, she climbed to her feet. Cade helped her stand and then pulled the hood up over her head. "Your ears already look like they're frostbitten."

"Sorry, I didn't think to take that guy's helmet."

Cade kept quiet, walking over to stand by the controls. Van joined her as soon as she felt like she could do so without collapsing. She grabbed Cade around the waist, a little more sharply than required, but Cade still didn't respond.

"Do it."

Cade nodded and twisted the control. The dome dropped and the women had a fight on their hands to reach their lifeline. Van thought the wind had increased in the few minutes she'd been inside the protective circle. It was even more difficult since Cade couldn't assist, other than by walking to the edge of the dais. Van kept her arm around her and climbed down carefully to keep from sinking into the snow again. Already exposed to the subzero temperatures for too long, she couldn't afford to dally.

It felt like an eternity, but finally Van and Cade collapsed through the opening of the shelter. Activated for approximately ten minutes, the heating elements had yet to warm completely but Van felt the heat like a caress over her whole body. It increased quickly and condensation started filling the space. Groaning in aggravation, Van pushed up to her knees and reached for the small

controls near the hatch. The hydro-scrubber hummed to life and the steam slowly dissipated. All she wanted to do was sleep, but she still had responsibilities.

Admiral Meryan lay face down on the snow that had been blown in on the shelter's surface. Van knelt beside her and eased the woman onto her back, frowning when she appeared to be unconscious. She checked Cade's pulse and thought it felt sluggish. She needed to get Cade's body temperature up and the supplies in the pack would help with that.

Van left Cade where she was and delved back into the carryall. She retrieved a three-centimeter square package sealed in aluplastic and tore the parcel open with her teeth. In seconds, a padded, inflatable mattress filled the center of the chamber. Then she looked at Cade and took a deep breath. How was she supposed to lift a woman that stood almost a foot taller?

Not by standing there debating the issue.

She squatted down at Admiral Meryan's head, lifted her shoulders, and slipped her arms around the woman's upper chest. Van stood up, grunting under the weight. She pulled and pushed, managing to drag Cade toward the pad. The mattress struck Van at the back of her knees and she sat abruptly with Cade in her arms. Under other circumstances, it might be enjoyable but she was too tired. She heaved Cade to the side and stood awkwardly to retrieve her pack. She tossed the case onto the mat before she knelt on it and grabbed hold of her companion once again.

"Come on, Princess. You've got to wake up and help just a little."

Cade mumbled and tried to lift her head. Her eyes fluttered and her legs twitched. It wasn't much, but it provided enough traction for Van to pull her up from the freezing surface. Sweating from the exertion, she let go of the admiral and unfastened the Gothoan jacket. Situated inside a warm shelter, Van thought all Cade needed now was some rest. She sympathized with Cade's exhausted state, but had one more task to accomplish.

Van keyed her wrist com and spoke into it with a trembling voice. "Captain Swann to Commander Byra, respond."

She waited but no one answered. "Swann to *Gauntlet*."

Nothing. Perfect.

Admiral Meryan moaned and her eyes opened. She looked at Van and a slow smile curled her lips. "I guess we made it." She slurred a little, but at least she was awake.

"Glad to see you're back with me. How are you feeling?"

"Sore. Hungry. You?"

"Exhausted. And I need to pee."

Cade chuckled and the sound made the hair on Van's arms stand up. "Any ideas?"

Normally, Van wasn't much on modesty. Military life precluded such luxuries on many occasions and she'd long ago become inured. For some reason, she felt uncomfortable at the idea of urinating in front of Cade.

"You can't hold it forever, Captain. I promise not to peek."

"It's no problem." Van hoped she sounded casual. "Everyone has to eliminate. I suggest we use the farthest corner of the shelter for bodily functions. I can cut a flap from the floor in the back corner. The snow is deep enough for us to dispose of it." After all, they could hardly go out in a raging blizzard to take care of biological functions.

Cade nodded and looked around at the tent and the mattress. "I'm just glad you held onto your supplies."

"And that I packed everything it could hold," Van muttered.

"What's that?"

"Nothing. I'm going to dig our latrine."

"Sounds good. I'll lay out thermal blankets and see what you've packed for dinner."

Van retrieved her folding shovel and started walking to the rear of the tent. Large enough to hold four people, they'd be able to have some distance from the smelly trench. "Unfortunately, I only brought dried nutritional supplements but at least there's no split pea soup."

"Split pea soup? Yuck." Cade's response was distracted, her attention focused on the inside of Van's backpack.

"My sentiments exactly."

Van cut out a respectable hole from the shelter floor, dug the pit and then stabbed the tip of her spade into the ground, her intention to leave the tool there to cover their waste. Reluctantly, she removed her gloves and fumbled with the closure to her trousers. She kept her eyes on Admiral Meryan while she did her business, but Cade never looked in her direction. Relief made her feel a hundred times better and when she walked back over to the mattress she was in much better spirits.

"So, what are we having?"

"Turkey and dressing for you and a hot ham and cheese sandwich for me."

"Yum," Van said, hoping the sarcasm wasn't too obvious.

They ate and then Cade used the makeshift bathroom. She returned with a pensive look and sat on the edge of the pad.

"What is it?"

"I assume you've tried to contact the ship?"

Van frowned. Were they on that subject again?

"Of course I tried to contact *Gauntlet*. Why wouldn't I?"

Intent dark eyes fixated on hers. "I just asked a question, Captain Swann."

"You've been asking me the same question since I met you."

"And you never answered me," Cade returned with heat in her voice. "If you didn't call for help eight years ago when your squad was being killed off, why would I assume you'd call now?"

"I did call." Van finally shouted, losing patience with the same inquiry repeated over and over. "We all did, but no one ever answered. Finally, we realized that our transmissions weren't getting through or no one cared to respond. Now will you leave me alone about it?"

Cade watched her silently for a moment. "Why didn't you tell me that when I asked you before?"

She couldn't look at Cade and picked absently at the edge of one of the thermal blankets. "Because talking about what happened...it makes me remember. That thing that grabbed you? That big hairy thing that looks like an Earth yeti on steroids? A bunch of those...Phantoms...fed on our dead. Sometimes they carried off whole bodies. Sometimes they tore off an arm or a leg and ran away with it like it was some kind of bloody club."

Van jerked slightly when Cade's hand slipped around the back of her neck. She leaned into the contact, needing the silent support.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know. I never read any reports about these Phantoms of yours."

"There wasn't any report," Van admitted softly. "Who would have believed me, and it didn't matter anyway. They're carrion eaters, like a red-legged buzzard. The important details concerned the Gothoan rebels. Speaking of Gothoans..." Van raised her head and found sympathy in the dark eyes.

"I know, I recognized the uniforms, too." Cade shrugged. "I never really expected them to just go away. However, there's nothing we can do about it right now. But about those Phantoms..." Cade shuddered and took on a haunted expression. "I wish you'd mentioned them

before. You were wrong not to and as a result our teams weren't as prepared as they should have been."

Van nodded slowly. "You're right. I guess it just happened so long ago that I wanted to believe it wasn't as bad as I remembered." She snorted in disgust. "And there I was on the jump ship lecturing you about giving your people all the information in your possession."

"As soon as this storm blows itself out, we'll transport back to the flagship and inform headquarters of everything we've found."

Cade didn't mention the creatures again and Van figured she'd bring it up at the most annoying time just so she could rub it in her face. "And in the meantime?"

"I suggest we get some sleep." Her tone seemed a little frosty.

Tension fled from her when Van realized Cade wasn't going to quiz her further and the thought of sleep sounded like heaven. "I think that is a phenomenal idea, but first I'd like to check your injuries."

"You mean from where that Phantom picked me up on the ridge? I'm pretty sure those are minor, Captain. They sting a little, where the claws pricked my skin, but they don't really hurt anymore."

"Then why did you lose consciousness? Lieutenant Argante told me you were knocked out when they attacked."

"I think I must have hit my head on something." Cade pushed the hair away at her temple and Van saw a goose egg with a cut in the center.

"All right," she relented. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure. Now let's get some rest."

Both women removed their boots but left their socks on. They climbed beneath the thermal blanket and relaxed, but something still bothered Van. What if Cade's body temperature dropped to dangerous levels while they lay unconscious?

"Do you think we should share body heat?" She felt Cade tense.

"I think we're fine for now, Captain."

"Right."

Chapter Seven

VAN SNUGGLED AGAINST the warm body. Soft curves pressed against her and full breasts pillowed her head. In the comfort of shared heat, she reveled in the feel of long arms wrapped around her. Only partially awake, she turned her face into the fullness and pressed her lips against a hard breastbone and then rubbed a cheek against the erect nipple she found waiting. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she realized the identity of her companion but it didn't fully register.

Unbuttoned during the night, the thick coat didn't present an impediment, only the clothing that remained prevented unlimited access.

Cade moaned softly and her arms tightened, pulling Van tighter against her body. Instinct drove them, the biological imperative to connect to another person. Lips met briefly and then separated as Van moved to the juncture of neck and shoulder. There she drew tender flesh between her teeth and sucked softly. Cade arched into her, hissing in arousal. Hips thrust upward and one leg clamped against Van's thigh. The sensations exploding through her mind prevented Van from realizing the implications of her actions. Caressing over valleys and planes of muscle and sinew, she trailed a path to the fastening of Cade's trousers. Rather than stop her, Cade turned her head and pressed their lips together again. Van didn't mind that she kept her mouth closed, her hormones focused on another part of Cade's anatomy.

Deft fingers parted the buttons and pulled aside the Velcro flap before eagerly lowering the zipper. In one swift move, she released the tab and pushed her hand under the offending cloth only to encounter another layer. Frustrated by the extra barrier, Van tightened one arm around Cade's shoulders and hugged her close, her eyes tightly shut. For a moment, she couldn't find the top of the lace covering but then her fingers slipped under the hem and she found crisp curls and moist heat.

Cade sighed but didn't cry out. Her knees rose slightly and she allowed Van to touch her. When Van slipped inside, she felt Cade counter her movement and push back against her.

So wet.

A single stroke of her thumb and Cade tensed, her arms tightening convulsively. The spicy scent of her body was even stronger than Van remembered from their encounter in Cade's office, bringing home to her exactly who she lay with. Fully awake, her eyes widened but she didn't pull away. She could hear Cade's heart begin to slow and then strong fingers grasped the back of her neck, stroking gently.

Van felt herself twitch and gasped against the tingling surge in her midsection. She wanted to continue this, wanted to let Cade stroke her to completion. Every atom of her not-so-celibate being cried out for her to do precisely that, but she couldn't. It had nothing to do with Cade's

rank. Van didn't know why, but part of her instinctively thought Cade deserved better. Slowly, Van began to pull away, already aching to draw Cade back into her arms. Her wrist com abruptly activated, nicely saving her from making a complete idiot of herself.

"Commander Bosk to Captain Swann. Please respond."

She sat up carefully, trying to maintain body heat yet put a respectable distance between them. "I'm here Commander and I have Admiral Meryan."

Boy, did she.

"She's all right. What's your status?"

"Everything's fine on this end, ma'am. We bugged out right before the storm hit. The only ones still on the surface are your team, the admiral, and Lieutenant Argante."

"Argante? Wasn't he supposed to be with you?" Van shared a concerned look with Cade.

"Long story, Captain."

"Too bad we don't have time for it. Have you contacted the rest of my team? We were separated by the blizzard."

"We're tracking Commander Byra and Chief Yosef's life signs approximately one click west of your position and a jump ship is in route. So far, there's no sign of Lieutenant Heliosius or Lieutenant Argante."

"Keep looking. Swann out."

She couldn't look at Cade. Both sat quietly on the mat and Van didn't have the guts to look in the woman's eyes. What would she find if she did? Disappointment that she'd take advantage of someone while they slept? Maybe Cade found it funny that the pretentious Captain Swann acted so uncomfortable and childish over something as simple and natural as sex.

Cade cleared her throat, preparing to speak and it was the catalyst Van needed to get moving. "That ship will be here any minute, Admiral. We should get packed up and ready so we can help locate the others."

"Captain Swann."

"You can use the head first, if you want." Van scooted to the edge of their pad, her knees folded to prevent putting her feet in the melted puddles caused by the snow while she reached for her boots.

Admiral Meryan tried again. "Captain..."

"We'll need to get you checked out in sickbay..."

"Vanessa."

Van's teeth clicked together and she finally looked at Cade, worried what she might find. "Sorry. I tend to babble when I get nervous. I assume you want to talk about what happened."

"No. I don't. There's nothing to talk about." She didn't sound upset, only calm and matter of fact.

"But, we..."

"Yes. We did. Pass me my boots."

She did as requested, still not quite sure how to behave. Cade spoke as she dressed. "Look, I know you're waiting for the other shoe to drop, but there isn't one. What happened between us is just one of those things. It's only natural really, considering what we've been through lately."

"No big deal, huh?" Van asked, a little hurt by the cavalier attitude but not quite sure why. "At least I don't have to worry about any more falling footwear."

Cade snorted and stood up.

"I didn't say it wasn't a big deal. I certainly don't go around having sex with my officers after a harrowing ordeal. In fact, it's happened exactly once. Now. But, I'm not going to beat myself up over it and neither should you."

Just one of those things, Van thought, like drinking a beer or having dinner. She supposed anyone would do in a pinch. After all, it was only natural. Van guessed it could be worse. Some women, a person just wanted to sleep with and have a good time and next thing they knew, they woke up married.

"Glad I didn't get stuck with Paul for a tent mate."

A low, husky chuckle emanated from her companion. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Van started to say that Cade could take it any way she wanted. As a matter of fact, she could shove it up her ass. She clenched her teeth shut in time to avoid speaking out and stood abruptly, striding across the tent to retrieve her pack.

Cade stripped the thermal blankets from the pad and went about packing up without any indication that something intimate had occurred. Van remembered how silent she was while they lay together, even through her orgasm. Lost in the moment, she'd considered the quiet control arousing. Now she found it unnerving. Did this woman ever really let go?

VAN AVOIDED CADE as much as she could after returning to the ship, a task made difficult considering the search for missing crew members. Both Heliosius and Argante were still missing though the skies over Tokar remained clear after the blizzard passed, offering little signal interference. She watched from the rear of the bridge while *Gauntlet's* commander coordinated the movements of three heavily armed search teams as they scoured the surface. After two hours, Van grew tired of holding up the bulkhead.

She pushed away from the wall with her shoulder and headed for a nearby empty chair. Cade didn't even glance her way and Van sighed in exhaustion as she prepared to sit. A few short hours sleeping in Cade's arms weren't enough for her to recuperate from their underground exploits. Just as her butt was about to make contact with the seat cushion, communications sputtered to life.

"Lieutenant Rex to *Gauntlet*."

"Go ahead," Cade answered quickly.

"Bad news, ma'am. We just found Heliosius. He never made it to shelter. I put a tracer on his body and he's ready for transport to the ship's morgue."

Van watched as the admiral closed her eyes for a moment. In that instant, grief clearly etched Cade's face. She looked weary beyond words. It didn't last long, but left Van with the knowledge that Cade cared deeply for her crew.

"Understood. Have you found any signs of Lieutenant Argante?"

"Not yet, but we'll keep looking."

"Negative. You've been out long enough. Come back to the ship and warm up. Second squad will relieve you."

"Copy that."

Commander Bosk leaned over to his commanding officer. He spoke quietly so the bridge crew couldn't hear, but Van sat closer and overheard every word.

"Cade, you're tired. Go get some sleep. I'll let you know as soon as they find anything."

She looked as if she might argue but after a slight hesitation, Cade stood. "You have the bridge, Commander."

"Aye, Admiral."

Cade walked toward the exit. She stopped before the automatic doors parted. When she looked at Van, her eyes were lifeless and held no warmth. It was difficult to believe she was the same woman Van had slept with that morning.

"Captain Swann, come with me."

Silently, Van fell into step beside her. They took the ship's lift to deck three, where both their quarters were. Cade led her to the door and Van wondered what she had in mind. Neither had spoken a word, yet Cade lingered.

"Um, do you want to come inside?"

Cade nodded and swallowed hard. She seemed uncomfortable and Van wondered if there weren't some repercussions to their intimacy after all. She entered her quarters, sensing Cade's presence close behind.

"Have a seat."

Van walked over to the small chiller in the cooking area. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Coffee?"

Stopping with her hand on the chiller door, Van looked over at her in surprise. "Really? Won't that keep you awake?"

Taking a deep breath, Cade swiped a hand over her eyes. Then she sat forward on the edge of the sofa, hands dangling between her knees. "Yeah, you're probably right. How about some juice?"

Retrieving two bottles of erium juice, she passed one to Cade and sat next to her on the sofa. For a long while, they sipped the berry juice without speaking. Van concentrated on the taste of her drink. It reminded her of a mix between orange and papaya. Yet as much as she tried not to second-guess the commander's purpose for sitting in her quarters, she wished she'd get on with it. Just when the tension mounted to the point where Van thought she'd puke, Cade broke the silence.

"My apologies, Captain. I know how tired you must be and I've basically shanghaied your quarters. I should go." Cade placed her drink on the low table in front of the sofa and started to stand.

"Wait." Van quickly placed a hand on her leg to keep her from leaving. Then she snatched it back as if she'd burned her fingers. "Please, whatever it is, just say it."

The uncomfortable expression was back. Finally, Cade relented. "I realized after we returned that I hadn't thanked you for saving my life."

Van blinked. "That's it? All this craziness because you forgot to say thanks?"

Fury flashed hot and fast. She was still miffed about Cade's cavalier attitude toward their earlier encounter and this was icing on the cake. Van was always the one who walked away; she dictated what happened after she had sex with someone. Cade acted like it meant nothing and now she behaved as though apologizing was beneath her.

"Well let me save you the trouble. I was doing my duty so don't worry about it. Now if you don't mind, I'd really like to take a shower and get some sleep."

"You're walking the line of insubordination, Captain." Now Cade was clearly angry. She stood so that she towered over Van.

Van stood as well, taking one long stride until she stopped centimeters from Cade's face. "You didn't feel that way when I was fucking you, Admiral." Van's stress on the final word intentionally communicated her disgust.

A bewildered expression crossed Cade's face. "Is that what this is about? You're disappointed that I didn't attach myself to you at the hip?"

"No, of course not." She tried to sound confident, but suddenly she wasn't so sure.

The confused expression gave way to amusement and Van suddenly considered she'd lost control of the situation. Was she delusional to think she ever had it to begin with?

"I'm not clingy. I've slept with plenty of women and no one has ever accused me of that. You're no different."

"Right." Cade pressed her lips together trying to hide a smile, but she couldn't douse the twinkle in her black eyes. "So why are you acting like a jilted girlfriend?"

The question left her scrambling for a plausible response. Accustomed to thinking on her feet, she found herself grasping at straws.

"I'm just...tired."

"Really?" Admiral Meryan clearly didn't believe her. She stared into Van's eyes, daring her to confirm the lie.

She couldn't actually say it again, but nodded obstinately.

"Well, then, I should let you rest." Cade unfolded her arms and sauntered over to the exit. She stopped there and looked back over her shoulder. "Good night, Captain."

Gone before she could respond, Van wasn't sure she could have anyway. The wish goodnight sounded like a singsong, teasing remark intended to titillate. That was definitely the result.

Images from that morning came rushing back. Every taste, moan, and sensation flooded her memory. Van gasped and a light sheen of sweat broke out over her skin. For long agonizing moments, she could feel Cade's firm softness in her arms.

Stop it, Van told herself. She was just annoyed because Cade walked away before Van could. Cade Meryan wasn't any different than the others.

Wiping the moisture from her upper lip, Van noticed Cade's drink sitting on the table. Condensation covered the aluplastic and she pictured full lips sealed around the opening. She picked it up and stared at the container for a while. Would it be completely juvenile if she put her mouth where Cade's lips had rested such a short time ago?

Van ignored the temptation and walked over to the windows made of transparent flerovium crystal. She stared out at fixed points of light visible from her quarters. Stars, planets, suns. The sight never failed to help her feel centered. She desperately needed that right now. Cade Meryan had a way of throwing her off her stride. Calling her on her childish behavior was just one example. At least she didn't have to worry about that for very much longer. With the completion of their mission, she anticipated *Gauntlet* would head for the Andromeda system as soon as they found their other missing member. Once that happened, she could put Cade out of her mind and concentrate on her primary objective.

Falcon facilitated that mission, leaving her the freedom to patrol where necessary to accomplish that goal. Van didn't know if the powers that be would allow her to command another vessel considering the circumstances, but she still had work to do. Uncrossing her arms, Van headed for the bath. She didn't want to think about Cade anymore. She wanted a shower and eight uninterrupted hours of sleep.

"Ensign Mercer to Captain Swann."

Van cringed, but could hardly ignore the hail from the communications officer. "Go ahead."

"Ma'am, you have an incoming communiqué from Psmanth, Coalition Headquarters."

"Understood. Put it through to my quarters on a secure channel."

"Right away, ma'am."

Van spoke quickly before the young man could close the channel. "Any word on Lieutenant Argante?"

"Second squad found him a few minutes ago, Captain. He took shelter in a cave just before the blizzard hit. He sustained a deep cut in his left thigh falling down a fissure, but other than that the infirmary reports he's okay."

"That's great news. Go ahead and put the call through."

"Yes, ma'am."

Van sat wearily in front of the computer interface. She started in surprise when Saral Barab appeared on the screen. "Ma'am."

"Sorry to catch you off guard, Captain." Her midnight eyes glittered in the same way Cade's did. "I just wanted to say thank you for bringing my cousin back safely. I see her confidence in you wasn't misplaced after all."

"Just doing my duty, Admiral. Err, uh, that is to say, it was my pleasure ma'am." Van felt her face burn, thinking again about the encounter with Cade.

Fortunately, Admiral Barab didn't seem to think anything of the comment. She laughed and replied, "I understand completely. Oh, by the way, I wanted to inform you that the High Queen Dorma intends to hold a banquet in your honor."

"That's really not necessary," Van assured her. She wasn't much for pomp and ceremony and felt even more uncomfortable than she had before.

"You're not going to talk her out of it. Besides, it was my idea."

Admiral Barab suddenly terminated the communication channel and Van sat staring at a dark screen. Were all the women in the Meryan clan so abrupt?

Van wasn't happy. This banquet was going to delay them even more. Commodore Grier was not going to approve.

Chapter Eight

VAN SAT IN the chair directly in front of Cade's desk. At the moment, it was just the two of them and she had the admiral's undivided attention. Too bad Cade couldn't think about anything but the debriefing. Van could think of other things they could be doing together, things that involved rolling around that very narrow bed in her quarters. Instead, they were here discussing the attendance of a banquet on Alara after dropping off the balance of *Falcon's* crew at Coalition Headquarters.

"Captain?"

"Hmm?"

"Captain Swann, are you listening to me?"

"Of course, Admiral. What else would I be doing?"

Cade didn't look like she believed her, but let the matter drop. "I asked what your take on Lieutenant Argante is. Why do you think he disobeyed orders like that?"

Van hated to speculate about the motives of another officer, especially one who could face a court martial for his actions. She cleared her throat and sat up a little straighter. "Have you asked him?"

"Yes, but all he'll say is that he takes full responsibility for his actions. He won't tell me why he went off on Tokar alone."

Thinking back over the whole set up, the answer seemed pretty obvious to Van. "He's embarrassed."

"About what?"

She could see she'd caught Cade off guard and wanted to shake her head. The woman was brilliant and beautiful, but she didn't read people very well. "I think the lieutenant thought he'd go after you and bring you back to *Gauntlet* all by himself. I think he wanted to prove that you could trust him to come after you no matter what the cost."

Cade sat back in her chair, stupefied by the possibility. "What makes you say that?"

"He was really upset when I wouldn't let him join the rescue team, but I couldn't take the chance."

"Because he froze during the initial attack?"

"Exactly." Van shrugged. "He felt responsible for what happened to you and was determined to make it right."

"Then why doesn't he just tell me that?"

Van snorted. "That one's easy. Male pride."

"Of all the ridiculous..."

"Yeah, but I think that's it in a nutshell. Let me ask you this, are you going to court martial him?"

Cade stood and paced over to a small portal. She stared out into space at the passing stars and Van took the opportunity to look at her. The woman was lean, strong and tall, everything Van wasn't. She had her short dark hair combed back toward the center of her neck and it curled a little there, just above her collar. The thickness made Van want to run her fingers through the midnight locks.

"I should," Cade finally answered, drawing Van's attention back to the topic at hand. "Running off like that cost us a lot of time in reporting back to HQ so we could look for him."

Van chose not to point out that they had to look for the missing Lieutenant Heliosius anyway. Cade had enough on her mind and mentioning the glaringly obvious wouldn't help the situation. "But you won't?"

"No. I won't." Cade turned back around, meeting her eyes. Van tried not to drown in the inky depths. "But he's still going to receive one hell of a reprimand in his permanent record."

"He should. He should also consider himself very lucky."

Cade stood only a few feet away, forcing Van to look up at her. The view did strange things to her insides and Van felt her mouth go dry. Why couldn't she be around Admiral Meryan without feeling as if the universe had tilted on its axis?

"Bosk to Admiral Meryan," the executive officer hailed from his place on the bridge.

Cade tilted her head slightly to project her voice toward the speaker in the top of the room. It wasn't necessary, but it was something all military personnel did. Van felt a little better knowing she was just as Human as the rest of them. Sometimes Cade seemed larger than life.

"Go ahead, Commander."

"We're closing in on the Lantass Asteroid Belt. Estimated time of arrival is ten minutes."

"Understood, shut down fusion engines in five minutes and take us the rest of the way in on sublight. Target orbital position three and have all department heads standing by to go over their areas. I want everything in perfect working order as soon as the engines cool down. Final jump to Psmanth will be twenty-four hours from time of initial orbit."

"Yes, ma'am."

The orders were standard procedure for any vessel flying an extended mission. Fusion engines couldn't function indefinitely without a cool down period and Lantass Asteroid field was the designated stopping point. Even the expansion teams on assignment to terra-form Venus stopped here, though they also observed a secondary stopping depot before completing the final jump to Earth.

Cade poured herself a cup of coffee from the silver set on her desk and took a sip before she offered Van a drink. When she declined, Cade asked, "Care to join me on the bridge?"

It wasn't really a request since Van wasn't about to stay in the admiral's office without her. She stood without answering before she realized how polite Cade was trying to be. Two nights ago, she'd taunted Van about her reaction to their intimacy, and indeed, she could see signs of the humor in her dark eyes even today. Yet, Cade maintained a professional decorum today that

bordered on stilted. Van didn't really have time to wonder about it though as she followed her onto the bridge.

Van sat to her left in a subordinate command chair. She was close enough to smell Cade's skin and felt her heartbeat pick up slightly. She glanced at her from the corner of her eye, but Cade's gaze remained firmly fixed on the forward viewport. Van frowned and looked away. She found looking upon broken chunks of dead rock and various unimpressive minerals left over from failed planets beyond boring. The only good thing about the asteroids was the extensive trinium mines contained on some of the largest formations.

Since that morning on Tokar, she couldn't seem to keep her mind on business around this woman. Even Paul noticed her distracted air and called her on it yesterday in the mess hall. It just seemed that all she could think about was the softness of Cade's lips. She remembered their taste and how they felt pressed against her own. Sometimes, Van allowed the memory to become a fantasy. However, in the fantasy, Cade's mouth opened when she kissed her. It was open, her tongue softly stroking inside Van's mouth.

A surge of molten arousal shot through her and Van took a deep but quiet breath, trying to suppress her surging hormones. It was hard since she sat right next to the object of her fantasies, but Van had a reputation to protect.

"Closing in on Lantass," the young Thuban at the helm reported. Van barely heard him.

Van rationalized her physical reaction as normal because she hadn't gotten a chance to get Cade out of her system. Seriously, Cade hadn't even touched her. It was only natural that Van would still be wound up.

"Engage sublight and prepare to orbit," Cade ordered. "Bring up the asteroid field on the viewer."

Her husky voice wrapped around Van's insides and squeezed. She felt moisture pool between her legs and she shifted slightly. Gods, that voice should be bottled and sold on Hokay. Talk about receiving pleasure vicariously. Merchants on the pleasure planet could make a killing.

"You could show a little more enthusiasm, Captain. Where would the fleet be without material for new ships?"

"I've seen it before."

Cade didn't say anything but Van felt her disappointment. Rather than worry about it, she kept her eyes pinned on the viewer but didn't really see anything. Every free second her mind wasn't on something important, she remembered Cade's kisses.

Cade gasped and Van felt it from nipples to groin.

It took a second for her to realize that there was something wrong. Cade grabbed the chair arms and lunged to her feet, her gaze pinned directly ahead. Van frowned and focused on the viewport. It looked like tiny rocks hurtling toward the ship, growing in size as they closed the distance. But rocks didn't aim directly at a ship.

"Shields." Admiral Meryan shouted. "Evasive maneuvers."

Gauntlet rocked under the assault from the small enemy spacecraft, but the shields held. Van looked toward Cade for orders.

"I assume you've been briefed on how to fly the new Viper class fighters?"

"Briefly."

Cade nodded once. "I won't keep you then. Take command of Blue squad, Bosk will handle Red."

Neither wasted time as they headed toward the ship's lift. Bosk keyed his communicator to ship-wide and announced, "Red and Blue fighter squads report to the hangar deck on the double."

For the first time in days, Van didn't think about Cade. Adrenaline sang in her veins as the lift plummeted down eight decks into the belly of the Coalition's flagship. Already, she was planning strategies and maneuvers. She didn't know Cade's pilots, but all fighters practiced the same moves. She just hoped she got a seasoned team. Then again, the Coalition wouldn't assign them to *Gauntlet* unless they knew what they were doing.

The lift stopped. Van and Uther sprinted toward the fighter craft, a team already standing by to prep them for flight. A young woman met her with a pressurized flight suit while someone else jammed a helmet on her head. After a quick radio check, the woman, Fletcher according to her name patch, connected the helmet to the bulky suit. Then she pointed to a nearby fighter. Van nodded and started up a ladder someone had pushed to the craft's side.

"Who's my wingman?"

"That'd be me, ma'am," a male voice responded. "Lieutenant James Holden, but you can call me Raptor, Blue Leader."

Van glanced over as she lowered herself into the cockpit and waved at the pilot to her right. She couldn't see his face, but it didn't matter as long as he covered her well. "Stay on tight, Lieutenant."

"Like your shadow."

She ran through the start-up list quickly, bypassing many systems checks due to the emergency situation. Van felt the roar of the engine and released a nervous breath when the

heads-up display immediately activated. On one side, atmospheric readouts popped into view along with the condition of all vital systems. She felt pressure building around her inside the cockpit, cushioning her from dangerous maneuvers. Everything was in the green for the moment. The single-man cockpit hugged her body, embracing her in a way that would ensure stability during any quick maneuvering.

"Blue Leader ready," She reported, twisting the controls on the front of her O2 pack.

"Blue Two, good to go."

Each squad consisted of eight fighters paired in groups of two. The rest of her squad checked in followed closely by Bosk's team. In less than three minutes, *Gauntlet's* deadly attack forces were set.

"Bosk, Red Leader, take point," Van commanded.

"Understood."

The hangar deck opened, showing the blackness of space. From the aft section of the flagship, they couldn't see any targets but that would quickly change. At the exit, a force field shimmered. The barrier protected the fighter bay from explosive decompression and the personnel from the vacuum of space. Van's mind and body abruptly settled, focused on the singular purpose to destroy the enemy before they could inflict damage on the ship or harm the crew. She didn't know who the attackers were, nor did she care.

"Red Leader to the bridge, we're prepared to engage."

"Understood, Red Leader. You're clear to launch. Happy hunting."

Van listened to the exchange absently; her attention focused more on the timbre of Cade's voice. There was no doubt that the woman's body was a work of art; strong, lean and muscular in all the right places. She could picture Cade as she stretched, her arms reaching overhead and outlining the vee shape of her upper torso as it narrowed at her waist before flaring gently at the hips. The voice only completed the picture, husky and slightly breathless. It was the sort to capture the attention of anyone scanning channels that would make them pause, hoping to hear more.

Those tones washed over her, reminding her exactly why this particular engagement was so important. She'd do anything to keep Cade safe and by extension, anyone and anything important to her. Van didn't want to think about why she felt that way, so she forced herself back to the present. Commander Bosk launched his vessel with the balance of his squad close on his tail. As soon as they were clear, it was her turn.

Rolling forward toward the force field, she felt excitement humming in her veins. "Blue squad all set, bridge. Ready to kick ass and take names."

"Acknowledged, Captain. Enemy spacecraft are closing at one thousand kilometers. Don't have too much fun and I expect you to come back in one piece."

That sounded like a personal request. Van's heart thumped against her ribs but it didn't have anything to do with the upcoming battle. Then she thought she was just imagining things.

"Keep the coffee hot."

Van's body slammed back against the seat as she hit the throttle. The inside of *Gauntlet's* hangar was a condensed, transitory blur through the full-face visor. Then she was free of the ship, flying through the star-studded blackness from the aft port of the mother ship. Hauling back on the yoke, Van directed her vessel perpendicular to *Gauntlet's* hull. She screamed upward into the darkness, her indicator panel showing that the other pilots in her squad were tight behind her. Once clear of the flagship, she pulled back on the stick again until she was flying belly up. Van righted the ship and sighted the enemy vessels fast approaching.

Commander Bosk and his crew were already tearing into the oncoming craft. Ruby laser blasts interspersed with titanium projectile rounds filled with Octanitrocubane, commonly known as octanitro. The compound consisted of a cube-shaped molecule of eight carbon atoms with nitro, groups of oxygen and nitrogen attached to each carbon. It didn't require an external oxygen source to decompose, meaning that it could blow up in every environment, including water and the vacuum of space. Developed originally in the 21st century, the military had of course tweaked it until it was the most powerful explosive known. Octanitro rounds weakened and then penetrated the attacking vessels' shields.

Flying straight into the fray, Van depressed the trigger on her plasma weapon and watched the beam punch through into an oncoming ship. The vessel exploded and she witnessed a brief flare of orange and yellow as argon inside the vessel ignited, triggering a secondary explosion and leaving a green wake.

"Got one on your five o'clock, Blue Leader."

"On it, Raptor."

Van's instrument panel lit up, indicating someone had acquired a lock. She rolled right and the lights faded. Then she stepped on the speed brakes and felt the straps on her seat restraints dig into her body even through the pressure suit. The enemy spacecraft wasn't prepared for the maneuver and shot past her. It was so close Van could imagine she saw the surprised look on the alien fighter's face. As soon as it screamed past, she opened up with the Octanitro rounds.

"Good shooting." Raptor shouted over the comm channel as the craft disintegrated.

Van was too busy to respond. Straight ahead, she saw three enemy craft closing in on a member of her squad. She shot off toward them, already planning her strategy.

Chapter Nine

CADE WATCHED THE fight and tried not to drum her fingers nervously on the arm of her chair. So far, Red and Blue Squads had taken out all but four of the enemy ships. It hadn't escaped her notice that the vessels bore no marks declaring loyalty to any planet or government, which meant they were pirates. That didn't make any sense. Bandits generally cobbled ships together from spare parts or battered older vessels refitted until space worthy. These were shiny new, but where would rebels get the kind of money it took for a fleet of such craft?

However, Cade disregarded all of that as irrelevant for the moment as her eyes remained glued to Blue Squad's lead vessel. She held her breath yet again as Van threw her ship into barrel rolls so tight she could imagine the screech of straining metal. Then she'd alternately brake and accelerate so quickly it was hard to keep her in sight amid the others. She flew with her hair on fire. When the last two vessels turned tail and ran, she heard Swann order *Gauntlet's* squads back to homeport.

Cade took her first easy breath when Van turned, bringing up the rear. Fortunately, she had lots of practice at appearing cool and felt confident the bridge crew hadn't noticed her trepidation. Even though she'd given the order for the dashing captain to leap into action, it hadn't been easy and she regretted it. Cade was career military. She'd stared down the barrel of alien weapons more than once. She hadn't lived this long by deluding herself. She cared a lot more for Van Swann than she should, definitely more than an admiral should for a subordinate officer on her ship. Of course, she did not intend to let Van know that. It could never go anywhere. Van was a typical cocky young officer who probably had a woman in every spaceport.

That still didn't keep Cade from wanting to be with her. She wanted to know everything like, what was her favorite color? Had she ever thought of settling down or dating anyone seriously? Once she dropped Van off at Alara, Cade could forget about her. Right now, she'd be happy if Van just made it safely back aboard.

"*Gauntlet*, prepare the tag lines. We're coming home."

"Understood, Commander Bosk. Well done."

One at a time, Cade watched as the fighters returned to the ship. Four *Gauntlet* fighters were heavily damaged, but she hadn't lost anyone. The other side couldn't say the same.

By tradition, the leaders of each squad were the last ones to land. Van was six thousand kilometers behind her executive officer when a pirate vessel came out of nowhere. It smoked and

belched gas out into space, but it kept on coming. Focused on her approach, Captain Swann didn't see the threat.

Cade didn't even think about her actions. She thumbed the control switch on her panel, breaking into the squad's air traffic. "Van, you've got one on your tail." Even as she said it, she knew Swann was too close to *Gauntlet* to turn away and engage.

"Quan, take that pirate out." Cade wanted to shout the order to the bridge tactical officer and barely refrained.

The Mirachan tactical officer, a nineteen-year military veteran, didn't hesitate. He fired *Gauntlet's* forward torpedo bay. Everything happened in slow motion after that. Cade's mouth went dry, her tongue cleaving to the roof of her mouth. She watched the octanitro round speed toward the pirate vessel at the same time that it released its own deadly payload. The ordnance impacted the craft and the shockwave quickly reached out to slap the Coalition's flagship. Cade instinctively shifted her weight, staying on her feet with her eyes pinned to the space encounter.

A beam of ruby laser fire shot from the fighter a split second before Quan hit his mark. The weapon sliced cleanly across the rear engine ports of Van's ship. The engines erupted into a fireball, tossing the craft end over end as the concussion pitched it toward *Gauntlet*.

"I'll be in the hangar deck," Cade said quickly. "Quan, you have the bridge."

She didn't wait for a response, nor did she look back. Cade dove into the lift and keyed in her command code to force the conveyance to emergency speeds. It took seconds for the car to drop through the belly of the ship, but that was all it took to remember. After Van made love to her on Tokar's surface, a shy self-conscious expression had crossed her face. She'd looked almost relieved when Bosk interrupted before Cade could reciprocate. That expression had pierced Cade's armor, rendering a chance encounter a wealth of emotional resonance. Saral had accused her of having a crush on the diminutive captain, but it was that one unguarded moment that captured her heart. She couldn't tell Van. Her feelings would only make her uncomfortable, but she was damned if she was going to stay on the bridge when Van was in trouble.

Cade was out of the lift, sprinting toward the main hangar before the doors finished opening properly. Aware of the startled looks as crew members darted out of her way, she ignored them and raced into chaos. The fighter still burned. Too hot to approach, Van remained pinned inside the cockpit while emergency crews worked frantically to put out the blaze. All eyes on the flaming spectacle, no one noticed as Admiral Meryan stepped close enough to cringe from the heat. She coughed just as someone shouted to increase the ventilation.

Finally, they extinguished the fire and crews wearing padded, fire-retardant gear hurried toward the cockpit. In seconds, it was open but the ship was so damaged the cockpit hatch disengaged and clattered noisily to the ground. Cade felt dizzy with relief when she saw Van moving around. Flight techs dragged her out of the seat and quickly started stripping the pressure suit and helmet, searching for injuries.

"I'm fine, damn it. Did we get the bastard?"

Cade grinned and walked toward the captain, blinking back the tears in her eyes. If anyone asked, she'd blame it on the acrid smoke still rising from the remains of the fighter. With her fears calmed, she felt her heartbeat start to return to normal. Van didn't seem to have a scratch on her.

She cleared the emotion from her throat. "Captain, do you realize how expensive those fighters are?"

Green eyes swiveled in her direction and Cade thought she looked confused. She frowned when she realized Van appeared pale and unstable on her feet. "S...sorry bout that, Admiral. Did you see? Did you notice how new their ships were? They must be organized." Van gulped. Her words slurred a little and she reached up to push the hair back from her forehead.

"I noticed. Why don't we worry about that later? I think we need to have you checked out by medical."

"Why is it so hot in here?"

Cade was ready when Van slumped toward the floor, almost unconscious on her feet. Scooping her up in her arms, Cade ordered, "Advise the infirmary we're on the way."

Van's arm slid around her shoulders, holding tight. She was close enough Cade could feel her breath in her ear. "I think I just did something involuntary...and messy."

Cade bit her lip to keep from chuckling. Many people did lose control of their bodily functions after a trauma, but Van was clean. Besides, Van was too strong for that. Cade ignored the curious looks directed her way as she walked through the ship toward the medical bay, completely unconcerned.

VAN PULLED HER tunic on over the white T-shirt, tugging at the hem to encourage a proper fit. She didn't mind wearing her Coalition dress uniform to the banquet since it resolved the problem of exactly what to wear. High Queen Dorma intended to give her a medal for saving the crown princess's life so it didn't take a super genius to realize military dress was the order of the day. The glint of shiny and colorful decorations almost kept her mind off Cade Meryan. Almost.

Buttoning up the stiff, grey jacket, Van frowned, wondering again why the admiral had carried her through the bowels of her ship after she crash-landed on the hangar deck. Cade could have ordered anyone else to convey her to medical, but she didn't. She never had explained why, either. She just dropped Van off and left.

Come to think of it, she'd pretty much avoided Van after that. When Van regained consciousness, the doctor released her to her quarters and said Cade would be in touch. She wasn't. After that, Van spent the rest of the time on *Gauntlet* working out in the ship's gym and

hanging out in her quarters. She'd only seen Cade once since then, just as the crew exited at Psmanth. Van could have stayed in her quarters then, but she wanted to wish her crew a pleasant shore leave even though she had to return to Alara for the awards ceremony. Cade never looked her way as she smiled and thanked the departing crew members for their service. Although it had only been a little over a week since the incident, Cade's distance still stung.

Paul was there. Van told him to be ready for her return with a new ship, but he surprised her by saying he wouldn't miss the ceremony for anything. He wanted to see her add more shiny objects to her dress uniform. Van couldn't have cared less about the ceremony. She had plenty of medals.

At least she got a nice room in the palace out of the deal.

Hair still wet from the shower, Van shook her head and finished buttoning her jacket. The room's comm system beeped to notify her of an incoming communiqué. She thought it was Paul checking to see that she was still going to show up.

"Computer, receive transmission, full audio and visual."

Van stepped in front of the monitor display with a grin, but the smart remark died on her lips. Reflexively, she looked around but they were completely alone unless the High Queen had a habit of bugging her guests. Still, she frowned in concern.

"Commodore Grier, what are you doing contacting me here?"

"Careful, Swann. You might give me the impression that you're avoiding me."

A smile tugged at the corners of narrow pink lips and laser blue eyes bored into Van's even over the long distance connection. Grier's blonde hair and rosy cheeks made her look like the girl next door, but Van had it on good authority that Erika Grier was one of the Coalition's most ruthless intelligence operatives at one time. Now, she filled the bill as Van's contact and direct supervisor but that didn't mean she was any less dangerous.

"It's not that, ma'am. I'm just not sure how secure these quarters are."

"Relax, this signal is encrypted and we've already swept the room for listening devices."

Van didn't bother to ask when these security measures had taken place. "What can I do for you, then? I don't mean to be rude, but I'm due downstairs in less than an hour."

"Yes, I heard all about Admiral Meryan's daring rescue and that congratulations are in order. Nice job on that, by the way."

Wondering if she could possibly mean something else entirely, Van refrained from speaking but couldn't hide the blush.

"I read your mission report and apparently you not only saved the Queen's daughter from Gothoan rebels, but also an entire fleet of pirates." Her amused tone was slightly mocking.

"I was in the neighborhood. Did you call for a particular reason or just to bust my chops?"

Erika smiled and relented. "Actually, I wanted your take on all of this. I'm sure everything is in the report, but an official document doesn't allow much room for speculation and frankly, I'm concerned. First, there's the maniac with an army in an underground base on Tokar."

"Not just any maniac," Van interrupted. "A Gothoan maniac who's clearly well-funded if the looks of that base are anything to go by."

"You think he's getting assistance from his government?"

"It's more than that. I think he is part of their military. I swear there's something familiar about him. There's also the distinct possibility that he's using the Phantoms on Tokar to do his dirty work. They're the ones who initially attacked Admiral Meryan's team and then kidnapped her."

Erika looked shocked by the idea. "I thought the Phantoms nothing more than mindless killers and scavengers. How's that possible?"

"I don't know, but there's more. You can't tell me those pirates waiting for us at the asteroid field were a coincidence."

"So you believe they're collaborating." This idea didn't seem as surprising and Van wondered if Erika had already thought of it.

"Possibly. What I do know is that most pirates can't afford one brand new ship, let alone a fleet of them."

Erika nodded. "That's true. They don't typically band together in large numbers either."

Van cast a glance toward the chronometer on the wall and then pulled a drying comb through her hair, hoping Erika would take a hint. She didn't want to be late for her own award ceremony. More importantly, Cade would be there.

"You did well on your assignment, losing the *Falcon* notwithstanding."

"Thanks for reminding me," Van mumbled, but the commodore went on as though she didn't hear.

"Now we know Gothos is planning to attack and they might have some new friends to help with that. We just don't know when, where or how."

Something in her expression made Van cringe. "Let me guess, you already have my next job lined up."

"That's one of the things I love about you. You're so perceptive. Only this isn't going to be what you think."

"Uh huh, okay. Just go ahead and tell me, ma'am. The night's not getting any younger."

Erika's eyes narrowed and Van immediately saw how deadly an adversary she could be. "Both the Alaran Senate and Coalition Central Command are concerned with the business with Meryan. I'm afraid Gothos tipped its hand by abducting her. If they manage to take her out of the picture, they could take over the Andromeda System without firing a shot."

"Makes sense. This Nemo character admitted he worked for someone else. If that person somehow came to power, they could hand the keys over to Gothos and no one would know until it was too late. Of course, they could only do that if they eliminated High Queen Dorma. Even then, you're talking about a select group of individuals with that kind of power or standing."

Sighing deeply, Erika said, "I think I'm getting too old for all this intrigue. In any case, I'll have a few undercover agents added to her security detail until this is over. Your orders are to stay as close to Admiral Meryan as you can without arousing her suspicions."

Flashes of Cade's fingertips on the back of her neck while they made love went through her head. Van didn't think Commodore Grier meant that close. She cleared her throat and asked, "How am I going to do that, Commodore?"

Instead of answering the question directly, Erika grinned and said, "Congratulations, Captain. You've been assigned the vessel *Pandora*."

"The new Nebula Class ship just out of the shipyards? I'm impressed. She's almost as big as *Gauntlet*. You better be careful, Commodore, or people will think they get rewarded for destroying the first spacecraft they command."

"I'll chance it. In the morning, you'll provide Admiral Meryan with a ride to Coalition Headquarters on Psmanth. *Gauntlet* will remain on Alara for maintenance after her recent encounters. That should allow you all the excuse you need to stay close to the princess."

"So she's just supposed to go back to steering a desk? Did anyone tell her that?"

"You really don't know much about the higher ranks, do you, Captain?" Erika had that amused expression again that made Van feel she'd asked a particularly stupid question. "Most of our job is desk work. Not only is Meryan required to fulfill that role, but she's royalty as well. She doesn't fly the flagship around except for political functions and as a show of force."

Feeling a little embarrassed by the impromptu lesson in military protocol, Van felt inclined to hit back. "Which of those was she on when she pulled our butts off of *Falcon* and then took us to a frozen ice ball looking for rebels?"

Erika was angry enough at her little outburst to say what she really thought. "That hare-brained scheme almost cost her life. The sad fact is that the entire episode could have been avoided if she had an heir."

"What?" The possibility of a miniature Cade running around left Van breathless and she sputtered for a response. "No way. She's military, through and through. When would she have time to get married and have a kid? Besides, what's that got to do with the price of Kona on Hoka?"

"If she had an heir, there would be a clear line to the throne. Right now, it's just Cade and her brother, and a male can't rule in the Andromeda Sector."

"He's too young, anyway, but even if she had a successor that just makes them both targets."

"Maybe." Erika looked thoughtful, making Van curious about what she was scheming. "Anyway, I'll send the details of your assignment through in a secured data burst."

"Looking forward to it. Can I go now?"

Laughing, Erika said, "You are so insubordinate, Van."

"It's part of my charm. Now if you don't mind?"

"Right, but keep your eyes open. You can bet whoever grabbed Meryan will have people at the ceremony. It wouldn't surprise me if they tried again."

Just the thought of such a thing sent a wave of cold chills over her skin, but Van played it off. "Understood, Commodore. Swann out."

Van had a lot to think about as she finished dressing, most of which wasn't very pleasant. What would she do if someone did make a move toward Cade at the banquet? There were sure to be a lot of people around and they might prevent Van from getting to her in time. It was the first time she could remember being frightened for someone on a personal level. Strategies came to mind that she immediately rejected. There were just too many unknown variables.

She'd just finished donning her highly polished shoes when someone knocked on the door. Van opened it to Paul Byra. He wore the same tight, grey uniform complete with military decorations. Taking a quick and silent inventory, Van discovered she had more awards than he did.

Sketching a mock bow, Paul held out an arm and said, "I've come to escort you to the ball, my lady."

Van barked out a laugh. "How long did it take you to think up that line?"

"More time than I care to admit. You ready to go?"

"Sure, let me grab my gloves."

Chapter Ten

THICK, PLUSH CARPET muffled the sounds of their military shoes. Walking down the hall, Van took another look around and marveled at the castle. That she knew of, Meryan Hall was the only existing castle in modern times. The other royal families on Andromeda's planets lived in swanky houses, mansions even, but they were nothing like this place. High stone walls stretched from the main level and up three floors. A turret dominated the south side, but there weren't any subterranean torture chambers. At least she hoped not. Tapestries and portraits covered the walls but not in an effort to keep the castle warm as in ancient times.

Unlike in the past however, the populace didn't see the castle as a place to take shelter. These halls were the home of the royal family. Tonight, security had compartmentalized the lower floor of the huge structure, ensuring those invited to the ceremony stayed in the dining rooms, library and ballroom. The conference room was the size of the orphanage in which Van grew up. Here, the massive structure seemed empty, the dominating silence making her feel small. She knew it was an illusion. Though the castle was something straight out of Earth's distant past, the technology utilized wasn't. Dampeners placed strategically in the most heavily populated areas prevented the sound from disturbing slumbering guests.

"How's your room?" Paul asked conversationally.

"Compared to military quarters? Luxurious. Why, how is yours?"

"From what I saw, it's about half the size of yours but I can't fault the room service."

Van dared take her eyes off the stairs to look at him. "You have room service? I don't."

"Yeah, but I made friends with one of the girls working in the kitchen last night."

He wagged his eyebrows up and down suggestively and Van laughed. "Dog."

"Hey, I deserve something. It's not like the High Queen's throwing a snazzy banquet in my honor."

Van only smiled as they approached the Ceremonial Hall. A white-gloved and tuxedoed butler tipped his head and opened the doors. When he did the din that greeted them seemed almost overwhelming. At the last second, she mentally prepared herself and stepped into a sea of life forms. Highly decorated military uniforms from the five Andromeda planets and their neighbor Hokar mingled with numerous civilians in fancy dress. Attendance was by invitation only.

Paul snagged a couple of drinks from a passing waiter and handed one to Van.

"What is it?"

"I have no idea, but if they're serving it here then it's expensive. I recommend you have as many as you can hold."

She couldn't argue with that. Van took a healthy swig and then coughed as the heat hit her esophagus. "Here, you can have mine," she wheezed.

"Sissy. It's just Celestan whiskey. I grew up on this stuff."

"Good for you." Van stopped a passing man who wore the wait staff uniform and asked for some erium juice. After taking a sip she said, "I'm going to get something to eat. Want something?"

He nodded and they braved the crowd to struggle to the buffet tables along one side of the room. Just one glance was enough to tell her that the Meryans had spared no expense. Earth delicacies like cucumber sandwiches and brisket sat alongside offerings from all the other represented planets. Van grabbed a plate and loaded it with skewered meatballs of hastoka from Andromeda and a Mirachan exotic salad. The slightly bitter mistal leaves would offset the sweetness of the hastoka meat. She snagged a couple of cucumber sandwiches to finish off her meal.

"How can you eat that?"

"What? I like cucumbers."

"I mean the hastoka," Paul clarified. "That stuff is gamey."

Van chuckled and bit into a sandwich. "You should like this stuff more than me. At least you're from this galaxy."

"Don't even try it. It's not like you've ever even been to Earth." She noticed everything he chose was of Earth origin.

"Who would want to? It's nothing but a sun-baked penal colony."

They spent about twenty minutes eating and talking, trying to look like they were mingling. In truth, Van kept searching for a certain tall Alaran/Human hybrid, but didn't see her. Strangers kept shaking her hand, congratulating her for saving the princess and thanking her for her service. After a while, they started blending together until she didn't remember what any of them looked like. Unexpectedly, dignitaries started lining up on either side of the room.

"Guess the show's about to start," Paul offered, taking another whiskey from a tray.

"Nothing gets by you."

He snorted and took a sip, but Van cared more about getting a glimpse of the royal entourage. Looking overhead, she saw that the other royal families occupied the boxes assigned to their planets. Queen Galene Rizo occupied the place designated for the Planet Celestas. Purple and yellow curtains displaying their colors opened to show the elegant woman and her three very feminine daughters. Van doubted any of them were old enough to even think of ruling.

Farther along the processional line, she saw the flag of Psmanth. This royal family appeared very different from that of Celestas and not just because the colors were black and red. Psmanth rule belonged to the most militant of the four queens, Agea Tyche. She stood in the box alone, straight and tall in her uniform with her hands behind her back. Van could see the salt and pepper dusting at her temples. Coalition Headquarters was on Psmanth.

Next came Queen Sitiana Elpis in Mirach's diplomatic compartment, her features mostly obscured by ceremonial veils. Finally, Van lifted her eyes to see Temis Barab and her daughter, Saral, in the Meryan's booth. Temis was the High Queen's sister, but had no desire to wear the heavy crown. Van wasn't so sure about her daughter. She remembered Saral from speaking with her after Nemo kidnapped her cousin. She seemed friendly and capable, just the kind of person to fill in on the throne in a pinch. Then she thought of Saral's obvious concern for Cade. You didn't fake that kind of love.

"Presenting her royal highness, the Queen of Alara and the Andromeda Sector, friend of the Earth Alliance, High Queen Dorma Meryan. Presenting her royal highness and admiral of the Alara and Earth Coalition, Princess Cade Ellerton Meryan. Presenting his royal highness, Prince Andres Meryan."

Van craned to see over the heads of people standing in front of her. An older gentleman wearing a Mirachan uniform smiled and stepped aside so she could view the procession. Two guards entered in front of the family. They looked sharp in the dark blue uniforms complete with silver sabers at their hips, but she barely noticed them. The resemblance between Dorma and Cade was most clear in their bone structure and height, but the mother's tipped ears lay backward toward the center of her head and her pale blue skin looked almost translucent. Cade also had her mother's jet-black hair and eyes.

High Queen Dorma wore a heavy crown and long, gently flowing robes that brushed the floor as she walked. Her easy smile reached her eyes and she shook hands with the people she passed, stopping here and there to share a word. She was gorgeous, regal and bred for the role as

monarch, looking like a modern day Snow White. But where her mother was beautiful, Cade was heart stopping.

Instead of the Coalition formal uniform, she wore the traditional Alaran military dress. The jacket of Caribbean blue along with the high, square collar, open only at the throat, served to highlight the paleness of her skin. Her black eyes and hair stood out like night on a snowy backdrop. Gold and silver medals from both Andromeda and the Coalition covered both sides of the jacket and Van recognized enough of them to know they weren't ceremonial. Blue-black trousers reached nearly to the floor and rested gently on the surface of her dress boots. Ivory white from her gloves, white highlights around the top of the jacket collar and the saber at her waist completed the outfit and took Van's breath away. The thin, silver filigree crown seemed all the more exquisite by its simplicity.

Cade held her mother's hand tucked safely in the crook of her elbow as they mounted the steps to a raised platform. She released the monarch and turned to stand the traditional sentry place at the head of the stairs. The Queen moved toward center stage, but Van couldn't look away from the admiral. As she faced the assembly, Cade's gentle, dark-eyed gaze rested briefly on the crowd, portraying nobility, strength, and courage. Only when the other patrons applauded did Van realize she'd forgotten to bow as the royal party walked past her.

"Breathe," Paul advised, raising his voice so she could hear above the thunder.

Van complied as she reached out and took the drink from his hand. She downed the whiskey in a single gulp.

"Hey."

Still silent, Van returned the glass as the applause dwindled and finally stopped. Queen Dorma smiled and stepped forward, preparing to speak.

"Royal families, brave and loyal military and honored guests, welcome to Alara. It isn't often that I host a banquet in my home, but this is a very special occasion. Recently, my daughter Princess Cade, whom some of you call admiral..." Dorma paused to allow the chuckles from the people. "She put her life on the line for her people and the Coalition. I'm not at liberty to give the details of her mission, but she was taken captive by a ruthless foe."

Van understood the woman's pain when her voice broke, the heartache of a parent who'd almost lost a child. She couldn't imagine what that felt like, but she did know she'd do everything to keep Cade safe. Leading rescue teams onto Tokar was never in question and even the loss of a good man wasn't enough to make her regret that decision.

"Tonight we're here to honor an exceptional young hero who risked her life to save my daughter. Captain Vanessa Swann."

The applause rose again and it took a second for Van to realize that was her cue. Paul slapped her on the back and she took an involuntary step into the aisle. Van's mouth went dry, but she

straightened her spine and focused on the women standing on the platform. Military ceremonies weren't anything new and she'd participated in enough of them to know what the procedures were. Only Cade's presence made it any different, her attention focused more on Cade's beauty than the High Queen's presence. Unfortunately, there wasn't time to wonder why she felt so drawn to Cade.

Van reached the bottom of the stairs and concentrated on not tripping on her own feet, stepping up quickly and then crossing to stand beside Dorma. As dictated by protocol, Van took one large step that turned her sideways to the assembly so they could see the presentation. Then she brought her heels sharply together, standing at attention in front of the Andromeda System's highest reigning official.

A guard, who'd stood on stage toward the rear, now stepped forward and handed a small rectangular box with a hinged lid to the queen. Remaining silent, he turned to face Van and stood at attention. Queen Dorma opened the hinged lid and removed a medallion before handing the box off to the guard. She turned toward the crowd and held the award aloft so everyone could see. Van also watched from her peripheral vision but standing at attention with her eyes fixed forward didn't allow her to fully visualize the medal.

"The award presented tonight is not one granted by the Coalition. Nor is it one lightly bestowed by the Ruling House of Meryan. The Order of Distinguished Valor with silver stars is the highest award the House of Meryan can present to a deserving soul."

Queen Dorma turned back to her. "For gallantry, unwavering courage and valor in the face of overwhelming odds, I am honored to present Captain Vanessa Swann with the Royal Order of Distinguished Valor."

The crowd's thunderous applause as she pinned the medal to Van's chest was deafening. It continued even after she turned to face them with the shiny new award. Van felt her face burn, she'd never received such a show of gratitude before and wasn't sure she really deserved it. She'd just been doing her job. Unfortunately, now came the part she liked the least. As the din finally tapered off, she prepared to give a short speech. She wasn't very good at drafting such language so she borrowed some of the words from one of Earth's greatest war heroes, General Douglas McArthur.

"I can't help but be deeply moved by such a tribute. Coming from the people I've served so long and loved so well, it fills me with an emotion I can hardly express. Not intended primarily to honor a single person, this award symbolizes a great moral code of conduct. The chivalry of those who guard this system's culture and ancient descendants. For all hours and for all time, it's an expression of the ethics of the Coalition Alliance soldier. For the crown to integrate me in this way, with so noble an ideal, arouses a sense of pride and yet of humility that will be with me always.

"Duty, honor, loyalty. Unhappily, I possess neither the eloquence of diction, that poetry of imagination, nor that brilliance of metaphor, to tell you all that they mean. Some might say they are only words, a slogan, or a flamboyant phrase. Every pedant, every demagogue, every cynic,

every hypocrite, every troublemaker, and, I am sorry to say, some others of an entirely different character, will try to downgrade them even to the extent of mockery and ridicule."

Van looked around the assembly as she spoke, meeting the eyes of many. Somber expressions of understanding told her they too had witnessed the anarchistic attitude. She forgot her nervous self-consciousness, feeling connected to these people with similar experiences and sense of obligation.

"But these are some of the things they do. They build your basic character. They mold you for your future roles as the custodians of the Andromeda System's defense. They make you strong enough to know when you are weak and brave enough to face yourself when you are afraid. As soldiers, we cling to these ideals and hold them as dear as a lover. They are the code we live by and, occasionally, we are fortunate enough to be recognized by the people we love. It's my honor to stand before you today and accept this award. Thank you."

If anything, the ovation when she finished was even louder than before. She resisted the urge to clap her hands over her ears and faced toward the monarch. She could have sworn that High Queen Dorma smiled through tears and felt her cheeks burn again that her simple words might inspire such a reaction. Van bowed low before the queen to show her respect but Dorma touched her arm and encouraged her to stand. Then she stepped closer and kissed Van on the cheek.

When she turned away, Van faced the crowd beside her. Slowly, the applause died and the High Queen addressed the people. "Captain Swann makes a very good point. Without the brave souls willing to fight and die for what they believe, things could be very different. I would like to take the opportunity to express our thanks to all members of the Coalition who are with us as well as our dedicated military liaisons and all the civilians who work to preserve our way of life. Having said that, might I suggest that we all adjourn to the ballroom for the traditional first dance."

Dorma took Van's elbow, leading her toward the edge of the stage where she clasped Cade's arm on the other side. The trio led the way from the hall. Fortunately, since she was part of the royal procession, no one accosted her. Van needed a few minutes to regroup. If given the choice, she'd rather spend the rest of the night in solitude. It was hard to share how she felt about anything, life having taught her that keeping her heart isolated was the safest bet. Just the little bit she'd shared during her speech was more than she was accustomed to and left her feeling vulnerable.

"Are you ready?"

She looked at the queen in confusion. "For what?"

"The first dance of course. It's traditional that the royal heir initiates the evening's festivities by dancing with the guest of honor."

"By ourselves?" Van gulped, suddenly more concerned about being so close to the princess in front of a crowd.

Dorma laughed and squeezed her arm. "I can see why Cade likes you so much."

She did?

"You two would make a very cute couple. Have you ever considered marrying into royalty?"

Van almost swallowed her tongue. "Uhh..."

"Mother, stop," Cade hissed.

"What? I'm no different from any other parent. I just want to see my daughter happy. It wouldn't kill you to give me a grandchild either."

Chapter Eleven

UPON ENTERING THE cavernous room, Van noticed the size of the dance floor and surrounding area dwarfed even the ceremonial hall. In addition, a large semi-circular staircase led up to a second level. It was hard to believe that soon the chamber would seem crowded. The trio stepped inside the empty room followed by a security contingent of four heavily armed guards. She thought the palace guards more of a traditional function since it wasn't likely anyone would dare attack the royal family amongst a crowd of dignitaries.

Queen Dorma led them inside and released their arms near the dance floor. "The music will begin whenever you two are ready. Please excuse me, but I think I'm required to mingle now." She flashed another charming smile and disappeared into the throng.

Van suddenly felt very nervous. "Err, uh..."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you. If you want, we can wait a few minutes for people to settle in."

"That would be great, thank you ma'am."

Cade frowned. "Do you mind if we drop the titles for tonight? I'd like to relax and having you call me admiral or ma'am all night doesn't really fit with that goal."

"Of course, ma...uh, Cade."

"See, that didn't hurt. Congratulations on the medal, by the way."

"Thank you," Van glanced down at the award. "I'm still not sure where it goes on my uniform."

In keeping with most ceremonies, the Queen placed the device around her neck but for everyday operations, the wearer pinned them in order of importance on their chests. Being a royal award rather than military, Van wasn't sure where it belonged.

Cade reached out to touch a spot on her chest with one finger. "To the left of the others, the place of honor. You do realize this award makes you an honorary custos. It's a very ancient custom."

"Royal guard? Does that mean I'm a knight?"

Cade smiled, easing some of the awkwardness. "Not exactly. Oh, there's Saral. Pardon me for a minute while I speak with my cousin."

Van nodded, but Cade had already walked away. She watched as they hugged in greeting and struck up an animated conversation. She recognized the cousin from the communication with Headquarters after Cade's kidnapping and from the way Saral kept looking in her direction, Van thought she knew the topic of discussion. A waiter walked past and she took a flute of something golden and sparkly. She swallowed it in a single gulp.

"You might want to slow down on that," Paul advised.

"Why?"

Rather than answer, he started to ask, "So, what's going on with..."

"Nothing," she interrupted quickly. "Nothing's going on. We're just friends. No, not even friends. Why do you ask?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't but remind me to do so later."

"Let's start again. What were you going to ask?"

"I was going to ask, what's going on between you and Coalition Command? Are they going to fry you over what happened to the *Falcon*?"

The tension ebbed away for the first time since she'd stepped out of her room. "Not at all. You're looking at the new captain of the recently commissioned vessel, *Pandora*. We ship out first thing in the morning."

"Oh no, you're kidding. Not even one day off?"

"No rest for the wicked, but this is an easy one. We just have to escort the princess back to her office at HQ." Van placed special emphasis on Cade's title and wasn't disappointed when Paul picked up on the implications.

"The princess? Does that mean we're on diplomatic envoy duty?"

He looked disgruntled and Van started to laugh until the full ramifications of what such a duty entailed hit her. "Oh c...crap."

"Yeah, guess you didn't think about that one before you agreed."

"Right, because the military is in the habit of offering me a choice. Just be ready by oh eight hundred."

Miffed by the situation, Van deposited her empty glass on a convenient serving tray and helped herself to another. One thing about the Meryan Empire, they valued tradition. In this case, tradition dictated that any mission of diplomatic stature required certain observances. One of those was that the captain attended each meal with the dignitary in question with breakfast being the notable exception. Even the royal families agreed that running the ship was of paramount importance. Van had a built in excuse to avoid it and she could probably ditch lunch too if she created enough diversions, but unless they happened upon hostile space, she couldn't get out of evening meals.

Okay, so they weren't the best of friends. She would even admit that she found it hard to keep her eyes off Cade, but surely Van could act professionally for a few lousy dinners.

"Would you care to dance?"

The husky tones sent a shiver down her spine, brought home to her just how much trouble she was in. Her head turned in Cade's direction and someone took the drink from her hand. Paul, she assumed.

Having no other choice, Van took the proffered hand and allowed the Crown Princess of Alara to lead her onto the dance floor. The music started, a slow waltz requiring Cade to slip an arm around her waist. The first step was a little awkward owing to her nerves but Van quickly recovered, trying to ignore the mirth in her partner's dark eyes. Initially, she noticed only the sound of her heart hammering in her ears and how self-conscious she felt dancing, only the two of them on the monolithic dance floor. Eventually, she felt the softness of Cade's hand and the crowd receded from awareness.

The skin of Cade's hand reminded her of a flower petal. Soft, smooth and flexible, yet with a hint of strength that belied its seeming fragility. She noticed how long and slender the fingers were, easily encompassing her smaller ones. From there, she made the mistake of looking up into fathomless depths of midnight. She'd never before perceived the narrow band of navy separating iris from pupil. The waltz swept her around the ballroom, but she couldn't break the hypnotic gaze.

Cade's pupils dilated unexpectedly, signaling that she wasn't unaware of the sudden chemistry. Her posture relaxed and her arm tightened around Van's waist, eliminating any semblance of distance between their bodies. The dance became intimate despite the crowd slowly joining them on the floor. Her partner's strong thighs caressed hers as they moved. The now familiar scent of her skin flooded Van's senses. The air fairly crackled between them.

The crowd disappeared altogether when Cade carried them out of the ballroom and onto a balcony. Balmy evening air touched her skin but went largely unnoticed. Moonlight softened the strong features that dipped toward her as Cade closed the distance even more. Van read the intent in dark eyes and slipped a hand around Cade's neck. Lips brushed hers, a promise full of heat. When Cade pulled away slightly, Van started to speak.

"Cade..." She couldn't deny the magnetism between them, but questioned if the romantic setting caused her to lose so much of her self-control. Was it, instead, the beginning of something that terrified her just to think about? Van instinctively felt it could be more and she wasn't sure she was ready for that.

"Don't speak. I just want one moment alone with you before I have to think about duty."

Eyes heavy lidded and full of desire spoke to Van's passion. Her fingers curled around thick locks at the base of Cade's neck, urging her down. Kissing deeply, she felt the roughness of the tongue that stroked her own, stoking the fire in her belly. For endless minutes, she lost herself to the lingual caress, not thinking of anything but the need to merge. Doubts vanished and she kissed Cade with all the pent up emotion she usually held in check.

Eventually, the kiss ended but Cade didn't release her. They hugged each other tightly and Van's eyes closed. She surprised herself by drawing comfort from the embrace even as she freely offered it in return. The moment was magical, filled with the scent of growing things from the valley below and the spray of Alara's triple waterfalls, the Gederium Falls, such a short distance away.

The sound of a manservant clearing his throat broke the spell. "My apologies, Your Highness. Queen Dorma seeks your company."

Cade impressed her by not releasing their embrace. If anything, her arms tightened. She took a deep breath, filled with the sound of regret, and replied huskily. "Tell her I'll join her shortly."

Van felt frustrated when they were alone again, but smothered her disappointment when Cade withdrew to arm's length. "I'm sorry to leave you here. I'd do almost anything to change that, but I can't."

"You're a princess. You have appearances to keep up."

"Thank you for understanding."

Cade rested a palm against her cheek and smiled before kissing Van's forehead. Then she was gone.

Van couldn't face the assembled delegates right now. She turned toward the railing and rested her arms across the top, staring out over the darkened valley. Bellaco, Alara's largest moon, painted her light over the view that included the triple waterfall. Van heard the water crashing into its basin. Animals rustled through the brush, but her thoughts replayed the kiss over and over. Priding herself on never getting emotionally involved, Van couldn't understand what was happening.

Twenty minutes later, she sensed someone step onto the balcony. Paul joined her, adopting a similar pose.

"Van, you okay?"

"Fine, Paul." She strove to sound steady, her normal self, but her heartbeat had yet to assume its usual rhythm. Each time she thought of Cade's kiss or the look in her eyes it started pounding again. "I just have a lot on my mind."

"She's something special. It's obvious she cares about you."

She couldn't look at him, afraid he might see the tears shimmering in her eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't." Van heard the disappointment in his voice, perpetuated by her refusal to confide in him. "I'm going to turn in."

He'd reached the entrance to the ballroom before she spoke softly, taking a chance. "Paul?"

"Yes?"

"She really is something, isn't she?"

"Yes, Van. She is. Goodnight."

Van took a minute to gather her thoughts before rejoining the celebration. Though confused by her earlier actions, she wasn't in the mood to guess Cade's motives. She wiped her eyes and went inside. Intending to pass through the crowd without speaking, Van sought the sanctuary of her room. Instinct caused her to glance around anyway, but she didn't see Cade. Instead, she spotted a very tall, lean man at the top of the stairs. Something familiar about his movements made her stop.

Distinguished-looking at a glance, the man's white hair appeared neatly barbered and his immaculate tuxedo hugged his form. The most singular feature was the large, hawkish nose. He sported the grayish skin typical of someone from a cold environment. The joints of his hands and

arms were a little too thick and elongated to fit the usual species she encountered, extending past the jacket's cuffs and making it look small on him.

He turned and unexpectedly met her gaze, as if he'd known she watched him. Van's eyes widened and she started up the stairs at a run, convinced of his identity. This man had taken Cade, held her captive in Tokar's subterranean chambers.

"Excuse me," she shouted, dodging guests. "Please, let me through."

The heavy crowd forced her to backtrack nearly as often as she progressed. By the time she reached the upper rail, he was gone. Van leapt into the air, trying to see over taller heads, but she couldn't find him. Finally, she stepped onto the edge of the staircase runner, hoping a few inches would be enough. The handrail pressed against her upper thigh, providing a false sense of security as she cast around. She searched the landing repeatedly, but he was gone. Van went to step down, but the second level was quite crowded and the throng of bodies surged toward her.

Because her hold was precarious, Van had little leverage. She felt her body lean out farther than she could recover from and knew she was going over.

Someone screamed.

Van's arms and legs flailed as she tried to maneuver into a less dangerous position, but the long fall proved too short to accommodate. Guests scattered as she dropped. Van hit the marble floor with a resounding crack and quickly bitten off scream.

She tried to remember her dignity, tried not to roll on the floor like a mad woman. The pain in her arm was so intense that she clenched her jaws until she thought her teeth would shatter.

"Back up. Give her some room."

Then Cade was there, cradling Van's head in her lap. Unaware of her actions, Van half rose and huddled against her.

"Where do you hurt?"

"My arm," Van replied from between clenched teeth. She wrapped her good hand around the injured appendage and tried to breathe past the pain. It wasn't as intense now and she thought she might not cry like a schoolgirl.

A middle-aged woman squatted next to them and started scanning her injury. Van saw she carried a physician's case. After that, she ignored the doctor and tried to focus more on the feel of Cade's arm around her shoulders and the fingers combing the hair back from her forehead.

"You've done quite a number on yourself, young captain. I'm afraid you've broken your arm in two places and fractured your wrist." The healer sounded positively thrilled.

"Glad I could give you something to do."

She chuckled. "I'll have you fixed up in no time." She reached into the bag, and Van couldn't see what she was doing. The next thing she knew, the woman injected her with something. The medication immediately took the edge off her pain and made her vision swim. While she worked knitting bones together with an infuser, Cade further distracted her by speaking quietly.

"Van, what happened? How did you manage to fall from the top of the stairs?"

"I thought I saw someone, that Nemo guy."

"What? Here?" Cade looked around in alarm and Van unreasonably waited for her to continue the list of interrogatives. When she didn't, Van felt the need to clarify.

"He's gone now. I couldn't find him when I got up there and I stood on the edge of the stairs to try and see better."

Dark eyes closed briefly. "And you lost your balance."

"Felt more like I was pushed."

Cade hissed and fury dominated her expression. Van quickly sought to reassure her. "It's all right, baby. There were just so many people I'm sure it was an accident."

The sedative made her groggy and Van didn't realize exactly what she'd said to make Cade look at her so strangely.

"She's all set," the doctor interrupted, returning her instruments to the bag. "She needs a good night's sleep and should take it easy on that arm for a few days, but I've repaired the breaks."

"Thank you, Doctor Kolisev. Your skills are greatly appreciated."

"Yeah, thanks," Van slurred, now seeing two of everything.

Cade stood, lifting Van into her arms as she did.

"Hey, how come you're always hauling me around?"

Van barely registered chuckles from the onlookers, blinded by the brilliance of Cade's smile. "Why are you always getting hurt?"

"I can walk, you know."

"I prefer to reach our destination in one piece."

Van forgot what they were arguing about as Cade carried her from the room. Her weight didn't seem to cause the princess any difficulty as she walked through the ballroom and out into the castle's main entrance hall. From there, she entered the family section of the structure and started up the stairs.

"You sure are cute in your little crown."

Unconscious before she finished speaking, Van wasn't aware of the effect her words caused. Cade's eyes filled with tenderness and she brushed her lips across Van's forehead.

"You're going to break my heart, aren't you, little one?"

Chapter Twelve

CADE STOPPED IN front of Van's bedroom door and smiled, thinking about the previous night. She hadn't expected the evening to turn romantic, but couldn't argue the truth. Van had returned her kisses passionately and if Pauncey hadn't interrupted, who knows where the moment would have carried them. She'd been attracted to Vanessa Swann from the start, influenced partly by her bravery and unique approach to command but that wasn't the only thing she found captivating about the woman. Vanessa possessed an unspoken vulnerability that touched her heart and Cade didn't think it was just because of what happened to her on Tokar. Somewhere in her past she'd been deeply hurt, so long ago that it had become a part of her. Cade wanted to reach in and erase that damage, soothe the pain. The desire to enfold Van in her arms and keep the rest of the known galaxy from ever hurting her again was so strong it made her ache.

Van had called her "baby" last night and the word had left an indelible impression, though Cade doubted she'd even remember. It was a slip, meaning nothing for the intrepid captain but leaving Cade open to a fervent wish for more. Undressing her and putting her to bed after the injury compounded her craving. At least she'd stopped short of removing all of Van's clothing, leaving her in a plain white T-shirt and her underwear. Cade easily recalled the way muscle and sinew shifted under tanned flesh and gasped against the sharp tingling sensation in her stomach.

She realized she'd fallen for the petite captain, but revealing her heart would only result in Van running as far and as fast as possible. She couldn't go back now, but was treading on thin ice by further lowering any barriers between them. Van's reputation told her she'd only get hurt if she insisted on pursuing any type of personal relationship, but she didn't want to just give up. Cade straightened and prepared to knock on the door, hoping Van was up and ready to go. They were already late, supposed to have headed out a half hour ago. Unaccustomed nervousness rippled through her, halting her before her knuckles actually made contact with the door.

A noise down the hall made Cade look over to meet the curious gaze of one of the housekeepers. Cade stared pointedly in return and the woman mumbled an apology before disappearing down the hall. Taking a nervous breath, Cade finally knocked.

She wasn't used to feeling so off guard around anyone. As royalty, she'd grown up with people catering to her every whim, though her mother ensured it didn't go to her head. Still, there was an inherent quality of intimidation built into the position that Cade had learned to temper. Part of the way she did that involved setting herself apart and never letting down her professional façade in public. No one got past her defenses, or at least never before. Van seemed an exception to that rule.

Cade heard a muffled curse from behind the heavy wooden door just before it opened. She tried very hard to lock her features into a neutral expression, but it wasn't easy with Van looking so adorably frazzled. Her short auburn hair stuck up in every direction and her bangs all but obscured her vision. One bleary eye was half-open. It took her two attempts to get anything past an obviously dry throat.

"What's going on?"

Cade suppressed a smile. "Good morning, Captain. How are you feeling?"

"Sore... and a little confused." Van grimaced.

"About what?"

"I don't remember coming back to my room or going to bed."

This could get awkward. "Do you remember the accident? You broke your arm."

"That's right." Van's expression cleared. "Didn't you carry me...back here?"

"Yes and I, uh, put you to bed." Cade couldn't prevent her eyes from drifting to the robe Van wore.

"Oh." The full implications hit her a beat later and Van's now wide-open eyes turned toward Cade. "Oh."

Cade might have become uncomfortable under the sudden scrutiny if not for the mental images of Van's supple skin and small, tight nipples. Removing the Coalition uniform definitely proved the highlight of her evening.

"Is there something you wanted, Admiral, or did you just want to see me naked again?"

The slightly hostile question wasn't far off the mark but Cade wasn't about to admit it. "Actually, I came by to see if you'll be ready to move out anytime soon."

"Move out?" Van pushed the hair out of her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Zero eight forty. I understand Commander Byra and the rest of the crew are patiently waiting for us at the shipyards. You'd better hurry or your first officer might commandeer the captain's quarters for himself."

"Great, I'm never going to hear the end of it." She rubbed a hand over her eyes trying to wake up, in what was becoming a familiar gesture. "Give me thirty minutes."

Cade nodded. "I'll meet you downstairs and I'll let the others know we'll be there soon."

"Thanks."

Van quickly closed the door and Cade walked away. Half asleep or not, Captain Swann had her barriers back up this morning. Cade wished she could say the same. Instead, the sensation of soft lips against hers played again in her head. She'd told Van that having sex together on Tokar was just one of those things, a biological imperative to connect with someone after surviving a harrowing experience. The kiss last night proved her words a lie. The weirdest part was that she never looked for anything more than sex. Even then, she had to be careful since any potential partners cared more about the crown than Cade.

Maybe that was what made Van so unique. She didn't care a whit about the throne.

"What are you smiling about, child?"

Cade looked up at the royal cook as she entered the dining hall. Reena's blue skin appeared to shimmer in the morning sunlight. Some people might consider her question presumptuous for a servant, but not Cade. Reena had practically raised her when the queen set off on one diplomatic mission or another. She'd spent most of her free time in the kitchens.

Plucking a sticky roll from a plate on the huge table, Cade took a big bite. "Nothing," she mumbled. "I'm just in a good mood."

"Does that cheerfulness have anything to do with a certain newly honored captain? Rumor has it, you two looked awfully cozy together last night and I heard you carried her from the ballroom. Very sentimental if you ask me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The cook chuckled, but Cade ignored her skepticism. "Speaking of Captain Swann, could you pack up a light breakfast and a coffee for her? She's running a little behind."

"Right away, Princess Cade. Make sure you brush the sugar off your uniform when you leave the dining hall."

"Yes, ma'am."

Reena left the room, but another voice from behind said, "I don't know why you let her get away with talking to you like that. You are the heir to the Alaran Empire."

Cade grinned at Saral over her shoulder. "You're too worried about appearances. There's no one here but us and Reena knows exactly who I am."

"I suppose."

Her cousin sat at the table and took a plate. She didn't say anything further as she helped herself to breakfast.

"Are you upset about something?"

"No, I just don't think you should be so friendly with the staff. It isn't proper."

Cade frowned. "You just don't like Reena."

"Can't argue with that."

Pulling out a chair, Cade sat next to her. "I never have understood why. She's a nice lady."

Saral shrugged and swallowed. "I don't know, I can't explain it. Let's talk about something else."

"Like what?"

"Like, why are you still on Alara? I thought you wanted to leave early this morning."

"Van overslept," Cade admitted. "I think that sedative the doctor gave her really knocked her out. She'll be ready soon though."

Saral had a wicked grin on her face. "So it's Van now, huh? What happened to Captain Swann?"

"Stop. There's nothing wrong with me calling her by her first name."

"If you say so." Saral sipped her coffee.

Her smile faded and she suddenly appeared pensive. Cade realized there was something on her mind that she didn't know how to bring up. "What is it?"

Saral blinked and looked at her. "Why won't you wait a few days and return to Psmanth with me? You know I'd love to have your company and we don't get to spend enough time together."

"You know I'd love nothing better, but I'm so far behind in my work that I'll never get caught up as it is."

"Looking at recruit training files is that important? Surely they can wait a few days."

Cade was touched her cousin wanted to spend time with her, but she wasn't going to relent. An entire session of new Coalition troops had graduated while she was off scouting Tokar and a large part of her responsibility entailed placing them in units to best utilize their particular skills.

"I wish they could, but the Coalition doesn't pay them to just hang around headquarters with nothing to do."

"Are you sure that's the only reason you're traveling with Captain Swann?" Saral was strangely intent, even for her.

"Is there something about her in particular that you don't like?"

Placing the coffee cup on the table, Saral reached for her hand. "What's bothering me is that I'm not sure she can be trusted to keep you safe. Look what just happened. You could have died."

Cade couldn't believe her ears. "You are aware that she rescued me from a megalomaniac, right?"

"If it wasn't for her, you wouldn't have been in that situation to begin with."

"How do you figure that? She wasn't anywhere around." Cade was starting to get angry. Saral was blaming Van for something she had no control over. In fact, she'd followed Cade's orders to lead the other team. How could Van know the Gothoan insurgents had planned an ambush?

"She should have been there." Saral's eyes flashed. "Then no one would've got their hands on you and a rescue wouldn't have been necessary. When I think of the danger you were in it makes me crazy."

Cade's ire vanished and a gentle smile graced her lips. "Is that what this is about, you're worried for me?"

"No."

Cade didn't believe her. She squeezed Saral's hand and then released it. "I'll be fine. I'm going straight to my desk at Headquarters, no more clandestine missions in the near future."

"Promise?"

"Promise." Cade stood and stepped around her chair. She leaned down and hugged Saral from behind, kissing her temple. "Come and see me when you get to Psmanth. We'll have lunch."

"I'll hold you to that."

Reena entered the dining room carrying a perma-poly satchel and hot-mug. Cade didn't miss the contentious glance she directed toward Saral before she handed her the requested breakfast items and vacated the chamber. These two had never gotten along and no amount of effort on her part would alter that.

"I'd better go."

Saral flashed her a smile. "I'll see you soon. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Feeling warmed by her cousin's concern, Cade's smile held as she walked out of the dining room carrying the satchel and hot-mug. From a distance, she watched Van descend the staircase. She wore her everyday uniform and her hair was still a little damp from the shower. She looked wide-awake now and had a bit of a bounce in her step.

Cade looked forward to the next five days spent in her company, especially since she fully intended to take advantage of her diplomatic status. By traveling as a passenger aboard a Coalition vessel rather than a commander, protocol required her status to be that of a member of the royal house. For once, that procedure didn't annoy her. In fact, it worked in her favor. Operating procedure called on the vessel's commanding officer to share all meals with a diplomatic member when not engaged in matters of ship's safety.

It was true, she didn't know if they had a chance for any kind of serious relationship and the possibility existed that Cade was being overly sentimental. But she'd never know if she didn't try. She just had to ensure that Van didn't catch on or she'd be gone before Cade even started to set her plan in motion.

Reaching the foyer, Van looked at her. Her eyes darted to the items Cade held.

"My cook put some breakfast together for you."

"Thoughtful," Van acknowledged, reaching for the hot-mug. She closed her eyes, tasting the coffee.

"Yes, Reena is a considerate woman. She was concerned you have a proper meal before our departure."

Van took the satchel from her, but didn't check inside. "I guess she heard about the accident. Good news certainly travels fast."

Cade noticed two bright points of color on her cheeks along with an expression of consternation. Van probably felt embarrassed to have made a scene the night before in front of so many dignitaries. Cade would have felt the same so chose not to dwell on the subject. Nor did she want to admit that the breakfast was her idea.

"I really couldn't say. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, ma'am. Lead the way. I just hope the transition center isn't too crowded this morning."

Silently, Cade left the castle with Van trailing behind. The footman opened the heavy door as they stepped out into the morning sunlight, but Van continued to follow just as proper etiquette dictated. Cade's plan was never going to work if Van insisted on carrying out military protocol to the letter, at least not this part of her scheme. Later, that same discipline would come in handy for their working relationship, but not for what Cade wanted on a personal level. Cade stopped and turned so quickly that Van almost ran into her.

"Whoa. Is something wrong, Admiral?"

She had to be careful not to overdo it. "Van, I was wondering if you could do me a favor."

"What is it?"

"I'd really like for you to use my first name when we're alone."

"Uh, I don't think that's a good idea."

Van looked unsure and a frown rested between her brows, illustrating her discomfort with the proposal. The walls were definitely in place and Cade needed to find a way to breach the perimeter. The only way she could think to do that was to relax her own. She allowed some of the fondness she felt for Van to show in her expression.

"You've done it before. Just last night, in fact. Please?"

Sputtering for a moment, Van was lost for words. Her gaze finally fixed on the ground. Just as Cade decided she would refuse her request, she glanced up with a haunted expression in her eyes. "All right."

Cade was relieved to have won this first tiny battle. "Good. Since that topic is out of the way, we need to get moving."

She waited until Van stepped up beside her and they started walking to the transition center. Van hesitated just a beat to allow Cade to draw ahead. Rolling her eyes, Cade stopped again and finally lost her patience.

"Enough, already. You're the last person I want treating me like royalty."

"But you are royalty," Van pointed out helpfully.

"As true as that may be, do you think we could call a truce and try to at least be friends? All this walking on eggshells is starting to make me crazy."

Van opened her mouth, hesitated, and then closed it again. Cade figured she'd barely refrained from making a smart remark. "All right, I'll give it a rest but I can't promise I won't slip once in a while."

"Fair enough."

They left the palace grounds and stepped onto the path leading to the transition center. Basically one huge wildlife preserve, the ruling house of Alara did their best to keep the planet that way. Everything as far as the eye could see was lush, green and full of life. It was the main reason the Coalition situated their headquarters on Psmanth, that and the fact that Queen Agea was a fully capable warrior. Cade noticed the few clouds in the sky and the way the domed ceiling of the transportation hub blended with the canopy of trees high overhead. Just because an advanced civilization utilized sophisticated technology didn't mean it had to stand out like some clunky steel can.

Few people walked the grounds and she realized how much time had already gotten away from them. Cade increased the length of her stride and had almost reached the entrance when she realized Van was practically jogging to keep up. The woman had such a large personality, it was hard to bear in mind that she only stood a little over five feet.

"Sorry about that."

"No problem. I'm in a hurry too. I can't wait to see what *Pandora* looks like."

"Oh, that's right. You only found out about the assignment yesterday."

The doors retracted automatically and they walked across polished marble floors toward the nearest station. There was a short line so Cade didn't anticipate a long wait.

"Yeah, I still can't believe they gave me another ship, much less a brand new one just off the showroom floor."

"You must have friends in high places," Cade observed, slightly amused by Van's enthusiasm.

"Or low ones, I guess that remains to be seen. My official orders are to patrol the outer edge of the sector past Mirach. We're not to leave the fifth planet's vicinity. I can't imagine there will be much excitement in the middle of nowhere."

"And what are your unofficial orders?" Cade asked absently.

The man in front of them left for a transportation ring, leaving them at the front of the line. When Van didn't respond, Cade turned to look at her. Van's eyes rounded in surprise and she looked a little pinched. "Is something wrong?"

"No, of course not. How could anything be wrong?"

Cade frowned. She didn't know Van very well, but thought she might be attempting to hide something. Since Cade barely remembered what she'd asked, she had to think back over the last few minutes. Before she could arrive at any conclusions, the stationmaster interrupted.

"Where are you headed this morning, Princess?"

"New Hope Shipyard, party of two."

"Right this way."

The man wore a cap that did little to conceal his tired features. Cade guessed he'd worked the night shift and he was probably ready for it to end though he still smiled politely as he led them to a platform. "Please step up onto a ring and I'll key in the coordinates for you."

"Thank you."

The transition platform stood less than a foot off the ground. Cade stepped up and made sure to keep her entire body inside the ring outlined at her feet. Van did the same next to her while the stationmaster stepped up to a console and keyed the coordinates into the database. Seconds later, Cade felt the familiar prickle like static electricity all over her body as the beam locked on and transported them hundreds of miles by advent of quantum entanglement physics to a receiving station aboard the shipyard. Even after hundreds of trips through the matter stream, she still held her breath until the cycle completed. Cade left the dais as soon as her vision cleared, relieved at yet another successful transference.

"You don't think the brass assigned us to the outer perimeter of the Andromeda system as a way to keep me out of trouble, do you?"

Van had picked right back up on their previous conversation. Apparently she didn't have a problem having her atoms scrambled and reassembled by a technology that was still in its infancy.

"I'm sure that's not it."

They fell into an easy silence as they walked down a long corridor to docking port twenty-seven. Through the transparent gallium windows lining the walkway, both got a good look at the new vessel long before they were in range to board. Composed of tritanium alloy, the ship gleamed like a new gem in the backdrop of space. Three hundred and forty-four meters long, *Pandora* boasted ten decks. She carried the usual ram-jet fusion engines and laser cannons, but she'd been equipped with new antimatter torpedoes. The Coalition had seen fit to equip this latest Nebula-class ship with a small transition system of its own, trying the technology for the first time on a moving vessel. Cade hoped they wouldn't have to try it out.

"We'll only have a skeleton crew for this initial trip to Psmanth, Admiral. I'll pick up the rest of my people when we reach headquarters."

Cade didn't remark on the lapse back into military jargon. "Just make sure you keep her at sublight. We want to break the engines in nice and easy."

The fusion engines weren't necessary inside the planetary system, reserved usually for much longer jumps such as their previous mission into Gothoan space. Her cautionary words did little to erase the smile from Van's lips.

"Right. I can't wait to see what this baby can do."

Chapter Thirteen

VAN TIDIED UP her desk for the second time and then swiveled her chair around to look out at the familiar star field. In the distance, she could see Alara's second and largest moon. She'd finished all the paperwork required for a ship's first successful launch and sent it off in a data-burst to Coalition headquarters. After that, she'd tackled crew status report updates and filed them in each member's service jacket. The updates weren't really due yet and consisted merely of minor comments on each person's performance during her last command. That she took her responsibilities seriously in that regard was secondary to providing her an opportunity to avoid Admiral Meryan.

She couldn't figure out what was going on with Cade, but she was definitely acting out of character and it made Van nervous. No one called a member of any royal family by their given name. You addressed them either by their military title or by their honorific. Then there was the question Cade had asked just before transport to the orbiting shipyard.

Van thought she had swallowed her own tongue when Cade asked what her unofficial orders were. Did she suspect Van was more than the typical Coalition captain? But how could she? Who would tell Admiral Meryan that Van was a member of Sector Intelligence?

Anyone trying to cull favors from her.

Standing, she walked over to the thick portals, not really seeing the stars anymore. Van crossed her arms and leaned one shoulder against the bulkhead. She didn't believe that was the answer. Cade didn't seem suspicious...merely lonely. Since that one incident on Tokar, she appeared to be reaching out to Van in an ever-increasing personal way.

Van couldn't deny that she found Cade appealing. It was so easy to look in her dark eyes and just forget about everything else. She had a way of making Van feel like she was the only person in the universe. That was what made her so scary and alluring at the same time. Sighing dramatically, Van pushed away from the wall and left the sanctuary of her office for the bridge. She couldn't avoid Cade forever.

"Captain on the bridge," a young female voice shouted, startling Van.

"As you were, as you were." She frowned and took the captain's seat between Cade and Commander Byra. These techies were already annoying. At least she only had to put up with them for a few days.

"What do you think of her so far?" Van asked her executive officer.

"She's great, fast and light and armed to the teeth for such a small ship."

"Let's just hope we don't have to put any of those armaments to the test," Cade interjected.

Van nodded her agreement. "I'm with you there, Admiral, though there are some tests I'd like to run in the next few days."

"Such as?"

"This new portable transition system. I think we should try it out in a controlled situation before we're forced to do so in an emergency."

"Good idea," Commander Byra said. "As soon as we get the regular crew on board, we should probably set up battle drills too."

"Draw up a schedule and I'll look at it. What about you, Admiral? Anything you'd like to add?"

Cade shrugged. "I'm just a passenger on your maiden voyage, Captain. My status here is as a civilian. Run all the simulations you want as long as we reach Psmanth in five days."

Van dipped her head in what she hoped was a successful manner. Then she made her first bid to avoid spending too much solitary time with Cade. "We should pass Hoka's belt in a few hours. That'll be a perfect spot to try transferring an empty canister to one of the asteroids and back."

The planet was independent of all others in the system and had no interest in the small asteroid cluster near its outer reach. Performing the tests wouldn't infringe on their territory.

"Fine with me." Cade stood and stretched her back a little and Van tried not to notice how the move thrust her chest forward. "Just make sure you're not late for lunch, Captain. I had the royal cook send along some very nice provisions for everyone to enjoy during our trip. Short of an explosion or unexpected attack, I'll see you in my quarters at thirteen hundred hours."

Van could practically feel Paul's grin, but kept her eyes on Cade. "Understood, Princess Meryan."

Her eyes narrowed, letting Van know Cade had noticed the intended insult. She turned and left the bridge and Van relaxed the breath she'd been holding. She wanted to vent her frustration, but Paul had already focused on his duties and it wouldn't be appropriate in front of the technical crews.

"Ensign Chang, how long before we reach Hokar's Belt?"

A brief pause ensued before the woman answered. "At current speed, we should arrive in four hours and twenty-six minutes."

"See," Paul said helpfully. "You have plenty of time for lunch. We won't even arrive until fourteen-thirty."

"Thank you so much for that insightful observation." Van couldn't stand it anymore. She needed time to think. "I'll be in my office. Call me if anything remotely interesting happens."

As soon as the doors closed behind her, she lightly banged her forehead on the wall. Cade wasn't helping her to keep an emotional distance by forcing them to spend time together. Van realized there was no way Cade could know how she felt, but she still irrationally blamed her for making this so hard. In the past, it had never been a problem. Abandoned at such a young age, not even a year old, she'd grown up unable to rely on or become dependent upon anyone. Lovers in her life were non-existent though she'd enjoyed countless one-night stands and temporary liaisons. Cade threatened to upset all of that. She broke through chinks in her armor Van didn't even know were there and she refused to give Cade that kind of power.

She wanted to think it was different this time, that Cade might be someone she could count on not to abandon her if things got a little tough. As appealing as the thought was, Van pushed it away. If nothing else, Cade would be a distraction. This region was far from settled, what with Gothoan invaders on the horizon, and Van couldn't afford to lose her edge. Though the argument made sense in her head, she knew it was only an excuse. The simple truth was that she was afraid.

Finally, she needed to focus on something other than a non-existent and ill-advised relationship with Cade Meryan. Running a brand new vessel provided an abundance of diversions. Van needed to go over system function reports, work out crew accommodations and memorize every inch of *Pandora* down to the last rivet. Experience had taught her that often times the smallest detail could save a person's life. For all the centuries spent exploring space, it remained a dangerous place where the slightest error could result in catastrophe.

Pulling up the computer files for *Pandora*, she lost herself in the specs. She discovered the ship's small hangar bay carried four shuttles and a personal captain's vessel to boot. The shuttles weren't fighters by any means, intended for short distance space or atmospheric surveys and investigations. *Pandora* wasn't equipped with fighters at all, but made up for it in her armaments. Van considered the captain's cruiser, *Prometheus*, more than an adequate trade-off.

She shut down the display and headed for the door. Paul grinned when he noticed her excitement. "It's still a little early for lunch."

"Shut up," she said, returning his smile. "Did you know this tub has its very own captain's shuttle?"

"You're kidding. Can I come with you to look at her?"

He'd already braced his hands on the arms of the chair, preparing to stand, but she had to disappoint him. "Sorry, not this time. Nothing personal, but I'd like to check her out on my own."

His smile never wavered as he sat back down. "Pee in the corners, mark your territory?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"No problem, I understand. Have you decided about crew quarters yet, deck three or four?"

"There are some pretty nice cabins on both, but I'd like to keep the two larger quarters on deck four for VIPs. I put Admiral Meryan in one of those."

"I take it you're going to put the balance of the crew on the same deck?"

"You know me too well. The techies can bunk down on deck four as well, until we reach Psmanth. I claim the largest cabin on deck three and I'd like you on the same level. You can choose from among any of the others and I'll assign senior staff to the rest."

Van didn't volunteer that she'd deliberately chosen to house Cade as far from her quarters as possible and Paul didn't ask. The captain's cabin was the largest on the ship and easily three times the size of her old quarters aboard *Falcon*. She felt a little uncomfortable about claiming them, unaccustomed to such luxury, but that was captain's prerogative.

"Understood. Enjoy your tour."

Taking the lift from the bridge on deck two in route to the hangar bay, Van stopped on every level, checking not only crew quarters but also the maintenance shafts and alcoves. On deck five, the arboretum proved fascinating and she wondered that the ship's designers would think to include one at all. Perhaps someone finally understood the need to feel connected to a real planet during a long space mission. The small trees and the feel of real grass under her feet provided that sensation without the need to stop and take shore leave. Van discovered a small babbling brook among the grass and stones, possible with the aid of sublevel current generation technology and a large water containment tank.

Prometheus eventually lured her away from the setting and she bypassed the rest of the tour for later, directing the lift to deck ten. It seemed to take forever to travel through the remainder of the ship, but when the doors finally parted, it proved to be worth the wait. The captain's shuttle took up the far side of the hangar bay and with no one else around, Van took her time

appreciating the exterior lines. It was larger than expected, though the schematics told her the shuttle was fifty feet long and almost thirty high. The bottom rested flat against the deck plating because it came equipped with one thruster engine on each side that folded down into position. The rounded nose allowed for aerodynamics, the top tapered upward and then around toward the rear. The design engineer chose to add twin tail fins. The fins gave it a menacing look that she appreciated.

Though assigned to the ship itself, the cruiser felt like a personal gift and her heart thudded in anticipation of seeing the inside. Van crossed the deck and stood at the hatch, figuring out how to open the craft. She spotted a flat panel on the exterior and placed her hand against it. A green light flashed and she heard a beep before the hatch folded upward and into a recessed pocket.

"Cool."

Van stepped inside, awed by the gleaming new instrument panels and plush pilot seats. Most shuttles or captain's yachts automatically made her want to duck, instinctively protecting her from bashing her head against the ceiling. Not this one. The design proved open and roomy, with plenty of height for even the tallest crew member. Apparently, Coalition engineering had finally realized that not all humanoids were vertically challenged and they accounted for it with the new design. For a long while, she walked throughout the main cabin touching the new upholstery and feeling the thick padding under her feet, looking out the smaller portals cut into the sides.

Distracted in her world of discovery, Van lost track of time while she investigated every nook and cranny of the small vessel. She felt like she'd barely scratched the surface and was shocked when the overhead communications system activated.

"Admiral Meryan to Captain Swann."

Van flinched and checked her wrist chronometer. Somehow, she'd lost two hours. "Swann here."

"You're late, Captain. I hope you have a very good excuse."

Crap. "I'm on my way now, Admiral."

Chapter Fourteen

VAN SAT BACK and looked across the table at her companion. For whatever reason, Cade hadn't really commented on her tardiness other than to say it better not happen again. Conversation so far had been light, but Van was hyper-aware of every word spoken between them and Cade's unconscious gestures. Now that she'd gotten to know her a little better, Van

realized how soft-spoken and thoughtful the princess was most of the time. It made the occasions when she lost her temper all the more impressive because of their rarity.

They shared a small table in the largest of the VIP quarters on deck four and Van noticed that all the rooms had a similar layout. Not surprising considering they were aboard a starship, but she wished the designers could use a little more ingenuity in the separate living cabins. Still, the simple meal in an erstwhile unimaginative space seemed intimate. Lingering looks with little conversation made the tension between them palpable until Cade broached a topic Van enjoyed.

"What do you think of your new ship, Vanessa?"

It caught her a little off guard for Cade to address her so informally and no one utilized her whole name. "I have to admit, it's pretty impressive. I decided to explore after you left the bridge, which is why I lost track of time. I was in the hangar bay."

Cade flashed a smile that turned her insides to jelly. "You found the captain's yacht."

Lunch forgotten, Van leaned across the table. "She's small enough for one person to operate, but still fully equipped. You could shuttle half the crew to the surface of a planet if you had to, it functions atmospherically as well as in space. Did you know it even has a cargo hold and an escape pod and has room for torpedoes and laser cannons?"

"I'm pleased the designers incorporated some of my suggestions into the vessel." Cade sounded a little surprised.

She wasn't the only one. "Your suggestions?" Van felt a little silly for not realizing the crown princess of Alara probably had her fingers in every aspect of Coalition business. Considering she was both military and royalty, it made sense the various departments would ask her opinion on a host of subjects.

"Yes, from what I understand, the design team sent out feelers to all Coalition Commanders. They figured people who'd been in the trenches would know what equipment they needed in any unexpected circumstances."

"That's unexpected," Van admitted. "Have you already seen the yacht, then?"

Cade shook her head. "Only on paper. Maybe you could show it to me in the next few days, just the two of us?"

Something in her voice told Van there was more to the question than a casual request for a tour. She detected a light flush on Cade's cheeks and her eyes glittered with an intense expression she couldn't mistake. Coupled with the obvious interest, she detected a bit of nervousness, illustrated by the fact that Cade had hardly touched her food. Strangely, the fact that Cade was uncomfortable made her own tension vanish. Tenderness replaced it, along with another sensation she couldn't name. Van sensed the exact moment her carefully erected shield cracked, but for once chose not to resist.

"I'd like that."

Cade reached across to squeeze her hand and Van never flinched. If asked later, she couldn't have said what might have happened had Commander Byra not interrupted.

"Bridge to Captain Swann. We've arrived at the asteroid field."

She held Cade's gaze. "Understood, I'm on the way." Once the connection terminated she said, "I'm sorry, but I have to go."

Van realized she truly meant it. Before arriving, she dreaded spending time alone with Cade yet now she wanted nothing more than to stay.

She felt a little breathless with anticipation even after arriving on the bridge. Finding it difficult to concentrate, all she could see was Cade's perfect smile and the promise in those dark eyes. She longed to skim her fingertips over satiny skin, to take her time touching and memorizing the lean, strong body. The hurried groping of their previous time together hardly counted as far as she was concerned and the intensity of her longing stunned her. She wanted to see where things might lead and, for once, didn't feel the need to run.

"Captain?"

"What?"

She had the impression Paul had asked an important question. All eyes rested on her, awaiting her next command and a few people looked a little concerned. Van pushed her amorous thoughts away, not about to admit to woolgathering.

"I said the container is in place. The transition matrix tech is standing by for your command."

"We need a better name than that. Transition matrix tech is such a mouthful."

Paul grinned, easily falling into their familiar banter. "How about transport tech' or TMT?"

"Remind me not to let you name anything. Now, back to more important things."

Van instructed the tech to initiate the sequence and watched the front viewer, magnified to a particular spot on a small, floating chunk of rock. It took a few seconds, but then the metal cylinder slowly materialized over a thousand kilometers away. Van had secretly worried the process would deform the object, a frightful omen for someone unlucky enough to stand on the dais.

The few techies on the bridge cheered, but she quickly squelched the enthusiasm. "All right, people. It's one thing to send an inanimate object from here to there, but the real test is in the retrieval. Commander Byra, would you do the honors?"

"Cheerfully."

Van smiled as she watched him. Paul seemed so happy with such a simple task and her smile slowly evaporated. She felt tears prick her eyes as she considered how hard his life was before now. Farming Celestas land was an unforgiving enterprise, the soil rarely yielding enough to make the backbreaking labor worthwhile. Then he'd lost his entire family to Gothoan invaders, receiving a permanent reminder each time he looked in a mirror. She tracked the scar on his face with her eyes. Barely a man, he'd almost died during that attack and lost everything that mattered. When he was finally healthy enough to leave the battlefield hospital, he'd already been gang-pressed into military service. Though the choice to enlist hadn't been his, he'd served honorably and Van wouldn't know what to do without him.

"Transfer back to the ship is successful, Captain. The tech says the object is fully intact."

"Fine," she said softly, surreptitiously clearing her throat. "Have someone run a microscopic analysis. Let's make sure it's really unaltered before we send a person through."

"Sure thing."

Facing forward, she instructed the navigator to resume their previous course. *Pandora* broke away from the asteroid field and the front portal cleared, presenting the depths of space. They travelled at a leisurely pace within the solar system, using only sublight that offered an amazing view but she wasn't interested in the scenery. Van was more curious concerning her uncharacteristic bout of sentimentality. She and Paul had worked together for a long time. He was like family, but she didn't remember ever being so mushy about his past before.

Maybe that's what love did to a person.

Her eyes widened and she swallowed hard as the full impact of her thoughts struck home. Van tensed and her hands fisted, but the expected sense of panic never materialized. If anything, a quiet acceptance permeated her soul and for the briefest instant, she felt lighter than air. Then the questions came, flooding her consciousness. Was she sure what she felt for Cade was love? She had no basis for comparison, having never felt the emotion. Oh, she loved Paul and her job, but that was different.

What if Cade didn't feel the same way? Just because she was physically attracted didn't mean she'd want anything long-term.

Long-term? What was she thinking? Van didn't do long-term relationships of any kind.

The previously anticipated reaction finally happened and she felt her breathing come fast and shallow. Her hands started to shake and she felt sweat break out over her body. Feeling sick, she told herself to breathe, but everything seemed out of focus. Van mumbled something about having work waiting in her office and stumbled from the bridge.

The doors had barely closed before she started pacing her office like a caged tiger, trying to convince herself it wasn't true. She couldn't be in love. Love was for suckers, people who deluded themselves into believing in happily ever after.

Van stopped in mid-step, trying to think things through. Maybe it wasn't really love. Maybe she was just really, really sexually attracted to Cade. That was probably it. It was just a bad case of lust. Van just needed to get hold of her libido and not do anything stupid in front of Cade.

Since avoiding Cade completely was off the table, she'd just have to get control of her raging libido. She planned to spend the next few hours focusing on boring Coalition paperwork and reinforcing her willpower. By the time she had to show up for dinner, Van intended to be back to her normal solitary self.

She checked the chronometer, dismayed to see that only four hours remained until dinner. Why did there have to be so many meals in one day?

WHEN VAN ARRIVED for dinner, Cade surprised her with a dirty martini. Although she personally compared the Earth concoction to the taste of rocket fuel, she'd noticed Van drinking them at the banquet.

"Thank you." Van frowned and looked around the room. "I thought we were having dinner."

"We are, but I thought we could relax for a few minutes first. Come, sit down with me."

Cade led her into the sitting area. The curved sofa was the only large piece of furniture and she waited for Van to choose a spot before sitting a couple of feet away. She wanted to be close enough to encourage an intimate atmosphere without encroaching on Van's personal space. Deeply interested in pursuing a personal relationship, Cade intended to take things slowly. To catch her, she couldn't let Van know she was pursuing.

"How was your first day at the helm?"

"Fine." Van nodded once and took a long taste of her drink.

Not good, Cade thought. Monosyllabic answers. She could sympathize with Van's unease, having felt the same way at lunch. Yet despite both their discomfort at the noon meal, they'd reached out to one another. Clearly, Van had time to pull away again, but Cade wasn't going to let her go too far. She smiled and shifted to her side, facing Van and drawing one knee up between them as she leaned back against the sofa. The relaxed posture moved her a little closer without making it obvious.

Cade sipped her juice, trying to think of something to break the ice. "How did the test go? Did the transition matrix function properly?"

Talk of such mundane things seemed the right approach. Van's tension dissipated. "Surprisingly, there weren't any problems. I had one of the engineers run a particle scan after we retrieved the container and it checked out all right."

"Why is that so shocking? You step onto the platform at the planetary transfer stations without a second thought."

"True," Van said, after taking another healthy swig of her drink, "but those machines are hard-wired into a stationary system on a much larger scale. There are tons of safety measures in place and staff on hand around the clock to monitor the slightest variance."

"I'm sure the Alaran and Coalition scientists have taken every precaution, Van. I don't think engineers would've installed the unit onto our fleet vessels if they weren't sure it was safe."

"Maybe, but we don't have anyone permanently assigned to that station unless the system is in use. That means there's no one around to notice any abnormalities. Right now, we barely even have a skeleton crew, much less someone to keep an eye on things."

She seemed really concerned and Cade sought a way to reassure her. "There's nothing to say a captain can't reorder her crew as she sees fit. Once your people arrive onboard, you could make the transition station a permanent post."

"I hadn't thought of that. Maybe I will, thanks."

Taking her empty glass, Cade stood and offered her a refill. "Are you hungry," she asked, walking over to the kitchenette.

"Famished. What are we having?" Van started to get up, but Cade stopped her.

"You can stay there. I thought it would be nice if we could be a little less formal for dinner. It's nothing fancy."

Van's expression tightened again and Cade thought she detected a hint of panic, but Van followed her suggestion and leaned back against the sofa. "Sounds good to me."

Cade retrieved a platter of sliced meats and vegetables from the warmer and another piled high with Thuban flatbread. She thought Van looked a little tired and wanted her to unwind and enjoy her meal. As the evening progressed, she kept the conversation focused on everyday topics such as ship's operations and Van's latest mission to patrol the sector's outer border. Hours later, Cade glanced at her chronometer and couldn't believe how late it was.

"I should probably let you get some sleep."

Van didn't seem very enthusiastic and Cade realized how nice it had been for both of them to just sit and talk without any pressure, but it was time to say goodnight. Now she had to figure out how to forward her agenda without completely scaring Van away.

"I really enjoyed dinner with you tonight." Cade kept her tone soft and held Van's eyes as they stood by the door.

"Uh, yeah. Me too."

"I'll see you for breakfast?"

Van stammered and said, "I might have to be on the bridge early."

"Now, none of that." She took Van's hand, feeling her tremble slightly. "You know the rules of diplomatic contact."

"C...contact? But Cade, it's not like we don't know each other so do the rules really apply to us?"

It was a perfect opening and she couldn't resist. Cade smiled and said, "I couldn't agree more. They don't."

She bent down slowly, giving Van plenty of time to pull away if that was what she wanted. When she didn't, Cade kissed her gently. She stepped closer and slid her arms around Van's waist, concerned she might suddenly change her mind and back away. Instead, her lips opened and Van's tongue touched hers. The kiss deepened and Cade moaned at the heady sensations spiraling through her body.

Van's fingers threaded her hair and tugged her closer. Cade had intended to woo her gently, to prove to her over time that the universe wouldn't end if they were together, but the taste of Van's lips made her forget all that. She lost track of everything but the feel of Van's body pressed tightly against her own. Strong hands roamed over her back, stoking the fire and Cade wanted to feel Van under her.

She kept her hold on Van but started in the direction of the bedroom, encouraging her to walk backward slowly. Van broke the kiss and took the skin of Cade's throat into her mouth, sucking lightly. Cade gasped and stumbled a little but they finally crossed the threshold. Hands pulled at the hem of her shirt, one slid underneath to touch her stomach. Cade's muscles clenched, driving her desire up another notch. Now beside the bed, she reached for the front closure of Van's uniform.

Unexpectedly, Van grasped her hands to stop her. "I can't, I'm sorry."

"I know you want me. Why are you resisting?"

The apprehension in the green eyes faded. "Because if we do this, I'm not going to be able to walk away."

"Good, I don't want you to walk away. Don't you know how I feel about you, how much I care?"

Vulnerability wasn't an emotion a Coalition commander did very well and Cade was no exception. The admission cost her, but was well worth the price when Van relented. Silently, she reached for the bottom of Cade's shirt again and slid it over her head. Her eyes fixated on Cade's breasts, pupils dilated and her breath came in short bursts.

"You're so beautiful."

"You've seen it before," Cade pointed out shyly.

Van's gaze met hers. "Not like this. Before it was instinct and I was half asleep."

"And now?"

"Now, I want to remember every second, every touch and every taste."

Cade had no words to respond so she did the only thing that she could think of. She kissed her. Clothing disappeared and Van pulled back the covers, lying on the sheets to wait for Cade. When she settled down onto Van, the warm breath against her neck caused her to shiver. Van's body was soft but strong, yielding as Cade pressed down from above. Her scent drew Cade in and the love she felt seized her, driving the breath from her lungs. She took a shuddering breath in reaction to such a powerful emotion and kissed Van again.

Van surged up against her, returning the kiss, never once showing signs of hesitation. The contact gentle and unhurried, Cade poured all of her heart into the caress and Van responded. Cade's tongue stroked along the soft upper lip before nipping and kissing her way to Van's neck. She touched the small, firm breasts for the first time, feeling the nipples harden against her palm before she took one into her mouth. Groaning, Van arched her back and placed a hand behind Cade's head, encouraging firmer contact.

Her thighs parted as Van opened to her. Fingers tangled in her hair urging her lower and Cade released her breast. Brushing her skin lightly, Cade explored the body beneath her. Unhurried in her lovemaking she sought only to release the truth of her feelings without words, tasting as she slipped farther down until she rested between Van's legs. No thoughts remained to her except rampant, hungry desire.

"Cade."

The single word, spoken so breathlessly, caused a rush of desire that Cade felt in the form of moisture at her core. Gently, she brushed her fingers through the obvious signs of Van's pleasure, spreading her moisture over sensitive flesh. Cries of arousal issued from her throat as she pressed against Cade, her fingers tightening on her shoulders as Cade nipped her thigh. One finger slipped inside and she heard Van gasp. Cade lowered her head and tasted Van for the first time, moaning in need. Caressing with her tongue, she moved suggestively over the tender knot of flesh at the apex. Van began to shudder, her head moving from side to side.

Her cries, tremors and taste began to overwhelm Cade and she found herself moving against Van's leg. Unconsciously, she mimicked the synchronous rhythm of the light thrusting against her mouth. Van's body suddenly went rigid with the intensity of her climax and Cade was helpless to resist. She joined her in that infinite moment of ecstasy.

For long hours, they made love to each other, giving and receiving with equal ardor. When Van finally fell asleep, she lay curled against Cade with her arms holding tightly. Cade didn't know what tomorrow would bring, but she would do everything in her power to keep Van beside her. It wouldn't be easy and she acknowledged the possibility that Van would withdraw. Cade had never felt like this for anyone and she vowed not to give up. No matter what.

Chapter Fifteen

VAN SAT QUIETLY in her command chair though internally, her heart ricocheted randomly around her ribcage. She'd awakened snuggled against Cade's naked body, one hand trapped between powerful thighs. Managing to extricate herself without waking the other woman, Van had escaped to the safety of her own quarters. Yet after a shower and cup of coffee, she had to admit she was more confused than ever.

Loving Cade was like nothing she'd ever before experienced. The strength of the desire to return to her bed left Van reeling. It was so hard to admit her true feelings, even to herself, but she'd known she couldn't share the morning meal with Cade. The thought of food made her feel sick so she'd reported to duty early. Cade had arrived an hour later, shortly after the day crew, and taken her customary seat to Van's right. She didn't mention Van's absence from her cabin, for which Van was eternally grateful.

"Helm, what's our position?" Van asked more for something to do than anything.

"One point four light-years from Celestas, Captain."

Van huffed in irritation. They weren't quite halfway to Psmanth and she chafed at the delay. She needed time to herself to think and that wasn't possible with Cade aboard. She wondered if Cade would permit her to use the ramjet engines. After all, they needed to test the FTL drive, didn't they? Van glanced at Cade from the corner of her eye and dismissed the notion. The shortest burn would send them hurtling out of the system, far beyond their destination. Even if it didn't, she wanted to be with Cade, although it was driving her crazy.

Push, pull...back and forth. Van needed to make up her mind. Either she loved Cade or she didn't. But how could what she felt be love? She hadn't really known Cade for very long.

Regardless of the internal struggle, Van feared she already had the answer. She just wasn't ready to face the truth.

"Captain," a man whose name she didn't know spoke from a nearby station. "Long-range sensors are picking up another ship on an intercept course."

"How long range?" When he blinked in confusion, she clarified by asking, "How far away are they, Lieutenant?"

"Five million kilometers."

"That is certainly a long way," Cade supplied helpfully.

"It is. I'm impressed the sensors can detect anything at that distance. Are you sure it's a craft, Lieutenant, and not a floating piece of space rock?"

"No mistake, ma'am. It's definitely a vessel, a big one if my instruments are right."

"Well let's hope they are since they're brand new." Van considered what to do next, pleased that Cade didn't jump in and try to run the show. At their current distance, the vessel didn't present an immediate concern. "Try hailing them."

A few moments later he said, "No response."

"If I may?" Van nodded for Cade to continue. "Maybe their systems aren't as advanced. It could be an old cargo barge or something."

"Good point. Notify me when they're within conventional communications range."

"Aye, Captain."

Van turned her gaze forward again. The welcome distraction hadn't lasted nearly long enough. She wondered if she could turn the bridge over to Cade and retreat to her own office, as Paul had done. Probably not. If she tried it, one of two things would happen. Either Cade would remind her she had passenger status on this trip or Cade would remember how much she liked being in charge and take over completely.

Why did Van have to like bossy women?

"Van."

Still frowning, she looked over and met Cade's gaze. She had a smile on her full lips and the artificial lights shone off her indigo hair. Van longed for another taste of Cade's kisses and forgot about wanting space.

"What?"

"I said we need to talk. You can't avoid me forever."

Van glanced around, sure she would find the crew listening but no one could've heard Cade's low voice. "I know, but now isn't the time."

"Then perhaps lunch in my quarters will provide..."

"Captain."

Startled, and annoyed for being so, Van looked at the crewman. "What is it, Lieutenant? I told you to let me know when they're in conventional hailing range."

"That's just it, ma'am. They are." He looked slightly panicked.

"Impossible, no one has sublight engines that fast."

"It's true, Captain. I looked away from sensors for just a few minutes and when I looked back, there they were."

Rather than lose herself in the endless debate, Van asked, "Distance?"

"Fifty thousand kilometers, ma'am."

"That's right on top of us. Raise the shields." She quickly opened an intra-ship communications channel. "Commander Byra, report to the bridge immediately."

Van kept her voice calm with some effort and checked the forward portals. Through the transparent gallium, she saw the usual backdrop of space, but in the distance was a tiny speck. As she watched, the speck grew until it took on the clear lines of a space vessel. It hurtled toward them, increasing in magnitude as it advanced. For one insane moment, Van thought it would collide and continue on its way, never aware that another ship had existed.

"Hail them," Cade ordered when Van didn't.

"No response, Admiral. They're firing laser cannons."

"Return fire," Van directed seamlessly.

The woman at the helm station pressed a series of buttons, but hadn't completed the sequence when *Pandora* rocked under the assault. Even without the aid of magnified viewing, Van could see their weapons made little difference.

"Fire plasma torpedoes."

"We can't, Captain," the helmswoman responded. "Those systems aren't online."

"Whose brilliant idea was that?"

The lift to the rear of the bridge opened and Paul staggered out. He had a knot on his temple and looked a little dazed. "What the hell's going on?" Then his eyes tracked to the front window and he blanched as he received his answer.

Everything around her suddenly seemed to slow down as Van's mind raced ahead. There was no logical explanation for this unprovoked attack inside the Andromeda system. Roving outlaw raids weren't uncommon in space, but they generally confined their attacks to the outer regions. Besides, even a first-day cadet could tell this ship had nothing to do with barely organized marauders. It was too big, fast and well equipped. She'd told Cade the first time they met that she was good at tactics and that ability told her this was another attempt on the crown princess.

"Captain, they've stopped firing and are hailing."

Van ignored the lieutenant. "Cade, get down to the captain's yacht. The hull is an alloy of trinium and alumenethal. It should be more resistant to scans than the *Pandora*." This was exactly where those tiny details of knowing one's ship came in handy.

"I'm not going anywhere," Cade said stubbornly.

"Now."

Cade went from stalwart to pissed off in an instant. "Who the hell do you think you are, Captain?"

Van fought the anger that surged through her when Cade attempted to pull rank. Instead, she allowed her true feelings for the princess to show in her eyes and softened her voice. "Please, we don't have much time before they start shooting again. This is about you, don't ask me how I know but I do. Asking you to hide out in the shuttle is the only way I know how to keep you safe."

Cade's expression softened at her admission, but then she caught on to the content of Van's explanation and held up her wrist. "My bio-chip."

All Coalition personnel had a device implanted to track bio-signs as a matter of course. Each was unique to the individual and easily distinguishable with a specialized algorithm.

"That ship is more advanced than anything we've ever seen. What makes you think they won't be able to pick you out from everyone else onboard? Please, Cade. Go."

Cade stood without another word and started for the lift. She paused briefly when she reached it, waiting for the doors to open. "If this does come to a firefight, I'll launch *Prometheus* to back you up."

Van had swiveled around in her chair to watch her leave. "Sounds good. Now get going...oh, and Cade?"

Cade waited, but Van couldn't say the words. They stuck in her throat and she knew if anything happened to Cade, she'd never forgive herself. Apparently, she didn't have to.

"I know," Cade assured her. "Me too."

As soon as the doors closed, Van turned back around to face front. "Connect the transmission."

Audio-visual technology interfaced with holographics to display the communiqué directly over the forward portal. Van flinched, treated to a twenty by fifteen foot view of a man at once familiar and unknown. She recognized the white hair and elongated joints from the top of the staircase at the banquet. That he was a Gothoan wasn't in question, but she'd seen him before and it wasn't when he kidnapped Cade.

Commander Byra gasped and Van thumbed the mute control on her console. "What is it?"

"That's Senator Benter Mentis, the Gothoan rep on the Sector Council."

The information created a hundred new questions, but now wasn't the time to pursue them. It looked like Mentis was winding down from his opening spiel. Van switched on the volume.

"...if you surrender her now, I promise to forego the execution of your crew."

She was right. This was about Cade.

Van's mouth went dry and her hands started to sweat, but she responded with her usual bravado. "Over my rotting corpse. I thought your client wanted her humiliated. Why do I get the feeling the rules have changed?"

"We should've eliminated the Meryan threat from the beginning," Mentis asserted angrily. "Our agent will control the throne of Alara and when we invade, there will be nothing the vaunted Coalition can do to stop us."

He'd told her more of the enemy's plans in the last thirty seconds than they'd discovered during the entire mission on Tokar. Van hoped needling him would cause Mentis to be even more forthcoming.

"Spare me the super villain riff, Mentis. No wonder you're not calling the shots. I bet someone really has to keep a tight rein on you."

"I see you've heard of me."

Talk about an ego. "Actually, I hadn't. My first officer had to tell me who you are. Did you know," she said casually, "that in the old Earth language, Latin, your last name means mind? Of course, no one speaks Latin because it's a dead language. But that's not important. If you switched your names around, last to first instead of first to last it might translate to Mind Bender. Appropriate I suppose since you're clearly psychotic..."

"Enough. Surrender Princess Cade to me or I'll destroy your ship."

It looked like her time to stall was up and Van hoped she'd given Cade enough time to evade the enemy ship's instruments. She frowned in disapproval that he dared use Cade's first name even if it was the custom when referring to her by the formal title.

"You know I'm not going to do that or you wouldn't have fired first, and if you'd bothered to scan my ship, you'd know she's not here."

Mentis looked surprised and turned to one of his people.

"She's right, sir. We're no longer detecting the princess's bio-signature."

"Find her."

"Forget it, Mentis." Van didn't attempt to conceal her amusement at his reaction.

The senator's face reddened in anger. "I know she's there somewhere; there isn't anywhere else to go. But since you won't give her up, you've left me no choice."

The transmission ended abruptly and Van instinctively reacted to what was coming next. "Brace yourselves. Fire all available weapons. Chang, get us out of here."

Pandora turned sluggishly to port. It wasn't that her systems were ineffective or damaged, just that the assaulting vessel pounded her so hard. Mentis's ship dwarfed *Pandora*, like a man standing on an anthill. Yet Van realized that for all their size, ants could sting a man to death.

"Lieutenant...?"

"Marbrey, ma'am."

"Right, concentrate the cannon fire on their central shield grid. Chang, evasive maneuvers, try to put some distance between us without getting us blasted apart."

"Ma'am," Marbrey said, "the cannons can't penetrate the shields."

"Just keep firing at that point. Admiral Meryan, what's your status?" Van considered firing the engines just as she had during that fateful encounter with the *Falcon*, but held back. This time her crew was a group of technicians, civilians. They wouldn't know how to react if they had

to abandon ship. It was straining the limits of their capabilities to respond to an armed threat. This had to end quickly.

"I'm here, Captain. I'm ready to launch on your word."

Van swallowed hard and looked at Paul. He stared back with a grim expression. She didn't want to risk Cade this way, but they all knew they needed the support. "Do it," she ordered gruffly. "Keep targeting the shield grid. The concentrated fire should weaken them in that area. If we can disable the shields, we can take out their weapons and engines."

"I understand. Launching in ten seconds."

"Cade, watch your ass." Van didn't know if she heard her, but she turned to Byra. "Give her some cover fire, Paul. Protect her."

He nodded and turned to his board, firing as fast as the systems rearmed.

Van watched the enemy vessel turn its fire toward the *Prometheus*. It was almost as if he knew Cade piloted the small yacht. Without the additional protection provided by *Pandora's* hull, the scans had finally located her. For all their efforts, Cade evaded the plasma torpedoes and laser cannons, zigzagging her way toward the behemoth.

Much smaller than Mentis's vessel, *Prometheus* ably avoided the bulk of weapons fire on her approach, hovering just outside the larger ship's protective bubble. Her proximity prevented him from targeting her. Cade opened up with the yacht's laser cannons and an occasional octanitro bomb. Van still couldn't breathe easy, not until this ended and Cade returned safely.

Pandora twisted into another evasive roll and Van clasped the arms of her chair. Their new position prevented her from seeing the captain's yacht. "Paul, how are we doing?"

"We're getting through, their shields are weakening."

Chang brought the ship back around, darting toward the larger vessel so Marbrey and Byra could fire freely. Suddenly, the ruby beams of laser fire conjoined, contributed by Byra and Marbrey, and Cade aboard the *Prometheus*. Just before the shields failed and a lucky shot punched through, Van saw it.

"Cade, you're too close. Get out of there."

She watched the shuttle heel to starboard, executing a half-roll away from Mentis's vessel. An explosion ripped through a point of space directly in front of them so intensely that Van had to look away. When the brilliance faded, she discovered she was standing though she didn't remember doing so. Huge chunks of metal flew away in every direction and there wasn't any sign of *Prometheus*.

"Cade, are you there? Respond, damn it. Cade."

The Gothoan vessel had stopped firing, presumably because the explosion damaged the weapons. Cade could come out of hiding now and return to the *Pandora*.

"Captain," Commander Byra said softly. "We're being hailed."

She assumed it was Cade. "Patch it in."

Mentis's gray visage filled the image, resembling a grinning praying mantis. "I thank you for your assistance, Captain. Coercing the princess into piloting the other ship to her own demise was very clever."

Fury surged through her, fast and hot. She wanted to tear through the holographic image and wrap her hands around his throat. "You bastard."

"Don't worry, I'll keep my word. You and your crew are free to go."

The communications link ended abruptly. "Blow that ship apart."

The men tried to comply, but the scarlet light shot out into the emptiness of space. Mentis's navigator had engaged the faster than light drive and they were already gone. In the vacuum of space, there wasn't even a wake of displaced air to tell them it had left.

"Stop shooting. You might hit Admiral Meryan. I want sensors searching every piece of debris within a parsec."

The crew looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. Paul's expression hinted that he was fighting with his emotions, but no one moved to carry out her orders.

"Do it. She could be floating out there in an environmental suit."

Marbrey turned away, unable to maintain eye contact. "Scanning." His voice broke.

Paul stood and walked up to her. He rested a hand on her shoulder. "Captain..."

"No, don't say it." Van felt tears threaten, but wouldn't allow them to fall in front of the crew.

"Captain," he said a little stronger, "she's gone. I'm sorry, but she's gone."

Through a watery haze, she looked around the bridge. No one would meet her eyes. She wanted to deny it, to make Paul take the words back. She knew he wouldn't. Cade was dead. Van had given the order that cost Cade her life. Mentis was right about that. Only now that it was too late could she admit the truth. She had loved Cade and that final explosion would haunt her for the rest of her life.

Disregarding the truth of Commander Byra's words, Van spent another twelve hours searching before she relented.

"Ensign Chang, turn us around. Best possible speed back to Alara." The words tasted like ash in her mouth.

Chapter Sixteen

SORROW AND ANGER competed for dominance within her as Dorma grieved the loss of her eldest child. Along with the death of her daughter, Alara had lost their beloved heir. Dorma loved her young son, but he could never replace Cade in the eyes of the people since the ruler had to be female. She had scheduled a planetary day of mourning for the day after tomorrow, and Dorma prayed she could make it through the opening ceremony without breaking down.

She felt the fury surge anew that the Gothoan military were finally successful in killing Cade. No one had considered them a serious threat in the last decade, since their defeat during the Border Wars. The knowledge that a Gothoan emissary, grudgingly trusted on the Senate Council, was responsible for such an atrocity was like a stab in the back. Dorma had never trusted Mentis, though he went out of his way to ingratiate himself, but she never expected him capable of such horrors. The fact that his actions revealed the latest Gothoan threat provided little comfort.

Dorma had sobbed until there weren't any more tears. Her son, Andres, tried to get her to eat something. So consumed with worry for his mother, he'd followed her around until she lost her temper and chased him from her side. She regretted the outburst, but her pain numbed her to the point where apology was beyond her abilities. Now, she wandered the palace grounds like a shade, visiting all of the places her darling Cade loved best.

The Gederium Falls concealed a small cave behind the cascading waters and a deep, subterranean pool resided there. Cade had loved to dive the dangerous waters and hid the knowledge from her mother so she wouldn't worry, but Dorma had always known. The falls still ran just as clearly and powerfully as before, but somehow Dorma thought they'd lost their majesty. She knew she'd never look at them the same way.

From there, she explored the reesha pastures, watching the muscular animals race across the expanse. Standing on two legs, the muscled thighs bunched and stretched while the tiny, monkey-like front legs dangled at chest height, all but useless. Cade's favorite mount, a chocolate male named Rahmeed, saw her and scampered near to beg for a treat. He'd appeared to look around, searching for his master. Dorma had stroked his massive, bony head, her soul heavy with the knowledge that Cade would never ride him again. When she couldn't bear to look at him anymore, Dorma walked out across the open fields toward the Solstice Canyon.

Her bodyguards, two brave and beautiful young women, followed at a respectful distance. Even in her grief, the queen wasn't allowed the full solitude she craved. The sun began its graceful descent as she strolled along. Shadows lengthened and the heat of the day abated slightly.

Cade had adored summers on Alara and all the growing things she found there. She loved the rare life forms the planet offered and had traversed this region of the castle grounds as a child and into adulthood. Trees loomed thickly here and the rough wallick grass stood thigh-high, grasping with soft, claw-like thorns at her heavy trousers. Dorma reached the marble stepping-stones that led to the canyon rim and turned back to her escorts.

"Wait here, please."

Her words sounded hollow, devoid the strength and certainty she felt a monarch should always possess. Regardless, she read the suffering and respect in their eyes. Both clapped their right fists against their chests in the Alaran form of a salute and nodded in compliance.

The distance from here wasn't far. Dorma walked the last twelve meters to the edge of the gorge. Resting her hands on the wooden rail, she gazed into the distance. For once, the breathless beauty of this sacred chasm failed to move her. Captain Swann's words returned, permanently etched in her memory and on her heart.

"I'm so sorry, Queen Dorma, but I wanted you to hear it from me. A Gothoan warship attacked us and Cade is...she's gone. Oh Gods, I'm sorry. I failed you and she's gone."

How the young woman's voice had broken, the misery she felt clear for anyone to hear. Her pain stemmed not in breaking the terrible news to Cade's mother, but from her own loss. Dorma hadn't been sure at the banquet, watching them dance together as if no other couple existed, but now she knew for sure. Vanessa's heartrending admission confirmed what Dorma had suspected. Van had loved her child. The tragedy of her daughter's demise seemed compounded all the more by the loss of a romance not yet realized.

Shouts from a short distance away drew her attention. She turned to see flames leaping high into the air, a cloud of black smoke drifting on the wind. The stables were on fire. Her guards turned to face her, clearly caught in a dilemma. They resisted the urge to rush to assist in putting out the blaze, concern for the queen's safety paramount.

"Go," Dorma urged. "I'm fine, go help the others."

The warriors didn't hesitate, bolting back toward the reesha stables. Dorma watched the fire, the image standing out sharply in the coming darkness, and puzzled over what could have started the blaze. Stable hands used modern cobalt-ion lanterns, eliminating the threat of an open fire near the livestock. The only thing she could imagine was that someone had carelessly harvested some green wallick grass. If not properly dried before bailing and storage, it would spontaneously combust.

Sighing, Dorma took a step toward the stables intending to oversee the fire-fighting operations. From the corner of her eye, she saw something dart from the shadows beneath the trees. When it struck her, Dorma realized it was a person wearing black from head to foot. A dark covering concealed the attacker's features.

The fire was a distraction to catch her alone.

Fighting with all her strength, the high queen resisted her assailant who pushed her backward toward the gorge. She yanked the woolen cap from her attacker's head and gasped in astonishment. Through the anger on the contorted visage, she easily identified the person.

"You?"

Her enemy didn't pause; no empathy appeared. A foot in Dorma's mid-section drove the air from her lungs. She bent forward in reaction but still they grappled, rolling on the ground as each tried to gain the advantage. When a final violent shove sent her flying from the canyon's rim, she realized how foolish she'd been to send her guards away.

VAN TRIED TO swallow the lump in her throat but it refused to dislodge. She buttoned her jacket, thinking that the last time she'd worn the dress uniform had been a happy occasion. She'd received a medal from High Queen Dorma and a passionate kiss from Cade. Now they were both gone. One had died at the hands of a megalomaniac and the other from grief. Rumors abounded that Queen Dorma had flung herself from the highest point of the Solstice Canyon.

She didn't know if it was true, but the image of a woman so riddled with sorrow that she'd take her own life didn't sound like the person Van had met so briefly. Dorma had seemed a force of nature, full of energy and vitality. Then again, people did all kinds of unexpected things. Van never would've guessed she herself would fall so completely for a royal heir.

Thoughts of Cade caused her jaw to clench. Pain surged through her and her stomach roiled while guilt rocked her to the core. She couldn't deny her own culpability in Cade's assassination and it was tearing her up inside. Even the loss of her troops during the assault on Tokar so long ago didn't weigh as heavily and she knew it was something from which she'd never recover.

Finished donning the uniform, Van checked her appearance in the full-length wall mirror. Absently, she noticed the garment hung more loosely upon her frame. Her cheeks looked hollow and she seemed pale. She hadn't been able to eat anything since Cade's murder six days ago and news of the queen's death added to her nausea. Now, she prepared to attend the double funeral when all she wanted was for everyone to leave her alone.

And then what? Wallow in self-pity because the only woman Van had ever loved was dead? Van needed to face it. She was no hero. She couldn't even keep Cade safe.

Anger swelled inside her, hot and fast, a maelstrom of grief, self-loathing and interminable acrimony. Along with the fury came the feeling of falling into a dark well of despair. On all sides, hidden forces maneuvered, plotting mayhem and destruction in a desperate bid for power and she had no idea who they were. Without that key information, she could see no way to bring Cade's killer to justice. Adrenaline pumped through her and she turned away from the mirror to lash out in her rage.

Van grabbed a chair from behind by the top rail and swung it sideways, shattering the mirror. Glass and fractured wood flew in every direction, but she'd already dropped the remnants and moved on. Van yanked every drawer from the dresser and destroyed them by slamming them into the walls or tossing them across the room. One she used to hammer against the top of the chest until it turned into a pile of splinters. Another she sent through the gallium window to land on the castle lawn. She didn't realize she was screaming or that her hands were lumps of raw, bleeding flesh.

The door to the bedroom burst open, but it didn't register. Caught in the haze of maniacal ferocity, she sought to demolish anything she could lay her hands on. Someone shouted but she wouldn't, couldn't, stop. Paul grabbed her from behind, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her back against his chest.

"Stop it, Van. You're hurting yourself." His voice gentled as he tried to reach her.

Van's legs gave out on her and she slumped to the floor. Vaguely, she saw him nod to someone and the door closed. She stopped struggling, inhaling in great shuddering breaths as though she couldn't get enough air. Wordlessly, she turned in Paul's arms, pressed her face against his chest and burst into tears. For a long time, he simply held her, sitting on the floor and rocking her. He didn't speak, but Van didn't want him to.

The rest of the day passed in a haze, a nightmare of half-formed, disjointed images. The physician easily repaired her wounded flesh but couldn't touch the hollow ache as she watched the procession. Full military honors accompanied the dual crystal coffins, announcing their passage from the Alaran hospital to the final resting place. Heavy security contingents lined every street and encircled the cemetery to ensure no surprises on this global day of sorrow.

Through the transparent catafalque, Van saw Queen Dorma posed in a stately repose, her crown shimmering in the afternoon light. The Alaran flag draped Cade's casket, concealing the fact that her body was absent. After words she scarcely heard, pallbearers consigned them to the family mausoleum. Mourners wept and eventually dispersed when a gentle rain started falling. Van remained steady until she was alone. Precipitation soaked into her uniform, hair and eyes. Her skin chilled and gooseflesh erupted on her arms, but she scarcely noticed.

Cade was dead yet it still didn't seem real. The anger from that senseless death hadn't faded in the slightest, nor did Van think it would anytime soon. Until it did, she thought it best to avoid polite company.

"Van, are you okay? Come in out of the rain before you get sick."

She might have found Paul's concern touching...if she could feel anything. Van ignored the question. "It's time to move out, Commander. We still have a crew to retrieve and a mission to start."

"What?" He smiled wryly. "Patrolling the outer edge of the system to guard against Gothoan invaders? Sounds like a huge waste of time."

Her temper overflowed, fueled by his careless words. "And it was just a diplomatic run to Psmanth, wasn't it," she snapped, piercing him with a glare. "That's how we lost her and I won't have it. Lose the complacent attitude, Commander. Is that clear?"

Although he became serious, she detected no sarcasm. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good. We'll leave orbit in one hour. Prepare for an extended stay. We're not setting foot on a planet until we either track him to one or blow him into space dust."

She didn't wait for a response since nothing he said would matter. There wasn't any room for compromise. She headed back into the castle, intent on changing into her duty uniform. Water streamed from her trousers onto the marble floor as she crossed the foyer. A small commotion drew her attention and Van stopped, looking toward the dining hall to see Saral Barab. A group of five surrounded her and Van realized they were members of the royal advisory board.

It made sense. With both Cade and Dorma gone, the crown would fall to the next member of the royal family. Van only wondered why Temis didn't want the position.

As Dorma's sister, Temis stood next in line, but apparently she had no interest in politics. Watching Saral, Van wondered if she was the right choice. Saral looked regal enough, beautiful in an exotic way even for an Alaran. Her skin was almost unbelievably blue, the tips of her ears nearly touching behind her head. In the Rear Admiral's fleet uniform, she made quite an impressive sight. Anyone would easily fall in line with her anointment to the throne, but not Van. To her, no one but Cade should ever sit in command of the system's home world.

Saral must have felt her lingering gaze. Her eyes drifted from Councilwoman Rhetin and found hers. For just an instant, the black eyes narrowed in what felt like a menacing stare. Van felt her body's instinctive reaction, the release of adrenaline as she sensed a threat. Then Saral smiled and dipped her head once and the sensation passed. Van frowned as she continued on her way, convinced she'd imagined the perception of intimidation.

Chapter Seventeen

"DROP IT, COMMANDER. I'm not going anywhere."

"And when I have to carry you off the bridge, what then?"

Byra had the sense to keep his voice down so the crew wouldn't overhear, but there was no mistaking the mixture of hurt and anger warring in his eyes. Her formal treatment of a man who'd long been a friend wounded him and her obstinacy in insisting on remaining in her chair pushed his tolerance.

Van couldn't seem to help it. She hadn't cried since the day of the funeral three weeks ago and now she felt numb inside. Treating him like a stranger preserved the emotional cocoon in which she found herself. Additionally, it almost forced him to give her distance, space that she needed to drive on in the relentless pursuit for the one responsible for her anguish. Under her orders, *Pandora* pursued every ion trail indicative of a vessel's energy signature. They investigated every ship, questioned every crew and if anyone dared to offer a threat of a weapons attack, *Pandora* blew them into space dust without hesitation.

Pirates ran from them on sight now. Smugglers attempted to bribe the captain or offered unconditional surrender. None of them mattered. Van's sole concern was a certain Gothoan with a red-clawed three-headed eagle painted on the hull of his vessel. No one she questioned admitted to any knowledge of his whereabouts, many didn't know of whom she spoke. It had come to the point where Van questioned if she'd managed to deal a more lethal blow during their encounter than Mentis let on. Rather than delight at his possible destruction once he'd left her presence, she raged at having her revenge thwarted. She wanted to see the knowledge in his eyes when she extinguished his life with her own hands.

"Captain," Lieutenant Commander Ozal reported from the aft tactical console. "Ion trail detected at bearing one twenty-one mark four. Initial scans indicate a Hokaran pleasure ship."

Van sat up a little straighter in her chair and fixed her sights on the forward portal. Her body still reacted like it had with the last twenty-seven vessels they'd confronted, heart pounding and adrenaline surging. If she could have, she'd have taken the fight directly to the Gothoan sector but *Pandora* was under strict orders not to leave the system.

"Set an intercept course, Ensign Yugi." The young navigator immediately changed their flight path and Van was never more pleased to have her original crew back aboard.

Twenty minutes later, they met and questioned the captain of the small tub. She'd been satisfied that they weren't enemy insurgents within the first few moments, but Van still questioned them and issued a warning about touring so far from their home world. The sector was a dangerous place these days and an attack could come without notice from any direction.

By the time she finished, the captain clearly wanted nothing more than to escape her presence and Van felt exhausted. The forward viewer winked off, replaced by the backdrop of space and she almost sagged in her chair. With the adrenaline purged from her system, she felt more exhausted than ever. Van stood, maintaining as much dignity as she could on shaking legs, and turned command over to Commander Byra, effecting not to notice the relieved look on his face.

Her young navigator, Ensign Yugi, surprised her by speaking. "Captain, are you all right? Would you like for me to walk with you?"

Looking into the blue eyes of *Pandora*'s only full-blooded Alaran, Van saw the depths of her compassion. In the scheme of things, Ensign Yugi remained a rookie to ship's operations, but Van couldn't find it within her to chastise the officer. Nor could she continue to look at her. Yugi remained a visual reminder of what Van had lost because she shared Cade's planetary history.

Van swallowed and shook her head, her tone far gentler than she'd used with Paul. "Return to your post, Ensign."

Traveling through the ship in the lift, Van allowed the hum of machinery to quiet her internal demons, if only for a short time. She was ready to fall over by the time she reached the sanctuary provided by her quarters, but instead of stripping off her clothes and climbing into bed, she collapsed on the couch. Van couldn't even think of sleeping in the bed. The last time she'd been there, she and Cade had made love. Looking at the sleeping mat, or even entering the room, was too painful because of the memories conjured.

Fully dressed, she lay on the sofa and closed her eyes. As tired as she was, every nerve ending sang and throbbed. Her head ached and felt as though stuffed with cotton. Still, she didn't really expect to sleep, not having done so for more than an hour at a time since Cade's death. Van decided she'd just rest for a while, close her eyes. Maybe then her headache would go away and she could think.

Her body made the decision for her, overriding her mind's unrelenting insistence on action. Muscles relaxed, twitching occasionally from overuse. Slowly, inevitably, she nodded off. Cade's kiss teased her unconscious thoughts and a fleeting smile ghosted across her lips. Her hand jerked before her fingers relaxed, curled toward her face as she lay in an almost fetal position, unwittingly attempting to contain all the turpitude and torment she felt.

Just starting to doze off for the first time in nearly a month, Van jerked upright with a shouted curse when the communication system in her quarters sounded.

"Sorry to disturb you, Captain, but you have a priority communiqué from Coalition Headquarters."

"Put it through," she snapped.

When the face of Commodore Grier popped onto the computer screen, Van's ire overrode her common sense. "What the hell do you want?"

Blonde eyebrows did their best to climb off the top of Erika Grier's forehead. "Since you look like hell, Captain Swann, I'll ignore that."

Anything but contrite, Van sighed her frustration. "Apologies, Commodore. You caught me off guard. What can I do for you?"

"For one thing, you can stop terrorizing the quadrant. Headquarters is flooded with complaints of the Coalition Captain carrying out her own personal crusade throughout the sector."

Van's face froze, her lack of expression masking the surge of anger that was her constant companion these days. "I thought my job was to keep the system safe from rebels and potential invaders."

"You're right, but that doesn't mean scaring the wits out of innocent commanders of every little pleasure cruise."

She remembered the Hokaran ship from a few hours ago. "That was fast."

Grier nodded. "Especially when one of the guests aboard that ship happens to be my boss, Fleet Admiral Akkadia. Now I'm telling you this as your friend and as your commanding officer, drop your hunt for vengeance, Van. Let the intelligence corps handle this."

"Are you kidding me? Those morons couldn't catch a cold. We know exactly who authorized this trip, but the intelligence guys are a bunch of diplomats who tie everything up with red tape and their so-called negotiations. We should go in there blasting every warship we find to smithereens."

"Before you get up on your high horse, I'd like to remind you that you are one of those morons. We can't just fly into Gothoan space with guns blazing and demand retribution for something that could be the act of a single individual."

"Right, a single individual who just happens to have a Gothoan warship that's armed to the teeth."

"I can't argue with that," Grier admitted. "In fact, I didn't call to argue with you at all."

Van's eyes narrowed. She'd been blinded by the storm constantly brewing inside, but now that she looked closer, Grier seemed excited. She kept tapping a finger on her desk in front of the monitor and her eyes shifted about ceaselessly.

"You found something," she stated with conviction.

"Maybe." Grier raised a hand to caution Van and force her to listen. "A deep space survey ship on its way to the Terran Sector reported faint traces of an Alaran on Gothos Prime. They admit that it was only for an instant and that their instruments could have malfunctioned, but we're treating the report seriously."

"My crew and I can be on our way to Gothos immediately. I'll need reinforcements..."

"Stop, Captain. You won't be going."

"You can't be serious. We're the closest ship to the Triangulum Galaxy. We can be there in a little over a week if we use the ram-jet engines."

"Precisely my point. You're the only Coalition vessel patrolling the outer rim of the system in that quadrant. If Gothoa does plan an invasion, *Pandora* is the only defense. Without you there, we'd be offering them the perfect opportunity."

Van dragged her fingers through her hair in annoyance. "This is crazy. Is the Coalition at least planning for them to pull something? After everything that's happened, I'd hate to think the rest of the galaxy is just going along like usual."

"Rest assured, the military is stepping up its presence in the sector and all citizens have been alerted to a possible renewal of hostilities with the Gothoan Empire."

"Hostilities?" Van spat. "You mean we might have another war on our hands. What are you going to do about Admiral Meryan? Are you just going to leave her there to fend for herself?"

Grier's eyes widened and her head went back as if someone had slapped her. "You're assuming that she is on the planet, don't forget that. That being said, we can't ignore the possibility. We dispatched a highly fortified scout ship with a squadron of our best close combat soldiers this morning. Their mission is to slip behind enemy lines undetected, determine if the admiral is or was ever there, and how to retrieve her if possible."

The highly trained soldiers Grier referred to had to be a part of the Scorpion Group and Van felt a little better. No unit had ever existed that was better prepared for battle in or on any terrain. She knew Headquarters expected to find Cade on Gothos or they wouldn't have sent the Scorpions, and Van wasn't about to be left out.

"They're the best, all right, but you said they just left this morning."

"That's right."

"*Pandora* is a lot closer to the Gothoan system and can beat them there. We can provide reinforcements if they need us," she hastily added when Grier looked as if she might argue.

"I'll say this once, Van. No. I shouldn't even have told you about this, but I know there was something between you two. Consider it a professional courtesy and let the Scorpions handle it."

The compassion in Grier's voice only irritated her more, but there wasn't any use in continuing the discussion. The commodore had given her a direct order and expected her to follow it.

"I understand."

"Good. I'll let you know just as soon as I hear anything."

A few minutes later, Grier signed off. Van considered all she'd learned from the commodore and knew she couldn't go back to patrolling the outer rim while someone else attempted to rescue Cade. It just wasn't in her. She glanced at the sofa and regretted the lack of sleep while her heart rejoiced at the news that her lover might still be alive. Van thought she should have known. She would have felt it if Cade was truly dead.

Van stripped off her shirt and headed for the shower. Nothing in hell or in heaven could stop her from her next course of action. The only possible delay would come when she gave the crew the option to disobey orders with her or return to headquarters on the ship's lifeboat, *Pemberton*. She just hoped that only a few would decide to leave as the small ship could only hold twelve.

As it turned out, she didn't have to worry. The entire crew was with her.

Chapter Eighteen

CADE STOPPED AND squatted down in the deepest shadows available. She could hear the grunts and shouts from the warriors pursuing her in the distance, quickly closing ranks. She scooped up a handful of soot-covered dirt and smeared it around the palladium that encircled her wrist. A glint from the luminous white metal would reveal her location and spell her doom. She couldn't afford any more mistakes. Her carelessness from a week ago had the Gothoan patrols on her trail, although the palladium dampened the signature emitted from her bio-signs chip. That deception would prove useless if one of the soldiers spotted her. Removing the circlet long enough to relieve the constriction of blood flow to her hand had almost cost her life.

Tired and hungry, she closed her eyes for a moment and rested her forehead on a rusted hunk of metal. The wind tossed her hair and caused her to shiver. Cade's uniform hung tattered in some places, but still provided some warmth on the cold and barren planet. Remnants from a long-ago battle littered the landscape, providing shelter and the opportunity for death. Here, semi-destroyed vehicles and burned out buildings competed with unexploded ordnance and anti-personnel mines. Regardless of the danger, the dark side of the orbitally locked planet was far safer than the alternative.

In the distance sat the Gothoan military capital, Han-su. Someone in their perverse wisdom had placed the headquarters right on the dividing line between darkness and light. When Cade needed food or water, it required a trip to Han-su. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her of the futility of her last foray, but at least she'd taken out the newest Gothoan battle cruiser before enemy engineers finished it. A well-timed plasma grenade, courtesy of the soldier she'd surprised, saw to that.

Now she knew that the Gothoans, so long-thought defeated and demoralized, were ready for an all-out assault. It was just too bad she couldn't tell anyone. Cade berated herself for not waiting until after she found something to eat.

She opened her eyes when she heard something bounce off metal nearby. The latest patrol was closing in on her. Cade had left too obvious a trail when she ran from the complex housing scientific research and development. It seemed too tempting a target, the R&D division butting right up against the dark side, though the largest portion of the building sat in perpetual, albeit

weak and watery, sunshine. Now, she wished she'd taken time to consider the consequences of her actions. Hunger and lack of sleep had her teetering on the edge of a full collapse.

"Over here," a man shouted.

The Goths weren't the intruders here and felt no need to lower their voices. Clearly, they didn't consider her a threat. Cade hoped that would work in her favor. Carefully, she backtracked. She tried to stay in the shadows and keep as quiet as possible. If she drew the attention of her attackers, their night vision goggles would easily find her. Cade had nothing except her wits. Crouching low, she circumnavigated a downed inter-planetary aircraft and headed for some nearby ruins, though they weren't her destination.

The farther away she moved from the terminator, the line marking darkness from light, the easier it was to see. Gothos's atmosphere wasn't like any other planet in the solar system. The stars were closer to the world, making her feel like she could reach out and touch them. Moreover, they provided enough light to interfere with the Goths' night vision goggles' photoelectric effect. In a nutshell, the soldiers would be on equal footing.

She entered the dark valley among the boulders and debris from a recent rock slide. At the base of the hillside, she waited expectantly and wasn't disappointed. She'd hoped to ditch her unwanted company, but the soldiers faithfully followed what little of a trail she'd left, which told her how well trained and determined the Goths were. True to their reputed tactics, the patrol of five split up as soon as they entered the ancient arena. If they knew the identity of the intruder in their midst, the planetary government would have sent an entire battalion.

Instead, the men held laser rifles ready and spread out to block the entrance to the canyon. From the outsider's point of view, Cade realized it might appear the Goths had the advantage, but they would be wrong. Crouching in the darkest recesses of the largest portion of the rock fall, Cade pulled a four-inch, military issue hunting knife from the sheath on her boot. With everything she'd been through, it was a small miracle that she still possessed the weapon.

As a solitary figure neared her position, Cade circled her place of concealment with one hand on the boulder. She could hear him breathe. Even without the physical manifestation of Alaran hearing, the tipped ears, she still had the heightened senses. Cade took another step and found a small ledge cut into the surface of the rock about a foot off the ground and halfway from the top. She placed a knee on the stone and carefully hefted herself upward. From her new vantage point, Cade saw the top of the soldier's black helmet. Dropping down behind him proved easy and the knife across his throat quietly dispatched the threat.

Cade hated using the weapon, how it felt slicing into flesh and muscle. Even worse was the sensation of extinguishing a life. It sickened her even as she acknowledged the necessity. He slipped quietly to the ground, leaving her thankful for the faceplate that prevented her from identifying the features of the soldier.

She searched the body quickly, taking anything that might prove useful including a canteen, the night goggles and a small pouch. Cade squatted and reached into the bag. Among the items, she discovered a spool of microfilament. Perfect.

Cade scooted to another location, back toward the ruins. At the base of the cornerstone, she attached the wire and strung it across to the remnants of the original stairway. Across at an angle, the strand wasn't much of a threat, but would provide a distraction. Cade backed away, hiding where a formal entryway once existed. She could still feel the lines etched in the marble under her feet through the layer of dirt. Just then, she heard a shout and knew the others had found their compatriot.

She hunkered down and waited for the inevitable. Soon, she heard her next target and grimaced in repugnance. Cade didn't want to kill anyone else, but she wanted to survive to return to Van. It was the promise of Van's embrace that kept her going and it was what made her do what she needed to now. Cade was ready when the soldier tripped over the line and fell to his knees. She was on him in a second, her intent to use the knife once again. As distasteful as using the weapon was, it was still quieter than a rifle, or would have been if he hadn't fought back.

The Gothoan pushed up onto his knees and he brought the rifle around, but was too close to actually use it. Cade kicked the weapon away and stabbed toward his chest. The soldier dodged the knife and rolled away in pursuit of his rifle. She followed quickly, hoping to dispatch him before he could shout a warning. Things spun out of control. The black-helmeted Gothoan grabbed the laser rifle and continued to roll into a firing position. Cade threw her knife even as he brought his weapon to bear and squeezed off a shot. Rather than taking him high in the throat as she intended, the knife embedded itself in the soldier's chest. The shriek belonged to a young woman.

Cade hardly registered the fact because of the lance of red-hot pain that blasted across her left thigh. She swallowed her own scream and scrambled toward the fallen woman, knowing the cry would haunt her for years to come.

"Where'd it come from?"

"Over there."

Cade started at the sound of the pursuing soldiers so close to her position. She couldn't help the Gothoan and forced herself to take the things that might help extend her own life. Cade had time to do only a cursory search before she sprinted for the darkness. Covered in blood, she realized she couldn't keep this up for much longer. Exhaustion had already dimmed her reflexes and almost gotten her killed. Cade decided to end the game of cat and mouse and return to her sanctuary for a few hours of sleep.

Relying on stealth and her years of training, Cade crept away from the ruins. She heard the soldiers near the place where the woman had died and took advantage of the distraction to escape. The remains of a town lay less than a kilometer deeper into the dark lands. Overturned and heavily damaged vehicles lay among what remained of the town that was really more of a

village. No houses stood intact and artificial lights had shut down long ago. Cade slid into the rear of an antiquated supply truck. She pulled the rear closed and turned the handle to engage the simple lock.

Alone and fairly secure in the alumenethal-lined vehicle, she dropped the supplies taken from the soldiers, removed the palladium circlet and rubbed her sore wrist. Then she eased her trousers down to check the seriousness of her thigh wound. From the appearance, there was both good and bad news. The laser had cauterized the wound so she wouldn't bleed to death, but considering the conditions, she couldn't guarantee freedom from infection. On top of that, now that she'd sat down, her leg hurt like hell. She probably wouldn't be able to go anywhere for a few days at least.

Disheartened, she refastened her pants and opened the canteen she'd taken from the first soldier and cautiously sniffed the contents. Water. Cade drank a third of the container in one long gulp. The fluid eased some of the pain in her stomach, but she realized the need for rationing. Cade eased into a more comfortable position before delving into the last satchel she retrieved from the female soldier and could have cried in relief when she found a morsel of rough bread wrapped in a cloth.

She took a bite and chewed slowly, savoring the food for as long as she could. A minute sound caught her attention and she wondered if she imagined it when it didn't repeat. Shrugging it off, she took another bite. She heard the sound again and frowned. Cade stopped chewing and listened intently. She raised the wrist communicator to her ear and knew what it was...static. Cade dropped the bread and reached for the handle to the truck, stopping just before she opened it. The alloy lining the interior of the vehicle interfered with energy signals, that's why she'd felt comfortable removing the palladium.

Someone was sending a message on Coalition channels. Was it a trap? She didn't know, but couldn't take the chance of ignoring it. She raised the door and opened herself up to the possibility of Gothoan military forces tracking her. The sound disappeared as soon as she opened the hatch and didn't return though she listened for a long while, nearly holding her breath in a fervent desire for rescue. Eventually, Cade had to concede that she was mistaken. No one was coming and it would be up to her to escape this nightmare planet on her own.

Resolute, Cade decided that her small acts of terrorism against the Gothoans weren't enough. Destroying a ship here and there was at best an annoyance and at worse could get her killed. She had a stockpile of weapons and armaments taken from the enemy over the weeks and she intended to deal them a crippling blow. Before that, Cade needed to devise a means of escape. She would set off her parting gift of destruction just as she left the planet. She knew the layout of the military complex and where the Gothoans kept their space-worthy fighter craft. Though heavily guarded, Cade didn't consider that especially discouraging since she didn't have a choice. If she stayed on Gothos Prime, she would die.

Cade finished the bread and lay down on the bottom of the supply truck's rear compartment. While waiting for the relief of slumber, she wished for some more water to slack her thirst but realized the importance of conserving her supplies. She tried not to think of Van. Allowing those

thoughts to surface would only make her more miserable than she already was. Now, if she could only keep the woman from visiting her in her dreams.

Chapter Nineteen

"CAPTAIN, WAIT."

THE half-Thuban tactical officer stopped Van before she repeated the hail. Without words, she acknowledged Lieutenant Commander Ozal's concern. Nodding once, Van terminated the attempt to contact Cade on Gothos Prime's surface. She couldn't make that call without possibly endangering Cade. Limited on what actions she could safely take, Van stood and addressed her seasoned officer.

"Can they detect us?"

"There aren't any signs of it, Captain. No weapons have powered up and patrols haven't headed in our direction. I'd say the new cloak is effective."

Van felt a small sense of relief. So far, all of the prototypes enhancing the *Pandora* had proven effective. "Scan the planet. Tune the sensors as high as they'll go. I want to know if you even think you find any Coalition signatures."

"Aye, Captain."

Van pointedly ignored Commander Byra's disgruntled expression. He didn't speak, but looked as though he'd tried to gargle with broken glass. Just like the rest of the crew, Van had given him the choice to opt out of her self-appointed mission. He hadn't.

He had to get over it. He'd had his shot.

"Set up station-keeping. The cloak should keep the Gothoans from detecting us."

Byra nodded. "I'm just glad we have it, otherwise we wouldn't even be able to attempt this rescue."

The stuff of science fiction, invisibility cloaks had only recently become viable. Tiny metamaterials guided rays of light around an object rendering it invisible. Now that their scientists could use the materials for something larger than a petri dish, Coalition engineers had decided to try it out on *Pandora*.

"Right. With all this prototype technology on board, something is sure to break down. Fortunately, the Gilgamesh should be here soon. Bug out if you have to and we'll rely on the Scorpion unit for reinforcements."

Although their relationship was still somewhat rocky, Van felt better than she had in weeks. The tension on the bridge had eased a little as well and she noticed that her crew smiled a bit more. That was good. They needed all of the optimism they could muster. It might make the difference between success and failure on this mission.

"Commander, please ensure the assigned crew members are in the war room in one hour."

"Aye, Captain."

Turning on her heel, Van strode to the lift. It was one of the rare times the conveyance didn't stop to let others off and on as she traveled to the lower decks. In moments, Van entered *Pandora's* single cargo bay and visually scanned the cavernous room. Rows of supplies took up one long wall, sorted into various categories of necessities. Near the far corner, she spotted the equipment she'd ordered put aside for this mission into hostile territory. Although Van trusted her crew, she wasn't willing to take it on faith that their supplies were properly prepared.

Van walked across the room near a stack of fully equipped packs. In addition to emergency meal packets, small first aid kits, thermal blankets, plasma grenades and more, someone had also considered the planet's cold climate. A crate of white camouflage winter gear stood ready to go. Thankfully, Gothos Prime wasn't as cold as Tokar, but it would still be cooler than most warm-blooded humanoids found comfortable. The parkas were perfect without being stifling.

After digging through one of the packs sitting nearby, Van was satisfied with the personal equipment. She opened a locker that sat against one wall and found it stuffed with pulse rifles, extra charge packs, octanitro grenades and other munitions. Night vision goggles filled one side of the cabinet. Pleased, Van started to head back to the lift with the intention of checking on the *Pemberton's* status. The rescue team would utilize *Pandora's* lifeboat to operate this mission. Van would have preferred the captain's yacht, but it was destroyed in the battle where she thought she'd also lost Cade. If she really was still alive on Gothos, losing a shuttle was a very small price to pay to get Cade back.

The door opening drew her attention and a single brow rose when Van saw Ensign Yugi headed toward her with a determined expression. Yugi smiled tentatively as she crossed over to stand next to Van.

"Shouldn't you be at your station, Ensign?" Van liked the young Alaran but now wasn't the time to indulge her.

"Commander Byra gave me permission to speak with you, ma'am. Since we're at station-keeping, there wasn't a lot for me to do at the helm."

Van could have pointed out that the situation was volatile and unpredictable. It was more important than ever to have everyone at their post. However, she sensed something unusual was afoot and kept silent. Crossing her arms over her chest, Van looked up at the slightly taller navigator and waited to hear what she had to say. Jaw set, she figured Yugi wanted to offer more moral support and she felt slightly miffed. When Yugi merely stood looking at her, Van broke the silence.

"Out with it, Ensign, and this had better be good. I have a rescue to pull off and I don't have time to get in touch with my feelings."

The last was somewhat sarcastic, but Yugi didn't seem to notice. "That's not why I'm here, Captain. I wanted to ask you to assign me to the mission."

"You can't be serious."

For an instant, Van thought Yugi was joking, but there wasn't anything funny about her request. "The answer is no."

"Captain Swann, please hear me out." Yugi's eyes implored her. Their blue depths weren't the same color as Cade's, but every time Van looked at them, she thought of Cade. She couldn't deny the young woman the right to make her case, though Van would not allow her to join the assault...no matter what she said.

"You have two minutes, Yugi. Make them count."

"Yes, ma'am." Yugi pushed wispy blonde hair back from her forehead and tucked a strand around her tipped ear. "Here's the thing, I know I haven't been in the Coalition for very long...only a year. Well, not quite. It's really more like ten months."

"Yugi, you're babbling. Get on with it or go back to the bridge. You know what? This is ridiculous. You're not a combat soldier."

"No, I know, but I am an Alaran."

"Excuse me? What's that got to do with anything?"

"Captain, she's my princess. I know I've never seen combat, but I need to be part of this. Besides, as a Coalition officer, I'm expected to take my turn on ship's missions just like everyone else."

Van didn't even have to think about it. "Not this time."

She started to walk away, her mind made up, but Yugi stopped her by grasping her forearm. Van was surprised by the strength of her grasp. Yugi quickly released her but tried to pursue her case.

"Please, give me a chance."

"No." Van was finished with the conversation. "You can get your feet wet some other time. This mission is too dangerous. No one is going to have time to protect you and I'm not going to take you along just to watch you die. That's final."

Van felt Yugi's stare boring a hole into her back all the way to the lift. As far as she was concerned, the navigator could be angry all she wanted. Van wouldn't allow any inexperienced crew member to put themselves in danger so thoughtlessly. Eventually, Yugi would understand.

She'd almost reached the shuttle bay when Van's wrist chronometer/communicator beeped and she heard her tactical officer's voice. "Ozal to Captain Swann. I've found something."

"On my way."

A few minutes later, Van entered the conference room on deck one. All of the crew members she'd handpicked for the mission had assembled. When Van first dreamed up the scheme to rescue Cade, her plans hinged largely on the hope that Cade was still alive. Now, as she looked around at the curious and eager faces, she felt they finally had some concrete proof. Yet, despite how the prospects were looking up, Van's first thought was, why is everyone always taller than me?

"All right, people. You've all had time to go over the plan. Any questions?"

"Yeah, when do we start?"

The seemingly insubordinate question masked a crewman's eagerness, but Van couldn't permit her people to become careless. "I appreciate the sentiment, Lieutenant Arwak, but I need all of you to pay attention. When I decided to go against orders and leave sector patrol, you were with me. You didn't have to be, but you were. Twenty-four hours ago, I made my decision based on a gut reaction, the feeling that Admiral Meryan is still alive. Thanks to Lieutenant Commander Ozal, we now have a glimmer of proof."

"What is it, ma'am?" Lieutenant Osborne waited patiently, hope shining in his eyes.

"Scans picked up traces of Coalition ore," Ozal answered. "The kind you find in military issue wrist communicators."

For a brief pause there was stunned silence before Lieutenant Bjorg said, "That's all? You found a trace of ore? No offence, Captain Swann, but that ore could be there from any time in the last hundred years. Andromeda forces landed on Gothos in the previous war. How do we know it's not left over from then?"

Bjorg was a young officer, but not inexperienced and he had a point. Van couldn't look him in the eye and lie to him. "The signal decay is too weak for that, Jason. Additionally, this signal is isolated on the dark side of the moon and it only lasted for a few seconds before it disappeared."

I have a hard time explaining that unless someone deliberately tried to hide it. I'd really like for you to go with us. You have some exceptional skills that we could really use, but I don't want you if you have any doubt at all."

All eyes were on him while Bjorg made his decision. It didn't take long. "I have no doubt at all that if Admiral Meryan is there, we'll find her. I'm with you, ma'am."

"Good," Van looked around at everyone, "because this has become more than a rescue mission. If we're very lucky, we'll find the admiral without alerting the enemy to our presence. However, this is also an opportunity. The enemy doesn't know we're here and I intend to take advantage of that fact by crippling their fleet. Commander Ozal, are you ready?"

"Yes, ma'am. Lieutenant Arwak and I will take images of the compound and gather as much intel as possible. If the Goths are planning a full-scale assault, we'll find out. Chief Yosef and Lieutenant Bjorg will plant mines throughout the weapons depot and instill markers around the northern and eastern perimeters of the enemy fleet. Lieutenant Osborne and Petty Officer Slater will plant markers on the western and southern perimeters. When we rendezvous back aboard *Pandora*, we'll fire a full spread of octanitro charges and destroy the fleet from space."

"That might destroy half the planet, too," Yosef point out, but he didn't sound very upset by the prospect.

Van joined with the others in an unexpected moment of silence, an acknowledgment for the lives that would be lost. Maybe they could find a way to use the new transporters to carry the contingent of enemy military forces from the planet. Entertaining the possibility, Van knew it wasn't realistic. *Pandora* couldn't possibly hold the additional people without severely overextending their supplies. For all that, Van might have carried through with her half-baked plan despite the almost insurmountable problems it would cause. Then she thought of Cade and her decision wasn't difficult. The Goths had started this conflict and if the arms base were allowed to stand, Van would be just as guilty as the enemy if Coalition citizens were harmed as a result.

"Right. I want everyone prepped and in the shuttle bay in fifteen minutes. We'll use the *Pemberton* to transport and set down at the edge of the old city."

"Good thing the lifeboat has a cloak, too," Chief Yosef added.

"Glad you're so positive. You'll be our pilot."

"Captain, who are you partnered with?"

Although the question seemed innocent enough, Van's officer's looked first at Yosef and then at her, curious about her answer. "I go alone."

"But, Captain..."

"No, Chief. I appreciate your concern, but that's the way it has to be. I'm going after Meryan and it'll be easier to do alone." Van's heart made the decision and would not be dissuaded.

Commander Byra stood silently against the bulkhead throughout the meeting. He fell into step with Van when she left the room. The hopeless, numbing pain she had experienced over the last month had abated, but they had yet to return to their former closeness. Walking down the corridor, Van didn't know what to say to break the silence. The worst part was she couldn't remember exactly why she was angry with him anymore.

"Captain, are you sure this is such a wise move?"

Oh yeah.

"Are you going to try and talk me out of rescuing Admiral Meryan, again? You're wasting your time, Commander." Van's voice was pure ice.

She heard him blow out his breath in exasperation. "Permission to speak freely?"

Van glanced at him as the lift whisked them to deck one. Briefly, she considered denying his request. "You have five minutes."

Byra waited until the elevator stopped and then followed Van into her office. She allowed the silence to continue as she pulled up her computer in preparation of sending a message. There was no doubt they had noticed *Pandora* had left her post by now. Rather than let the Coalition wonder at her sudden absence, she felt she owed headquarters some type of explanation.

"I've accepted that I can't change your mind."

"Good. Then why are we here?"

Paul tapped a small metallic device against the palm of his hand, looking at Van and then back to his trinket. Finally, he handed it over. Van inspected a small, black square about the size of her pinky fingernail. Attached to the top was a curved plastic piece and a red light blinked near the bottom.

"Nice toy. What is it?"

Van tried to give it back to Paul, but he held up one hand. "It's for you. It's a homing beacon one of the science guys put together. You wear it around your ear."

"What's wrong with the wrist chronometer? The bio-signs detector performs the same function."

"True," Paul allowed, "but the Gothaans know about that technology. This thing is something new. I'm not even sure how it works to be honest. All I know is that Smitty says they won't be able to detect it. If you get into trouble, it might give you an edge."

Frowning, Van turned the monitor over in her hands to inspect the smaller details. She didn't really think much of this latest gadget, but she shoved it into her pocket. "Thanks. They could have made it smaller, but I guess it's okay as long as it works. Is that all?" She glanced down at the computer monitor hoping Paul would take the hint.

He shook his head. "How can you be so damned sure she's here, Captain? Bjorg was right when he said that palladium signature might be old."

Full circle. Van rested her weight on fists braced against the desktop. "She's here."

"But how do you know? Just because our instruments show that the ship that attacked us is on the planet, that doesn't mean Admiral Meryan is."

Anger and stress finally won out and Van snapped. "Because I can feel it. Don't ask me how because I can't tell you. I just know she's down there...waiting for me. And I won't let her down."

"Gut instinct, huh?"

"Yes, that's right." Van stared at him, daring Byra to try to prove her wrong.

"This isn't like you, Van. I've never seen you operate based on just a hunch before." The challenge vanished from his tone and the fire went out of his eyes. "If you're that sure, then I've got your back. Whatever you need, I'm here for you."

The tension in her shoulders suddenly eased and Van almost felt light headed. Until his acceptance and unexpected support, she hadn't realized how heavily their rift weighed upon her. "Thank you, Paul."

"You really love her, don't you?"

Van never hesitated. "More than I could ever tell you."

They shared a smile and he dared tease her a little. "The great charmer has finally fallen. What would all of your conquests have to say?"

"Let's not tell them just yet."

"We'll let them find out at the wedding."

"I think you're getting a little ahead of yourself. Let's get Cade back before we make any future plans."

Paul nodded. "You're the boss. So what now, are you getting ready to send the standard I take full responsibility and my crew was only following orders' message?"

Van looked again at the monitor, the screen waiting with the comlink set for Coalition Headquarters. Such a communiqué was procedure when a commander feared they might not return from a dangerous and unsanctioned mission. "Think the powers that be will believe me?"

"It doesn't matter. It's the captainly thing to do."

She did intend to send the message, but Van also planned to send a second transmission. Meant for Commodore Grier, Van would explain her rash actions. For a clandestine intelligence operative, such a move was unheard of but Grier was more than her superior officer. She'd taken a chance on a naïve young captain when few others would. Her opinion mattered and if something went wrong, Van wanted Grier to understand. Still, her sentimentality didn't make her foolish. Van planned to insert a twelve-hour time delay into the encoding sequence. If all went well, she'd be back in plenty of time to cancel the messages.

"I'd better get to it then. I've got a mission to lead."

Paul stood up straight and addressed her in the best military tradition. "Aye, Captain. We'll keep an eye on air traffic and warn you if anything looks amiss."

"Very good, Commander. Radio silence once the lifeboat enters the atmosphere. Report to the bridge."

Turning on his heel, Commander Byra headed for the command center. Van sat to compose her communications packets. Eyes on the screen, she heard Paul's curious question just before the doors closed.

"Where's Ensign Yugi?"

The doors slid shut and Van spent ten precious minutes recording messages. She felt each passing second like a thorn throbbing in her skin. Every cell in her body cried out for her to leap out of the chair and storm the planet on her own. Such a mission would be suicide and was unthinkable, but she couldn't deny her sense of urgency. Van had never met a woman who occupied her every waking thought before. Knowing Cade was alone on a Gothoan stronghold threatened to upset her military training. For the first time, Van understood why personnel were generally precluded from the rescue of a loved one. The irony wasn't lost on her and a smile crossed her face for a few seconds. Then Van logged off her screen, stood, tugged down the hem of her jacket and headed for the shuttle deck. It was time to get her lover back.

Chapter Twenty

LANDING NEAR THE old city on the dark side of Gothos Prime proved easier than Van thought it would. Part of her had expected enemy forces to fire at them as soon as the *Pemberton* entered the atmosphere. Instead, Ensign Yugi landed the lifeboat without as much as a bump. Still not happy that the young Alaran was along for the ride, she realized there wasn't any choice. After Chief Yosef suddenly took ill, Van needed a pilot. That she'd already denied Yugi's request to join the mission no longer mattered. Van stifled her sigh and concentrated on the objective. Her team assembled in the rear of the shuttle.

"I won't waste any more time explaining your assignments. Mark the time as 0100 Zulu. I expect everyone to finish up and return to the ship in eleven hours. Avoid contact with the enemy at all costs. I don't want them to know we were here until we detonate the charges from *Pandora*. Any questions?"

The time limit would return them to the ship before Van's encoded messages self-transmitted. She wasn't about to leave the planet without Cade or unless she found positive proof that she wasn't there, but she had to make sure her people made it to safety. She had already lost too many crew members in the past few months and she couldn't stand to have another life on her conscience.

No one had any questions. With cold weather gear already in place, the Coalition officers hefted packs of supplies and pulse rifles. Everyone, including Van, wore a blast pistol strapped to their thighs. Pulling night vision goggles into place, she nodded for Osborne to lower the ramp. Van spared one more look at Yugi's back, worried for the youngster but knowing that Lieutenant Bjorg would do everything in his power to keep her safe.

By twos, the officers exited the lifeboat and headed in different directions toward the terminus line marking daylight and darkness. Set in teams of two, they would be harder for the Gothoan patrols to spot. Van exited last and turned to close the hatch. She used the wrist controls on her arm to engage the *Pemberton's* cloak and set up a dampening field to avoid detection. Once the ship shimmered out of sight, Van struck off on her own toward the last known coordinates of the ore signature that Ozal had discovered. The cold breeze on the dark side of the planet carried a sting, but it was nothing like Van had experienced on Tokar. Here it was just cold.

The temperature made a vast difference, not just in her chances of survival if she couldn't get back to the ship. Here, Van didn't require a parka and had no need of an insulated head covering that would obstruct her vision. The coat wasn't as heavy either and she enjoyed the advantage of easier movement. Still, after walking three kilometers, sweat trickled down her temple and slid under the edge of her tunic. As she approached her destination, doubts finally began to intrude.

What if Byra was right and Cade wasn't on the planet? All of the engineers in the Coalition insisted the captain's yacht from *Pandora* had disintegrated in the explosion during their encounter and Van had seen that destruction with her own eyes. Had she defied orders and put her crew at risk for no reason? Van honestly didn't think so, but even if she had, she knew she would do the same thing again in an instant. What terrified her more than being mistaken about Cade being on Gothos Prime was the possibility that the rescue might come too late. Cade had

been on the planet for several weeks and the enemy might have already discovered her and killed her.

Van rejected that possibility immediately. If Mentis and his troops had located and murdered Cade, they would have broadcast the news on all channels, happy to incite chaos and fear throughout the Coalition. All of her thoughts led her back to the same conclusion. Cade was here and she was alive.

Her scanner beeped softly and Van glanced down at the readout. She had arrived. Heart suddenly thumping, she looked around the barren terrain. Through the greenish light of her night-vision goggles Van could only see boulders of varying sizes, a burned-out water truck and the mountain range she'd been walking toward for the last hour. Slowly, she turned in a circle. Nothing moved. Van headed for the water truck.

It was an old, overturned Gothoan water supply vehicle with a huge rusted cylinder still attached to the end. The hatch to the tank was thrown open, but heavy enough that the stiff breeze didn't move it. Van's eyes scoured the surface, looking for any signs that someone had been here recently. A boot print rewarded her search and she quickly squatted, propping the butt of her disrupter rifle against her bent knee. From the slickness of the imprint, she realized the print didn't belong to a Coalition military boot. She knew at the time Cade disappeared, she'd been wearing her uniform.

It wasn't Cade's print, Van allowed, but that didn't mean she wasn't still alive.

Van stood and slung her rifle onto her back. She reached overhead and grasped the edge of the truck to haul herself up. One foot on the undercarriage provided her with a leg up and she managed to clamber up over the side. The climb was made awkward because of her goggles, but Van was reluctant to pocket them in case she had uninvited company. Once she was mounted onto the side of the water tank, Van sat on the lip of the hatch opening and lowered her legs into the darkness. Bracing her hands on either side, she prepared to lower herself into the container.

"Byra to Captain Swann."

Van almost jumped out of her skin.

She had given an order for radio silence for the duration of the mission and hadn't expected to hear from her first officer. For him to call her now, it had to be serious. Preparing herself for the worst, Van tapped her ear bud and answered quietly. "Swann here."

"Medical reports Yosef poisoned."

The four words sent a shiver over her frame. Possibilities bombarded her, but Van quickly sifted through them and centered on one. Someone had wanted to keep Yosef from joining the rescue detail. Yugi's serene blue face came to mind. She had wanted to come on this mission, been adamant that Van let her join. In the face of her captain's refusal, Yugi had taken the matter into her own hands. The incident explained why Yugi had been off the bridge and away from her

post just before deployment. The real question was, did Yugi's motive stop at wanting to join the rescue? She had said she needed the mission experience, but what officer would deliberately poison a crewmate just to gain some tactical training?

As a military commander and an intelligence officer as well, Van had to consider all sides of the question. "Prognosis?"

"Full recovery."

At least there was that. "You know what to do." Her tone was resolute, as hard as granite.

"Search already in progress."

"Swann out."

The communiqué lasted less than a minute and both parties had kept their comments short. Van prayed the Goths hadn't picked up the signal, but she understood why Byra broke protocol. He'd also inherently understood that Yugi was the only person it could have been and acted to warn her that she might have a rogue crew member on an enemy planet with her. Van truly hoped that was the end of it, that Yugi acted impulsively out of some desire to impress her commanding officer and hadn't fully comprehended the consequences of her actions. Until Van made it back to *Pandora* and learned what searching Yugi's quarters revealed, there was very little she could do. The evidence against the young woman was circumstantial at best.

Van felt as though a net was dropping around her shoulders. She closed her eyes, hoping she was about to make the right move. Contacting Lieutenant Bjorg now, without knowing his location or who might be within his proximity, was a dangerous proposition. Yet, if she didn't, she might unwittingly place the man in a perilous position.

Tapping her ear bud, Van heard the beep of an established communications channel. While she was sure Paul had isolated only her com device for the previous transmission, Van didn't have that luxury from the ground. All of her team would hear the conversation.

"Swann to Bjorg. Clear?"

After only a second's pause, Van heard his breathless whisper. "Here, Captain. I'm clear, at least for the moment."

"Understood. Status?"

Aware that the simple question would sound suspicious given the circumstances, Van couldn't come right out and ask if Yugi had done anything to give away their presence to the enemy. As expected, she could hear the question in Bjorg's voice when he replied, even if he didn't ask.

"Markers planted along the north. Yugi split up from me and said she was taking the west. Haven't heard from her since we landed."

"Understood. Carry on. Yugi, respond."

Though she tried twice more, Van was unable to raise Yugi. Van wanted to believe the navigator was in a place that wouldn't allow her to receive the signal. At any rate, she couldn't afford to keep trying. Eventually, the Goths would notice all the communications chatter and decide to investigate. Van grasped either side of the opening on the water tank and lowered herself inside.

Enough ambient light filtered through the hatch to allow the goggles to continue functioning and Van looked around for any sign that Cade had been there. The inky blackness would have been complete if not for military technology, yet shadows prevailed, making progress slow. When her eyes began to adjust to the new lighting, Van realized she'd been right all along. Though Cade was nowhere in sight, there could only be one reason for the stockpile of ammunition inside an abandoned water truck.

Feeling almost lightheaded with relief, Van had a silly grin on her face. There was only one person who would have stacked munitions in a hidden location. But where was she? Van only had to ask herself what she would do if she were in Cade's shoes.

If it were Van, she'd go where she could inflict the most damage before finding a way out. But Cade had been on the planet for so long now. Why hadn't she already put a plan in motion? Finally, she decided it must have taken Cade a while to gather enough explosives.

Whatever the reason, Van knew the best place to create a nuisance was in the munitions depot. Rather than alert her rescue team to the possibility that they might run into Cade, Van climbed out of the tanker and headed toward the light side of the terminus line. She couldn't keep jumping on the communications system every time there was a development. Everyone would know Cade was fine when they gathered back at the *Pemberton*. Van had ten more hours to find her and rendezvous back at the lifeboat.

Setting off at a steady jog, Van proceeded toward the Goths base.

SHIVERING DESPITE THE heat-baked air inside the ammunition depot, Cade lurked behind a heavy beam as the sentries passed. Infection caused bullets of sweat to pop from her skin and trickle down the back of her neck. On the light side of Gothos Prime and inside a metal warehouse, Cade had expected stifling heat. Instead, her body trembled continually and her hands shook. She rested her forehead against a strong support beam, panting quietly, until the pair's footsteps faded out of range. Cade took a breath and hobbled toward a stack of crates near the rear of the building.

Her left thigh alternately throbbed and burned. Sometimes it did both at the same time. She wasn't sure how much longer she could hold out without proper nutrition or medical care, but she was determined to cause as much damage as possible to the Goths rebel military. To

implement her plan, she required high-yield explosives. The munitions she'd hoarded in the water truck simply wouldn't do the trick.

Looking around for a tool to open the crates, Cade suddenly realized that each chest had a digital packing list attached to its side. Her Gothoan was rusty so she didn't think she'd be able to read the inventory, the supplies had to come from somewhere. Cade was willing to bet the ones who provided the weaponry probably dealt with other species in the galaxy. If she could hack into each miniature microprocessor, she might be able to convert the data to Coalition standard.

She didn't expect the sentries to return for at least seventeen minutes. Watching from the shadows earlier, she'd determined they patrolled on a twenty-minute rotation. Fighting against the pain in her thigh and her vision that swam from fever, Cade squatted near a wooden box. She felt the scab covering her wound stretch. The strip of cloth that bound the injury was thoroughly saturated and blood soaked into her uniform trousers. She ignored the pain and slid aside the covering on the packing list. Cade didn't expect to find an encryption preventing her from assessing the contents and she was right, but it would still take a few minutes to convert the data.

Sweat dripped into her eyes and her hands were unsteady. Cade swiped at her forehead with her arm and tapped the buttons on the pad. She was a little surprised when familiar words ran across the tiny screen after only a few seconds. Unfortunately, the contents of the crate weren't worth breaking into. Electronic fuses weren't very useful without the plasma torpedoes to go with them. Cade sat back with a sigh, wondering how much time she'd wasted. She wasn't in any condition for a hand-to-hand struggle with the guards if they suddenly returned.

Resolved to slink back into the shadows and wait for the cycle of the patrols so that she could start over, Cade struggled to her feet. She had just reached the deepest shadows when she heard the sentries. Voices raised in alarm, they ran in her direction. Cade pressed back into a corner of the wall and crouched down in an effort to hide. She was worried that she'd triggered an alarm somehow when she accessed the crate. When the troops passed her position and kept running, relief hit her so hard that Cade sagged against the floor. Whatever was going on had nothing to do with her.

Gathering her reserves, Cade climbed to her feet and stumbled back into the main munitions chamber. She didn't know how much time she had before the sentries returned, but she planned to make the most of it. Systematically, Cade started at the end where she'd found the torpedo fuses. Box by box, she moved along until she began to wonder if there was anything useful in this section of the warehouse. Swiping a hand across her damp face, Cade headed toward another compartment.

Over the course of her exile on Gothos Prime, Cade had carefully scouted the region. Movement was slow on the perpetually light side of the planet, the threat of discovery ever present. That threat was real enough that she'd never before moved on the ammunition site. All of what she had stored at the water truck was taken directly from the sentries as they explored the dark side. Cade only did so now because she felt she was running out of time. With iron resolve, she passed through the hatchway with a heavy limp. This chamber was large, all the crates of

various sizes neatly stacked and organized. Though this sector offered many more choices than the previous, there was a very good reason Cade had avoided it.

There was nowhere to hide if the goon squad returned.

Thirty minutes later, the security patrol still hadn't returned. Cade worried she might be pressing her luck, but continued on while straining to hear any sound indicating she had company. The current objective lay low to the ground. Long and half again as wide, the crate was the first of its kind she had found. Cade tapped in the now-familiar sequence and read the nomenclature as it lit the screen. She blinked and then read the information again, convinced her mind had started playing tricks on her.

Anti-Spacecraft Rocket

Five Neutron Yield

No Time Delay

A five-neutron explosion would leave a sizeable crater on the surface of Gothos Prime and destroy everything within a seventy-kilometer radius. Cade swallowed hard and began searching for a way to open the box. Her plans for this brutal enemy had just changed. Senator Mentis's warship currently sat on the eastern landing pad near the headquarters. It had left once after Cade escaped from the cargo hold and only returned recently. She didn't know how long the senator would stay, but now she'd be ready for when he decided to leave again.

Opening the crate proved more difficult than hacking into the inventory list. She had almost given up when the lid hissed and popped up. Refrigerated preservative gas wafted out, surrounding Cade with the lingering scent of gun oil. She raised the top and carefully placed it on the floor. The rocket was a weapon any able-bodied soldier could use. By resting the weapon on the shoulder, the user sighted in at the target through a built in scope. A trigger housing resembling the ones utilized on a blaster rifle would fire the device. It was perfect.

Cade reached inside and tried to lift the rocket. It was heavier than she had expected. Frowning, she had to use both hands to pull the weapon from the crate. Cade sat the rocket on the ground and replaced the lid, ensuring that it sealed in place before she pushed the box back into position. There was no sense being careless and advertising that someone had broken into the armory.

The sentries still hadn't returned but they would eventually and Cade thought she'd probably worn out her welcome. Now she had to find a place to wait and watch. It didn't matter that when she fired on the Gothoan warship. She'd be signing her own death warrant. Without the hope of rescue, slowly starving to death and with a fever raging from an untreated infection it was only a matter of time. This way, her death would mean something.

Chapter Twenty-one

VAN HAD JUST crossed the terminator line and stuffed her night vision goggles into the rucksack when the alarm sounded. Crouching next to the garbage dump, Van felt betrayal and disappointment wash through her in equal measure. Though it was possible one of her people had encountered a Gothoan patrol and caused the alert, instinctively she knew that wasn't the answer. Yugi hadn't made Chief Yosef sick just to gain some tactical experience. Van didn't have the luxury of second-guessing her conclusions. Yugi's treachery would ensure people died.

Expression grim, Van double-checked her map coordinates on the scanner. She'd passed through the line from darkness into light near the outer edge of the Gothoan installation. She was between the garbage processing facility and an imposing, four-story building with a lot of windows. Whatever the structure's intended purpose, it wasn't the storage of ammunition. Any munitions holding facility would have the appearance of a bunker. Additional reinforcements and possibly even a dampening shield would prevent catastrophic damage in case of an accidental explosion. To carry out their plans of destroying the base, someone had to first ensure that any shields were disabled. Her expression tightened further when she realized that task was something Bjorg and Yugi would have performed.

Van didn't know if that part of their assignment was complete. She wanted to continue with her own plan to find Cade, but now she was torn. Van wasn't even sure Cade was on the planet. Her belief that the woman was alive might stem from wishful thinking. The blaster fire she heard coming from nearby told her that her people were in trouble. That was fact. She had to make a decision. Van dashed to the side of another small structure, holding her rifle in one hand by the pistol grip. She still carried the scanner in the other. A quick look at the readout told her she stood very near a building with a dampening field. This was the ammunition warehouse, her original destination. The dampening field was an electromagnetic barrier designed to contain an explosion, but it wouldn't keep people in or out. Since she didn't know what Bjorg and Yugi had accomplished, she wanted to ensure a marker was in place for *Pandora* to target from space, along with all the other markers. However, with the enemy alerted to their presence, the munitions depot might as well be three parsecs away rather than the thirty meters the scanner indicated.

She would have to settle for any intel already gathered by her team and the buoys they'd managed to set in place. Worry for Cade clashed with the desire to rush to her crew's defense. Van barely heard the whimper that issued from her throat as she dashed from the side of the building. Running toward the nearest area of recent blaster fire, Van realized the need for radio silence had passed. The Gothoans knew they were here.

Opening a communications channel, Van shouted, "Everyone bug out. Rendezvous at the prearranged coordinates."

Van spotted the Gothoan headquarters just ahead and dove behind a cooling unit before someone spotted her. She counted twenty-three black-helmeted soldiers in various postures of readiness, weapons raised. As they were scattered over the steps of the building and dispersed throughout the immediate grounds, Van couldn't see any of the troops actively engaged in fighting. Weapons fire still sounded from the far side of the fortified structure though it had greatly diminished. Her worry for her people went up another notch. She had to find another way around.

Her only solace was that the blaster fire was coming from the northwest side of the installation, the area assigned to Lieutenant Bjorg and Ensign Yugi. Yugi had disappeared almost immediately upon landing so Van was pretty sure which crew member was in trouble. Since the encounter continued, Bjorg was still alive.

Van's eyes tracked to the left. The large open parade ground in front of headquarters was filled with spacecraft, the perfect camouflage for her to make it past enemy soldiers. They were either engaged on the far side of the compound or protecting the large administrative structure. Without a second thought, Van crouched and ran from object to object until she reached the airfield. Moving as quickly and covertly as possible she traversed the area, taking advantage of ships of various sizes and shapes. Near the far north side of the fleet Van squatted down, preparing to dash to the vessel at the extreme outer edge. She had taken a step toward her objective when she saw movement from the corner of her eye. Van could see only the lower legs and black boots of a uniformed soldier and judging by the colors, this person wasn't a member of the Coalition.

Swallowing hard, Van held her ground and waited for the sentry to move away. After a few minutes, Van was clear but realized the weapons fire had stopped. Was Bjorg all right? Had he somehow evaded the Gothoans? As soon as it was safe, she left the fleet grounds and navigated her way toward her crewman. As she moved, Van noticed the Gothoan troops had started to disperse. Not good.

Apparently, the enemy had decided they'd eliminated the threat but would undoubtedly increase patrols. What had begun as a dangerous mission was now too hazardous to continue. Van would collect Bjorg and get back to the lifeboat. Her heart cried out for Cade and ached over Yugi's betrayal but duty dictated she place the safety of her crew as the top priority.

Taking advantage of the delay required for the Gothoans to organize heavier patrols, Van scooted past headquarters without incident, relying on various terrain features to provide cover. When she'd cleared the main area she spotted a smaller landing pad previously concealed by the structure. The ship resting there made the hair stand up on the back of her neck. She identified the vessel on sight, unable to vanquish the memory of this ship firing on and destroying the captain's yacht, *Prometheus*, and possibly killing Cade in the process.

Heartbeat thudding in her ears, Van slowly approached the spacecraft. Instinct and the damage from blaster fire covering the ship's hull, told her Bjorg had encountered a patrol here. No Gothoans were present. Van circled the ship, holding out hope that Bjorg had somehow escaped. She carried her rifle at the ready, finger on the trigger. Cursing the perpetual daylight

that refused to offer her natural cover, Van didn't blink when she rounded the far side of Senator Mentis's ship. Van knew she wasn't alone before she ever saw the other person, and she knew it wasn't her erstwhile crewman. Anger over the circumstances and the Coalition's refusal to take action against Senator Mentis caused her finger to tense. By the thinnest of margins, she didn't fire.

In a split second, Van registered every detail of the scene. Lieutenant Jason Bjorg lay unmoving on the rocky ground with a large blast wound in the center of his chest. From the way his eyes stared blankly into the sky, he wasn't meditating. To further complicate the issue, Van found herself staring down the barrel of a shoulder-held anti-spacecraft rocket. Cade Meryan held the weapon.

Van's expression froze, unintentionally stern due to her conflicting emotions. She and Cade stared wordlessly at each other. Shocked to come upon Cade this way, it took a moment for Van to react. When she finally did, Van surprised herself. She lowered the rifle as she stepped forward. Holding the weapon in one hand, she used the other to slap the rocket away from Cade's face. Without thought or hesitation, Van grasped the back of Cade's neck and kissed her, hard. After a moment, Cade dropped the rocket on the ground and flung her arms around Van's shoulders while burying her face against Van's neck. Aware of every passing second that someone might discover them, she held Cade and felt the trembling in her frame. She stepped back with difficulty and finally noticed Cade's condition.

Even under the dirt and grime, she was gaunt and pale. Her uniform was ripped, ragged and frayed. One sleeve was torn away, utilized as a bandage and wrapped around a wound in Cade's upper thigh. The cloth was soaked through and Van suspected the substance was blood.

"We need to get out of here. The Goths could come back any second."

Van handed Cade the blaster rifle and took the rocket in exchange. The weapon was heavy enough to take her by surprise, but she couldn't leave it here for a patrol to find. Slinging it over one shoulder, Van took Cade's upper arm and encouraged her to walk away, toward the northern perimeter where they could take cover behind a building.

Cade glanced back over her shoulder toward the downed crewman. "I'm sorry about your lieutenant. Where's the rest of the cavalry?"

"Um, this wasn't exactly a sanctioned mission." Van frowned at the heart-wrenching sound of Cade's gravelly voice. "The Coalition thinks you're dead."

"My mother must be out of her mind with worry. That means you decided to come looking for me without authorization."

Van was pleased it wasn't a question. She squeezed Cade's arm in response. She'd have to tell Cade about her mother, she deserved to know, but Van couldn't just blurt out the bad news. Cade was weak and injured and the news of Queen Dorma's demise might be too much for her to handle.

"Can you walk about five kilometers? We need to rendezvous with the rest of my team near the ruins of the old city."

"If it means getting off this rock, I'll walk all the way to Alara. Just one thing."

"Yes?"

"Do you have any water?"

Van felt like an idiot for not considering Cade's need for food and water. She'd been heading toward the northwest perimeter to avoid being close to Gothoan headquarters and they still weren't in a very good stopping place. The mess hall provided some shelter for the moment, but they needed to make their respite brief. Skirting around to the rear of the building, Van was thankful it wasn't mealtime. They could use some of the large outdoor freezers and storage buildings for concealment. She encouraged Cade to sit and lean against the back of a low-slung hut while she laid the rocket on the ground. Van squatted and shrugged off her pack. Cade took the canteen as soon as Van brought it out.

"Drink slowly," Van cautioned. "I don't want you to get sick."

Cade nodded and set the canteen between her thighs after a few swallows. She abandoned the water altogether when Van handed over a ration bar. Tears pricked Van's eyes as she watched Cade tear off the wrapper and shove the food in her mouth.

She wondered how long it had been since Cade last ate.

Van remembered the trembling in Cade's body a few minutes before. She had thought relief at having been found caused the tremors. Now she realized it was more than that. Cade's uniform hung loosely on her body. She'd lost a significant amount of weight. While Cade chewed and sipped the water, Van offered her another nutrition bar.

The military rations were grey and overly sweet-tasting, not exactly a gourmet meal. What they lacked in taste, they made up for in calories, carbohydrates and nutrients. The eager look in Cade's eyes when she looked at the food was testament to how hungry she was.

"We should get going. It isn't safe to stay here."

"Eat it," Van said, pressing the bar into her hand. "I'll keep watch."

Taking the blast rifle, she kept an eye on the area while Cade ate. After a few quiet moments she asked, "Why were you carrying the rocket around? It wouldn't exactly be my defensive weapon of choice."

Cade chuckled but there was little humor in the sound. "I knew I couldn't last much longer without supplies. Beating up troops and lifting their weapons is one thing, but most of them don't carry food around."

Hearing her speak so casually about her own demise sent chills down Van's spine. "You can't eat a rocket."

"No, but I can blow up Mentis's ship."

Van frowned. "Why not blow up his office, with him in it?"

"I thought about it, but I don't know where it is and I didn't think anyone would be willing to give me directions."

"I get it. The next best target was the ship he brought you here on. You're going to have to tell me how you managed that one. I saw *Prometheus* explode and I thought..." Van clenched her jaw shut, unable to say the words.

"And still you came for me."

Van turned her head and met Cade's gaze. "I'll always come for you."

Her communications device sputtered to unexpected life. "Captain Swann, respond."

"I'm here, Ozal. The team?"

"Three outstanding, including you."

"On my way. The others won't be joining us," she said sternly.

"Understood. ETA?"

Van couldn't detect any emotion in the brief transmission even though Ozal had to know what she meant. In a way, Van was irritated that her tactical officer didn't seem devastated by the information, but she had to admit it was better than falling apart in the middle of a dangerous mission.

"Unknown. I'm five clicks away. Depends on how many ghosts I run into." Van didn't intend to use the slang for a pale, pasty Gothoan until it slipped out. It wasn't politically correct, but at the moment she didn't care. By finding Cade on a fully functioning military installation, she'd accomplished two missions. Commodore Grier would have proof the Gothoans were massing for war and Cade Meryan was alive to be crowned the next Queen of Alara.

"Understood, standing by."

Cade hadn't expected any other reply since the lifeboat couldn't fly to them. Before the rescue team left *Pandora*, they'd left everything behind that the enemy could use to track them. Van and Cade needed to get to the ship on their own.

Kneeling in front of Cade, Van offered a small smile. She reached up and gently cupped a soft cheek, wiping at a smudge of dirt with her thumb. Cade closed her eyes for a moment and leaned into the touch.

"Feel a little better?"

"Yes, I'm ready to get out of here."

"Good."

Van packed up the canteen and stuffed ration bar wrappers into a pocket. She offered Cade a hand up before shouldering the rocket. Cade took the rifle and linked her arm through Van's. Her limp more pronounced, Van detected a grimace on her face. Going was slow and she mentally counted off the minutes in her mind. They'd reached the western perimeter and rounded the edge of the barracks when Van realized there was a problem.

Cade must have felt her tense. "Let me guess. We crawl from here."

"Worse. We have to crawl past a couple of hundred Gothsans doing calisthenics less than eight meters away."

"That's not so bad," Cade responded after a beat. "Eight meters is far enough away to give you trouble on pistol quals. How hard could this be?"

"Funny." Van went for sarcastic but was relieved Cade felt strong enough to tease.

They knelt at the edge of the enemy barracks. Cade stretched out flat on her stomach, holding the rifle in her outstretched hands with her weight resting on her elbows. Used by countless soldiers for centuries, the low crawl was still a useful stealth technique. Cade would use elbows and knees to propel her body forward. The posture would definitely cause more damage to her injury and they wouldn't make very good time. They also wouldn't be able to stand until they reached the building just in front of the line between daylight and dark. According to their limited information, Van thought the structure might house research and development. The thought of destroying any future high tech weapons that could be used against Coalition forces was very exciting.

Shaking her head in disappointment, Van laid the rocket on the ground and slipped off the backpack. Cade was hurt, but low crawling past the enemy was still going to be easier for her than for Van. Van wrapped the strap attached to the neutron rocket around her hand and then doubled it around again. The weapon was heavy. She'd have to drag it by her side, crawl a few inches and then push the pack ahead of her with the free hand.

Van kept her eyes pinned to Cade's butt when she wasn't looking around for observant troops. Sweat dripped into her eyes and despite the cool temperatures, she longed to remove her coat. She didn't because then she'd have to carry it and removing it would require too much overt movement.

Time passed slowly in mind-numbing tension. They would move forward a few centimeters and then stop to see if anyone sounded an alarm. Designed to blend into the terrain, Van's grey rescue gear provided camouflage. Cade's dirt-encrusted clothing offered her the same protection. There were times when Van lost sight of her in the high, straggly weeds scant meters away. Eventually, the troops finished their mandatory exercises and scurried off to engage in other activities without discovering the trespassers.

Van cautioned herself not to get careless. They were able to make better time without so many troops at hand but there were still enough patrols moving about to remind them of the stakes. The Gothoans weren't stupid. Assuming Yugi really was a traitor, Mentis knew who was here, the purpose of their visit, and that *Pandora* was cloaked nearby waiting to retrieve the crew. He couldn't afford to let them leave with proof of an imminent Gothoan assault. Even now, he was probably racking his brain and driving his engineers crazy in an effort to find them.

A predatory smile curved her lips as Van thought of what Mentis, aka Nemo, would do to Yugi when he failed. Yugi really hadn't given the senator anything. In fact, all she'd really done was tip her hand. Poetic justice, she considered. That's what Mentis got for using a green undercover operative. She still wanted to believe that Yugi was innocent of being a traitor, but there was too much circumstantial evidence and lives hung in the balance. In this case, Yugi was guilty until proven innocent.

It felt like it took forever to reach the end of the compound. By the time they neared the research building Van craved water and worried how Cade was holding up. Even as she looked, Cade reached the structure and crawled past the edge before she lay down flat to rest. Van glanced around and didn't see a single ghost in sight. She increased her pace, sacrificing stealth for speed, but still didn't stand until she reached Cade's side.

"You okay?" she asked, panting a little.

"Fine. Just need a second."

Unexpectedly someone began to clap. Van pushed up on her arms and looked toward the rear of the building. Ensign Yugi stood there with a squad of Gothoan thugs. The smile on her face reminded Van of a Hokaran shark. Like most Alarans, Yugi was susceptible to cold and she now wore a heavy, fur-lined parka in place of her Coalition gear.

"It's about time you got here. We've been waiting."

Van climbed to her feet, refusing to have this conversation lying belly down on the ground. She noticed absently that Cade sat up and leaned against the building. "What, hoping I'd wear myself out before I got here so I wouldn't have the strength to beat you to death? You're out of uniform, Ensign."

"Oh no," Yugi said, melodramatically placing a hand against her cheek. "Are you going to put me on report, Captain?"

"Maybe I'll just shoot you for being a traitor." There was no way Van could carry out such a threat. The blast rifle and neutron rocket both lay on the ground, useless. She would never reach them before someone blasted a hole in her side. "Did you kill Lieutenant Bjorg?"

"Unfortunately, no. I really did leave him to pursue my own agenda, just like he told you when you contacted him. As for being a traitor..."

Yugi looked at Cade and suddenly kicked her solidly in her wounded thigh. Cade fell over, writhing in pain but didn't give Yugi the satisfaction of crying out. Van lunged toward her former ensign, intent on tearing her head off but two soldiers grabbed her arms from behind. She hadn't heard them come around the building.

"The vaunted Cade Meryan is the traitor, her and her family. What true right do you have to the throne of Alara?"

"Her mother is the queen, you moron."

"Was the queen," Yugi cruelly pointed out. "As soon as the entire line is eradicated, the rightful ruler of the system will be free to take her place upon the throne. Take their weapons and take them to the holding facility."

The troops broke ranks and stalked toward Van and Cade. Two reached down and yanked the admiral from the ground with no regard for her pain. Another stood by just in case she put up a fight while a soldier stooped and picked up the blast rifle. Before he could grasp the rocket strap Van took advantage of his vulnerable position and kicked him in the top of the head. The impact with the black helmet he wore sent a sharp pain from the sole of her foot into her calf, but she had the pleasure of hearing his neck snap. The soldier crumpled to the ground at the same time Yugi backhanded Van across the face.

"Get them out of here before she kills the lot of you. Oh, wait."

The Gothoans stopped and waited for Yugi to explain. Instead, she stepped up to Van and removed the communications device from her left ear. "Can't have you contacting *Pandora*. Your time limit is almost up, Captain. In one hour, they'll leave without you."

Yugi nodded once and the troops dragged Van and Cade back toward the center of the installation.

Van couldn't think of any sarcastic comeback. Yugi was right. No one knew she'd found Cade and the entire crew was already taking a risk on an unsanctioned op that Byra had objected to from the start.

"Why not just kill us?" she asked over her shoulder.

"You're far too valuable for that. Although you're just a tool for the current regime, the Goths might be able to get something useful out of you. Maybe some nice juicy tactical information."

"Not likely."

Before long, Van and Cade sat in a cold, damp cell located in the headquarters basement. Van was grateful Yugi hadn't seen fit to separate them and now they huddled together for warmth. If her butt hadn't been freezing to the floor, Van might almost have been cozy with Cade's arm around her shoulders. She still couldn't believe her rookie navigator had gotten the drop on them and turned out to be a Coalition traitor. Some intelligence officer she had turned out to be.

"When were you going to tell me about Mom?" Cade's voice held no accusation, only sorrow.

"When we made it back to *Pandora*."

"Were you afraid I'd fall apart if you told me?"

Damn.

Van answered softly. "Honestly? I just didn't know. You've been through so much and I couldn't take that chance."

Cade sighed. "Thank you for not lying to me. In your position, I might have done the same."

Van felt Cade rub her cheek against the top of her head. "What happened?"

The last thing Van wanted to do was tell Cade how her mother died. Tact had never been her strong suit, but she knew she had to say something. "There was an accident...at Solstice Canyon."

Cade's body tensed. "She fell?"

Van heard the tears in her voice. "Yes. I wasn't there, but that's what I heard. It happened about the same time Mentis attacked us near Celestas."

Cade nodded. "Did you attend the ceremony?"

Closing her eyes briefly, Van wished she could take all of Cade's grief away. "Yes. I was there. I think all of Alara was there."

"A beautiful ceremony?"

"The best. I've never seen anything like it before. Unfortunately, considering the circumstances, I'm starting to wonder if it really was an accident."

Cade went quiet for a second. When she spoke, she said everything that Van was thinking. "Yugi gloated that the Goths intended to eradicate the entire Meryan line. They made an attempt on me and Mom at the same time and almost succeeded in killing both of us."

Van leaned away and looked up at Cade, shivering at the deadly intent in her eyes. "With Alara in chaos without a ruler, it would be the perfect time to launch an attack."

"Except that I ruined their plans by surviving. They couldn't attempt to invade without knowing for sure that I was dead."

"And now they have exactly what they want. We're both here, *Gauntlet* is in the hands of an inexperienced commander and *Pandora* is too far away to be of any use."

"Even if *Pandora* started back now, they'd never make it in time. We don't know how many ships he already has waiting to attack and a single radio call could set the whole thing in motion."

Van stood and paced across the cell. "We have to get out of here and warn the Coalition."

"This is all my fault," Cade observed, still sitting on the floor. She absently rubbed her wounded thigh. "You told me to back off from Mentis's ship, that I was too close. I didn't listen. Now look where we are."

"You didn't have to listen. You outrank me." The excuse sounded weak even to Van.

"I was traveling aboard your ship as a civilian. I should have listened. Still, thanks for letting me off the hook."

Van walked back over and sat down. Her mind swirled as she tried to think of a way out of their confinement.

"How long until *Pandora* uses your bio-chip to find us?"

Van snorted. "Never. We all had the implants removed before transporting down. The Goths could have tracked us."

"Great. How do you suggest we escape, use a spoon and dig a tunnel to freedom? It might take about a hundred years."

"Somehow, I don't think that will work." Van started as she realized she'd been missing the obvious. She stood up and slipped her hand into her front trouser pocket. "Then again..."

"Van, I was kidding. If you pull a spoon out of your pocket, I swear I'm going to punch you."

Instead of a spoon, Van retrieved the curved piece of black plastic Paul had given her before she left *Pandora*. She wasn't quite sure how it worked, but remembered he had told her it fit

around her ear. Crossing her fingers that there wasn't a dampening field in here, Van slipped it into place.

"What's that?"

Van tapped the front of the communications device, praying that it worked the same way as an ear bud. She let out her breath when she heard the beep of an open line. "Paul, you there?" She kept her voice low so the guards wouldn't hear.

Empty air responded, but then suddenly she heard, "Hell yes, about time you called. You all right?"

"Yes. We're guests of the Gothsans at their headquarters facility."

"We? Ozal reported Bjorg and Yugi were taken out."

"No time. Relay our coordinates to the lifeboat. Tell Ozal to fly in here cloaked."

"And then what? The rescue crew isn't large enough to take the facility and get you out of there."

He sounded confused, but Van was already three steps ahead. "They don't need to either. Paul, I have a crazy idea."

"Uh oh."

The expression on Cade's face mirrored her first officer's concern.

"Have her use the experimental matrix to transport us out. She can lock onto this device to get a fix."

"Captain, it's called experimental for a reason. There's no guarantee."

"Do it. I'd rather have my atoms scattered than be tortured for information by Mentis and his goons."

"Right, I'll contact you when they're in position."

Van pulled her hair over the device to hide it from the Gothsans. For the first time she was glad she kept it a little longer than regulation.

"How long until they get here?"

"Unknown," Van admitted.

Footsteps interrupted them and Van cursed herself for not remembering the tiny transmitter. The approaching guards could only mean that Mentis was ready for the first round of interrogations. It would take at least a couple of minutes for Ozal to fly the *Pemberton* into position. She looked toward the cell door, noticing that Cade didn't attempt to stand. Apparently, Yugi's kick had further damaged the wound.

Two guards entered the cell. One of them kept a blast rifle trained on the women while the other opened the door. "Get up," the man with the key ordered.

"I can't," Cade responded. "You may have noticed the leg injury."

He hesitated and then gestured for his partner to help the admiral. Van abruptly caught on to Cade's plan as they made eye contact. The second Gothoan dropped his two-handed grip on the rifle and tramped toward Cade. Both of them had carelessly turned their backs on Van. Intuition told her this was the only chance they'd get. Being shorter than average, she used the key-bearing soldier's weight against him. She drove her foot into the side of his knee, either dislocating the joint or breaking the limb. Van didn't care which, only that the soldier cried out and dropped to the floor. At the same time, Cade swept her uninjured leg sideways and cut the other Gothoan's feet out from under him. When he hit the ground, the rifle went spinning away. Van had it trained on both soldiers before they could regroup.

Her finger had already tightened on the trigger when she stopped herself. She thought of Lieutenant Bjorg lying lifeless on the Gothoan terrain and couldn't bring herself to pull the trigger. She reversed the weapon and struck one of the guards with the butt of the rifle. Although she struck him hard, the helmet would absorb most of the shock. It was enough to render him unconscious. The second guard had clambered to his knees and held his hands up in surrender.

"Take off your helmet."

He hesitated in surprise before complying with Van's order. She didn't really care to see his face, more concerned that the soldier had a communications device inside the headgear. She found herself looking into the face of a young, frightened woman.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"Turn around," Van ordered harshly.

The woman opened her mouth to argue, thought better of it and seemed to steel herself for what would come next. Van had to hand it to her for bravery. The soldier probably thought she was about to die, but refused to beg for her life.

"Tie her up."

Cade moved quickly, searching the unconscious guard for restraints. She used what she found to secure the woman's hands behind her back and attach them to her feet. Though restrained, she could still cry out for help and Van's plan rested on catching the Gothoans

unaware. Cade tore off the other sleeve of her jacket. She'd be really cold now, but Van didn't plan for her to be on Gothos Prime much longer. She waited patiently while Cade tied the strip of cloth around the soldier's mouth.

Just as she saw Cade finish, Van felt a sharp tingling sensation crawling over her skin. "Get over here!" she said urgently.

Cade's eyes widened and she lunged for Van. Her hand extended and Van thought she reached out, but she couldn't feel anything. Ozal had locked onto Paul's device and was pulling her away.

"Cade!"

She thought she cried out, felt the word leave her throat. Blackness swirled and the brig faded. Seconds took an eternity. Slowly, her vision cleared. Van stood inside the reduced transport hub aboard *Pemberton*. She discovered Cade's arms wrapped around her neck and she had an up-close view of smudged cleavage.

"Admiral Meryan."

The voice belonged to Lieutenant Commander Ozal. It was the first time Van could remember the woman sounding surprised. She quickly disengaged from Cade and turned to her tactical officer. "Admiral Meryan needs medical assistance. Get us back to *Pandora* as fast as you can Ozal. I need a comm channel open, now."

Her remaining crew rushed to obey her commands. Lieutenant Osborne reached out to assist Cade into a seat while Ozal jumped back into the pilot's chair and began punching buttons. *Pemberton* streaked upward toward the atmosphere.

"Channel open, ma'am."

Van leaped into the unoccupied chair beside Ozal and spoke quickly. "Swann to Byra. The Goths are planning an invasion. Alert Coalition Headquarters and have all available vessels converge on Alara. If the ghosts take the capital planet, they'll own the sector."

"Understood. Transmitting message as we speak." She heard the urgency in his voice. "Status on your mission?"

Van shook her head. He still didn't think Cade was there. "Successful. Admiral Meryan is aboard." She regretted that she couldn't say the same for Bjorg, but she'd make up for that soon.

"Commander Byra, target all markers on the planet and lay out a full spread of octanitro torpedoes. Concentrate fire on the center of the buoys, which should take care of their fleet."

In response, Van watched ruby light streak past the *Pemberton*, headed for the surface. Seconds later, a massive explosion issued from the planet below. It wasn't as large as she

expected and Van realized her team had never accessed the armory. She knew from the scans she'd taken earlier that the building contained a dampening field that would protect it from the force of the current explosion. Unsure of the extent of the damage, she could safely say the Gothoan armory still existed, regardless of the damage done to their fleet.

"We still don't know how many vessels they already had on scene."

Van looked over her shoulder, surprised to find Cade standing there. "All we can do is hope we warned them in time. You should sit down."

"At least Mentis and Yugi aren't a threat anymore."

Rather than point out they had no proof the two were dead, she said, "We still don't know who's behind all this. You're still in danger, Cade."

Chapter Twenty-two

"HER THIGH WAS badly infected. For a while, I thought she would lose the limb, but she has responded well to the battery of antibiotics. I was able to repair the blast wound without too much trouble, although she may be stuck with a bit of a limp. Admiral Meryan is dehydrated and suffering from malnutrition in addition to a slight case of hypothermia. Alarans weren't meant for an extended stay on such a cold planet."

"Prognosis?"

"She needs rest and some decent food, but she'll make a full recovery. At least physically."

"What does that mean?" Van asked sharply.

Doctor Juntao sighed and frowned, a perpetual expression for the older Thuban. "She's been through a prolonged trauma. I'd recommend psychotherapy for post traumatic stress, if I thought she might actually listen to me."

"Can I see her?"

Cade's eyes closed involuntarily. Exhausted by her ordeal, she lost her struggle to remain awake. When she awakened again, she had the feeling that a lot of time had passed. She heard a familiar voice and wondered if Van had ever left sickbay.

Cade resisted the urge to smile. She was surprised at the warmth Van's concern generated. Desire surged through her veins and she struggled not to rein it in. On the planet, fighting for

survival, she hadn't allowed emotions to come into play. Now, she couldn't seem to prevent the yearning she felt for the woman who had saved her life for the second time. The most touching part was that Van acted like it was all in a day's work. She never reminded Cade of her bravery or seemed to expect anything in return. It was that nonchalant gallantry as much as anything else that appealed to her. It had been two hours since arriving back aboard *Pandora* and it felt like she hadn't seen Van for much longer.

"Only for a moment. She needs to sleep."

Van briefly rested a hand on the man's shoulder, already walking across the medical bay. "I promise."

Van made eye contact with her and Cade felt it to her core. She was aware of the doctor as he pattered in his office. If not for his presence, Cade was afraid she'd pull Van down onto the bed and keep her there.

"How are you feeling?"

Considering the question, Cade stayed with safe. "Better. My leg is already starting to itch. Doctor Juntao tells me that's a good sign. How long was I out?"

"A couple of hours. You had me pretty scared."

"Any word on survivors from the planet?"

Van flushed slightly, Cade assumed in anger. "We never finished planting the markers so we didn't get the armory, but the fleet is history. Most of the surrounding structures were vaporized by the blast."

"Most?"

"Yeah. Apparently, some sections of R&D were heavily shielded along with segments of their headquarters. We don't know if Mentis was able to order a strike on the Coalition, but it will take time before we receive a response."

As impressive as it was, twenty-fifth century technology still had limitations. The speed of light was one of them. Their message to headquarters would take about two days. If the rebel military already had ships inside the sector, the warning would be far too late to do any good. They should soon know the Coalition's status. It chafed that Cade was restricted to this bed when her people needed her.

"I assume we're traveling at full sub-light?"

Van squirmed a little and her response seemed uncomfortable. "We're not at sub-light. We're at jump speed. My orders. I take full responsibility if anything happens."

Of course she did.

Jump speed inside a system was ill advised. The ship's velocity required precise timing, the reason the Coalition used sanctioned jump points but restricted them to outside the solar system. If *Pandora's* timing was off in the slightest, they could emerge inside the planet.

"ETA?"

"A few more days. The upside is that we managed to hail the Scorpion team and have them abort the mission."

"Scorpion team?" Cade of course knew what a Scorpion assault team was but had understood that Van acted alone in coming to her rescue.

"Oops, guess I forgot to tell you about that. Coalition Headquarters sent a team to investigate rumors that you were on Gothos Prime, but we were closer. I was afraid that by the time they arrived, it would be too late."

Cade had no issues with Van making a preemptive strike. She wouldn't have lasted much longer on the planet. "Trust me, Van, I appreciate your initiative."

Smiling, Van stepped nearer to her bedside and their fingers brushed. "I was so worried about you." Her voice had softened and the moment felt much more intimate than it had a few seconds ago.

"Did I tell you that I knew you'd come?"

"You may have mentioned it."

Van leaned nearer and would have kissed her, but Cade yawned. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm pretty wiped out."

"That's all right. Why don't you get some rest? Doc says you'll need some time to get your strength back."

"Well, I'm not doing that from here." Feeling suddenly wide awake, Cade prepared herself for a duel with the Thuban doctor.

"Oh yes you are. I'm not having you keel over as you're sauntering through the ship. It would be bad for morale after we just got you back."

"I don't saunter."

Van squeezed her hand and her eyes narrowed. "You do, magnificently by the way, even if you do smell like antiseptic at the moment."

The desire was back. Breathless, all Cade wanted was to kiss every inch of Van's body. Instead, she gave in to the doctor's orders. She'd need all her strength for what she wanted to do with Van. Aside from that, she had a lot to think about and decisions to make. Cade remembered the news about her mother and all thoughts of being with Van disappeared.

"I'll let you know when we're close enough to speak with Coalition HQ directly," Van assured her, mistaking Cade's silence. "By the time we reach Alara, you'll be standing on the bridge."

"All right, you win."

Van offered her another reassuring smile and then left Cade to her thoughts.

Later, Cade learned that six warships had attacked the Coalition; their target was the Alaran home world. The *Pandora's* warning made it through within minutes of the assault and the military managed to bring four vessels into play. Although the vessels weren't a match for the heavily armed raiders, they gave it everything they had and were destroyed in the process. Suffering heavy damage, the warships were still fully capable of obliterating the royal castle. Yet, just on the cusp of victory, the assailants unaccountably ceased fire and bolted out of the sector.

Cade figured that the invaders received word of Mentis's destruction and abandoned their task as a lost cause. If only. There had to be more to it than that, but she couldn't imagine what it might be. Regardless, someone had called off the attack and for that she was thankful. By the time Cade discovered what happened, it was long over, but it solidified her decision.

COMMODORE ERIKA GRIER'S eyes kept tracking to Captain Swann and from her barely concealed frustration, Cade guessed the two had a history. It was all the commodore could do to finish reporting to Cade about the situation on Alara. Even through the artificial communication provided by the view screen, Cade could sense the woman's ire.

"I was the officer on scene, Ma'am. We launched everything we had on the planet; there wasn't time for anything else. They had us and then they just stopped firing and left. We don't know why."

Standing on *Pandora's* bridge, Cade clenched her hands behind her back and tried to ignore the trembling in her knees. She still felt very weak but didn't plan to show it to anyone. The call had come in that someone attacked the Alaran home world and Cade felt sick. She tried to focus on the details as the ship zoomed through space headed for the Andromeda sector.

"Any question of the attacker's identity?" Cade asked.

Grier shrugged, "None, but the Gothoan High Council is disavowing all knowledge and condemning the attack. They have proclaimed Mentis a terrorist and issued indictments against him as a war criminal. Council member Faux issued a writ of apprehension as soon as the shooting stopped."

"Tell him they can find Mentis scattered all over their secret military post on Gothos Prime. As large as that facility was, I find it hard to believe the Gothoan government didn't know about it or the planned invasion."

"Yet we have no proof, Admiral."

"Damage to Alara?"

"Confined to the northern area, concentrated around the castle. Fortunately, we received your warning before the bombardment started. The electromagnetic barrier went up in time. Damage was minimal."

"And the...royal burial grounds?" Cade's voice shook a little.

"Untouched." Into the heavy silence, Grier added, "My condolences, Admiral. Queen Dorma was an incredible woman."

"Thank you, Commodore. There will never be another like her."

Cade's voice sounded harsh to her own ears. She cleared her throat and concentrated on business, sure that if she gave into her grief she wouldn't be able to stop. She watched Grier shoot Van another dirty look and felt irritation wash over her. Whatever the story was with the two of them now wasn't the time for Grier to indulge her temper.

"We'll be there within the hour. Please inform Coalition Headquarters I'll meet with them right after I've seen the queen's advisors. Have the advisors standing by in the conference room."

"At the Coalition substation?"

Cade was momentarily confused. "Why would the queen's advisors need to report to the substation? I want them at the castle. In the meantime, beef up our forces throughout the sector if you haven't already. The *Pandora* will remain on station around Alara in case of any more uninvited guests."

"Understood, Admiral." Grier looked at Swann again and this time she spoke. "Captain, you and I need to have a conversation as soon as this is over."

"Belay that, Commodore," Cade interrupted, impatient with her behavior. "Clearly there's something going on here that I don't understand, but that doesn't matter right now. Commodore Grier, if I find out that your covert operations contributed to any of this, you'll spend the rest of your career as an ensign cleaning out waste reclamation units in the armpit of the galaxy."

Grier opened her mouth to respond, but Cade was past caring. She signaled Ozal to end the transmission.

"Come with me, Captain."

Leading the way into Van's office, Cade was very aware of the woman following. She was annoyed that Van was apparently keeping secrets, and further irritated that the knowledge didn't seem to dampen her desire. Cade sank into the captain's chair and looked at Van.

"Well."

"Well what?"

"Are you going to tell me how long you've been working for Grier?"

The silent communication between Swann and Grier had spoken volumes. It hurt to think Van was involved in anything that might have gotten her mother killed. Suddenly, she felt very tired. After squeezing the bridge of her nose to stave off a headache, Cade sat back and waited. Normally, Cade had a very intimidating presence and that was what she was going for now, but she wasn't sure she carried it off. She wore one of her uniforms she'd left in *Pandora's* VIP quarters before the incident that left her stranded on Gothos Prime and it hung loosely on her frame. She clenched her fist as the silence built, aware of how large her knuckles looked with the weight loss.

"It's not what you think, Cade."

The soft tones strained her defenses. "How long?"

"About two months before I met you."

"Your mission?"

"To patrol the far edge of the sector and report any evidence of Gothoan forces massing for invasion."

Cade swallowed, feeling the hurt harden into a ball in the pit of her stomach. "So, Coalition Intelligence already knew there was trouble and they didn't say anything. Now, Queen Dorma is dead and Alara fired upon. We stand at the brink of war and still the intelligence corps withholds information."

She stood up so fast that the chair would have toppled over if it hadn't banged into the wall. Striding toward the portholes, Cade stood staring out into space with her chest heaving. Adrenaline sang in her veins, causing her heart to pound.

"I didn't know. I swear." There was no apology in Van's voice. "I'm a junior captain who was given a set of orders and my first command."

The anger still burned strong, but not toward Van. It never had been. Soldiers followed orders or resigned their commissions. Considering all she'd done, all she'd gone through to save Cade, Van would have told her if she thought her actions would culminate in this chaos.

"I believe you."

Cade's body was as tight as a bowstring. She wanted to lash out at the injustice of having her mother taken so cruelly. Wanted to haul Mentis in front of a tribunal, but even that was denied to her. Cade held everything in, convinced she could handle it, but she knew that soon she would have to take time to process all that happened in the last few weeks.

Van's arms slid around her waist from behind and her head rested on Cade's back. The sweetness from her touch seared Cade, driving her toward the edge of her control. More emotions pounded at the doors of her restraint and she felt like she would snap.

"I need to be alone right now."

Van tensed. She released Cade without a word and strode from the room. Cade heard the thud of her footsteps. She regretted hurting her, but she just couldn't handle anything else. Taking a steadying breath, Cade settled down at Van's desk and pulled up her computer terminal. It belatedly occurred to her that she'd just kicked the ship's commanding officer out of her own office. That fact paled in importance as she focused on what was now required. Not only had she lost her queen and her mother, but also one of her greatest supporters. The loss was like an open wound, much more painful than the one she'd suffered on Gothos.

Shame hammered her as Cade acknowledged that she regretted what all of this meant for her personally. All she had ever wanted was to serve the Coalition military and protect her people. With Dorma in such excellent health, she had thought her mother would rule for decades to come. Suddenly, everything was different. Her mother was dead and although there wasn't any proof, Cade didn't believe she had died in a freak accident or thrown herself from the cliffs in a fit of despair.

Drafting her resignation to Coalition Headquarters was the easiest part of what came next. When she reached Alara, the hard part would begin. That would require approval from the queen's advisors, now her own. She roughed out the document, read it and then started over from scratch. She wrote and revised the file that would spell the end of her career three times before she was satisfied, her stomach churning. When she finished, Cade saved the file to a chip and slipped it into her pocket. This wasn't the kind of thing you sent off to Coalition Command over a communications channel. She needed to deliver the missive in person.

With the distasteful task complete, Cade walked over to the full-length windows again. Staring out into space as stars streaked by always helped settle her emotions. Acknowledging the vastness of the universe put things into perspective. By the time Van informed her *Pandora* was preparing to dock, Cade felt centered. Fate had decided her course of action and she would be strong enough to see it through. Resistance to the inevitable was pointless. Squaring her shoulders, Cade walked out of the captain's office, determined to prove herself a ruler that would have made her mother proud.

"Extend docking clamps," Van ordered as the ship neared the spaceport. She kept her eyes on the forward viewer. Her voice was confident, but Cade detected her hesitation toward the replacement navigator.

Cade hadn't met the young man at the helm before and briefly wondered from what section of the ship Van had pulled him, not that it mattered. This voyage was at an end and in a few more minutes she would return to Alara. It hit her all at once that the nightmare was truly at an end. She was home. The thought caused her eyes to burn and she self-consciously blinked the moisture away. Cade refused to show any sign of weakness. Her people needed to see her as strong, a leader never unsure, and ready to face any danger to protect them.

The ship docked and systems began to power down. For the next half hour, *Pandora's* crew would ensure the vessel went into station-keeping mode. They didn't need Van for that.

"Captain Swann, you're with me." Cade kept her voice neutral, completely professional in front of the crew.

"Aye, Admiral."

A crew member had opened the main hatch before they arrived and snapped to attention on sight. Cade nodded to him as they passed. The familiar sights and smells of the space station hit her and Cade felt herself truly relax for the first time in what felt like forever.

"Things are going to get a little crazy for the next little while, Van. I'd really like it if you'd stay with me for the next few hours."

"Of course. I know it sounds silly, but I really don't want to let you out of my sight."

The comment contained layers of meaning that Cade latched onto immediately. Van had made similar statements over the course of the last few days. Cade was starting to think Van cared for her deeply. The possibility was a little disarming, but she hoped it was true. It would make things a little easier later. She looked at Van and smiled, resisting the urge to take her hand.

"What's first on the agenda?" Van asked.

Cade directed Van into the transport hub, abruptly aware of all the people staring at her. Some people looked a little shocked. Others smiled unabashedly. The crowd in the busy terminal slowly became aware that she was there and came to a standstill. When the clapping started, Cade couldn't have been more touched. This time, she didn't attempt to stop the tears.

Amidst the din, Van clapped a hand on her shoulder. "Come on. Let's get you home."

Cade shook hands and shared a few words with well-wishers as they were ushered to the front of the line. Transport sparkles filled her eyes and when they vanished, she discovered another surprise. A contingent of Fleet Marines stood surrounding the retrieval pad in full

military dress. Commodore Martin Quaid, the base commander, stood front and center of the squad. Five steps from the platform, Cade discovered Fleet Admiral Alimi, Commander of the Coalition Military Forces. Her cousin, Saral Barab stood next to him, her smile so broad Cade thought it might be painful.

"Present arms," Quaid ordered loudly.

Quaid and the contingent of Marines saluted in unison. Admiral Alimi smiled broadly and stepped toward Cade. "Welcome back, Admiral Meryan. You had a lot of people very worried."

"Thank you, sir."

She started to salute her commanding officer, but he caught her off guard by wrapping her in a bear hug. Alimi was three inches shorter than Cade and had fifty kilos on her, but his embrace was strangely comforting. She had known him for years and had a lot of respect for him, but they had never really been close. He released her and she didn't have time to think about his actions.

"It's about time you got here." Saral took Cade into her arms, squeezing so hard it was difficult to draw breath. "I see your captain rescued your butt again. Is there something going on between you two that you haven't told me about?"

Fortunately, Saral had whispered the last part into her ear. "Wouldn't you like to know," she teased in return, low enough that the others wouldn't hear.

Cade pulled away and looked at the military personnel, realizing they still maintained the salute. "As you were."

Quaid terminated his salute, performed an about face and ordered, "Ready, too." The squad snapped to attention.

"I don't know what to say about all this. Thank you, sir."

"This is nothing," Alimi assured her. "We're going to have a parade in your honor later."

Cade froze, absolutely horrified at the idea of being venerated in such a way. She believed that only politicians and self-important blowhards truly appreciate a parade to show the people's admiration. Yet, what could she say?

Before she could force a polite response, Saral laughed. "The admiral is teasing you, Cade. Some of the base officials wanted to organize the parade, but we knew you'd hate it."

"Oh, thank goodness." Her relief was very real.

Alimi reached out and took her hand. "I want you to know that your people are deeply sorry for your loss, Cade, but we are so happy to have you back. If there is anything you need, please contact my office."

"Thank you, Admiral. I believe I may have to take you up on that offer soon."

She saw the frown on Van's face, but her comment didn't faze Alimi. "I was afraid of that, but I understand completely. The best interests of the people have to come first."

"Precisely."

Admiral Alimi turned to Van and shook her hand. "You've done the Coalition proud, Captain. Bringing the princess home has made you a national hero."

"That's not why I went after her, sir."

"I'm aware of that. It's that fact that makes what you did all the more impressive. Considering all the ramifications, what do you say that we forget all about you disobeying orders, hmm?"

Van grinned in obvious relief. "I'd really appreciate that, Admiral."

"Good." Alimi took a step back and looked at Quaid. "Commodore, why don't you release your people. I'm sure we all have work to do."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Commodore Quaid dismissed his troops as soon as the admiral walked away. As they dispersed, Cade started walking toward her home with Van and Saral next to her. Saral chattered away, excited that Cade was back safe and sound, but Cade barely heard her. She was listening to the birds sing and absorbing the scent of growing things. Warm sunshine caressed her skin, a welcome respite from the searing Gothoan cold.

"Cade? Are you all right?"

She looked at Van, seeing her worried expression. "I'm fine. I just have a lot on my mind."

Saral wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "I can't even imagine what you've been through. If Mentis wasn't already dead, I'd kill him myself."

Her cousin's infamous temper had made an appearance in less than five minutes of being on the ground. Normally, Saral's quick emotional outbursts irritated her, but in this instance she couldn't find fault. She felt the same way.

"Are the advisors in the conference room?"

"Yes, just like you wanted. Cade, you don't have to meet with them right now. Why don't you take some time, go visit your mother's tomb? No one will think any less of you if you ease back into things slowly."

"I will." The casual mention of her mother's grave cut deeply. Cade's jaw clenched. "Please have Jefferson ready with the ground car. I'll need him in about an hour."

Nonplussed by her tone, Saral stopped at the entrance to the castle. Cade continued on, grateful that Van stayed by her side. They crossed the circular foyer, headed for the conference room. A palace guard snapped to attention upon their approach. Cade stopped and turned to Van, drawing strength from her presence.

"Do you mind waiting? I'll try to make it quick."

The tenderness in Van's eyes shored her up. "Whatever you need. Take your time and I'll grab us a snack from the kitchen."

"Make mine a coffee and a sandwich."

"Something you can carry with you?"

Cade wanted to hug Van, but settled for a smile. "You know me so well."

"Not yet," Van said softly, "but I intend to."

Cade's heart thumped against her ribcage and she barely managed not to gasp. Rather than respond, she moved toward the conference room and the guard broke his stance to open the door. She knew that once she entered, he would adjust his position to guard the room for any unauthorized entry.

Four individuals stood facing her. One man and three women. All of them had been with her mother for years and each wore conflicting expressions of equal parts sorrow and relief. They had been standing near the double doors next to the garden talking quietly. As one, they turned at the sound of the main entrance opening and walked over to meet her. A much older Alaran woman was the first to reach Cade and took both her hands. Pisa Rhydane's faded blue eyes held compassion.

"My dear, our prayers to the Mother have been answered. We believed you lost to us."

The only man in the room was fully Human. Jonas Seaver didn't speak, but he smiled and Cade thought he might cry. She looked at the other two women, an Alaran named Mali and the final woman who had some Human ancestry, Grace Barton. Cade motioned for them to sit.

"Princess Cade," Grace said, "I know you've only just returned, but time is of the essence. Much has happened since you were last on Alara."

As the queen's chief diplomatic advisor, Grace maintained close contact with representatives from the system's other planets. Often, she could see difficulties coming to bear long before they actually materialized. In this case, Cade didn't need the insightful woman's expertise to know she had to act quickly.

"The system is in chaos without a seated ruler and with the recent unprovoked attacks, the people are understandably worried. That's why I intend to submit my resignation with the Coalition military leaders as soon as I leave here."

"Good." Jonas nodded soberly. "You also know that Dorma's successor must be crowned quickly."

"You mean me. I appreciate that all of you were with my mother for a long time, but I am going to need your counsel as much as she ever did. For that reason, I ask that you not stand on ceremony with me. If you have something I need to hear, just say it."

She could see that she surprised them with her directness.

"Very well." Mali Tahima had been the Alaran science advisor, but that didn't mean her knowledge was restricted to technological matters. "The coronation should take place within the week, the sooner the better."

"I agree. Please see to the arrangements."

Mali nodded and then glanced at her counterparts. Clearly, she wanted to say something else, but wasn't sure how. Cade's headache intensified and throbbed behind her left eye. "What? I have little patience for prevarication."

"Have you chosen a counterpart?" Grace met her eyes without flinching. Considering the sensitive nature of the question, she impressed Cade.

"Yes. I think I've also just chosen who my chief advisor will be."

Grace flinched in surprise and smiled. "May I ask who you've chosen?"

"Captain Vanessa Swann, although she doesn't know it yet."

Old Pisa chuckled. "I'd like to be an insect in the corner when that discussion occurs."

"Believe me, I'm not looking forward to it. There is no one I'd trust with Alara's safety more than Van, but I just can't predict her response. She could refuse."

Jonas frowned. "That would be disappointing. The people will accept the esteemed captain. She risked her life to save you and has gathered quite a following among the populace."

"Who cares about that?" Mali scoffed. Being nearer to Cade's age, she had other concerns. "Do you care for this person, Princess?"

"Of course, why else would I ask her to be my counterpart?"

Shaking her head, Mali clarified. "No, I mean do you wish her to truly be your spouse?"

"Isn't that a little personal?" The hint of a growl in Cade's voice warned the woman to back off. It didn't work.

"Princess, I do not wish to offend, but we are your advisors now until or unless you decide to replace us. There can be no secrets if we are to properly fulfill our roles. I am not asking you because I seek fodder for the rumor mills. We must know if Captain Swann is to truly be your spouse or if this is merely a diplomatic solution."

Cade carefully considered Mali's declaration and knew she was right. These people would be her eyes and ears, the true intelligence gatherers behind the throne. If Cade intended to use Vanessa as a pawn, her councilors needed to know.

"Honestly, Van is someone I would choose to be my spouse. She doesn't know and I don't know how she would react if she did. I do think she'll agree to at least a temporary alliance. Alaran tradition declares I must have a counterpart within thirty cycles of the coronation. As much as I lo...care...for Van, the welfare of the people comes first. If she later decides to nullify our association, that's something I shall have to deal with."

"Then we shall accept her as a fully vested mate until the future proves otherwise," Pisa promised. Cade thought she detected a sentimental streak in the slightly hunched, older woman and hoped she wouldn't attempt to play matchmaker.

"Just don't treat her any differently until she says yes."

"When are you going to ask her?" Grace asked.

"Tonight. First, I must meet with the fleet admirals and then I'd like to pay my respects to the queen. I'll ask Van to join me for dinner tonight in the central gardens."

"A wonderful choice," Jonas approved. "The gardens are in full bloom. I'll ask the kitchen to make a special meal that your chosen mate will enjoy so much she won't be able to say no."

"I'm surrounded by a bunch of hopeless romantics."

Grace had the temerity to rest a hand over one of Cade's, something Cade appreciated. "We only wish to see our future queen happy."

"Thank you. Now, have any of you heard any news of border skirmishes or trouble on any of our planets?"

"No," Mali answered. "If anything, this trouble with the Gothoans seems to have pulled our people together. Skirmishes in the outlying areas have died down and even the few pirates in the sector are keeping quiet."

"It is a little strange," Pisa said, "how nationalism can bring a people together."

"Yes, well, I'm sure it will only be temporary. I understand the Gothoan government has denied any affiliation with Senator Mentis's actions, but I still don't trust them."

"And you shouldn't." Advisor Seaver sounded angry and his Human ears had gone red. "I will never believe they didn't know about two separate military facilities that just happened to be stocked with weapons of every description. Nevertheless, they know they could never stand against the Coalition and have agreed to remove all ambassadors from our sector. When the Senate meets again in eight rotations, we will discuss allowing them to rejoin the Coalition Council."

"Who made that decision?" Cade was a little miffed that no one asked her, considering that she should have been involved in any treaty after her mother's death.

"Forgive us, young one," Pisa said. "You were not available and something had to be done quickly to ensure peace. Advisor Grace made the suggestion and your cousin, Princess Saral backed the decision. She was quite effective in your absence and I must admit she surprised me with her leadership."

"Saral took on the Gothoan government? I'm impressed. I certainly can't fault the outcome. Ensure that the Gothoans know that if any of their ships cross our boundaries without prior negotiated access, they will be fired upon and their presence will be considered an act of war."

"I'll see to it," Grace assured her.

Cade stood up. "I'm sure there is much more to discuss, but for now I think you all have enough to keep your hands full. I'm on my way to Coalition Headquarters now."

"Princess," Jonas said, "there is one more thing. Since you are acting queen, it would be unseemly for you to move about without a security contingent."

That did catch her off guard. Of everything she had considered recently, Cade never thought of having a security detail. "Please arrange something. Until then, Captain Swann will be with me. She's waiting outside and will accompany me to Headquarters and later to the royal tomb."

Cade didn't miss the poorly hidden smiles and tried not to roll her eyes. "Fine, fine. I'll be back...we'll be back for dinner by nineteen hundred."

The meeting took a little longer than she had thought it would and Cade strode from the conference room before her advisors vacated their seats. She found Van waiting just outside the door and happily took a tumbler of coffee from her. Cade refused the sandwich.

"You need to eat, Cade."

"I will, later. I'm too keyed up for food at the moment. I'd just rather get all these meetings out of the way first."

"All right, but I'm going to nag you until you do."

"Fair enough. Why don't you join me for dinner tonight? It's my first day back on Alara and I've decided to enjoy the palace gardens. They're beautiful this time of year and the kitchen staff is very skilled." Cade felt a little weird setting Van up like this. She swallowed hard and avoided eye contact while she waited for an answer.

"Sure. What time should I be there?"

"Nineteen hundred?"

"It's a date."

The next meeting took far longer than the one with her advisors. Cade ordered the military to double patrols inside the solar system and informed them of the decision to restrict Gothoan ships inside Alaran space. She tendered her resignation, effective immediately and requested to have Vanessa Swann reassigned to the flagship *Gauntlet*. She would be promoted to Commodore and Paul would take her seat on *Pandora*. The only hitch came when she informed Admiral Akkadia that Van would no longer work in sector intelligence. He argued the point until Cade told him to get behind her decision or submit his own resignation. Although he outranked her as a military officer, Cade's authority as the Alaran ruler trumped his.

Van stayed with her throughout the afternoon and offered her a shoulder when Cade went to see her mother. Magnificent blooms of every variety, including some that were very rare, surrounded the family crypt. Dorma's likeness, sculpted of the finest Celestan marble rested on a stand beside the vault door. The gardeners had outdone themselves, grooming the area until it surpassed the lushness of the surrounding park, showing the Alaran people's appreciation and sorrow for the latest queen. Finally, Cade signaled her readiness to return to the castle. There was one more task she needed to accomplish this day and the thought of asking Van to marry her scared Cade more than she wanted to admit.

Cade separated from Van a few hours before the scheduled dinner date. Not only was she exhausted, but also seeing her mother's name etched on the crypt door brought home to her the finality of the situation. She longed for the oblivion of a few hours of sleep but succeeded only in tossing and turning until she gave up and climbed into the shower. She was dressed and waiting for Van in the garden twenty minutes before their scheduled dinner. When Van arrived ten minutes later, she was out of uniform for the first time since Cade had known her and the sight took her breath away.

Van had chosen a simple midnight blue blouse and black slacks. Auburn hair curled over her collar, coming to the middle of her shoulder blades. Van offered Cade a slightly shy smile that melted her heart. Suddenly, Cade was deeply aware of the setting and how it might look from Van's perspective. To drive the darkness away, the grounds crew had illuminated tall lanterns around the area. The posts were black titanium that disappeared in the darkness so all that was visible was the soft yellow light itself. In the center of the clearing kitchen staff erected a small, round table with a single candle.

She could hear humming bees flitting between night blooming flowers. Perfume from the blooms was so heady Cade thought she should be able to see the scents. Near the table, someone had set up a hovering cart that held an ice bucket with champagne. Two crystal glasses waited beside it. Cade suffered a moment of sheer terror and almost bolted from the garden. Taking a deep breath, she stood her ground despite the nerves. She was the future queen of Alara. She could handle proposing marriage.

"Hi. Did I miss something?" Assessing Van's expression, Cade saw curiosity warring with nervousness.

"Uh, I guess the kitchen staff really went all out, huh?"

"You think they missed you or something?"

Van's levity was just the right thing to help Cade relax. "Whatever their reasons, I'm happy you're here to share it with me. Would you like some wine? I assure you, it's very fine, from my family's vineyard on the Mauti Coast."

"Wonderful, I'd love some."

Cade held out Van's chair and as she sat, Cade suddenly decided her white gloves were a little over the top. She slipped them off and set them next to her plate before opening the effervescent wine.

"When's the coronation?" Van asked casually, placing a napkin on her lap.

Cade froze in the process of pouring their drinks and then smiled as she finished. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you figured that out without me saying anything."

"There isn't really another option, is there?"

"No, unfortunately."

Cade sipped the wine, pleased when Van complimented her on the beverage. Rather than focus on what she had lost, Cade tried to find promise in the future, starting with the woman sitting across from her. Wait staff served the first course and Cade decided to ease into what she wanted to ask slowly.

"I found out that the Coalition is sending a team of astrobiologists with Scorpion assault crews to Tokar. The Scorpions will ensure Mentis's base there comes under our control while the astrobiologists study your Phantoms. Fleet Admiral Alimi assured me they will take every precaution."

Van set aside her fork and picked up the champagne flute. Her eyes were on the golden bubbles that floated inside. "They wore control collars. That's why they took you, you know. Mentis had someone controlling their actions. I don't have any proof or anything, but I saw the

collars when we went after you. Trust me, when I was on Tokar before, those collars were not a part of their wardrobe."

She sounded sad. Perplexed, Cade asked, "You're not upset that the Coalition only wants to study the Phantoms and not destroy them? You've lost a lot at their hands."

"They're living creatures," Van responded. "I don't know if they're sentient, I highly doubt it, but they don't deserve to be exterminated. They should be left in peace and a warning buoy set in orbit around the planet."

"I'll see to it."

Van cocked her head and smiled. "Just like that? No argument about how dangerous they are?"

"None. I happen to agree with you and I'm not in the habit of wiping out a life form just because it's one I don't understand."

"It's my day, then. I found out I don't have to work for Grier anymore. Thank you for that. I didn't enjoy working intelligence, even though I love the military."

"I would never take that from you," Cade assured her.

"Excuse me? What's that supposed to mean?"

Cade realized she had allowed some of her feelings to surface in her comment. It was time to ask her question. "As queen of Alara, there are certain expectations I must fulfill. I can't serve in the military, as you know. I must stay on Alara most of the time, unless conducting official business..."

"And?" Van finished her drink.

Cade topped off Van's glass and attempted to maintain a casual tone when she replied. "I am expected to provide a co-ruler within thirty cycles of taking the throne. A spouse."

Van didn't respond at first. She had gone slightly pale and it didn't look as if she was breathing. "I see."

Frowning, Cade wondered if Van thought she was ending their affiliation so she could take a spouse with more strategic importance. "I don't think you do. I don't intend to choose some ruler from a neighboring system to solidify political ties. Although I'm sure that's what the people will expect."

"What are you saying then?" Van asked, her voice breaking a little.

Cade tossed her napkin onto the table and stood. She assessed the slightly terrified look in Van's eyes. The desire to wipe away the fear was almost overwhelming. Cade stepped around to Van's side and then knelt on one knee. She took Van's trembling hand between her own.

"I'm asking you to marry me, Vanessa. Will you be my wife?"

Chapter Twenty-three

"IS THIS A joke?"

Van didn't know whether to laugh or throw up. Had Cade somehow discovered her true feelings and was now using them to taunt her? Van discarded the notion almost before the thought finished forming. Cade would never be so cruel. The only possible conclusion was that she was serious. But Van wasn't marriage material, everyone knew that. She saw Cade's uncertainty and realized she'd actually verbalized the question.

"No, Van. This isn't a joke. I'm asking you to marry me."

"But why? Hell, Cade. You can have anyone in the system, woman or man. I'm just a grunt. The military is all I know. Surely you need someone who understands what it means to be royalty."

"Are you saying no?"

If she did, would Cade ask someone else? From what she'd said, Cade had no choice about the marriage requirement. The very idea of her wedding another threatened to make Van physically ill. She wasn't sure she was ready for such a big move, but Van couldn't face the alternative.

"Just answer one question. Why do you want me?"

Cade barely paused to consider her response. "I trust you with my life. You're intelligent, brave and honorable. The people of the Andromeda System view you as a galactic hero and will accept you as my counterpart without question."

Van waited, looking into Cade's eyes. She hadn't expected a declaration of undying love, but Van wasn't convinced at the emotion in Cade's proposal. She thought it far more likely that this was all a political move, forced by the death of the queen. Cade needed a royal mate. Crushing hurt forced her to say, "That's it? There's no other reason? I guess after we figure out who's trying to wipe out the royal line we can just have the whole thing annulled, right?"

"If that is your decision."

Cade sounded funny, as if she was strangling on the words, but anger blinded Van to the possible reasons she would react in such a way. All Van could see was Cade kneeling in front of her, asking Van to save her life again. A marriage between them wouldn't just satisfy a political requirement. Such a bond would justify the two of them spending an inordinate amount of time together and allow them to set a trap for whoever was truly behind all the recent violence. Van would never betray Cade by forcing her to deal with a homicidal maniac without her support. Also, a part of her hoped Cade would develop feelings for her over time.

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"I'll marry you."

Cade closed her eyes, preventing Van from seeing her reaction, but she thought she detected relief.

"Thank you." Looking up, Cade took her hand. "I realize this is unexpected. I've had to make a lot of decisions today that affect a great many people. I'm sorry if our union damages any relationship you might have with another."

The word union made Van's insides flutter. She responded honestly. "There is no one else."

When would Van have time to date anyone? And why would she want to with Cade looking at her this way?

Van decided to take a giant risk. She cupped Cade's face between her palms, passing a thumb over the full lower lip. Cade gasped in response. At least she wasn't indifferent to Van's touch. Dipping her head, Van stopped a heartbeat away for only a second. Cade's breath ghosted against her mouth and Van closed the distance. She kissed Cade gently, a simple press of the lips. It was the most erotic sensation Van had ever experienced. When Cade's tongue touched her lips, Van opened to her, sliding her arms around the strong shoulders and falling into the caress. For long moments, all she knew was the touch, taste and scent of Cade.

When they eventually parted, Cade looked a little dazed. "What was that for?"

"We have to keep up appearances, right? After all, you did just propose." Somewhere during the course of the kiss, Van had decided to make a play for Cade's heart. "Have we decided on a date?"

"The coronation will be in five days. It'll take that long to send out notices and make the arrangements. The wedding will be the highlight of the ceremony. How does Queen Vanessa sound?"

"Like...it sounds...whoa. I don't even know what to say."

"Now that's a first," Cade teased. She stood and offered Van her hand. "I know I said it before, but thank you. You have no idea how you've made me feel."

Van's heart skipped a beat. For a moment, only a moment, she thought Cade would admit to hidden feelings. Then she continued as though her statement was rhetorical. "Would you mind walking me to my room? I'm so tired that I'm worried I'll fall over before I make it to bed."

Recalling Cade's recent ordeal, Van couldn't be upset. Coupled with the weight of responsibility thrust upon her by her mother's death, it was miraculous how well Cade was holding up. Shame caused Van to blink. She had put her own selfish desires above Cade's welfare. It wouldn't happen again. Van still wanted Cade to return her feelings, but vowed there wouldn't be any games involved, no deliberate seduction. Only honesty, understanding and above all, love.

It was strange and unexpected, the epiphany that allowed Van to see the precise moment that half-hearted love became relentless devotion. Any future decision to terminate their union would not come from her.

"It would be my honor."

CARE WAS TAKEN to fill the crowning cup with anointing oil and placed upon the cathedral's altar. Outside, the day was drawing to a close. Warmth flowed into the basilica through the open doors. Van heard the litany being sung by the Alaran choir but couldn't understand the ancient language. From her vantage point at the head of the apse, alongside the Captain of Arms and Arch-chancellor, Van awaited the future queen's entrance. People stood in the nave, flowing out into the courtyard and onto the street, maintaining a respectful distance from the royal procession. Van resisted the urge to run her finger around the inside of the high, tight collar. Her Coalition dress uniform had been exchanged for the regalia of Alaran majesty.

All voices fell silent as the entourage entered, headed by the ruling queens from Andromeda's other planets. Queens Agea Tyche of Psmanth and Galene Rizo of Celestas peeled off and walked around to the right side of the apse. Queen Sitiana Elpis from Mirach along with Temis Barab, Cade's aunt, took the left, flanking the dais. Then a single female voice chanted the anthem to receive the new queen. Van thought it sounded like Cade's cousin, Saral.

"I present unto you, Cade Meryan, your undoubted Queen. Wherefore all you who are come this day to pay homage and swear fealty throughout the sector."

In the meantime, Cade passed through the body of the sacellum. Her eyes glittered, dark hair shone brilliant. Her garments mirrored Van's, save for the deep purple cloak pinned to her shoulders that trailed behind her on the floor. Set off against the midnight blue waistcoat and trousers, Cade was a vision. Her eyes rested dutifully upon the Chancellor. Up the steps to the apse, Cade paused and knelt upon the stool supplied for that purpose. The queen's advisors

stepped into the theater around Cade. Carrying the majestic regalia, they placed sword, matching crowns and shield upon the altar.

Van recognized the sword as the ceremonial blade Cade wore during her medal ceremony. The Book of Andromeda joined the other items. Though rumored to contain the recorded history of all planets in the system, Van had little interest in the tome. Pride and adoration suffused her being as she gazed upon her future monarch, wife and, the universe willing, her lover.

Arch-chancellor Marshal drew a symbol upon Cade's forehead with the anointing oil and then bid her stand.

"Madam Cade, are you willing to take the oath of loyalty to your people?"

"I am." Cade's voice rang out strong and clear.

"Will you solemnly promise to govern and serve the peoples of Alara, Celestas, Psmanth, Mirach, Thuba, Hokar and other outlying sectors belonging or pertaining to Andromeda, according to their respective laws and customs?"

"I so promise."

"Will you execute your power with justice and mercy in all aspects of judgment?"

"I will."

The Chancellor turned and retrieved the Alaran ceremonial sword. He reversed his grip and handed the weapon to Cade, hilt first. "With this sword accept the role as protector of the people. Smite injustice wherever it shall exist. Punish what is profane and relegate it to perpetual darkness."

Accepting the blade, Cade slid it into the scabbard at her side without the need to look. The Chancellor held a hand out toward Van, inviting her to join them. Van swallowed nervously, attempting to ignore her trembling legs as she stepped forward. All of the moisture in her body disappeared. Her hands felt cold and her mouth was as dry as a Celestan desert. Cade took her right hand in what resembled a handshake and the Chancellor looped a gold chain around their wrists, symbolically binding them together.

"Captain Vanessa Swann, counterpart to the queen, will you promise to adopt the ways of Andromeda as your own, to assist your mate in serving justly and wisely over the people under your authority?"

"I promise." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Will you accept Queen Cade as your spouse, forever committing your lives together in sacrifice and joy?"

Van looked at Cade. This was it, the last chance to bail. She thought she detected amusement in the black eyes and felt Cade's grip tighten.

"I will."

The Keeper of the Vaults stepped toward the Chancellor, a slightly hunched older woman whom Van heard Cade refer to as Pisa. She carried a lavender cushion trimmed in gold. Two rings rested upon the pillow. Van always thought that if she ever married she would choose her own ring. Not so. The white gold bands symbolized the Royal House of Alara. Set with a sapphire, Van decided the stone perfectly complimented the color of their uniforms.

"Receive the rings of a queen. As you are both this day sanctified rulers of Andromeda, so you are also sworn and bound to each other. May your reign be long and glorious."

Cade took one of the rings and slid it onto the fourth finger of Van's right hand. The band fit perfectly, having been sized a few days before. Van performed the same action for her new wife. It all seemed like a dream. Her head felt stuffed with cotton. It wouldn't have been hard to convince Van that this was happening to someone else.

When the Chancellor retrieved a crown and faced Cade, Van heard the crowd rustle in renewed excitement. This particular crown was the larger of the two, fitting since Cade was heir to the throne. Still, it wasn't the heavy, jewel-encrusted monstrosity Van anticipated. Rather, it resembled the simple silver headwear Cade had sported as princess. The only exception was the impressive blue tanzanite gem mounted in the center and framed by triple rows of small sapphires. Tanzanite was the rarest jewel in the system.

Chancellor Marshal reverently placed the crown upon Cade's head. Scattered cheers resounded throughout the cathedral. He settled a smaller crown onto Van's head. Delicate silver, designed like a tiara, also boasted a tanzanite stone surrounded by a single band of blue sapphires. Van had worried the crown would fall off, but the headwear was heavier than expected.

Heavy is the head that wears the crown, she thought, remembering the old adage.

"May you both be crowned with righteousness. Be courageous and command the loyalty and devotion of the people. Please symbolize your union according to the customs of Alara."

Cade smiled broadly. She faced Van and Van's heart skidded off her ribcage. When they kissed, the entire cathedral erupted in cheers. Somewhere trumpets sounded.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur. Van vaguely remembered Cade whisking her off to a formal reception and beginning the festivities with the traditional first dance. Dignitaries she'd never met or dreamed of continually paraded by, offering best wishes to the newly crowned royal couple. Wine flowed and Van's head spun from a combination of alcohol and activity. At one point, Paul stopped by and teased her about hearing hearts break all over the galaxy as the most eligible bachelorette dropped off the market.

Before she knew it, midnight on Alara came and went and the first full day of her married life began. Cade ushered in the day by taking her hand and bidding farewell to their guests. Van felt a little sad that everyone thought they were off to enjoy a romantic honeymoon when that simply wasn't the case. As much as she longed for that to happen, a charade was about to start.

Cade laughed and waved to her guests, tugging Van toward the exit. Van hoped her own smile proved convincing. She followed Cade up the wide, central staircase while the party continued without them. Suddenly, she was very eager.

By prior agreement, the women retreated to Cade's suite. Ostensibly, they would spend a night making passionate love before setting out for the Mauti Coast in the morning, the site of the Meryan family vineyards. Only a few hours away by atmospheric transport, the coast's Emerald Forests were considered extremely romantic. Cade had used the recent governmental upheaval to justify a single week's honeymoon. In reality, they planned to share a quiet night and a bed to maintain the illusion of blissful matrimony. The true purpose of the trip was to draw out their attacker. With any luck, the mastermind behind Mentis's elaborate schemes would show his face.

However, Van did not intend to meekly follow along as Cade's counterpart. Over the course of the last five days, Van had started to believe Cade was hiding something and she had an idea that she knew what that was. An unguarded look here, a quiet touch there. Tonight, she intended to discover if they could have a real life together or if it was all an illusion.

"I'm going to take a shower," Cade announced as soon as the door closed behind them. She peeled out of her jacket, oblivious to Van's licentious expression. "Are you okay? You look a little tense."

"I'm fine. I guess I'm just feeling a little overwhelmed."

"Why don't you relax and have a drink. I'll be out soon." The house staff had thoughtfully brought in a cart that held champagne and two glasses. It was in the seating area and Van hadn't noticed it until Cade mentioned it.

Tossing her jacket onto a chair in the corner, Cade kicked off her shoes and placed her crown into the wardrobe before she headed into the bathroom.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Van made her decision. She gave Cade time to undress and step into the shower by putting Cade's jacket and shoes away. She placed her own crown on the dresser and then stripped down. Van ignored the champagne and placed her clothes neatly over the chair. She had her own suite, but to an outsider that would appear to be a formality. Naked, Van placed a hand on the bathroom doorknob and hesitated, hoping it wasn't locked. She could hear the water running and acted on impulse. The door opened and she entered quietly. Steam rose and she could see Cade's nude form behind the clear shower stall, sleek and wet.

Taking her courage in her hands, Van opened the door and entered behind Cade. She felt her tense when she slid her arms around her waist. Cade turned and looked at her, confusion warring with obvious desire.

"Van, what are you doing?"

"Do you have to ask?"

Van pressed against Cade, shivering at the feel of hot, supple flesh. Cade didn't argue. Lovemaking in a shower had always been one of Van's favorite activities, but the experience with Cade transcended all others. By the time the water ran cold, Van was shaking from the force of sensations cascading through her body. Though they'd both been satisfied a few times over, Van decided to move their encounter into the bedroom.

Cade apparently caught on quickly, following her as Van pushed the door open and grabbed a couple of towels. With Cade's arm around her waist, they hurried toward the other room, leaving the shower to shut off once the sensors indicated it was no longer occupied. Semi-dry, they fell into bed to continue what would be a very long and gratifying first night as a married couple.

Chapter Twenty-four

SMILING, VAN RIPPED the t-shirt over her head and stepped into a hot shower. She and Cade had just finished an invigorating five-kilometer run through the trails in the Emerald Forest. Sweat caused the shirt to cling to her skin and desire coursed through her veins. The last week had been like a true honeymoon with much lovemaking and intimate companionship. The only thing lacking was an actual declaration of affection from either side. Van kept her love hidden with difficulty, determined that Cade should speak the words first. If she ever did.

Van kept remembering their first time together on Tokar, just after she'd saved Cade from Mentis and his Phantoms. Cade had made a comment that there was nothing wrong with a casual sexual encounter, that it was just biology. Van certainly hoped that she didn't feel that way now, but she was too afraid to ask. Pushing the unpleasant thoughts away, she finished her shower and dressed. Not one to miss out on making love in the shower, Cade usually joined her, but she was busy arranging transport back to the capital city.

There hadn't been any attempts on Cade's life during the week on the Mauti coast and both of them were starting to think their troubles were over. Van thought whoever orchestrated the attempts on the royal line had given up when Mentis was killed and his military facilities either destroyed or appropriated. In the last few days, Cade had finally started to let down her guard and fully relax for the first time since her rescue from Gothos Prime. The only time they thought

about getting back to business as usual was during her daily conversations with her cousin, Saral, who had taken the reins of the monarchy during their absence.

The door opened and the instrument of her musings walked into the bedroom. Even red-faced and sweaty, Cade still managed to get Van's blood pumping. She watched as Cade removed her t-shirt and bra, her breasts bouncing a little with the movement. "Grace says hi."

Van was surprised at the mention of the advisor. "You couldn't reach Saral?"

"She's off in the lower peninsula settling a border dispute between some farmers."

"There are constables for that sort of thing."

"You don't know my cousin very well. She enjoys getting personally involved. Saral says it keeps a friendly face on the monarchy." Naked, Cade walked toward the shower. "Any way I can entice you back in with me?"

Van wrinkled her nose at the smell of sweat. "Why don't you shower, alone, and then we can have fun getting sweaty together later?"

"Sounds like fun. Unfortunately, the transport will be here in less than an hour."

Cade climbed under the hot water and Van responded, "If Saral is doing such a great job in your absence, we could stay for another week. You still haven't completely recovered from your time on Gothos."

Van didn't really care for Rear Admiral Barab, though she would never say anything to Cade. Cade adored her cousin and Van didn't want to hurt her. Still, the woman had proven herself capable on the throne if only in a short-term capacity.

"Hey, I remember keeping up with you just fine on that last run."

That was true, but Cade still sported a slight limp and Van knew she would hurt later from the workout. However, that was only part of her motive for wanting to stay on the coast. Van knew she couldn't hide here forever, she was just afraid to go back because right now she felt like she was living in a fantasy where she and Cade shared a real marriage. Eventually, if the assassin never returned, Cade would see there was no reason to go on pretending. She would end their union.

The water shut off as Cade stepped out of the stall and reached for a towel. Van waited for her to dress and then they walked out into the courtyard, hand in hand, to wait for the transport. They didn't bother with any luggage, having brought along a small staff to deal with such minute details. The servants would gather up their belongings and close up the house before heading to the castle.

Standing in the gardens, Van heard the approach of an airship before it topped the trees and came into view. Unexplainable dread made her hold her breath. She expected to see a gun ship coming at them, firing. Being so isolated, both Van and Cade had carried hand weapons the whole time and she felt comforted by the weight of the blast pistol. She was almost surprised when the royal airship came into view and dropped down a few meters away without incident.

Van glanced at Cade, trusting that the queen hadn't noticed her anxiety. The slight smile on Cade's lips doomed those hopes but at least she didn't say anything. She started walking to where the small craft hovered for a second before setting down. Van followed from a distance, her eyes on Cade's slim form. What would happen now? Would Cade expect Van to take command of *Gauntlet* right away and continue pretending to be married while in reality they led separate lives?

She felt miserable stepping through the vessel's hatch. Cade had already settled in the last row. Her head rested against the seat back, her eyes closed. For once, Van appreciated that it wasn't in her to simply give up and accept the inevitable. Their honeymoon was proof of that and she wasn't going to start taking the easy road now. Cade had real feelings for her. Van ambled through the airship and settled in the seat next to Cade.

With her eyes closed, Cade asked, "You expected a gun ship, didn't you?"

"Didn't you? Why else would we both have worn pistols the whole time we were here?"

Cade looked at her, reaching over to take Van's hand. "Sorry, I wasn't trying to put you on the spot. I'll admit I almost expected something to happen too. I thought for sure someone would try to eliminate us in such an isolated setting."

Van voiced her earlier thoughts. "Maybe they've given up. After all, nothing they attempted exactly worked out for them." She tried not to think of Queen Dorma. Remembering the woman caused her heart to ache.

"Still, I should meet with my advisors once we reach the castle and let them know everything that happened. Before I took the throne, they reminded me that there can't be secrets between a queen and her advisors."

"You know they'll insist on a heavy security detail for both of us once you do. Not that it's a bad idea for you. You're the queen. But I'm still a Coalition commander and I can't have bodyguards following me around."

"You've got a point," Cade allowed. "I'll make sure they understand."

"Great. So what's on our agenda once we get home?" Van held her breath as she waited for the answer.

"Hmm, I thought we'd take the weekend before you take over the flagship. I'm sure Commodore Kazmi is happy to keep the reins for as long as you like."

Relief flooded her system that Cade didn't appear to be in a rush to separate from her. "That's nice to know, but the sooner things get back to normal in the sector, the more secure the people will feel."

"You're going to be great at this royalty stuff," Cade said softly. "Thanks for considering our citizens."

Van's heart thudded when Cade said "our," but passed it off as no big deal. They chatted about nothing special for the rest of the flight and arrived at the castle in time for an early dinner. Afterwards, Cade invited Van to spend time with her in the queen's suites. Listening to music and sipping a light wine, Cade requested her input on new security measures she wanted to institute throughout the galaxy. Without knowing who had organized the attacks on Cade and Alara, they needed to stay prepared for another incident. Once satisfied that they'd considered every angle, Cade announced that she needed to speak to her advisors.

"Feel free to stay here if you want. I shouldn't be too long and I was hoping we could take a walk through the gardens before retiring."

"I'd love that," Van admitted. "The Alaran gardens are so beautiful."

Cade left and Van stretched out on the sofa. Light classical music played throughout the suites and she allowed herself to doze. The last week had been quite enjoyable, but both of them had been constantly vigilant in preparation of an encounter with Cade's erstwhile executioner. Sleeping deeply, Van was having a great dream of shared passion when the suite door abruptly opened and slammed shut with force.

Van sat up, fully awake and battle prepared. Cade swept across the floor, pacing in anger. Her hair stuck up in places where she'd dragged her fingers through the locks, always a sign of frustration. Her face was red and her jaw bunched as she clenched her teeth together.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

Cade started and Van wondered if she'd even seen her when she came through the door. "My self-appointed babysitters have decided the queen should have bodyguards in the bathroom."

"Hunh?"

Van met her in the middle of the room and rested a hand on her arm. The touch helped calm Cade and she took a few deep breaths. "Not really, but they might as well have. Grace, Jonas and Mila insist that I have a double contingent of soldiers following me around every time I leave my rooms. Only Pisa realizes that a queen can't project an air of vulnerability or the people will lose faith in their abilities."

Settling onto the arm of a chair, Van asked, "What did you say?"

"I told them that I have a life. While I understand the need for diligence, I won't act like a frightened tika cat."

"Cade, they just don't want to lose another queen. I can't say I blame them. If anything ever happened to you, I don't know what I'd do."

The anger vanished and Cade smiled at her. She brushed her fingers along Van's jaw line. "How do you always know just the right thing to say?"

Van hadn't expected the opportunity to come out and tell Cade her true feelings, but she wouldn't let it go without acting on it either. She stepped closer until their bodies touched and rested her hands on Cade's chest. "Because I love you and making you happy is more important to me than anything else."

Her kiss prevented Cade from responding. Van didn't want her to feel pressured to reciprocate. If and when Cade expressed her affection, it had to be at a time of her choosing. When the kiss ended, Van stepped away, but grasped her hand.

"Were they very pissed when you refused to have a security detail?"

"No," Cade admitted sheepishly. "Mostly because I didn't. I told them that I'd accept two guards outside our suites. They wanted a double detail on you, too, but I managed to convince them that a starship wouldn't require such overkill. Only when you're on the planet will it be an issue."

"Wise choice, Queen. What about when you're conducting business?" With Cade's anger abated, Van turned to stoke up the fireplace while she listened.

"A small detail of no more than four standing guard outside the throne room. Pisa suggested it and the others went along with it, albeit reluctantly."

"Remind me to invite Pisa for dinner some night. Without her, we wouldn't have any kind of personal life."

Cade knelt and hugged her from behind. "You have no idea how right you are."

Cade released her and settled into the chair in front of the fire. Van turned and watched as she warmed her hands in front of the flames. Cade's Alaran physiology responded to the heat, helping her to relax further. Van stepped around behind her and rubbed her shoulders. Cade groaned at her touch and Van felt tingles in her stomach. She decided that sex was the best way to help her truly unwind.

Van kissed Cade's ear. Cade's eyes closed and her breath became irregular. Van scooted around the chair and settled into Cade's arms, resting on her lap. Lips met and parted, tasting. Van unbuttoned the top of Cade's shirt, sliding a hand inside and cupping a cloth-covered breast. Cade's hand cupped the back of her head, pulling Van more tightly against her.

Vaguely aware that someone had knocked on the door, both continued touching and tasting. Cade's fingers unsnapped the top of Van's trousers and then they heard it again, louder. Someone wanted to see the queen.

Cade pulled away reluctantly. "Damn."

"Damn," Van repeated. She climbed off Cade's lap and stood next to her, a hand resting possessively on Cade's shoulder.

"This had better be really important. Come in," Cade ordered harshly.

A man wearing the royal uniform of an Alaran guard opened the door, but he did so for another. Saral Barab, Cade's interim queen, entered the suite bearing a tray laden with a brandy decanter and three glasses. She swept in without any indication that she might have interrupted something, offering Van and Cade a wide smile.

"Welcome home, ladies. I wanted to be the first to congratulate you on surviving the first week of matrimony."

"Your timing could use some work, cousin."

Saral ignored the harsh tones and settled the tray onto a table in front of the sofa, forcing Cade and Van to join her in the seating area. She handed each of them a glass and took a third for herself.

"To the newlyweds," Saral toasted.

They clinked the tumblers together and Cade took a sip of her drink. Still incredibly aroused, Van wasn't interested in the brandy and merely mimed tasting it to be polite. She absently noticed that Saral didn't raise the glass to her lips.

"I haven't been to the Mauti Coast in years," Saral gushed. "Is it still as beautiful?"

Cade nodded and took another sip. "The beach is nice, but I've always preferred the forest. It has such a timeless quality."

Saral's eyes narrowed slightly as she watched Cade and an idea occurred to Van with such force that she thought surely her heart had stopped beating. She wanted to believe she was wrong, but the truth was so obvious she couldn't believe she hadn't realized it before. There wasn't any proof, so until Saral did or said something obvious Van couldn't just accuse her of nepotism.

Saral was in the perfect position and had all the resources she would need. She also had motive for wanting Cade and her mother dead. Cade had a brother but males couldn't inherit the throne. Saral or her mother would be next in line. But Cade once told Van that Temis has no

desire to be queen; she refused the throne as a child and allowed Dorma to rule. Still, that didn't mean Saral felt the same way.

Cade tasted her brandy again, and Van noticed a slight smile on Saral's lips. She must have poisoned the drink.

"Cade!"

Van reached out and knocked the tumbler from her hand. The glass shattered as it hit the floor and brandy soaked into the rugs. Van lunged to her feet, ready to pounce on Saral, and stood face to face with a laser pistol. Given the situation, Saral had chosen the perfect weapon. Just as deadly as a blast rifle, it was almost soundless.

"Sit down," she ordered, her voice cruel. "Don't even think about calling the guards. I'll kill her before you say a word. You're looking a little sleepy, Cade."

"What have you done?" Cade's eyes drooped and she wobbled a little even in a sitting position.

Saral continued like Cade hadn't spoken. "Too much exercise with your little consort?"

"Van is my wife."

"She won't be for long."

Cade sagged and grabbed the arm of the chair for support. Van wanted to run to her, tempted to ignore Saral's threat. If she hadn't seen firsthand the results of callous efforts to eliminate Cade, she might have.

Van cautioned herself to wait. Saral would make a mistake and Van had to be ready to move at just the right moment.

"Why?" Cade rasped. "You're my family."

"You don't know the meaning of the word. If you did, you wouldn't have accepted the throne. You'd have made sure the true queen was anointed."

"That's not you," Van pointed out strongly. The weapon pivoted in her direction and Van swallowed hard.

"What do you know? You're an outsider. My mother should have been Queen before Dorma, and I would have been next in line. Our traditions say the first born carries the royal line, and that is not Cade."

Van could see Cade slipping away. She was too weak to counter Saral's reasoning and it wouldn't have mattered anyway. Saral was a psychopath and far beyond listening to reason.

"What was in the brandy?"

"An odorless, tasteless, and mostly untraceable poison. If you want something done, sometimes you just have to do it yourself," Saral quipped. "Don't worry. You drank some of it too, although not as much as Cade here. It might take a little longer, but at least you'll die together. After that, I can put you to bed together and make it look like an intruder slipped in and killed you during the night."

"The guards know you were here," Van pointed out.

"Yes, and when I leave I'll tell them not to disturb you. That the queen wants to be alone with her counterpart. They'll think I left because you want to spend some quality time together."

Cade's head drooped weakly. Van prevented her from falling to the floor by grabbing her around the waist. She was frantic that she couldn't do anything to stop this. If she made a move against Saral, she might kill them both outright.

"It's time. Help her up and move into the bedroom."

Saral stood and moved back where Van couldn't reach her. She indicated that Van and Cade should precede her. Van obeyed, lurching past Saral as she tried to hold Cade's weight. Cade was much taller and heavier, making things difficult. Van realized that if she didn't act against Saral, Cade would die regardless. Saral would probably situate them in the bed and wait to ensure they were dead before she left. Since Van hadn't imbibed any of the poison, she would only ensure Cade's demise if she pretended to be affected. She had no choice.

Perspiration dotted Cade's forehead. Her breathing was labored, she could hardly move. When Cade stumbled, Van took advantage of it by allowing Cade to fall to one knee. Van pretended to collapse toward the floor with her.

"Get up." Saral's voice was far too close.

Reacting quickly, Van released Cade and spun around. She swung her arm back and impacted solidly with Saral's hand and the weapon. The laser pistol sailed across the room, landing near the fireplace. The women went down in a tangle of limbs, fists flying as each attempted to pummel the other. They crashed into the table and something clattered to the floor. Saral managed to get the upper hand and straddled Van's waist. Hands were suddenly around her throat as Saral tried to strangle her. She was a lot stronger than Van expected.

Cade hadn't moved since she fell, either dead or unconscious. Van wouldn't get any help from her and her vision was going black. Dots of color danced before her eyes. Van kept one hand on Saral's wrist, trying to make her let go. With the other, she searched along the rug, praying whatever had fallen off the table would make a viable weapon. Van felt something hard yet smooth. She struggled to get her fingers around the neck of the brandy decanter. Almost full, the container was heavy. If she could only lift it.

With the last of her ebbing strength, Van swung the bottle, aiming at Saral's head. Her blood pounded in her ears so she didn't hear the container strike the target, but Saral's hands released her as she slumped over. Van drew in great shuddering gasps and her vision cleared. The brandy bottle had shattered and Saral stood drenched. Blue blood ran down her face from where a shard had sliced her skin, but she wasn't out of the fight yet. She dove toward Van and Van reacted on instinct. She planted her feet in Saral's stomach and tossed her over her head. Saral crashed down right on top of the laser pistol.

Van didn't wait for her to sight in on a target. She charged on top of Saral just as the woman turned and grabbed for the hand weapon. When it went off, she heard Saral scream and knew she was hit. A second later, Van lunged backward as the laser discharge set the brandy covering Saral aflame.

For a moment, Van was tempted to let her burn. She wondered why the guards didn't respond to the screams and then realized all of the suites were heavily insulated for privacy.

Van jumped up and grabbed a heavy rug. She used it to douse the flames, coughing from the acrid smoke. Once the flames subsided, Van sprinted for the door.

"Call a medic. The queen has been poisoned and Saral is dying."

She refused to say the same of Cade for fear it would come true. Instead, she bolted back to Cade and turned her over. Cade's skin was ashen and her eyes closed. She wasn't breathing.

HOURS PASSED WHILE Van waited outside the emergency medical theatre. Saral's mother, Temis, had made a brief appearance to ask about Cade, but Van could hardly face her. Temis's concern for Cade struck a sympathetic chord but her grief for Saral's death negated any warm feelings. She didn't care if some would view her behavior as callous. Cade was everything to her and she didn't regret taking Saral's life. After what she'd put Cade through, Van only regretted that Saral was dead so she couldn't kill her again.

The doors opened behind her and a physician wearing a white lab coat entered the waiting area. Grey hair stood out in wispy strands and his pale blue eyes were bloodshot from exhaustion. He smiled despite that and sketched a bow in Van's direction, in deference to her status.

"Majesty, I don't mind telling you that it was touch and go for a while, but we managed to neutralize the poison. Queen Cade is awake and asking for you. Please keep it brief. She needs her rest."

Van wanted to sprint to Cade's side but realized that in this instance, she represented Alaran royalty. "Thank you, doctor." She walked sedately into Cade's room, relieved there weren't any medical personnel around to see her tears of relief.

Cade's dark hair stood out sharply against the stark white of the sheets, but her skin was almost the same exact shade. Her lips looked a little blue. Van tiptoed up to the bed, trying hard not to make any noise. Cade surprised her by opening her eyes and offering a weak smile.

"I hear you saved me again. That makes three times now."

Van sniffled and wiped her wet face with her sleeve. She leaned against the mattress, close enough to take comfort from the heat of Cade's body. "Third time's the charm. I'm sorry about Saral. I never dreamed she could be responsible."

A tear tracked from the corner of Cade's eye. "At least it's over now."

Van tensed, wondering if Cade referred to the threat against them or something else.

"What?" Cade took her hand. "Tell me what's troubling you, sweetheart."

Her chuckle broke on a sob and Van replied, "That's just the thing. Am I? Your sweetheart?"

"Why would you think otherwise?" Cade appeared genuinely confused and Van felt a little more confident.

"I know this isn't fair, certainly not so soon after Saral's...after Saral. And I wanted to wait until you were ready, but you almost died, Cade. That's not something I could live with so I need to know how you feel. About me."

Cade squeezed her hand. "Van, stop. Sit."

Van scooted onto the edge of the bed next to Cade, trying to avoid the medical tubes leading to her body. She waited nervously while Cade gathered her thoughts and then began to speak.

"Surely you know after the last week that I'm crazy about you."

"You are?" Van asked tremulously.

"Have I ever told you how soft your skin is and how wonderful you smell? Every time I take your hand, I feel the connection to my soul."

Van smiled upon hearing the words and leaned down to kiss Cade on the temple. She was so relieved she felt lightheaded. "You say the sweetest things."

"Come up here." Stretching out beside Cade, Van rested her head on the strong chest. "The real question is, do you want to end things between us, now that this ordeal is over?"

Listening to Cade's heartbeat, Van answered without hesitation, looking up into black eyes. "I swore to be with you forever. You should know I never break a promise."

"That's good." Cade smiled and kissed Van's chin. "I intend to hold you to it."

Van settled down with her head on her wife's chest and eyes drifted closed as she considered all the possibilities that lay before them. A smile curled Van's lips, thinking that she'd begun life as an orphan. She'd always wondered if she would ever truly belong anywhere. Lying in Cade's arms, she knew she had found that place. It had been a mighty struggle to get here but she'd finally found her way home.

About the Author

S. Y. Thompson lives in North Texas with her Yorkie and six adopted cats. Her previous fan fiction works (all seventy-two stories) can be found on her website: SYThompson.com. S. Y. spent ten years as a United States Marine before becoming a San Diego County Deputy Sheriff. After an early retirement, S. Y. moved back to Texas and began writing in 2002. Currently, she is a full time student at Texas A&M University with a double major in Sociology and Criminology and a minor in Psychology.

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Under the Midnight Cloak

Lee Grayson is a nature photographer whose father is a senator in New York. She's never felt close to him and her faith in people as a whole is lacking. She moves to the town of Harmon deep in the Adirondack Mountains after inheriting her great aunt's estate, but the local townspeople seem a little...off. Then she meets Ranger Jamison Kessler and learns there's a killer running rampant around the area. Jamison seems to be hiding things from her and Lee is starting to become suspicious.

Lee discovers that her aunt was a central part of this community and that she possesses the woman's unique abilities. She and Jamison are falling for each other, but things take a turn for the worse when the murderer sets his sights on Lee and a cure for his condition which he believes her to be harboring. Their situation is further complicated by the fact that the killer isn't even human. Neither is Jamison

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Coming Soon From S.Y. Thompson

Under Devil's Snare

Jamison Kessler and Lee Grayson are back in book two of the "Under" Series. Set one year after *Under the Midnight Cloak*, their adversary is very human. Someone has a fixation on Lee that manifests itself in a series of grisly murders rapidly approaching serial status and child abductions. These crimes are merely warnings, but what happens if Lee fails to interpret their

meaning? Jamison, Lee and the Panthera rush to save the lives of the innocent while they struggle to identify the instrument of so much suffering. Strains in relationships cloud their ability to see the whole picture. At the same time, U. S. Park Police Detective Patricia Hex shows up to help out but may soon become a threat to the Panthera community. Jamison's concentration splits between Lee, a mysterious killer and trying to keep Hex out of the Council's crosshairs. Her lack of focus may be all the stalker needs to get to Lee.

Woeful Pines

While undercover agent Emily Baptiste is investigating a rash of disappearances in rural Kentucky, she discovers something that strains the limits of credulity. The kidnapped are being hunted for sport. When she is also captured, Emily discovers an insane truth. The missing are taken through an inter-dimensional portal to a place where fantastic creatures reside, predominant among them are a race of vampires. The vampires use other species to hunt as well as for sex and slave labor.

Now Emily is among the hunted. Her only hope is Sheriff Jenna Yang from Woeful Pines, Kentucky. Unfortunately, Emily and Jenna hardly know each other. Will Jenna even realize Emily is missing? If she does, will Jenna be willing to risk everything to cross into an unknown land and face enduring hardship to rescue a virtual stranger?

Other Silver Dragon Books You Might Enjoy

Partners: Book One

by Melissa Good

After a massive volcanic eruption puts earth into nuclear winter, the planet is cloaked in clouds and no sun penetrates. Seas cover most of the land areas except high elevations which exist as islands where the remaining humans have learned to make do with much less. People

survive on what they can take from the sea and with foodstuffs supplemented from an orbiting set of space stations.

Jess Drake is an agent for Interforce, a small and exclusive special forces organization that still possesses access to technology. Her job is to protect and serve the citizens of the American continent who are in conflict with those left on the European continent. The struggle for resources is brutal, and when a rogue agent nearly destroys everything, Interforce decides to trust no one. They send Jess a biologically-created agent who has been artificially devised and given knowledge using specialized brain programming techniques.

Instead of the mindless automaton one might expect, Biological Alternative NM-Dev-1 proves to be human and attractive. Against all odds, Jess and the new agent are swept into a relationship neither expected. Can they survive in these strange circumstances? And will they even be able to stay alive in this bleak new world?

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To Sleep

by Paula Offutt

To Sleep is told through the journal of Karen Miller, a nurse and student from Philadelphia. The journal begins the night three alien ships appear above Earth. When Karen awakens, she is told Earth was destroyed by a space phenomenon called the Rift and she is to be the leader of a small group of women tasked with assisting their alien rescuers in awakening the four billion or so surviving humans who are in cryogenic suspension.

Each time Karen goes to sleep, she doesn't know exactly what it will be like when she awakens. The line between what is real and what is not real becomes so blurred that Karen and the other women can only trust each other. When reality is finally defined, the six of them learn truths that will forever change not just themselves, but every genetic homosexual on Earth.

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