



StarJumper's Bride



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To Jared and Aidan,
who provide constant inspiration in my life.

Chapter 1



Larion Confluence:/Second Rising
Fortis Cluster

She wanted the drug back. Wanted the blessed state of apathy it induced, then she wouldn't have to think about what was happening to her.

For the first time in days, the fog in her head dissipated, but into its place crept the all too familiar, terrible, mind-numbing fear.

Cassie Gordon knew her reprieve had run out. Weeks of captivity and sheer terror had led here—to this luxurious prison—a place with no identity, no location. Why had her comfortable, drugged routine of an unknown number of days been broken?

The future terrified her.

She faced the rose-tinted wall in the warm, perfumed room, positioned by hands that had become intimately familiar with her body. Her mind screamed a warning. Her limbs, still in the grip of the drug, wouldn't, couldn't react as a long scarlet scarf, fine and feather-soft, slid against her naked flesh. Another of teal followed, then one of deep gold, then a rich purple mixed with sea-blue until her paralyzed body was

covered in layers of sheer erotic fabrics. Gentle fingers, that moments ago had applied cosmetics to her face, grasped the heavy weight of her dark hair and twisted and bound it against her nape.

Another scarf covered her hair, then something else was lifted over her head. Her terror increased when she caught a glimpse of a webbed metal visor that soon blinded her vision. Hands grasped her unresisting wrists, drew them together in front of her, and secured them tightly. There was a touch on her leg and each ankle received a manacle.

Cassie stifled a moan, convinced the familiar gag would be next. Determined to resist it, she clamped her lips together hard enough to cause pain. The pressure on her jaw never came. Instead, she was guided to sit on the bed. She heard the light rustle of robes as her attendant moved away. Her captors didn't seem interested in ensuring her silence this time and the realization caused her dread to escalate.

The small space of movement in her ankle restraints was just enough, she judged, to allow her a slow shuffle, but not enough to attempt an escape. She sensed her attendant was still in the room, although no sound betrayed the woman's position.

With the hiss of the opening door accompanied by a spate of harsh, guttural words, she knew the guard who had placed her here days ago was back. Her attendant gave an odd choked sound of distress. It was the only sound Cassie had ever heard from the woman. A hard hand grasped her arm and jerked her to her feet. She knew the exact moment she crossed the threshold from the false comfort of the perfumed room into the unknown. Her mind, clear and sharp for the first time in days, knew with growing certainty what she had so carefully been prepared for. Panic almost buckled her knees.

With a trembling breath, she forced her unsteady legs to move. The relentless pressure on her wrists dictated she walk or be dragged. She would not let them see how terrified she was, nor would she give in to the fear that threatened to consume

her.

Their pace was slow enough to accommodate her restricted movements. Even so, it wasn't long before the guard drew her to a halt. In an exchange of rapid and incomprehensible words, he handed her over to another man.

The place to which she was then led was in shocking contrast to her expectations. Loud noise assaulted her from every side—raised voices, shouts of laughter, and the whine of a machine. Somewhere close by a large object crashed to the floor. The sound was followed by the roar of rough male voices and a sickening crunch, flesh against flesh. Her nostrils filled with the odor of unwashed bodies, the scent of something pungent and sweet, and the spicy incense favored by geish smokers.

Noise rose and fell in waves around her. As she passed, it diminished then swelled louder than before behind her. She sensed many beings, but none except for her escort made contact with her. Her bare toes stubbed on some solid object and she tripped. Her escort caught her arms as she fell, jerked her upright, and led her up a short flight of steps. Her hands were released, only to be drawn backwards and fastened again around what felt like a slender pole at her back.

A man shouted next to her. Then came a rapid, horribly loud staccato sound. It was a signal. The room fell silent. From both sides of her, two men barked out a stream of words and the crowd roared its approval and excitement.

Cassie willed her legs to hold her, prayed that whatever was about to happen would be over quickly. She fought back a wave of nausea as her stomach heaved, and forced to mind an image which normally brought comfort—the delicate crystal blooms of her favorite orcan flowers. But her entire collection had been lost in the same attack that had placed her in this hell, and that memory was still a raw, gaping wound.

A tug at her head removed the scarf over her hair. A louder clamor rose from the crowd. Voices babbled near her. Then came a scuffling followed by a thump and cruel laughter.

She swallowed a moan of terror when she felt a hand in her hair. As the heavy, dark mass was released from its confinement and slid down her back, the shouts became louder, more frenzied.

There was another tug, and cool air swept across her left breast. Full and horrifying realization swept over her.

Vague memories of stories, whispered and giggled amongst childhood friends, now returned in chilling detail. They had laughed at the time and embellished on the rumors. It was all true, and the reality was utterly terrifying. A ruthless fate had led her to the notorious flesh auction block.

She was about to be sold to the highest bidder.

It took all her self-control, all her concentration, all her pride to remain upright. The babble of noise swelled. She became aware of a loud argument being conducted behind her back.

A new sound penetrated. The heavy clump of booted feet circled around her, behind her. Warm breath, with a faint smell of sweet tiug leaf, tickled her ear.

“I’ll try to help you,” a masculine voice whispered so softly she wasn’t sure if her terrified mind had conjured up the words or if they were real. His breath circled her and fanned her other ear. “Trust me.”

A tiny spiral of hope and excitement snaked through her. In this hell of incomprehensible languages, he spoke in a tongue she understood.

Another violent argument erupted behind her.

More angry shouts. More ominous thuds. The bonds that held her to the pole were cut. A not ungentle hand pushed her forward and down the steps. The crowd was not pleased with this latest development. Their entertainment had ended. Frustration and anger were evident in the press of bodies she felt much closer to her this time. Hands reached out to tug at her hair, and tweak at her flesh. She sensed the protective body behind her, felt the movement of the arm that deflected a number of the assaults, heard the warning growls.

Then the noise abruptly ended. They must have entered a private room. Still surrounded by people, she stood helpless and exposed as the arguing continued, and her fate was decided.

Desperate, she forced out a whispered, "Please?" If anyone heard, they ignored her.

A hand touched her shoulder. "I'm sorry. I have to do this. The other bidder insists. I won't hurt you."

Another scarf slid to the floor, and another, until she stood naked in a room grown quiet. A hard hand touched her bottom, stroked across the rounded curve, then slid up to brush her hair aside and briefly cup her breast. He was close. She felt his body's heat against her bare flesh. He spoke to someone in a harsh, guttural tongue.

Shouts, fierce and angry, broke out again. They were answered with increasing impatience by the deep voice until the arguments quieted and died to a series of satisfied grunts. Something soft and heavy was placed around her shoulders. A hand fumbled with clasps at the front of the garment, drawing it together to shield her nakedness. Arms reached around her under the cloak to unbind her wrists and draw them forward only to bind them again.

She was still a prisoner then, despite the promise of help.

Another murmur came in her ear. "Let's get out of here before they change their minds."

She could do nothing but follow. She had simply exchanged one imprisonment for another. What she had come from had been bad enough, but she was under no illusions. There were far worse things that sentients did to one another. This man had paid an enormous price for her, she guessed. What he would demand in return didn't bear thinking about. The memory of his intimate touch, gentle though he had been, made her shudder.

Their pace was too fast for her restrictive bindings. She stumbled several times, but each time he caught her. Once

again, her whispered plea was ignored. Her bare feet grew sore from the textured surfaces they encountered. Her mind whirled with questions she wanted desperately to ask.

“Duck your head and step down!” The tone of his voice was normal. A hand on her head urged her to comply with the first command. Another on her back guided her forward. Pain sliced through her shoulder as she bumped it against a solid jutting object. “Sorry.” Seconds later, she was pushed down onto a padded seat. “Stay here. I’ll remove your bindings and visor when we’re well under way. I don’t trust the Gerfins with a moin-taw, and particularly not with a transaction like this. And they have even less reason to trust me.”

His own words seemed to amuse him. He chuckled, then grunted. Metal slid against metal. “They’ve probably found some item to dispute in the trade agreement already. Put your harness on.”

He moved past her, mumbling to himself.

Outrage swept through her, replacing fear and uncertainty for an instant. Transaction? She was a trade transaction? After all she had been through, the man’s careless comment was the final insult. The emotion died just as quickly as it had been born when she heard his boots again.

He uttered a soft curse. “Sorry, I’ll do it.”

She didn’t understand what he meant until she felt the bite of straps across her shoulders. He gave her head a pat. “On our way. Relax.”

Minutes later, she felt a shudder.

They were moving, and she was with a man she had never seen, and didn’t know anything about.

A man who had bought her. Seen her naked. Touched her intimately. Who, by the liberal definitions of free trade, now owned her body and soul.

And she hadn’t the slightest idea where he was taking her.

A sudden rush of hot tears took her by surprise. She blinked them away and let anger rise in their stead. With

bound hands, she tore at the hated visor, an attempt that only proved futile and painful. She slumped in her seat, discouraged.

The faint throb of the vessel's engines seemed a grim validation of her lost future and shattered dreams. The steady rhythm spoke of purpose and a destination over which she had no control. Her immediate past didn't bear thinking about. Her future was a void defined by fear and uncertainty. In the pale gray world of her metal visor she could only allow herself a thought or two about the man who had bought her. She must have dozed then because she awoke with a start, instantly panicked when she felt hands on her.

"It's all right. I won't hurt you." The masculine voice was calm and soothing. "You must want to be rid of these bindings."

She quieted under his touch, forced herself to be still while he lifted the metal bands from her wrists, then pushed aside the cloak at her feet. The large hand on her ankle was gentle, yet caused a peculiar heat to flare out from the spot where he touched her.

The visor seemed to give him particular difficulty. As he wrestled with the clasp, unintelligible mutters issued from his mouth and the scent of tiug leaf became stronger. His grunt of satisfaction came at the same time she heard the twang of metal. The visor was lifted away from her face.

Reflexively, she put her hands up to rub the pinched skin at her temples and lifted wary eyes to the face of the stranger.

He was a big man. Even balanced on his haunches before her, he looked down on her. But it was his eyes, the color of the pale gold of the sea stones from the caverns on Barthos, that compelled her attention. His gaze embraced her with warmth and compassion. The hard knot of fear in her chest eased a little.

"Welcome aboard, lady." His lips curved in a smile. She had an unexpected, irrational desire to reach out and run her finger down the deep laughter grooves carved below his cheekbones, to trace a path around his well-shaped lips.

“Sebastian Asteril at your service. You’re aboard my vessel, the *Shilmonite*. You have nothing to fear here.”

Cassie swallowed and barely managed a nod of acknowledgement. She couldn’t tear her gaze away and his eyes were starting to crinkle at the corners with amusement, but he seemed otherwise undisturbed by her stare. He couldn’t be called a handsome man. His features were too rugged, too uneven, the crooked nose too large. The thought that his unruly thatch of dark blond hair looked as if it took constant abuse from his fingers was confirmed when he lifted a hand and raked it through an untidy strand that had fallen across his forehead.

The action revealed something else.

At his temple, there beat a tiny pale gold pulse in the shape of a prism.

Only one race in four star systems laid claim to the unusual temple mark. Cassie’s gaze fixed on the distinctive characteristic as her mind worked frantically to identify it. The knowledge was elusive.

“Where...?” Her voice was horribly scratchy and tight. She cleared her throat. “Where are you from?”

“The Mariltar Nation.” The smile faded from his face. A faint frown gathered between his brows.

“The Crestar System?”

His frown disappeared and he nodded.

Enormous relief swept through her even as a voice inside her head urged caution. If he was true to his race, she had found sanctuary, and possibly transport. The Crestar System and the planet, Treaine, a multi-racial colony, had been her intended destination before the attack on the transport vessel had thrust her into captivity.

Excitement prompted her to open her mouth with another question, but then she remembered and snapped it shut again. She looked down at her hands. This man had seen her unclothed, had touched her intimately in a vulnerable

moment. He owned her. How could she begin to trust him?

"You're of Earth descent?" His quiet voice held no threat.

"Yes," she whispered.

"You've had a rough time, haven't you?"

The compassionate tone, after weeks of sheer terror, undid her. To her horror, she discovered that, this time, she couldn't stop the tears. They welled out of her eyes and streamed in hot rivers down her cheeks. She opened her mouth to gulp in air and heard a wail swell out of her throat instead. Embarrassed, she dropped her face into her hands and prayed for solitude.

Hands grasped her under her arms and lifted her out of the chair. Instinctively, she kicked out and twisted in his grasp but he subdued her easily and moved her to another small compartment where he chose to sit on the floor rather than a narrow sleeping platform. She found herself in the cradle of his lap.

"It's all right. I won't hurt you. You're safe now." A hand smoothed over the top of her head, and strong fingers pushed through the strands of her hair to begin a gentle massage of her nape. Cassie buried her face in the rough weave of his shirt and wept harder. She should resist this stranger's touch but the comfort he offered was too potent. Pent-up stress and misery of the last few weeks flowed out of her. As the storm of emotion died down, muffled sounds began to penetrate her consciousness.

Disjointed words and soft curses tumbled around her. A hand rubbed up and down her back in jerky strokes.

Then a garbled imprecation was followed by a clear burst of frustration and helplessness. "Balls of Sortor! What, by Cor's blood, do I do now? Why do women have to cry over everything? I'm not the one who hurt her. I'm only trying to help, and cursed expensive it was, too! I'll never understand females. I hate it when they cry. Where is that blasted, lazy, good-for-nothing Rom-pin when I need him? He'd know what to do!"

Cassie felt a hysterical giggle well up inside of her. It burst through her lips before she could stop it. The hand on her back

paused in its rough ministrations.

“What now?”

For some reason, the pure bewilderment in his tone struck her as enormously funny. An uncontrollable howl of laughter escaped her. Horrified, she tightened her grip on his shirt, and pushed her face against the warmth and hardness beneath. What was the matter with her? He was going to think she was out of her mind. His arms tightened around her and the mutters resumed, this time in a language she didn’t understand.

Then, abruptly, she had herself under control. A strange sense of calm washed over her. It was comfortable here in the cradle of his lap. Safe. She was struck by a powerful urge to close her eyes and let sleep take her.

“Better?” His deep voice rumbled against the top of her head.

She nodded. The small action seemed to take tremendous effort. “Who’s Rom-in?”

“Who? Oh—Rom-pin. He’s my partner. Sometimes. When the mood strikes him.”

Exhaustion warred with curiosity and gave her courage. “D—do you always talk to yourself?” She risked peering at him through the tangle of her hair, conscious for a fleeting instant of how she must look with swollen eyes and reddened nose.

His mouth dropped open. She had taken him by surprise, but only for a moment. The grin he flashed robbed her of her breath and sent a quiver through her lower belly.

“I’m compelled to entertain myself when companionship is lacking—which is often. I’m a trader. I make long voyages.” He offered her a square of cloth pulled from a pocket. “Here, I think my shirt is all used up.”

Embarrassed again, she scrubbed at her face, bent her head and blew her nose. All sense of safety and comfort had vanished. She sat in his lap with only the inadequate barrier of the loose cloak to cover her nakedness.

All of a sudden, she couldn’t bear his touch.

She finished drying her face and risked another glance at him from under spiky, wet lashes. He grinned back at her.

"I'm sorry. I d—didn't mean to lose control like that."

He lifted his shoulders in a casual shrug. "You're entitled. Anyone who's had to endure Gerfin-style hospitality and a flesh auction can be forgiven for losing control. What's your name?"

"C—Cassie Gordon."

"Well, Cassie Gordon, you're safe with me." He glanced around the small crowded compartment in which they sat. "The question is, what do we do now?"

It was a lazy speculation, but it brought back all her fears and nervousness. She gathered her courage and pushed herself to her feet, clutching the cloak protectively around herself. The golden gaze immediately swung back to her, but his arm fell away. He made no move to stop her.

"I—I need to find transport to Treaine. Can you—will you help me?"

His demeanor didn't change, but Cassie felt her request had surprised him in some way. He took his time to stretch his large body with slow, unselfconscious pleasure. Muscles rippled under the fabric covering his arms and thighs.

"Treaine's a long way from here. Why do you want to go there?"

"I have a position there. A—at least, I think I do." She moved away from him, hesitated, then settled gingerly on the edge of the narrow sleeping platform and drew her bare feet under the hem of the cloak. She had lost track of time during her captivity and had no idea how long it had been since the *Araminy* had been attacked. It was entirely possible, probable even, that her superiors thought her dead and had filled the position already. But it was even more important she get word to her parents who must be frantic with grief. She glanced again at the man on the floor. He looked as if he were about to fall asleep. Half-closed eyelids shuttered his expression. Amusement lurked in the tilt of his mouth.

Panic and doubt beset her again. She wondered what he had meant by that lazy first question. Of course he would find the request ridiculous. She was his property. He wouldn't just put her on a vessel bound for Treaine.

He owned her.

And, no doubt, would want to exact some recompense from her.

Chapter 2



Sebastian Asteril studied the huddled figure on his bed. He had obviously lost his sanity.

There was no place in his life for charitable gestures. He was too highly trained to give in to impulse. An important negotiation had been interrupted, a critical contract put at risk over this demented lapse in judgement.

His feelings confused him. The intense sexual attraction he could understand, but this fierce protectiveness, this need to soothe, comfort, and reassure was alien—and not welcome.

Compassion was no justification for jeopardizing his mandate. On top of that, he had ignored all the sanctioned rules of commerce and participated in the flesh trade. It hadn't even been a conscious decision. When he had turned in time to see, across that noisy, reeking, crowded room, the veil of long dark hair tumbling over her shoulders, he had ceased to think. Before he knew it, he had found himself on the platform beside her, bartering a vessel's worth of trade goods.

He had seen many women come and go on that particular auction block, many with a greater claim to beauty. The deep anger and revulsion he felt over the foul practice had always been kept in check.

He had always been able to walk away.

Until now.

So why was he allowing his conscience to dictate his actions at such a crucial time?

What made this woman so different?

Perhaps it was because she had been destined for a particular bidder. That much had been obvious from the very beginning when other interested parties had quickly fallen away. It had fired his determination and motivation. No Mogton warlord was going to get his blood-fouled hands on this fascinating creature. But after a brutal round of bidding, his rival had faded away, given up—far too easily, in complete contradiction to his reputation. It worried Sebastian.

His body's reaction was the other answer. It throbbed with a savage sexual desire. He wanted her with an urgency he hadn't felt in years. Wanted to push her back down on the bed and persuade her with the expertise that made him welcome in many a bed in four star systems.

And yet, he had a far deeper desire to draw her back into his arms to smooth the worry from her face, and pledge to her that he would keep her safe with all the considerable skills and resources at his disposal.

From his position on the floor of the compartment, he studied her. He saw the pink tip of her tongue brush and moisten her upper lip, then her teeth nibble on her lower one. She slanted him a nervous, uncertain sideways glance.

She didn't trust him—and why should she? He could only guess at the terrible experiences she must have suffered.

And what, by the blood of Cor, should he do with her now?

He couldn't keep her with him. His assignment would be put at risk, his judgement condemned in an instant. His body wouldn't tolerate her presence.

He forced his thoughts back to her surprising request. It was ironic. Of all the women in the star system he had to choose to rescue, why did it have to be one bound for Treaine? This development could prove a grave complication if he let it.

And in that instant he made up his mind. Against his better judgement, and against all his instincts, he knew he would keep her with him—for a few days anyway. He could at least take her part of the way to her destination. There was a reason he had done what he had done. Time would reveal what it was.

The uncertain look on her face had turned to panic. He realized she still waited for a response and his reply was short. “I can arrange to get you to Treaine.”

Puzzlement registered on the expressive face, then cautious relief. He wondered what answer she had expected. She edged forward on the sleeping platform, a sudden eagerness lighting her eyes. “Could we send a message to let them know I’m on my way? Could I also send a message to my parents?”

“At this distance, we’ll have to relay to Treaine, but messages can get through. Communicating with Earth from this sector is virtually impossible.”

“Oh, no, my parents aren’t on Earth. They’re on Grale-Tern.”

“Grale-Tern?”

“It’s in the Flotorian System. I lived there before—before...” She looked away.

Sebastian stretched his cramped legs out before him, folded his hands behind his head, and studied her further. The mystery had taken on new meaning. Signals were going off in his head. “You were traveling from Grale-Tern to Treaine? It’s a long trip. To do what?” The Flotorian System subscribed to interplanetary law. How had she fallen into the hands of the Gerfins to become the main attraction in one of the most notorious flesh auctions in this star system? He wanted to bombard her with questions but knew he would have to proceed with care and patience. She was, with good reason, nervous and very unsure of him.

“I’m an apprentice engineer. I—I received the assignment when I graduated from the Barthos Academy.”

“And you must be an excellent one. Treaine takes only the best.” He hid a smile at the color that flooded her face. She was

in her mid-twenties at least, yet she lacked the sophistication of the women with whom he usually associated. It was part of her appeal.

Then something she had said struck a cord in his memory and the signals in his head went crazy. *Barthos!* It was too much of a coincidence. “There was a vessel, a transporter registered on Barthos which was attacked and destroyed two months ago. It was assumed that everyone aboard had perished.” He kept his tone casual but watched her carefully.

With a violent shudder, she shrank into the cloak. Her eyes stared at him, but it was obvious she saw something else. Something infinitely terrifying.

“The vessel was the *Araminy*. You were a passenger, weren’t you, Cassie?”

Dark pools of pain gave no indication she had heard the question. He leaned forward, touched her hand and repeated it.

She blinked and shivered, moved her hand, drew back from him. “Yes,” she whispered.

“You’re the only known survivor then. The Barthos authorities must be notified. They’ll want to know what happened.”

“No! Not yet. I can’t... Please, not yet. Will you—will you send the messages?”

“I will.” It would be difficult under the circumstances, but he could try. It was doubtful the one bound for Treaine would arrive much in advance of its sender.

“You won’t send me back to Barthos, will you? I can’t go back.” Her voice held a note of hysteria.

“Of course not. We have to sort out our—er, unique arrangement first. I’m headed in the other direction anyway.” He hated to mislead her, but it was a justification to himself to keep her when, by all rights, he should turn her over to the authorities at the border post. It had been two months since the attack. What harm would another few days do? A message would suffice—when he was ready to send it.

She was tense and withdrawn again, not looking at him as

she pleated and unpleated the folds of fabric in the cloak. "You promised to help me get to Treaine," she whispered.

"I did, and I keep my promises. Tell me what happened, Cassie. I'll need something for the message."

He waited. His impatience grew but he held it in check. He had been trained by the best. Then the shining dark head lifted. Tears shimmered again in the stunning violet eyes. Her voice quivered with emotion as she told a horrific tale of the sudden attack, killings, incarceration of the women passengers, and grueling, forced labor. Clearly anxious to be done, she finished with a few short words of how she had ended up at the flesh auction.

The fabric of the cloak twisted around her fingers. Her hair slid forward to hide her face, but not before he saw her anguish. "I don't know where we were. Th—those other women—is there a way to find them?"

"I'll tell the authorities on Barthos," he said quietly. He had little expectation that anything could or would be done. The territory in which he had found her was off limits to most of the peace-abiding nations. The *Araminy* had clearly ventured far off course. Even if the government of Barthos was inclined to request the return of its citizens, of whom would they make such a request? The sector was fractured into numerous barren asteroid strongholds, each ruled by its own despot. And he had only an unconfirmed suspicion.

Her next words came as a whisper. "You bought me. Why?"

He stilled, then forced his lips to curl in the semblance of a grin. "You were in need of help. I was in a position to provide it, and the buying and selling of females is accepted practice in this region. It was time for a good deed on my part—an atonement for all the trouble I've gotten myself into lately." It was an answer that revealed nothing of the powerful emotion which had driven him to offer a first bid. He had yet to define the feelings that had fueled his determination when he realized she was intended for the Mogton. He had every conceivable

reason to walk away, but everything in him had rebelled against letting this intriguing creature go to what he knew would be a grim, horrible destiny.

“How—how much did you pay?”

“Enough. It doesn’t matter!” The deliberate roughness in his voice forestalled the objection he saw quivering on her lips. He would have traded three times the amount of cargo he had forfeited to release her from that nightmare.

A nightmare that might not be over yet.

He should check the controls again. He pushed himself to his feet.

There was more to her story, he suspected, and much she probably didn’t know. The Gerfins were not her original abductors. Flesh traders they might be, but their procurement methods didn’t include attacking star vessels, nor mining operations. “I’ll be out there.” He gestured to the closed door between the two compartments. “Prepare your messages, and I’ll do what I can to send them to their destinations.”

She had shrunk into the cloak again and stared at him from wide, fearful eyes. Her long, dark hair tumbled in riotous disarray over one shoulder.

His body tightened. She had an extraordinary effect on him. He was crazy to keep her. “You have my word I’ll help you,” he said softly, the need to reassure her as great as the growing urgency to determine their status. “You have nothing to fear from me.”

And tight schedule or not, he was going to plot a detour to visit the dubious pleasures of a not too distant substation. The clear, fresh memory of a slender, naked body, with gentle curves in all the right places coupled with the current view of that same body curled up on his bed was too much for his deprived libido.

Cassie’s expression didn’t change. He hesitated, then turned to the door.

“C—Captain Asteril?”

The sound of his name on her lips sent a jolt of pleasure through his body. He turned back to her. "Sebastian, please."

"I have...would you show me where I prepare my messages? And, do you have something else I can wear?" Her face flushed with embarrassment. She searched the crowded compartment as if she expected something to materialize out of thin air, looking everywhere but at him. "And w—where is the—ah—um...?" Her voice trailed away. The nervous hand movements were back.

Hiding his amusement, he waved a hand and said with matter-of-factness, "The head is behind that panel. You can use the information console over there." He pointed to equipment partially concealed by containers on the opposite wall. "Just activate it with the yellow switch on the far right. Speak, and then close it off again when you're finished. The message will be stored until I can transmit it. As for clothes..." He paused, then said with some doubt, "You're welcome to see if any of mine will work. They're in the cabinet over the sleeping platform. I'm sorry, women's clothing is the one thing I don't trade."

Out in the privacy of the navigation module, a quick scan revealed no other vessels anywhere in their vicinity. Captain Sebastian Asteril, a decorated commander in the Seventh Fleet of Mariltar, or a trader of questionable ethics—depending on whom was asked—settled into his seat and forced his mind away from the woman behind the closed door.

He flicked a switch and stared at information he had spent countless hours analyzing. There was no new information in the database. But Cassie Gordon had revealed more in the last half-hour than he had been able to uncover himself in a long time. *Forced labor. Mining operations. Mogton warlords.* His gut told him there was a link. He just had to find it. His instincts were always sound.

His determination grew to keep her with him until she told him more, willingly or not.

He flicked another switch. More reports, more deaths. Each individual death was a tragedy. And the threat to an infant society struggling to maintain a hard-won peace after generations of warfare was immeasurable.

Shilil dust. A strong hallucinogen. Irresistible. Soul destroying. Deadly.

The rage rose in him, as it always did, when he remembered a good friend, a woman, who had succumbed to it.

It was a great relief to be left alone. Exhausted, Cassie stared at the closed door through which the Mariltar had disappeared. The reliving of the past weeks had utterly drained her. She had sketched the bare facts of the story for him, but hadn't described the screams that still echoed in her head, the sheer terror, the helplessness, and the hopelessness.

She allowed herself to slump over until her body rested on the sleeping platform. She had nothing to fear from this man. He would help her. He had said so several times. Yet something bothered her. Something about him. He seemed kind enough, concerned enough, interested in her story.

Perhaps too interested? For a trader?

From somewhere inside her mind a tiny voice urged caution. She couldn't put her finger on it, but knew, despite his reassurances, there was still a threat here.

The warmth of the cloak couldn't prevent the deep chill that shuddered through her body and raised the fine hair on her flesh.

The size of his vessel, the quality of his clothes, the volume of containers stacked in the sleeping compartment suggesting the cargo hold was still full, despite his trade for her—all signs that he was very good at his profession. Successful traders benefited from every deal. And there was no escape from the fact that he owned her.

She had to convince him she would repay her purchase price, just in case he started to look for an opportunity elsewhere

to make a profit off her. It made her nervous that he had shrugged off that particular question with such abruptness. She hadn't been able to read him, but she would, she vowed. She would persist until she had an answer and then she would do whatever it took...

Fighting off an overwhelming desire to close her eyes and sink into oblivion, she pushed herself off the sleeping platform and went to investigate what he had called 'the head.'

Chapter 3



“Captain Asteril?”

Sebastian jerked his head up. Deep in concentration, he hadn't heard the hiss of the compartment door. She stood framed in the doorway and the sight of her made his body clench with a rush of desire.

She had found something with which to tie up her hair, and now the heavy length hung tamed down her back. Her face was washed clean of the cosmetics used to enhance her appearance for the auction and she had made good use of his personal belongings.

He would never think of those particular clothes the same way again. Sleeves and pant legs were rolled up to accommodate her shorter height, and she had belted the shirt in around her waist. But oversized and baggy as the clothes were on her slender frame, they somehow lent unexpected and unintended sexual appeal even though the curves of her body were not clearly evident.

“You're very resourceful,” he said, trying not to think about what she had or didn't have on under his clothes. What was it about her that attracted him so strongly and made his body react like that of an adolescent boy?

Her cheeks flushed pink and she made an awkward gesture

at her borrowed garments. "Thank you." She took two uncertain steps into the module.

"Use what you need. Everything that's mine is yours."

She nodded and came another step closer. He smelled the cleansing powder he kept in the head. On her, the almost indiscernible scent transformed into something mysterious, exotic. His blood pressure notched up. He'd had his fair share of sexual encounters, had taken women more beautiful than this one to his bed, but she had a more powerful affect on his mind and body than the aphrodisiacal aroma of a fleniam blossom. He didn't know why, and was deeply mistrustful of the extraordinary urges that had no hope of being satisfied anytime soon. But he did know that as soon as they were through the Myerta Array, he was going to chart a course for that substation.

"Am—am I disturbing you?"

"I'm always glad for company. Have a seat." He waved her to the empty chair beside him. He tried to turn his attention back to his nav chart, but found himself watching her instead.

After a slight hesitation, she sat. "I wanted to ask—"

"A moment, please. I need to finish this up." The course through the shifting canyons of the Myerta Array was an intricate one and required all his concentration. He should send her back to the other compartment.

He checked the tracking sensor again. The blip was still there. They were being followed. The twinge of concern became a full-blown alarm. But they would be inside the array within another hour. Few knew the canyons as he did, and fewer still would be prepared to follow at the speed he planned. The magnetic field would shield their direction, prevent them from being tracked, disguise their exit point. Once through, it would be only a matter of days before they arrived at the substation.

By then, he would have decided what to do with her. Until then, he hoped his body could withstand this sweet torture.

He sneaked another look at her. She was gazing with rapt

fascination at the brilliant streaks and swirls of light through which they were passing. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes!” she whispered. Awe filled her voice. “Where are we?”

“In the Cyclo Depression, heading for the Myerta Array. This is one of my favorite spots. Watch!”

He touched a control and the vessel danced sideways. The streaks of light shattered, changed color and reformed. Her uninhibited exclamation of delight was a spur to his desire to impress her. He grinned, and pressed another control. The vessel rocked gently from side to side. A triple ring of multicolored light appeared directly in front of them. She gasped, then laughed, and the sweet sound of it drove him to greater effort. For the next twenty minutes, he forgot they were being pursued as he performed a series of maneuvers to entertain her. The haunted look, at least for a few moments, seemed to disappear from her eyes.

A warning beep shocked him. The tracking sensor had identified another vessel a hundred lins distant, but still far too close. Their pursuer had increased his speed while he had been distracted. He swore soundly under his breath, irritated at his own carelessness. The other vessel should never have been allowed to get this close. His own vessel responded instantly to his commands. The rapid increase in speed blurred the lights to solid waves of neon-green. He would have to be careful he didn’t overshoot the entry point into the array.

“What’s the matter?”

The worried question drew his attention for only a second.

“Playing was so much fun, I forgot where we were,” he said in a tone of forced cheerfulness. “Just need to concentrate on navigating through some rough spots. We’re going to hit some bumps. Why don’t you make yourself comfortable in there?” He jerked his head in the direction of the inner compartment.

She had been dismissed. Nicely. But there was something in his tone that told her she didn't really have a choice.

Her desperate need to ask about her purchase price would have to wait. There was a new urgency in him. And something he wasn't telling her. Cassie had noticed the tension that gripped him when the control panel had beeped, yet his verbal response had been unconcerned. Now deep in concentration again, he ignored her when she rose to follow his suggestion.

A short while later, she lay curled on the sleeping platform in absolute misery, convinced she was going to die. A giant hand played a cruel game of tossball with the *Shilmonite*. The vessel shuddered and groaned as it rode through stomach-curling swoops and bounced off solid objects. The scream and grind of tortured metal rang in her ears. A painful encounter with the floor early on persuaded her to use the restraint system attached to the bed, but now she wondered how the vessel could possibly even hold together.

She jerked in fear as a container burst its ties from a stack near the door and fell. Its contents of small mirrored pyramids spilled across the floor. Nerves in shreds, she buried herself under a mound of covers and pillows, but still couldn't muffle the dreadful noises enough.

The agonized sounds and terrible battering continued unabated.

Then, surprisingly, she fell asleep.

She wrenched into wakefulness in complete and absolute silence. It was utterly eerie. Even the faint, reassuring shudder of the *Shilmonite's* engines had ceased. The only sound was the fast, harsh panting of her own terrified breaths. In the false security of the cocoon she had made, she lay still, hands clenched tightly in the pillows, and strained her ears for the slightest indication of something, anything. The door hissed. Footsteps approached.

"Cassie? Are you in there?"

The calm voice with its undercurrent of laughter produced

an irrational wave of irritation. How could he sound so calm and unconcerned and amused after what they had been through? Some perverse sense made her lie still and silent. Maybe he'd think she was asleep and leave her alone. It was a vain hope.

One by one the pillows were lifted and flung aside. He talked the whole time.

"It's all right, you know. To be scared, I mean. I was terrified when I first navigated through this array. Didn't think I'd make it. Thought I'd never find my way out of the Gala Canyon and I'd become one of those ghost ships drifting forever. But really, it sounds far worse than it is. The *Shilmonite* comes out with a few more dents each time, but nothing serious. I enjoy the challenge of collecting fewer holes each time I go through. It's a... There you are!" The last pillow over her head was grabbed out of her resisting hands. Sebastian's face grinned down at her.

Cassie lost her temper. "I wasn't scared," she snapped. "But you could have warned me. You said we were going to hit some bumps. That was more like a massive asteroid storm and wind tunnel combined."

"A lot worse, technically," he countered with relentless, cheerful unconcern. He reached over her to release the restraints. "Glad you weren't scared. Next time you can hold my hand." He picked a pillow up, tossed it into the air, and caught it. "Hungry?"

Hungry? The man was insane. How could she possibly be hungry when her stomach was still tied in knots in anticipation of the next bottomless swoop? She frowned and opened her mouth to deliver an irritated denial, then realized she was starving, couldn't remember in fact the last time she had eaten. She muttered an affirmative reply that didn't sound too gracious and immediately regretted her tone.

Sebastian wasn't paying attention anyway. He had begun to paw through a storage bin. A stream of words issued from his

mouth all the while. Cassie's mood lightened as she listened. She fought the urge to giggle. He was doing it again.

"Why are the vessel's engines shut down?"

"Eh?" He stopped in mid-word and looked up as if surprised to find her still there, then went back to what he was doing. "They're not. They're just idling. We're riding in a balian cloud while I get some rest. Unless you know how to pilot a star vessel?" He peered at her. Thick blond eyebrows wagged in an exaggerated expression of hope.

She wanted to giggle again. "No, of course not."

He lifted broad shoulders in a careless shrug. "You never know. Hah!" In triumph, he held up two small containers. "I knew I had some left! Vargon soup. You're in for a real experience if you've never tried it before."

He dropped them into the food heater, retrieved them moments later, tore off the lids and handed her one. Cassie studied the chunky, vermilion-colored brew with some doubt. It smelled wonderful, but she wasn't an adventurous eater, and had forced herself to consume too many strange-tasting foods recently.

"Eat! You'll like it!" her companion encouraged. He plunged his utensil into the container and quickly devoured the soup.

His confidence about her food preferences brought back her irritation. She lowered her head and took a cautious sip. To her chagrin, she discovered he was right. The food was delicious and not unlike, in fact, her father's favorite soup recipe. As hungry as she was, she ate slowly to savor every bite.

A sudden flurry of activity erupted next to her. Finished with his meal, Sebastian bounded off the sleeping platform, tossed his empty container into the waste disposal unit, then grabbed several pillows off the sleeping platform and dropped them on the floor.

"What are you doing?" Cassie stopped eating to watch, amazed at the amount of energy he put into such simple actions.

"Have to get some sleep before I set a course for the

Ilian substation.” His body followed the pillows. His various limbs shifted independently of one another as he tried to settle himself.

Unsure of herself, Cassie took another bite of food as he twisted and turned and grunted. “You can’t sleep down there,” she blurted in exasperation.

He rolled over, a grin on his face. “You’ve got a better idea?”

“I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“Can’t allow that,” he said. “You’re my guest.” He turned over again. She heard another stifled groan.

Helpless, she stared at his back. Guilt over taking his bed warred with the suspicion that his display was one big act. The man was irritating, funny, generous, a successful trader, a terrible pilot—and a little strange. But even though she was beginning to think he was basically harmless, she knew she must never forget he owned her. Just then, he rolled onto his back, a pained expression on his face, and released a heavy sigh. Cassie wavered, then gave up.

“All right. The sleeping platform is narrow, but probably big enough for both of us, as long as you can stay in one place. And don’t—don’t get any ideas.” Horrified, she squeezed her eyes shut unable to believe what she had just said. The last thing she wanted to do was antagonize him; neither did she want to give him even a hint of encouragement. In the end, it didn’t matter what she did. He owned her. She cracked open one eye to assess his reaction.

“Works for me.” Far from being offended, he flashed her a wide grin, bounced up from the floor and dropped onto the sleeping platform. She got out of his way so fast she almost spilled her soup.

“Hey!” she squeaked in protest, unable to bring herself to say his name. Where did he get all his energy? Wasn’t he supposed to be tired? A muffled grunt answered her. She contented herself with a suspicious frown at his broad back

and sat back down to finish eating her soup. By the time she had spooned up every morsel of food, deep, regular breathing issued from the prone shape next to her. She disposed of her container as she had seen him do, then picked up the spilled pyramids he'd ignored. There was nothing else to do.

She didn't want or need to sleep again so soon, but she lay back down beside him anyway on the very edge of the platform.

As she listened to his breathing, dark memories from recent weeks assaulted her mind and, try as she would, they couldn't be banished. In desperation, she rolled over and propped herself up on her elbow. Her rescuer's face, relaxed in sleep, had a boyish appearance. It was a nice, normal, very masculine face, she decided. One that anyone should be able to trust. And she so desperately needed to be able to trust him.

Four days later, Sebastian relaxed in his command seat and watched with pride as Cassie navigated through a small asteroid field.

For lack of anything better to do, she had taken to spending much of her time in the *Shilmonite's* control module where he delighted in teaching her some basic navigational skills and piloting techniques. She was an apt student and, though not at all a risk taker, would make an adequate commercial pilot if she ever wanted a career change.

To his relief, there had been no further sign of pursuit. The canyons of the Myerta Array had been the discouragement for which he had hoped. Even so, on the two quick stops they made at sparsely populated outposts along their route so he could pursue his trading business, he left the *Shilmonite* concealed in whatever cover was handy, and took Cassie with him on the tiny shuttle. Despite her protests, he never allowed her to leave the shuttle, and always conducted his business nearby.

He watched her neatly dodge a small obstacle. She gave a crow of triumph and looked at him for approval.

He grinned. "Don't get too cocky. You have another hour of this before we can shut down for the night."

"At least I missed it. You would have navigated right over it," she shot back.

"It's a matter of choosing one's battles, rookie. I don't waste energy on the small stuff."

"That's because basically you're just lazy."

"Insults again." He heaved a deep breath, tipped his seat back and closed his eyes. "You must not want to hear about the Crestar System tonight."

"I did. I do! Don't you dare go to sleep on me." There was a hint of panic in her voice.

He yawned. "You'll do fine. Just make sure you miss the big one a half lin directly ahead."

"What? Where? I don't see it. Sebastian? Sebastian!"

He hid a grin and didn't respond. She would figure it out soon enough. A pilot had to be prepared for anything. He heard a series of soft beeps that indicated she was already checking her instruments. He sank deeper into his seat. The last few days had been among the most delightful, frustrating, and hardest of his life. She was still largely a mystery to him, a creature of lightning mood changes, one moment capable of withstanding his teasing, the next sad and distant and sometimes fearful. There were times when she didn't hesitate to say what was on her mind or deliver a sharp scolding, and other times when she withdrew abruptly inside herself to a place he couldn't reach.

In the close quarters they shared, it was impossible to avoid physical contact. With each touch, he craved more. He found himself, under the guise of playfulness, twining his fingers in the silk of her dark hair, curving a hand over a rounded hip, kneading the soft skin of her nape. And each encounter became a little more painful, because she neither accepted nor rejected the contact. Sometimes, she delivered a sharp reminder not to touch but, more often than not, she

behaved as if it had never happened.

Once he had wakened to find he'd rolled into her during the night and taken her into his embrace. He'd lain there, tortured by the warmth and sweet curves of her, by her closeness, yet unable to pull away. His arms were curled around her. One hand cupped the full, firm curve of her breast. His hips fit snugly against her bottom; a fierce erection pressed into her softness. She had awakened all too soon and extricated herself without fuss while, like a coward, he had let her think him still asleep. And despite his increasing discomfort and need, he never had plotted that course to the sub-station. Now it was too late. They were past it. The border was days away.

"Sebastian? I still don't see it. Are you making it up? Because if you are, I'll give—Oh, my God!"

Target identified. Right on time. She'd done well, but then he'd have been disappointed if she hadn't seen what many pilots so often made the mistake of ignoring at great cost.

He'd discovered she had a laser-sharp intelligence. Early on, he had bullied her into learning a couple of versions of the Mariltar mind skills game. Once she tried them, her engineer's mind was hooked. She quickly built her expertise to the point where she won every game and, in exaggerated disgust, he refused to play with her until she promised to let him win once in a while.

Something hard jabbed him in the ribs—a first. She never deliberately made physical contact. "Wake up, you worm! What is this thing?"

"Your test," he said without opening his eyes. "If you can get past it, I'll tell you about the Crestar System."

"And if I don't get past it?"

"There won't be any need to tell you about the Crestar System."

"You are joking. It looks like a perfectly harmless cloud."

"It's not. It's impenetrable and has a gravity burn of thirty-two."

She inhaled sharply. “You’re crazy. I’m not doing this. Look at the passage. It’s—”

“More than adequate. You’ll do fine. Wake me up when we’re on the other side.”

“Sebastian, I really don’t want to do this.” The panic was back in her voice.

He almost succumbed to it, but hardened his heart and sank further into his seat. He heard her mutter something under her breath that sounded like another uncomplimentary name. His body, sensitive and finely attuned to every movement of his vessel, felt her make the necessary adjustments to the flight pattern. He cracked an eye open to be sure and relaxed again.

She had progressed from refusing to call him anything at all in the first two days, to an interesting selection of epithets in defense to his teasing. And he encouraged it in a resolute quest to learn more about her. Despite constant, subtle probes she wouldn’t talk again about her abduction and imprisonment but, in small snippets, he learned about her childhood, her parents, and her education, which was impressive. She only made brief mention of Treaine once more, but the look in her eyes told him more than words could of her hopes and dreams. Then she turned away, as she often did, withdrawn, distant, and mistrustful.

Today, he had promised to tell her about the Crestar System. He had avoided it for as long as he could, but she had pinned him down during the last mind game they had played.

He felt the vessel shudder as it encountered the gravity field of the zorn star. She had the *Shilmonite* well under control as a peculiar tension rippled around the ship. Then they were past the worst of it and back into clear space.

Cassie turned to him, a little shaken but triumphant none the less. “Tell me!” she demanded.

And so he talked to her of growing up in the Crestar System and the difficult times inherent to a people at war for generations. As a child of Mariltar, he had been sheltered from

the worst of the effects of constant warfare, but adulthood had brought the responsibility of defending the neutral planet against enemies who wished to enslave it and control its rich resources.

He didn't dwell on the Conflicts, but deliberately shifted the focus of his story to the post-war climate. It was the planet, Treaine, she really wanted to hear about. All but abandoned for many years, the planet lay on a defunct trade route in a corner of the Crestar System. Now, brought to life by a group of visionaries from each of the nine nations in the Crestar System, its mandate was to enforce the Coalition peace treaty and oversee the reconstruction of a star system torn apart by war.

As they idled the *Shilmonite* for the night and moved into the inner module to select and heat a meal, Cassie asked the question he'd always known he'd have to answer. "Have you been to Treaine?"

He reached for a bottle of Mariltar ale, snapped the top and took a long swallow. "Yes."

"How long did you stay? Is it as beautiful as they say it is?" She leaned forward on the bench, her face alive with curiosity, her meal forgotten.

"It's one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen."

"How long were you there?" she persisted. "How much did you see?"

He'd considered lying to her, but once she reached Treaine she'd discover the truth soon enough. It was somehow important that he keep deception to a minimum with her. He raised the bottle again and studied her over the top of it as he took another swallow. The brew slid down his throat and settled uncomfortably in his empty stomach. "I was there for more than a year."

A look of shock crossed her face. "You—" She swallowed. Her teeth bit at her bottom lip. "You were part of the original reconstruction team?"

“Yes.”

“A trader?”

He forced a smile. This was far harder than he had ever imagined. “Traders were part of the second settlement. People need goods and services, after all.” He looked away. “I wasn’t always a trader.”

“What were you?”

“Part of the security team.”

“Of course,” she whispered. “The Seventh Fleet of Mariltar, charged with keeping the peace. Your rank?”

“Captain.”

“Captain! How did you get from there to here?”

“People change careers all the time. I thought you wanted to hear about Treaine?”

“Later,” she said impatiently. Her mood was determined, he saw with resignation. She wasn’t going to let this go. “How does someone leave an elite fighting force with a critical mission to become a trader whose activities are... questionable?”

Sebastian looked at the congealed food in front of him and decided he wasn’t hungry after all. He’d told her about the trading business that took him to distant places, and made no effort to hide the fact his activities were not always legitimate. His was a mercenary business and extremely competitive. He bought and sold whatever produced a reasonable profit, whatever his clients wanted—with a few exceptions—and, in the process, crossed over the many blurred and confused legal lines of trade regulations. “I was doing a little trading on the side. Not much. But got involved with the wrong people.” He clenched his hand around the bottle and looked directly at her. “I was thrown out of the Fleet.”

Nothing in her expression changed and it was she who looked away first. His heart ached a little as he recognized the signs. She was visibly withdrawing from him, going to that place where he couldn’t follow and reach her no matter how he tried.

He picked up his plate. "I'm going to go check the nav grids." There was no reaction. She was already gone. He hesitated. "Cassie?" Still no reaction. He wanted to drop his plate, grab her shoulders and force her to acknowledge him. Force the terrible memories out of her.

Time was running out and he would have to let her go soon. Just yesterday, he'd been given new orders. He gave the silent, withdrawn woman one last glance and moved into the command module to check for additional messages.

Two hours later, as he eavesdropped on several very boring conversations over the comm links, a shrill scream ripped through the vessel. He slammed his hand down on the panel to close off the link and raced through to the inner module.

Cassie heaved and twisted on the sleeping platform in the grip of a nightmare. Scream after scream issued from her throat. Sebastian grabbed one arm, then the other and pinned them down, amazed at the strength in the slender body as she fought him wildly.

"Cassie. Cassie, wake up!" He kept his voice steady and calm. Her struggles lessened. Her eyes opened. There was no recognition in them at first, but he continued to talk to her quietly until he felt the violent trembling of her body begin to ease. "What is it, love? Talk about it. Tell me."

The endearment slipped out, but she didn't appear to notice. In a flood of anguished words, she began to talk. And, at some point in the dreadful recital, he gathered her into his arms, desperate to relieve her of some of the terrible pain. She spoke of the attack on the *Araminy* again but, this time, described the attackers and the man who led them, a man with no soul who could order the murder of half the transport vessel's occupants and laugh about it. Cassie had somehow caught his attention.

"His eyes," she whimpered. "It was his eyes. There was nothing in them. They were just dark, soulless holes. I thought he would kill me too, but then he just... let me go."

Into a nightmarish captivity of grueling labor and fear. Yet she had been treated differently in one respect. She relived the mistreatment of her fellow women captives, and confessed to a terrible guilt because she hadn't suffered the same fate.

"Cassie," he murmured, and tightened his embrace. She was where he had longed for her to be, but not like this. A powerful emotion, dark and destructive, seeped through him. She had escaped serious physical harm, it seemed, but how profoundly had the experience affected her otherwise? "You couldn't have prevented what happened, nor could you have had any influence on the outcome."

"They blamed me... those women. They hated me... some of them... because it didn't happen to me."

It was a question he'd asked himself. Why had her captors left her alone? Young, and extraordinarily attractive, she should have been a prime target for any male bent on satisfying his lusts. His mind sorted through all the information again. The physical characteristics she had talked about could belong to any one of a dozen different sub-groups in that particular sector. A mining operation in hot, humid, underground caverns could be anywhere.

"Cassie, think!" he urged her. "Is there anything else you can tell me? Or any idea why they treated you... differently?"

"No, of course not," she snapped, suddenly angry. "I couldn't understand anything they were saying. They—" Her face went blank, her gaze unfocused.

"What, love?"

She was silent, a tight, tense ball curled in his lap. He waited, his body still and relaxed, his mind a whirl of impatient activity.

She whispered something.

"I didn't hear you," he said quietly.

"Sis-ka'la. They treated me like anyone else until they looked in my face. They were repelled by my face and they called me Sis-ka'la and left me alone. Except—except for him.

He kept staring. He—he seemed fascinated, but I never saw him again after the attack on the *Araminy*.” A deep shudder shook her body. “Sebastian, I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

He barely heard her. There was a great roaring in his head as large pieces of a dangerous puzzle clicked into place with complete and utter clarity. He had concentrated too hard on the known factors; had foolishly discounted as too insignificant one small link in the insidious chain. The link hadn’t been insignificant at all. Mogton warlords. Mining operations. *Shlil dust*. *Slave labor*?

He nudged at Cassie’s resisting chin, and lifted her face. Violet eyes, filled with anguish and fear, stared back at him.

“Sis-ka’la. It was your eyes, Cassie. Your eyes are the color of the pur sponge, a valuable commodity used in many applications. But it also produces sis-ka’la, a vital ingredient in a powerful hallucinogen called shlil dust. It’s dangerous, volatile and very valuable. It was the sponge you were forced to harvest, I’m sure of it. Your abductors must have been Mogtons. They would have hesitated to harm a woman whose eyes glowed like the sis-ka’la for fear you might have controlling powers as does the drug. They’re a very superstitious race.”

Mogtons, he thought exultantly. It had to be! The pur sponge was their livelihood but, more than that, a sacred symbol. If they had become organized enough to attack neutral vessels to obtain slave labor, what other influence might they have on the manufacturing and distribution network of the shlil dust drug outside of their own territory? Mogtons kept to themselves, didn’t form alliances—or did they?

But if Mogtons had attacked the *Araminy*, why had Cassie been sent to a flesh auction only to be sold to a Mogton warlord? The puzzling question intruded even as he planned his message to his support team. Operatives in the Fortis Cluster would be ordered to concentrate on the root of the lucrative business. The planetoids that sustained the Mogtons were multitude and off-limits to non-natives. A search for the caverns that nurtured

the sponge would be a forbidding task. But there were ways. There were always ways. Others on his team would begin to look for Mogton alliances, something they hadn't considered possible before. The next secure relay wasn't scheduled for another two days. He *had* to get a message through before then.

Something warm and wet splashed onto his hand.

"Cassie?" He tightened his embrace. Her body was pliant, the tenseness gone, but tiny shudders shook it.

"W-what?"

"Don't cry, love. You're safe with me." For as long as he had her, and it wouldn't be much longer. A deep ache, such as he had never felt before, spread through his chest.

"I'm not crying," she denied with fierce pride. "I just can't help thinking about those p-poor women." She pushed closer against him, burrowed damp cheeks into his shirt. He groaned as fire blazed hot and aching and urgent through him. She had no idea what she did to him, this beautiful creature of lightening moods. He had never denied himself like this before.

For a split moment, a second in time, he contemplated giving up everything and taking her to a place where it would be just the two of them, where nothing and no one would interfere. It was an impossible fantasy. Duty won out. Duty and the burning need to protect and defend... and revenge. He loosened his hold with reluctance and made to move away.

"Do you think you can sleep now, love?"

"S-Sebastian?"

"Mmm?"

"Will you-will you stay with me and hold me?"

Hope flared bright as a laser light and was quenched in an instant. Fool! That wasn't what she meant.

"Of course." Body clenched in protest, he eased her down and held her close. He continued to hold her, staring out the porthole above their heads, long after she had fallen asleep

It was several hours before he put her aside and went to send a coded transmission into the depths of space.

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