



HUNTRESS: UNBREAKABLE

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by

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Prologue

Senor Del Rey carried the curled up, pink creature towards the group, huddled close for warmth.

The watching Nomadians knew not what he cradled in his appendages, it was hairless, skeletal and a hard pink, like the shattered pines around them. Something razed the Human settlement and vast tracts of surrounding forest; and that something obliterated the enslaving aliens, too.

For more years than the Nomadians wished to count, the shadowy aliens studied them, using the gift of implants to manipulate, to punish, to enslave the government and those in key business and enforcement positions.

And then the Hunter arrived. Judgement made flesh. Rumours abounded on what happened up here, rumours that the Hunter freed the Nomadians, sacrificing herself for all of Nomad.

The scientists knew who, why and when, now they needed to know the 'how' and the Nomadian hierarchy suspected Earth technology.

Senor Del Rey, already on planet for a scientific conference, insisted he accompany the expedition north as a consultant. A human saved them by using something; so a human could solve the mystery – under the supervision of a few Nomadian scientists, of course. And when they discovered what type of device the Hunter used, then the Nomadians could replicate it, use it to protect themselves from other alien species who attempted to enslave them.

Never again would the Nomadians trust an alien species offer of technology or gifts – they'd work it out on their own.

The human didn't speak to them, refused to look at them, he walked by them, as if he'd found what he sought.

The Nomadians shuddered. This early in Barkoosh, the snows came thick and unrelenting. When Credosh came, ice blanketed this area as far as the

eyes could see; every animal hibernated, awaited Ardros and the first pink sprouts poking through the glittering white crust.

The landscape was empty almost to the horizon; nothing lived, no creature returned in the many weeks since the incident and the silence unnerved the scientists.

The Nomadians stopped building their camp and watched the human. No one spoke until the human was out of sight, striding across snow covered ash and dirt.

Senor Del Rey's expression was... dangerous and the scientists did not speak for fear of raising the human's ire. Though none would describe himself as a Diviner, each scientist recognised the aura of potential violence surrounding Senor Del Rey. His expressionless grey eyes gleamed near as white as the snow, he held his mouth in a tight, grim line; and he strode through the snow as if it were grass, as if daring anyone to get in his way.

"Do you think what he's carrying is important?" One biologist asked and turned his curved, hammerhead-shark head to watch the human.

An atmospheric scientist bared sharp, triangular teeth in disdain. "He didn't look happy. I would think a human would be happy if he carried something important."

"I get the impression," a botanist murmured, "that Senor Del Rey has no interest in what caused all this damage; his interest was in locating whatever he found."

"Should we call the Enforcers?" The biologist asked.

"Look around you, Cenrish, what could he have found that would be worth *anything*?" The atmospheric scientist waved his long fin-like arms, indicated the devastation, the silence.

The botanist paused in thought. "Wood samples? It *was* pink, though strange in form. He could determine if there was significant genetic damage.

Maybe it was a twisted piece of pine or remanent of the device, work with it to create another weapon."

The other scientists looked at him for a moment, then the surrounding empty landscape. They hissed out laughter, fell against each other at Cenrish's statement.

"What?" He protested. "It *could* happen."

Chapter One

Excalibur Jones emptied his mind of thought as he bulldozed through the knee-high snowdrifts.

His heart pounded with effort, his lungs hurt from sucking in frigid air and his head throbbed with a deep ache, but he didn't stop; couldn't stop.

He wanted to put some distance between him and any Nomadians who might happen by, even as he admitted the impossibility of company arriving. The government declared the Northern Province off limits to anyone but scientists until declared safe from radiation.

He also did not want to think about whom he carried, rescued; or her words to him. Instead, he contented himself with memories.

The first time he'd seen Cambria Petersen, when she arrived on the male-only prison planet Tudor, he'd been shocked speechless. When he saw her and the 'pillar escort, Haariss, walk down the path, everything around him disappeared. He'd watched as Haariss escorted her into a hut, and then absented himself until he could regather his thoughts.

She'd looked lost, tired and wary, her face red and puffy and she'd walked as if in pain.

He'd begun to wonder what could cause such discomfort when one of the 'pillars informed him the female had tried to cook herself without the benefit of a death blow and asked if this the way of females?

He'd grinned, then laughed and shook his head. She had a ferocious case of sunburn, all over that lush body.

And he *knew* they were going to be friends.

It hadn't quite worked out that way. Instead a love/hate relationship developed.

Cambria did not understand she was anyone's meat until she proved herself more violent than the men. Being a generous soul, Excalibur set

about teaching her, and there was no better instructor's tool than throwing the student into the deep end, by forcing confrontations to see how she coped.

Cambria proved made of tough stuff indeed.

She killed and killed again for him, ridding the 'pillar-built village of all his problems. And then she defended them all against the large, indigenous animals summoned by that bastard Moeller to trample the village.

His smile grew pained as he recalled she'd won over big Sam at the foundry and the quiet assassin, Chien. Even took on an unwanted apprentice in Vangana and taught *him* to fight.

She also knew how to escape Tudor and he could not allow her secret spread to other inmates.

He knew she planned to leave, was considering informing her 'friends' on how to escape, he'd seen it in her face, the internal conflict. And he'd again, forced the issue. He destroyed her friends as easily as he slaughtered his many other victims. It was, after all, why he called Tudor 'home'.

His lip curled and he adjusted his hold on his precious burden, refocused on his memories, lest he falter.

Humanity did not countenance the removal of the dispossessed, the dissolute or the corrupt. They fought wars over ideology, over some religious doctrine, killed as many of the opposition as possible – the good and the bad – and yet, take out those who burdened society like leeches and you were a killer, a serial killer, in fact. Shunned, feared, *exiled*.

He accepted it all – especially the fear – and, by sending him to Tudor (with the expectation someone would kill him), the Judicar provided him with his own special playground, as if rewarding him, or 'hiring' him to do their dirty work in secret. A win-win situation for all concerned - until Cambria arrived.

Excalibur stopped and swayed with exhaustion. He could go no further today. He set her down, groaned as he removed his pack and stretched his lower back. He walked around in a circle, shook out his arms and then stood still, watched the sparse forest. He'd walked further than he expected - and not far enough.

On a sigh, he set up his camp in the lea of downed, giant pink-barked tree. He constructed the light-weight tent, scrounged for wood and lit a fire, and when the hot coffee warmed his insides, he turned to study his obsession.

So quiet, so... innocent. *So different and strange and frightening.*

He'd come to this world of Nomad to continue his imperative of destroying malcontents, but he'd made a mistake. How could he have known that a planet called 'Nomad' didn't have... nomads? That it was a high-functioning civilisation where everyone worked and no one fit his description of a target? That the locals bore a striking resemblance to Terran Hammerhead sharks?

Judge Bolingbroke's database indicated this world was ripe for exploitation, had listed it as one of his possible escape planets, through his personal, illegal corridor.

And the name appealed to Excalibur. A planet full of nomads must have those who refused to pull their weight, who were defective... who would get lost in the vast landscape and not be missed.

But neither Bolingbroke, nor his minion Moeller, visited the planet - that became obvious to Excalibur the moment he stepped through the portal and saw his first Nomadian.

But then a Nomadian sneered at him, told him he to go to the human enclave where he belonged. And Excalibur's interest spiked. Certain he'd

find what he needed - what would scratch the ever-increasing itch between his shoulder blades - he set off.

Kekotown. Ruled with an iron fist by Vladimir Kekovic.

Excalibur figured he could take on the big man anytime he wanted. None of his victims fought much, it was all about gaining their confidence, gaining their trust and moving in to remove them from this life.

He'd been wrong. *Again*. And he couldn't understand it.

Kekovic was unlike his usual victims, and life took a turn for the worse – at least for him.

He'd kept up the charm, the innocence, even as they viewed him with suspicion. He'd been helpful, worked hard to ease his way into the community.

Then Kekovic came for him, hauled him to his office and secured to a chair, demanded Excalibur tell him about the missing colonists.

Excalibur denied all knowledge; he'd not had the time to scout out his victims yet, but someone had.

Kekovic had his suspicions about who Excalibur was, for he explained he was all about second chances and building new lives. But back-sliders deserved all they got and were not welcome in his town.

With his giant hands and huge wrestler body, Kekovic cracked his knuckles, smiled and then beat Excalibur senseless, dumped him beyond the borders of the village with the warning never to return.

Excalibur made his way back to Cohasha City, with the intention of leaving Kekovic alone until he had a better plan to take him down. Face-to-face, Excalibur didn't have a chance and it was unsporting to use long distance weaponry, though he felt tempted, just this once.

He'd healed and turned his thoughts to his own personal assassin, wondered whether she'd worked out his clues and booked himself into a hostel to wait.

The Nurturer – and what kind of a name was that? – proved informative about a guest soon to arrive who would rid the world of evil. He'd registered as 'Henry Tudor', the excitement of a game resumed flashed through his veins.

His eyes went to her again. No movement, not even breath. Only silence. Excalibur shuddered.

The chances of him and Cambria Petersen being in the same hostel, he'd thought, were impossible. Only fate could explain it. That the hostel accommodated visiting dignitaries meant nothing to him; destiny did. Their destiny: teacher and student, together until student equalled the teacher and they could hunt whomever they pleased.

He did not see it as coincidence that she was a World Council Hunter and he, a hunter of the parasites of humanity. They fit. It was all - it was *everything*.

And he'd set about thinking he could use her as his tool once more, that she'd take Kekovic down for him and he could live through the death vicariously. And, again, she surprised him when she headed right for Susrah City.

Excalibur followed, took his time while a plan stewed in the back of his mind. Cambria, as a Hunter, could take on anyone, kill anyone who threatened her, and her target was him; all he had to do was divert her attention toward Kekovic and the man was most definitely a threat.

They'd made a deal, called a truce for the greater good. Jones would shut down the illegal corridor and Cambria would take care of negotiations to

stop the Nomadians from slaughtering the humans because they were being uppity. As a bonus, she planned to take out Kekovic.

He'd wanted to stay and see to the corrupt World Council Minister, Corona Cottington-Blake, the financier of the illegal settlement and corridor, but escape seemed the greater imperative for him.

For the first time in his life, he'd felt torn. He and Cambria engaged in the most incredible sex of his existence and he found he wanted to stay with her and do it again and again.

Maybe her sense of justice was rubbing off on him, for he agreed to stop the corridor's operation. And he'd actually *promised* to return for her.

But... he'd gone through the corridor and then the whole thing stopped, disconcerting those about to go through. Jones meant to fulfil his promise: to contact the Hunter and Retrieval teams. With the damn corridor shut down, he knew someone else arranged it. All he thought about was getting back to Cambria.

His eyes watched her for any movement, any indication of life, but he saw none, even as her words echoed in his ears.

"You kept your promise. For a change."

He still felt freaked out by it, by the circumstances, by the story told to him by the Nomadians.

Humans weren't the first to try covert invasion and the Nomadians took steps to squash any further infiltration. Not because they were angry... oh, they were pissed about their inability to get human leaders to stick to their word, but because they were trying to *save* the humans from the alien experimentation that had befallen *them*.

One ship of unknown origin enslaved the entire planet before the first human stepped foot on Nomad. Intrigued by this new species, the aliens directed the Nomadians to give them land, corral them for study.

The Nomadians had no choice but to agree.

The last any Nomadians had seen of Hunter Petersen and First Officer Karesh of Cohasha City, was in a report from the troops sent to dismantle Kekotown.

First Officer Karesh ordered the troops away, to head back to Susrah City as fast as their vehicle would take them. One trooper said he'd never seen the First Officer so scared and that translated to the driver.

Not long afterwards, an enormous explosion erupted into the sky; a huge cloud seen from the orbiting satellites.

The truck, just, made it to a safe distance, though it rocked and staggered as the shock wave caught it. Nearly every single window in Susrah City shattered, buildings shook and the deep rumble shimmered in the marrow of bones.

Excalibur did not believe Cambria was gone, not when he'd promised he'd return; not when they had something to work on. She would not abandon him or her Hunt for him.

It wasn't possible. So, he'd donned an alternative persona and joined the research team, determined to find Cambria, to find *something*, because unless he had evidence, even genetic evidence, she wasn't dead. Not to him. She was his, heart and soul, and he wouldn't give her up for anything or anyone.

He couldn't entertain the thought she was dead. That way lay true madness and he would wreak such vengeance on the World Council for causing him pain... They were, after all, responsible for setting her on his trail.

He sighed and unrolled his thermal sleeping bag, wrapped it around him and lay down next to her pliant, hot form, enveloped her in his arms and... slept.

* * *

Darkness lay heavy when Excalibur rolled out of his thermal bag. He'd slept for eight hours and still the night reigned.

On this world, thirty-hour days dragged on, at the primeval need to sleep when it was dark, work and play during daylight.

He'd adjusted to the difference by not trying to change. If it was night following his eight hours of sleep, he still rose and went about his business. If it was day when he felt tired, he slept. His work did not require a set time.

Cambria hadn't moved all night, still lay curled on her side. Steam rose from her heated, dusky pink skin into the chilled air. He held a hand over her, then lightly pressed his fingers against her flesh.

"So hot," he murmured, fascinated by the growing plumpness. No longer a bag of bones, Cambria's body slowly reconstructed her. But how? She'd taken no sustenance; where did her body get the energy, the material to rebuild her?

Excalibur found himself uneasy over her coma, over her very nature. Yet, however, why ever she survived, Cambria returned to him and for he was thankful.

He rolled away from her and broke down his camp.

His shoulders ached, but he figured he was more than a third of the way back to Susrah City. There, he could acquire a vehicle and drive down to the southern province of Cohasha – he dared not risk flying, he had no explanation for her and he refused to let her out of his sight.

He stowed his gear into his pack and shrugged into it, adjusted the weight. Then he crouched down and lifted her. She felt heavier than yesterday, but not the weight he wanted to feel.

Excalibur walked for the rest of the night, paused at sunrise for a break and continued on. When the sun was high above him, cool and bright, he set his camp and settled down for another eight hours sleep, resumed his

journey until he saw the glow of lights from Susrah City in the growing night.

He found a secure area and laid her on the ground, settled his pack next to her and arched his back to ease the strain.

He needed a vehicle. He could have taken the scientists' car, but guilt nibbled him as he thought of the older Nomadians walking such a long distance.

"Damn you, Cambria and your sense of fair play." He muttered and walked into the city.

The alien quarter was abuzz with species. But no humans. Their shops were dark and empty, like pockmarks in an otherwise bright and vibrant street.

He'd get no assistance here, but he did see a human vehicle, abandoned.

Excalibur grinned. It was one of Kekovic's Enforcer cars, unmarked by graffiti. The Nomadians and the local alien species seemed reluctant to go near it.

He climbed in and started the engine, grinned at the subtle hum and near full energy indicator.

"This'll do me." He muttered and drove off. No one paid any attention to him or the vehicle.

He bumped over grass and sticks and avoided downed branches to where he'd left her.

His pack went onto the passenger side seat and he picked Cambria up, laid her on the back seat, secured the belts.

Then he got into the driver's seat and headed south.

* * *

Excalibur lost track of the days – Terran or Nomadian – as he made the thousands of kilometres drive south. His food reserves diminished and he

was tired of supplementing his rations with Muriak and Mushtak, or, in human terms, a burger and fries.

And still Cambria didn't awaken. She remained catatonic, yet her body became pliant, regained more flesh and muscle, weight. Her skin darkened to red and burned with heat.

Excalibur rubbed his tired eyes. If his life was to mean anything, if he was to do this one good deed – the *only* good deed he'd ever do – he had to persevere.

When his patience neared snapping point, and the itch became almost unbearable, he drove into Cohasha City and towards the docks.

It was late in the Nomadian night when he arrived at the checkpoint.

He drove up as close as possible, kept the engine running and emerged to greet the slow and sleepy guard.

"You are not authoris..."

The hunting knife slid deep into the Nomadian's lower belly and Excalibur walked his victim back into the guard hut, then dragged the blade up, as if gutting a fish.

Are sharks fish? He wondered as he absorbed the slow fading of life from the guard's black eyes.

He eased the body down to the floor, wiped his hand and the knife on the guard's uniform. His lip curled at the awful stench of ruptured internal organs spilling onto the ground.

He'd expected it to stink like fish, given the Nomadians' apparent evolution from native sharks.

"I guess you don't eat other fish after all." He muttered and grimaced at the sticky feel of blood. He'd have to wash everything, clean the blade properly, but not yet, not now, and he knew it would be extra work to return the blade to its proper shine. That was okay. For now, he absorbed

the Nomadian's death into his soul and his shoulders eased with relief, felt energy course through his veins.

He got back into the car and drove along the dockside, searched for the corridor. He smiled as he saw the alleyway, with its scattering of debris, of dirt and mud and old rotting things.

It hadn't taken much torture of another Hunter on Earth to discover the corridor's location. It had taken a little more pain to find another corridor away from the one destroyed at Kekotown.

Excalibur used his pack to keep the corridor's access hatch open. It wouldn't do for him to be transported into the very heart of Hunter territory. Although, he could easily imagine the shocked faces if he did. Unfortunately, there'd be no escape from them and he couldn't let it happen. He wanted Cambria to come after him again – and now he had the patience thanks to his latest victim.

He picked Cambria up and carried her inside, laid her down on his coat and brushed a hand over her bald scalp.

A surge of some... emotion went through him as he bent down to kiss the scorched, sunburned skin of her forehead, to brush his lips over heat and baby softness.

He eased back with a sigh, then he set the emergency beacon on his wrist unit and placed the band on top of her so still form.

"Safe journey, Cambria. I'll be waiting for you."

He rose and picked up his pack, paused at the door and watched her. "But don't take too long. You know what happens when you don't do what I ask of you."

The door clanged shut behind him.

Excalibur Jones got back into the commandeered car and drove away.

He did not look back.

Chapter Two

Cool, empty darkness surrounded her, held her in its comforting embrace. The longer she stayed, the more content, even relieved, she felt. There was no pain - physical or emotional – no sound nor scents nor tastes; no joy, either. Nothing to stimulate her senses, but a vague memory of duty incomplete. Who and what she'd been no longer mattered; only the peace and comfort of the darkness soothed her.

As long as she stayed wrapped in the cool silence, she didn't need to recognise any imperative, any demand; she could float, unafraid, unconcerned with the issues and problems of others.

Others.

Flashes of light erupted at the thought. Had she brows, she would have frowned at the flickering images. They didn't come all at once, just a sharp flash, like a strobe, followed by peace and quiet. She waited until she felt sure the flash didn't come again, then sank back into lassitude.

But it came again, with others, before vanishing.

The images increased, until a long flow of interconnected images that at first made no sense filled her mind. A strange, liquid voice called to her, but she made no sense of the alien words and ignored them.

A room with old, dark furniture and a man called... Bolingbroke.

A jungle planet called Tudor and a man called... Excalibur.

A cold planet with shark-like creatures called... Nomad and a man called Excalibur; another man called... Vlad? The sharks, Gordash, Nurturer...

Karesh!

The images stopped with a flash of brilliant light and she sank back into the darkness, deeper and blacker so the images wouldn't come again. Again the garbled alien voice, querulous, demanding, then fading.

The pictures returned, a strange montage of her life. They hunted her, taunted her, demanded things of her she couldn't do. *Wouldn't* do.

The images replayed over and over again, the brilliant flash repeating with painful intensity and brightness until she would have wept had she the tears.

The explosion repeated itself and she saw Karesh's face, solemn, grateful and proud until it vanished. Simply... disappeared into the light. And she vanished, too. Painlessly, without thought, vanished into nothing until she became aware of the comforting darkness and all that followed.

Does it understand the visions? She recognized the soft alien words as they murmured around her, inside her. *Does it understand the progress of its life and where it will end, what it is constructed of or how it came to be? Does it understand it should not be here and cannot stay?*

Did it understand anything of this dimension, of its own?

What are you? What will you be? Did the uniqueness of being, in this dimension, in every dimension, make any sense?

The voice faded, as if walking away to ponder an interesting philosophical question. She wanted to call the voice back, to talk, to ask her own questions and seek answers, to end the darkness as she realised the loneliness of this empty place.

The horror and terror and understanding of her nature sent her back to the darkness, where she buried the memory of alien's questions.

She could not stay here and then a mournful sigh eased through her.

Yes. She understood. She was not meant for this place, for any place in time and space, but if she could find her way home, she need not face what was to come; she could hide amongst the familiar and ignore the future.

* * *

More quiet, more peace, but different. She was warm, felt something light covering her and slowly opened eyes long shut.

The low light hurt her eyes. Without thinking, her vision adjusted to a more comfortable level.

She was in a room with unrelenting white walls, with no windows to the outside world, no colour to break the monotony of white and nothing to indicate where she was or what she was doing here.

She'd slept, but for how long? She sat up, the sheet falling to her waist, exposing patchy, flaky skin, as if shedding the old like a reptile.

Alarms, harsh to her ears, shattered the silence and to her right, a door burst open. Armed soldiers, dressed in green poured in to surround the bed.

The alarm shut off and the soldiers aimed their rifles at her, each one with grim determination in their eyes as they watched her.

She kept still, not wanting to give them any opportunity to fire. Her gaze met each of the soldiers, but there was no flinching, no change in expression and she heard the creak of someone's leather glove tighten around the barrel guard.

A white coated woman hesitantly entered and she turned her head to the newcomer. Medium height with seal-brown, curly hair tied back in hasty ponytail, wary blue eyes and trembling mouth. She held a clipboard and nervously flicked her gaze to it.

The... doctor cleared her throat.

"Do you... do you know *where* you are?" She was frightened, or... confused about something.

"No." Cambria said with a rusty voice.

"Do you know *who* you are?"

"I am... I am... *Petersen*." The soldiers leaned in, as if she was dangerous. She frowned at them. "Cambria Petersen, Hunter."

"Do you know *why* you are here?"

What an odd question, she thought and tilted her head. If she didn't know where, how could she know why? But since this woman wore a white coat, she must be a doctor, ergo...

"I've been... sick?" She asked.

The doctor didn't answer, but didn't approach, either.

"How do you feel?"

Again, she frowned. "I feel... I feel... *unnatural*." She said and heard a collective intake of breath. Was it the wrong word? It was the truth. She *did* feel unnatural - and strange and odd and out of sorts, as if she'd been away for a long time and in her absence, the world changed.

"Have I been ill for long?" She asked but the doctor didn't answer. The woman eyed her as if she was something to study.

Study? The word echoed inside her with savage disbelief. She'd felt it before. "Karesh." She murmured and dropped her gaze. She'd explained... something studied, experimented on her people, and then the humans. An alien species Karesh had to stop somehow.

"Do you know the word 'Karesh'?" The doctor asked.

Cambria eased back against the pillows, drew up the sheet and folded her hands in her lap. "First Officer Karesh of Cohasha City." She said and a spurt of sadness drooped her shoulders. A film ran behind her eyes again in detail. "Killed in action at Kekotown, Susrah Province, Nomad."

"What else do you remember?"

"Everything." She murmured. "Everything *except* where I am and how I got here." No, not everything. Something lurked in the darkness of her mind, something waited, patient and terrible.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"The very last thing?" She looked at the doctor and the woman nodded. "Looking into Karesh's eyes, feeling enormous regret and... pressing the button anyway."

"Nothing afterwards?"

Cambria lifted a shoulder. "Nothing of any great moment. Darkness, mostly; long, cool, comforting darkness."

The doctor nodded and turned to the soldiers. "That will be all, thank you."

With reluctance, the soldiers lowered their weapons and marched out of the room, every one of them watched her until they went beyond the door.

The doctor stared at her as they left.

Cambria winced at the tight, painful cramping of her empty stomach. "May I have something to eat and drink, please?" She asked and the doctor blinked.

"Anything in particular, you'd like?"

"No. Just... something."

The doctor nodded and backed out of the room, closed the door.

Cambria heard the click of the lock engaging and closed her eyes for a nap.

* * *

She didn't really sleep, hadn't since... that night with Excalibur; and that was the first time she slept for a solid eight since Tudor.

But she dozed in the twilight between waking and true sleep, enjoyed the drifting sensation.

When the lock disengaged, she turned to see who arrived.

A man, in a military uniform, with the dark colouring of an Italian. He was familiar, wore a slight smile... and carried a tray with food.

"Major Caparossi." She said and shifted up the bed.

"Cambria. You remember me."

"Of course. You rescued me from Tudor." She lifted her hands as he placed a tray across her legs.

"I'll return." He said and went out.

She looked down at the bowl of pale yellow and clear soup. From the scent, she identified it as chicken, or *essence* of chicken soup.

Caparossi returned as she was eyeing the liquid and dipping the edge of the spoon into it.

He set a visitor's chair down and sat, with coffee in hand.

"For me or is it yours?" She asked, staring at the mug.

He flicked a grin. "Mine. All mine, but if you're good and eat your soup, you might... *might* I say, be allowed a sip or two."

She still hesitated. The soup was more coloured water than substantial.

"Go on. I don't think it will harm you, and it's good for recovering digestions."

On a sigh, she lifted a small sample and tasted it. Not too bad, but not loaded with flavour either. She swallowed it down and waited.

Her stomach accepted it without complaint and she ate more.

"So, I have been sick." She said.

"In a way."

"Are you going to spit it out or give it to me straight up?"

He smiled, then snorted.

"Lord Montague would skin me alive if I dumped a load of information on you at one sitting. So let's just take it one small bite at a time, hmm?" He raised his mug and sipped.

Oh, she so wanted some of that. It felt like forever since she'd had a mug of fresh Brazilian beans.

"Fair enough. But have I or have I not been ill?"

His expression twisted with exasperation.

"It's a simple 'yes' or 'no' question, Major."

"If only." He muttered and gave her a quick, reassuring smile.

Cambria waited. She'd learned patience on Nomad, with the thirty-hour days that sent some humans into meltdown as they tried to become accustomed to the fifteen hours of daylight.

"Ah..." He eased out a breath and began again. "I understand from Doctor Daley that you remember the death of First Officer Karesh."

"I do." Cambria said and lowered her gaze. "She was my friend." She felt a pang of grief in her heart.

"Yes, well. Can you explain why she is dead and you are not?"

Cambria paused, the spoon halfway to her mouth. She lowered it back to the bowl. "No. I should be dead, really, irrevocably, dead. Spread to the four winds, like Karesh, turned to ash and atoms."

Your name will live on in Nomadian history, Karesh, and I will always remember you. Both she and Karesh knew her words were a lie – no-one could survive the explosion to come, yet...

She looked at Caparossi. "I knew. In that last instant before we pressed the button together, I *knew* it wouldn't be the end of me. But this is *impossible!*"

Caparossi raised his eyebrows.

"Well, obviously not 'impossible', because just as obviously, I'm sitting here talking to *you*."

"I am to understand that you don't know why you aren't dead?"

"Yeah. The first time it happened was a bit of a shock, but this time, I could have sworn a hydrogen-fuelled bunker buster would do the job. There wouldn't be enough left of me to reconstruct."

"The... *first* time? Caparossi paled.

"Minister Corona Cottington-Blake and her bloody cannon-sized handgun. Blew a hole right through me."

Caparossi lowered his gaze. "I was unaware." He murmured.

"Didn't...?" No. Karesh was dead and Gordash... well, who knew why he wouldn't witness the killing. Maybe no one had asked. Maybe with Karesh dead, Cottington-Blake had wheedled her way out of... *no one knew*. That was it; no one knew but Cottington-Blake and she'd never tell.

"The evil little shit." She finished. "Where is the Minister?"

"She is... gone. Like Bolingbroke, except her office is nice and tidy."

Cambria sighed and finished her soup. "She financed Kekotown, manipulated the Nomadians into slaughtering the human enclave. She then called in the marines; they'd fight, war would break out. She then planned to take over the defeated Nomadians as a Governor, the ruler of her own little world and you *let her go*?"

His mouth tightened. "We didn't 'let her go'. Mr Kekovic gave us his recordings with remarkable haste, but by the time we arrived at her country estate in Buckinghamshire, she was gone. Not everything, but she'd left in a hurry."

Cambria's brows lowered. "She's still on Earth?"

Caparossi shrugged. "We don't know. Hell, we're still trying to locate all the illegal corridors, but they are available to anyone who can afford the technology. We shut one operator down and another springs up."

"The genie is out of the bottle."

"Yes and there's very little we can do about it. The overall human population is shrinking and there's not a damned thing we can do."

"People are abandoning Earth?"

Caparossi grimaced. "The underground flyers and information describe beautiful planets where people can start afresh. And given the colonial

instinct of old, the amount of people who assume their lives here aren't going to get any better, add a dash of financial incentive and who wouldn't want to go?"

"Have they learned *nothing*?" Cambria asked, appalled. "Did all those rescued colonists not tell of their disastrous time on other planets? Of becoming slaves to those who sent them?"

Caparossi shook his head. "Most speak of 'next time'; it will be different, it will be better, that one experience doesn't mean they can't try again."

"Then they are fools." She huffed out a breath. "I admire the colonist spirit, but surely the government is providing information?"

"As you said, the genie is out of the bottle, and as always, people see the grass as greener away from their experiences here, or on other planets. And we don't have enough people to stop them from trying."

He waved a hand. "But it is not the issue. The problem is *you* and why you are still alive."

"Oh, right." She set her spoon into the bowl.

"More?"

"More food, as in steak? Or more, as in soup?"

He grinned and lifted the tray. "Soup and light meals for awhile yet, I'm afraid."

"Then, no, thank you. Have I earned coffee?"

Caparossi went to the door. "I'll bring you back a mug. Won't be long."

No one knew of her resurrection, or they were keeping it very quiet.

Colonel Walker had seen her heal a catastrophic injury when Cantor shot her in the throat; the young private knew she'd killed Colonel Markov and thought she was going for her gun.

Walker *said* he'd made a full report to be dealt with later, but did he say that for the benefit of Lieutenant Geeves who'd brought her in on a warrant?

Did the Colonel leave that entire section out as unbelievable or dangerous information?

She shook her head. It didn't matter. Lord Montague might know the whole story and was waiting for her side of it, as told to someone she trusted: Major Caparossi, her handler. She had no doubt cameras watched and microphones listened.

Cambria had nothing to hide. She must be in the Hunter facility and her... presence must have caused no end of concern. But how did she get here? Why wasn't she back on Nomad? Who rescued her? When?

Dread surged. *What* of her remained to rescue? A blob of flesh or tissue? Traces of genetic material that wouldn't stop binding together? No. Something... else?

Caparossi returned with a steaming, white ceramic mug. He offered it to her and resumed his seat.

Cambria wrapped her hands around the smooth, warm cup and inhaled the scent of coffee.

"Oh, yeah." And she took her first sip.

The Major watched her with a bemused expression.

"Okay, Caparossi, ask your questions." She said.

"You said Minister Cottington-Blake killed you. Can you elaborate?"

"Let's see." She said and thought back. "I was having a conversation with Primary Enforcer Gordash about the Minister *not* being the head of our government. She comes in with First Officer Karesh and we get into it a little. I tell her that as a Hunter I outranked her..." She glanced at Caparossi.

"Off world, you outrank any human, including Ministers of the World Council." He confirmed.

"Oh, good. I wasn't sure at the time. Anyway, she says 'not' and pulls a gun. Before I could say otherwise, she shot me in the chest. Last thing I

heard was her telling Karesh and Gordash that the warrant out on me had been executed. Then there was a lot of pain. Mind-numbing, agonising, senses-ripping pain. And I woke up with some Nomadian *pissing* on me in the latrine pit."

"And *this* time?"

"Weird. No pain, just darkness, as I said to the doctor. And emptiness until the memories started up. And, well, here I am."

"Yes." He murmured. "Here you are."

* * *

The major left soon after and Doctor Daley returned to examine her. The doctor resisted every attempt at conversation, gave Cambria instructions to follow.

Her eyes and ears were looked into, her reflexes tested, her heart and lungs listened to, blood taken.

Then the doctor left her alone and Cambria spent time studying the white wall opposite her.

She could see the wires of surveillance system, tracked them to minute cameras imbedded in the corners. Saw the ultra-sensitive microphones that listened to her every word, her every breath, every rustle of movement.

And beyond the wall, to the next room where a man lay hooked up to monitoring devices, his body burned, his flesh a bloody red with black flecks of charred skin and white antiseptic cream. Nurses walked around him and adjusted the machines, spoke to the man without response. Another Hunter? Wounded in the pursuit of a warrant?

She turned her head to the left, examined the room beyond, but all she saw was soil, no, clay and earth. To the right was a hallway where soldiers paced, on alert and medical staff walked, heads bent over boards.

Eventually, she grew bored with her visual exploration and closed her eyes for another nap. Someone, Caparossi maybe, would return for more interrogation. There was no way they'd be satisfied with what she'd told them. And she couldn't give them the answers they wanted.

Chapter Three

Hours later, Lord Montague, head of the Hunter Unit, settled into the visitor's chair. Grey hair combed back off a tanned, unwrinkled face, mild blue eyes. She knew not to underestimate him.

"Cambria, how are you feeling?" He gave her a faint smile.

"Lord Montague. I don't think I can complain. A little bored, but other than that? I'm sure Doctor Daley is keeping you updated."

He nodded. "That she is."

Cambria smiled at him. "All health issues aside, I'm pretty sure you're here for a reason."

"I am." He replied. "And health issues *are* why I'm here."

Cambria waited.

"Do you remember when you came back through the corridor and set off the alarms because you had alien technology inside of you?"

She pursed her lips. "I do. First time I've ever had so many guns pointed at me at one time."

"Yes, well, the tech is gone now." Lord Montague said and watched for her reaction.

He needn't, she was just as shocked as the techs must have been.

"If the tech is gone, Lord Montague, *why* am I still here? Why am I not dust?" *And why can I still see through walls?*

"There's a question we cannot answer. And obviously, you have no idea either."

Cambria shook her head. "I've told the doctor and Major Caparossi what I remember, but..."

"Yes, I understand." He said with a sigh. "And I'm thinking it might just be something we'll never know the answer to, since you and First Officer Karesh blew up the aliens responsible."

"It was that, or eternal enslavement, sir." Cambria scowled and he held up his hands.

"I know, I know. We've had a *complete* briefing from the Nomadians. I understand what you and First Officer Karesh did for the planet and for us."

"But...?"

His grin was boyish. "But I can't help wishing for some..."

"Don't you dare say *samples*, Lord Montague. What they were going to do to babies, children and adults is repulsive. What they *had* done, in fact, until Karesh and I put a stop to it. And I'd do it again. So would she."

"Peace, Cambria. I was going to say 'technology'. The blast was so effective, nothing remains of the craft itself and only nasty little black blobs of the aliens. I *am* glad they are dead. But the astonishing thing is: you *are not*. So what saved you? Why are you not, well, vaporised?"

Cambria shook her head. "I don't *know*, Lord Montague and that's the truth so stop *asking* me! I didn't so much as get a glimpse at the instruction manual!"

He sighed. "I never thought you were lying to Doctor Daley or Major Caparossi, Cambria. I just thought I'd come down and see for myself how you were travelling; and by all accounts, you are more healthy than you have a right to be."

"I am?" She asked, surprised, although... maybe she shouldn't be, given her recuperative powers... oh, the tech was gone.

"You are. The question is: what do we do with you? We cannot have a... resurrected being running around the neighbourhood, devout people worshipping at your feet."

Cambria's eyebrows shot up. "No, I don't think so, either, Lord Montague. Very few people know about it and at least one of them is dead." She said.

"True, but your turning up like you did raised a lot of questions."

Cambria wriggled beneath the sheet to get comfortable. "I don't *know*."

"No, I realise that, but you got from Kekotown all the way to Cohasha City and into the corridor. An emergency beacon was set off and here you are." Lord Montague said.

"Jones." She murmured as she recalled staring up into his wide, shocked grey eyes.

"*Excalibur* Jones? You're *Hunt* Jones?" Lord Montague stared at her.

"The very same." She sighed and explained the bargain she'd made. "It was the only way to stop more illegal humans coming through, and in particular the marines. If I could stop them, then the Nomadians wouldn't find any humans to slaughter – the humans already evacuated north."

"But it didn't work."

Her lips twisted. "No. The corridor shut down soon after he went through. Cottington-Blake, I presume, to stop any humans returning so she'd have her slaughter. Jones buggered off. But he came back for me." She shook her head, amazed. "He came back for me." She said again, her voice soft with wonder.

"And he's still on the loose."

She looked at him. "I guess he is, unless someone else has taken over the Hunt for him."

Lord Montague glanced at the wall, beyond which the burned man lay. "He carved your initials into the last one we sent after him." He frowned, scowled. "Every damn one of them he's sent back and one might not survive. And that's the thing." His eyes met hers. "He's not killed *any* of the Hunters. Just... incapacitated them, hauled them to the corridor, set the emergency code off and vanished, until the next one caught up with him. Wash, rinse, repeat."

Cambria looked away. "He *loves* me, Lord Montague. And he would not appreciate anyone else coming for him."

"You know this for a fact." He asked and she met his gaze.

"He told me often enough."

Lord Montague stared hard at her and firmed his mouth. "During this truce, did you and he...?"

"Like rabbits, Lord Montague. I'm his addiction, and for me...?" She turned her gaze from him again and lifted a shoulder. "I have needs as well; something you might think about on long haul missions."

"Christ." He rubbed his face with his hands.

"Oh, hey, now. I *told* you we had sex on Tudor. I *told* you he thought we had a relationship going. Is it so surprising that he'd bargain for a truce first, then have sex later?"

He dropped his hands with a sigh. "I thought you had more control after what he did to your friends."

Cambria stuck out her bottom lip. "Well, sue me for want a fuck every now and then. This job isn't exactly conducive to having a stable relationship, now is it?"

"No, it's not." Montague agreed. "But I thought you, at least, would resist him because of who and what he is. What he's *done*."

"I *do* know, but he was never in a position to do me harm, physically or emotionally." She grumbled and he snorted out a laugh.

"You *cannot* be that good."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Jones seems to think so."

His cheeks reddened. "Your pardon, I didn't mean to offend you." Lord Montague said. "This whole situation beggars belief."

"You should see it from *my* side, sir." She said and he looked at her, startled.

"Yes, well... I'm sure this has been difficult for you."

"So... what now?" She asked.

"To be honest, I'm in a bit of a quandary. I have a Hunter who appears to be indestructible. I have bosses who want to know why and how. I have missions coming... if you'll pardon the expression... out the wazoo and not enough Hunters to take them on. And Excalibur Jones isn't helping by injuring my people."

"No, but he's *mine* to deal with."

Lord Montague gave her a considering look. "Yes, I do believe he is. However, I think we'll let him go for the moment."

"You do? But he's..."

"Not going to go far. He rescued you for a purpose; he wants you to come after him, *only* you. So we'll let him stew in his own juices. What you need is to get back up on the horse, ease your way back into work."

"And the staff who want to poke and prod?"

Lord Montague smiled. "They have taken enough samples from you to last them years. Let them pout."

"Good. I'd hate to have to go after them." Her eyes met his with lethal intent. "I will not countenance *any* experimentation. Ever."

His eyebrows nearly disappeared into his white hair. "I believe you mean that."

"After Nomad, rest assured I most *emphatically* do."

* * *

Cambria decided physical therapy sucked. For six weeks, she worked out, sweated, stretched soft new muscles and allowed a masseuse to pummel her back into shape.

Her new quarters, she decided, would remain unadorned, a place where she slept but did not live.

The alien technology had consumed the complex monitoring system Major Caparossi had installed under her jaw. He'd declared her dead and disposed of her gear.

Her return to warn them of the illegal migration, shocked and appalled him. It hadn't occurred to him that someone might find the tiny device, let alone remove it. And when the bunker-busters went off, with the Nomadian witness reports verifying her location, he declared her dead again. This time, she'd been absent, from Nomad, from Earth, from *existence*, for over three months.

And so, here she was, in empty quarters that had a bed, cupboards, a desk and chair, fridge, small oven - for when she didn't want to socialise - and her own bathroom.

Lord Montague confirmed her return to active duty and Caparossi arranged supplies for her.

Cambria went into the bathroom, stared at her reflection in the mirror.

She didn't *look* any different, with gold-flecked blue eyes, dark hair, smooth skin...

A finger reached out and brushed along her jaw. Komatsu claws had torn her face open on Tudor and the alien tech had removed the scar. And the one on her cheekbone where an assassin's arrow had sliced. Her finger touched the missing scar. It didn't seem right that her rites of passage, the hard earned medals of survival, should be there one day and gone the next, as if the events never happened.

Cambria dropped her gaze, as if she couldn't bear to look at herself. She couldn't, she thought, she didn't know what she was. Human or alien?

She *felt* human, *looked* human, but was she really? The doctors said so, but with a hint of caution, of secrets kept. The medics knew her inside and out;

knew her body, her blood and internal systems, mapped her body right down to a genetic and molecular level – for identification purposes.

They must have found something inhuman. Did they actually know the answer or were they still puzzling over test results? Or worse, they found nothing to explain her resurrection and were simply wary of her?

She didn't challenge them, refused to ask the questions because she genuinely didn't want to know – the potential for disaster appalled her and yet, she still called herself a coward for refusing the knowledge.

A knock at the door brought her out of the bathroom. "Come in."

A young twenty-something woman opened the door. Blonde hair swung around a heart-shaped face and dark brown eyes glittered with good humour.

"Hunter Petersen?"

"Yes."

"I've brought your supplies and your kit from the quartermaster." She smiled and stepped aside as two more near-children brought in boxes and packages and bags. "If you'll sign here, please?" The girl thrust a board at Cambria and she took it, scrawled a vague signature.

All three left, the woman with a happy, contented smile for a job done.

Cambria turned back to the supplies on her bed and on the floor.

With nothing better to do, she explored the packages.

With reverence, she unpacked the coffee machine, set it on top of the fridge and began to make her first brew of freedom.

The scent must have caught someone's attention, because there was a quick knock on her door.

She opened it and glanced back at the machine. Nearly done.

"Are you distracted by something important?" Major Caparossi asked.

Cambria turned back to him, opened the door wider for him to enter.
“What else but coffee. I have discovered I have a distinct addiction to it.”

“A memory of home.” He said. “Some Hunters demand cheese, or a particular alcoholic beverage, chocolate, or... well, I’m sure you get the picture.”

Cambria poured him a cup. “I do, and I’m thankful it’s a legal substance.” She handed him the mug with a meaningful glance.

“You’d be right, Cambria.” He sat at the desk and she poured her own mug and sat on the end of the bed. “Some Hunters aren’t built of the moral fibre we would like and expect. But I said to you at the time that we were understaffed, so there were bound to be a few fall through the vetting process.”

“Tough times.”

“Now and always.” He sighed and enjoyed his coffee.

She let the silence draw out; she felt no need to fill the empty void.

When Caparossi had drained the mug, he rose. “Well, I just thought I’d drop by and see how you were settling in to your new quarters. And to apologise for getting rid of your other gear.”

His olive skin darkened with embarrassment.

“Major, they were *things*, replaceable. I am not concerned about it, nor should you.”

“Thank you, Cambria.” He took her hand, bent over it and kissed the soft skin of her knuckles.

She froze, uncomfortable with his affection for her. “You’re welcome, Major.” She tugged her hand free. “I’m sure you’ll let me know of my next mission? Soon?”

“Yes. I’ll be back in a couple of days with a briefing.”

She shook her head. “Give me a call and I’ll meet you in the ready room.”

His dark eyes glittered with understanding and sorrow. "As you wish, Signorina." He said and left.

She'd told Lord Montague that stable relationships were impossible for a Hunter. There was no doubting the regret and longing in Caparossi and she couldn't stop the guilt from pinging her. He was an attractive man with a seductive voice and bedroom eyes.

But it wouldn't work. He'd wait for her to return from missions. But... he'd worry, too, and it would go from there until he couldn't bear to see her leave and she couldn't stay.

One night, Louis, one night will you stay? She remembered asking her former lover. Now, she was the one to turn away and Caparossi let her.

He was still testing the waters, not confident of her reactions. Better to put up the barriers, she assured herself, so he wouldn't be hurt when she did leave, but the guilt remained.

* * *

"This will be a simple Hunt, Cambria, to get you back into the groove." Major Caparossi did not smile. He donned the professional demeanour he'd worn when she first met him on Tudor.

His black uniform was immaculate, gold buttons shined, black boots gleamed; every inch the professional, unemotional soldier delivering his orders.

She didn't blame him, but she wondered if their relationship, the camaraderie between them, was gone forever and whether it would return.

Her focus was on the Hunt – it had to be or she'd make a mistake, like she had with Excalibur Jones. Never again would she allow a handsome face to distract her. And her mind went back to the note Excalibur wrote on Tudor, a note long gone that read: *You were so blinded by what men could do to you, you never realised what men could do for you.*

And Jones was a perfect reminder of both. A lesson not to be ignored.

Cambria refocused on the issue at hand. Jones would wait for her.

A flicker of amusement flashed in Caparossi's eyes and he folded his hands behind his back.

"Lord Montague is a great believer in justice, as I'm sure you know. He's also a believer in an eye for an eye, especially when it comes to Hunters." He said, as if lecturing.

Cambria felt her own lips twitch. Now whom would she be Hunting that had gone and done her wrong?

"Cottington-Blake." Cambria suggested.

"Cottington-Blake." Caparossi agreed with a tilt of his head. "We have confirmed she cashed in her assets – except for the Buckinghamshire house and that's a part of the family holdings, not personal – and escaped. While the military is most keen to see she's brought back to face crimes against humanity, they are not averse to having a Hunter – and I mentioned your name, much to their satisfaction – go after her and bury her in the deepest hole you can find. The judicar has found her guilty of treason for both worlds, mass murder for both species and we've added the charge of Hunter murder – which is an automatic death penalty."

Cambria's eyebrows rose. "She *killed* a Hunter?"

Caparossi snorted out a disbelieving laugh. "You mean she *didn't* shoot you in the chest and blow a big hole out the back?"

"Oh." Cambria said, embarrassed. "That Hunter."

He lifted an eyebrow. "We procured testimony from Primary Enforcer Gordash to that effect and it was enough to have the warrant against you vacated. I doubt, though, that if you went out into the big, wide world, certain civilians would see it that way." He tilted his head again, eyes filled

with speculation. "Now that the alien tech is gone, are you still indestructible?"

Her embarrassment and humour fled and she shrugged. "I have no way of knowing until someone kills me, and I'd rather not, you know, find out too soon."

"Agreed." He said. "But to the mission. On inspection of her assets and landholdings, we discovered no less than five corridors. We investigated four and shut them down, destroyed them. The fifth we found at the Buckingham Estate. Can't destroy that without blowing up the building and the relatives are... hesitant to destroy a one thousand year old manor house. The government agreed and it will monitor any activity. She may try to escape you through it."

"Not this time, Major." She promised and he nodded.

"Didn't think so."

"So, where is she?" Cambria asked.

The smile twitched again. "Former Minister Cottington-Blake is unwilling to be without the trappings of wealth and influence. To that end, she has set herself up in a rather nice stone-built chateau on the planet... Ragnarok; with hot and cold running servants. Locals, of course, so she can pay them a pittance and they're grateful."

"Are they an indigenous species?" She asked.

"No. They're legitimate migrants to the planet, but who've found the going tougher than they expected."

"Ragnarok." She mused. "Mythological end time for the Asgard gods."

"Yep. And a planet predominantly covered in snow. Thus, the thermal wear. Please, try not to lose this lot, it's custom-made and will regulate your body temperature, like the coat you lost on Nomad." He said with a pained expression.

"I'll do my best, but, as always, I can't guarantee it."

"Okay. There's not a lot of wildlife given the weather. You'll find the complete food chain, from herbivores to carnivores. No indigenous civilisations, it's what we call Terra Nullus. No intelligent life, it's an empty planet."

"Well, at least I won't have to mind my manners then."

"Probably not, but do remember your quarry is Cottington-Blake, no one else."

She looked at him. "And if anyone gets in my way?"

"Mmm... try *not* to kill them. Just... be gentle but emphatic and move them aside. Every legitimate migrant knows of the Hunters. It's explained to them before they leave. If there's any trouble on Ragnarok, it will be because Cottington-Blake has warned her staff that..."

"She's been falsely accused, is a witness to a murder and fears for her safety should she return to Earth because a Hunter has gone rogue and is obsessed with her."

Caparossi's smile was genuine this time. "You have an excellent grasp on her personality."

"I'll bet she tried it when she suddenly emerged from the corridor yelling blue murder. People questioned, sympathised, protected until she could plead exhaustion from the thirty-hour days and escaped." Cambria curled a lip as she imagined that very scenario.

Caparossi looked at her with a strange expression. "That's exactly what happened."

"No, major, I haven't suddenly turned psychic. It's the most likely scenario she'd use. Charm is her most effective asset." She said and Caparossi's cheekbones darkened.

"Weaponry?" She asked.

"Anything you like."

"My pistols... ah. *New* pistols, please, a hunting knife – I don't know what happened to the last one – and smaller knives, like used for peeling apples."

"I'll check the armoury."

"Food stuffs?"

"Typical ration packs, but you'll have the finances to boost the local economy; it's an agricultural economy, although I couldn't say where the farms are. Probably in the milder equatorial zone."

Cambria nodded. A planet was a big place. How loyal were the natives to Cottington-Blake? And how far would they go to protect her? "I don't suppose you have an address?" She asked without much hope.

Caparossi snickered. "As a matter of fact... we do."

Cambria gaped at him. "Really?"

"Yes, really. What's the point of being top toff on a planet of peons if none of the population knows about it?"

"Um..." Cottington-Blake couldn't be that stupid... could she? Did the Minister truly think she could continue to live her precious lifestyle and not be held accountable for her actions?

"She's a career politician, Cambria, who likes her wealth and has no idea how to hide herself. That is why this is an easy mission for you. Bring her back alive, or bury her on Ragnarok. The Government and military have no preference as long as justice is done." He said with a tilt of his head.

Cambria thought about it. She couldn't just march up to the woman and kill her; that smacked of assassination, of murder. And regardless of what Lord Montague and anyone else thought, she wasn't an executioner. She refused to be what Excalibur Jones tried to make her: a cold-blooded killer. "Actually, I like the idea of her wallowing in prison for the rest of her days."

The warrant is for execution, but I can commute that to a life sentence without the possibility of parole, can't I?"

She'd surprised him; she saw it in his eyes as he nodded. "You can. But I wonder how long she'd last?"

"Not caring over here, how about you?"

He bowed his head. "I shall search my heart for the answer."

Cambria waited and he raised his head, looked at her. "No caring over here either." They shared a moment of perfect understanding until she glanced away as she found herself on the edge of leaning towards his handsome face. Neither of them could afford any distractions, and she knew a relationship with him would be... difficult.

He's not the only one with regrets, she thought with a pang.

"Do I have a deadline?"

"No, take your time, enjoy the chilly- to-bitter weather." He said and another genuine smile threatened.

"Okay, rearm me, add a tranquiliser gun, and let's get that bitch."

Chapter Four

Ragnarok was as bitterly cold as Caparossi said. People wore thick coats and furry or woolly headgear as they wandered around the transit area.

Cambria cleared Customs with a quick display of her identification and the officer's eyes rounded.

"I won't ask if you're here for business or pleasure, nor will I ask if you will be staying long." The woman said. "I think that is self-evident. Is there anyone I can help you locate?"

The government wouldn't hand customs over to just anybody, and this woman looked as if, while she didn't enjoy the cold, was determined to do her job.

Still...

"Have you been on Ragnarok long?"

The agent blinked at her. "Six months, ma'am. I have another six to go before I hand over and move on."

"Enjoyed your stay?"

The woman shrugged. "A year-long, paid skiing holiday, ma'am. A place in front of a warm fire with my husband, nice neighbours. Skiing when I feel the need to think of Colorado. Next job is Paulo's choice." She grinned. "We alternate."

"You don't have any regrets?"

The woman shook her head. "Not a one."

"It's nice to have a job you enjoy." Cambria replied. "I'm looking for Blenheim's Peak." She said and the custom agent's smile grew broad.

"I'm sure Lady Blake would enjoy a visitor from the home world, ma'am." She said then donned a professional expression. "You'll need to take the shuttle up to Snowden – weather depending – it gets rough with the winds and blizzards."

"And I can get one of those... where?"

"Lowlands. At New Breckenridge." She pointed to the front door of the corridor complex. "A bus will take you down and right to the shuttle port. Good luck, ma'am and good Hunting."

"Thank you, I believe it will be an excellent Hunt."

A biting wind smacked her in the face when she emerged into the sunshine. Ice-crystals flirted and sparkled in the frigid breeze. Other new arrivals took a gasping breath and scurried to the yellow bus, parked by the curb. Cambria followed at a more casual pace.

Around her rose magnificent peaks, snow-doused, jagged, with black rock cliffs where the snow couldn't settle. A mountaineer's wet dream.

She made her way onto the transport and to the back.

The bus rose on its conductors and made the long, slow and torturous journey down the cutback roads of the mountainside.

Her view consisted of black rock wall on one side and a panoramic vista of pale green savannah as far as the horizon on the other. It would be ironic if the bus fell off the mountain and she wasn't so unbreakable after all; especially on her way to capture the woman who caused the resurrection reaction in the first place.

Cambria hunched down. If Corona hadn't shot her, *would* she have ever known? Old age and deathbed excluded.

Maybe on another mission, on a distant world. Maybe Jones. She'd told him she was dying and, at the time, she was. The alien tech took over all repair work, leaving her marrow to produce excess blood cells that would eventually cause tumours. By shooting her, Cottington-Blake reset the system. The why and how remained a mystery.

Cambria sulked. Corona Cottington-Blake wasn't a humanitarian, she was selfish, spoiled and ruthless; she hadn't shot Cambria out of any

charitable cause, but to avoid responsibility and discovery, to forward her plan for global war and a peace plan of her own making.

Egocentric of Corona to think she could control a war and create the peace. Too many players and too many things could go wrong – as she'd discovered.

But she'd also escaped justice – so far; wriggled out of responsibility through the helpless, shocked female routine. And wasn't that contemptuous in this day and age?

Would 'Lady Blake' fight? Or would she flee and use her personal staff to run interference?

Hmm... Cambria thought, she could use a good fight but didn't want to afford Cottington-Blake – or her staff – a lucky shot. Maybe it was better to take them all down with the tranquilisers and apologise later.

The bus turned the last corner and the road levelled out towards the shuttle port.

The small town of New Breckenridge sprung up around the port with clothes stores, restaurants, bungalows, a ten-storey hotel, ski shops and bars. Where there were humans, there'd be alcohol.

The bus parked in front of the port and she disembarked with the rest of the passengers.

Off the mountain, the air was cool, not cold and biting. She untabbed her coat, careful to keep her weapons harness out of sight.

Inside the port, she read the board, searched for the shuttle heading northward to Snowden.

She spotted it at the very end and saw she had two hours to kill. On a shrug, she walked over to the counter and bought a ticket, then headed to the bar.

Over the pint of imported Budski Dark, she studied the other drinkers. Most were here for a holiday, their long bags containing skis. People wore woollen hats and puffy jackets, had tanned faces – except for around the eyes where the skin was pale.

No locals here but for the barkeeper and he kept rubbing glasses with his towel.

Cambria felt a twinge as she realised the bar was imitation Swiss Alps Inn, with exposed beams, gingerbread trim, dark wood tables and a comforting, warm flames in the stone fireplace. She missed her home in Geneva; missed the walks in the cool air, the snow in winter, the bright green grass in summer.

But that life was over; had been over since the day she handed Senator Dortmund the report containing proof of Judicar Bolingbroke's corruption.

She sipped her beer and longed for an Earth-made hot chocolate. She spent the two hours brooding on how much her life had changed. The old Cambria – even the one who worked for the World Council's Bureau of Political Security – wouldn't recognise the new Cambria.

Too much had happened, too many deaths – those she caused to die, those she'd killed herself. She'd been forced out of her comfortable life and into one of kill or be killed. And wasn't that the biggest joke of all?

The darkness within her started to rise - she could feel it, like a tidal wave ready to consume her with a secret best kept unspoken. She pressed it down, denied its existence and drained her tankard.

The call came and the skiers shifted, picked up their gear. Cambria followed them out, glad she wasn't heading up by herself and could blend... could *accompany* a crowd.

No one spoke to her - few looked at her. She handed her ticket to the attendant and walked down the boarding tube, settled herself into her seat and stared out the window.

No one sat next to her. They were in pairs, in groups, all excited about the coming ski trip or mountaineering. She hunkered down to wait for the journey's end.

The shuttle rose in its cradle, the rockets fired and the shuttle shot up into the sky.

For sensitive travellers, the counter-grav kicked in for a smooth ride.

An hour later the shuttle descended onto a runway cleared of snow and the excited travellers disembarked eager for powder.

Outside was colder than the entry corridor and she sealed her jacket, shoved her hands deep into her pockets and slouched, followed the holiday-makers off the apron and inside the arrival lounge.

On the other side of the building, more buses waited to take the tourists to their hotels and chalets. She wasn't interested and approached the counter.

"Four-wheel hire?" She asked of the florid-faced man.

"Yup. Anti-slip included. Latest models." He said and named an exorbitant amount.

Cambria stared at him. "Are you aware of the penalty for profiteering?" She asked and his face darkened.

"You don't want to pay, you don't get the vehicle." He said.

Cambria reached into her top pocket, her eyes on his, drew out her identification.

"You know, it's funny how the law always catches up with malcontents, isn't it?" She said softly and his face paled.

"You're... ah... yes, well." He swallowed. "I'm sure we can come to some sort of an arrangement." He smiled weakly.

"I believe we can, but offering me a bribe would... not be in your best interests." She said.

"Ah... right." He said and named a more reasonable price.

"There you go." She paid up and he slid a card across.

"Car park across the road."

"Thank you. Be good now," she said with a smile, "because I'll be back to check on you." And she walked away.

The vehicle was a dark blue, with a shimmering coat and a yellow lightning bolt painted down each side.

She tossed her pack into the passenger side and climbed in, adjusted the seat and turned on the GPS map unit.

Cambria studied it. Once she had an idea of Cottington-Blake's location, she set the program and started the engine.

White steam gusted out of the back muffler and she waited, thought about her next move.

Should she be bold and drive into the chateau or park somewhere and sneak in? Both had merit, but one allowed for the opportunity to escape.

Blenheim Palace - and wasn't *that* a travesty – was originally a skiing hotel until Cottington-Blake made the owners an offer they couldn't believe and in no way refused.

Multi-storied, multi-roomed, it was a down-sized replica of an old hotel overlooking Lake Louise in provincial Canada.

The arrogance staggered Cambria. The former Minister could not possibly use every room and she added petulant and greedy to the list of Cottington-Blake's sins.

But the size of the place gave Cambria an advantage. It was so large, no one bothered her when she parked outside the gate three hours later. Perhaps they were used to people up here taking images of the magnificent view.

And it *was* spectacular. She got out and marvelled at the towering peaks. Across from her, the mountains dropped away to a steep-sided valley.

Cambria could see all the way to the green flat lands below and the smoky blue mountains rising at the end of the valley. No wonder Cottington-Blake selected this place. She had an unimpeded view from the windows facing the valley. She shook her head and approached the gate.

A middle-aged guard dressed in a green uniform stepped out and touched the peak of his cap.

"Incredible, isn't it?"

"Not a view I'd ever get tired of, I should think." She replied.

"No," the older man said with a wry smile, "every day is different, the light changes, the mountains change, the air changes."

"And the temperature changes." Cambria shuddered deep in her coat. "So who lives here? Or is it a hotel?"

The guard shook his head. "This is Lady Blake's residence."

"Lady... Blake? I don't recognise the name."

The guard turned back to the chateau. "Lady Blake is a descendant of the war leader, Sir Winston Churchill. She named this place Blenheim Palace after where Sir Winston was born. Blenheim Palace, near Oxford, in England, was the residence of the Duke of Wellington, nicknamed the Iron Duke. He, in case you don't know..."

"Defeated the French Generale Napoleon."

"You know your Earth history, then."

"Some," she sighed and drew her hand out of her pocket. "What I do know is that Lady Blake is the former Minister of Trade for the World Council, Corona Cottington-Blake."

"Yes, that's right. She retired not long ago. Something about being tired of all the politicking and bickering and the need to compromise too often."

"She didn't mention Nomad?"

The guard frowned. "We had heard, of course, of the battle. And of the marine victory there. Bunch of savages." He muttered and Cambria felt a shift in her temper. "I tell you, if I'd been there..."

"You would have run screaming." She interrupted him and he stared at her. "I *was* there."

His eyes sparked with interest. "Are the rumours true, then? That they're sharks and used their teeth?"

Cambria remembered the gruesome sight of soldiers bitten by the Nomads, the dismembered bodies from grenades and bombs, the echoing sound of terrified men and women as they defended themselves and nodded.

"Bloody hell." He murmured.

"Did you hear what started it?" Cambria asked, testing his knowledge and his loyalty.

"Something about humans not being good enough to be there; that the Nomads didn't like them very much and planned to wipe them out. The marines got there just in time, fought them off and rescued the enclave before the Nomads blew it up."

Cambria sighed. Stories always got twisted when the truth didn't suit – especially if Cottington-Blake was telling it.

"You're wrong, you know." She said quietly. "The *Nomadians* live in peace, live *with* peace. They were trying to save the enclave from alien experimentation." She said and he snorted with disbelief.

"Nah. I don't believe it." He chuckled and her temper shifted again.

"I was there. I *saw* it. And that motherfucker up there in the chateau? She fucking started the whole damn war!"

He backed up. "Hey now, there's no need to use such language about a fine lady!"

"She's no more related to Winston Churchill than you are." Cambria bit out.

"I think you should leave now." The guard said, stiff with offence.

Cambria stepped up and showed him her identification. "I'm the Hunter responsible for bringing her to justice, pal, and I'll not be leaving until I get that justice for *all* the soldiers killed on that day, for all the humans she allowed the aliens to take, to slaughter, to examine: the babies, the children, the old, sick, the *pregnant women*!"

He stared at her ID wallet, stared at her with shock in his eyes.

"Oh, no, sir, there's nothing *noble* about that bitch up there. She came from minor aristocracy who worked hard to send her to the right schools, the right advanced universities, who worked their fingers to the bone to make sure she succeeded. And she betrayed them. Turned her back on them. The only thing she did was to keep the family home because it was heritage listed. That's it. She betrayed her office, her people by setting them up. She betrayed the military by leading them into a trap; a trap *she* set via the *Nomadians*. And when things didn't go her way, she ran, screaming like a little girl, back to Earth, back to dissolve her assets and move here. Well, time's up. I'm taking her home. You can either get out of my way or you can

join her." She dragged in a breath, pissed that she'd lost her temper. "Your decision, please."

The guard continued to stare at her, didn't answer.

She lifted the tranquiliser gun and he suddenly realised she was serious, held up his hands and shook his head.

She fired anyway and he slumped to the ground, with the tiny dart in his throat.

Cambria rolled her eyes. She should have waited until he was in the guard house.

She dragged his heavy body into the hut and sat him up, leaned his head back then stepped out, closed the door so he wouldn't freeze to death.

The gate, when she tried it, was unlocked and she eased inside, closed the gate behind her. The afternoon shadows aided her as she walked along the side of the courtyard.

Her eyes searched for any movement, any sign someone had spotted her and reported her presences to Corona.

She went around the back, where the sheer black cliffs towered above her and snow drifted down. Here was another courtyard, less deep, with a multi-car garage. Further around, she saw a garden, small and covered with a thick, crisp layer of snow.

Shaking her head – who tried gardening at altitude and in winter? – she went through the back entrance, and into the kitchen.

Steam rose from pots on the stove, but the chef had stepped out of the warm room.

Cambria stamped her boots on the mat and snow clumps fell away.

She heard chatter from the hallway and walked straight ahead to a door. The voices came from the right, unknown and disagreeable as they discussed French cuisine.

The second door to the kitchen burst open and the argument grew louder.

Cambria pushed through her door to the dining room, where a maid, in an old-fashioned black skirt and white frilled apron, set the long dining room table. The woman looked up with an inquiring expression in her eyes.

"Pardon me, I was looking for Lady Blake? I have a message for her."

Understanding dawned. "Oh, she's up in her office. Are you from the valley? She's expecting a package and her mail."

Well, she'd *paused* in the village. "Yes." Cambria pointed at the ceiling. "I'll just go up, then?"

"Sure. And you might inform her Ladyship that dinner will be served promptly at seven." The maid said.

"In those words?" Cambria grinned.

"Well, you could make it a suggestion. Gustav hates being kept waiting, simply hates it. Her nibs always criticises him, even though it's her own fault."

"I'll make it a reminder."

"Probably for the best." She rolled her eyes. "Well, go on, she doesn't like being kept waiting."

Cambria turned and walked to the ornate sweep of a staircase. Carved wood banisters, polished to a gleam, finely woven red and blue carpets on the steps and portraits of what Cambria could only assume were Blake's ancestors, peered down aristocratic noses from the wall.

Shaking her head, she went up, drew her gun and held it down at her side.

Upstairs, on the top level, she walked down the centre of the carpet and wondered if it was an antique or imported from one of her residences.

She shifted to the side of the hallway and listened, changed her vision to seek heat sources. There. A single human with a yellow bleeding to an orange and red centre moved about the room.

Her quarry. On the right and beyond the only double doors on the level. Probably had a fabulous view. Did she get distracted by it or was she so used to it she took it for granted and ignored the splendour?

Not that it mattered.

Cambria waited until the thermal image turned and walked to the windows. Her hand drew the door handle down and she eased inside.

Lady Blake spoke into a com unit, tucked into her ear.

"I do not care for such manners, Mr Garber. Either you meet my price or I shall seek supplies elsewhere, and you know what that will do to the local economy." She lifted a hand, pressed it against the window as if to test the temperature. "I'm sure I could, especially if I brought in a manager." Her fingers drew a circle, then a cross in the centre. "I thought you'd see it my way." She oozed calm and superciliousness.

No wonder the locals were happy to oblige a Hunter.

Lady Blake laughed, a light sound as she disconnected. And then she turned and all humour fled.

Cambria raised the pistol before the former Minister had a chance to reach her desk drawer, where, no doubt, she kept her gun. It might even be the miniature cannon she'd shot Cambria with.

"Lady Blake." Cambria nodded.

"Have you come to kill me?" She asked in a tremulous voice.

Cambria didn't answer and Lady Blake lowered her slim frame into her custom-made leather chair.

"I did it for humanity, you know." She said, her face pale and her green eyes limpid with unshed tears.

"Maybe you should talk to your victims about that, those who lost limbs, who lost colleagues, friends, loved ones."

"But a new world for us to expand into - with infrastructure already up and running. *Think* of it. The Nomadians populate barely five percent of the planet. Plenty of room for all."

What kind of twisted thinking was this? She wanted to enslave an entire planet so she could rule them all?

"Shame about the other aliens then, isn't it." Cambria said and watched her reaction.

"What other aliens?" Lady Blake asked, puzzled.

"Oh, that's right: you ran screaming back to Earth before the final solution. I mean the ones who had *already* enslaved the Nomadians and were whittling the population away with their sick experiments. The ones who'd already started on the humans in the enclaves, the old, the very young and even the fit ones, to see how we worked. *Those* aliens."

Lady Blake made a dismissive gesture and her chair rolled closer to the desk. "Rumour and innuendo, perpetrated to scare the locals and justify the bigotry the Nomadians had for humans."

"Yes, I figured you'd justify your treasonous ways somehow, but Corona, here's the thing: I'm an eyewitness to the destruction of those aliens."

She sat up which brought her a little more closer to the desk. "You *saw* them?"

Cambria lifted a shoulder. "Well, their ship anyway – kind of; a bit, right before I blew it out of the sky. Oh and Kekotown, too. That's gone along with a big area of forest."

Lady Blake smiled without humour. "That's right. You rose from the dead, didn't you?"

"Hmm... I did."

Suddenly, Lady Blake had another gun in her hand, a different model to what she used on Cambria, though just as large. Cambria didn't bat an eyelid. "I wonder, then, how many times you'll come back. I think if I shoot you now, it will give me enough time to escape. What do *you* think?" Lady Blake said smugly.

Cambria pondered the question. "I think you've got another corridor here, close by?"

"And you'd be right." Lady Blake tilted her head. "It's a shame I'll have to leave this place. It's beautiful and the view is spectacular. The people work hard for minimum wage, too."

Cambria slowly leaned to the side to look around Lady Blake, raised up on her toes. "Do you think personal flying transports should be able to peek into a person's windows?"

"Again? Why, those..." Lady Blake shifted as if to glance over her shoulder.

Cambria raised her tranquiliser gun and shot Lady Blake in the centre of her forehead as she turned back. The woman wavered a moment then slumped back, slid out of her chair and under the desk into a heap.

"I think, Lady Corona Cottington-Blake, that you are under arrest. Oh, and you shouldn't gloat. Always bad to gloat." She put the gun back into her pocket and drew out the cuffs.

Chapter Five

With the help of the staff, Cambria soon had Corona loaded into the back seat of the car.

"I can't believe it." The maid said. "A felon, *here*. And you a Hunter. I just can't believe it. She was so..."

"She was an old trout, always bemoaning and never a kind word to anyone." Another staff member said.

"What will happen to us now?" The maid asked.

Cambria paused in her climb into the car. "The estate will be sold to pay a small part of restitution. Her assets have been frozen, likewise to pay restitution. I suggest you either wait for the new owners, or try to find alternative employment." She said and got in.

The group stood forlorn as she drove away. Corona would have a lot to think about during her long stay in a Council prison – preferably off planet. And Tudor sprang to mind.

Cambria grinned all the way back to the shuttle port.

Cambria hauled the semi-conscious Corona out of the vehicle and across the road to the shuttle port.

She sat the woman down into a hard plastic chair and walked to the car hire counter where the assistant gaped at her.

She glanced over her shoulder. Corona still had the tranquiliser's red dart in the middle of her forehead.

"Here you go, and not a scratch to be found."

"But that's... that's..."

"A known and convicted felon." She slid the car card across the desk.

"You don't get much news from Earth, do you?"

The man's mouth twisted with disgust and he shook his head. "No, not unless it's an old media slip, and that's usually tabloid. What I wouldn't give for some real news." He sighed.

"You know, you're a bit of scam artist..." Cambria said and his head moved back, indignant. "Oh, come *on*. You know you are! But... here's a suggestion: This planet, Ragnarok, has everything for the adventurer and yet very few people know about it. Up on the hill there, will soon be an empty hotel." Cambria leaned her elbows on the counter. "All you need do, is... well, there are so many things than being the manager for a car hire firm."

His eyes began to gleam with interest. "Ye-es?"

"*Think* about it. *Think* about advertising on Earth. Think about contacting the local government here for a Real Estate licence. Think about tour operating. Think about boosting the profile of this world. Think about the commissions you could make in a number of fields. Think on a larger scale than car hire."

His gaze went blank with thought and she grinned.

"I'll just leave you to it." She murmured and turned away.

The last shuttle for the day was leaving in half an hour and she purchased two tickets, then dragged Corona upright and, with the assistance of the pilot got the woman settled in a seat at the back.

"You know," the pilot, Jeffers, frowned, "She looks a lot like Lady Blake."

Cambria strapped the harness around Corona's body. "That's because she is."

"Oh. She doesn't seem well."

"The thought of a long life in prison, I suppose, doesn't appeal to her."

Jeffers gave her a sidelong glance. "Right. We'll be taking off in about five minutes." He said and went back to the cockpit.

Cambria stowed her pack in the overhead compartment. Since the heaters were working overtime, she peeled off her coat and shoved it in next to her pack. Then she settled in across the aisle from Corona. The shuttle was near empty. She assumed most travellers preferred to witness the spectacular views during the day. But an older couple, thin with greying hair and flushed faces sat near the front.

That was it; no more passengers. The automated hatch closed with a pneumatic whine and Cambria leaned back in her seat, shut her eyes.

Corona wasn't going anywhere and it was time for a nap. Another hour back to the bus, two hours up the mountain and then home free. A good day's work. An easy mission.

* * *

A jolt woke her and she checked her watch. Ten minutes? They'd been flying for *ten* minutes.

She wriggled in her seat, huffed out a breath and closed her eyes again.

Another jolt. Just turbulence. Her life couldn't be as clichéd as...

"Ladies and gentlemen, we're experiencing a little... oh... *crap*."

Cambria heard a loud bang and the world was suddenly spinning with sickening speed.

Terror flashed through her and then she held on, gripped the armrests as centrifugal force took over, shut her eyes. She heard screaming, high-pitched and long. Another bang and... nothing.

* * *

As sudden as the nothing descended, it lifted.

Cambria heard electrical snapping and popping, smelled burning wires and blood, felt the frigid breeze of winter across her face.

She rolled her head forward and opened her eyes.

"Well, that hurts." She said as she caught sight of the thin spear of shiny metal that pinned her to her seat. A throb pulsed just above her belly button and her back, and the pain increased with every pulse. She also saw that her silver pistols were gone.

She looked to the right. Corona was gone, her harness unbuckled, but there were blood splotches. Not enough for Cambria to say she was dead. Damn bitch survived the landing. The cuffs were also sitting, unlocked, on the seat.

Above her, the compartment was open, half her coat hung out. Down the aisle, she saw the golden glow of sunrise through a rent in the shuttle's side, the shadow of footprints in the heavy snow. They'd left her here since last night.

The cockpit door swung in the breeze on one hinge.

The shuttle had come to a stop at an angle and Cambria shook her head. A fucking shuttle crash. Could it be anymore cliché, any worse than this?

You're not dead. A snickering voice said in her head and she groaned.

"Should be, but not, eh?" Yeah, it could get worse. It was a thought she did not want to deal with. Ever. And as long as she didn't, she wouldn't fall into a gibbering heap. But the fear was there, at the back of her mind, where she'd caged it.

Crash landed on an icy planet with two old people, a pilot and – she assumed – a co-pilot and a convicted felon. Yep, cliché.

She wrapped her hands around the spear, braced her feet against the legs of the chair in front of her... and pulled, gritted her teeth against the agony and encroaching darkness in her vision.

The darkness won.

Cambria woke with her hands still wrapped around the spear, but the throbbing had stopped in her back. She slid the spear out and held her hand

to the wound. Thick blood pulsed between her fingers, but at least she was free.

She waited, with her eyes closed until the blood stopped flowing and the pain eased.

Sunlight streamed white and foggy into the cabin when she focused again. She needed to check in with the others, see when the rescue team were due to turn up.

She turned and slowly levered herself out of the seat, held on until the dizziness passed. Then she grabbed her coat and put it on, sealed the front against the bitter cold.

Time to see where they landed and she shuffled down the aisle. She picked the handcuffs up and hooked them onto her belt, shoved the key into her pocket.

The hazy morning sun indicated snow was coming. All around her were high jagged peaks. The pilot, miraculously, or he was just that good, landed on a plateau no bigger than a couple of football fields.

He'd just made it, the nose of the shuttle was a mere two metres from the edge, which meant he'd aimed for the plateau and the craft had dropped at the last second, slid long and hard on the snow-packed surface.

Shaking her head, she searched for the footprints. She hadn't seen any other remains so she assumed all the passengers and crew survived.

The footprints arrowed off towards the cliff face. Caves, perhaps? But then she caught sight of the sloping roofs of two vibrant orange tents side-by-side against the cliff.

Did they glow in the dark, too?

The first person she saw was Corona, unshackled, dishevelled with a bandage around her forehead, leaning down into the snow to wash the blood from her hands.

As she stood, she eased a hand into her lower back and turned, spotted Cambria.

She ducked back into the tent and Cambria heard an argument erupt.

Corona stepped outside again, holding Cambria's pistols.

Cambria came to a stop, ten metres from the tent. Without the benefit of a personal stylist, Corona Cottington-Blake had the look of a desperate woman. Her wild, fuzzy dark hair lost the smooth coif, the light reflecting off the snow squinted her eyes and deepened the lines and red blotches marred the usual whiteness of her cheeks.

"Don't come any closer or I swear to *God* I will kill you." The gun in Cottington-Blake's hand shook, but the determination in her eyes held Cambria still.

"If I can survive you shooting me dead, a hydrogen bunker-buster explosion, and being harpooned, I don't think you shooting me, again, is going to kill me. What do you think, your ladyship?"

Corona's expression turned cocky. "A preponderance of power. And they're *your* pistols. I think only *your* weapons can kill you."

Cambria shook her head. "The logic in that staggers me, Corona, but go ahead, blast away and be finally done with me." She held her arms out to the sides.

Corona raised both guns with a look of triumphant in her eyes and fired.

Nothing happened and she turned the guns slightly and tried again.

Cambria saw her fingers pressed the triggers as fast as she could. Then she gave a small cry of frustration and threw the pistols and Cambria. She swerved to avoid them, but one hit her shine and she winced.

"I *hate* you!" Corona screamed and stamped her foot, dived back into the tent.

Cambria picked up her weapons, brushed the snow off and holstered them.

On a sigh, she ducked into the tent. Jeffers and the co-pilot sat around a thermal heater, both stared at her wide-eyed.

Corona sulked in the corner.

"What up, peeps?" Cambria said.

Jeffers got to his feet. "I... I... thought you... were... dead."

Corona snorted.

"Just a flesh wound." Cambria said and hunkered down in front of the heater to warm her hands. "The other passengers in the second tent?"

Jeffers sat again, shook his head. "Got blown out the hole in the side of the shuttle, I'm afraid."

"Just us, then."

"Yeah."

"What brought us down?"

"A missile." Jeffers' lip curled. "Tried to generate a miss, but..."

A... *missile*?

Someone deliberately brought them down? Why? She slid a glance towards Blake, but the woman showed no reaction. Someone else then. She'd discuss that later.

Jeffers looked like he needed a boost – and if there were enemies out here, she needed a focused ally. "You got us down, Jeffers, and that was some triple-A flying."

"Ex-military." He rumbled. "Flew jets over Cuba – when there *was* a Cuba."

"Tough missions." Cambria sat and glanced at the co-pilot. He wore an empty expression. "He all right?"

"Will be." Jeffers nodded. "A little shocky, a little cut up; we all are, but Lady Blake fixed us up."

Cambria glanced in the felon's direction, but she wouldn't look at any of them.

"Huh. Well, I think we need some food and hot beverages." She got up and looked around the tent.

"Next one over." Jeffers said. "Didn't want to warm two tents."

"Good thinking." She went next door. Plenty of ration packs, but then the emergency kits would have been for a full load in the shuttle. She grabbed four and took them back.

The co-pilot seemed a little more responsive.

Cambria tossed a silvery pack over to Corona, but she didn't budge, focused her attention on the orange wall. Cambria shrugged.

"Here." She said and handed one to Jeffers and the co-pilot. "What's his name?" She asked and nodded to the co-pilot.

"Derryn." Jeffers peeled open his pack and plucked out another, flatter bag. He read the front. "Mmmm... chicken stew with dumplings."

Cambria opened hers. "Pasta cabonnara. Wanna swap?"

Jeffers opened Derryn's. "Savoury mince. Nah, I'll stick with the stew." He pulled the tab on Derryn's meal and set it in front of the pilot, then did his own.

Cambria pulled her own tab.

The air smelled like a cheap restaurant, but the food wasn't as bad as Cambria expected. The pasta tasted as if it were fresh off the stove and she finished it quickly.

Then she removed her reward: *coffee*.

It was in a flat, folded mug and she tugged it into shape, added water, pulled the tab and watched the brew warm with eager eyes.

Derryn roused enough to eat his meal, but it was the scent of coffee that caught his attention. His blue eyes regained their focus and his face flushed. He ducked his head, hid his expression behind curly, light-brown hair and continued to eat.

"So, Jeffers. Missile." Cambria said.

"Didn't see it on the radar soon enough." He said and licked his spoon, folded the empty bag and set it aside for his own coffee. "These mountains mess with the images. No thermal either. The black rock blocks it."

"I figured." Cambria said. "But my question is why is *anyone* shooting at you?"

His mouth twisted. "These mountains are sacred."

"To whom? *Humans* are the only intelligent species on Ragnarok."

He met her gaze. "You'd think, but where humans colonize, the nut-jobs turn up, too." He turned to Corona. "What's that fanatic group called again?"

"Thorians." Lady Black mumbled around a mouthful of food.

"Thorians?"

"Don't know much about Earth mythology, do you." Corona sneered and Cambria raised her eyebrows.

"*Thorians*? As in Thor, the Asgard God of Thunder?"

"We *are* on Ragnarok." Jeffers said with a shrug.

"There are crazy people all over the galaxy." Derryn added.

"But... Ragnarok is the *end time* for the Asgard. What? They want to witness it?"

Jeffers shook his head. "They believe that this is *post* Ragnarok. What came after: The new world where the gods would rise again and all would live in peace."

"Like I said," Derryn set his empty bag aside, "crazy people."

Jeffers continued. "A man by the name of Heimdall set himself up as their leader. Heimdall, in case you don't know, was the guardian of the bridge into Asgard. He stood on Birfrost, the bridge, night and day, ever watchful for the envious and deceitful enemies of the Aesir."

"O-kay. Heimdall is the chief nut job." Cambria said.

"Don't underestimate them. They guard these mountains like a mother guards her children." Jeffers warned.

"So... what do they want?"

Jeffers grinned. "They're waiting for the return of Thor, of course; he *is* the guardian of mankind, killed during the last battle by the poisonous serpent Mid-gard."

Cambria frowned. "If Thor is dead, then they've a long wait."

"Heimdall convinced his followers that Thor is sleeping, after all a god is immortal and cannot die."

The words hung in the air and Corona slowly turned her head towards Cambria.

"Do *not* go there, Corona, or I will hurt you." She warned.

Corona shrugged, returned her attention to her coffee.

"Gods die, Jeffers, otherwise we'd be overrun by them."

"True, but then you're not a Thorian who's convinced that the God of Thunder will return one day and again protect mankind against those who are envious..."

"... and deceitful." Cambria finished.

"Right. So. Heimdall and his followers want to preserve this world for the coming of the God of Thunder. To do that, they need to scare or terrorise people away from Ragnarok, because they, being unbelievers, fall into the category of envious and deceitful people." Jeffers frowned. "Surely you've seen what a great place this is and the lack of people?"

Cambria shrugged. "I have, but I thought it was because it hadn't been properly advertised or invested in yet." She looked over at Corona. The woman's cheeks glowed red. With embarrassment or something else? She'd manipulated the Earth military and the Nomadians into armed conflict, why not do the same here? "Corona?"

"I didn't know until *after* the chateau was a done deal. Alright? If I'd known, I'd be somewhere else." She bit out, pissed.

Embarrassment, then. "Why hasn't the World Council done anything?" Cambria asked.

Jeffers lifted a shoulder. "Because it's not much of an issue... yet. So far, they're nuisance value. No overt destruction of property, no assaults or killings, just intimidation and threats."

"Until now." Cambria said.

"Until now." Jeffers agreed. "Something must have happened for them to escalate like this. Some timetable maybe."

"Or someone else is pulling the strings." Cambria kept her eyes on Corona.

"Not me. I do things the legitimate way." She said and Cambria snorted. "I do *not* mix with religious fanatics."

"No, only unsuspecting alien species already enslaved by another."

Jeffers cleared his throat. "Can we, ah, get back to the issue at hand, please?"

Cambria sent Corona a glare before turning her attention to the pilot. "Sure. Okay, we've been shot down by religious nutters. How soon can we expect rescue?"

Jeffers chewed his bottom lip. "Hours ago, maybe two hours after we went down. And yet... nothing and no one."

"They can't find us in the mountains?"

"The teams should, yes. I gave our location and the location of the landing site to shuttle control, initiated the locator beacon. Everything was as it's supposed to be."

"Except for the actual 'rescue' part." Corona grumped.

"Corona, we have food, we have water, we have shelter and we have heat." Cambria pointed out.

"Oh, sure. What we *don't* have is security, better weapons and an escape plan. Would *you* like to address those issues, madam Hunter, since you're so good at it?"

Derryn perked up. "You're a Hunter? For *real*?"

"Yes," Cambria sighed, "for real."

"Oh, wow, who are you..." His eyes went to Corona. "No *way*. Lady Blake?"

"Is no more a 'Lady' than I am." Cambria said. "And if you want to know more, or why, then I suggest you ask Corona yourself." She saw the gleam of speculation in his young eyes. "Or you not and leave it at that."

She met Jeffers gaze and he shrugged.

"Okay." Jeffers said. "We need a course of action."

"We need to get out of these mountains." Corona put in.

"Yes, we do." Jeffers agreed. "We have the GPS, we have the survival equipment and plenty of supplies. All we need do is... go."

Derryn stood. "Then what are we waiting for?" He limped to the tent flap. "Uh oh."

Cambria glanced over at the young man, saw the snow flurries and listened. She'd been so focused on gaining information, she hadn't heard the snow hiss against the tent roof. Now she did.

She got up and joined Derryn at the flap. "That's... a lot of snow." She said at the knee-deep drift. How long had it been falling?

Long enough to be a problem and a potential death trap if it covered the tents. Carbon dioxide and monoxide build up would kill them... uh, the others.

"Well, Derryn, time to break out the shovels, I think."

The co-pilot groaned.

"What? You've never shovelled a driveway or a path free of snow? Never built a snow man or created a snow angel?"

He looked at her. "I'm from *Hawai'i*."

"What are you doing on a snowy rock, then?"

"Year-long skiing holiday." He said with a grimace.

Cambria grinned. "Can't have a vacation without the snow shovelling bit. Come on, it won't take us long to clear it all away and create a trench. Think of it as... furthering your on-the-job survival training."

She went into the near white out. Derryn gripped her coat and held on. This was not good, and her vision changed to thermal as she made her way to the supply tent.

Once inside, Derryn showed her the folded shovels and took one for himself while tossing her a second.

"Which tent first?" He asked.

"I'll take you back to the other one; that way you won't get lost. I'll deal with this one."

"Why won't you get lost?"

Cambria winked at him and smiled. "Hunter trade secret." She lied.

Derryn shrugged. "Okay."

She led him straight, to the back of the tent. "Start here and work your way around. Get rid of as much snow as you can." She instructed and turned to start digging.

Chapter Six

The snow fell in unrelenting waves. It came down in sheets, in buckets, in thick clumps, in soft snowballs.

And it doubled the work. Every time Cambria felt she'd made headway, she'd turn and see the trench half full of snow again.

Derryn's trench wasn't much better, but he couldn't see it as he worked his way around to the front of the tent.

Well, it wasn't as if the snow was going to do her much damage and she let him finish the job and head into the warmth.

Once she'd finished tossing the snow away, she started again on Derryn's trench, then back to the supply tent.

Exhaustion set in, but she dug the first trench out again and then gave up. She stood at the tent flap and arched her back, turned around to see the snow bank she'd created. It was large enough to block a lot of the snowfall from the trench, but she didn't expect it to last.

Inside, it felt overly warm and she stripped out of her coat.

Three sets of eyes stared at her mid-section. She'd forgotten about all the blood and her sweat and the snow moistened the red stain to a renewed freshness.

"How...?" Jeffers began.

"Oh, wow." Derryn said. "You need someone to look at that."

"I can't believe I let you go out and do all that work." Jeffers stood.

"When you're injured like that. Come on, I'll fix..."

"I appreciate your concern, but you needn't worry about it. It's just the blood stain."

"Someone should still take a look." Jeffers glared.

"I'm a Hunter, we get bitch-slapped all the time. I've dealt with it."

"Are *all* Hunters as macho and butch as you?" He asked and Corona snickered.

Cambria nodded and recalled the burn victim. "It's not a job for pussies." She said, her expression serious. "I don't know of any Hunters who have retired to a tropical paradise." She'd never asked, never wondered. Had any Hunter retired?

"What we do is dangerous and some felons would rather kill themselves and take as many people with them, than give up and face justice. It's the nature of the job. So when I tell you it's fine, you can take it to the bank."

Jeffers slowly nodded. "I understand."

Derryn watched Corona with a narrowed gaze, as if trying to imagine the former Minister as a cold-blooded killer.

"I, you'll be happy to know, am not one of them." Corona's lip curled.

"I need a nap." Cambria said and went to the opposite corner from Lady Blake.

Cambria stretched out on the insulated floor, spread her coat over herself and tucked her elbow under her head, her eyes on the survivors. Jeffers sat near the heater, his head tilted as he listened to Derryn's whispered questions. Corona watched her with a narrow, speculative gaze.

Cambria let her eyes drift shut and dozed.

* * *

The silence woke her from a dreamless sleep and she cracked an eyelid. Jeffers lightly snored, Derryn lay flat on his back and Corona slept curled up, as if protecting herself, even in sleep.

Cambria concentrated, but could hear nothing. Then she felt the weight behind her and turned.

The tent bulged inwards and she lifted her eyes to the ceiling. Two and half metres of snow?

Cambria eased away from the heavy weight and rose. She needed a bathroom break and a feed, but first, she needed to see how deep the snow.

The tabs at the tent flap strained against the pressure and she wondered if the compacted powder entombed them.

She'd have to dig a tunnel. She got down on her knees and separated the first tab. There'd been so much snow, heavy in weight that a solid wall blocked her. None of it trickled inside.

Cambria turned back towards the centre of the tent and eyed the heater. Better the snow melt drain away outside of the tent than for her to make snow piles in here.

She set aside the shovel and picked up the heater, turned it to full and placed it facing the snow.

It melted fast and she lifted the lip of the tent to void the flow of water beneath the tent. The heater created a nice hole in the snow as far as her arm would extend. She didn't want to run the risk of a cave in, but she kept melting the snow until she had enough space to replace the gaps with her digging.

She turned the heater down to low and put it back, picked up her shovel and with a deep breath, began to dig straight and then curved upwards, pressing the snow as she went.

Jeffers woke as she was heading up and took over. Ten minutes later, he called down that he'd reached the surface and the sky was clear, but the day was waning.

Cambria drained her coffee and grabbed the other shovel.

"I can help." Derryn said.

"I know, but until I can get to another shovel, all you'll have is your hands. And frostbite is nasty."

Derryn looked around for something to use.

Corona, however, lay with her head on her arm and watched them with sleepy eyes.

Cambria went up the tunnel. Jeffers had already begun to widen it tossing snow away over his shoulder. Of the supply tent, there was no sign.

"All that hard work." She muttered and forced her way through the snowdrifts. She dug herself a pit and relieved herself with a sigh.

Then she filled the hole, washed her hands in snow and went back to the tents, set to digging out a route to the supply tent.

She worked long into the night. There was no way to know when the next heavy snowfall would happen, but if it snowed any time soon, she wanted access to the supplies. She dug down at an angle, along the side of the tent, kept going until she saw the orange, then took a break.

With a roll of her shoulders, she shifted snow out of her tunnel, compressed more of it into a solid footing. When she reached the entrance, she loaded up with rations and took them back to the other tent. After a quick meal, and hot coffee, she started on an alternative tunnel to the right of the flap. She dug all the way around to the supply tent, compacting snow around her.

Now, no matter how much it snowed above, they wouldn't be cut off. Although, she eyed the tents, how much weight could they take, and how much snow was going to fall?

"Okay." She said as she went inside. "I've dug a tunnel to the supply tent. Just in case we get dumped on again. Now, I need some eats."

She plucked out a ration pack. *Beef* stew and dumplings.

"What's our plan, Captain?" She asked of Jeffers while stuffing her face.

"Plan? Captain?" He asked.

"You're the pilot, so that makes you Captain. And Captains come up with plans." He blinked at her. "You're ex-military, you know how to form strategies."

"Yes, but... not over this type of terrain. I was a pilot, not a grunt."

"Don't disappointment me, Jeffers. Think of how to get off this mountain and to somewhere warm."

"The beacon..." He began.

"Given that some thought, I have." Cambria nodded. "You did everything right. You called in our location, where we landed and set off the beacon. Just like you're supposed to. But... no one has come for us. What does that tell you?"

He studied his fish in sauce and rice. "One of two things: either Shuttle control didn't receive the messages, or they did and chose to disregard them."

"And that means?" Cambria prompted.

"Someone in Shuttle control knew what was about to go down."

"Ergo..."

"No one is coming and we have to get down ourselves and report the crash to someone other than Shuttle control." He finished with a glare.

"So, Captain, how do we get off this mountain?" Cambria repeated.

"Only one way." He snorted. "And that's to hike down." He dragged in a deep breath. "We'll load up in the morning – if it doesn't snow again – and find a route down that doesn't involve the fast way."

"It's gonna take time." Derryn said. "We are a long way from anywhere."

Jeffers looked at him.

"So we are. Blenheim's Peak is further up, but closer. The Corridor Port is down and up again. Then there's New Breckenridge, the town where the shuttle port is."

"You're in charge, Jeffers, you decide which way." Cambria said and watched him as his skin darkened.

"I don't know these mountains. I fly *over* them. I don't wander around on the ground. Either way it's going to be difficult." He said.

"As long as we have the GPS, we should do okay, Mr Jeffers." Derryn murmured and Cambria saw the first spark of interest in Corona's body language she'd shown since the crash.

She probably thought that with the unit, it would be easy to lose everyone else and she could make her escape. Good luck to her if that's what she thought.

"Maybe." Jeffers said and looked at Cambria. "I'll let you know my decision in the morning."

Cambria retreated to her corner and the shadows.

She looked at Corona. The woman had settled down with a slight smile on her face.

Cambria could find no amusement in their predicament. Maybe she should explain to Lady Blake the realities of the warrant against her. But, she thought with a yawn, she could always tell her in the morning.

* * *

She half expected Corona to have done a runner by the morning, but the former Minister still snoozed, still wore that half smile, as if she knew everything was going to be fine; that she'd survive the mountain and somehow escape Cambria to freedom. That or she had wind.

Cambria got up and grabbed a shovel. She went out, climbed the tunnel and ploughed through the snow to dig herself another latrine. The sky above was an eye-searing blue, the sun bright and the white snow blinding. That might cause a problem for them and she wondered if the emergency supplies had eyeshades and thermals to protect them from the cold.

Done with her morning ablutions, she shoved a handful of snow into her mouth and waited for it to melt before spitting it out. She continued to rinse her manky mouth all the way back to the tent.

The boys were up and eating breakfast but Corona still lay abed.

"You might want to be getting up now, Corona." Cambria said.

"I thought I'd stay here with the supplies and wait for a rescue team. You know I'll only slow you down." Corona said with a faint smirk.

Cambria picked up a ration pack, studied the contents. "And you might want to have some food before we go." She tossed it to the woman who caught it in both hands. Then she selected *Huevo Rancheros* for herself and waited for it to heat.

"I'm hardly mountain climbing material, Hunter, you know it will be difficult and with me," she affected a shrug, "it will be slower. Better I stay here."

Cambria stirred her breakfast. "You speak as if you have a choice here, Corona, and you don't."

Corona hissed with temper.

"And if you try to deliberately slow us down," she lifted her gaze, met Corona's eyes, "I'll execute the warrant without any problem whatsoever."

Corona looked away first.

Jeffers and Derryn watched the exchange with fascination.

"I thought it was an arrest warrant." Derryn put in and Jeffers hushed him.

Cambria turned to the young man. "Hunters have *execution* warrants, Derryn, they are discretionary, though, depending on the behaviour of the target. If they behave themselves, they have the opportunity to plead their case in front of a jury; if they don't..."

Derryn paled and glanced at Corona.

The former Minister sniffed and focused on her breakfast.

"But... that's *barbaric* to threaten her that way." Derryn said with another glance at Corona. The former Minister stared tragically into her breakfast.

"Until you discover the pre-meditated murder of hundreds." Cambria said and Derryn glared at her.

"She said it was an accident."

Cambria stared at Derryn with a piercing expression until he looked away, a red flush staining his cheeks.

"Corona, don't make me gag you. You indulge in bullshit again, and that's what I'll do."

Corona poked her tongue out at Cambria. "Yeah, real mature, I'm sure." Cambria muttered and turned her attention to Derryn. "As for you, stay away from the felon. And if you cross me in this, I'll lay charges of interfering in the transportation of a convict."

"You are not judge, jury and executioner, you know. Ragnarok still has freedom of speech. I can talk to whoever I want."

"Derryn..." Jeffers laid a hand on the young man's shoulder. Derryn shook it off. "No. I'll not be lectured to, nor will I be told what to say to who. I can make that decision myself."

"Are you done pouting and bitching or are you about to go off about how unfair life is and nobody understands you?" Cambria asked. Corona, she saw, smirked until she saw Cambria watching and set about making her coffee with busy hands.

Derryn looked at her, outraged and offended.

"Hunter, you are not helping." Jeffers scowled. He put his hand back on Derryn's shoulder and squeezed. "FYI, Derryn, Hunters *are* judge, jury and executioner, or did you miss that part at the orientation?"

Derryn muttered.

"What was that?" Jeffers asked and tightened his fingers.

"I said I didn't go. I figured it would be a drag. Got my sheet signed off because I snuck into the crowd for the signature." Derryn said, resentfully.

Great. He was younger than Cambria expected. And with his new attitude, he promised to be a problem. She looked at Jeffers. He was appalled and pissed. A muscle flexed in his jaw and he turned Derryn around.

"Listen up, boy. You do not talk to Lady Blake unless it's to inquire as to her health or well-being. I hear you reply to any attempt at conversation, and I'll lay charges myself. And before you go all rebellious, you need a reality check. We are on a mountain. If anything happens to the Hunter or me, could you honestly say you could guide yourself and Lady Blake down? Do you think – given it is an *execution* warrant – that after the Hunter and I suffer an accident, that you *won't* be next?"

Derryn wasn't going to let it go just yet. "And if the warrant's a mistake?" He asked belligerently.

Cambria turned to Corona. "My, my, you have been busy." Corona replied with a shrug and Cambria turned back. "The warrant is issued by the *World Council* after careful deliberation of the evidence which is confirmed from a number of sources. They don't *make* mistakes. But in case you don't believe that, believe this: I was *there*. I watched marines and Nomadians slaughter each other, all because *madam* over there wanted a planet of her own to govern. I *saw* what a mass shark attack looks like, up close and personal."

"You murdered Colonel Markov. I *saw* that!" Corona said as Derryn's gaze shifted to her. "Gunned him down for *no* reason. She was on the enemy's side at the time."

Cambria turned to her, a slow burn of anger in her belly as she remembered the moment. The marines, moving around the back of the house and attacking the Nomadians, the gunfire attracting everyone's attention – except Corona who bolted for the safety of the troops and the corridor. First Officer Karesh spinning around as Markov shot her and then saying in a smug tone as he blew the smoke from his pistol barrel, *"I killed myself a shark."*

"You should keep quiet now." Cambria said with lethal intent and uncurled her fingers before they dug into her palms.

Both Jeffers and Derryn looked confused.

"We need to go, Jeffers." Cambria finished and began stuffing her backpack with rations. When she was done, she attached the shovel across the pack and slid her arms through the straps, adjusted the weight and her weapons harness until both were comfortable.

The men also arranged their packs. Corona sat on the ground, leaned on her hands with her ankles cross and watched them.

"Okay, let's go." Cambria said and Corona didn't move. "You, too, your ladyship."

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

"You must have forgotten what I said earlier." Cambria said and drew a pistol.

"Come on, Derryn, I don't think you want to see this."

Again, the young man shrugged off the hand on his shoulder. "No, I want to see if the Hunter has the balls to do this with a witness."

Corona smiled as if proud of Derryn's rebellion. Jeffers shrugged. "I'll be outside when you... ladies come to an agreement."

"Before you go, Jeffers, can you see if there are eye shades and thermals in the supply tent? It's bright and chilly out there." Cambria said. Jeffers nodded and he moved off into the tunnel.

"Well?" Derryn asked and crossed his arms.

"Don't worry, Derryn, the guns won't work in the cold. She can't shoot me." She gave Cambria a malicious smile.

Cambria thought for a moment. She might need the pistols later, should they meet any wildlife. She didn't want to take on any of the big cats that roamed the hills in hand-to-hand combat.

She holstered the gun.

"See, Derryn? I told you she couldn't shoot. Now, I'll stay here and you can..." Her eyes rounded.

Cambria slowly slid the hunting blade out of its' sheathe at the back of her waist.

"Oh, *hell* no!" Derryn growled, his wide eyes on the blade. He dropped his arms and stood in front of Corona. "*I won't* let you do it."

"Cottington-Blake, I have to admire your talent for enlisting reasonable people to your cause." Cambria said with a slight shake of her head.

"Derryn, you've made your point, now leave."

He braced himself as if expecting Cambria to knife him, but he was going to do his duty and protect the civilian.

On a sigh, Cambria put the knife back. Derryn's shoulders slumped with relief and Corona chuckled.

Cambria used both hands and shoved Derryn hard. He staggered away and Cambria drew the knife again, crouched down and held it to Corona's throat. Derryn got to his feet, fury pulsing from his very being.

She held Corona by the throat and aimed the knife tip at Derryn. "You defy me again, you will join Corona on the warrant list, now get out."

Derryn clenched his hands.

"Do it now." Cambria said calmly. "Corona will be joining us shortly."

He slowly backed away, his eyes, filled with apology, clung to Corona. With a last look, he turned and scampered up the tunnel.

Cambria turned her attention to Corona and sheathed her knife with a shake of her head. "I cannot believe you. How did you get him infatuated with you so fast?"

Corona smiled and began gathering ration blocks, shoved them into her pack. "Sheer bloody talent." She said smugly. "And late night chats."

"Yeah, it's something you're good at; convincing the unsuspecting that your motives are pure, that is."

Corona lifted a shoulder. "Like I said: it's a talent."

Cambria stood. "Hurry up, daylights a'wasting."

"I still think I should stay here. I was serious when I said I'd only slow you down. I don't do walking too well, and a hiking marathon, well, let's say I enjoy watching, not doing."

"Now's your opportunity to stretch your legs and give it a go." Cambria looked at Corona's mutinous expression. "Unless you want to join the Thorians, of course."

"The... Thorians?"

"They shot us down for a reason. Maybe a shuttle load of supplies is what they're after. With everyone dead and the ration packs and other useful items scattered all over..."

Corona's expression cleared. "Well, why didn't you say so? I'll be out in a jiffy."

"Thought so." Cambria stood back and wasn't surprised when Corona looked around, jammed a thermal blanket into her pack and decided herself done. "We can go now, I'm ready."

Cambria led the way out of the tent and into the bright sunshine.

Jeffers waited with the black eyeshades and thermal jackets, handed them out.

“Which way, Captain?” Cambria asked and slid the protection on.

“Follow me, people.” Jeffers said and led them towards the black cliffs, away from the crash site the GPS unit in his hands.

Corona sighed and followed Jeffers. Derryn went next and Cambria brought up the rear and wondered if they’d all survive the trip down.

Chapter Seven

It took an hour of forging through the deep snow to reach the cliff face at the end of the plateau. What Cambria thought as a double football field was larger; it was her perspective that supplied a shortened image.

Jeffers handed over to Derryn and came back to the end of the line. Cambria moved up and kept an eye on Corona.

Derryn struggled through the snow, then stopped and leaned against the cliff, breathing hard, his sweat-drenched hair steaming in the cold air

"Where to now, Jeffers?" Cambria asked while the young man got his breath back.

"Left. There should be a fissure." He pushed past the young co-pilot and looked down the side of the mountain. "Yeah, more than a fissure though, more like a cut in the rock going down and around."

Cambria frowned. "Man made or natural?"

Jeffers shrugged. "Like I said, I fly over the stuff." He looked at Derryn. "You okay? Ready to continue?"

Derryn nodded, unwilling to admit he was tired and needed a longer rest.

Cambria knew Jeffers would keep an eye on him.

"Shall I lead?" She asked and Jeffers' brows lowered with puzzlement. "If I go down, you won't have lost the GPS unit." She explained and he nodded. "You take the rear guard."

Cambria set her feet against the sawed off rock to avoid slipping, felt the gust of an icy updraft. The ledge was maybe a metre wide in parts, barely a foot deep in others. "Here we go." She muttered and moved forward, aware of Corona behind her.

The only reason she didn't have the woman go first was the fact Corona hadn't killed anyone with her own fair hand – at least, not that anyone knew.

Cambria faced the rock and moved around, fingertips hooking into tiny faults of the black stone. She watched her footing and watched Corona beside her. The former minister's eyes were wide with fear, and her breath came out in pants. She clung to the wall like a limpet, slid her feet an inch at a time.

Cambria turned back. She could see a flat area, not very wide fifty metres away.

"You'll see a platform soon - keep your focus on that." She said to Corona. The woman didn't acknowledge the comment, kept her concentration on her feet.

Cambria stepped onto the snowy ledge and breathed a sigh of relief. She sat on her pack and turned to watch the others come, faces plastered to the cold cliff.

When they arrived, sweat slicked their faces.

"Dear God, don't make me do that again." Corona breathed and leaned against the wall, dabbed at her damp face with the sleeve of her jacket.

Cambria smiled and looked at Jeffers. He was pale and kept glancing towards the edge. "Don't think about it." She said.

"I'm just wishing I'd thought of parachutes. But the shuttle doesn't contain any."

"Shame that. A bit of base jumping would be just the thing for a fast get away." She glanced at Corona.

"Adventure sports aren't my thing." The woman grimaced. "I prefer more... sedate exercise, like golf."

Cambria chuckled. "Golf." She looked at Jeffers who shrugged. "Ready?"

The pilot nodded, wiped the sweat from his lower face with his elbow and checked the GPS unit, pointed past Cambria. "There."

"Convenient." She muttered and stepped onto the next ledge.

This strip of hard rock proved easier, not because of width, that was still tricky, but because it led between two rock faces, as if the plinth on the left had thrust up right next to the mountain, or it had suffered a slip and it was a mega-sized piece of mountain that shifted out and down. She looked up and saw the pointed tip of the piece.

The wind died away as they slid into the protection of the plinth. The walk was just as difficult as the first with narrow sections and glimpses down the fissure of nothing but black.

Cambria came to a halt at a jagged corner. She turned her head. "Ask Jeffers where the damned path went."

Corona went so pale she was almost translucent, but she turned her head to ask Derryn.

Cambria couldn't hear what Jeffers said. Corona turned back to her. "He says it's there, the GPS unit says..."

"I don't care what it says – there's a bloody *gap!*" She said through gritted teeth, held herself against the rock face.

Corona blinked at her.

Cambria huffed out a breath, dug her fingers into a crack in the wall and leaned back.

Corona sucked in a breath beside her.

Cambria saw the problem: a three-metre length of the rock had dropped half a metre, but the gap remained. Dare she step down onto the lower shelf? Did she have a choice? The alternative was to return to the crash site and find another way down. She trusted that Jeffers located the most effective and safest route.

She dragged in a breath, eased it out and shuffled to the corner and the edge of the break, kept her fingers holding onto rock, just in case and eased down.

The rock beneath her boots shifted, sent a sparking surge of fear through her veins as the gravel moved. She kept a hold of the rock face, pressed her cheek to the chilled stone, then shuffled across, kicked the stones off the ledge to ease the adrenalin surge.

She heard sharp, ragged breathing behind her, but didn't turn, she needed to focus on the next narrow ledge, at waist high.

Carefully, she reached out, set her palms on the grooved surface and hauled herself up. Her knee touched the surface and she dragged herself forward, turned around and stood to watch the others, to help if needed.

Corona needed the leg up from behind and Cambria's hand. The woman flashed her a quick smile of thanks before resuming her stance plastered to the wall.

Derryn and Jeffers didn't have any problems, nor could Corona have helped them, she didn't have the fitness or know-how.

Cambria continued along the ledge, then paused as the plinth's shielding dropped away and the wind resumed its chilled taunting, trying to blow them off the cliff and throw them down into the ravine.

The ledge kept going, around corners, along the face, down at a steep degree, up slightly, but she didn't see anywhere they could stop to rest. Corona's breath was harsh behind her and she heard nothing from the men.

She felt her knees tremble, her thighs ached with the up and down, her fingers cramped with cold, but still she continued shuffle along the ledge. To stop meant the wind had a better chance at them. But darkness, too, was a danger. She'd be all right, the others, though...

"Tired." Corona said. "So tired."

"You need to buck up there. If you need a motivator, glance over your shoulder." Cambria said.

"Can't look, can't look, can't make me, can't make me." Corona repeated, but kept going.

The light changed as the day wore on until the black rock gleamed with sunlight. It gave the rock a deceptive wet look. It also signalled that night was coming and they'd better find a place to camp, fast.

"Corona, stop your damned mumbling and pay attention."

The former Minister glared at her.

"Ask Jeffers where the next ledge is." She said and then sighed. "Please."

Corona turned her head to ask. "He says another hundred metres."

Cambria followed the ledge with her eyes to another corner. If it wasn't beyond that... they'd have to go with Plan B. When she thought of it.

* * *

A shudder went through Cambria as she eased around the corner and saw the ledge. It was more an indentation into the mountainside, a hollow carved out, but it was shelter for all of them without having to snuggle up too close.

The shadow of the mountain crept across the lowlands towards the horizon with irritating speed. Finally, they were all on the outcrop, backed up against the wall and staring out to watch night fall.

"Crappy day." Jeffers muttered.

"We're alive, relatively fit and able." Cambria said. "I'd say that's a *good* day."

"Yeah." He sighed and took the GPS unit from around his neck, handed it to her. "I'll go first tomorrow, you can use this."

"Roger." She said.

"We'd better eat and get some rest. As far as I can tell, it doesn't get easier." Jeffers said and pulled out a ration pack.

The night proved cold and uncomfortable, and the morning wakeup call was the direct, white light of sunrise into their closed eyes.

Cambria rolled over, away from her shifting and groaning companions. During the night, she'd changed positions and found herself at the feet of someone. That someone grabbed the back of her shirt. Her eyes popped open and stared down, down and further down the near straight cliff a thousand metres to jagged black rocks.

She teetered on the very edge, her heart in her throat, air trapped in her lungs and every muscle tensed for the fall. Then... a hard tug rolled her back and she lay flat on her back, stared up into the pale blue sky gripping her blanket.

"I'd rather you *didn't* take a short cut." Corona murmured.

Cambria's breath rushed out and she turned her head to stare at the woman who conspired to kill thousands.

"Thank you." Cambria rasped as she tried to swallow her heart back down. "But why?"

Corona raised an eyebrow. "The fall mightn't kill you, Hunter, but it would be somewhat inconvenient for the rest of us." She turned away and huddled closer to Derryn.

Cambria stared at her, shocked. Corona was going back to face the death penalty. Cambria could execute the warrant at any time. Yet she'd reached out and saved Cambria from... she shuddered at the thought, but imagined the plummet to the ground anyway, of slamming into jagged rocks...

She eased out a shaky breath, tried to dismiss the images from her mind and shut them away. She cautiously sat up, inched away from the precipice and leaned against the rock wall, closed her eyes.

It was supposed to be a simple mission. Get in, arrest Corona and leave - a day's work, maybe two. Nothing complicated. Now the woman had saved her life. Or saved her from significant pain.

The others protested the sun, and shifted, continued to sleep if they could.

On a sigh, she dragged out a ration pack and ate, then ran her tongue over her teeth.

What she wouldn't give for a toothbrush! But she had water - it snowed during the night - although no one noticed.

She spat the liquid over the edge and pulled out another ration pack.

Derryn sat up at the scent of her coffee, his nose twitching. He turned his head and looked down at Corona. The young man's face softened with affection.

Cambria could not allow him to develop a relationship. All Cambria had to do was remember Nomad and what Corona had done; remember the marines and Nomadians, remember the callous way Corona shot her. Cambria rubbed her chest and felt the ghost of remembered pain.

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to have the two of them together, but she'd arranged them into the line they would travel. Jeffers, Derryn, Corona and her.

Derryn didn't speak with the woman. He turned and opened the pack he'd used as a pillow and pulled out his own ration.

Then he looked up and saw Cambria watching him. His face turned pink and he dropped his gaze to his food.

There was going to be trouble with the lad, she just knew it, but until it presented as an actual threat to someone's life and limb, she could do nothing.

Bathroom breaks proved a bit of a problem, especially for the ever lady-like Corona.

In this rocky place, all they could do was take turns sliding back up the ledge around the corner, drop their pants, hang on and hope for the best. The men, Cambria thought with resentment as she came back, had the easier time of it.

Corona was the last to go and she came back with a flushed face and hunched shoulders. She wouldn't look at anyone.

Oh, Cambria thought with a smirk, *the indignity*. Well, they all had the same issues; it was how you dealt with them.

With the sun warming the black rock, the group headed out along the ledge, led by Jeffers.

She consulted with Jeffers, while Corona was busy up the ledge. He now had an idea of how far to travel to the next stop, and how far they could go in the daylight hours.

As Cambria worked it out, it would take them another two days of ledge walking until they came to open areas with steep and dangerous scree slopes, and rugged blocks of rock.

She hoped they didn't lose anyone on the way, even Corona and the moral dilemma she presented.

Cambria kept checking the GPS unit, but the pilot led them to another carved indentation as the shadows lengthened without her referring to the unit.

She felt her suspicions about the trail grow, but she didn't give voice to them, content to wait until they were further down the mountain before asking any questions.

The next platform was larger, but the group still huddled together for warmth as it began to rain, then sleet and finally snow.

She was surprised it had taken so long to snow again, but the white stuff swept across the ledge in miserable gusts of wet thickness.

The problem wasn't just the snow, but the melt turning the ledges slick with ice. For now, the sun-heated rock kept them warm and the snow dissolved on contact. Their clothes stayed damp, but not wet.

The weather made for another uncomfortable night and in the morning, the sun remained hidden behind low clouds that enveloped the mountain.

True to her prediction, the ledge had patches of black ice and they had to hold onto each other in case of slippage. Every heart-stopping jerk slowed their progress, slowed her progress since she was behind Derryn, with Jeffers once again bringing up the rear.

On the plus side, Derryn wasn't so cocky after *his* first brush with the ice. Cambria kept a good hold of the strap of his pack as he slid his foot along the ledge, tested for slipperiness. She had to give him credit for thinking.

Every member of the group, including her, was exhausted by the end of the day. But their rest spot was broader still, a more open platform carved into the mountain side, with a deep ledge above the indentation and more open space to either side. It wasn't natural, not carved by the wind, rain and snow, but by human hands. It was too uniform, too... *comfortable* to be a natural break along the path and Cambria looked around her.

The mountains rose above, uncaring, disinterested; black and forbidding, yet on the way down, the trip was easier. Going back up? That would be a challenge as it grew more difficult. The reward at the top was the plateau.

Who had carved the route? Why? As a rite of passage? When and what had they used to do the work, sonic blades? That meant technology and an intelligent species. The Thorians or someone else?

She studied the carved rock, ran a finger along the saw marks. She didn't know whether it was important enough – at the moment – to become an issue; but it did suggest one thing.

Were the humans not quite as alone on Ragnarok as they first thought?

* * *

Cambria chewed over the idea as she ate Savoury Mince that wasn't. It was bland and texturally indifferent as if meat and savoury had never made each other's acquaintance. She made the coffee to wash it all down and brooded, stared into the thickening fog.

"Could be a problem." Jeffers said, his voice muted by the mist and she grunted.

"As long as you can see your feet, you can continue."

"Not a lot of compassion in you, is there?" Jeffers said, disappointed and she turned to look at him.

"You wanna stay on this mountain for longer?"

He shook his head. "Nope, but we have enough supplies, we have a cave, of a sort, we're dry-ish and warm-ish. I'm just thinking that if tomorrow is as foggy as this, it might be too dangerous to continue."

She turned away, her eyes changed and she stared out over the savannah and forest. "You're the boss here, Jeffers, it's *your* decision. I will abide by that decision." Cambria continued to watch. The lowlands were closer, she could almost make out the tops of the trees rather than the distant spread of green. Her companions couldn't see through the fog, couldn't see how far they'd come or how close to escape they were.

The shadows lengthened once again and she watched until true night came. Then she rolled under her thermal blanket and closed her eyes, not expecting to sleep.

Nor did she. The questions of who built the ledge continued to plague her throughout the damp, chilly night. And no answer came.

Oh, she knew the Thorians were somewhere around, they'd shot them down after all, but she doubted they'd been here long enough or had the

technology to create the ledges, to carve them out and she couldn't believe they were natural; they were too uniform, the marks too regular.

She listened to the rustle of blankets as each sleeper shifted, heard the drip of water off stone and into a puddle. But she heard no breeze, no stealthy footsteps and she wondered if she read too much into the construction, whether she was becoming paranoid.

Cambria dozed, but it was fitful and too often she was startled out of the twilight by Corona twitching in her sleep, or an errant elbow, or the sound of the water dripping.

Rest wouldn't come and she shifted, lay flat on her back and stared up towards the stars.

Lesson learned. She thought. *There are no simple or easy jobs.*

The mountains rose, black against black and she was reminded of home, of Geneva and her life before Bolingbroke destroyed it. Oh, she'd love to be on that Hunt, but no one knew where he was and his list of worlds was longer than they had Hunters. Did Excalibur find him and hide the body? Or was Bolingbroke gone before he'd turned up?

Excalibur Jones.

Killer, lover, saviour. Man of no conscience, but rough hands and wicked kisses.

She closed her eyes. He would wait for her and when his patience ran out, he would come after her.

"I'll come back for you. I promise."

The words echoed in her head. She hadn't believed him and yet... he'd kept that promise. Saved her and sent her home.

And she couldn't work out why. He had no conscience, had already told her he would leave her one day. If her indestructibility continued, she thought with a sigh, *she* would be the one leaving *him*.

If she didn't kill him first and that was a distinct possibility given his ever-increasing body count. Anyone who got in his way was at risk. He didn't hesitate - he just killed and got on with fulfilling his objective.

She opened her eyes to weak sunlight. The fog still hung heavy in the air, but not as thick as last night. What would Jeffers decide?

The fog's moisture beaded on her skin and she wiped her face with her hands.

"Good for the complexion." Corona said from beside her.

"Uh huh." Cambria said and sat up. "Another glorious morning on the mountain."

Corona lightly punched her arm. "True, but we are that much closer to the bottom. And at the bottom, there is real food, hot showers and comfortable beds." She smiled.

Cambria rubbed her eyes. "Who are you and what have you done with the real Corona?"

A chuckle came from Derryn and Jeffers.

"What? It's a perfectly legitimate question."

"She's right though." Jeffers said. "We are closer to the bottom and the pathway isn't as difficult. We should make excellent progress and be able to camp just above the scree tonight."

Cambria didn't want to burst their bubble about the dangerous scree; one slip and a rock avalanche would bury them. All three were happy. Why put a dampener on the mood just because she was feeling pissy?

She dragged in a cool, moist breath. "Okay." She shrugged. "We're close."

Following breakfast, she took the lead. Jeffers was right: it was easier. They could walk instead of slide, but the ledge was still too narrow to walk abreast. That suited her fine; she didn't want to talk to anyone.

Jeffers, however, had a different idea and he set Derryn on rear guard while he walked close behind Cambria.

"Something's bothering you, Hunter." He said and she nodded, glanced back at him.

"This path, all the paths. You notice anything... odd about them?" She looked forward.

"No. But then I haven't been looking. I've been concentrating on finding the way.... ah. They're conveniently spaced, aren't they?"

"Yep."

"I didn't notice... and that's not the only thing is it? They're very uniform, as if someone's carved them." He spat out a curse and continued his thoughts. "And if someone did carve them, where are they now?"

"Yep." She repeated.

"Are they someone to worry about?"

"No idea." Cambria replied. "Not thinking about it at the moment."

"Yeah? What are you thinking about?"

"Why I thought this would be a simple extraction of a known felon."

Jeffers laughed. "Things are never as easy as you hope they'll be, and never as difficult as you think they are."

"Great, philosophising from a pilot."

"Well, I have had a number of near misses and any crash you walk away from is a good one."

She glanced back at him again and he nodded.

"I guess it is."

"So, we don't worry about the creators of the path, you don't worry about your felon, and I'll not worry about anything other than getting us back to civilisation and the local law enforcement agency to report the crash and the

shuttle controller. There.” He said with satisfaction. “Easy and difficult all rolled into one.”

Cambria shook her head and kept walking. Chirpy she didn’t need right now. She wanted off this damned rock.

The day grew warmer the lower they went. Her thighs burned at the steepness, but as soon as she stopped, the burning eased. The others weren’t so fortunate. Whenever she glanced back, each face wore expressions of pain with each step.

Here then, was the challenge for whomever had built the road up. Work them hard at the bottom – probably climbing the scree slopes first – then climb up what amounted to maybe a hundred thousand steps, rest in the indentation, then take to the ever-narrowing ledges until reaching the plateau.

A Rite of Passage, up and down. Again, the question was for whom?

“I need a soak in a hot bath.” Corona said behind her. “With a lovely G and T in hand or a glass of Shiraz – French, of course.”

“Of course.” Cambria muttered.

“I want to lie down for a week and just stay still.” Derryn said from behind her. “Maybe a beer or two.”

“I want both,” Jeffers called from the back. “A hot bath and a few beers. You can keep your fancy wines.”

“What about you, Hunter?” Jeffers called out from the back.

Yes, what about her? What would she like once they were down?

“I hadn’t given it much thought. I’ve just been focusing on getting down, not what comes after. But,” she thought hard and fast, “I suppose putting my feet up.”

“Well, that’s pretty boring.” Derryn said and she glanced back with a smile.

"Oh, I don't know, having one cabana boy rub me feet, another at my shoulders, a third attending to my every need: beer, choice bits of food..." She looked back.

Corona snickered while Derryn flushed bright pink. Jeffers grinned from the back of the line.

"You asked." She said and continued down.

The path widened, almost like it was a solid, black glacier and, at the bottom, a three hundred metre wash of scree, then a stretch of a hundred metres of grass, then the forest.

Cambria stopped; everyone stopped and spread out. On either side of the rock slope, the scree went on forever. The only way down was through the loose rock.

She blew out a breath, then picked up a fist-sized stone, threw it on top of the scree. The fluid rocks began to slide until it an acre wide wave of rock and dust moved like water, then settled further down.

"That's not good." Derryn said.

"How the hell are we going to get down without being crushed?" Jeffers asked, frustrated.

"Carefully?" Corona suggested. All three turned to Cambria.

"Sideways." She said. "One at a time."

"What?" Her companions gaped at her.

"Sideways. I tossed a stone and the slip went straight down. If we go one at a time, at an angle across the scree, the slip behind won't catch up – as long as you're quick enough."

The stares continued, as if they were waiting for the punch line. Then Derryn threw up his hands and turned away.

"You are kidding me." He said. "Oh, this is so *not fair!*" He stomped around on the hard rock then glared back up at the mountains, at the scree.

“Okay, fine. *Fuck you all!*” And he took off, ran diagonally down the three hundred metres, slipping and sliding and near surfing the wave of rocks until he hit the bottom and ran across the bare ground and stopped.

The scree rattled after him.

Derryn turned, gave them a wave.

“Okay... that worked pretty well. Who’s next?” Cambria asked into the stunned silence, but Jeffers took Derryn’s courage as a personal challenge and followed. He was more than three quarters of the way down when his left foot caught on the rocks and he fell. The landslide of shifting stone, near swallowed the pilot in a liquid smear of rubble.

Fear for Jeffers rose in Cambria and she nearly stepped off the solid ledge to rescue him; she knew she couldn’t or be swallowed by the scree herself. She had to be patient, see if he was recoverable.

Derryn shouted at the pilot and ran up to the edge. He saw the slide coming and backed away to a safe distance. He paced, kept his eye on the pilot and waited.

Jeffers struggled against the tide and finally the avalanche stopped.

Derryn went to him, cleared the fist-sized rocks off until he could drag the pilot out. He looked up the hill and gave them the thumbs up.

Cambria looked at Corona. And Corona looked back, fear and tears brimming in her eyes, fingers pressed to her mouth. Yet, the former minister nodded. “Okay. My turn... I guess.”

There was no other way. The scree went on in either direction as far as the eye could see, in some places right up into the mountains.

“Fast as you can, Corona.” Cambria ignored Corona’s trembling.

The woman swallowed and stared down the hill. “Oh, dear. I don’t think I can do it.”

"If it helps, think of Derryn and Jeffers as your tickets to freedom."
Cambria said. "If the scree catches me, you'll at least have a head start.
Plenty of time to convince them of your innocence."

"You can be such a bitch sometimes." Corona muttered.

"Time is wasting. Off you go. The boys are waiting."

Corona didn't look at her. She took a deep breath. Then another. The former Minister backed up to the side of the solid rock and ran at the scree, kept running on the diagonal, screaming, until she was down, and off the liquid rock.

And then she kept on running into the forest.

Derryn and Jeffers watched her run by and shouted after her, but the woman didn't stop and she disappeared into the woods.

Cambria had to wait for the rock to stop sliding before she could take off after Corona. Derryn stood, took a step and then looked down at the injured pilot. He lifted his head to Cambria, as if undecided. He shook his head and squatted down next to Jeffers.

Cambria grimaced. She should have known the Minister would see this as an opportunity. And she had to give Derryn credit for remembering his responsibilities.

Five minutes later, Cambria hit the scree running, surfed the rolling rocks like Derryn. She ran onto the grass and slowed to a halt as she heard Corona scream.

Her pistols were in her hands before she realised she'd drawn them.

"Stay with Jeffers!" She ordered and bolted for the forest. She dived into the undergrowth and rolled, held still while her eyes changed to seek out heat signatures.

Three, four, five, six, seven targets, two of which held Corona by the arms. She looked further afield but didn't see anyone else.

Slowly, she rose, shifted her vision again.

Men. All men in blue shifts belted with gold coloured woven strands. One barked orders at Corona.

She lifted her head and glared at Cambria. "Well? *Do something!*"

The men turned and she saw they wore helmets of beaten metal, a shiny silver metal with wings.

"Thorians."

"You defile the sacred forest." One said and stepped forward. "You defile the sacred mountain, Thor's mountain. For that you must be sacrificed to the God of Thunder."

Cambria stared at him. Did he realise he sounded like a bad movie script?

"The Aesir never indulged in human sacrifice, pal, that was the *Aztecs*."

"*Blasphemer!*"

"Give it up and let the woman go." Cambria demanded and wondered why *she* now sounded like a bad movie script.

She shook off the thought, braced her front foot and back foot. "Let her go. *Now*."

Five men stood in front of the other two holding Corona.

Cambria aimed at their legs and fired. She hit one in both shins. He fell to the ground without a sound, but screwed his face up in agony. She hit the second one and he fell.

"I will shoot every one of you." She said and aimed at the third. He stared at her with a determined expression. They all watched her with the same expression. Determined, a little bit fearful, but refused to move.

She shifted her vision. The two behind were carrying Corona back, a hand over her mouth and another clamped on her throat. The line of men hid their escape.

Cambria tilted her head and they braced themselves. She shot the legs out from under two when she heard another shot and then she slammed to the ground, her eyes stared through the undergrowth until the blood from the head wound coloured her vision red. Strangely, there was no pain and no feeling in her body. She watched the last men standing dragged the wounded ones away.

All Cambria could do... was wait.

Chapter Eight

Her eyesight jiggled as someone removed her pack. Derryn rolled her onto her back, but she couldn't move, couldn't blink, couldn't do anything. She watched him sigh. He stood up and looked around, then he tried to take the pistols, but her hands gripped them, as if in rigor, and he left them.

Instead, he took her knife and sheathe. She'd get them back off him once she caught up with him, the thieving bastard.

He tucked it into the back of his pants, pulled down his coat and left.

"I can't find them, Jeffers!" She heard Derryn call.

She didn't hear Jeffers reply.

Darkness fell and still she waited. Bugs crawled over her and small forest creatures came out to sniff. She heard the roar of a cat, the squeal of something small and prayed the beast wouldn't scent her blood.

Dawn came warm and bright and she felt a finger twitch. A bullet fired into the undergrowth, and she found she could slowly shift her stiff finger away from the trigger.

Noon came and her stomach grumbled.

Then, all her frozen muscles thawed, she relaxed onto the ground with a sigh. The bullet used to kill her fell onto the ground in front of her eyes and she shuddered.

She wanted to close her eyes, but she had blood in them. She sat up. Derryn had left the pack next to her, as if he didn't have time to ransack it.

Bastard.

The water bottle was half-full. She leaned back and poured the liquid across her eyeballs, rubbed them with a strip of cloth until the stinging stopped. Damn, but she had a head a... the throbbing eased to nothing.

She dragged out two ration packs, heated them and ate, uncaring of the flavour; she needed the energy if she was to take on the Thorians.

Bigger Bastards.

Finally, she was ready. She holstered the pistols, repacked the rubbish and thrust her arms through the straps of her pack.

Cambria got to her feet and studied the small bullet. Then she put the lead into her pocket and moved through the undergrowth, walked with her head down, studying the footprints.

The Thorians had set up their camp of tents deep within the forest. They used animal trails as their pathways, broadening them, and one led Cambria right into the camp.

Men, women and children all wore belted shirts, leggings wrapped with leather ties. Some of the women wore braided headbands, made from cloth or leather, that didn't appear to serve a purpose.

As she walked towards the biggest tent, the people rose as if they'd never seen an outsider before.

She changed her vision and looked at the tent. Two guards on either side of the entry. She pulled the gun out and shot through the tent material. Both men fell clutching their legs. The watching crowd gasped, the men ran for their... swords?

Cambria ducked inside the tent.

"Heimdall, I presume?" Cambria asked of the big man with long flowing yellow hair. He held Corona by the throat, had her body across his.

"Who are you and what do you want?" He asked in ancient Norwegian.

"I want my felon back." She replied in the same language and heard men at the tent entrance. The two fallen men crawled to the entrance and their comrades dragged out.

"This little snip?" Heimdall guffawed, a big booming sound. Corona looked scared and offended at the same time. "She is nothing to you. Leave us now and you will be spared."

"Heimdall, you shot our shuttle out of the sky, we crashed on the sacred plateau."

His smile vanished. "The Gods decided no unbelievers shall fly over the mountains; it is *their* playground and shall not be defiled by things modern."

Cambria ignored him. "We then made our way down and when we are nearly free, your asshole pals steal one of the passengers, *my* passenger. Worse yet, one of them shoots me. Can you imagine how pissed off I am?"

"You defiled the sacred mountain!" His expression darkened with anger. "Thor built the Way to test the acolyte priests! Only those anointed by Thor may walk the Path. You have blasphemed!" While flecks appeared at the corners of his mouth and his voice rose. "I shall hew the heathens in two with my axe! I shall..."

"*Oh, shut the fuck up!*" Cambria shouted. "I do not want to be here. *She* does not want to be here, but you *had* to intervene, didn't you. We'd be gone, without ever meeting but you *had* to go and shoot us down. You wanna tell me why?"

Someone came in behind her and she turned aimed the gun at the big blonde man's forehead.

His eyes widened, his face paled.

"You want to try and kill me again or should I just pull the trigger on you and see how *you* like it?"

He shook his head and backed up, his old-fashioned, mechanical-loaded gun by his side. He got to the tent entrance and fled.

Cambria turned around. Heimdall had a knife tip at Corona's throat. A thin trail of blood ran down her throat.

"This world is sacred to Thor and the Aesir." Heimdall's lip curled in a sneer. "We will take it back and await the arrival of our Lord. Those who do not submit, will die – and we have shipped in all the weapons we need to

see it done." His eyes held a smug, triumphant gleam, as if he'd already won a great victory.

Cambria wanted to roll her eyes, but she addressed her felon instead. "So. Corona. You want to stay with this big brute and be abused for the rest of your miserable life? Or do you want to come with me?"

"She stays. And I think you will too." His eyes insolently moved down her body and up again.

"Let me speak plainly, Heimdall. I am Hunter Petersen of the World Council. You have the right to remain silent and I suggest you do that."

"A mere wo-man does not tell me what to do." He replied.

"Oh, dear God, a misogynist." Cambria rubbed her forehead, scraped at the dried blood. What was it with people? "Why don't you wise up and speak properly, you idiot. You are *not* an emissary of Thor, the people outside aren't the Aesir, or Thorians, they are followers of a religion that doesn't exist anymore and if they had their druthers, would probably bugger off. As for you personally? You either let my felon go, or I'll shoot you. Dead, in fact."

Heimdall smiled and drew Corona closer, to use as a shield. "And can you do that before I..."

Cambria raised and fired while he spoke. The bullet struck between his eyes and he fell back onto the elaborate cushions, blood flowing from the wound. "Do not *gloat*."

Corona looked at her. "What took you so long?"

"Why did you run?" Cambria asked instead.

Corona dabbed at her throat and winced. "Bastard cut me."

"Grab your pack, we need to go now, Corona."

The woman sighed. "Yes, I suppose we do."

Cambria turned and opened the tent flap. A line of men holding swords and round wooden shields with a large metal stud in the centre semi-crouched ten metres away.

"Hold!" A large man with long orange hair and beard demanded of them. He stood behind the line.

"What now?"

"I am Vidar! Son of..."

Cambria rolled her eyes. "Odin, yes, alright. You killed the monstrous wolf Fenrir who had killed your father, Odin. Where's your brother?"

Vidar folded his massive arms across his chest. "I have no brother. I, alone, survived the End Times."

Cambria shook her head. "Uh, huh. According to legend there were a number of survivors, including your brother, Vali." She paused in thought. "There were your cousins Vili and Ve, Hoenir, your father's faithful retainer, oh and two of Thor's sons, Magni and Modi. And one other... Oh, that's right. The favoured god, Balder."

"This is nonsense! None survived but Heimdall and me. The rest were brought down by woman's sin."

Did she suggest he was mixing his religions? "And that sin would be..."

"Enough! Surrender or die!"

Cambria shook her head. "You can't kill me." She said. She might as well have been talking to a tree as he slowly smiled.

"We're leaving." Cambria said and pushed Corona to the left, away from the line of men. "You can run now." She murmured. And they started to sprint down the path. A roar came from behind as the men gave chase.

She and Jeffers had planned their route while up on the mountain and she figured that as long as they headed in the right direction, even while pursued, they'd find someone who could help.

Cambria kept Corona in front of her, urging her on. If the woman fell behind, she'd be re-captured.

The crack of weapons fire came from behind and Corona squeaked.

"Are you hit?"

"No." Corona breath hitched with fright.

"Keep going."

"You are such a bitch sometimes." Corona grumbled.

"What do you mean 'sometimes'?"

Bullets whizzed by, close and closer. Cambria risked a glance back. Vehicles. Four-wheeled, bush-stomping, fat-tyred vehicles. So much for the rustic village life.

Running wouldn't cut it, but difficult terrain might.

"Into the undergrowth, Corona, they are gaining."

The former Minister ran left, leapt over branch and shrub. Cambria followed, impressed by the fitness and stamina of the woman.

They moved down another animal trail and Cambria heard the rev of an engine, the breaking of shrubs and branches as the Thorians charged after them.

It grew darker the further they went, the animal trails narrowed and the trees drew closer together, broader at the trunk and towering.

Soon, the sounds of pursuit faded until Cambria could only hear the harsh, regular breathing of herself and Corona.

Corona slowed to a walk, her hands on her waist and breathed deep. "Bugger me." She huffed. "I don't think... I've ever run... so far... in... my life."

"You did well enough down the scree." Cambria pointed out.

"Ah... that. Well, that was more... momentum... My legs were pumping... just to keep... up." She stopped and bent over.

Cambria didn't believe her, but let the lie stand. She listened to the forest. Bird calls, the rustle of small mammals rooting through the ground cover. No breeze. No pursuit.

She waited for Corona to recover.

Corona huffed out a final breath wiped her face with her arm. "Which way?"

"We follow the trails. Find water and a place to camp for the night."

"Another night out. I was so looking forward to a bath."

"All good things come to those who wait." Cambria put in.

"One word: Nomad." Corona replied, walking alongside.

"Good point."

"I really didn't mean it, you know." Corona plucked a leaf from a shrub and began shredding it.

"What did you *think* would happen?"

Corona shrugged. "A stand-off with a lot of posturing. I'd come in, negotiate a handy peace treaty and stay on as... well..."

Cambria shook her head. "Nope. But I suppose if you *think* of it that way, you'll come to believe it. You cannot re-create history, Corona. And let me remind you, you were absolutely ruthless when you gunned me down."

"Does it help to say 'I'm sorry'?"

"Corona, I woke up in a *latrine pit*. With a Nomadian *pissing* on me. What do you think?"

"Guess not." She murmured. "At least he wasn't... you know... *defecating*." She said the last word in a whisper as if it was the most heinous thing.

"Small mercy there, Corona. But a dump I could have brushed off. *Piss?* *That* takes a bath."

Corona made a sound in her throat and Cambria glanced at her. The woman was mortally offended by her language.

"How did you know what language they spoke?" Corona asked and Cambria blinked.

"It was an old Norse dialect, probably developed from ancient runes and artefacts discovered in Viking excavations. Although their pronunciation was a little bit off, and they didn't believe the truth about the Aesir and true Ragnarok, or Ragna rokke as it's..." Cambria clamped her mouth shut. *What the...?*

"I got that. I didn't understand a word they said, and yet... you did. I didn't realise you were so well read."

"Um..." Cambria's mind went blank. She couldn't explain it herself.

"So... what's it like?"

"What's what like?"

"Being immortal." Corona said casually.

She'd said it. She'd gone and *said it*. Cambria sighed. She supposed someone would, but as long as she didn't think of it, it wasn't true... until the next time someone killed her.

She felt the darkness rise, felt it trying to expand and consume her. The mental bonds she used to suppress the secret that lay at the heart of the darkness strained and cracked.

Cambria knew she could not afford for light to expose what she kept hidden from herself. She needed to bolster the chains, reinforce them with thoughts of strength, of calm and of focus, with thoughts of... Caparossi's face appeared in her mind.

The bubbling panic and darkness subsided as a smiling image of the major rose above her despair and she eased out a sigh.

"Well?" Corona asked.

"Nothing is truly immortal." Cambria replied quietly.

"Um... how many times have you been, ah, killed?"

Cambria eyed her with disgust. "Five, at last count."

"Mmm. Yes and, oh dear, there you *are*."

"You sound bitter. Want some longevity for yourself?"

"Might be nice to try it." Corona said. "It's the Holy Grail of humanity after all. To live long, long lives."

"It hurts." Cambria finally said.

"Why would it hurt?" Corona frowned, then her expression cleared with understanding "Oh, you mean *emotionally*. There you are, all dead and everything, expecting to go on to your great reward. Or do you mean that one day, everyone you've ever known will be gone and you'll be alone? I get that. I hadn't thought about it, but I do get it now." Corona shrugged. "Sad for you."

Cambria felt a pang in her heart at the thought of losing Caparossi and held on to her patience. "I meant, *dying* hurts. No painkillers involved. *Reviving* hurts, again, no painkillers. Except twice. Back there, I felt nothing. No pain, no movement, it was as if the bullet severed all my nerves. All I could do was see and hear; that was it. And being blown up on Nomad. Or should I say: atomised. No pain there either, just white and then nothing." She shrugged, held the fear back and stared into the forest. "But it hurts like nothing you've ever experienced, like being on fire, or boiled alive, every nerve ending flayed with razor blades." She said and looked at Corona. "I'd prefer people not try to do me in ever again."

Corona stared at her, horror in her gaze.

"Nothing good comes without consequences, Corona. This... whatever is up with me... has *consequences*."

"Yes, I'm beginning to see that. But you could always retire from being a Hunter, live long and prosper on some nice planet in a distant galaxy."

Cambria snorted. "It's what *you'd* do, but would..." she paused. Corona did not know about the alien technology that changed her into what she was, whatever she'd become.

"Would... what?" Corona asked.

Cambria changed her question. Cottington-Blake wasn't a friend, a confidante or a therapist. She was a felon and Cambria reminded herself, that regardless of saving her life, Cottington-Blake would escape if *convenient*. "Would all that luxury and contentment bore you after a while? You'd be indestructible. You could do anything you wanted; anything dangerous that is. Sports, *law enforcement*, military. And still come back for more." She said.

"Not the fighting sort, really, and sport? I prefer to watch, thank you." She paused and thought about it. "I'd travel. See the galaxies, see them all."

"And when you had?"

Corona frowned. "Ah, yes, I see your point. I don't know. I'd probably think of something."

She didn't ask any more questions, or make any further comment.

Cambria stewed and brooded. She pushed feathery fronds out of her way. The question of what could kill her came to mind. She'd survived a massive bomb blast, lived through the heat of a sun, and, from the information she had, it had taken weeks, months, to put her back together – but it *had* happened.

She could imagine herself eventually piloting a craft into a collapsing star. Would that do it? Being sucked into a black hole? Was that the only way she could die? She shook off the image. One day she might do it, when she was tired of life – if life remained in the galaxy. Cambria didn't believe in suicide... yet.

But how many lives did she have? Did she have a limit and then not come back? And why was she coming back *at all*. Major Caparossi said the alien tech was gone. None of the sensors could pick it up.

She wondered if Karesh had known, would she still have implanted the universal translator? Yes, Cambria decided. The Nomadians were under an alien imperative. Whether Karesh and Ardesch wanted to or not, the aliens wanted Cambria to have the translator.

But... *why her*? Kekotown provided hundreds of humans to test the device on. That was the question and there weren't any aliens left to ask, since she so thoroughly destroyed them.

Oh, wait a minute. *Had* she destroyed them? If they had the technology to bring her back from total annihilation, why would she assume they wouldn't use the same technology on themselves?

No one mentioned it. And they lived in shadows and fog, unseen, but allowed enough of a glimpse for people to imagine nightmarish creatures. No-one mentioned anything about finding parts from the ship, either.

She came to a stop. "Fuck." She hadn't destroyed them after all, just dis... what was the word? Oh, yes, *deconstructed* the nucleic bonds between cells that held a living organism together.

"Shit." She murmured and continued walking. How did she *know* this stuff? And why did she now understand what happened.

How did she understand Heimdall and why did he show surprise when she spoke his language. An archaic language no-one but scholars knew? "Ker-iste." She paused in thought. All of which meant that the tech wasn't gone, it attached itself to her DNA and become organic. "Motherfuckers!" She bit out and moved on. Would she evolve into the aliens she'd killed? Turn into a creature of shadow and...

"Any more curses?" Corona asked, amused and Cambria looked at her.

"What?"

"You've been swearing under your breath for the last, oh, fifteen minutes?"

"Just some serious issues about how to destroy something that can't be destroyed by anything we have." She muttered and continued walking.

Corona's eyebrows rose. "You're thinking about self-termination already?"

"Not me, the... never mind. It's Hunter business." And it was. This alien bunch had killed people, Nomadian, human and representatives of who knows how many other species. In the Hunter book, according to World Council law and treaties with allied planets, that was an automatic death penalty.

A little difficult to enforce – but what killed them, would kill her. Then again, she had destroyed the ship and the alien inside, but not herself. Worse, she didn't know how to find them.

The darkness inside her rippled like she'd tossed a stone into a still pool.

"Oh, thank you whatever gods might be out there!" Corona said, relieved.

Cambria focused on her surroundings. The forest, the undergrowth and a trickling stream in front of them. "What?"

Corona walked faster and got down on her knees, leaned over for a drink of the tea coloured water.

"I suppose it tastes a little... ah, leafy, but it's refreshing and cool." Corona turned with a smile that then vanished. "*Be... hind... you.*" She whispered.

Cambria turned, lifted a hand to her pistol and drew it.

Her gaze met the clear white eyes of a six-legged cat the size of a Terran lion. It had a wedge-shaped head and very pointy teeth. Pale green-grey fur bristled, long claws extended and the tail whipped the air as it crouched down and prepared to attack.

Cambria backed up, one slow step at a time, her eyes on the beast. Her boots met the water, but she couldn't afford to look where she stepped.

Corona grabbed her pack, tugged at it, guided her through the water and across to the trail behind. She kept the gun by her side, kept her gaze on the cat and the lashing tail.

Then the cat lay down, watched them, but did nothing else. Cambria didn't trust it and kept moving backwards until the trail curved away and the forest hid the beast from view.

Corona tugged harder.

"Don't run, not yet." Cambria whispered. "It might be able to feel the vibrations, hear us, or come after us. Just take it nice and slow."

"Aren't you ever afraid?" Corona complained.

"I am shitting myself this very instant, Corona."

"Doesn't look like it." She muttered. "And I guess this means we are not stopping for the night."

"Not yet." Cambria finally turned and they both walked fast down the trail until Corona tripped.

"I can't see a bloody thing in this dark!" She rubbed an elbow, then a knee.

Dark? What dark? Her vision changed and she saw night had fallen.

Despair surged. Her body was automatically changing her vision for optimal performance. She knew things she shouldn't. And she couldn't die.

She dropped to the ground next to Corona, depressed. Then thought about the cat and laughed with near hysteria.

"What?" Corona asked and Cambria heard the note of panic and concern in the woman's voice. "What's wrong?"

Cambria kept laughing until Corona punched her flush on the jaw. "Snap out of it!"

Cambria lay back on the path, waited for the sting to fade and stared up at the forest canopy. She couldn't see the stars and wished she could.

"I was thinking about that cat. If I let it eat me, would I be reconstructed from cat shit? Or would it vomit parts of me back up?" Would she acquire cat DNA in process?

"That is *not* funny." Corona said.

"Not to you, but it's a thought."

"Look here, Hunter," Corona said with a huff, "you've been given a great gift!"

"It's a *curse*." Cambria spat and sat up. "A blight that taints my very existence! And I am going to hunt down the motherfuckers who did this to me and wipe them from the universe!"

"Did this to you? How? When?" Corona demanded.

"Oh, wouldn't you like to know." Cambria got to her feet. "Come on, we've got miles to go yet."

"I can't see a bloody thing!"

Cambria glared down at her. "Then it's a good thing I *can*! Now get your sorry ass up and start walking!"

Corona climbed to her feet. "I don't know what's suddenly got you upset, but don't take it out on me. I'm only trying to help."

"Yeah, right. If you hadn't fucking shot me in the first place, I'd never have..."

"Realised your new state until *someone blew up Kekotown*! Don't bitch at me because I pre-empted your realisation of godhood!"

"*Shut up*! I'm not a god!" Cambria shouted and her voice echoed around the forest.

Corona didn't back down. "So what would *you* call it? A *health* issue? A disorder? A premature ascension to the next state of evolution? The birth of a new species? *What?*"

Cambria stared at her and the anger seeped away. "I don't know what I am. All I know is I don't want to *be* this way!" She dragged in a breath and rubbed her forehead. It wasn't Cottington-Blake's fault she was what she was. And Corona was right. "I'm sorry." She said, contrite. "I know it's not your fault; you just happened to provoke a meltdown."

"We still going on?" Corona asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, the cat's too close behind us. It might have only wanted a drink, but it had that carnivorous 'but I might need a snack later' look. I don't want to tempt it into the cross-hairs of my guns." She gave Corona a smile, but the woman couldn't see it. "Grab onto my pack, I'll... lead the way."

Cambria walked through the forest for another two hours before she was satisfied the cat had lost interest in them. Corona stumbled along behind her, kept upright by virtue of the tight hold she had on Cambria's backpack.

Cambria felt the frustration rise. She saw no clearings, no wide areas where they could camp and have a safety zone. She finally guided them off the trail and between two towering trees, into an area where the bushes weren't so prickly and thick.

"We'll camp here." She said and removed her pack.

"Why not on the trail where it's flat?" Corona asked, tiredly and slumped to the leaf-strewn ground.

"Because it's an *animal* trail, that's why." She said. "And we don't want the cat, or its pals, or whatever other predator might be out here, gnawing on us in the middle of the night."

Corona dug through her pack then stopped. "I can't see." She said and Cambria got down on the ground beside her.

"What do you need?" She asked.

"Food, thermal blanket, room service and a back rub."

Cambria flashed a smile and pulled out the first two items, handed them to Corona.

Then she dealt with her own food and blanket.

She listened to the forest as she ate, but couldn't detect any unnatural sounds. Then again, she was a city girl and unfamiliar with what might be the natural noises of *this* world.

Once finished with her meal, Corona shook out her blanket and rolled herself up, snuggled beneath the nearest shrub. "You keep watch; I'll sleep." She murmured and dropped off.

Cambria watched the former Minister of Trade. The woman trusted her to see them safe, had enough faith that she slept easy in the middle of an alien forest on an alien planet with alien life forms that could hunt them.

It was stupid. Corona should be planning her escape to another world and yet, she focused on getting down the mountain first, then dashing to the forest. Now, she was at ease, sleeping peaceful as if the past didn't matter and hadn't happened; that because she was a nice person now, all would be forgiven.

Corona Cottington-Blake was as naive as she was trusting.

Cambria rolled into her own blanket. Corona would have that fantasy world shattered soon enough.

Chapter Nine

After a long night in the twilight, Cambria rose and walked a distance to relieve herself. She buried the results and returned to camp.

Corona still slept, but they needed to get going. She bent down and shook Corona's shoulder. The woman eyes popped open, almost with expectation, but then shuttered with disappointment.

"No, Dorothy, this isn't Kansas yet." Cambria said and laid the shovel next to her. "For your... ablutions."

Corona looked at the shovel then up at Cambria. "Who's Dorothy and where's Kansas?"

"And you call yourself a Trade..." Cambria paused, looked away. "You need to do your business – away from the trail, please."

Corona shrugged and got up, took the shovel with her.

Cambria went back to brooding. Kansas didn't exist anymore, hadn't for more than a century since the nuclear silos went up courtesy of a few fundamentalist terrorists.

She ate her breakfast without tasting it. They'd have to find civilisation soon or they'd run out of supplies.

Corona returned with the shovel and a grimace.

"The pleasures of going back to nature." Cambria said and sipped her coffee.

"If that's a *pleasure*, you can keep it." Corona said with a sniff.

Cambria smiled.

Corona settled down to her own breakfast. "Do you think we'll be out of here soon?"

Cambria shrugged.

"You mean we're *lost*?"

"Could be. We'll see how the day progresses." She held up her hand as Corona opened her mouth. "And don't go borrowing trouble; we have enough as it is."

Corona subsided and made her coffee. "It's a nice planet. Ragnarok, I mean."

Cambria looked at her.

"The mountains are the best in the galaxy, the forests a lush and filled with wildlife, the rivers are a 'wow' on the scale. The deserts, to the south of here, are broad and a deep burnt umber. Even the seas teem with life and are as blue and as fresh as anywhere." She sighed.

"No pollution."

"That's right. Unspoiled wilderness, what I imagine Earth must have been like before we came along and ruined it."

Cambria felt a pang of regret. "You can't stay, Corona. You have to make restitution for what you did and caused to be done." She said.

"You could say you couldn't find me."

Cambria shook her head. "Too many people know I came to get you."

"You've been thinking about it, though, haven't you?" Corona gave her a sly look.

"And every time I do, I remember the marines who were killed by shark attack. I remember the Nomadians, killed by grenade or gunshot. I remember the fear on the faces of women and children as they realised the Nomadians were coming for them. I remember Karesh."

"I had nothing to do with her death." Corona protested.

"No, you didn't, that one's on me, but it's all a part of the same story: you wanting more power than you had on Earth."

Corona sighed. "I blame Judicar Bolingbroke for this mess."

"What? Why?" Cambria asked, surprised. "You knew Bolingbroke?"

Corona shrugged. "Of course. All the Ministers and Judicars got together at one time or another. With all the various functions we're all required to attend, it's inevitable you meet just about everyone at least once before elections. I met Ranald..." she frowned in thought, her green gaze turning inward with the memory, "I think it was about six years ago, after the World Council passed the Provincial and Extra-Territorial Trade Agreement with Giese 4."

Corona smiled. "Ranald wanted to know who would write the regulations." She slid a glance towards Cambria. "He was... generous in his donations and time to help craft those regulations; in an advisory capacity, of course."

"Of course." Cambria's mouth twisted. Bolingbroke would want the best advantage for himself and his friends - anything to make money and increase his power. "And he told you about the corridors, his corridor."

"Oh," Corona waved a hand, "he'd seen all these fabulous worlds, ripe for exploitation. All I had to do was reach out and take one. He even took me on a tour of a few. I chose Nomad because, while they look fearsome, they were peaceful people determined not to be involved in conflict."

"That evil bastard." Cambria muttered.

"We had a mutually beneficial arrangement. From various functions and legal advice on off-world trading - that was going to be my next job, you know, the Off-World Trading Minister when Jarulinsky retired. I'd have been in the perfect position to help both of us."

"So... you actually know some of the worlds Bolingbroke visited."

"Sure. Even those he didn't have on his list, and let me tell you, it was a long one."

Those he didn't... Without her realising it, Corona Cottington-Blake had just bought herself a stay of execution. Now Cambria had to keep her alive

until they returned to Earth. She was the only person - that Cambria knew of - who'd visited Bolingbroke's other planets. And the list had been reconstructed from Moeller's memory. Maybe Cambria hadn't intimidated him enough into giving up all the worlds, or maybe there were so many, he just didn't remember them all. That's why Bolingbroke had written them down - and why Excalibur Jones stole it.

Cambria sighed. "Who built your corridors?" She asked and packed her rubbish into her pack. Corona did the same and they both went back to the trail.

"Gardishan." Corona said. "Um, Olmert and Olbert Gardishan."

"Oh, boy." Cambria muttered. "And Bolingbroke's?"

Corona shrugged. "I think it was Gardishan, too. I understand it's a family business. And they only cater to those who can afford the exorbitant price tag, the money grubbing little bastards."

"You know a lot about them?"

Corona's smile was smug. "Well, I am... *was* Trade Minister after all."

"And that means you know who else has one and where they came from, too."

The former Minister glanced at her and her expression turned calculating. "I do."

"This... is not going to end well." Cambria said.

"Oh, I don't know... it might end very well. For *me*."

The military would not be happy about this turn of events, nor would the Nomadians, nor the families of those killed. "Worked it out have you?"

"I think so, but I'll keep it to myself for the time being."

"You do that." Cambria said and saw the trail was widening again, that the trees were further apart. "Come on, I need to jog." And she quickened her pace. Corona huffed out an annoyed breath and followed.

They moved through the forest for another three hours, alternatively walking and jogging. The density of trees lessened and the species changed. Finally, Cambria saw the open grassland and stopped at the edge of the forest.

"Oh, damn." Corona said beside her. "I thought we were near a town or something, not more bloody nature."

"The good news is, we're out in the open."

"And the bad news?"

"I don't have any beacons to attract a shuttle's attention." She did some mental calculations. "By my reckoning, and correct me if you see fault, we crashed a little over ten minutes into our flight. Correct?"

"How would I know? I was unconscious, remember?"

"The only time I got any peace." Cambria remarked and earned a scowl. "Okay, so we're ten minutes into a sixty minute flight. It took us three days and two nights to come down the mountain, we've had a night in the forest..."

"You forgot a day." Corona said. "Actually, a little more. I was with the Thorians for half a day, then a night, and then another half-day. Two days."

"Since I was mostly dead at the time... but, okay, two days plus one in the forest and today. Agreed?"

"Um... okay, I'll go with that."

"We've been out and about for a week, more or less heading in the right direction. So... theoretically, civilisation shouldn't be that far away."

Corona swept her hand indicating the grassland. "I'm not seeing so much as a mud hut out here."

"True, but according to the GPS unit..."

"Which you don't have."

"Which I don't..." Her brain suddenly supplied her with the information and she closed her eyes, gently bashed a fist against her forehead.

Civilisation was ten kilometres to the right of them.

"Go on." Corona urged. "According to the GPS unit you don't have..."

"I should take up illegal drugs." Cambria muttered and moved through the grasslands in the direction of the town.

"Really? I know an excellent... Ah, yes, well then." Corona gave her a sickly smile as Cambria glared at her. "Rhetorical statement."

"Ten kilometres, Corona, and we hit the showers."

Corona's smile was huge and a happy light came into her eyes. Then dimmed to amusement. "Well, good. You'll pardon me for saying, but... Hunter, you look like you've been dragged through a bush backwards and hung out to mature like road kill."

"Corona, you don't smell like a daisy either." Cambria replied with a half smile.

Walking and jogging took them to within visual range of the town.

Corona slowed to a walk. "Well, hallelujah, I'm free..." She glanced at Cambria. "-ish."

Cambria raised an eyebrow. "Are you going to be good, or will I have to cuff you?"

"Of course I'll be good! What do you take me for?"

Cambria's other eyebrow joined the first.

"After all we've been through together and you still don't trust me."

Corona said with offended dignity. "I'm... crushed. Simply... *crushed*."

"I'll have your word, Corona." Cambria said.

Corona's lips tightened, then she nodded. "You have my word I'll behave."

"One false move..."

"I *know*." Corona said, aggrieved. "You'll execute the warrant. But you'll also have to do without all that lovely information I have in my head."

"I'm sure we'll cope; you're not the only source I have now."

Corona pouted.

They walked into a town built of prefabricated buildings, uniform in shape and colour: Square and white with two windows a piece.

Cambria stopped at the first and knocked on the door.

A young man with a thick thatch of dark brown hair and dark eyes opened the door, then jerked back.

"Whoa, *ladies*, that perfume ain't gonna cut it on the open market!"

He reached behind the door and then pointed a can at them, sprayed before Cambria could reach for her guns.

Floral scent enveloped them.

"I keep it for the bugs and as an anti-contaminant." He said. "So, what brings you to Freyaville? Can't be the partying," he frowned as he took in their appearance, "and you look like you've had a rough time of it. Want me to call the cops? Coz, they're just down the street from here. I'd say the white building, but they're *all* white." And he wheezed out a laugh.

Cambria and Corona looked at each other.

"So what can I do for you?" And he looked at them expectantly.

"A... hotel?" Corona asked. The man shook his head.

"Not around here, but we do have a camping ground for the ones who want to experience the," he lifted his fingers and crooked them to indicate quotes, "great outdoors and the natural setting."

"Transport, then." Cambria said.

"Got a bus that comes in twice a week with supplies, but it's not due in for a couple of days."

"How about a shower block."

"Oh, sure, that's down at the camp ground. The campers might like the," he lifted his fingers again, "great outdoors, but they also want their creature comforts."

"And the campground is..."

"That a'way. Can't miss it. Go through town and it's on your right, next to the Freya River."

Cambria pointed in the same direction as he and he nodded. "Can't miss it."

"Thanks."

"Have a nice day!" He chirped and closed the door, left them on the doorstep.

Cambria heard the spray can again.

"I don't think he gets out much." Corona remarked.

* * *

The campground was as populated as the town, with tents of all shapes, sizes and bright colours, dotted about the landscape.

Through the tent city, Cambria saw the twenty-metre wide Freya River. The water would be bitterly cold with snow-melt and she turned around.

"Wow." She murmured and Corona turned to see what had caught her attention.

The mountains, black and forbidding with white capes under a stunning blue sky, and at the bottom, the dark green of the forest, the yellow of the grassland and the white of the buildings.

"I can see why the tourists come here." Corona said.

"Yes, but the Thorians are between them and those peaks."

"I would suggest they do a lot of hiking in the forests and the grasslands, do a bit of fishing in the river or simply absorb the beauty of the place and be content for a while." Corona said.

Cambria nodded. "You're probably right." She lowered her gaze and searched for the shower block, saw it on the town side of the camp. "Shower first, then food and after that, well, who knows?"

"Ah, yes." They both walked towards the pre-fabricated building. "I shall imagine it to be somewhere else, like my chateau, or the manor house. It had a lovely shower, dual heads for a front and back wash."

Cambria grunted. She'd never lived in luxury, but she'd never lived in poverty either. Over the past two years, she'd been in the jungle, at the Hunter facility or hotels. Now that she thought of it, the hotel in Cohasha City had been pretty nice.

Inside the shower block were two rows of twenty shower stalls. Steam rose above two of them.

"If you'll excuse me, Hunter, I'm planning some meaningful time under hot water."

"That sounds like a plan." Cambria agreed and they went into joining stalls.

Cambria set her pack on the low shelf and stripped off her clothes. She grabbed soap out of her pack and turned the water on.

From the next stall came a groan of pleasure and Cambria couldn't help but smile. She stepped under the water for a damned good scrubbing and the luxury of hot water.

Dressed in clean clothes and smelling fresh, Cambria stepped out of the stall and waited for Corona.

She used her enhanced vision to make sure she hadn't done a runner and saw the woman with her head back, luxuriating in the hot water cascading over her, the heat signatures blending.

"Come on, Corona, fresh food awaits." She said as a lure.

"Spoilsport." Corona grumbled and turned the water off, stepped in front of the automatic dryer.

She took just as long getting dressed as she did under the water, but Cambria didn't feel impatient, she accepted that this was the type of person Corona Cottington-Blake was; someone who indulged herself whenever possible, regardless of what other people might think.

Finally, she emerged, a smile on her face and her pack slung over her shoulder. Without the grime of the last week, or the cosmetics, Corona Cottington-Blake had the look of a mature outdoorswoman. Gone was the stress and tightness of expression Cambria was familiar with, as if without the trappings of power, the real Corona emerged.

A smile quirked the former minister's lips, a smile for a friend. "Did you say 'fresh' food?"

Cambria didn't want to like her, didn't want to fall into that trap lined with charm, but knowing what was coming, she allowed a relaxed smile in return. "Oh, I hope so. I don't know about you, but I'm a little bit tired of rations."

"Not so good for the digestion, either, although I *am* keeping the chocolate bars."

"Right." Cambria slung her own pack over her shoulder and left the building, Corona behind her. "Let's see if we can't find a restaurant and work out how to get out of town and back to New Breckenridge."

* * *

Corona ordered the steak, with vegetables. Cambria ordered the same and turned to the window. The town was small, but it was thriving with the tourist industry. Beyond the houses along the main street, construction was beginning on a newer, more permanent town and the locals were thrilled to bits.

"All it takes is a little bit of investment," the waitress, an older woman said, "and we are going to be the action capital of Ragnarok."

"What about the Thorians?" Corona asked and the waitress grinned.

"They've gone and done it now, shot down a shuttle I heard. Pilot and young co-pilot were the only survivors. The authorities caught a sympathiser, of all things, working for Shuttle control who's been allowing arms' shipments from off planet to land. I hope they throw the book at him."

Cambria put her booted foot over Corona's and pressed down.

"Is that so? Damn shame. So what's the government going to do about the Thorians?"

The waitress nodded. "Sending in the cops to roust 'em. While they never bothered nobody, nobody bothered them. But shooting down a shuttle? With passengers? What were they thinking?" She shook her head. "Jail for Allan this time, for sure."

"Who's Allen?" Corona asked.

The waitress snorted. "Thinks he's some sort of a god. Hemdil, Humdull, Haydool? Something like that. He used to be a professor at the University of Cape Town. Mythological Literature or some such nonsense. He had a breakdown – probably spent way too much time wallowing in the past, if you ask me – and moved here to create his own perfect little world. People like that always attract malcontents. Anyway, I'll be getting your steaks. You want some beer with that?"

"Wine, if you have it, a nice cha..." Corona began and looked at the waitress. "Ah, no. Guess not. In that case, Stout, dark, please."

"And for you?"

"A tall bitter." Cambria said with a smile.

The waitress left.

"At last, the local constabulary will do something about those heathens."
Corona smirked.

"Indeed. And I'm glad to see Jeffers and Derryn made it, although I have a bone to pick with that young man, when I catch with him, that is." She scowled.

"Oh, dear. What did he do to deserve such ire?"

"He stole my knife and left me in the forest. Blatantly, lied to Jeffers to cover up his crime."

Corona shook her head. "Always knew that boy was trouble."

"Corona, half the time *you* were the one who got him *into* trouble."

"That does not excuse his current behaviour. I never thought of him as a thief." She said with a sniff.

The waitress returned with their drinks and Cambria emptied the glass with one attempt.

"Will you be needing a refill, then?" The waitress asked with a grin.

Chapter Ten

New Breckenridge, it turned out, was an hour's drive away. And since the waitress commuted every day, Cambria and Corona hitched a ride with her. Their driver, Martha Chen, loved speed.

"I don't believe it." Corona kept muttering. "We could have gone the extra distance and been back by now."

Cambria gave her a warning glance and she subsided.

"So you two were out in the forest for a few days." Martha said. "Did you see any of them big cats? The ones with six legs? Damned difficult to see in the forest with that coat and all and no hunting's allowed."

Corona slid her a look.

"We did, but just the one." Cambria said.

"They are the damned prettiest things I've ever seen for all their ferocious nature."

"Do you hike on the weekends?" Corona asked.

"Most days I'm out there, studying the fauna. I wait tables for extra money and because it keeps me in touch with people."

"I see." Corona said, when she didn't.

"People come to Ragnarok as an escape. It's beautiful, there's a lot of space and it has fresh air. A person can... breathe here. But some... the isolation gets to them. Me, I'm out in the woods for days on end studying small and large furry creatures. Gets that I can't stand to be with myself. So I took a job waitressing; gives me the opportunity to chat."

"So... it's a hobby?"

From the look on Corona's face, she couldn't believe anyone would willingly camp out.

"Dear me no, it's my *life*! I'm a xeno-biologist with the University of China. I'm working on a wildlife report and through the University, there's

a group of us – on different worlds you understand – hoping to petition the World Council to make certain planets total wildlife sanctuaries.”

“Wouldn’t that close them off to people?” Cambria asked.

“No, just the money-hungry exploiters of natural resources. People can come and go as they please. It’s the *industries* we’re after, so what happened to Earth never happens to the wild places. Eco-tourism, that’s the way to go. Keep the bloody developers-for-development’s-sake away – except for those who will preserve the natural environment.”

“Sounds like a plan, then.” Cambria said.

“Too right. There are plenty of empty rocks in the galaxy that can be exploited for minerals, they don’t need to destroy the environment for them.”

“Not a hobby, not a life, but a passion.” Cambria mused.

“Sounds like you understand.” Martha’s gaze met hers and she nodded.

“Where can I drop you ladies off?” Martha asked.

“At the biggest, most luxurious ho...”

“The bus station will be fine, thank you, Martha.” Cambria said with a smile as Corona’s shoulders slumped.

“Misery-guts.” Corona sulked.

Martha grinned, but pulled up in front of the entrance to the bus heading up the mountain.

“Thank you, Martha. You’ve saved us from a longer journey.” Cambria said as she climbed out.

“You’re welcome. Come back and see me soon, okay?”

She bent down. “I will.” She said and Martha frowned a little.

Cambria stood and patted the roof of the car, watched the low profiled four-wheeled drive take off.

“So, nearly home.” Corona said nervously.

"Not quite. I have some unfinished business."

"We're staying in a hotel?" Corona brightened.

"Yeah, we're staying in a hotel."

Corona did a tiny happy dance. She held her arms tight to her body and feet went up and down as if jogging on the spot. "Yes!"

Cambria rolled her eyes. "Show some maturity, would you please?" She said and looked around. "It's a little undignified for a former Minister of the Council to be jumping up and down like a kid with a present."

Corona sobered, dropped her hands. "You know what? 'Former' is the operative word. Former everything, really. In the time we've spent together, I've realised a few things..."

"Please, not the redemption speech."

Corona's eyebrows lifted. "And you won't be getting it, I'm sure. I was going to say that it's terribly free-ing not to have any responsibilities. No decisions to make, that is, and not be perfectly turned out every single minute of the day to satisfy politically-correct appearances." With a grin, she fluffed her already fuzzy hair. "Now I don't *have to* use expensive cosmetics. I can do things for myself and not expect staff to do it for me. I find that rather liberating." Corona's smile was content.

Cambria saw what she was looking for and headed down the street, away from the buses.

The hotel was ten-storeys of native black stone. Cambria figured it was for people pausing before their shuttles left for parts further afield, but it was a striking building on the landscape.

She booked a suite on the top level, much to Corona's surprise and pleasure.

Cambria leaned on the counter while the clerk booked them in. She scanned the area, saw excited patrons hoist climbing gear, or skis, or

backpacks onto shoulders, tour guides corralled chattering teenagers and business suits arrived or left with an aggrieved air. Her study shifted to the dining room where staff hovered over diners. Her brows lowered as a waiter, with a short white jacket, inelegantly slid plates from a trolley onto a table of five, uncaring if anything spilled.

"Your card, madam." The clerk said and Cambria turned to him with a distracted smile.

"Thank you." She accepted the card.

Corona grabbed her arm, hauled her to the waiting elevator.

"What's your hurry?" Cambria asked and tugged free.

"Room service." Corona sighed and grinned all the way up.

The suite had two bedrooms, double, a lounge area, with entertainment units, and a bathroom between the two sleeping areas.

Corona opened the door and stared at the bathtub, turned to her, misty eyed, and gave her a hug. "You *remembered*."

Cambria cleared her throat, uncomfortable. "It's a bathroom, Corona, other rooms have them, too."

Corona wiped her eyes with her fingers. "Only the suites. I checked out the brochures while you booked us in. And you didn't have to get a suite; you did it for *me*."

"Bubble-bursting time?" Cambria asked.

"No. Don't you *dare*. Let me enjoy this last night without thinking of tomorrow. For now, I'm hitting the room service and having a wallow, all, I might add, on the government's dollar. Nice irony there."

"Fine." Cambria sighed. "Have at it. I need to go out. And I want you to prom..."

"I am *not* giving up *my* bathtub or Julio, for the illusion of being able to escape. No money, remember? Not even a credit card."

"Julio? Who is Julio?"

Corona's expression turned smug. "Hopefully, he's the young and studly room attendant I'm going to take advantage of."

"Oh, jeez, just the imagery I *didn't* need." Cambria spun away from the deep tub and the vibrant red of the tiles. "Enjoy yourself."

Corona hugged her again. "Not such a total bitch after all." She said and stepped back, closed the door of the bathroom.

"You have no idea just how 'total' I can be." Cambria murmured and went downstairs to the reception desk.

"May I help you?" The young woman asked.

"Where do the pilots hang out when they're not on duty?" She asked.

"You'll find all our facilities an improvement on the establishments frequented by..."

"Yes, right, I get that. But I need to find a *particular* pilot. I promise you, any carousing I might indulge in, will be done right here."

"Madam," the offended woman began.

"No, thank you. I'll speak with someone else if you don't have the information."

The woman huffed and drew herself upright, as if standing to attention. "Most of the pilots drink down at Fenrir's. If your pilot isn't there, they'll be at the Valhalla." The woman checked her slim-line watch around her bony wrist. "It's a little early for them, but you might get lucky."

"Thank you; and I'll find these... establishments down near the shuttle port?"

"Yes." She said and dropped her eyes to the computer.

Dismissed, Cambria went out the door and walked down to Fenrir's. Further down the street was the Valhalla and she considered them both.

Fenrir's, with its wolf's head sign, appeared the most likely and she stepped inside.

In keeping with the Viking theme, Fenrir's was decorated as a drinking hall, with furs on the seats, an open pit over which a... porcine creature was roasting. The cups were tankards and the tables had thick, yellowed candles in glass containers. A few men in pilot uniforms sat scattered about at long wooden tables.

Cambria went to the bar and hooked her butt on a stool.

"Getcha?" The barkeep asked. He was young, handsome with dark hair tied back in a queue, long lashes and blue eyes, smooth skin and a faint smile.

"Ale," she ordered, "dark as you can make it."

He built the drink slowly, like it should be, and eyed her. "Don't get many women pilots in here of a day."

"I'm not a pilot." Although she figured she probably could be once she laid hands on the stick.

"Looking to hook up with one, then?"

"Looking for young Derryn." She replied.

"A little *too* young, don't you think?" The barkeeper frowned and poured a little bit more.

"He has something of mine that I'd like back. I have no other interest in him."

"I... see. Well, when he does come in, go easy on him would you? He's had a rough time of it."

"How's that?"

The barkeeper set the perfect dark ale capped with creamy foam in front of her and leaned his elbows on the counter, spoke quietly. "The shuttle

crash. He and Jeffers were the only survivors. He's tore up some about it. His girlfriend died up there on the mountain."

Cambria dropped her gaze from his, hid her grimace behind the glass. "I'm sorry to hear that." She said, trying not to curse. "I'll be gentle with him."

"He's a good lad and it's a shame this happened to him."

"It surely is." Cambria agreed, although not for the reasons the barkeeper thought. "Maybe we can keep this between ourselves. I wouldn't want to upset him again. I'll just sit here and enjoy this ale."

The barkeeper checked his watch. "He'll be along in about half an hour. By then, there will be more of a crowd and you can ask him without causing a ruckus."

"There's a plan." She murmured and settled down to wait. No-one should sympathise with Derryn. His behaviour demonstrated a lack of human compassion and gross selfishness. From the barkeeper's kindly and protective expression, Cambria felt certain Derryn had been exaggerating his stories to make himself look the tragic hero. The bastard hadn't even sent a retrieval team for the 'remains'. And where was Jeffers in all this? He was the responsible pilot, why hadn't he seen to their recovery?

True to the barkeeper's timing, more pilots came in and the crowd began to grow. Cambria ordered a second ale from another 'keeper and took it to a table near the fire-pit.

Not long after, Derryn came in with friends, all trying to cajole him into having a good time and took seat two tables away from Cambria. One young man with a shock of ginger hair ordered drinks, advised Derryn to put his wallet away.

Derryn did so with seeming reluctance, but Cambria saw the brief smile.

She waited until the second round arrived before shifting positions to sit behind Derryn. She listened to the conversations, the attempt to bolster Derryn's mood.

"Come on, Derryn, it's over with. You need to move on." One young man said.

"Yeah. Time to move on – or seek counselling." Another snickered.

"You don't understand; don't know what it was like." Derryn replied. "Dead bodies, just me and Jeffers trying to make it down the mountain on our own. The wind, the snow, the tiny ledges. And us, with barely any supplies. I'll never forget it." He said softly. "It was only with the GPS unit that I was able to guide us out. Jeffer's'll be in the hospital for another two weeks. It was a bad break. That scree stuff..." He shook his head. "Totally evil. If I hadn't worked out how to get down, we'd still be up there."

"Show us the blade again." The first lad asked. "It's awesome."

"Guys, I dunno. It's not a trophy, Petro. It's a... memorial, I suppose. Something to remind me of..." He sighed dramatically. "I *shouldn't* show anyone. It's kinda personal, ya know?"

"Why not? You have every other time we asked." The second friend said.

Cambria rose and turned, placed her hands on Derryn's shoulders.

"Because it's not *his* knife to show."

The four young men looked up at her with surprise and she felt Derryn's muscles tighten, then tremble.

"It's *my* knife and I'd like it back please, Derryn."

He uttered the word "*Hunter!*" before relaxing into a dead faint.

Cambria lifted her hands and he slipped to the floor, under the table.

But his faint was not without effect. The single word rippled out in a whisper and conversations around them ceased, people turned towards her and the group.

The young men looked at each other with various expressions: fear, surprise, doubt.

The handsome barkeeper came over and took in the scene with one look.

"I thought you weren't going to cause a ruckus?" He said and bent down to pick the young pilot up.

"I changed my mind. I decided I wanted my knife back after all."

"That hunting blade he's been flashing around?" He eased Derryn into the seat and gently laid his head on the table top. "Derryn said he found it in the crash."

Cambria smiled at him. "He *found* it on my... unconscious body."

The barkeeper's brows lowered. "I think I'd like to see some identification, please."

Cambria pulled out the wallet, opened it for him to study.

"You're a *Hunter*?" He said and she heard a few gasps, some pilots shifted away. "Who's your target?" He asked, suspicious.

She pointed to Derryn "His *girlfriend*. Who, I might add, is safe at a hotel nearby."

"Why, that little liar." One of Derryn's companions said. "After all the drinks we've bought him."

Cambria bent down and lifted the back of a slowly recovering Derryn, unhooked the sheath from his belt and stood.

"I'd love to stick around and hear his explanations..." She looked at Derryn's soon to be ex-friends, "unless you want me to take him in for fraud?"

Derryn groaned and she stepped back.

He slapped a hand on the table, lifted his head and looked at his friends.

"She gone? I swear, I thought she was dead at the time and..."

"...there I was, bleeding like a stuck pig, and you did nothing to help me, nor did you go for help. You abandoned Corona and me to save yourself." Cambria said behind him. His muscles tightened again and his face was pale when he turned. "Worse, you took the *only* weapon I had to rescue your... girlfriend – who, by the way is uninjured. So what does that make you, Derryn? What is a man who abandons those who need him? Who helped *him* off the mountain?"

The silence was near deafening in the bar and all eyes turned to Derryn. He shrank into himself, his face bright with embarrassment and shame.

"I... I... panicked!" Derryn pleaded.

She snorted with disbelief. "You did *not*. I heard you, while I was semi-conscious, as you stood over me: *Can't find them, Jeffers!* And I know damned well Jeffers will confirm those words."

Derryn's chin trembled, his bottom lip stuck out, but he didn't speak.

"You have two choices, Derryn. I can arrest you for theft, for the deliberate abandonment of a Hunter in distress, for disobeying a direct order, for being just plain stupid enough to think you'd get away with it. Or you can pack up and head back to Earth. Here, and on any other planet, you're pilot's licence will be revoked and you declared as being unfit to hold one until the appropriate authorities give you leave to try again." She stared down at him with an empty expression. "My report will be most specific in the details."

"I'll go." He said and got to his feet, hung his head to avoid making eye contact with his friends.

"Good choice. And Derryn," he raised resentful eyes to hers. "This is the *second* and most serious time you've defied the order of a Hunter. There will *not* be a third. Do I make myself clear?"

She heard someone suck in a breath in the silence. Patrons shifted, uneasy with her words.

"What does that mean?" someone ask in a harsh whisper. Cambria held Derryn's gaze as the barkeeper answered. "It means the next time, an execution warrant will be issued."

She heard murmurs of discontent. "He's just a boy!" "Idiot." "They wouldn't, would they?" "Wow, that's harsh." "You wanna challenge a *Hunter's Decree*? Are you nuts?"

Derryn paled, his eyes turned frightened.

"And it will be *me*, who comes after you." She promised.

Derryn looked around at the patrons, but he saw very little support. Everyone else in the room understood. He slumped into his seat and Cambria addressed the barkeeper. "I think he needs a drink, while he processes his... recent behaviour." She said.

The crowd parted to allow her to exit. At the door, she paused. *Was* it too harsh? Cambria knew his lack of attendance at the orientation and his own arrogance brought him to this. She'd warned him on the mountain and he'd chosen to disregard her, chosen selfishness over helping her or Corona by reporting the events. At least he helped Jeffers – that was his only redeeming act. No. He deserved his punishment. She pushed through the door and stepped out onto the street.

Cambria went back to the hotel and to the suite.

She heard the sounds of... must have been 'Julio' getting Corona to make those... and did an abrupt about face, went down to the restaurant instead.

"Madam," the concierge said with an arch look, "we do not allow... weapons in the restaurant."

She smiled at him. "Where would you like me to *put* them?"

His face flushed. "Your room would be more appropriate."

"Long way to reach for protection against the screaming masses, don't you think?"

"This is the finest establishment in New Breckenridge, madam and we..."

Cambria held up a hand. "Stop. Okay? Just... *stop*."

He folded his lips together.

She did not want to go back upstairs while Corona was entertaining, she wanted to eat.

"How about a compromise?"

He lifted an eyebrow.

"You keep the pistols here, under the counter, and I'll just go and have something nice to eat. I won't even disturb the other diners with my rough manners and violent ways." She tried a smile on him and he sniffed.

Then he gave a curt nod and she peeled out of the harness, handed it over. He took the harness as if it were poisonous and slid the weapon under his podium.

He did not ask if she had any other weapons on her and she didn't offer them.

He took a menu and slapped it under his arm. "This way, if you please." He held out an arm, tilted his head and she moved forward.

The restaurant was smarter than she expected with diners in suits and dresses. They eyed her as she walked past and the concierge wore a tight, pained expression as he guided her to a seat near the kitchen door.

"Your room number please?" he asked as he snapped out the linen serviette.

"Ah... top floor suite, number... oh, um... 10-02."

The concierge goggled at her then swallowed hard. "Ten... oh... *two*?"

Cambria nodded. "Yep, that's the one. Two bedrooms, a lounge area and a red tiled bathroom with a tub big enough to fit a platoon in?"

His expression turned vaguely ill. "Hunter..."

"Petersen, Cambria Petersen."

A twitch started at the side of his mouth and he handed her the menu.

"And..." He cleared his throat. "Will your... colleague be joining you?" He inquired politely.

"Nope. Busy would be an understatement." She smirked.

"Indeed. Enjoy your meal." He bowed and held a finger to the twitch as he walked away.

She ordered pepperoni pizza *and* beer.

* * *

A nice alcohol buzz filled her head and the hot pepperoni zinged her belly. She was, she thought, quite content in that moment.

She picked up her harness, signed the receipt and leaned against the wall of the elevator as it made its way up to the tenth level. A nice long hot bath and a good night's doze would see her right for the morning.

Oh, and she had to speak with Corona about tomorrow.

A single lamp near the entertainment unit provided the only light in the suite. Corona and Julio must have exhausted each other by now and she smirked.

That Corona, what a wildcat! Cambria covered her mouth and giggled. She shouldn't be thinking such thoughts. And she straightened her mouth, tried not to giggle again. She was a kick-ass, tougher-than-tough, toughity-tough, Hunter, enjoying a happy state of drunkenness and she didn't care. Another giggle escaped.

Nope, not caring tonight.

Cambria rubbed her eyes. Maybe a long hot soak? *Nah*. She went to the mini bar set her harness down on the top and dragged out a bottle of beer, drank it down, and reached for another.

She took the beer and slouched down onto the couch, rested her boots on the coffee table and crossed her ankles. She channel-surfed and she guzzled the drink. Nothing interested her as she flicked through recorded programs from Earth.

She settled on the music channel, let the music wash over her and leaned back against the couch with a sigh.

Not mountain climbing, not hiking, not fighting; not talking, not discussing, not decision-making. Just... not doing anything except enjoying the drowsy state of too much beer. This was the *best*.

She was on the edge of the twilight when she felt someone pluck the half-empty beer bottle from her hand.

"Go 'way, Julio, not interested." She mumbled.

Fingers broke the tabs on her boots, peeled them off along with her socks and warm hands began massaging her feet. "'kay, jus' give me a min... Oh... tha's good."

The hands stopped their ministrations and slid up her shins, past her knees, over her thighs to her waist.

She slapped a hand over the foreign one and brought her head forward, pried her eyes open. A familiar smile lit up his handsome face.

"Hello, Cambria, did you miss me?" Excalibur Jones asked.

As a sobering wakeup call it was right up there with sirens, but she'd drunk too much to focus clearly.

"Jones? What are *you* doing here? Why are you here?"

He continued to undo her pants. "You didn't come to find me, so I decided I'd come and find you, and the best way to do that, was to find Cottington-Blake – too easy – and keep watch. You've been missing for over a week, Cambria. People worry."

She pushed his hand away and he started on the tabs of her shirt.

Her eyes went to Corona's room. "You didn't..."

"No, not yet, but she'll sleep through the night. Who is Julio?" He asked and spread her shirt wide.

"Corona's fantasy man." She tried to slap his hands away, but he tugged the shirt out of her pants. "Look, just stop that will you?"

"In a moment. So you're not sharing Julio."

"No. He's a figment of Corona's imagination."

"Ah, that's why she kept calling me 'Julio'." He got up and grabbed the cuffs of her trousers, tugged them down and off.

"We're not doing this." She said and squinted. "You... were working in the dining room."

"You're not that drunk and as I said, I *missed* you." He looked down at her with a slight smile. "No... underwear?"

Her head fell back and she closed her eyes. She was not explaining that she'd run out of clean ones. "Christ. I'm supposed to *kill* you, Jones, not..."

"We'll get to that later. For now, you need to relax."

"How did you know where I was?" She asked as he moved away from her. She heard the rustle of clothing, knew he was disrobing.

"I asked around. I've been looking for you for days. I knew you'd be back if I waited long enough, paid attention to stories and loitered around appropriate buildings. Corona is used to luxury and I knew she'd convince to stay somewhere nice as a parting gesture. This is the best establishment in New Breckenridge; best place to await your return. I can't seem to teach you not to be so compassionate."

"I'm becoming predictable in my old age." She murmured and she felt his hair-roughened skin brush the outside of her thighs as he kneeled astride her lap.

He leaned over her. "You'll never be old, and never predictable. To others. I just know you better than you think I do."

Cambria sighed at the feel of his erection pressed against her upper belly. Heat surged through her veins, pooled low. "And no, you're not going to..."

"Whether you like it or not, Cambria, and I know you *do*, I'm fucking you. I am the only man for you. The sooner you accept that, the sooner we can get on." He laid his mouth on hers and his knees tightened on her hips.

She gave up before she started resisting. He was a bad, bad man, but... she kissed him, opened her mouth beneath his and sighed with pleasure as his hot tongue tangled with hers, thrusting against hers and retreating.

And, oh, lord, she went wet with need of him.

He lifted his mouth from hers, kissed her chin, brushed little kisses over her face and then down her throat.

She ran her hands through his silky hair and across his broad shoulders. He'd muscled up since the last time she'd seen him and she dragged her nails down his back to his ass, squeezed the firmness and held him to her. He eased back, sat on her knees.

"I think we need to get more comfortable," he murmured and slid his hands under her shirt, pushed it off her shoulders and down her arms. Then he eased between her thighs and pulled her towards him.

The touch of him against her belly electrified her and her fingers pressed into his lower back.

His mouth returned to hers, with more intensity, more vigour. The heat rose and he became more urgent. She held him to her as he turned and lowered her to the couch cushions, then he slid inside her with one easy sweep.

She lifted her hands above her head, stared at him as he spread her thighs and plunged deep.

His mouth clamped on her breast bit down as he thrust into with power, with energy reserved for her.

Oh, she loved the way he moved inside her, the way his thickness filled her, rubbed all the nerves. His hand slid under her hip, lifted her to him as he increased the rhythm, slammed into her with sure strokes and nipped her nipple.

She arched back as the powerful surge of an orgasm swept over her, blurred her vision. Jones moved into her again and pulsed deep.

He breathed in through his nose and let go of her breast, ran his tongue over her chest. "I can't get enough of you." He mumbled against her throat. "I just... can't." He licked her chin and shifted inside her, started to firm up again. "I don't know why." He murmured and slid part the way out. "I think of you all the time, being here, inside you, *all* the fucking time." And eased back in. He slid out again, and slammed home hard.

She looked at him and hooked her legs around his hips.

And he began thrusting into her with anger, with fury, but most all with passion - for her.

But this time wasn't about her, but *him* and his efforts to rid himself of whatever he felt for her.

His hands moved down her chest, pressed her down and she came for a second time, a smaller orgasm, just enough to grip him and make him come, too.

He held himself still over her and shut his eyes, shuddered.

Then his grey eyes opened and he stared down at her with venom.

"I expected you to have changed."

She sighed out a breath. "Into what?"

He slipped out of her and marched to the bathroom. "Join me?" He held out his hand and she rose, but she didn't take his hand and he went into the

shower cubicle, turned the water on. She stepped in next to him, beneath the hot water.

He coated his palms in soap, rubbed it over her shoulders and down her back to her buttocks.

"I expected... I don't know. When I picked you up, you were all hairless and naked, as if a newborn, a... skeleton with a layer of skin. Scattered around you were the black rotting remains of the aliens you blew up." He turned her around and applied soap to her front, down her legs.

"Nothing else but snow and devastation." He looked up at her. "I don't know why you're alive. I don't understand or know why I came back for you." He said and stood.

Cambria applied the soap to his muscular body, ran her hands over his slicked skin, felt the firm muscles underneath. She was crazy to do this, even crazier to enjoy the feel of his body under her hands.

"I don't know either, Jones. I remember a white flash and the next thing I saw was your face." She cupped his jaw. "I don't know what I am anymore, but I can't be human, can I?"

His hands held her hips. "You feel human to me, Cambria, and that's all that matters. Whatever is going on in your head over this, you need to set it aside and keep your attention on what matters. Me."

She sighed at his arrogance, then ignored it. "Whilst on Ragnarok, I've been killed twice." She said and his grip tightened. "I've been forced to face what that means... and I want to know *why*. I want to know what was done to me and I want them to change me back."

"And if *they* can't or won't?"

Tears filled her eyes, but she didn't look away from his grey gaze. "I don't know." She said through a tight throat.

"Then like I said, don't worry about it until we find them." He gently kissed her forehead. "Until then, I'm your focus."

"We?"

"I leave you alone for a few months to recover, expect you to come after me and what happens? You come to *this* world Hunting and end up dead. *Twice*. That does not fill me with confidence in your ability to actually find me wherever I go."

Cambria stuck out her bottom lip. "You, Excalibur Jones, are a serial killer. Condemned by the courts, by your own words and you expect me to just... let you go?"

He grinned at her.

"No. On so many levels, *no*." She shook her head. "Jones, how many Hunters have you injured or killed? It's an automatic death sentence. No court is going to commute that; no court anywhere is going let you go. *Ever*."

His expression was smug. "I know. That's what makes this game so much fun. It's the chase. Being caught is no fun, but I'm the one doing the chasing, well, then, it puts a whole new slant on the game."

Cambria stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel, dried off. Jones took his time and she left him to it.

She picked up her clothes and headed into her bedroom, draped her clothes over her pack and climbed into bed.

Jones came in and climbed in behind her, hung his arm over her waist and breathed her scent in. "It will work out, Cambria. It will *all* work out." He murmured and dropped into sleep.

She stared at the long, dark red curtains and knew it wouldn't be. Ever again.

Chapter Eleven

Corona startled her awake.

"Julio!" She crowed and bounced onto the bed, came in under the covers and snuggled up to Jones.

Cambria's eyes popped open and she turned.

"Corona! What the hell are you *doing*?"

The woman rose up on her elbow, leaned her head on her hand. "I see you've enjoyed the delights of Julio, too. Fabulous, isn't he?"

Cambria looked down into arrogant grey eyes.

"You faithless *bastard*." She sneered and threw the covers back over the pair of them. Got up and grabbed her clothes and her pack.

"What's wrong with her?" She heard Corona ask Jones, right before the giggling erupted.

Cambria got dressed in the bathroom. And wondered at the pain lodged in her chest no amount of alien tech could heal. She rubbed the spot and went out to sit on the couch.

Eventually, Corona staggered out of the bedroom with a ruffled and flushed appearance, clutching her clothes to her chest. She gave Cambria a sloppy smile and went into the bathroom.

Cambria donned her weapons' harness and waited, stared blankly at the dark entertainment screen until the bathroom and bedroom doors opened.

Excalibur stepped out of the bedroom dressed in jeans and a white t-shirt, Corona in black slacks and dove-grey silk blouse, her fuzzy hair somewhat tamed into a severe bun.

Cambria let her eyes drifted over the tight expanse of t-shirt covering Excalibur's chest, then stood. "Corona Cottingham-Blake, convicted mass murderer, meet Excalibur Jones, convicted serial killer. Jones, Blake."

Corona's mouth dropped open with shock, while Excalibur's expression tightened.

Cambria left them staring at each other and went down for breakfast. She ordered bacon and eggs, with hash browns and sausage. And a large coffee.

Ten minutes later, Excalibur strode in dragging a reluctant Corona. He pushed the former minister into a chair and sat opposite, picked up a menu, then lowered it.

"I'm disappointed in you, Cambria. That was as spiteful as it was juvenile."

She looked at him and raised an eyebrow. "Well, 'Julio', if memory serves, *you* started it. Do you need a re-cap?"

He glared at her. "While it is gratifying to know the deep jealousy you feel, it was still inappropriate."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Oh, don't you even..."

"You two already *know* each other!" Corona gasped.

Cambria ignored her. "If I said I'd boinked and was continuing to boink Major Caparossi, you'd throw a hissy fit. So why is it okay for you to screw the Minister here, then me, then the Minister again, and then threaten anyone I might want a relationship with?"

Jones leaned back in his chair. "You know the way I am, Cambria, know what I'm capable of. Caparossi would be a dead man walking." Jones said. "But *I* know you wouldn't screw him, because *you* know what would happen, what I'd do to him."

The waiter arrived with her breakfast and a carafe of coffee.

Jones ordered the same, but Corona went for fruit salad and wheat toast.

When the waiter left, Cambria resumed the conversation. "So let me test my understanding of your twisted sexist logic: it's okay for you to screw

around because you're Excalibur Jones, but not for me, a free agent. Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes." He acknowledged, his expression turned empty. "You are mine and no one touches what I own."

Cambria's temper simmered. "And if I said the same?"

Excalibur's face lit up with pleasure. "I'd welcome it. We'd become true partners then, as we are meant to be."

Cambria glared at him. When he was in this mood, she'd learned not to threaten him; too many innocent bystanders could get killed if she went for her gun. And she didn't know where his weapons were.

She heard a tap on the underneath of the table, knew where his weapons were after all: he had a gun levelled at her or someone else. Probably someone else, just to test her.

The waiter returned and set plates and bowls on the table.

She consumed her breakfast in resentful silence. Corona wisely kept quiet.

When she was done, Cambria leaned back with coffee in hand and waited for Corona to finish. She wanted to be gone from here, back to where the world made sense and Jones was the enemy. Back when she knew the difference between right and wrong, between villains and heroes and where orders were clear: go there, pick up him or her, return. She should have killed Jones when she had the chance; now those opportunities were lost and she had to set the problem of Jones aside.

This was supposed to be a *simple* mission. Where, when had it all gone wrong?

Corona toyed with her breakfast, eeking it out as long as possible and Cambria let her. She poured herself another cup of coffee.

Jones, too, seemed disinclined to get on with the day, and he, too, brooded.

When she could not extend breakfast any longer, Corona sat back with a sigh. "You've been very patient with me." She said and lifted her gaze.

"And now?" Cambria asked.

"It's time to go." Corona said and stood.

Cambria rose too, but Jones kept his seat.

Unable and unwilling to deal with him she walked away, signed the chit and escorted Corona upstairs for their gear.

Corona picked up her pack and her gaze drifted around the room. "I enjoyed my stay here, Cambria." She turned, her expression serious. "So I thank you for it. But now, it's time to face the music, as they used to say, and take my punishment."

Cambria lifted an eyebrow. "It may not be as bad as you expect. Given the information in that aristocratic brain of yours, that is."

"They'll offer a deal?"

"You'll have to take it up with them." Cambria said and resisted saying the words that she'd put in a good word for her. She couldn't. Not and stay true to the memory of those marines and Nomadian who died in Corona's pursuit of power. She had to be punished in any way the courts deemed just. All she could do was inform the authorities of Corona's actions on the mountain; and wasn't that putting in a 'good word' for her? She ground her teeth, compelled to do the right thing.

"Let's go." She grumbled.

Downstairs, she saw that Jones had disappeared. She signed the bill and escorted Corona to the bus station.

Her felon spent the journey staring out the window. Cambria kept her eyes alert for Jones. It wasn't like him to disappear. He was out there,

somewhere, watching and waiting. Maybe perpetrating a heinous crime to assuage his anger and frustrations.

She couldn't do anything about him. She was already overdue with Corona.

Finally, they arrived at the corridor and went in without waiting.

Cambria opened the door to the ready room. Guards waited as did Major Caparossi and she felt the tension ease away, felt the relief at the sight of the handsome officer.

"Welcome home, Hunter Petersen." He indicated to the guards and they stepped up to bracket Corona.

"Bye Cambria, it's been fun." Corona gave her a wave and went off with the guards.

Cambria sighed. "So much for the easy mission."

Major Caparossi watched the mass murderer go. "I'll be interested to read your report." He said.

"I warn you now, Major, it will be a long one." She said with a relaxed smile.

* * *

Cambria spent the next week writing up her report and brooding.

Corona had made a deal and it stuck in Cambria's craw that because of her and her big mouth, the dead would have no revenge. That the woman responsible would go to a penal colony, be stripped of all assets, but live out her life on what amounted to an agricultural colony.

It hadn't been Corona's wealth, nor her political connections that saved her, it had been knowledge and now they had a dozen more worlds to search. A dozen more corridors to shut down.

The call came at the end of the week for her next mission and she presented herself to the ready-room, loaded up and ready to Hunt. She

hadn't realised that Earth, or her part of since she wasn't allowed outside, was making her crazy.

Yes, the facility had entertainment, but it wasn't the same as fresh Earth air and it seemed she'd not be able to go outside until this generation of people had died. And that depressed her. Earth no longer felt like home.

Then Major Caparossi smiled at her with a gleam in his eyes and her depression lifted, speculation taking its place. "I've got a special one for you."

"Do tell." She invited.

"One word, Cambria: Gardishan."

A thrill went down her spine. The source of all the illegal corridors. They'd be able to stop more being built, give the Hunters time to track the others.

"Mission?"

"Twofold: here's your warrant. It's active and all our allied worlds are aware of it, including the Gardishan's home world of Nexus True. Seems the Gardishan boys have been very bad and selling the technology to anyone, not just us. The local law enforcers have their own warrants and are also hunting the Gardishans. It's a first in, first served kind of deal. The second part is that you need to acquire a list of all the corridors on this world that the Gardishan's built. Go through the paperwork. We need that list ASAP. If there are other worlds on it, we'll hand the information over to the relevant authorities."

"Right. So, kill the Gardishans, get the list." She adjusted her pack and Caparossi reached out to help her, tugging the straps and making sure the pack fit.

"Close enough, but if the Nexians have the opportunity, let them take the kill. They are mighty pissed that this has happened. And they're embarrassed that it's their own people who have betrayed the Sacred Trust."

She turned to him. "Sacred Trust?"

Caparossi grinned. "The Sacred Trust is that no off-worlder gets their hands on Nexian technology until a world-wide... ah, referendum is held. It keeps everything on their world because the referendum invariably fails. The Gardishans disagree with that part of democracy, it seems."

"You know, I can see their point after Ragnarok. There's a world that needs more exploitation, not less. The locals barely survive, and yet it is ripe for eco-tourism if it's handled with sensitivity."

"I'll take it up with the Council, shall I?"

"Ha, ha." She said and went to the door.

"One more thing. Do you remember me telling you about the partnership deal?"

She waved a hand. "Vaguely."

"Yours is waiting on Nexus True." He said.

Cambria frowned. "But I thought you..."

He was already shaking his head. "As much as I would like to be a Hunter, I don't have the mentality for it. I'm better suited to the retrieval teams." He lifted his shoulders. "But that's okay. After what I've seen happen to Hunters, I'm just as happy not being one." A smile curved his mouth. "Besides, lots of people throw themselves at me in gratitude."

"Lots of... female people, maybe?" She asked with a twinge of jealousy.

"Maybe." He said with a sly glance. "Off you go. I won't say it will be an easy mission – we know how that turned out – but it should be interesting for you."

"Thanks, Major. What's my time frame?"

"Well, if you don't have a lead in a couple of weeks, check back in. We'll take any of your recommendations under consideration in formulating an alternative plan. But the law out there will work in conjunction with you. They want this stopped yesterday."

"Okay."

"Good Hunting, Cambria."

She gave him a nod, then paused to study his features. So different from her previous lover, Louis Boudreaux, and from Excalibur Jones; one lost through time and distance, the other because he was crazy. Major Caparossi, however, looked at her with a heat he couldn't suppress, was emotionally stable and loyal. He was gorgeous in a dusky Italian way.

Giving in to impulse, she planted a quick kiss on his mouth and escaped through the door before he could comment. *Consider that, major!*

She felt the spatial distortion come and go, then went to the other door and opened it, grinning.

Outside, crowds moved along the walkway in both directions and she looked down, gripped the door as fear streaked through her, froze her fingers into claws. She could see all the way down to *forever!*

"Oh, my God. Oh, my *God!*" She gasped. This was worse than the view from the edge of the mountain! At least there, she saw the jagged rocks at the bottom. This.... "Oh. My. *God!*" She whispered.

"Gentle Fem, please exit the Spatial Vortex Terminal." An amused voice said and she dragged her eyes from the planet.

Humanoid, bi-pedal, hairless – unless you counted the tufts of fur protruding from the tops of their ears – large hands compared to their short stature. Not a one was over five feet. And they wore the same outfit, a long tabard over loose trousers. The only difference was colour. Lots of colour, all tastefully blended.

She turned to the Nexian, felt the rush of embarrassment surge into her cheeks. Her grip slowly loosened from the door long enough for her to close it. So she missed her partner's arrival.

"Got your sea legs, yet?" A smirking Excalibur asked.

Cambria spun around and staggered. She shut her eyes against the vertigo. "Jones, I am not in the mood. Why are you even *here*, for God's Sake? How is it you keep finding me!"

"The warrant's been suspended." He said and her eyes opened wide.

"*What?*" Her jaw dropped then she shook her head. "Not possible, Jones; I explained why that would *never* happen."

"That was before they realised how damned useful I am; at information gathering, at getting the job done. At executing people. And let's not forget, the Hunter ranks have been considerably thinned lately."

"Because of *you*!" She hissed.

He slung an arm around her shoulders and walked her towards the moving path. "Send a killer to catch a killer, darlin', and that's what I am. A *bona fide* killer."

"How the hell did this happen? When did it happen? I cannot believe Lord Montague would do this! Major Caparossi would have..."

"Lord Montague is a pragmatist, Cambria. You have to remember that, or did you forget his manipulation of you into the Hunter ranks? While humanity is spreading out in the galaxy via these corridors, aliens are coming in. Another thing to remember. They are two-way corridors and the World Council is having a devil of a time rounding up a new breed of illegal aliens."

She shook her head. "Once upon a time, an illegal alien was someone in a foreign country without leave. Now there really *are* illegal aliens."

"It's a big galaxy, bigger universe with all sorts of interesting species."

She curled her lip. "All sorts of *interesting* species for you to hunt and kill."

"That too, but I'm finding this Hunter business as entertaining as it is time consuming. Do you know, for example, that my kill rate has plummeted since meeting you?"

"This is me, gasping with surprise and horror." She grumbled and she felt his chest vibrate as he chuckled.

"Honey, you can always make me laugh." He said and guided her around two bickering Nexians.

"What happened to the surly, to discontent, anger and frustration of Ragnarok?"

"Over it and moving on."

She shook her head. "This is madness. I cannot believe..."

"No, this is Lord Montague's way of implementing an effective use of force." Excalibur said and guided her off the walkway and into a cafe.

His arm slipped from her shoulder and gripped her hand. "He doesn't know you, Cambria. I'm the one who understands you, understands the changes in you. Cottington-Blake is so grateful to you, she'll never talk about it."

"Unless it suits her purposes." She read the menu and ordered the local version of coffee. Excalibur held up two fingers and the assistant nodded.

"Maybe I should contact Lord Montague to confirm..."

Jones cut her off. "First, from what I gather, Cottington-Blake is as happy as a pig in mud with her new found freedom – and she's accessible to the powers that be at all times – and second, how did you learn the language so fluently?" Jones asked.

Cambria smiled at the attendant and paid. Excalibur led her to a table and they both sat.

"The universal translator translates univers-*al* languages." She looked at him with a narrow gaze. "How do you know Corona's...?"

Again he cut her off and leaned forward. "You don't have alien technology anymore, so I repeat, how did you learn the language so fluently?"

Cambria scowled at him. "Don't you use that scary look with me, Jones, it doesn't work."

He eased back and hooded his gaze. "No, I don't suppose anything can intimidate you any longer. But it's interesting, don't you think?"

Cambria shivered as the darkness within stretched the bonds she'd placed on it. "I don't want to talk about it. Ever." She sipped the beverage and her mouth twisted. "This tastes *nothing* like coffee."

He took a gulp of his own drink and froze. Then he manfully swallowed. "Tastes like... cow's milk?"

"Great. The Nexian's understanding of food and beverages is probably something they debated then held a referendum on." She drank it all down anyway.

"There's a scary thought." Jones said and set his aside. "Never did like milk."

"From my briefing, I got the impression a consensus must be reached for a decision is made – right or wrong, it's the way things are done here."

"Makes me wonder how they managed the warrant so fast." He frowned. "Maybe we should ask them and hope they don't have to go off into a committee room to decide how to answer."

Cambria smirked.

"It seems to work for them." And she looked around at the thriving space metropolis. It gave her the willies. It was one thing to zip through a corridor

to another planet; it was another to see the planet from a few thousand kilometres above.

“What’s the plan?” Excalibur asked and she turned back to him.

“You’ve been here longer than I. What have you seen and what do you know?”

He gave her a smile. “I’m... hesitant to say. This is the first time I’ve had a partner. Tell me how it works.”

“Ditto. But... my understanding of it is we share information, discuss it, and formulate a plan following agreement.”

He snorted and looked out at the moving crowd. “Sounds like we do things like the Nexians.”

“Except we don’t need a committee, or a referendum.”

“True enough.” His eyes focused on the crowd as if searching for something. “The Gardishans are busy people. They hop from one world to the next demonstrating their corridor. They show it to business leaders rather than government, because business can pay them more. When they have enough corridors on a planet, *then* they show it to government at a discounted rate – still expensive, but the government has no choice if they are to stop the rest of them from operating.”

“So... Lord Montague already knew about the Gardishans.”

His eyes met hers. “The Gardishans build *every* off-world corridor, so yes. Monty knew.”

“And he’s been running around ever since, trying to find them.”

Jones gave her a nod.

“I imagine just about every planetary law enforcement agency is looking for them.”

Again, he gave her a nod.

"So, if I was a galactic criminal, I'd want a bolt hole all to myself. Somewhere no one knows about. Somewhere no one goes because of..." She gave a shrug. "Spatial anomalies? Unstable suns? Gravitational fluxing? Or a black planet."

He raised his eyebrows. "All good theories, but what's a black planet?"

"A celestial body with no heat or light source – a planet that has no day and is eternally night." She murmured. "Of no interest to anyone because of that and difficult to spot because they have no gravitational field to warp sensor readings." She paused.

"Cambria, why do you know this stuff?"

She lifted a shoulder. She had a theory, but that meant... too much.

Jones didn't press the point. "We'll need to find out what search patterns have been implemented by various worlds."

"How long have the Gardishans been doing this?" She asked.

"I believe a few hundred years – our time, that is."

"This is going to be a *big* job. Okay," she stood, "where do we start?"

Excalibur rose, pushed his chair under the table. "How about... the Gardishan Corporate Headquarters?"

"It hasn't been shut down?"

He picked up her hand and tucked it under his elbow. "The Nexians move in strange and slow ways, Cambria, they can't decide if the Corporation is to blame, or the two brothers, Olmert and Olbert. So, until they do, the Gardishan Corporation continues to operate."

They walked out onto the street, then stepped onto the moving transparent walkway. Cambria gripped Jones' arm.

"Afraid of heights?"

"No, afraid of *falling*!"

Excalibur chuckled. "No chance of that. The Nexians, for all their... indecision, let's call it, are brilliant engineers. What you see around you, this station, is more durable, more solid than the hardest diamond."

"Nothing is harder than a diamond." She said and her mind filled with things that were. "Okay, diamonds are way down the list."

"There you go again. Popping up with information you should not know. It would be interesting to find out just how much is in that head of yours."

"No, it wouldn't. Leave it alone Jones. I won't discuss it with you or anyone."

"So you *do* know what happened to you. Tsk, you lied to me, Petersen."

"I haven't lied, and I don't know. I can't discuss it and I won't. I don't need anyone sticking their fingers into my brain; I don't want to think of things that will send me crazy. So shut up about it."

Jones suddenly released her and she staggered, panic streaked through her. Her gaze dropped to the space below, the planet and she felt dizzy wanted to drop to her hands and knees, no, flat on her face and close her eyes.

She dragged her gaze up to the Nexian in front of her, resisted the urge to hold onto him or her, she couldn't tell. She swallowed hard and waited for the dizziness to pass.

"A flaw in your new found... abilities." Jones said from beside her, but he didn't touch her.

"You are such a bastard." She said through gritted teeth.

"That I am."

"Where are we going?"

"Planet-side. The major capital city dwarfs any we have, hence the space station – which is one of six in geosynchronous orbit. The planet is Nexus True. The stations are numbered. We, for example, are on Nexus Four. But

as I was saying, the Nexians are remarkable engineers. The exterior of this station can withstand a hit from a cargo hauler or a comet."

"If it's so tough, why don't they make ships out of it?" She asked, her focus on the pastel blue tabard in front of her.

"You have just ably demonstrated the reason. Sensory distortion. As you approach a planet, all you can think about is that you're falling towards it. Many species have the same problem. The Nexians don't have an issue with vertigo, but they respect the vertigo in others and find it amusing. Here, on their home world, they see no reason to pander to the frailty of others – their words, not mine."

The walkway ended and she breathed a sigh of relief as she stepped onto what she considered solid ground. The hallway consisted of shops, like any shuttle port on Earth, overpriced things for the discerning traveller.

A shadow passed over and she looked up to see the hull of an enormous ship creep across the transparent ceiling.

It was the first true space ship she'd ever seen and the size staggered her.

"Passenger vessel." Excalibur said, amused at her expression.

"I'm impressed. You can identify a passenger ship with one look at its hull?"

Jones grinned at her. "No, it says so on the board, right over there." He pointed to the left where an outside visual of the craft showed it passing over the space station. Underneath it said: Passenger ship *Ungarashan*.

"Yep. No flies on you, are there." She muttered. "Okay, how do we get down to the planet?"

"The usual. Corridor. Right this way." He said and lined up behind Nexians heading back down to the surface.

Cambria looked around at the near similarities between Earth structures and Nexian. They were so close it was disturbing. Even the Nexians

themselves. They were of a uniform size and uniform appearance with subtle differences on their odd, pushed in humanoid features. No noses, but slits, two eyes, but larger, more bulbous. What disturbed her the most were the 'baby' teeth behind thick lips. The skin was pinkish, with what looked like brown or tan age spots. She could find no distinguishing features between the males and females, yet some stood closer together than others, as if a couple.

Yes, the Nexians disturbed her a lot.

Excalibur flashed a wallet id at the attendant and Cambria dragged hers out to show the Nexian.

He went inside first and the attendant closed the door. The blue light above the door flashed twice then blinked yellow and the attendant pulled open the door.

Cambria went in and walked to the end where another Nexian opened the door. She stepped out into bright dual sunshine.

Chapter Twelve

"Weird." Cambria said as Excalibur came to her. "Two suns, two shadows."

"Let's go." He said moved away from the attendant and the door. He lifted his arm and a overcooked pea green, bullet-shaped vehicle pulled up in front of them. Excalibur opened the door and she got in, shifted aside for him. He leaned forward to the driver. "Gardishan."

"You know, it's funny, but that corridor? There was no spatial distortion." She said. "Every other time I've gone through one, you can feel it... well 'moving' isn't quite the right word, but..."

"I know what you mean. That ride," he jabbed his thumb over his shoulder, "was as smooth as. Just walk through a tunnel and bam." He turned his head. "I wonder if that's a flaw specific to the Gardishan-built corridors?"

"And where there's a flaw, there's the potential for failure." She said and glanced forward, but the driver and his Nexian partner in the passenger seat paid them no attention.

"Could be something to that. Maybe that's why the Nexians called in the Hunters. Are we the only species who noticed the difference or the only ones that mentioned it?"

Cambria shook her head and thought back to when Caparossi rescued her. No one with a head injury could go through the corridor; Jones bashed her unconscious so he could escape and when she arrived back at Hunter central, pandemonium broke out as she collapsed. "Why would anyone mention the, ah, disorientation, if they didn't know it wasn't supposed to be that way?" She asked.

Excalibur tapped his bottom lip. "Okay, the Nexians have found themselves in a quandary: they know Gardishan built the corridors, but

cannot reach consensus as to where the missing brothers are, or how to catch them. And since we are an inquisitive, violent species, they've set the hounds on the Gardishan brothers trail. It could be they never expected anyone to work it out; wanted to keep it quiet until they could solve the problem. Then we came along."

"What a clever little species we are." She murmured cynically. "My question is: have there been failures?"

"And how would we find that out? A failure means, what? Discombobulation of the time-space continuum?"

A smile flickered. "No, it would mean... dissolution at a level smaller than a molecule. The very particles of existence would be ripped apart and scattered throughout space."

"Painless then."

"So instantaneous as to be unmeasurable." She replied.

Excalibur frowned. "So a malfunctioning corridor..."

"...would not necessarily be discovered because all those who went through never returned or arrived at their destination. And there are plenty of one way corridors." She said and recalled Tudor where no one was supposed to be able to get back. If it had malfunctioned...

"And that," Excalibur murmured, "leads me to suppose the Nexians know it; which is why they're so hot to grab the Gardishans." He waved a hand. "In a slow, considered and deliberate kind of a way, of course."

"Of course." She replied. "And the Gardishans have been doing this for a long time."

"Makes me wonder how many have died. Why, they could have a kill rate greater than my own."

"Oh, those bastards." She said wryly. "How dare they?"

"Yes, I will *have* to put a stop to it." He said with frightening seriousness.

"Get over it, Jones, there are plenty of people who have killed more than you. This is not a race, nor a challenge; like he who has the most deaths attributed to them, wins."

His lips brushed her ear. "I'm aware of that. Mine is an *imperative*, the need to destroy those who would challenge me. This, this hunt for the Gardishan brothers is purely for profit and fun, to poke at their own government because they are incapable of doing it themselves."

"A serial killer turned bounty hunter." She snorted with disgust.

"The Nexians now see what stepping beyond the bounds of what they see as a perfectly legitimate style of government means. And they will cower, will submit themselves to even more regulations rather than become more imaginative. I find that..." He pursed his lips and stared at the rear-view mirror and the driver watching him, "pitiful."

The taxi pulled up to the curb. Jones leaned forward to pay the driver's companion and Cambria got out.

The street surface was a smooth red-brown colour, not the black asphalt of Earth. The buildings were a uniform block structure - all the same colour with the same amount of windows, but at least the different heights broke up the monotonous regularity.

Gardishans was a five-storey building.

"You do the talking, since you know the language." Excalibur said. "We want the Corporate offices first, then the research department, personnel records and... mail room."

"Mail room?"

"The Gardishan brothers have to get their orders somehow."

"So they do. And I wonder if the Nexians thought of it."

"The Hunt for the Gardishans *is* a race, Cambria. Whoever finds them, whoever takes them down, is in for a big reward."

"So... how much of a reward?"

He gave her a cheeky grin. "A big, *big* reward."

Cambria didn't ask how much, she wasn't interested in money; never had been. But Excalibur was, judging by the gleam in his eyes.

She and Excalibur walked in and approached the pastel pink receptionist desk.

"How may I help you this morning?" The first Nexian asked in an even tone.

"Corporate offices, please." Cambria said in the fluid tongue of Nexus True. The words were almost familiar, close, but not quite, like speaking French, but not.

"Please may I have your designation, so that I can confirm and inform your engagement of your arrival?"

"I am sorry, but we need no confirmation nor do we require assistance." Cambria smiled with apology. "This is a courtesy to *you*. To let you know we are here, not any particular officer."

The young, freckled face Nexian blinked, turned to her companion as if an alien speaking her language was a shock. Then she smiled, showed baby teeth in a rictus of a smile. "I understand. You are here for a law enforcement enterprise. Please, officers, you may search anywhere and everywhere. We are co-operating."

"Thank you. The blessings of the day be upon you." Cambria tilted her head and then joined Excalibur by the lift. Again with the subtle differences. The doors opened on a horizontal axis, not vertical.

The elevator, in contrast to the corridors, moved at a slow pace, slower than Earth lifts.

"Do you smell a large, grey or black furred rodent, Excalibur?" She asked with a smug smile.

"Interesting you should suggest such an animal. I was thinking the same thing. Solution?"

Cambria lifted her face to the dull blue light. "Nothing. Let's play it by ear. After all," she turned to look at him, "they may have the technology to travel the stars, but it appears not to travel up buildings."

He gave her a smile. "Oh, dear. What an embarrassment."

The doors opened to a pair of smiling Nexians. Not genuine smiles, but pained and forced. Cambria could discern no physical difference between the two. Identical twins?

"Officers." The one on left said. "I am Oralart Gardishan. This is my colleague, Onilert Gardishan."

"Gardishan." Cambria dipped her head to Oralart then turned to Onilert. "Gardishan. May I introduce..."

"Karl Soderling," Jones said with a smile, "and my companion, Hunter Cambria Petersen."

Oralart and Onilert swallowed as they both looked at Cambria. "We are honoured, most esteemed Hunter." Oralart said and they both bent in half as they bowed to her.

Jones raised his eyebrows and Cambria gave him a look that said 'I don't know'.

"We are pleased for you to come this way." Onilert said and led the way to an office overlooking the street. "Please, be seated and inform us on how we may assist you."

Cambria took the right visitor's seat, Jones, the left. The Gardishans sat beside each other behind the desk, rested their hands on the desktop and looked interested.

"Ask them about the brothers." Excalibur ordered.

Of course, he couldn't speak Nexian, they'd reacted to the names, not the content of the sentence.

"Gardishans, we are here about the brothers, Olmert and Olbert."

"Yes. We mourn the loss of our relatives."

"They are...?"

"Separated from the family in a way that cannot be reconciled, even by death."

She turned to Excalibur. "The brothers are exiled."

"And you have no thoughts on a sanctuary?" Cambria asked.

"None." Onilert's lip curled. "Every intelligent species we know of have been warned of the danger our relatives represent."

"It is unconscionable that they sully our name this way." Oralart put in and Onilert nodded. "They bring our whole nation into disrepute. It will take generations to fix, if we ever can."

"The brothers gave the Nexians a black eye with their behaviour." She said to Excalibur.

"Even the Darka'day have been informed, yet they show no interest" Onilert said with another sneer. "They are content to watch and do nothing."

Cambria's translator went into overdrive as it rattled through the word 'Darka'day'. It could not find a synonym and she rubbed her eyes to ease the ache. Images from a hundred worlds and words from a thousand languages crashed into her mind as if she were downloading an encyclopaedia. Then her vision went dark, a solid black. Cambria froze, then blinked, but the darkness remained. Her hands gripped the armrests like claws.

Excalibur touched her arm. "Cambria?"

She swallowed as the sudden fear spiked through her.

"Is something wrong?"

She turned towards his voice. Blinked at him, but she was still blind.

"Not good, girl, not good at all." He muttered.

"Can't see." She whispered through stiff lips.

"Yeah, got that. Your eyes have gone totally black." He said and she heard a note of fear in the concern. "You can still translate for me. So concentrate. Ask them who the Darka'day are. Break it down for me."

She licked her lips. "Who are the Darka'day?"

"They are the Watchers, the... inter-dimensional guardians of this space."

Cambria couldn't tell from the voice who spoke, but she thought it was Onilert.

"What do they look like?"

The Gardishans hesitated. "No one understands them. They are hard to see. They surround themselves with shadows, appear formless, are as smoke. They live in the night and never venture into daylight."

Cambria held herself still while she processed the information. "Not Darka'day. Dark *all* day." She murmured. "Dark *all day*. *Dark* all day." The Nexian language did not have an adequate word for them, nor did the Nomadian, and she understood the images and words better. No-one could explain the aliens, so a description was used.

"You feel as if they are important?"

"Yes, but not why. Ask your next question."

"If the brothers are exiled, where are the places to be exiled?"

"Very few are ever exiled. They go to a neighbouring planetary system, to remain close to this one. The local law enforcement agency is in on high alert there, and yet there is no trace. Olmert and Olbert were most pleased to go. We discussed this before the courts made their displeasure known, before we truly knew the magnitude of their betrayal of this company. A decision is still pending."

"Do Nexians frequent other systems often?" Cambria asked.

"No. In truth, customers come here, for this is where the technology is and until referenda are held, no technology may leave. Customers often come on referendum day for the results."

"How many referendum days does it take for a piece of technology to become available?"

"Usually two, sometimes three." Onilert said.

"And these days are held how often?"

"Every... three to four years. It is dependent on how much technology is up for a vote."

"And the corridors?"

"That technology vote has been defeated every time it has come up. We Nexians believe it is too dangerous a tool to release unrestricted, which is why we are so unhappy about this. The corridors were meant for our space, for our stations and outer planets." Onilert said.

"Are there any problems with the corridor?"

Silence greeted the question and she heard the two Nexians shift closer and whisper to each other. She couldn't make out the words, but the sense she got was that this was a new question for them and they weren't sure how to answer.

"Not that we are aware of." Onilert said and Cambria heard the smile.

She tilted her head to Excalibur. "They are unaware of a problem, but I suspect that's jargon for 'sure, there's a problem, but we haven't been *officially* notified of one'."

"Ask them this then. Put it as a hypothetical."

She paused, gathered her thoughts. "Nexian technology, Nexian engineering is renowned throughout many galaxies. Theoretically, your developments are perfect because you spend such a long time making it so."

The Nexians made a noise of agreement.

"That being so, in the unlikely event of something failing... a speck of dust in the spatial stabiliser, for example, you would know what to do to fix it because you know your technology so well. You would know what the symptoms were, thus being able to prevent anything happening before it became a problem."

"We are flattered by your knowledge of us. You are correct. We create... perfection." Oralart preened.

"And that is understood. The space stations are amazing in construction, in design, in safety and in beauty. Nowhere in the known universe is their equal. No-one in the known universe can match the sheer genius of your work."

"It is true." Oralart said with a satisfied sigh. "And we are most careful in allowing our perfection to reach others. Too much perfection is a bad thing. Others must learn to strive for our level, and you see the truth in that. You are wise beyond your years."

"I am grateful to you for the recognition." Cambria said.

"Get to the *point*, Cambria." Jones said, frustrated.

"No... I don't think so, Jones. I'm thinking of something else that the law enforcers may not have seen to." She said and pushed herself out of the chair. "I am most gratified by your answers Gardishans. My colleague and I would like to study your sales information now, please."

"Whoa. Didn't expect that reaction." Excalibur said. "They look pissed."

"Hunters, that may take some time to... collate. Perhaps tomorrow?"

Onilert suggested with a hint of panic.

"While I appreciate the need to take one's time, Gardishan, we wish to peruse them today, now, in fact."

"Of course." Oralart said.

"They are both conferring again and Oralart has gone and interesting shade of pale."

"That's because they know what we will find." Cambria whispered back.

"And what's that?"

"Perfection doesn't last. And what do you do when perfection fades?"

Excalibur snorted a laugh. "You sell it to someone who thinks it *is* perfect."

"Exactly."

"It is late in the day, Hunters, and you've had a long journey," Oralart said, "I'm sure with a fresh eye tomorrow, you will see we have nothing to hide."

"Actually, it's not that far, just a walk through the corridors." Cambria said. "Unfortunately, this is a matter of national security; yours and everyone else's. You're own government has impressed upon us, the necessity of haste. We must insist on the urgency of this situation."

"Now you've done it." Jones whispered. "Now they look *really* pissed."

"Of course." Oralart murmured. "Pleased if you would follow me."

Jones grasped her arm, held her close to his body as he followed them.

They entered the lift again and went down a level. Jones guided her out and to the left. She heard the unlocking of a door, the squeak as it opened and the click of a light switch.

"Within this room," Oralart said and Cambria heard the echo, "you will find the sales information for many of our products. I must advise that some of these files remain confidential and as such cannot leave this room or discussed with anyone other than a Gardishan staff member. To do so would break our local law."

"We understand." Cambria said with her head lowered. "We will do nothing to compromise your laws."

"Your respect is noted and understood, Hunter Petersen. Thank you."

The door closed and Excalibur's hands lifted to her jaw, raised her face.

"What happened?"

She instinctively hedged on her reply. "I don't know. I was thinking of the Darka'day, wondering what it meant and then I got a headache. It's gone now, but suddenly all the lights went out and I couldn't see."

He sighed. "There is something very screwy going on with you, Petersen."

"No shit. What I don't know is how to *fix* this!" Her voice rose with frustration. Whatever the bloody aliens did to her, they forgot to give her the instruction manual!

His thumbs brushed her cheeks. "Okay, we'll leave it until we can get you back to Earth to see a doctor, maybe take you to see one here. In the meantime, what am I looking for?"

"Re-sale, second-hand, reconditioned, refurbished..." she suggested, but still felt him by her side. "Oh. You don't read Nexian."

"And we're being monitored to see what we do. At least, I think those bulbous things stuck on the top of each aisle are cameras."

"What does the room look like?" She asked and turned her head as if searching for something.

"A multi-mega-mart. Twenty foot-tall bookcases stuffed with smaller boxes made of some..." she heard him scrape a nail against a surface, "plastic material. The aisles go back some hundred metres."

"Are there any empty shelves?" Cambria squinted, as if she could see them, but the black remained.

"Yes."

"Towards the front?"

Beside her, Excalibur shifted. "Oh, you are good. The recent sales will be at the front. Old records at the back."

"And resale should be somewhere between the two. Let's head in that direction and see what happens."

He gripped her arm again. "Do you expect trouble?"

"Jones, we are about to expose the corruption of a company already fighting for its life. It has exiled, permanently, those responsible in the hope that it has done enough to keep going; if not, then to salvage its name. We find evidence of resale and Gardishan is done. Forever. Shunned because they did not seek referendum to sell used goods. And they pride themselves on perfection. The resale of those corridors equates to less than perfection, something the Gardishans don't want known – the shame of it, you know." She smiled. "Oh, yes, Excalibur, if we're going in the right direction, I most definitely expect trouble."

Chapter Thirteen

He led her to the right side of the cavernous room and down the last aisle. "Here, then, should be the records of when Gardishan first started." Jones said. "All these boxes, about the size of a briefcase, are filled with cubes. Information cubes."

"Probably about the product. About its development and testing. Damn my eyes, if I had vision, I'd..."

"You'd read this for me. I know."

Cambria shook her head as the black cleared, swirled away like a whirlpool. What the fuck was going on? First she thinks the encyclopaedia... The black swirled in again. And then... she says vision... The black swirled away.

Relief gushed through her, slumped her shoulders. She leaned a hand against the shelf and hung her head.

Cambria stared at the obnoxious orange of the floor.

This sucked like a drain. Why her, God damn it!

"Cambria?" Jones laid a hand on her shoulder.

She shook her head and wondered if Karesh understood about the translator. Probably not. The science involved in turning an inanimate device made of *technology* into an *organic* one capable of automatically translating alien languages without pause was beyond her – probably beyond the best scientists in the known galaxy, no matter the species.

Her mouth twisted. *We humans are mere aggressive and cranky babies compared to the rest of the universe.*

She eased out a breath as Excalibur rubbed her shoulders. "Okay." She said. "Okay. I'm fine."

He dropped his hands and she reached out to brush a finger over the raised text. "Seven hundred years ago."

"Great. She reads Nexian Braille too."

"No, she has her eyesight back."

Excalibur gripped her chin between his thumb and forefinger, looked into her eyes. "A nice deep blue with flashes of gold again. How'd you do it?"

She stared into ash grey eyes. "I don't know how it happened in the first place, how would I know what happened now, Jones?"

He stared at for a moment longer, then frowned, as if he'd had a thought. "We have a few things to discuss, I think." He said and dropped his hand. "We need to get this done first."

"Agreed."

She walked away, to the front of the aisle and read the numbers, the centuries of each aisle. "We need to find when the corridors were first developed. How long did you say the brothers had been selling illegal technology?"

"A few hundred years, give or take a decade or so."

Cambria strode down the front of the aisle's and read the centuries until she came to the current one. Then she did an about face and marched back four centuries and turned down the aisle. Jones followed her.

"I figure they'd be resigned at first to rejection by referendum. They'd accept it the first, oh, ten times or so. They'd keep pushing after that, and keep accepting rejection. Then, they'd hatch their plans to go off world. And it would be a careful plan given how..." She paused and tried to think of a word.

"Anal?" Jones supplied.

"Yeah, anal." She counted off the boxes, read a few labels here and a few labels there. "Given how *anal* they are, they'd spend some time thinking on the perfect plan; first, find an escape route in case it doesn't work and they're found out. Second, build a corridor in secret somewhere impressive.

Somewhere planet-side? Third, seek out a distant planet and show the business community the technology. Show them how easy it is to travel through, without the benefit of months in space. Sit back and collect the funds. Then hop throughout the galaxy doing the same thing. But, and the most essential, make sure the code to your escape route is shared only between the brothers." She put her index finger on a box.

"What is it?" Excalibur asked with a gleam in his eyes. "You've thought of something."

Cambria turned to him. "I was about to say that if more than one person knows a secret, it isn't a secret anymore."

"Okay, I'll agree with that."

"And brothers can be ferociously competitive."

"Again, I agree." Jones said.

"But Olmert and Olbert have kept this secret for hundreds of years. No bickering, no dispute over profits or suitability of client. Nothing." She turned back to her search while she filtered through her theory. "I've also noticed that there is no gender identification with the Nexians. They walk around in pairs, but their clothing is pastel or rich colours, contrasting, matching, always in balance always..."

"Perfect." Excalibur supplied. "Perfect couples."

"Yes."

"And what does that tell us?" He asked.

"What are the chances of every couple on Earth being a perfect match for each other?" She asked instead.

"Well... I'd say zero chance. No couple on Earth has the same likes and dislikes, they'd divorce within a year. Ahh... I see. Interesting. Everything on Nexus True is guaranteed perfection." He said. "Wow, that sucks."

"No variety and no spontaneity." Cambria said, still looking for the box.

"And yet they are content. I see now why it takes them so long to make a decision, and why they spend a lot of their time refusing. Why the need for change when everything is already perfect? To shift means that something is *not* perfect. And that's *bad*."

"Close." She said a little distant. "It takes them so long so they can see the perfection of their decision. The subject of a referendum isn't imperfect, nor is the system. The subject must be *seen* to be perfect and so they spend their time searching for the error. Then it comes up for referendum. Change is not imperfection, Jones, but it must be a perfect change."

"That's stupid." He growled.

"No, that's Nexian politics." She continued down the row. "And lo, a gap in an otherwise perfectly positioned boxes." She said and pointed to the empty space.

"Law enforcement or Gardishan."

She gave him a grin. "Guess."

"Well, that puts a crimp in our plans. I doubt the law will hand over the box, and the Gardishans will deny all knowledge, say it is misplaced or being audited or something."

"Not at all. You can garner as much information from what's *not* there as what *is*. Remember, we're not looking for information on the corridors, or as the Gardishans call them 'spatial vortex transporters', *themselves*, we're looking for a *date* of development."

"And then we count forward. Not bad, Sherlock, not bad at all." He grinned.

"Elementary, Watson, elementary." She read the date on the boxes on either side of the missing one. Then counted forward into the next aisle. "We still don't know when the brothers started selling. What year or month."

"Nor do we have a reader. Although..." He went to the front of the room, while Cambria kept reading the years and the list of contents, searched for a difference in title to indicate a resale of an SVT.

"Nothing like a bit of efficiency to make your job easier." He said and handed her a device with a handle and a square, flat screen. She held it up to the first box and read the actual contents.

"I wonder." She said and input a search parameter. "I would expect the Gardishans to want to find information fast. Ah, there we go a list of boxes that have... Uh, oh." Cambria said. "We are in so much trouble."

"What?"

"Search parameter for the SVT on Earth. You know, the one at the World Council Lord Montague thinks is illegally built by the brothers? I put it in just to see if it came up with anything."

"Yes, as you do."

"The Gardishans built it alright, with Gardishan *Corporate* approval. It's a second hand model." She looked down at the screen. "Let's see now." She put another series of words in and looked around. Glows from boxes lit up the aisle as if they were fairy lights. She walked out of the aisle and looked down the next. More glowing boxes. And into the next aisle and the next, all the way to the current years' invoices. Every aisle had more than two dozen glowing box fronts.

"Why are they glowing, Cambria? What did you do?"

"They glow because within those boxes contain invoices with the word 'resale', Jones. And as I said, the Gardishans would want to locate a file fast if they needed it. What better way than to input a key word for the file – not necessarily like the Dewey system, but something specific to the type of file."

"Like re-sale."

"Yep. We need to contact the local constabulary about this, take a file with us." She suggested. "Or two, from different years. Take this reader too. It has a nifty save function."

"I saw a trolley at the front of the room." Jones said and went to retrieve the four-wheeled cart.

Cambria selected glowing boxes at random from four aisles, loaded them onto the trolley.

"All right then. We take 'em and come back tomorrow for the others." Jones said and headed to the back of the room. "Rear exit is always nice, don't you think?"

Cambria followed him and opened the door onto a back hallway. Two Nexians wandered by, gave them a nod and continued their subdued conversation on the efficacy of a new fabric that changed colours to reflect the mood of a Nexian pair.

Jones wheeled the trolley down the hallway to the end and looked to the right. He eased back, lifted four fingers and pointed to the door of the archives. Then he lifted his thumb and fore-finger in the shape of a gun.

He reached behind him to the hunting knife he carried, like her, drew it and used the gleaming steel as a mirror. He kept his back to the wall. Cambria came up beside him.

"We'll go to the elevator as soon as they go in. Ready?"

She gave a nod and cocked her head to listen to the conversation.

"Complete termination of Soderling. Detain Hunter Petersen." Oralart ordered.

"You have permission to harm Hunter Petersen, but do not terminate." Onilert said.

"You're marked for death, 'Karl' and I'm for capture." She whispered.

"Get set." He said and she gripped the handle of the trolley. "Go."

She pushed the trolley towards the lift. Jones strode a head of her and pressed the button. The doors opened and she rolled the trolley inside. Jones hit the down button and the doors slid shut, and less than five seconds opened again on the ground floor.

She and Jones shared a smirk and walked out of the building with the evidence to bring Gardishan down.

* * *

Officers Oderie and Oderah accepted the trolley for examination with smiles and gratitude.

"This is a sample of the files." Cambria laid the reader on the top box. "You need to get officers down there as soon as possible before they destroy the rest."

"But they will not." Officer Oderie said. "It would interrupt the aesthetics of the archive and that, Nexians cannot abide." He said. "We will send officers to shut down the archives in the morning, send a guard tonight."

"They are armed, Officer. Please take care." Cambria said and the officer nodded.

"I shall send Officer Onarius and Odarius. Rest assured, Hunter," he included Jones in the term and Excalibur frowned, "we will take care of this."

With nothing more to do, Jones and Cambria exited the building.

"Where to now?" She asked.

"I suggest we go back and dig into the mailroom, unless you want to quit for the day?"

"Nope, not yet."

Back at the counter, the receptionist seemed to have... sucked in her face. Her mouth was tight, her nose slits barely moved and her eyes squinted. At least... Cambria thought it was a 'her'. Maybe her gender bias was showing?

"We're just going to see the mailroom." Cambria smiled at the receptionist and she and Jones went down the stairs.

"Do you have any idea what to look for?" Cambria asked.

"I do, although with all these 'O' names, we'll have to come up with some sort of filtering system." He said. "Or," he opened the door to the noisy mailroom, "we could simply check their out boxes."

"Too easy, too simple."

"Too *perfect*?" Jones snickered. "The archived boxes were in plain sight, why not the mail?"

"Because they'd be nuts, that's why. These are two brothers who've been in exile for centuries, in perfect exile." Cambria protested.

"And that might be their downfall. None of the locals came down here. Nobody else did either. And I have to wonder whether the brothers knew exactly what the local constabulary would do to try to find them. The atypical routes of asking questions, studying their lives, you know the drill. So why would they, if they meant to get away with it from their own perspective?"

Cambria nodded and walked along the conveyor belts full of pale pink envelopes. "Okay, that fits."

"Right. So they had to think *outside* the box. Step away from perfection and let's remember they're selling less than perfect products here. If you know how the police operate, defeating the investigation is a lot easier."

"And of course, you'd know how." She sneered.

"Yes, I would. That's how I've remained free for so long and turned the Hunters into the hunted. Even you never expected when or where I would turn up. But I know you better than any Hunter, Cambria, I know you as a lover."

That stopped her in her tracks and she turned around. His grey eyes glittered.

"You knew the old me, Jones, you don't know me now." She said and his smile was slow.

"You haven't changed that much, Petersen, not so much I can't catch up to you."

"We'll talk later, but I'm disagreeing with you." She said and returned to her inspection of the mailroom.

Pairs of Nexians worked at stations monitoring the flow of mail. It all worked beautifully with no hesitations, no jams, no sudden rattle as envelopes flew off the conveyor; it was all neat, tidy and fast.

"Where?" She asked Jones and he put a hand on her shoulder and pointed to the stacked and enclosed post boxes.

"Right. So...?"

"All the mail from the offices comes down the chutes. Different chutes for different divisions going out to wherever. All we need to do, is find the off world chute and check through for mail to the brothers." He said and walked beside her to the operators.

Cambria frowned at him. "Isn't mail tampering a criminal offence?"

"On Earth, sure, but everywhere else? Yeah, okay it is illegal – except for officers of da law." He grinned and tapped an operator on the shoulder. The pair turned around and looked at them expectantly.

"Show them your warrant, Cambria."

She reached into the top pocket of her denim jacket and pulled out the Nexian language warrant, flicked it out and showed the operatives.

Eyes rounded as they read the document. Then, as if synchronised, they pointed to another operator across the room.

"Thank you." Cambria said and went to the next operatives hand sorting mail onto the conveyor belts from a bin.

Again, Jones tapped a shoulder and both turned.

Cambria showed them the warrant and both faces flushed a bright pink. They looked at each other, then shrugged, as if handing over another's mail was of no consequence.

The one on the other side of the bin turned to a smaller box and pulled out a bundle of letters, handed them to his/her Nexian partner who gave them to Jones.

"Thank you." She said again.

Jones read the address and slapped the bundle against the palm of his hand. "I think it might be more... efficient if we hand deliver these to the brothers. What do you think?"

"I think it's a fine idea."

"Then let's see if we can't hitch a ride on a passenger ship." He tucked the letters into the back pocket of his jeans.

Outside on the street, he hailed another taxi and asked for the space port SVT.

"Shouldn't we inform the locals about our discovery?" Cambria asked.

"Sure, we'll call from the liner." He said and she shook her head as she got in.

"You are such a liar, Jones. You don't intend calling them at all, regardless of the Hunter briefing that they have the first shot at the brothers."

"The bounty is *mine*, Cambria. I'm not sharing and I don't care for the Nexian constabulary." He said in a low voice but the driver looked back anyway.

"A strange attitude for a new Hunter to have, 'Karl'. Hunters aren't concerned about money, they're after justice." She said.

Jones sat back. "Suspended, Cambria, not vanquished or cancelled or anything else. *Suspended*. That means any time I fuck up, I'm back on the hit list. This bounty will enable me to go far, far away from this galaxy. I intend to do that."

"So, you're leaving after all."

He turned his head to look at her with a strange expression in his grey eyes. "You're coming with me." He said as if she didn't have a say.

"No, I'm not. I have other business to attend to, and flitting about the galaxy isn't my style."

He leaned in close. "Oh, yes, you *are* coming, even if I have to drag you kicking and screaming all the fucking way."

"Jones, you're a real screw up if you think, I'm..." He laid his mouth across hers and her mind shut off under his gentle assault.

The driver cleared his throat, as if kissing in the back seat of a taxi was offensive.

Jones lifted his head, drew a finger along her lower lip. "Your eyes go all glazed when I do that, Cambria. Sparks of gold become clearer. You want me as much as I want you, and to be apart is as painful as being together. But unless we have a serious discussion, away from the pressures of Hunter and Hunted, we'll never find happiness. You know that."

"You, Excalibur Jones, are a violent, unrepentant, sociopathic, killer." She replied with venom.

"But with the lips and hands of a maestro." He grinned.

"With the lips and hands of a maestro." She agreed. "And any woman is your instrument, any woman will respond to you, because you know how to play them. And you've played me, Jones, since Tudor." His smile was slow, his eyes burning with a promise. "You'll play me again, too, because you are

just that good. I'll hate myself for it after, but I'll enjoy it while I'm with you."

His gaze emptied and he moved back.

"Oh, yes, Jones. Don't ever think I'll forget Corona coming out of your... *my* room on Ragnarok. So don't you dare, don't you *ever* think I'll find happiness with you, because *you* never change."

The taxi pulled up and she got out, waited for Jones. He took his time and his expression was that of a determined man. She couldn't say what he was determined to do, but she figured it involved her.

He grabbed her hand in passing and dragged her inside the transit building.

Jones twitched beside her, impatient to get to the SVT as they lined up to travel back to Nexus Four. When their turn came, Jones pushed her through the door first and she waited on the other side. He came striding through but didn't touch her, left her to deal with the vertigo as she hurried to keep up.

And this was one reason why she had no intention of going with him. He was too damned selfish, too egocentric. It was all about him and what people could do for him, not what he could do for others.

She recalled the note he left for on Tudor. It was all so much bullshit and she imagined him smirking as he wrote it.

He wanted her there so he wouldn't be alone, so he'd have someone to play with until he tired of her and returned to his old ways. What did he expect her to do? *Let* him murder people on a whim? And while he was out selecting victims, did she stay at home like a good little woman and knit?

Her strides lengthened to match his and Nexians moved out of their way. Jones looked like he wanted to kill someone, and the Nexians picked up on his aura of impending violence.

Excalibur walked to the attendant couple, standing next to a bank of screens.

"Earth." He bit out. "In English, please."

The attendant on the left paused and Cambria saw Jones' expression darken, his temper fray.

She translated his request and the Nexian's puzzled expression cleared.

"Hunter, please accept our heartfelt apologies for our tardiness in recognising your species." Cambria translated, but Jones' maintained his cold fury.

"Starmap." He demanded.

She read the signs above the screens and pointed to one of them. "Here." She said and grabbed his arm to drag him away from the attendants.

"So. Where are we going?" She asked and held her fingers over the fluid-like keyboard.

"Step aside, Hunter."

Cambria turned to face him. Ice flared through her veins. He stared at her with the promise of murder in his cold-as-the-Arctic eyes.

Slowly, she lifted her hands away from the keyboard and slid out of his reach.

She watched as he jerked his hands up, as if he held himself under the tightest of control. His fingers trembled, then he dragged in a deep breath, then another, to settle himself.

He sent a look, a slightly raised eyebrow, a tilted mouth, then turned to the screen.

Cambria moved away, let him get on with finding the Gardishan brothers address. She felt like she'd come close to seeing the true Excalibur Jones, the monstrous, violent, slaughterer of innocents. But she now also understood why he believed she would accompany him into exile: Excalibur Jones

would, and probably had, killed anyone who defied him, and that meant anyone whom he perceived as a threat to anything he regarded as 'his'.

When she heard him grunt with satisfaction, she was careful to maintain a healthy distance from him as he lead the way to the ticketing counter.

The two Nexians regarded him with caution as she translated his demands. "I need two tickets to Ngraka, and then onto Blurdach." He barked in English and the operators issued the slips under his Hunter id.

He glanced at her. "Let's go." And he strode off towards the docking tube.

Cambria followed, watched his stiff back and brooded. If it wasn't for their partnership, she dump the bastard and complete the mission herself. But... partners didn't abandon partners. Then there was his inexplicable determination that she join him in exile. The dog professed to love her on numerous occasions, and yet it didn't stop him from screwing anything on two legs. And yet, he expected her to be faithful to him, had threatened Major Caparossi. Jones would never get close enough to the major, or anyone else, she promised herself.

She followed him down the tube to the starliner. The Nexian pair accepted the ticket slips and wished them a happy trip.

Cambria's lip curled, but she stopped. "How long will the trip take to Ngraka?" She asked the smiling Nexians.

"That will be two Nexian days." The one on the right said.

"And from there onto Blurdach?" She asked with a sigh.

"Another three. Plenty of time for recreation." The Nexian said with a slow wink.

"Thank you." Cambria said and went onboard.

Jones, in his fit of pique, hadn't waited for her. But she wasn't concerned. She went to the concierge.

Nexians, as a rule, didn't travel on starships, preferring to stay in their 'perfect' home system and travel via the SVTs.

The concierge was a bipedal alien with long, thin appendages the colour of lemons. It stood more than two metres tall and she looked up at his thin, elongated head.

"Are the communicators to Nexus True still on line?" She asked.

"For the next ten minutes." The concierge smiled. "Shall I place a call for you?"

Cambria paused in thought. Jones was the type of operative to say he was going to a particular place as a diversion. And they'd discussed calling the constabulary. He knew damned well she'd call it in.

"No, thank you. Can you tell me where my berth is? My partner seems to have disappeared."

He turned to an electronic chart on the wall behind him. "Your designation?"

"Booked under Soderling."

The chart swirled at his command. "Ah, yes. Stateroom seven, deck B."

"Thank you." She said and went to the lift. If she was lucky, she could find the room, dump her pack and go to the observation deck, since this was her first time on a space ship.

The lift took two minutes to rise to deck B, which gave her an idea of just how enormous the ship was. She opened the door.

"Holy..." It was large, with a bed the size of Switzerland. A wet bar, an entertainment area and bathroom. She heard the shower running and figured Jones was trying to quell his temper. He could not afford to leave any bodies on the ship and there were precious few places to dump them without a witness.

She set her pack down at the end of the bed and left him to it, went out exploring.

People filled the observation deck. Some laid back on body moulding lounges, stared up at the clear dome above to the stars beyond. Others milled around with drinks in hand and the occasional glance up or to the side where the dome met the deck.

Cambria went to the bar.

"How may I assist you this fine trip?" The silver-skinned, multi-limbed, cylindrical server asked and she looked closer.

"You are..."

"An electronical, yes. I am programmed to assist passengers in any way, from directions, to tour guide. I am presently a provider of beverages." She stared at its smooth surface and resisted the urge to say 'of course, *you're* behind the bar.' But maybe there were species aboard that didn't recognise robots.

"Do you have a designation?"

"I am unit Elasficia."

"Elasficia?" *What kind of name...*

"Electronical Assistant First Class."

Ah. That kind of name. "May I call you El?"

As if it hadn't heard her, it said: "You may call me El. How may I serve you?"

"Do you have any, ah, Terran, no, *Earth*, beverages or their equivalents?" Cambria asked.

"Affirmative. What is your beverage of choice?"

"Dark ale." She requested.

"At your service." El's limbs reached under the bar. After a minute, it presented a large glass of molasses dark liquid with a tight beige froth.

She picked it up and tasted it. "Oh, wow, it tastes like the real thing! Thank you, El." She said.

"At your service." El replied in the same tone as before.

Cambria wandered around the room, with occasional glances at the dome and the white spray of stars beyond. Passengers found themselves seats and she located an empty one further away from the side wall and lay down.

The couch shifted underneath her to the most comfortable position and she placed her drink the holder provided.

A hush came over the crowd, then absolute silence.

The star field shifted slowly as the ship drew away from the dock. Cambria wondered if there was a similar viewing deck on the hull for people who wanted to see the stations and the planet. She shuddered. Not a view she wanted to see; she'd be sick.

She stared up as the ship moved, marvelled at the ingenuity of the Nexians to provide such a display. Then she watched as the stars moved faster and suddenly, she saw white streaks that shifted colour until they blurred and she gripped the lounge when the stars shifted to the sparkle and rainbow of hyperspace.

The crowd 'oohed' and 'ahhed' and squeaked at the sight. Many stayed, entranced by the magic, but others, those travellers who'd seen it all before, began to wander back to their cabins or wherever.

Cambria adjusted the couch to a sitting position so she could enjoy her ale and watch the remaining crowd. There were all types. Multi-limbed, with single appendages; tall aliens, short, round, tiny; green reptilians, orange arthropods... grey humanoids with large, uptilted black eyes – one winked at her before turning away. She saw family groups and children, couples – both old and young – groups of seniors; a typical mish-mash of travellers going places to see things. Just like on Earth, she thought, with tour groups.

She finished her drink and returned the empty to the bar. El was busy with another customer and she returned to the stateroom.

Excalibur sat in front of the entertainment unit, flicking through channels. "I wondered when you would turn up. Where have you been? What have you been doing? Who were you with, Cambria?" He asked and slowly turned towards her, his eyes frosty with accusation.

"I *know* you're not talking to me with that attitude." She said and went to her pack.

"If we are to be partners, we need to share information, discuss and then make a decision as to a course of action. Isn't that what you said?"

She glanced back at him. He had one arm over the couch and was looking at her, puzzled. She didn't trust that expression. "I did, but that only pertains to a job and our job has taken a hiatus for the next five days."

He raised an eyebrow. "Excellent. Then we can discuss... us."

"There is no 'us' Excalibur, there is only *you* and how *you* can gain what *you* need. This is nothing to do with me."

"Ah... but you're wrong there. It's about *us* and what we mean to each other and how we can reach a compromise where both of us are happy." He said.

Cambria snorted. "I don't believe you, Jones. I don't trust you and I certainly don't think you care about whether I'm happy or not."

Jones sighed. "And to think I dragged you pink, naked, hairless and helpless from that pit near Susrah City, all because I promised to come back."

She stood straight and walked over to the couch. "Yeah, you did. I don't understand why, you don't keep your promises."

"I shut down the gate, didn't I?" He said and his gaze slid away from hers.

She crossed her arms over her breasts. "Did you? Or did Cottington-Blake? At, it turns out, the most inopportune moment and it wasn't permanent, either. The marines came through anyway. How did that work?"

"Unfortunately, the best I could do was a temporary halt to the corridor. I pulled as many plugs as I could find, but obviously, someone put them back in." He explained without looking at her. "And I had to do a runner before anyone caught me."

Cambria sighed. A most reasonable explanation since she couldn't check his story. "Not nearly the truth, I think, but, in the end, it didn't matter. Peace broke out anyway."

"I came back for you, because I promised. I don't know why I kept it when promises mean nothing to me. But this time... it was almost like my imperative. I *had* to come for you and bring you back." He stared at her, grey eyes burning with white heat. "And that makes you... *Mine*."

She leaned on the back of the couch. "I'm am my *own*, Jones. Not anyone's property. I abhor slavery, willing or otherwise, because it takes away choices. Your coming back for me doesn't change that; no, not at all. It was your choice to come for me, not mine."

"I know and it pisses me off not to know myself as well as I thought." He replied.

"Take your anger out on anyone?" She asked even as she knew the answer.

"Yes, I did and I felt better for it, more centred."

"Killing people *centres* you?"

Jones nodded. "I'm mis-wired, I know that. It can't be fixed so I don't try to reject who and what I am. I'm a killer. That's it and that's all. It's only a matter of time before I do it again."

"Thus ending the suspension of the warrant."

"By then, I'll be a long way away. My new life is with you, that way you'll never know *when* the suspension is lifted, and it won't matter."

Cambria shook her head. What was so wrong with him that he disregarded what she'd said about not going with him? What was he up to? What was it he wanted? The bounty, yes, but there was something under his words that she couldn't decipher. Another lesson?

She patted him on the shoulder. "I *know* who and what you are, Excalibur Jones." She said. "If it wasn't for the suspended warrant and our being partners in this, I'd end you right now." She went back to her bag for fresh clothes as he laughed.

The shower time was limited, so she made it quick. She didn't want to tempt Jones, either. He'd be in here like a shot if she gave him half a chance.

She dressed in jeans, a black t-shirt and her denim jacket, went out. "Why a stateroom?"

"I like space, as in space within a ship travelling through space."

"Curious."

"Not really. The Hunters can afford it, so why not? Why fly on the cheap, uncomfortable and distracted when you can relax and focus? So, how about a pot of coffee and we can sit down and read these letters?"

His request wasn't unreasonable, so she went to the automated food dispenser unit and studied the contents. This time, she made sure she smelled coffee when she opened the unit. She brought the pot and two heavy based mugs to the coffee table, poured as he opened another letter.

"How many orders?" She asked.

"Too many for just two brothers." He murmured, and then looked at her. She handed him a mug of coffee. "I'm reading the ones from Earth – three

orders from there – but I can't read the others, so I'll leave them to you and your translator. Can you write everything down for me?"

"Yep." She said and settled the scribe and board before her.

"First one." He said and handed it to her. "With, I might add," he gave her a sneaky grin, "a nice fat cheque and a deposit slip included."

Cambria lifted an eyebrow. "Which you have already confiscated in the name of the World Council or Nexus True."

"Which I have duly deposited in my pocket as a future hedge against poverty. You never know when you might need to bribe someone and make a quick get away."

Cambria grunted. "Of course. Never let morals get in the way of your bank account."

"There you go, now get translating."

Cambria lowered her head and began to read, to write on the small board as much information as she could glean from the order.

After five letters, she leaned back and rubbed her neck.

One hundred thousand galactic credits as deposit. What a haul for Excalibur. And they weren't even halfway through the bundle of letters yet.

He was going to make a... *steal* a fortune before collecting the bounty.

"How many letters are there?" She asked.

"About thirty, I'd say." He said, reading through another Earth letter. He set it down. "You know, all these rich people have no idea what they're getting."

"Nope."

"And regardless of the World Council's best efforts to warn them of the wide spread hunt for illegal SVTs they're still ordering, still expecting to have their corridors built regardless."

"Yep." She lowered the board. "Rich people have a habit of thinking the law doesn't apply to them because they have money. Besides, where's the harm in having your own tropical paradise? Or Winter wonderland?" She read the translation again. "They have no idea of the diseases they could be bringing back, no thought to the devastation that might cause."

"Don't like the rich much, do you?" Jones smirked.

"I don't care for them, no. And before you ask, the first wealthy person I met was Bolingbroke."

"And then Cottington-Blake."

"Rich people are a law unto themselves. They're never happy unless they're grabbing off more money. I mean, how much money can one person spend in a lifetime?"

"Oh, I don't know... they keep the economy ticking over with rabid consumer spending." He said and set the letters down.

Cambria gave him a glare.

"I'm heading for bed." He rose and stretched.

"I need to finish this one, or I'll lose my train of thought." She said, ignoring the look in his eyes.

She read the letter again, then the translation. A consortium wanted to hire the brothers for a system-wide network of SVTs. And they were willing to pay premium price for them. At two hundred thousand galactic credits a pop, this letter contained a prospective multi-million dollar haul.

The wide spread warning about the SVTs had only served for people to get in while the corridors were available; and the warning was being ignored.

This letter she'd translated, spoke of the coming together of different species for cultural exchange, for peaceful purposes and how wonderful it

will be when universal peace finally settled all conflicts. They made no mention of the potential for invasion – as she'd discovered on Nomad.

The Spatial Vortex Transporters were a significant weapon against any foe who knew the address code. And while it revolutionised galactic travel, it also revolutionised the idea of war and sooner or later, someone with grand ambitions would realise it, set into action a cascade of conquering.

Ideology of a perfect inter-galactic society was all very well, but it never worked in theory, no matter how much a people wished for it.

She shook her head at the stupidity of people. The Nexians were right to reject the referendum on this – obviously after long and detailed research and discussion. They knew what the less-than-perfect galaxy could and would do with such technology. But it hadn't stopped an unscrupulous corporation from selling off the excess and less than 'perfect' models. And facilitating the brothers, either.

"I'm waiting." Excalibur said, as if it was a demand.

"For what Jones? I have enough problems to deal with, without adding you to the list." She said.

She heard the rustle of bed clothing. Damn it, she wasn't his whor...

Hands reached under her arms and hauled over the back of the couch, slammed her to the ground. Air rushed out of her lungs and she grimaced at the sudden jolt and explosion of breath out her lungs. Jones pressed his knee into her sternum, held the tip of his own hunting knife to her throat.

"I am not a 'problem' to be solved." He ground out. "And if I want sex, you'll damned well *supply* it."

She looked up into his cold grey eyes. No warmth or affection or even love there, just brutal determination that she do as he bid, as if he were a feudal lord and she a peon.

Cambria narrowed her own eyes. He'd already scared her into compliance on this trip. She wouldn't allow herself be intimidated again. "Do it and die, Jones. I'm not one of your whores or victims to fuck around with." She said with soft, but lethal intent.

The tip of the blade nicked her throat and she winced. "I can cause you so much pain." He whispered.

She met and defiantly held his gaze. "And I can cause you permanent death." She whispered back.

"The warrant is suspended." He said.

"And you raping me at knife point will invalidate that suspension. You damn well know it, so why are you provoking me?"

His eyes flickered and he pressed down with his knee. Pain flared across the bones in her chest. "I like to live dangerously." He said. "It makes me feel *alive*."

That was partially true and she sneered at him. "You don't like being defied, Jones. And I do it all the time. This... this dumb-ass intimidation is your way of trying to gain some control over me. If someone's in your way, you kill them. If they don't give you what you want, you kill them. If they have the audacity to argue with you, you kill them. You're like a spoiled kid who always gets his way and throws a tantrum when he doesn't. You really need to grow up, Jones."

His gaze drifted lovingly over her face, his fingertips brushed her skin, traced the outline of her mouth, gently and taunting. "Do you know what I like most of all about the new you?"

Fear spiked cold and fast. "What?"

He moved the blade, moved his knee and set the tip of the knife against her sternum. "I can kill you as many times as I like and you'll still come back. I find that... fascinating."

Jones raised an eyebrow, dared her to disagree.

"You do this, you kill me and when I revive, I will hunt you down like the criminal you are and execute you. No hesitation, no conversation, no chance. I get you in my sights and you're a dead man. All the way dead." She stared at him, expression empty, just like she'd learned from him and waited for his response, waited to see if he believed her.

Jones' expression remained the same as he considered her words and they held each other's gaze for a fulminating minute. Then he grinned, laughed with delight and got off her.

"Oh, I have taught you well." He smirked and tapped the tip of the blade against his bottom lip. "Well enough to cause me some doubt and concerns. And I *love* that. I love that you can challenge me like this, just far enough. But be warned, my sweet, soon, I think, you'll push me too far – and I'll wonder how much fun you'll be under my knife."

Cambria sat up, rubbed her chest, fury surged through her veins. "I don't care what the Hunters gave you, Jones, in return for this mission, but as far as *I'm* concerned, your amnesty is over. So you be warned, *my sweet*, I'll be coming for you."

He turned his head to study her as if she'd finally said something interesting and unexpected.

"That's right. You have just pushed me over the limit, pushed me that one inch too far. You step out of line once, if there's a body reported on this ship that has disappeared mysteriously, or died of unnatural causes; if you threaten me again, I will take extreme measures and finish this mission on my own."

Jones clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes. "You cannot hold me responsible for the thousands of people on this ship. You need proof I did it, and Petersen, you'll *never* get it."

“Yeah? Your arrogance and conceit is just the thing to bring you down, Jones. And when it does, I’ll be waiting.”

She picked up her pack, the translator and the letters and stormed out of the room. Jones didn’t stop her. He stood in the middle of the stateroom with his arms folded across his naked muscular chest, a smug expression on his handsome face and the light of laughter in his storm-grey eyes.

Chapter Fourteen

Cambria went to the observation deck and settled onto a lounge. A server came up to her.

"How may I be of service?" The electronical inquired.

"Do you serve food, or is that reserved for the restaurants?" She asked.

"We have a variety of snack foods, Gentle Fem, or I can guide you to one of the many exotic restaurants here on this deck." It handed her a menu.

"I'll have the... deep fried sliced tubers. Make it a large and a dark ale, please."

"At your service." The electronical said and left her.

Cambria stared out at the colourful swirls of hyperspace and turned her thoughts to Jones.

She suspected she was witnessing a part of him he never let anyone else see – until they were about to die. He struggled with his 'imperative', but he'd never explained why he had it, what his background was and why he turned so violent. He had limited control over it, but seemed to enjoy letting it loose on occasion. She was right to infer he was a child, displaying childish behaviour.

He was civilised when it suited him, when he could gain something from it. And his reaction to disappointment was more violence. He also had a twisted sense of what love was, as if it was a tradable commodity. 'Do this, and I'll be good for a while'. It was one more method of manipulation a child would use.

The electronical brought her a big bucket of chips and she dug in. It set the drink into a holder and she thanked it, gave her room number.

"At your service." It said and went back to the bar.

She had to get away from Jones; that or kill him. She doubted he had any redeeming features that didn't involve his own personal satisfaction. Nor

could she reconcile Lord Montague giving him temporary amnesty. Did the Head Hunter truly believe this job was difficult that no 'ordinary' Hunters would do? That the mission was so dangerous it required a serial killer whom no one would mourn and someone who couldn't die?

Cambria sighed. She should have checked in, discussed her partner with Caparossi or Montague himself, but when had she the chance? Jones diverted her at every attempt, she realised. And speaking of whom, she shook off thoughts of him; she had translations to finish. Jones and his ambitions could wait.

It took her another bucket of fries and two more ales, but she finally finished the job, just as Jones expected. She leaned back on the couch and closed her eyes.

Encyclopaedia. She thought.

She cracked her lids. Yep, total blindness, but the lack of sight didn't scare her as much.

Vision.

The black cleared away in a swirl and she was looking into hyperspace again. Okay. Now she knew how to access... it. She'd start slow, present simple questions, then increase the complexity.

On a sigh of relief, she decided to find the brothers' hideout and to discover how much Jones lied to her.

Encyclopaedia. The black swirled in. *Starmap, route to the Varian System, display celestial bodies.*

Behind her closed lids a star map appeared, in three dimensions. Cambria gripped the sides of the lounge chair as the map plotted the journey to the system. It was nowhere near Ngraka or Blurdach. Jones had procured tickets for the first ship out to throw her off. To make sure any Nexian law enforcers went to the wrong system.

Well, she'd not called them after all, understanding instinctively that he'd think she would contact them. Her understanding of how Excalibur Jones worked was increasing - and wouldn't that piss him off?

And now she confirmed her suspicions. The long blue line of the journey icon passed through a number of systems then slowed to another one – none within light-years of Ngraka or Blurdach.

Good guess, Cam. "Black planet." She murmured. The Varian System had no sun. It wasn't, by strict definition, a 'system' at all. This rare rock hung in empty space a rounded shadow amongst the speckled star background. Whoever discovered it must have thought it a hazard to inter-stellar travel and named it a system to warn ships away from the area.

I wonder if it has life forms. She thought.

Deep red icons appeared and dotted the surface, so many she couldn't count. Okay, then, it takes a question literally.

I need a closer look, to separate those...

The icons shifted position and the sudden vertigo had her gripping the arms of the lounge in panic. The icons drifted apart as the images slowed to a stop above the planet. Her thoughts raced as she tried to quell the need hug the ground. And then the panic washed away under more questions.

But... how did the technology *do* that? It was as if *she* hung in space, as if *she* studied the internals of the planet. Surely, it had to be a record and not a live feed? But from whom? When? Why? She could swear she saw some of those icons moving underneath the surface of the dead planet...

The too-hard-to-answer questions about the technology faded.

Subterranean colonies? All working for Olmert and Olbert Gardishan. Slaves?

Population?

Numbers appeared above the planet: 3423.

Is it a registered celestial body?

Nothing happened and she took that to mean 'no'. So the 'system' appeared in the database, but not the unnamed planet.

What is the registered population?

Close to a thousand names began to scroll and she had a hard time not to read every alien name. But she did glimpse the Gardishan brothers.

So a third of the population had names known to the... technology in her head. The others did not, which meant they came from systems as yet undiscovered by... anyone else.

I should just accept that whoever made this translator is way beyond my understanding; I have no idea how the corridors work, yet I've used them without worrying, she thought. The whys and the wherefores don't matter. I have it. I can use it, but how on earth were they going to shut the planet down?

The image shifted, cracks appeared in the surface of the black planet and it exploded in silence, or erupted without the benefit of noise or colour, broke apart.

Not an option.

It would kill everyone and she was only after two. Oh, and their precious database.

Green circular lines appeared, pinged out towards the planet and back again, as if... as if... she needed a communications device that would...?

Cambria smiled. Hack into their computers and pluck the information out from a safe distance. Call in the Nexians and *voila*, no more Gardishans, the slaves get rescued and the others detained and questioned. As a bonus, Jones would *not* get his bounty.

Now, where would she obtain such a device?

The image changed, reset. And the blue line once again, travelled through systems to... why was she not surprised – Ngraka.

Jones had it all worked out well in advance of her. He wanted the list because... it gave him options. Even though he *knew* failure was a risk. But he could hop from one world to the next for as long as he liked, for as long as he was able.

What happened to the list he stole from Bolingbroke? Did he lose it? Not that she cared. He was here on this ship, with limited opportunities.

So. She knew the location, knew what she needed and... knew what she had to do.

End encyclopaedia, standard terran vision.

And she opened her eyes to hyperspace again. All she had to do was think of the word or the question she needed and the answer would appear or not and be in the negative.

She returned to the issue of why, when all scans indicated the alien technology implanted had disappeared. She'd assumed it turned organic

Ah. She thought. Disappeared from *human* scans, did not *mean* disappeared altogether.

She still had it. Resurrected with her and integrated into her cells, maybe?

Cambria shuddered and lifted a hand. It looked like a normal, skin-over-muscle-over-tissue-over-bone, five-digit human hand. But what *really* lay underneath? Mutated cells? A layer of undetectable organic technology over her bones?

She rose from the lounge and stretched. As naps went, it was pretty useful. She even felt rested, as if she'd had a good solid eight hours sleep.

She picked up the letters and the translator and went to the bar.

"At your service." The electronical said.

"Is there a facility to send document copies into normal space?" She asked.

"Negative, Gentle Fem. Communications have not yet reached light speed ability. Communications will be available once the *Angarishan* drops out of hyperspace in thirty-six hours." It said.

"Thank you."

"At your service."

Thirty-six hours; too long. "Can I cue a message? So it's sent once we enter normal space?"

"Yes. Communications facilities are available to passengers on Deck D, port side, room 1290, to stack messages for immediate transmission on entering n-space."

And that's what she need. "Again, my thanks to you."

"At your service."

Excellent. She thought and headed to the communications room to screw up Jones' plan.

* * *

Cambria avoided Jones for the rest of the journey. She did not hear about any missing passengers or crew, so Jones must have taken his evil temper out on some poor unsuspecting battle-bot in the recreation area – at least she hoped he did.

She watched, with the crowd on the observation deck, as the ship came out of hyperspace; a reverse display of the rainbow of colours that bled into streaks of light and then the white dots of stars.

Her messages were on their way, she thought with a smile, and went in search of the bane of her existence.

He lounged in front of the entertainment unit.

"Have you finished sulking, yet?" He asked.

Cambria sat on the couch, ninety degrees from his. She laid the translations on the coffee table. "As strange as it might sound to you, I was working. Here you go, the translations of all the letters."

He reached for the device and began reading.

"We've dropped out of hyperspace." She said. "It's time to go."

"Uh, huh." He said. "You know, there's an awful lot of SVT orders here. And this is only a week's worth. The brothers can't build all of these by themselves, and yet, according to the galactic reports, they were."

"It doesn't take much for extra workers to say they are Olmert and Olbert Gardishan. They don't even need to be of the same species." She said.

"No, I suppose not." His fingers danced across the board. "A consortium. These boys are bad, bad people."

"Yes, they are. Fortunately, we're on our way to stop them and to find the list so governments can hunt down those Spatial Vortex Transports still in existence." She agreed.

"Mmm..." He said.

"What are you looking for?"

"Nothing, just a pattern, any similarities." He lowered the reader. "It occurred to me that the Gardishans need a kind of agent to filter their work, to advertise in an underground kind of a way. A middle man, as it were."

"Could be, but soon, it's not going to matter."

"How so?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Because you and I are going to shut them down, that's how. And then Nexians are going to turn up and take the boys into custody."

"Right. So, we need to be on our way to Blurdach before they do." He stood and picked up the reader and the bundle of letters, walked to the bed

and stowed everything into his pack. "So the Nexians can follow our lead. I assume you contacted them?"

"I did. What's in Blurdach?" She asked and shouldered her own bag.

"Transport."

She affected a frown. "Transport? Why can't we get transport here, on Ngraka?"

He donned his pack. "We could, but I like to travel in comfort before I hire a speedster."

"Uh, huh. It's three days to Blurdach." She said and he grinned.

"Why, so it is. Whatever shall we do?"

"Gee, let me think. How about work out a plan for confronting the Gardishan brothers?" She said and opened the door to the stateroom.

"We could, or we could entertain ourselves."

She cleared her throat. "I think you mean *you* could entertain *yourself* while I'm flat on my back with my legs in the air."

"How could I refuse such a charming offer?" He said close to her ear and held her elbow as he guided her off the ship and into another space station.

This one looked like the inside of an airport terminal, but with lowering ceilings. Shops lined the concourse, alien voices instructed people on customs inspections, ticketing, departures and arrivals. The voices blurred and with a slight hesitation, became voices that spoke English. She could read the alien language signs without pause.

Jones gripped her hand and dragged her through the crowd.

He didn't immediately go to the second ship, but wandered around the shopping precinct. He paused outside one. "Wait here, I'll be back." He said and dropped her hand.

"Right." She said and went to the window advertising all manner of electronic goods for new and interesting enterprises.

Thermal vision.

She blinked as everything turned the red, yellow, orange of heat sources. She watched as Excalibur went to the counter, spoke to a cool blue, six limbed creature. Hand clasps were exchanged and the counter lifted. Excalibur went into the back with the alien.

After a discussion, somewhat heated if the deepening of the red of Jones was anything to go by, the alien handed Excalibur a small black box and both returned to the shop. Excalibur paused and looked at the shelves, pointed to something. The alien rose on three of its legs, plucked the item off the second to top shelf.

Jones nodded to the man, accepted the second item and paid.

He came out.

Standard terran vision.

"Find what you needed?" She asked and turned from inspecting the strange electronic devices on display.

Jones looked into the window, saw the backboard obscuring any transaction inside the shop and shook his head. "No, and we don't have time to order in."

"And what were we looking for?"

"A specialised tracking device. If we're to find the brothers, we need some way of identifying them. This tracker takes a... a genetic sample, and finds their trail."

You are such a liar.

"But... we'd need to be where they were and we need a genetic sample to compare with."

Jones sighed. "I know. Looks like we'll have to do it the old fashioned way."

"What, ask around if anyone's seen a pair of Nexians wandering around? I don't know if you've noticed, Jones, but a, they always travel in pairs and b, I haven't seen a Nexian since leaving their home system. We'd have to go back to start the Hunt all over."

Jones didn't reply, he turned to retrace his steps to the spaceport. But his ears reddened.

Serve him right. If he was going to treat her like an idiot, she'd treat him the same way and poke holes in his lies. *Let him come up with another excuse.*

She walked beside him. "You don't suppose they have a kind of symbiotic relationship with their other half do you?"

Jones shrugged. "Could be. You'll have noticed how they seem to move with synchronicity. I wonder how that works?"

She knew he wasn't serious, but as long as the subject kept her distracted from the shop, he was happy to run with it and *she* wondered how many times he'd done it to her.

"And how it creates an advantage for them. Two people? Doing the work of one? Maybe it's an employment thing."

"Double the brain power, too. They are, after all, the galaxy's leading engineers." He supplied and guided her through the crowds to the second ship.

Before she could check the name and the destination, Jones shifted in front of her. "Whoops, wrong one." He said and quick-marched her down the loading bays. The station was mega-sized and she noted the slight curve in the broad gallery they were walking down.

Jones checked the tickets again and kept walking.

"It would be easy to give me the tickets, instead of you checking to match the sigils."

"I know where I'm going, thank you." He said and she rolled her eyes.

Typical male, never needs help in finding places no matter how lost.

"Right. Fine. Sorry I asked." She said and kept pace until he slowed, watched the signs and pointed.

"That's us." He said and held her elbow again.

She was content to let him, curious to see what his plan was.

The ship was much smaller than the passenger liner - so small that it had less than one hundred cabins, all of them the same size and with the same facilities.

But the *Zendrabian* wasn't headed to Blurdach, she glimpsed that on the board as she passed by, momentarily unblocked by Jones' big body. No, they were headed for the Jasfera system. She'd look it up later, but again, it wasn't on the direct route to Varian. In fact, Jones was deliberately taking a longer route. She suspected they could hire a fast transport here, but Jones wanted a different journey.

She followed Jones to their shared cabin. It had a bed, a head, a desk and an entertainment screen. No escaping to the couch here and she knew that was a side benefit to his plan – or so he thought. She was keeping away from him and his dextrous hands and mouth. No more screwing around.

Cambria set her bag down. "Not as comfortable as a stateroom." She said.

Jones bounced on the double bed, stuck his hands under his head and crossed his ankles. "Nope, this ship doesn't have them."

"I guess not. Okay then," she pulled out the chair from beneath the desk, sat down, "what's the plan for the next three days?"

He gave her a slow smile and patted the space beside him as an answer.

"No." She said and his smile broadened.

"Yes."

"Is this an argument you want to have now?" She glared.

"We have three, glorious days of doing nothing but fucking. What more do you want?" He asked with a faint frown. "I've missed being inside you and I want to be there again."

"But you never ask what *I* want, do you. It's all about *you*."

"You want what I want, Cambria, and it's a little late to be denying it."

"And it's impossible to think a woman might change her mind, right? Who might think you're not so special after all."

His grey eyes glinted. "I recall telling you back on Nomad that there is nothing and no one more important to you than me."

"I do recall you saying that while you held a knife to my throat." She said and her lip curled with distaste. "Funny how being in peril will make you say anything and, at the same time, fill you with reservations about the stability of the person threatening you."

His eyes thawed. "Aww, come on, Cambria, you know what I meant."

"That we have a special something too good to waste on idle chit-chat? That the passion we share is like no other? And we'll never find the same with any other person? That kind of importance?"

He nodded as if she finally understood him, and she did, all too well. His expression brightened with anticipation and she saw that anticipation rise further down, too.

"It's funny, Excalibur, but the so called passion you feel for me, the importance of that passion, didn't stop you from fucking Corona, now did it?" She said with a hooded gaze.

He waved a hand. "Number one, you weren't in the room when I arrived and she was available and eager. Number two, she started it the next morning."

Cambria expected him to pout, as if nothing about that night and day was his fault.

"So... she *raped* you? Is that what you're saying?"

Something flashed in his eyes. "No. She did not. But it didn't mean anything, either."

"Not to you maybe, but it *did* to her and it *did* to me."

He shrugged as if it wasn't important, that what *she* felt wasn't important and she felt a shifting inside.

"Being unfaithful is nothing to you, is it."

"I can be faithful." He said and she saw his lip jut.

Cambria sighed. "Sure, for as long as it takes for you to be *unfaithful*."

He clicked his tongue with frustration and sat up. "You're being stupid. It's not as if you've been faithful to *me*. I know all about Louis Boudreaux and Major Caparossi, how you spread your legs for them. Do you suck off Lord Montague, too?"

"This isn't about *them*, it's about you and, indirectly, me."

"So," he said with a nasty smile, "you admit it. You *do* fuck them - let them have you. Do you do Monty in his office? On his desk? Oh, yes, I can picture that old bastard, sweating over you, pounding away."

"You need to calm down, Jones." She said and saw the light in his eyes.

"I'm going to kill them." He nodded. "Slowly, piece by piece. Cut off little parts to make the pleasure of killing them last longer."

Cambria shook her head. "You'll never get to them, Jones." She promised.

He stood, his hands clenched into fists. "You *always* challenge me! Why *do* you do that? You *know* what I'm capable of!"

"I do." She said quietly. "I do know and that's why you'll never get to them. And just for the record, I've *never* been unfaithful to you - I haven't had the time or the inclination. Caparossi is more often than not off world with his retrieval squad. I have no idea where Boudreaux and his little skank is, and as for Lord Montague, eww!"

“Skank?” Jones tilted his head. “What skank?”

Cambria snorted, stretched her legs out to the end of the bed.

“Bolingbroke’s daughter, Ranalda.”

“*Ranalda!* What universe did he live in to name his girl child after himself?”

Cambria saw the distraction was working and continued. “He is one sick fuck, I can tell you that much, but he went too far when he exiled Ranalda’s lover to... somewhere, I can’t remember what planet. The Hunters picked her up and took her to the facility. While I was away screwing around on Tudor, she stuck her claws into my Louis, dragged him into bed and kept him there.”

“The bitch.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think they deserved each other. All apologies and undying declarations of love for each other.” She pretended to stick her fingers down her throat. “As if I deliberately escaped Tudor to spoil their fun, to break up their happy relationship – the traitorous fucks.”

Jones smiled. “Well, he wasn’t for you then, if he’s so easily distracted by a skirt.”

“What did you do with him? With Bolingbroke?” Cambria asked and he shrugged.

“Nothing. He was already gone when I got there, lucky for him. But I did find his list and enough information to follow him.” Jones laughed. “Stupid git thought he’d found the perfect world where the natives worshipped him.”

“Really?”

Jones made himself comfortable on the bed again. “Yep. Unfortunately for him, they *did* worship him, gave him everything and anything he

wanted, except for the information regarding the sacrifice of their God-King – Bolingbroke – on their *feast* day.”

“So he’s dead, then.” Cambria rubbed her jaw, where the scar had been.

“Oh, very. And once he was, they looked at me as if *I* was their new God-King. Someone’s selected every two years. They are treated like, well, God-Kings for that long before...” He drew his thumb across his throat. “I declined, with thanks, and got the hell out of there, blotted out the code on his list.” He shook his head. “No one deserves that, but... Bolingbroke comes close.” He shuddered. “Roast of Bolingbroke. Blech.”

“And the list? Bolingbroke’s list?”

He waved off the question. “Once Corona began babbling, it wasn’t any use to me, so I chucked it, put it into a recycler so no one else could use it. Now, I guess I need a new one.” He sighed.

Cambria stood. “I’m going to get something to eat.” She went to the door.

“We’ll deal with the fucking when you get back.” He said, as if it was a done deal and they hadn’t had the discussion.

He just wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer.

She left, wandered the ship to acquaint herself and found the passenger’s galley. She ordered what she hoped was similar to leek and potato soup with thick crusty bread. What arrived was close, but not quite. She also ordered up coffee, in hopes it was the real thing.

She took her tray to her table and started to eat. The taste was subtly wrong with the soup, but the bread was bread, thick multi-grained and perfect with the butter facsimile.

Satisfied, held her cup in her hand and sipped. Not even close. The beverage was dark, true, but it was spicy with an almost... cinnamon flavour.

She stared into the depths.

Encyclopaedia.

Her eyes went dark.

Locate Jasfera System.

Only two days away from Ngraka, not the three the Nexian pair said it would take to make Blurdach, and she wondered how Jones would explain the time difference? Dilation, perhaps? The idea that time and distance worked differently in hyperspace? She'd bet her last Euro that's what he'd say. If she asked.

The important part was that the Jasfera system was two systems away from Varian. A short hop in a puddle jumper. And since it was 'empty' space, that is, nothing inhabitable and no redeeming features, it was written off. If Jones had his way – and he'd do his damndest on that – no one would know their final destination; thus assuring him of the bounty.

And she even knew why Jones kept her with him: he couldn't translate the many languages needed, Nexian and others languages in the soon-to-be purloined database. But as soon as her usefulness was over, he'd dump her fast and get back to Nexus True with the captives – or more likely, bodies – to claim the bounty on the Gardishans.

Standard Terran Vision.

Curls of steam still rose from the coffee cup and she sipped again. Did she like it? She wasn't sure. It wasn't coffee, but it had an interesting, if unusual flavour and had the same caffeine jolt as coffee.

Jones sat down across from her, his tray loaded with unidentifiable things of various colours. "You look so despondent, I thought I'd better cheer you up."

"Uh, huh. And the idea that *you* might be the cause never occurred to you." She said.

He dug into a plate of purple... something. "Nope. I thought you might be tired of all this travelling. And we still have a way to go. You can't be despondent aboard ship. Bored yes, but there is a recreational facility you might like to try out. Of particular interest, is the three-dimensional game console. It is... amazing."

"What type of games?" She asked, intrigued by the three-d part. Given the... encyc – *informational* storage facility in her mind, it might be interesting to try something with her eyes open.

He swallowed. "Anything from commanding a battle fleet, to puzzle games and meditation. You can be a cop on Kedred, hunting bandits, or solve the puzzle of the Q'risa Nebula. Stand on the bridge of a superdreadnought heading in to battle impossible odds off the Ar'estar, or escape from the prison planet Bandarius – where you've been falsely imprisoned, of course." He smirked.

Cambria curled her lip. "Been there, done that, have no wish to repeat the experience."

"There's quite a library of games to choose from."

She looked at him. "You've played some of them before." She accused.

He returned her look. "I had a life before you, Cambria, and I will have a life *after* you."

It wasn't an argument she wanted to revisit and she understood he was telling her he'd been hopping the corridors for some time before being caught, convicted and sent to Tudor.

"So... which is your favourite game, then?"

He continued to eat as he thought. "Being a captain is fun, so is being a cop, but... if I had to chose, I think I prefer the Pirate's Dice game."

"Why is that?"

“Because every decision is made with the throw of a dice; it’s all about gambling. Your life, your crew’s life, your treasure, your ship... *everything*. Win or lose on the turn of the dice.”

“You’ve got a gleam in your eye. Why is that so exciting to you?” She drained her mug and decided not to get another.

“These games are special because they are... totally interactive. They last – on the outside – about two hours; but while you’re in the game, days can pass, sometimes weeks if you get bogged down in the jungles of Hreria – and that is so easy to do, let me tell you.” He rolled his eyes.

“And this is relaxing?”

“Oh, sure. You come out of some of those games as if you’ve you slept for hours. When you awaken, you’re refreshed. It’s as if... the games have a regenerative effect.” He said thoughtfully.

“Now I’m curious. Where is the gaming deck?” Maybe she could use the deck as a deterrent for Jones.

He stuck his thumb up. “Next level up.”

She pushed back her chair and stood. “Then I’m going to explore these new worlds.”

She walked away, but heard him say, “you do that.” And wondered what he meant.

Chapter Fifteen

The gaming lounge was quiet when she stepped inside. It had the same silence as a library.

An electronical glided over to her. "At your service, Gentle Fem, how may I assist you?" It said in a soft voice.

"I think I need some relaxation. What do you recommend?"

"We have a number of programs designed to relax the mind, the spirit and the body. May I recommend some gentle, yet focused exercise? It is most beneficial to all three requirements." It said.

"So, it's like a walk on a moonlit beach, or under the stars, I can choose the environment?"

"Of course, Gentle Fem, anything you require. Inform me of the parameters and I will program your relaxation."

Cambria breathed in and thought. What did she consider relaxing? When had she last indulged in it? She'd been fighting for her life and the lives of others for so long, she wondered whether it was even possible.

But a walk, under alien skies, on a beach, alone? That sounded good.

"I'd like a beach, with soft surf and hard sand."

"At your service. Will you select a world?" He guided her to a cubicle.

"Whichever you think is the most beautiful, please." She said and ducked inside.

"At your service, Gentle Fem." The electronical said.

The small area had a lounge with a hard, curved shell that drew up and over the guest's head. There was also a head set.

She climbed onto the lounge and pulled the dark cover up, almost closed. She put the headset on and fumbled with the cover. It clicked shut and she lay still while the lounge adjusted to her body.

"Engaging program." The electronical said through the headset.

"Thank you."

"At your service."

She settled in.

A warm breeze brushed her face, the scent of sea water came to her and the cool, hard sand under her feet felt natural. Cambria opened her eyes, even though she knew they were open anyway.

The night was clear, with an astonishing array of stars above. She didn't recognise any of the constellations, but it didn't matter as a shooting star passed overhead. The sea, on her right, was a dark, mysterious green, the sand a delicate shell pink. To her left were trees with thick golden trunks and faint orange foliage.

As an alien place it was out there, as a place to relax... well, she had a beach to walk, sea to stroll through and, most importantly, she was blessedly alone.

She looked ahead and behind her. The beach stretched for kilometres in either direction with not a soul in sight.

With a sigh, she started walking at an amble, breathing in the fragrant night air. She could literally feel the tension seep out of her muscles. This distant beach, the stars, the soft rush of the seawater... she could feel everything as if she was here.

When she'd walked long enough, she sat down and watched curious tiny lights buzz and play over the water's surface. Each small creature brushed the top of the rolling green liquid and darted away. In the glow, beneath the waves, she saw movement, but nothing breached the surface and the glows darted further out to sea.

She became aware of someone sitting beside her, felt the warmth of his body, but she didn't turn.

He sighed. "This is some place, *chere*."

She didn't answer, she watched the glows dart and zip across the water.

"It is beautiful. Magical." The words had a hint of accent. "Enchanting." One arm came around her shoulder, the other lay flat on her naked stomach and he eased her back on to the sand. His hand slid down to between her thighs and she didn't stop him.

"Why are you here?" She asked. Louis Boudreaux, handsome with his dark hair and eyes, his lush eyelashes and firm chin, the gorgeous, tempting mouth. He leaned over her.

"*Chere*, we have unfinished business. We did not part on the best of terms." He lowered his mouth to her breasts, sucked a little, then soothed her with his tongue.

Cambria felt a buzz start low, resented it. "And, of course, I am absolutely stupid to think you'd ever think I might like a little peace and quiet." She said and dug her heels into the cool sand and allowed him to drift little kisses across her chest up her throat and chin.

"But we had good times together, intense times, and I would have stayed, forever, *chere*, just like you asked of me that night."

Cambria pushed him away, stood and continued walking down the beach. He followed.

"Will you come back to me?" Louis asked. "Will you allow me to touch you again, share with you the passion we once had?"

Cambria started to run, to jog down the beach as far as she wanted. The beach just kept on, the warm breeze soft against her skin even as the sweat of effort pearled on her forehead. She slowed to a walk.

"We were good together." Louis said from just behind her. "Will you not try to reach out one more time?"

She spun. "You are an evil, sick prick, Jones. You sully *everything*, even the good memories I had of Louis. Who's next? Caparossi? A childhood

boyfriend? Who?" She used both hands to push him away. He staggered and Louis' smile became that of Excalibur Jones.

"You are *mine*, ever and always. I don't care to have you thinking of anyone else but me. Ever. And now, every time you think of your former lover, you will *also* think of me, here, with you."

She stared at his smug expression, felt the hurt burbling beneath the surface that he'd done this thing. "How did you know what Louis said to me that night?"

His smile was sly, knowing. "Bolingbroke recorded... *everything*. As soon as that report landed on Dortmund's desk, his secretary arranged the surveillance. I'm sure when he saw how hot you and Boudreaux are in bed, he spent some meaningful time with his hand and a box of tissues." Jones snickered and walked away.

Cambria spent the rest of her time trying to regain the relaxation and peace she'd found her but it was tainted and when the environment faded to black and she tugged off the headset, she found the cover had been drawn down, and the tabs on her pants undone. The buttons on her shirt were undone and her bra pushed up. She felt vaguely abused.

She rearranged herself and stood, left the cubicle.

She eyed the electronical and marched over. "Are the cubicles secured when there is a guest inside?"

"At your service. Yes, they are."

"And if someone wants to interrupt a guest?"

"One only has to ask. Is there a problem, Gentle Fem? Did you not enjoy your walk on the sands of Durnush with your husband?"

Cambria breathed deep, tried to settle the burning rage bubbling inside.

"Thank you for your attention." She bit out.

"At your service." The electronical said as she walked away.

She wanted to hunt the bastard down and *hurt* him, physically, emotionally; he had involved himself in her life for far too long. Yes, he was great in bed, but outside? He was unreachable, unrepentant and just plain *evil*.

And oh, she *hated* him now, with a passion she'd never felt before, never thought she could feel.

She found him, propped up in bed back in the cabin, reading the translated texts.

He raised an eyebrow. "You look pissed at something." He said.

"You. I am *pissed* at you." She grabbed her pack and went into the head to change into her nightshirt. She had a quick shower, brushed her teeth with barely suppressed fury. When she came out, she climbed into bed and deliberately turned her back on him. If he so much as touched her, so much as *breathed* on her, she'd... she'd... do him a... a... mischief...f...

"You drugg'd me again." She slurred.

Excalibur turned her flat on her back and she looked up into his eyes.

"If you would just give in and..." He lifted her shirt up her body to her armpits, then settled between her thighs. "Understand we'll *always* be together. I wouldn't need to drug you. Just accept that, accept that I make you happy, that I am *everything* to you."

"Wh'n?"

He leaned down and brushed a kiss across her mouth. "Toothpaste. Just like last time." He confessed and settled his mouth on hers, probed with his tongue and she was helpless to do anything.

"Hate you." She mumbled as he kissed his way down her throat to her breasts. He ignored her, nipped and bit at her, but there was no enjoyment for her.

His erection pierced her with one firm thrust. "Oh, yeah." Jones sighed. "Where I want to be, where I *deserve* to be." And he continued to thrust, continued to tell her how much she enjoyed it, enjoyed him, enjoyed the thick slide of him inside her.

His teeth bit into the flesh of her breast and it *hurt* as he slammed into her, buried himself deep, held himself still and erupted into her.

He sighed and lowered his head to her chest. "Just think, sweetheart, we have another couple of days of this, of mutual satisfaction." And he fell asleep, still embedded within her body.

The drug took over and she dropped into heavy slumber.

She awoke to find Jones rubbing her teeth with the toothpaste and the lassitude flooded through her veins.

He was still naked, thick and full as he kneeled between her thighs. "I know you think you'd like to kill me, but you won't. You enjoy this too much, *want* this too much."

Jones lifted her legs and placed them around his hips, tugged her a little closer and slid into her. His eyes held a strange light, as if another personality looked down at her, possessive, demonic. "Oh, yeah, you want to fuck me as much I want to fuck you. I knew the moment I saw you, we'd be together. And since I know you like a little pain with your sex," he lifted his hunting knife and laid it on her lower belly, "I'm going to give that to you as well. Only I understand how you like it, babe." And he lightly drew the finely-honed blade across her skin.

And here was the true horror and terror of Excalibur Jones. The monster within released.

Here, where he could no longer control himself – intentional or not – he could do this, because he was confined, had been restricted for days, unable to kill whom he pleased. This was what Lord Montague warned her about.

She'd been so arrogant, so sure she'd be able to avoid the same fate as his other victims, that Jones wouldn't do this to her.

Tears leaked out of her eyes. His perfect victim. She'd survive physically, but mentally? Emotionally?

She still felt the icy, burning, sharp slicing pain of everything he did to her, what his 'imperative' told him to do, so she distanced herself. It was all she could do to escape his monstrous actions.

Encyclopaedia.

Analyse blood content. Search for sedative.

The chemical compound swirled as a molecular structure.

She winced as the blade bit deeper into her flesh and his penis surged harder into her.

Solution?

No answer came and she silently cursed. It wasn't an injury or a disease, so her enhanced metabolism could do nothing. Like when she was drunk on alcohol.

She felt him pulse deep within her, felt him lie over her, press himself to her as if he couldn't bear any separation from her; felt him lick her chin with a warm tongue, even as he slid the razor sharp knife down her belly.

"You need to look at me when I'm screwing you." He said, a little put out and she opened her eyes, stared blindly.

"Well, that's not good. What happened?" He asked, but she didn't reply.

The knife tip touched her lips. "Having black eyes doesn't mean you can't be civil and answer a question."

"I d'nt know." She mumbled and tasted blood. He tapped her mouth and took the blade away. "Wha' jhoo do?"

"Just a few cuts, a little deeper than I planned, but their healed now, so you don't have to worry. We'll do this as soon as little Ex has recovered." He

paused. "So... they're completely black, no sign of any other colour. What do you see on the other side?"

"Nufing. All black."

"Does it hurt? No? Itch, maybe? No? It like an oily black film coating your eyeballs. Hold still." He said and he touched her eyes. She felt the pressure but not the actual touch. "Feels... odd." And he did it again. "Feels like..." He rubbed his finger over the blackness, pressed down until it hurt; not that he cared. "It feels like nothing I've ever felt before, unless it's poorly made jello."

"Why?" She whispered, but she knew the answer, she wanted him to confess.

"Honey, I can be who I am when I'm with you; I don't have to pretend. Those others, they didn't mean anything because they couldn't appreciate my work, they never lived long enough – you will."

He shifted his hips, slipped out of her and she mentally sighed with relief.

Excalibur Jones was a dead man and he didn't even know it. His grip on civilised behaviour had vanished and she was his target. She also knew he'd do anything to escape her wrath, even deny raping her repeatedly, or cutting her, like he did his other victims.

And now, with her new nature, she was his perfect lover: able to take every cut, every stab wound and recover so he could do it again.

Excalibur Jones was a killer, burdened by the death of his victims who failed to understand him. Now he had her.

He'd convince himself that she wanted this, next he'd be telling her that she asked for it, that she threw herself at him and there was nothing he could do but oblige her.

Until he stopped drugging her, however, *she* could do nothing but wait.

* * *

Jones was insatiable. She'd fall asleep under the drug while he was striving for his release and she'd wake up with his finger between her lips rubbing more doctored toothpaste on them. Then he'd be at her again, biting, using the knife on her, slashing her flesh and sometimes sinking the blade into her as slowly as he liked, wherever he liked, and crooning with interest. That he hadn't killed her was a miracle, or he was being careful.

He'd ease back and she'd feel the skin knit together, wait for the biting agony to ease.

"There's a lot of blood, you know, but we'll be long gone before anyone does anything about it." He remarked and cut her again, slid the blade down her sternum, like a surgeon, as he raped her. And all the while, she kept her eyes closed, kept her distance in the encyclopaedia, but sometimes it wasn't enough and she'd scream out her tortured agony in her mind. She didn't want to see his sick enjoyment, wouldn't put herself through the memories of his blissful face. She'd already glimpsed him with her blood painting his cheeks, his nose, forehead and his chin as if he'd rubbed the blood in himself.

Eventually, he stopped.

"Time to go, sweetheart, but I need to clean up first." And he left her alone to shower.

Standard... Terran... Vision.

She opened her eyes, exhausted, near mindless. Blood covered her body, wet and dry, in smears and splashes. The bedclothes were stained, soaked in places beneath her body, though the sheets were deep blue colour. She still couldn't move and when she heard the shower turn off, she turned the encyclopaedia back on.

Instead of rubbing her teeth, this time he squirted the tainted paste into her mouth.

"Time for a little trip, sweetheart."

The stuff slowly melted on her tongue and she succumbed to the drug and a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * *

Cambria had no sense of time, but whatever alien technology was inside her took careful note of everything while she wallowed in near sleep: The flow of water over her skin as he washed her, the curses as he tried to dress her properly, the request for a luggage trolley and cover. The painful twisting of her body as he folded her into the bottom rack and the tying of her ankles and wrists to keep her contained.

The sounds of alien voices as he wheeled her to the exit and his comments of a most satisfactory journey, repelled her, but all she could do was wait.

Then there was silence for a time and nothing to record.

* * *

She awoke naturally, as if he'd forgotten to dose her again, but he hadn't. He'd cuffed her to the co-pilot's seat of a small inter-system ship.

"Water." She whispered as she lifted her head. "Please."

Jones touched her bottom lip with a hard object and she opened her mouth. Cool liquid flowed down her throat and she swallowed, wanted more but he took the bottle away.

"Not too much, now. You'll need some later."

Standard Terran Vision.

She opened her eyes and saw the console before her. She turned to him and he smiled.

"The black is gone." And then he frowned, touched her knee. "How do you feel?"

"Tired, exhausted." The languor of the drug still permeated her system, made her feel slow and fuzzy-headed.

"You were sick virtually the whole journey. Do you remember anything?"

Sick? That was his story? Why would he think she'd believe that lie?

Because she'd let him think he'd got away with other lies?

"You. Raping me, cutting me up, drugging me with the damned toothpaste." Cambria trembled. She wanted to run, to hide, wanted to deny what he'd done to her, that it hadn't happened and it was all just a nightmare. But tears surged into her eyes, anguish and fear clutched at her heart.

Oh, God, he'd really done all those things to her. Her stomach muscles contracted as if bracing for the cold kiss of a razor. And she could remember the pressure of the blade against her flesh, the awful sting, then agony of the knife parting her skin, his maniacal glee as he ruined her.

Did he think physical recovery meant psychological recovery as well?

Excalibur Jones was an abomination, worse than the aliens who changed her. The difference was she didn't fear those aliens. Jones terrified her, down to her marrow. He could hurt her in so many ways, wallow in her pain and take pleasure from it. He'd ably demonstrated he was stronger and smarter than her, that he could find her anywhere, at anytime and take her. And while a part of her denied his power over her, that she'd find the strength to defeat him, she felt she had no choice but to acquiesce to every demand for fear of provoking another attack.

He laid a hand on her forehead and she flinched. "You said no to me, remember? Told me I was a dead man if I did anything. Given your... recuperative nature, I didn't think it wise to try." Then he used his thumbs to gently wipe the tears from her cheeks. "You still feel a little hot. Do you feel nauseous?"

"No, just tired."

"Why don't you have a sleep, we'll be there in a couple of hours." He said and played with the console.

"The Jasfera system?"

"Behind us. You were really out of it. It was all I could do to get you to the ship."

"Not a doctor?" She asked wearily.

"You kept saying you were fine and not to worry."

She let the lie slide. "And I'm restrained... why?"

"You are violent when you're ill. I didn't want you to hurt yourself. I still don't. Just close your eyes and before you know it, we'll be in the Varian system and we can go in and get the brothers."

You are such a liar and one day, I'll find the strength to kill you. She thought and dozed in the twilight.

She heard him shift in his seat and cracked an eyelid. He didn't look at her, but set the small box he'd bought at Ngraka on the console, then he pulled a flat green board out of his pocket and plugged it into the box.

The top of the box lit up and he extended a filament of silver from the box to the translator.

What was he doing? She struggled to remember why they were here. Ah... yes, of course. He'd transmit the translations down to the black planet and while transmitting, she suspected the device would suck the desired information out at the same time.

He needed her to help him get to the brothers, translate the addresses quickly and then escape this part of the universe, taking her with him as his own personal toy.

She shuddered and closed her eyes as he turned towards her.

"You'll be fine, Cambria." He whispered to her. "All you need is sleep until I'm ready for you."

Fear bloomed and she cowered in her seat.

"Yes," he murmured, "now you understand me."

Two hours later and she felt a sting in her upper arm. Her eyes popped open and she felt suddenly clear-headed.

"What did you do to me?" She asked hoarsely as her heart beat increased and her blood surged with adrenalin.

"A stimulant, that's all." He lifted his hands as if he was harmless. She knew better and she flinched away from him... again.

He tilted his head and smiled, pointed to a screen. "You can just see it, a shadow against the star field."

She glanced at the monitor. The ship hung in almost the same position as the images she'd brought up when locating the system. It was an eerie feeling to know she'd seen the planet without the benefit of a spacecraft wrapped around her.

Cambria steeled her shattered nerves. He expected her to believe his every word, expected her to challenge him, to present arguments, ideas and solutions. All she wanted to do was curl into a ball and shut out the world. Her hands trembled and a shudder went through her body. She needed to convince herself she was fine – have the breakdown later – because her continued good health depended on how well she pretended there was nothing wrong.

She took a shaky breath, wouldn't look at him. "The Gardishans' happy home, I presume?"

"The very same. Now, we need an entrance strategy."

"What about a mail call? They have to be expecting their orders to come in. Someone must deliver, they're too well known on Nexus True and the space stations." She suggested.

She looked across from him and down to the device he'd installed.

"What's that?"

"This? Oh, it's nothing, something to do with the ship's workings I imagine."

"Jones."

"What? I know everything about a ship?"

She cleared her throat, braced herself. "Jones, it's *attached* to the console. It's not a *part* of it. So someone, you, put it there and hooked it up. Why don't you cut the bullshit and tell me instead of dreaming up *more* crap I won't believe."

"Okay, fine." He breathed. "It's an intercept device, designed to let me know if we are being pursued or detected in any way. That way we can skedaddle at the first hint of trouble."

The tightness in her chest eased slightly as he failed to produce a knife at her defiance. "Lies just love those lips." She said and he looked offended. "It's attached to the *translator*."

His brows lowered. "You're the one who can read and speak every known language in the fucking galaxy. I can't, so how do I know what a ship is demanding of me if I don't bloody well translate it *first*?"

As explanations went, it sounded logical, if she hadn't seen him buy the device and then lie about it.

He narrowed his gaze, studied her pale features. "That fever really screwed you up, didn't it." He said. "Maybe I should go down on my own."

"There is nothing wrong with me, Jones." She bit out. "I'm *fine*." No matter he scared her, kept her in a state of high anxiety, she couldn't let him go down there on his own, wreaking all manner of havoc.

Jones leaned over and uncuffed her as she held herself still. "Just remember: we get the brothers, we get the info, and we get the hell out."

"Are there... any other life forms down there?" She asked and rubbed her wrists. The stimulant made her feel odd, as if she needed to run around like a maniac. Everything was brighter, shinier, her hearing sharper, words wanted to explode from her. What *was* that stuff?

Jones raised an eyebrow and turned back to the console, used the scanner. Now would be a perfect opportunity for her to take Jones out. But... she'd need help with the brothers, too; at least, until the Nexians turned up, and that might take a while.

"Well, then." He muttered. "There are over three thousand people down there, all underground."

"That could be a problem, but at least we know this is where their workers are. They must prefabricate here and ship it out somehow. Any sign of craft in the area? Because if they're out there and have an eye on us, it could get tricky and..." She deliberately shut her mouth on the torrent of words. What had he given her? She glanced at him as he checked an alternative section of the console without referring at the box he installed.

"No sign. They must be making a delivery. Damn, I really hope Olmert and Olbert are down there or it's a wasted trip."

"Oh, I don't know. If we grab off the information, we can notify everyone where this planet is and what's going on. The Gardishans won't have a safe haven anymore. And then someone can come along and take off the workers, send them back to their own planet. I'm sure they've developed skills that will be useful..." Again she clamped her jaw.

He looked at her, amusement in his icy eyes. Then he leaned towards her. "I *want* that bounty."

Her eyes rolled with disgust and suddenly, she was speaking fast, as if she couldn't stop this time. "Me, me, me. That's all I ever hear from you, never what you might be able to do for someone else, it's all about you and

your needs. I don't think I've heard you say a kind word about anyone. You are the most selfish person I have ever met, Jones..." His expression went blank but she rolled on. "You're all about self-gratification and no noble cause is worth your time because there is nothing in it for you. Even now, it's your bounty as if I don't exist and..." He slammed a hand over her mouth and she froze.

"Why do you provoke me?" He asked softly and drew his hand down.

Cambria lowered her gaze to her hands resting in her lap. "The stimulant you gave me makes me want to say things I wouldn't normally speak of. It's as if I have a wealth of words, just busting to break free." She lifted a shoulder and risked a glance at him. "Why do you have no self control?"

He blinked and sat back, considered her question rather than her answer. "All my life, even growing up, I was given what I demanded." He said with a shrug. "You were right, you know. Even when I was a kid, my parents developed worker's guilt – lawyers, if you can believe it, working sixteen and eighteen hour days - and they'd buy me anything, everything I demanded, until nothing had any worth because it was too easy to come by. I'd have a tantrum and they'd buy me something. I'd resist what they asked of me until they promised to do something for me. I was raised to expect my own way. And my way didn't happen, I removed the resistance and took what I wanted."

"Why are you telling me now?" She asked, curious.

"Because you'll never trust me if you don't understand my past, the reasons why I am the way I am. It *is* all about me, because it's *always* been about me. The precious son, the only child, protected from responsibility by guilt-ridden parents." He stared down at the black planet, but she knew he didn't see it, he was wallowing in the past.

"You manipulated them."

"Oh, yeah. And it was so easy, pitifully so. You'd think leaving me with a nanny would assuage some of that guilt, but no, they wanted to raise me themselves and I think, if they'd given up their ambitions, or not aimed so high, maybe I might have turned out different. But they didn't and here I am. The son of selfishly wealthy parents, gallivanting about the galaxy, a casual killer, wanted by so many agencies I can almost feel a noose around my neck."

"So... you blame your parents for how you turned out?"

He looked at her a smile in his eyes. "Yes. I do. But not for the reasons you might think. It was my mother who took me on my first kill."

"Your... *mother*?"

"Yeah. What a bitch she was." He laughed. "The first murder was my father. My mother provoked me into such a rage." He fisted his hands, gently tapped them on the console. "Telling me my father thought me an idiot, that I didn't deserve a damn thing, that he wasn't sure I was his kid, that his mistress was a better lay than my mother. That he wished he'd never met the slut and she'd ruined his life by becoming pregnant. All of it true. I made him tell me before I stabbed him over and over and over again."

She stared at him and he lifted his head.

"My mother gave me a present afterwards, said I was a *good* boy. And from then on, I killed at her pleasure. She always watched. The sick bitch. I finally had to put an end to her. But she had to know I would. She'd taught me well. My reward for being a *good boy*, was the torture and murder of a staff member." He smiled in remembrance. "She only hired people who wouldn't be missed, picked street people to train – they were grateful for the work, the home and the food, never knowing what she and I planned for them."

"Jeez, Jones." Cambria said. His words had the ring of truth, although she expected some to be a lie, an embellishment to justify his actions.

"Don't get me wrong, Cambria, I *like* killing. I'll do it for as long as I'm able. It's the one thing I absolutely know I'm good at. And I take pleasure in my work. Sure, there are some... people who are unfortunate enough to get in my way, who just happen to be there when I'm in a hurry."

Cambria said the only thing possible. "Your mother was just as monstrous."

"That she was." He murmured. "That she was. But the result is I've made a career of hunting people, particular people who suit my needs. But I'm happy now, content with what you and I have together. You're everything I've ever wanted or needed, but I fear the Gardishans press every single button of my imperative. They're corrupt, they're greedy, they sell less than stellar products and they just don't know when to quit." He shrugged.

"What's not to like about targets like that?"

He was suggesting he had a *moral* compass after all? "And you're telling me *this* because..."

"Because I might get out of control. All those people down there, all those workers. They are in the employ of the Gardishans and just as culpable in my eyes. All those potential victims I can slaughter at will because they don't fit my profile of deserving to live. Do you understand me?" He pinned her with a glance.

Ah, now she saw it, he's deepest fear: he didn't want to become an unthinking killing machine, unable stop or to appreciate his work. And that's what made his 'moral compass', the need to admire his handiwork. If he went berserk, he was just like any other serial killer. "You want me to *stop* you from killing them?"

He snorted and rolled his eyes. "Lord, no, of course not. *I'm* going to provide the distraction, while *you* sneak in and get the information and the brothers."

"Oh, right." She frowned. "That's a lot of people to kill."

"I always did like a challenge, but you know what? This is a killer's idea of heaven. All those people, deserving of death and I can take down as many as I like." He sighed and she heard the anticipation, like a kid given free-reign in a candy store.

"Jones, what happens when I've got both, the brothers and the lists? How do I stop you? How do I get you back to the ship? How do I break whatever psychosis has taken control of you?"

He lifted a shoulder. "One might have killed me already. I doubt it, but there's always a chance. In any case, if I'm still going, I'll be tired, just bash me over the head and haul me away. Can't get more simpler than that."

"You're... trusting me to do the right thing by you."

"I am."

Cambria blew out a breath. He was appealing to her sense of justice, that if she gave her word, she'd stick to it. That they'd both do what they were so good at: him, creating a diversion by indulging his passion for murder; her, by hunting down her targets and the information needed - and finishing the mission like partners were supposed to.

Get the job done and then sort Jones out. That was the only plan she could think of. But he'd betrayed her before. She looked at all the angles, studied what and how he could do it again. He was after the bounty and the list. She'd be a fool to trust him, because once he had both, he'd run and leave her to face the consequences. She knew that.

And yet, she found herself nodding, completing the deal she knew he'd break as soon as he had the chance.

"All right, Jones. But if you fail me, if you screw this up, rest assured, I am coming for you and I will not fail in the execution of the suspended warrant."

He gave her a smile that had her breath backing up in her lungs again. "You do play hardball. Okay, sweetheart, that's the way it's got to be if we're to finish this mission."

She swallowed the fear. "Better contact them then, let them know they've got mail – oh and the deposits."

Jones pressed buttons on his console, typed in a sequence of letters and numbers.

No one seemed inclined to check the veracity of his request.

"Again, it looks like you were right. Their arrogance is about to bring them down. Stay hidden long enough and you think no one will find you." Jones said.

He shifted orbit and headed towards the black planet.

Chapter Sixteen

The planet was larger than she expected, but smaller, too. A giant asteroid, tossed off by some evolving sun or planet by impact or something else. It grew in the view screen and she saw a tiny flaw on the planet's surface.

Giant metal doors parted in the skin of the planet and Jones guided the shuttle into the black maw.

Her vision automatically adjusted for the low light.

In the cavernous interior, she saw gantries and partially constructed Spatial Vortex Transporters, saw completed ones too, ready for delivery, their dark cylindrical shapes stacked to the side, but no signs of life. Had they finished for the day?

"Looks like they have a store of them." She murmured and he glanced at her.

"How do you know that? I can't see a blessed thing."

She thought fast. "Why else would they have a bay this large, and how do you think they manage to install them so quickly? Like, I don't know, you order and the next thing, they're on your doorstep demanding payment. And given the size of this space, they must have a ship larger than this one for transport."

He grunted and watched the translator as it gave him instructions. "Docking bay up ahead." He said, as if being in a cavern this huge and this dark required a soft voice.

"Weird, isn't it." She said in a loud voice and he looked at her again.

"What?"

"That here we are covered in darkness, in our own little ship where no one can hear us, and we still feel the need to whisper." She replied.

"Yeah." He said in a louder voice. "You're right."

Jones docked the craft, pressed a button on the installed box and climbed out of his seat. "Okay, from here, we split up. Me to murder, you to the targets." He said it so casually, but murder was his stock in trade. It was casual to him because it furthered his own ambitions.

He directed her to a cabinet and opened it wide. Inside was every conceivable weapon she might like to use.

"Load up, Hunter, and let's get after our quarry."

Cambria chose a harness like she had on Nomad, with pistols, not her own, she didn't know what happened to those, and her knives. A hunting knife that Jones grinned at, and lots of smaller ones she secreted about her body. She took plenty of ammunition with her under her denim jacket.

She adjusted everything until it fit comfortably. She could kill him now. Hold the knife back-handed and plunge the blade into his black, empty heart. Her hand shook with the need to avenge herself. In her mind, she saw her hand lift and slam the knife into him, rip into flesh and bone.

Jones slapped her shoulder, broke the images and she looked at him, pressed her trembling hands together. "Okay, I'm ready, Jones, how about you?"

He flashed her a wry grin. "Oh, I am loaded up and ready for bear, as the expression goes." He held out the letters and she took them, tucked them into the top inside pocket of her jacket.

He guided her to the hatch door and opened it to the access tube. A shadowy figure waited on the other side, waiting for them.

Jones laid a gentle kiss on her mouth. "Be careful, Cambria, and shoot true."

She suppressed the urge to vomit as his soft warm mouth brushed hers. "You, too, give 'em hell." She said in a strained voice.

"Come a'huntin' when you've got the boys. I'll be waiting."

"Okay." She said and Excalibur Jones led the way down the docking tube.

The hulking guard of a reptilian species barely opened its mouth before Jones had his knife deep in its belly, with the other hand wrapped around its snout to stop any cry of alarm.

"Go! Now!" He ordered and she saw the familiar glitter of madness in his grey eyes.

He was right; he did enjoy killing things and she went to the right. The last thing she saw of Jones was him lowering the gutted body to the ground and looking around for more victims.

Cambria's vision changed as she translated the signs. She jogged down corridors in search of the so-called corporate headquarters. The signs guided her way. She slid to a stop at a reception desk.

"Designation, please."

She approached the desk, saw the receptionist was an electronical.

She dug out the letters. "Mail call for Olmert and Olbert Gardishan."

"I will see if they are available. Please wait."

In less than a minute, the door behind the electronical opened and two identical Nexians emerged. They had more tan spots on their skin than she'd ever seen on a Nexian. How old were they?

"Please for you to give us our mail." The one on the left said, but the right Nexian held out its' over large hand.

Cambria handed over the bundled letters. The one on the right snatched them away and both huddled over the letters, backed into their office.

She followed them in and closed the door.

"They have been *opened*." One said to the other.

"How is this *possible*?" The other replied.

"I cannot think."

"The *courier*. Invaded our privacy."

"We must kill her. Keep the secret."

"Yes, we must keep the secret."

"No, we mustn't keep the secret." Cambria said and they jumped, turned, scrunched in their faces.

"You cannot be in here!" The one on the right said.

"You cannot be here!" The one on the left said.

"Look Chuckies one and two, I am here on the authority of your own government and mine; oh, and a hundred others. The time has come, as it does, for all good things to come to an end. And you, Gardishans, are at an end."

The electronical's voice came through the intercom. "Emergency, emergency." It said in a calm, even voice. "Invaders have breached the perimeter. Please advise."

Both faces stopped scrunching and bulged.

"You have done this." They said together.

"I have. Now then, you can come along quietly or I can take you kicking and screaming."

Both Nexians looked at each other, then bolted in opposite directions around the desk.

Cambria drew a pistol and shot the chair between them. Stuffing and electronics exploded out of the back.

The Nexians froze and turned to her.

"Dead or alive, Gardishans."

"You cannot *be* here!" The one on the left said.

"She *cannot* be here." The other agreed.

"We must..."

"Stop talking to each other and step out from behind the desk." Cambria put in. "Because, believe it or not, I will kill you if you piss me off."

"Unbalanced."

"Yes, unbalanced."

"Murder, because of a bad mood?"

"Murder, because she is in a bad mood."

Both Nexians nodded.

Were they right? Would she pull the trigger because she was angry? She took a deep breath, eased it out. That was something Jones would do; not her. She, at least, still had morals. "Guys, stop babbling and come around here, please." She lowered the pistol and their eyes followed her move.

"We must..."

"Come around here." She said again.

"We must..."

They looked at her, as if studying who and what she was.

"Human female."

"Yes." She agreed.

"Nurturer?"

Cambria felt a pang. "No, not a nurturer, a Hunter."

"Detainer of criminals." One said solemnly.

"Yes, detainer of criminals." The other agreed and showed those eerie baby teeth. "We are not criminals; we are business Nexians."

"We are business Nexians." Both nodded with vigour.

"You sell illegal sub-par Spatial Vortex Transporters in direct defiance of your people's wishes. Of their laws."

"We are outside their laws, outside any laws. We own system, own planet, govern here; we make our own laws."

Uh, oh, she thought. Were they right? She needed to contain them while she checked. She had little to no knowledge of inter-galactic law and government. Still...

"That doesn't matter, neither of you own the patent to the SVTs. And the planet that *does* own the SVT prohibits its use out of system."

"We will pay fine."

"Yes, we will pay fine."

The intercom beeped again. "Caution, slave pens open. Caution, slave pens open."

Cambria smiled at the pair. "Well, there you go. I know for a fact slavery is a termination offence, whether you are in charge of a government or not. So, by your electronical's own words, you are condemned."

"We nearly had her."

"Yes, nearly. Much confusion on the face. Could be useful."

"Very useful."

Both carefully and slowly came around to the front of the desk. Cambria brought out the cuffs from her belt and joined the Gardishans together. She took the second pair of cuffs and secured one foot to the leg of the heavy desk.

The Gardishans sat in the visitor seats and watched her.

Cambria went around the desk to the information unit.

"She cannot operate our unit."

"She does not speak the encryption language."

"Too obscure for a human."

"Too difficult for a human."

She ignored the smug tone and sat down, turned the screen on. The alien language blurred and then rearranged itself.

Excalibur's device was already downloading the files. Good, and she turned to the desk drawers for the backups. No self-respecting business person would leave important data to the whim of electronics.

Nothing in the drawers and she looked around the room. And smiled. There, in the corner behind the door, a shiny silver box the size of a two drawer safe.

And it wasn't locked when she lifted the lid. "Wow, you boys *have* been busy!"

"Long time in business."

"Yes, long time in business."

"Profit loss ratios are excellent."

"Very profitable. Few complaints."

No way she'd be able to lift the box, but she needed all those cubes. She looked around the room again. *Okay, those will do.*

She went over to another chair where the Gardishans had their satchels. She emptied everything out and loaded up the two bags. Now it was easier to fill her pockets with the cubes until the box was empty.

"You don't get complaints because there is a flaw in those SVTs. No survivors to complain."

"Accidents happen. No applications for reimbursement or restitution received."

"No applications for restitution received."

She looked at the pair and shook her head. "Here's the thing: you knew those SVTs were faulty, that they would fail, eventually."

"None other than Nexians know of any flaw. How do you?"

"Yes, how do you?"

"A bit of spatial distortion when passing through. I imagine you tell customers it is normal, so the user *knows* they are travelling. But when you use a *Nexian* SVT it is a smooth ride, no spatial distortion." She grinned at them.

"Aliens are not allowed on Nexus True, it is a perfect place, not to be sullied by imperfection." One sneered.

"No imperfections."

"Boys, you've been away a long time. You're too comfortable in your perfect little outpost."

The brothers looked at each other then shook their heads in disbelief. "No change on Nexus True. Nothing changes."

"Nothing changes."

Cambria snorted. "Which is why you're out here. But they voted on a warrant for you. Wanna see?"

Both Gardishans nodded and she pulled it out of her top pocket, flicked out the folds and held it before them to read.

"This is Nexian."

"Yes, Nexian."

"No one but a Nexian may read it."

"No one but a Nexian."

"Humans cannot read Nexian."

"No, too difficult."

Both faces turned to her. "This is not a warrant. This is an order of patent."

She turned it around, read through the text. "It is? Then why does it say, For the detention of Olmert and Olbert Gardishan? And here, this warrant extends to any and all galactic territories that may house the aforementioned Gardishans. No galactic territories may provide sanctuary for the aforementioned Gardishans – for penalties, see attachment B." She hunkered down and unlocked the desk cuff.

"She knows our language."

"Yes, she knows our language."

"This is impossible."

"Yes, impossible."

"We need to discuss alternatives."

"Alternatives."

Cambria stood while they were conversing. "Right then, stand up."

The Gardishans stood and she put a satchel on each of the brother's shoulder.

"Walk to the door and open it."

They did as she asked.

"Move through, please."

The Gardishans moved through and then paused.

"Directive." One said. "Shut down facility and initiate term..."

"*Stop!*" Cambria yelled over the end of the word and laid her hands on the backs of the Gardishan necks. "Delete directive."

The electronical didn't look at her, but kept its focus on the brothers, as if waiting for the completion of the order.

She leaned in. "Try that again, and I will gag both of you." She gave them a push towards the hallway, marched them back to the ship. In the distance, she could hear weapons fire and shouting.

Go, Jones. She thought.

"What is that noise?" One asked.

"Yes, it is a noisy noise."

"Weapons fire, Gardishans, a diversion so I could detain you."

"The guards. The slaves. There is fighting."

"Yes, fighting. Bad for business."

"Bad for business. We must relocate."

"Relocate."

With a hand on the shoulders of her captives, she moved them down the docking tube and onto the ship, guided them to the back. There, a cage with both electronic and mechanical locks provided an appropriate detention cell for the two.

"Hold." She said and changed to enhanced vision, checked them thoroughly for weapons or devices that would aid their escape. She found nothing, but frisked them any way.

"Non-Nexians are not allowed to touch Nexians." One protested.

"Not. Allowed." The other said tightly.

She removed the satchels, set them aside.

"Times change." She said then pushed them into the cage, closed the door and locked it. "Hands through the bars, please Gardishan."

Both stuck their hands through the bars.

"Are you comfortable?" She asked.

Both looked at her bared their baby teeth at her. "Comfort is not your concern."

"Not your concern."

"Security is your concern."

"Security."

"Right. Ask a simple question and get an echo." She snapped the cuffs around their wrists. "Hopefully, I'll be back soon, if not... then I'll be back later."

She emptied her pockets of cubes and loaded up the satchels. Then she gave them a wink and went to look for Jones, shutting the hatch as she went.

Outside the docking tube she drew her pistols, held them by her sides and used her elbow to close the tube hatch. Then she walked towards the sounds of battle.

The carved, smooth broad hallway suddenly stopped at black, rough rock. The passage was narrow, with light supplied by single lights stuck to the uneven rock ceiling. The lights' direction varied.

Thermal and enhanced vision.

Her eyesight changed and she could see cooling bodies around the corner of a rock edge, but no sign of life.

Jones hadn't paused; he'd killed and moved on and she stepped over the two reptilian bodies. He'd taken the weapons.

Cambria worked her way through the complex, followed the bodies. Some were slaves, killed by weapons fire, but she didn't think Jones had killed them. One looked as if the guard had used him as a shield. The body's blasted back and front told the story. The guard had tried to shoot *through* the slave.

She shook her head in disgust and outrage. What kind of species killed innocent, unarmed slaves?

The shouts grew louder, orders to circle around and she saw the group of large lizards heading back in her direction. She lifted the pistols and waited.

Four came around the bend. It took them a moment to see her.

"Human!" One shouted and lifted his rifle.

Cambria shifted to the side as she allowed him to get the first shot off. She felt the heat of the weapon on the skin of her face.

The others were a little startled, a little too slow in lifting their weapons. Cambria pressed her fingers on the triggers and the lizards fell back, dropped to the ground. She wiped blood, green blood, off her face and stepped over the remains. Here, then, was the cool emptiness Jones tried so hard to teach her, the absence of emotional response to the death of others. But no, she felt the burn of justice for those slain; just what she needed to hold on to, or become like Jones.

Weapons fire bounced around the tunnel and she dropped to the ground, crawled forward.

She passed a shallow cave with three distinct species huddled together for safety, too afraid to move.

On her elbows, she checked the corner and moved around into a cavern.

Beams of ambient light zeroed in on broad and deep rock, chipped and melted the stone. Heat compromised her thermal vision and she couldn't tell if Jones was alive.

On the sides of the cavern, doors were open. The slave pens?

Bodies lay on the ground, reptilians and slaves in beige, roughly woven shifts. Men, women and children of a number of species.

The dead children were as scattered as the adults and she thought the reptiles had simply shot down anyone who wasn't of their own species.

Bastards.

She looked up as she saw a rounded object sail through the air.

"Grenade!" She shouted and fire came in her direction. She ducked back as rock chips sprayed and super-heated stone exploded.

Idiot. Tell them where you are next time!

The heat wave of the exploding grenade washed over her and she returned fire. She didn't hear any grunts and figured she missed. Then she had a thought and bolted back up the tunnel.

A second grenade blast threw her off her feet. Hot metal peppered her back and legs and she lay there, trying to clear the ringing from her ears.

No, not ringing, cheers. She rolled and aimed, shot the lizard off the shelf, and then the lizard's shocked friend who stood behind the first.

Their bodies fell, thumped on the rock dust pathway.

Cambria got to her feet. This wasn't working. She had to clear a path for Jones to escape – if he could. She had no idea if he'd been wounded. Dead, even. She'd not seen him return fire.

Maybe she should leave him here. Let him die amongst these monsters who slaughtered children and unarmed men and women.

She had the ship, the prisoners and the list; she'd completed the mission, all that was left was to return to Nexus True.

Cambria started to walk away from the battle zone. Then she paused, as she caught sight of a small body, the beige shift too big for the tiny, multi-limbed body. Purple blood soaked through the scorched material.

How confident was she the reptilians would kill Jones? He'd escaped impossible odds before and he had the patience to hunt and kill every single being on this rock. But surely he'd be overwhelmed by the number of guards? She could envision him hiding, taking them out one at a time, the slaves, too, if his murderous, psychotic rage hadn't been assuaged. He'd bathe in the blood of his victims. Could she risk it? He'd found her on Ragnarok and again on Nexus Four. If she abandoned him, she felt certain his punishment of her would be worse than what he'd already done to her.

"No, dammit!" She looked up at the rock ceiling as her vision blurred. "You son of a bitch." But she blamed herself as much as Jones, for her predicament.

After all he'd done for and to her, she couldn't let blind luck kill or worse, save him and she lowered her head to study her surrounds. Rock caverns and tunnels, slave pens and tables where the construction of the electronics for the SVT took place.

A thousand or so fully armed guards, ready fight and familiar with terrain; two enemy with limited ammunition and resources, fighting on unfamiliar terrain. Not good odds.

She skirted back around, searched for an entry point above and kept going around. No luck. The entrance had to be back up the hallway, somewhere beyond the corporate offices. She jogged back the way she came, touched her pistol to her forehead as she passed the still waiting electronical. She moved from the polished hallway and into the rough, black rock slave area.

Cambria wondered how many other areas were in use in the complex. The Gardishans had a whole planet to play with, and centuries of time to construct the work areas they needed.

At this end, the configuration was different and she snuck along the tunnel, searched for the enemy.

She came to another cavern, and tilted her head. She couldn't hear anything of the battle in the other direction. Here, in the centre of the cavern, slaves stood around a stone table filled with electronic connectors, gizmos and unidentifiable pieces of equipment.

Guards watched the slaves, tall and imposing, with rifles across their chests. No one spoke. The reptilians studied each slave with cold eyes and blank expressions, as if they were things, not sentient beings.

The slaves concentrated on their work, with the occasional fearful glance at a guard.

These lizards were professional, but why hadn't they gone to the assistance of their colleagues? Did they not know? Or were they that confident of their colleagues' ability to quell whatever rebellion the slaves tried? She tilted her head, but she couldn't hear any sound of gunfire. They didn't know.

Cambria looked around. Some slave pen doors stood open, others firmly shut. And she stood, hidden by shadows and tried to make a decision.

She couldn't free them all, couldn't take on the guards on her own. On a sigh, she backed away. The Nexians were on their way, and they'd have the manpower to prise them loose – if the guards didn't kill them all first. But she couldn't allow that to colour her decision to leave this group in relative peace.

If they had time, they'd be back, but if not, better a galactic authority take control than she and Jones slaughter as many as possible.

She backed away, turned and jogged back down the hallway and the sounds of gunfire. The best she could do was join Excalibur and shoot from his position.

At the corner, she saw ambient light going both ways. So, he was still alive. She dug her toe into the dust. Surprise would be her best ally.

She waited as the fire intensified, then slacken off and pushed off the ground. She leaped over the destroyed stone table and through the scattered parts. Fire erupted around her, ambient light bounced around her, singed her thigh and ankle, her lower back and butt cheek. Then she dived behind the rock and the fire intensified again.

"Hey, Jones." She winced. "Someone just shot me in the ass, God damn it." His grey eyes shifted from the view he had on the other side of the rock to her ass and snorted.

"Hey, Petersen. You got the stuff?" He fired off some shots, and ducked back before the return volley could find him.

Cambria got to her knees, shifted to the other side of the boulder and fired up at the shelf. They needed to go before the lizards called in reinforcements. "Both cargoes are primed and ready for departure. If you've had enough of this party, that is."

"And I was just starting to enjoy myself." He said with a fake pout. "Ah, well, at least there are a number of lizards I can add to my tally."

More fire came in and she ducked back, but not before she saw the shifting shadows. They were bringing in something heavier. Maybe to shift the rock and what was under it.

"We need to go, Jones. *Now.*"

Chips of shattered and melted rock exploded around them, ambient light lit up the ground and puffs of dust and debris spurted. "Sure, I'll use you as a human shield."

"And then I'd become a dead weight, literally."

Cambria turned her face to the rock, slid slowly around and stared up at the shelf. She saw a silver flash as lizards brought up a cannon and settled it into position. She moved back and turned around.

Slave pens.

"Jones, they've got a bloody great cannon."

"Damn, I am so toasted." He drew back, looked around and saw the room behind them. "It's better than nothing and will give us some protection, at least. Well, I hope it does."

"Until they blow it in, of course." She said.

"One thing at a time, Petersen."

Jones scrambled to the door in a crouch holding an arm across his stomach and she followed, eased the door partially closed, and stood to the side.

Jones stood opposite her, covered his ears and opened his mouth as a cure against the coming blast wave.

Cambria peeked through the door and up at the ledge. Her thermal sight caught the bright, white bloom of the plasma cannon firing. She turned away, jammed her hands over her ears and crouched in the corner.

The blast was incredible. Sound and fury erupted around her. The door proved no barrier to the forces unleashed. It embedded itself in the back wall

and scrunched in on itself. The rock, too exploded into the room as rubble and smoke and dust belched in.

Then there was silence. She checked herself over as she stood, heard the rattle of the grenade shrapnel as it shed from her body. She was covered in black dust and she patted the worst of it away.

Jones coughed and groaned in his own corner and she saw his grey eyes blink white against the black of his face.

He looked okay so she sidled across to the doorway, raised her eyes to the shelf. Cold-blooded lizards congratulated themselves and they had cause. There was nothing left of the giant rock Jones behind which had hidden. There was a shallow crater where it once stood and she looked to the back of the room. Dust, rocks and rubble covered the floor.

Jones cleared his throat and spat out blackened phlegm.

Cambria kept her attention on the shelf. The lizards were easing the cannon back.

"Can you run?" She asked in a hoarse whisper.

He looked at her. "Whenever you're ready." He levered himself up and she saw blood on the front of his shirt.

"Flesh wound?" She asked and he shook his head.

"Deep, penetrating and barely raising a throb." He said and winced.

"That's not good."

"I'll be fine." He said with a grimace. "What are those lizards doing?"

She had a quick look. "Smirking, banging snouts and... moving away. Back down the tunnel. We can go now."

Cambria gripped his arm, dragged him into the open. He staggered and fell, took her down with him. She tried not to fall onto him, put her hands out on each side of his head.

"Jones?"

Sweat beaded his brow and his eyes were slightly unfocused.

"You need to get up, *we* need to go before the lizards come back. I can't fight them off on my own."

Jones shifted and she tried to help him up, but he fell back. His grey eyes met hers, momentarily clear.

"We're not going... anywhere, Cambria." He coughed again.

Cambria felt a streak of fear for him race through her veins. "You are too tough to die here, Jones. You have too much to live for, too many victims to hunt down. You've been my nemesis for so long, I don't know how to find another."

He smiled up at her. "I know, Petersen, I know." He sighed and shifted again. "You've seen me at my best, and my worst. You are my perfect canvas, my ultimate masterpiece, my..." his breath hitched, "my own private angel and demon. I found Heaven between your thighs and Hell in your starlight eyes."

She looked down at the spreading bloodstain across his belly, the scorched material.

"Philosophy or a dying declaration, Jones?" She didn't think the irony of the situation was lost on him. He was going to die here after all, protecting the slaves, stopping the Gardishans and saving who knew how many people the flawed SVTs. He might even save more lives than he'd taken.

"Don't... worry, Cambria. When I said we're not going anywhere, I actually meant... you."

The length of his hunting blade slipped easily through her shirt, through the skin on her stomach and she gasped, her breath cut off. Then he shifted his grip and drove the blade up into her heart.

She stared into his smug, cold eyes, gripped his wrist holding the knife.

"It's only a flesh wound after all." He said softly. "I may not be able to kill you, darlin', but I can certainly give myself a head start." He said and rolled her flat on her back, rose above her. "Oh, I'm gonna love this game." He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "I'll be waiting for you. "

Her eyes lowered to the blade, hilt deep and at an angle. Pain flared, her head pounded with the effort to speak.

"Bast..."

He twisted the knife then dragged it out with a gush of hot blood. Her breath eased out and her vision went dark.

Chapter Seventeen

Cambria wallowed in darkness. Again. She had no sense of herself, yet heard a voice.

Such pain and suffering, yet it cannot escape. Dare I ease its distress, take from it the memories of anguish or simply block them? What to do, what to do. The connection to this realm is strong, but how? I cannot...

This creature is not of our making. Cambria heard a lighter voice interrupt. It surrounded her, was inside her, was everywhere.

And yet, it bears our mark. A deeper voice, curious, puzzled. But she recognised the voice, heard it during her other time in darkness.

It is an anomaly. An abomination that must be destroyed. The higher voice said, spiteful and filled with venom.

No! You cannot. We cannot. The deep voice urged.

It is a mistake, one we must correct. Sneering, contemptuous.

And I tell you we cannot. This being, this creature, it is the one whom your brother made. Look, it bears his hallmark.

So, my brother's killer returns. It must be punished, it must be dissolved, its' very elements cast into the dimensions. It must be... what is that? No, oh, no, it cannot be! The voice went higher with disbelief. Tell me how this can happen! It is not of us, it cannot be connected!

And yet you see it. In our annals, have we ever seen a creature such as this? The deep voice asked calmly.

You know we have not. This species is new. It requires study, intensive study as my brother reported. A note of interest came to the lighter voice.

And perhaps your brother saw in this particular creature something of value, something to advance the experimentation and the results. It was not alone when it died with the Urashi as we saw, and yet, it had the courage to destroy your brother

and its ally along with itself. The deep voice sounded persuasive, soft... impressed.

Perhaps you are right. It is perhaps... the last remnant of my brother. It bears some of his elements. Absorbed perhaps to assist in reconstruction? The lighter voice sounded like a scientist with a new hypothesis and a new specimen.

It sounds reasonable, given it contains our knowledge, including the ability to speak with all beings, even in this dimension. What would your brother have thought to be giving it such a gift? The deep voice inquired.

He would have been intrigued first, wanted isolated examples to test. There were, at the time, plenty of other creatures to the north, but this one would not be able to summon assistance at all, should it fail. The Urashi were instructed to implant, and according to the reports, they protested. The Urashi were punished for such rebellion. Amused now, as if the speaker enjoyed hurting lesser species.

Just another failed experiment to dispose of. I agree. But obviously, something went wrong. The deep voice said. It was terminated, was it not? And then revived on its own?

Yes. Most unusual. The light voice turned pensive and thoughtful. And then when it destroyed my brother, it gathered its elements together, recombined them with elements from my brother and others. How could this happen?

Here, the recordings of its life on Urash. And look here, the deep voice turned amazed, it travelled inter-spatially, through a flawed system. Could it be the spatial resonance did something on a sub-structural level we know nothing of?

Anything is possible. A return to the contempt. But it matters not. We have no use for this creature as we have no others for comparison. My brother's research was incomplete and now the Urash are temporarily lost to us. They warn others, tell the story of their so-called 'enslavement' and their battle for 'freedom'. These fleshy creatures know nothing of true freedom, only what they perceive.

And here, in front of us, is the very creature who dared stand against us, who defied us. I cannot remember a time of such a thing. I would suggest we need to explore the limits of this creature. And look, it is in a state of... lethargy? Of... sleep while it repairs itself? It displays interesting talents similar to our own.

You are right. We cannot terminate it and, no matter how I wish it dissolved, I fear it would revive again. We would have to research how, since it has absorbed some of my brother. A sigh of regret. If it had not, my brother would be here today and this creature dissolved.

Your brother is honoured. He and his crew are the first to perish in millennia. No small feat. Perhaps it is this creature who can show us how when we tire of existence. After all, it managed what none of us have been able to.

There are so many who wish to know oblivion. Another sigh, this one of longing.

We need to watch and wait, see what will dissolve a creature of our making. It combines the best of us and of its own species – whatever that is – it is truly a unique creation, a unique creature now. Not of us, and not of its own species either. I think it will walk alone for a long time. The deep voice sounded solemn, regretful. And this species, this soft-shelled, jellied and fragile species, I should think, does not have any natural protections. I suspect it had a shortened life-span that no longer applies.

Indeed. The smirking tone returned. An appropriate punishment then. Let it be unable to find a companion worthy of its talents or able to match its new lifespan. Oh, yes, a most worthy punishment that will last... millennia. Light laughter filled the air, swirled around her, through her; smothered her with its venom.

* * *

The pure agony stabbed through her chest, froze her muscles and drew her lips back in a rictus of a smile. Her eyes widened with horror and her back arched as if an electrical charge shot through her.

When she thought she might explode cold air rushed into her lungs. Her chest expanded, her muscles tightened further, curled in her hands and arms, her toes curled downwards, stretching her ankles painfully, her knees curled up towards her chest.

Then she felt all the vertebrae in her spine click in a long ripple and her muscles relaxed.

She revelled in the air rushing in and out, was content to listen to the even heartbeat within her chest and remembered all the Darka'day said. Tears of anguish and loss seeped out of her eyes.

The tragedy of what they wanted: to know death. For her own accident of nature, engineered by the Darka'day, implemented by the Urash - the Nomadians - polished by the Gardishans and their flawed Transporters; finished off to a new shiny status, a new creation, unique in the universe, by the very elements of the Darka'day.

Cambria wallowed in self-pity, in despair and grief. Whom did she blame? Senator Dortmund who asked for the report on the Judicars? Judge Bolingbroke for being so bloody corrupt? Lord Montague for blackmailing her into going after Jones? Major Caparossi for sending her to Nomad? First Officer Karesh for the implant or the alien Darka'day for developing it in the first place? The Gardishans whose flawed system changed her on a fundamental level? Whom could she go after in vengeance?

Revenge would not change who and what she'd become. According to the Darka'day, not even they could reverse the process, nor could they destroy her. But they intended to study her, at least from a distance. Did they fear what she was? What they'd made her? Or were they just wary and since she was a 'soft-shelled, jellied species' they wished to watch how she interacted in this universe? Test the limits of her new nature?

The tears eased, the black despair shifted and more reasoned thought broke through the nightmare her life had become. She need not seek redress against those caused this through their actions. She need not go after those who caused this to happen by accident, either. She had time – plenty of time to acquire the information she needed to plan, to decide what to do.

Cambria knew where her focus lay. She needed to go after Excalibur, for personal revenge. And his murder of her returned to her mind. Her ambivalence and fear of the serial killer disappeared, a cold determination replacing her anxiety.

He had to know she'd follow him. She'd warned him, but he'd not believed her, so caught up in his own fantasy of their togetherness. He'd seen her ability to heal as his own special boon. He could torture her, knowing she liked a little pain with her sex, and she'd heal. He'd get the joy of her pain, the thrill of his knife piercing her flesh as he thrust into her, and know he could do it again and again. His perfect lover.

It was his signature kill of women – and in her, he'd found his perfect match.

She burned with humiliation, with contempt for herself. Lord Montague warned her. Caparossi warned her. But in her arrogance, she was confident he wouldn't hurt her. She forgot the reality of who Excalibur Jones was and he became an intellectual argument. Oh, she knew he killed without remorse, whenever he could, but he'd never hurt her; until...

Cambria accepted the memories. Until he had her where he could release his 'imperative'; until he was confident of his power over her.

And she let him.

How many had he killed because she didn't execute the warrant? How many were on her conscience because he'd been her first Hunt?

Did he expect to be able to wheedle his way out of her sights? Did he think himself so... irresistible to her that she'd *never* pull the trigger, *never* use a blade on *him*? That he'd taught her so well, she learned to accept his twisted personality and would let him live, no matter what?

The student was about to supersede the tutor, and teach him a few home truths of her own. She accepted she'd failed in understanding what the Hunters were all about, in why there were so few and why they were so important. She'd failed Montague and Caparossi, the victims Jones took while she avoided taking the step she should have on Nomad.

But no more and she opened her eyes to the world.

* * *

Cambria found she didn't need to use a mental command to ask for particular things. Her vision automatically changed and she studied her prison.

Stacked beneath her and above her were the bodies of the slaves. Her stomach rebelled at the stench of rotting corpses, at the horrifying slack faces of empty-eyed children. It mattered not what species they were, they were *children* and her vengeance upon those lizards would be fearsome. She would not stop until every last one of them had been consigned to the pits of Hell.

She pushed one body after another to the side, worked up a sweat as arms and legs and appendages shifted aside. Tears streaked her face as one red-shelled child's head flopped between her breasts, stared up at her with four blank eyes.

They're spirits aren't here, she told herself and shifted the child away. She kept repeating the mantra until she manoeuvred her way to the surface of the pit, to lie on the bodies of slaves.

High above her was a black rock ceiling, but she saw the lip of the pit two metres above her head. She crawled across the deceased, apologised again as she went and stood; apologised for the indignity.

She reached up to the lip, set her feet against the cracks, crevices and nodules extruding from the rock face, climbed out onto the dusty surface of an empty cavern.

Someone had stripped her of her weapons - all of them - but she didn't care. She marched towards the tunnel ahead, righteous fury pulsing through her veins. The first lizard on guard barely had time to turn in her direction before she grabbed its head, bent the snout down and twisted. Its neck shattered with an explosive crack and she took the weapon, checked the load. And went Hunting.

Any lizard that stood in her way, or fired at her, died and she recognised, that in her anger, in her fury, she was acting like Jones. In this, she saw his purpose. She had a goal and no one was going to stand in her way.

She slaughtered her way to the administration area. Not once did she find a slave, only lizards. She did not give them the chance to surrender, nor did she allow them time to run.

Cambria had become fury incarnate and any lizard with brains hid from her, for she had death in her eyes.

At the Gardishans office, the electronical still waited for the last order.

She went around the counter and opened a slim metal panel, studied the coloured buttons and hit reset.

"Rebooting, please wait."

Cambria went to the other side of the counter and tapped her foot. She wiped the moisture from her forehead, frowned at the green smear and then lifted her gaze to the electronical.

"Please state the nature of your inquiry."

"Where are the slaves?"

"Enslaved personnel have been evacuated." It said in a calm voice.

"By whom?"

"Nexian battle cruisers."

The Nexians had a navy? Who knew? "And the guards? Who are they, where do they come from?"

"Hedrian mercenaries, hired by Olmert and Olbert Gardishan to protect the facility." It supplied.

"Why haven't they been arrested by the Nexians?" She ground out.

"Hedrian mercenaries are awaiting evacuation by the Hedrian home colony."

"When?" She asked.

"The Hedrian home colony is en-route." It said as if an ordinary conversation. "The Hedrian home colony is due to arrive within the next Nexian day."

That meant less than twenty-five hours.

"What happens then?"

It blinked at her. "Termination of facility, all records purged."

She breathed in and let the air out, still she relished the feeling of oxygen expanding her lungs. "The courier ship. How long since it departed?"

"Four Nexian days."

"Direction?"

"Immediate departure for Nexus True."

"Designations."

"Two passengers and one pilot." The electronical replied.

Four days. The bastard had a four day head... start. Or not. She recalled the surprised expression on the Gardishans' faces, the pause before they

asked for the mail, as if they weren't expecting an *actual* courier to deliver the mail, but bring something else. And that meant...

"Question."

"At your service."

"Is the Spatial Vortex Transport access between this planet and Nexus True or its satellites available?" She asked and crossed her fingers.

"Spatial Vortex Transport access from Gardishan Outpost to Gardishan Corporate Nexus True is operational." The electronical said and she felt a thrill race up her spine.

"Access point, Gardishan Outpost?"

It turned to the left of the desk and pressed a button on the wall – she'd assumed it was a light switch. A panel slid aside to expose a metal door.

"Oh, I *do* love electronicals." She murmured. "Access the address, please."

"At your service."

She strode to the door and opened it, stepped in and closed the door. Then walked to the end.

This SVT was perfect. No spatial distortions at all and she opened the door onto the mailroom in the Gardishan Corporate Headquarters.

She wasn't surprised, but the Nexian workers before her were. Eyebrows lifted, workers paused and the Nexian law officers monitoring them gaped at her.

"Hello." She said and closed the door behind her. She looked behind her. The sign on the door read: Supplies, authorised access only.

She and Jones had been so close to the brothers and never known it. And she'd bet her bottom Euro, the two Gardishans upstairs knew it. Although why they didn't warn Olmert and Olbert was perhaps an issue for discussion. Maybe they didn't think anyone would make the connection? That previous investigations hadn't made the link?

Cambria smiled at the approaching officers.

"Officers."

"You are not authorised to be here." The one on the left said and wrinkled its nose.

"I am Hunter Petersen."

"Hunter Petersen was killed in action on Gardishan Outpost. We hear news over communications."

"And yet, here I am. This," she jabbed a thumb at the door, "is a Spatial Vortex Transporter. You might want to let headquarters know. In fact," she tilted her head, "I think I'll just go down there and inform them myself."

She turned away, then paused. Dug into her pockets. Nope. Empty.

Cambria took the stairs two at a time up to the reception area. She gave the receptionist a wave on her way out, ignored the baring of those nasty little baby teeth.

She had no identification for a taxi, so she walked, strode down the street. Nexian pairs got out of her way, gave her a wide berth. She figured she smelled a little, but being buried under bodies would do that to a person.

She got to the enforcement officer and walked up to the counter. The Nexian pair leaned backwards.

"How may we... assist... you, please?"

"I'd like to speak to the officer in charge of the Gardishan investigation."

"If you have information regarding that discussion, please share it with us and I shall pass it on." The smile grew pained.

She disagreed. "No, I don't think so. I've just returned from Gardishan Outpost and..."

"No ship has returned."

"I used the Spatial Vortex Transporter at the Gardishan Corporate Headquarters." She said.

"I will see who is available. May I please have your designation?"

"Hunter Cambria Petersen, Earth World Council." She said.

The officer nodded and turned away to the communications system.

A few minutes later a pair of Nexians came downstairs. "If you would come with us please?" And they turned back. Cambria followed them to a hallway. The pair pointed to a closed door.

"Please for you to cleanse yourself, Hunter Petersen." They instructed and she grinned.

She opened the door, then looked back at the Nexians with raised eyebrows.

"Remove clothes, place them within the low square box. Press button. Step into tall box. Press button." With a shrug, she went in and closed the door. She stripped off the rank smelling clothes, shoved them into the smaller, washing machine-sized box and pressed the button.

She cocked her head, but heard nothing. She stepped into the cubicle and then pressed the single button. Warm, scented steam gushed out from a meshed hole above her and from a grid on the three walls. She stretched out her arms. The warmth grew hotter, the steam more intense as it whooshed over her. Less than a minute later, the steam stopped and a red light came on, bathed her in a blood red colour.

Then it stopped. She waited, but nothing else happened. She was clean and she was dry; what more was there?

She opened the square box and dragged out clean, dried, but wrinkled clothes. Even the bloodstains had vanished. Oh, but she could see a market for this on Earth, on any planet. She wondered if the Nexians would hold a referendum, if she asked.

"Interesting." She murmured as she dressed in warmed underwear, socks, jeans, shirt and denim jacket. She sat on the box and tugged on her boots.

Cambria stood.

She felt... different, but she couldn't put her finger on why. Was being clean and smelling fresh all it took to reorient herself? As if the steam had blown away all the dark matter that clung to her?

Cambria stepped out of the room and closed the door with less anger surging through her veins. The anger was still there, but not as ferocious, not as needy for expression. And in this, she realised, she was different to Jones, regardless of all he tried to teach her.

The Nexian officers approached, their nostril slits twitched with satisfaction. "Please for you to come this way."

She was lead to an office and she sat in a visitor's chair while the officers sat behind the desk.

"Please for you to explain your presence from Gardishan Outpost." The words were terse, the expressions serious.

Cambria explained nearly everything. She did not go into Jones' murder of her, that was for herself. She told them of the Spatial Vortex Transport in the mailroom of the Gardishan Corporate Headquarters, now under guard by the Nexian officer.

"Hunter... Soderling will be returning with the Gardishans in a few days to claim the bounty." She finished, remembering Jones' alias.

Both pairs of eyes stared at her. "We do not think Hunter Soderling will be returning, Hunter Petersen." One said. "We have notification from your World Council that Hunter Soderling is deceased."

"Ah." She said, and called herself all kinds of fool to believe Jones. Her first instinct had been correct: The World Council would never suspend an execution warrant for one such as he.

"We reported a human male termination to the human authorities. They confirm the designation of Hunter Soderling. We are grieved by your loss."

"Thank you, Officer." Cambria lowered her gaze. Did her naivety know no bounds with Jones? Why did she accept his word so readily when she knew he lied to further his own purpose? She was just too stupid to live, sometimes.

"We wish to know who this other Hunter is who returns with the Gardishans for the bounty."

Cambria shifted in her chair and thought hard. Jones expected it all: the bounty and the files. And his escape to parts unknown. She had no doubt that whoever supplied him with the state-of-the-art ship was also deceased. He knew he had at least a four-day head start on her. And he'd probably monitored Nexian transmissions through the translator board. Knew when they arrived, how long they stayed to retrieve the slaves and when they departed. He'd also know that when Cambria revived, her only option was to travel with the Hedrian mercenaries and that would delay her even further until she could reach somewhere that either had a SVT or a ship heading back to Nexus True.

She also knew the captive Gardishans on Jones's ship thought humans stupid. And with only the translations board to talk to them with, that would become more obvious. They would say nothing about the SVT. They would keep that secret to themselves and try to manipulate their way out of the cage.

She doubted the Gardishans would succeed, and she didn't expect them to arrive without some injuries because of their irritating habit of repeating phrases. That would drive Jones nuts.

So, a four-day head start. He could arrive soon.

She made her decision. "When do you expect the transport to arrive with the Gardishans aboard?"

"We expect a docking *request* at any time." The officer said. "However, because of the nature of our system – the reason we developed the Spatial Vortex Transporter – we do not expect docking for two of our days."

"The... nature of your system?"

"The outer system is scattered with debris from previous planets destroyed during weapons development. It requires careful manoeuvring and navigation to avoid collisions with the celestial bodies." Both officers smiled in the same way.

"But... when we left, the jump to hyper was hours, not days." Cambria said and the officers' eyes squinted as their smiles widened.

"We have cleared a space lane for outbound ships. *Inbound* ships are unknown and require monitoring, investigation, confirmation of statements."

Ah, yes. The Nexian need for perfection, to check and double check. That gave her more time than she expected. Excellent.

"I would, on behalf of the World Council, ask for a favour."

"We are already in your debt, Hunter, for the capture of the Gardishans and for showing us the evidence to shut down the Gardishan Corporation. We now have an opportunity to redeem our reputation, while punishing the transgressors. Ask your favour."

Cambria nodded. "I would ask that you temporarily recognise this Hunter as Hunter Soderling. That you not give any hint you know him as an imposter."

The eyes watched her and she continued.

"He is a known criminal who's escaped justice for too long. I need to return to my world for instruction. Will you allow me this time? Without raising his suspicions?"

The two subsided into silence, then turned to each other for a long and involved discussion on the merits and disadvantages of her request. They spoke quietly with each other, with other officers called in for the discussion.

She waited, understood the gravity of her request. The Nexian's may have got the coffee wrong with their referendum, but they got the SVT right. It was an important piece of technology, but until the consequences of it was understood, it should never have been sold on the black market.

She had the patience to wait.

After three hours, the consultations ended.

"We have reached a decision."

"Thank you for taking the time to consider my request. I know you have made it in haste. I will abide by any decision you make."

"We are gratified that you appreciate our difficulties under this time constraint. However, in the interests of assisting a potential allied world, we will grant your request in the hopes you will capture this criminal and take him from our space. To that end, we have instructed our space traffic control to delay Hunter Soderling in guiding him in. They have agreed to a two-day journey. Will that be sufficient?"

Cambria nodded. "It will, yes." She shifted in her chair. "Can you tell me the procedure to the granting of the bounty?"

The baby teeth showed again. "It is a complex matter, Hunter. First, we must confirm the identities of the alleged perpetrators. The crimes must be listed and recognised by a court of law before an warrant is issued. You have the warrant for the Gardishans. However, if you wish to add to those crimes, the process must be repeated and that could take a number of days. Did you discover any further crimes on your sojourn?"

Cambria didn't smile, didn't match the crafty expression. "You may add multiple counts of slavery of sentient species to the list. You may add the murder of children by mercenaries hired by the alleged criminals. You may add the attempted termination of Hunter Petersen by the aforementioned mercenaries. You may add the illegal disposal of the murdered slaves to the list."

The officers' smiles dropped away. "You have proof of this?"

"The proof is on Hunter Soderling's ship. You need to make sure, that once the designators aboard the ship have disembarked, you lock down the ship. There is a substantial amount of documentation on the Gardishan Outpost business dealings aboard. I also believe you should contact the Hedrian home colony for confirmation of a business contract to act as guards for the Gardishan Outpost and a report on their mission, pre- and post- missions."

The officers nodded, their faces tight with outrage. "Once proof is in hand and the new criminal charges validated, they will be added to the list and read to the court, where they will be recognised, Hunter Petersen. From there, the charges are proven, the convicted criminals sentenced. The arresting citizen is then recognised as the arresting officer and the bounty is then paid. With the new charges, with the proof still incoming, I predict the bounty will not be paid for at least a standard Nexian month."

"That fast?" She asked and the Nexians smiled at her humour, bared baby-sized teeth.

"The seeker of the bounty must remain in Nexian space to be eligible to collect, Hunter Petersen. We suspect the bounty will not be paid to this Hunter Soderling. It will either remain in the treasury or go towards compensation to those who have suffered at the hands of the Gardishans."

"I'm hoping to have settled the situation within the week." She gave them a smile and stood. "And now, Nexians, I need to return to Earth to brief my superiors."

"We anticipate your return for this most... entertaining of events." The officers exposed the baby teeth and Cambria suppressed a shudder. "We shall facilitate your journey home, Hunter."

Chapter Eighteen

Major Caparossi waited in the ready room when she returned.

He looked tired, she thought, tired and heartsick, but he gave her a smile of welcome, as if she hadn't been away and he hadn't worried. He need never worry about her again.

"You have lost your weapons again." He scowled.

Cambria marched to him, slid a hand around his head and dragged his mouth down to hers. Kissed him with a passion that surprised her.

She eased away. She'd feared she wouldn't be able to do this, to share a kiss with another man, that Jones had ruined her so completely, she'd never touch another man.

But a kiss shared with Major Caparossi, who'd shown her only kindness, who kept her safe, made her feel protected, blew on a flame of hope she'd thought extinguished.

Cambria licked her lips, tasted the coffee the major had recently drunk. "I need to see Lord Montague, right now."

He had a dazed look in his dark brown eyes, then he blinked, licked his lips and stood straight, glanced at the watching technicians.

Cambria looked up at the staring faces and gave them a wave.

"Now, Major."

"I'll see what I can do." He said, then cleared his throat.

"No, Major. This is important. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't."

He inhaled and exhaled. "Come with me." He said and did an about face.

Cambria followed him down the hall and into an elevator.

"You said before your mission back to Nomad that you and I... that we..." He trailed off.

"And I think I might have been wrong." Cambria said, then shrugged as his confused, hopeful gaze met hers. "It is a woman's prerogative to change

her mind." She sighed when he didn't speak. "We need to talk, Major, but it has to wait until Excalibur Jones is dead."

His gaze flared hot.

"Jones." He sucked his teeth and braced himself as if trying to restrain his temper.

"Fear not, Major, I have a plan."

"You do."

"I do, but the telling will have to wait until I see Lord Montague."

The lift doors opened and Caparossi glared at the open space as if it had interrupted an important point. He dipped his head and held out his arm. Cambria exited and went left to Lord Montague's guard dog.

"Hunter Petersen to see Lord Montague." Caparossi announced and the grey-haired secretary lifted an eyebrow as if to say 'so?'

"In regards to the secured warrant of execution of Excalibur Jones." The Major explained and the eyebrow lowered.

"I'll see if he's available." The secretary said, intrigued and reached for the phone.

Cambria suspected the woman would be listening in to the coming conversation.

The secretary spoke quickly then hung up the phone. She gave them a smile. "He'll see you now."

Major Caparossi opened the pale wooden door and she walked past him.

Lord Montague rose from behind his desk.

"Caparossi, Cambria, come in."

"I believe you said it was important?" Lord Montague indicated the visitors' chairs.

Cambria took a seat on the left, Caparossi on the right.

Lord Montague sat and leaned back in his leather chair. "This is your meeting, Cambria." He prompted.

"Yes, sir." She blew out a breath. "I'll begin with my entrance to Nexus True." And she briefed both Lord Montague and Major Caparossi on everything that happened – except the personal parts and the encounter with the Darka'day. She explained the flawed corridors and the Lord and Major both sucked in shocked breaths. She detailed the Nexians co-operation with the detention of Excalibur Jones and her plan to execute the warrant.

When she was done, Lord Montague steepled his fingers and swung in his chair for a moment. Then he reached for the telephone. "Rachel, coffee, please." He ordered and resumed his thinking position.

Having encountered the Nexian idea of deliberation, Cambria was comfortable with the Lord's patient thoughts.

Caparossi squirmed next to her until Rachel turned up with a tray of coffee. He leapt up and took the tray from her, set it on the edge of the desk and poured.

When he took his seat again, she saw Lord Montague was ready to make a pronouncement.

She paid attention to her real coffee, inhaled the scent and then considered the rich flavour. Oh, she *missed* coffee.

"I approve of your plan, Cambria, but I have to ask: is there a chance that you can capture Jones instead of executing the warrant?" Lord Montague's gaze met hers.

"I will not be giving him the opportunity, My Lord. He has evaded justice for too long. To my ever-lasting shame, I have denied too many victims that justice. I should have executed him on Nomad, but I allowed him to convince me I needed him. I did not." She kept her eyes on Montague's. "I

have made a fool of myself, of the Hunter organisation and it cost lives. Before you pass judgement on me for my negligence, I would ask to complete my mission. It is time to end his casual killing spree."

Montague remained expressionless as he considered her words.

Caparossi shifted in his seat next to her, but did not speak.

"You are right." Montague said with a short nod. "You *have* been negligent and it *has* cost lives. I will have to think on an appropriate punishment, given your... nature. We'll set that aside. For now. But you said 'casual'. Do you now believe he is out of control? That he has lost his deliberateness and will no longer try to hide what he is?" Lord Montague's eyebrows rose.

"I do. I think he believes I'll protect him as a Hunter; that I understand who and what he is and accept it, that I'll join him once he has the Gardishan bounty in his hands. Before that, he'll want to assuage his killer side. He will kill if annoyed, if someone happens to be in his way and attempts to keep him from his goal, if his 'imperative' gets the better of him, if provoked, if challenged, denied, looked at wrong, if he's in the mood. So, yes, *casual*."

"And your personal feelings on the matter? You did say you had sex with him on Tudor, on Nomad. Do you have any emotional connection with him? Is there any doubt in your mind that the execution of the warrant is the right thing for *you* to do?" Lord Montague's gaze was intense and Major Caparossi shifted again as if he wanted to walk away and not hear this.

She thought of how Jones had treated her, had manipulated her into killing, how he'd tried to dominate her, had raped her and his twisted idea she wanted it that way. She thought of how he'd used her for his own ends, how he'd betrayed her time and time again, how it was all about him and his needs; no one else's. She thought about his using her for the bounty and

to facilitate his escape, and his murder of her, without regret or hesitation. And then she thought of all his victims – her included – and all the potential victims of the future, on unsuspecting worlds.

She looked Lord Montague in the eye. “I have no doubt that I can execute Excalibur Jones for the crimes he is convicted of, for the crimes he hasn’t been convicted of and for the crimes I guarantee he will commit in the future. I have, during my time with him, seen no redeeming features, no regret and no remorse. He will not stop until someone stops him.”

Lord Montague kept quiet, sipped his coffee as if it would cool before he finished.

He finally nodded. “Very well, Cambria. If you have a shot, take it. But be aware of any innocents around him.”

Cambria gave him a smile that opened his eyes very wide. “Oh, I think the Nexians and I can contain the situation without any other casualties.”

She set her empty cup on the saucer and put both back on the tray. Caparossi did the same and they both rose. She gave Lord Montague a nod and left.

Once they were in the elevator, Major Caparossi leaned down to her. “I think you scared him.” He said.

“Eventually, major, I will scare *everyone*.” She replied with a pang.

“An intriguing comment, perhaps it will be a part of our discussions later?” He asked.

“Yes, it will have to be. And then you can make your own decision as to whether I am worth your time and your affection.”

His hands came down gently on her shoulders and turned her. He stared down into her face and then brushed his lips across hers. Nothing intense, nothing urgent. A simple, friendly and comforting touch. Then he lifted his head. “You will always be worth my time and my affection, Cambria, *always*.”

I don't think there's anything you can say to me that will change my feelings for you."

Cambria sighed. How long had anyone given her comfort? Jones wasn't capable of it. She guessed it had been Louis and in the end, he'd left her, couldn't cope with the scars she'd come back with and had already fallen in love with someone else. She didn't blame him. She didn't blame Jones for his lack of humanity either. She blamed herself for her poor choice of companions.

"So, you need to re-arm me with pistols and knives again."

It was Caparossi's turn to sigh. "You are costing us a fortune in high tech projectile weapons and finely crafted blades."

The doors opened before she could reply.

"Come on." He said and led the way to the armoury.

"How's the retrieval going?"

He gave her a look of dismay. "I suspect, in light of your revelations, that the project is going to be suspended until a compromise with the Nexians is made. And given their... propensity for long discussions, it may be a while before the retrievals are complete."

"I'm sorry, Major, but safety comes first. I wonder though, if the next referendum doesn't approve off-world reconstruction, given a lot of worlds have become dependent on them. The Nexians are most keen to make reparations and restore their good name. It may take time, but... eventually, they will have to compensate for all the faulty technology the Gardishans sold. We will have to readjust our own thinking and alert the stupid rich that their corridors – known as Spatial Vortex Transporters – may very well disperse their molecules. I expect some to disregard the warning and vanish." She said and went to armoury doors.

Caparossi used his electronic key to open the bi-fold metal doors, spread them wide so she could select her weapons.

Cambria decided she didn't need pistols after all. Better to go for knives and an up close and personal approach. He would have to kill her again to get away, and the Nexians weren't going to let that happen. She had to get him away from civilians, but he'd have to front the courts for his bounty petition first.

She lifted the long Bowie knife and sheathe from the hooks, turned it over in her hands. It was beautiful, with a fine edge and scroll work on the blade.

"This one." She said and clipped the knife to the back of her belt.

"Is that all? You don't want backups?" Caparossi asked and handed her a new identification wallet.

She looked at him. "No." She took the id, stuck it in her back pocket.

She practiced drawing the blade from the horizontal sheathe. Cambria adjusted her grip, the quickness she had, imagined plunging the blade into his traitorous, corrupt body.

"No." She said again and stepped back.

"Okay." He said doubtfully, closed and locked the doors.

He paused with his head lowered.

"Do you love him or do you hate him?" He asked.

"He's a brutal man, Major, and just between you and I..., he just... I couldn't... didn't..." She turned away, stared at the lockers as tears sheened her vision. She couldn't tell him about Jones' attack on her and she turned away, shame washing through her and tightening her throat.

Caparossi didn't say anything for a moment, then he brushed a hand across her shoulders. "You promised me on Tudor that he hadn't..."

She should have known he'd figure it out. "He didn't. Not then. But it is not something I can talk about. Not yet." And she turned into his warm, comforting embrace.

She heard his rapid heartbeat, his increased breathing and understood he was angry for her. He held her tightly, as if he never wanted to let her go.

"I won't talk to you about it, it's a now a part of who I am, what I've become. No, I don't love him; I thought I might back on Nomad, for a number of confusing reasons. But now, dealing with his increasing instability, seeing and experiencing what he is capable of, and how he does business, this is a man who has no conscience. Do I hate him? I don't know that either. He terrifies me. I do know I told him I would kill him if he stepped over the line, and he did, just to see what I would do. And when the situation was dire, he saved himself and left me to die, all in the pursuit of his ambitions, his 'new game' with me." She lifted her head, met his gaze. "I cannot allow Excalibur Jones to move on to a new galaxy to perpetrate his crimes, nor can I allow him to toy with me. And given that, anything I feel for him, becomes irrelevant."

He rested his cheek on the top of her head. "You are a remarkable woman, Cambria Petersen." He held her for a moment longer then slowly released her.

She didn't know what to say, had lost the ability to interact on this kind of level.

He looked at her, sympathy and compassion in his eyes, and mixed with pride. In her. "We'll take it one step at a time, Cambria, one step at a time. And we'll set it aside. You go to Nexus True and do your job. It's why they pay you the big bucks." He gave her a smile.

He escorted her to the ready room. "Go get your warrant, Hunter Petersen, I'll be waiting when you're done."

He gave her a little push.

She approached the door with trepidation. Knowing what she did now, she wondered.

But she shook it off. Her mission was too important, and if it failed, if the corridor spread her atoms across time and space, she'd be too dead to worry about it. Or not.

Cambria took a deep breath and opened the door, stepped inside and closed it. She walked to the other end, felt the faint distortion in the Spatial grid. But she made it to the other side and opened the door onto the Nexian Four's concourse.

She no longer felt the vertigo from the view of the planet and she smiled as she walked to the SVT that would take her down.

If her calculations were correct, Jones should be in system and heading towards Nexus True. Soon, her journey from Tudor to here would be complete and a new phase would begin.

On the planet, she took a taxi back to the law enforcement offices and asked for the officers she'd spoken to not so long ago.

They greeted her with baby teeth smiles. "We are pleased that you have returned so quickly. The ship containing the Gardishans and Hunter Soderling is making its way towards Nexian Station Three. They have been advised to guide the Hunter to here, for felon registration."

She gave then a slight bow. "Thank you, officers. I am pleased at the progress of this situation. If you feel it necessary, you may facilitate Hunter Soderling's access to the registration process."

"It will be at least another... thirty five hours before they arrive. We would be pleased to show you to your accommodation."

"Thank you, officers, I would be grateful for you to escort me." She said.

A day and a half and this part of her life would be over. But what she had to think about was her new nature as well. She could not delay thinking about the Darka' days for much longer, nor could she put off her thoughts on the whole affair.

The two officers, Operal and Oberan spoke of the city as they walked her down the stairs and out onto the street. Both officers breathed deep of the fresh air and kept up a running commentary on the delights of their home planet.

Cambria listened, but in her mind, she came up with scenarios to take Excalibur Jones; most did not include his talking, most had her sneaking up behind him, or meeting him head on, all were brutal and fatal; for him.

She had time to perfect the warrant's execution.

The accommodation was a temporary officer's quarters, with the basics: a bed, single, a desk, metal, a chair, wooden, a cupboard, in-built, communications, one. All were a dove grey with blue highlights. She had to share the bathroom down the hall with four other rooms, but they were unoccupied.

"We will be pleased to contact you on Hunter Soderling's arrival." Operal said.

"Thank you." She said and they left.

The waiting would be the worst, the anticipation, the ratchet of tension, Jones' capability of escaping her again through words, through actions. He could take a hostage, an innocent he had no other use for than as a shield.

Cambria lay on the bed, stared up at the ceiling. The Nexian law officers did not carry weapons, at least none she'd seen. That was problematic. Also a problem, she realised, was that Jones knew where she sheathed her favourite knife. Could she take him in a hand-to-hand fight?

He might kill her again and make his escape, unless there were enough law officers to detain him. Another problem. No Hunter could kill a warrant if they'd cuffed the detainee. Earth, as a rule, did not have a death penalty - all executions were off planet. But they'd let him loose on Tudor without another thought; his own playground, until she arrived to change his perspective and his goals.

Her mouth twisted at the hypocrisy. The World Council was as squeamish as it was corrupt; willing to employ killers to do what they could not, and yet squealed like little girls at the thought of themselves being punished for any crimes. Corona Cottington-Blake, for example.

Even as the military and Nomads supplied unimpeachable evidence of her part in the battle, in the attempted takeover of a sovereign world, they hesitated long enough in the issue of a warrant for Blake to escape off planet. *Then* they moved to act. Sent her to find the former Minister. Out of sight, out of mind.

The pressure on the Hunters increased as more felons were allowed to vanish off world and the Hunter ranks had been tested.

But the World Council was a problem for later.

She had to come up with a plan to take Jones down.

He'd be docking soon, he'd flash his stolen identification, bring the Gardishans down to Nexus True. He'd shove them into a taxi and bring them to the court. Announce the capture of the felons and register for the bounty.

Once taken into custody, the Gardishans would be out of his hands until a court appearance.

What would he do then? Once he'd been advised he must remain in Nexus True space while the felons were processed? Head to a bar and toast his success? He'd want to celebrate his success somehow, congratulate

himself on a job well done. Would he think of her, smile at his evading of her and sharing the bounty?

Did he still think she'd accompany him into exile? Or had she made her position clear enough that he'd understand?

Celebrate. *Celebrate*. There was only one true way of celebrating for Jones and that was another murder.

She had to keep him contained, within a detention cell if possible, the city if not, and she had to arrange it without his knowledge.

Was there anything he'd done in Nexian space that contravened their laws?

Why, yes. He'd murdered the Hunter she was supposed to partner with. But she couldn't use that; it would give the game away. The use of false identification would have the same result.

He'd kept his nose meticulously clean here, she thought as she went back over what they'd done. He'd let her do all the talking.

So, he'd be a free man once he handed the Gardishans over. Filled with anticipation of the bounty he could spend. At least the Nexians promised to lock down his ship, but the Spatial Vortex Transports were still open to him and no way would the Nexians shut them down without an explanation. They wouldn't admit to any flawed SVT.

On a sigh, she sat up. She had to keep herself hidden from him, lull him into a false sense of security. After all, he *knew* he had a head start on her. *Knew* there was no way she could return before him.

And so, she waited. Her patience was infinite, her thoughts calm.

Chapter Nineteen

When the call came, Cambria was studying the encyclopaedia in her head. She studied Nomadian history and Nexian True history and symbiosis, the surprising fact they did not reproduce naturally, but used cloning technology and DNA manipulation to ensure perfect, symbiotic couples. That once they *did* reproduce naturally but with the new technology, the *idea* of natural reproduction became a dangerous one because of elements they couldn't control; thus, any offspring would be less than perfect.

As the generations went on, the genetic pool available for manipulation diminished to only a few pairs. They eventually came to realise the restriction they'd place on their diversity. So, to avoid any further disasters, they resolved that any global decision, any decision that affected the majority of the population would be discussed until all flaws and conflicts were resolved, all future benefits or limitations discovered. The loss of diversity had been catastrophic for them and they didn't want it to happen again; with anything.

She read up on other cultures, the Hedrians, and their war-like evolution into cold-blooded mercenaries. It was all they did. Hire out for an exorbitant price to do the hirer's bidding, without any moral considerations. It was of no concern to the Hedrians.

She cruised through galactic star charts, within the known universe and beyond the borders explored. The Darka'days had had millennia on millennia to explore what was out there and input their data. But the numbers and sigils marking the end of each entry meant nothing to her.

Cambria was aware that the information had come via experimentation and the violation of a species fundamental rights to life, but knowing that didn't make the information any less interesting or useful.

Of the Darka'days, there was no information – it was as if they didn't exist. Of Earth, the information was sparse. Perhaps she'd destroyed the Darka'day ship before they gained any meaningful information. Whatever the reason, Earth was protected – for now.

But she knew there would come a time when the Darka'days would want to know what type of creature she was and what humans were, although she expected them to choose a different name. It was as if they had taken for themselves, the right to name new and interesting creatures they found, whether the species were civilised and sentient or not.

They were, from her own experience, a rather cold-blooded species themselves.

Watchers. Guardians of this space.

That's what the Gardishan executives called them. Cambria did not see them that way. The Darka'day studied everything until *they* were satisfied, then they moved on to the next species, cataloguing as if building a library.

Respect wasn't a part of their makeup.

The soft beep of the communication's line brought her out of the alternative head space and she reached across to the head set, put it on without opening her eyes. "Hunter Petersen."

"This is Oberan Milldarishan. The Gardishan and escort are docking. Their arrival is anticipated within the hour." The officer said.

"Thank you, Milldarishan, do you have a facility where I may observe the process?"

"Of course, Hunter, I shall personally come and collect you." Oberan said.

"I am grateful." She said and Oberan hung up.

She set the phone in the cradle and stared up at the ceiling. A clock inside started ticking the countdown.

Cambria waited outside the accommodation building for Oberan and Operal. The officers were prompt and she climbed into the pale orange pursuit vehicle.

"We go to the court house, where the city has the surveillance system." Oberan said.

"How wide spread is your network?" She asked and connected her seat belt. She might be damn near impossible to kill, but that did not prevent painful injuries.

"We have monitoring devices everywhere except for the privacy of designators homes, of course."

Of course. The Nexians prided themselves on perfection and they'd want to monitor the citizens to ensure perfect behaviour. What happened within the privacy of homes wasn't the authorities business unless *imperfect* behaviour was involved.

Oberan drove down into an underground car park and fitted the vehicle into its slot.

Cambria got out and followed the Nexians into the basement facility.

She had to give them credit for persistence. The length of the entire building - and probably the next - held screens on both walls and in two aisles down the centre of the mega room.

Pairs of Nexians watched the screens with infinite patience, occasionally switching their screens for something new.

The Milldarishans lead the way down the room and she glimpsed areas on the space stations, on streets, inside public buildings and stores. She even saw one pair of Nexians monitoring the insides of taxis.

Towards the back half of the room, the Milldarishans paused and indicated two work stations.

"Here you may follow the progress of the detainees from outside docking hatch to the court house and into an adjudication room." Oberan said. The monitoring Nexians wore headsets to listen in.

"Do you have a way of tracking individuals once they leave the court house?"

Operal smiled. "Of course. Did you wish an automated monitoring?"

"Yes. I need to know where Soderling goes after he hands over the alleged felons and what he says to whom."

Oberan picked up an ear piece with a microphone boom and turned.

"We use facial recognition to isolate pairs to monitor." Operal said and she raised her eyebrows. "Recidivist perpetrators are often of a similar genome we cannot find to modify. We would stop producing that Nexian, but the referendum has refused and the search continues. As for other species, it is much easier, for you have diversity." Operal said and showed the baby teeth again.

Oberan turned back. "When the Hunter exits his ship, we will follow."

She watched the screen, waited for the blue light to flash above the docking tube hatch.

And then there he was.

"He looks tired." She murmured. "And unhappy." Jones' mouth was in a tight, white line as he marched out of the hatch, dragged his captives behind him. His eyes glowed with lethal intent and fury as he looked around for the customs agent.

A pair of Nexians approached with polite smiles and asked questions, their attention on the Gardishans and Jones.

Jones visibly shook himself, readjusted his demeanour and it was fascinating to watch. Gone was the cold-eyed, frustrated killer and in his

place, the charming, sociable man who could manipulate you into doing anything he pleased.

He held the translator in his hand and lifted it to converse with the agents.

She watched the short conversation and then the Nexians guided Jones and felons to a Spatial Vortex Transporter. This was different, with a wider door and an operator.

Jones questioned the Nexians and she could almost hear their replies that this was a multi-personnel SVT. Every other corridor she'd been through had been for single people.

Jones studied the door and the Nexians, all of them. Then, with a shrug, opened the door and ushered the prisoners inside. Then he shut the door and the screen changed to the SVT port on Nexus True.

The Gardishans emerged first and looked around with interest. They had an intense discussion that didn't stop when Jones appeared and dragged them towards the street.

Oberon nodded. "Lockdown of Hunter Soderling's ship is complete. Investigators are on the way to take custody of any and all information pertaining to the latest allegations of criminal behaviour."

Cambria nodded, her focus on Jones.

His temper strained and he was back to the tight-lipped expression as he hailed a taxi.

The monitoring Nexians changed the screen again to inside the vehicle. The Gardishans continued their discussion, but her focus was on Jones and his body language. He wanted to kill them, but couldn't work out how to do it and still collect the bounty.

She watched as a muscle in his jaw bulged and he turned to the Gardishans, showed them the razor sharp blades and spoke to them. The

Gardishans huddled together as if to protect themselves from Jones' excesses.

Finally, they pulled up outside the courthouse and Jones dragged the Gardishans out. She studied the Nexians. They appeared dishevelled, stained and... bruised? They were less than perfect and they knew it as they kept close together, as if to hide from the perfection of their home society.

But then Jones had four days to intimidate, to threaten and to toy with them. He would have enjoyed that and it would have kept him occupied on the long journey back to Nexus True.

She shook her head. What tales the Gardishans could tell about Jones. She knew well of his idiosyncrasies.

He marched the pair into the courthouse and approached a desk where two Nexians looked up at him.

He slapped the warrant – the warrant he'd taken from her – down on the counter.

The Nexians drew it to them, read the warrant then looked at each other. The one on the left ducked its head, then presented Jones with papers.

He stared hard at them, offered the translator for a download, but the Nexians remained adamant he fill them out by hand. With a look that promised retribution, he took the pages and the translator.

Cambria grinned. It would take him time to fill out the documentation and in the meantime, two law officers approached to take the Gardishans away. Jones resentfully unlocked the cuffs and watched his felons taken through a door. From the look on his face, Jones was wondering if he'd ever be able to claim the bounty. As long as the Gardishans were in his custody, he could reassure himself. Now, he had to trust in the local law, and the law wasn't something Jones trusted.

He settled himself at a desk and chair, away from the counter, and picked up the scribe. He began the laborious task of claiming his reward.

It took Jones close to two hours to complete the forms.

Cambria kept her eyes on him from the comfort of a chair brought for her and with a cup of hot Juria, the Nexian's version of a caffeinated beverage. Jones, on the other hand, was directed to a vending machine for sustenance it was less than favourable from the grimace on his face.

He took his forms to the counter and laid them flat, next to the translator.

The Nexians took them, read his responses and checked off parts as if correcting an examination paper. She saw a cross appear and nearly laughed.

The Nexians pulled out an identical set of papers and placed them on the counter next to the corrected version.

Jones gaped at them. *What? Again?* She saw him mouth.

Then his brow lowered, he opened his mouth on a snarl then snapped it shut, grabbed off the pages and translator and stomped back to his seat, offense and anger in every step.

"Better put temporary guards on the counter staff, Milldarishan, Jones looks pissed."

"Agreed. He displays no perfection in his behaviour and is most disagreeable in his choice of words."

Jones went through the documents, filling everything out exactly as the checks required and pausing with the crosses. He finished and returned to the counter where it was marked again.

This time the Nexians smiled at him and one held out a hand. Jones slid his identification across to them and they placed it in a machine.

"Confirmation of designation complete." Oberan murmured.

Jones pocketed his wallet and made an inquiry. He was less satisfied with the response, but accepted it. He turned and went through the doors to the street where he looked in one direction, then the other.

He jammed his hands into the pockets of his jacket and headed to the left.

Cambria leaned forward and watched with a narrowed gaze as Jones looked around. Jones found a restaurant and settled in for a meal. She wasn't fooled, he was stalking the admin staff who'd not done what he wanted, she could see it in his eyes.

While he waited, he pulled out the translator board.

She assumed he was going through the files lifted from the Gardishan Outpost, searching for a world he could live on for a while.

The two counter staff emerged from the building and Jones rose, casually walked out of the restaurant. On the street, he paused as he saw the two law officers follow the staff at a safe distance.

Jones pouted but followed them anyway.

The monitor followed the group to the SVT port.

Seeing he couldn't get to them, Jones loitered around the port, his eyes roving over the crowd, searching for a candidate.

Cambria stood up and stretched. She'd seen enough. Jones was going to assuage his four-day long anger with a Nexian pair. It was up to her to stop him.

"I need to end this."

Oberan and Operal looked at her.

"I also need a portable communication device so you can guide me to him."

Oberan nodded and walked to another area of the room, between monitors. He returned with a similar device to the one he wore.

Cambria settled the com system in her ear.

"Com system on line." She heard and turned.

"Com system on line." She repeated and Oberan nodded.

"You are authorised to engage target. We will monitor and send assistance should it be requested."

"Confirmed." She replied.

Operal pointed to the exit. "That will take you to street level. We will maintain constant updates."

"Thank you for your assistance, Milldarishans." She nodded and headed to the street.

She walked towards the port as Operal murmured in her ear. "Target remains static."

"Location, please."

"Target is at the entrance closest to you. He is watching the street and the locals."

Cambria couldn't disguise herself to sneak up on him, she was too tall, but maybe she could approach at an oblique angle.

She headed left, around the corner of the courthouse and then right, strode down the street, ducking around pedestrians. She turned right again at the end of the block and approached the port street.

"Location."

"Still static. Target is expressing interest."

Cambria walked faster and crossed the street at a jog.

Through the glass of the building, she saw straighten as someone, or some *pair* caught his attention. His head turned to check his surrounds and Cambria froze, lowered her head, but kept her eyes on him.

The pair was deep in conversation as they came out of the port and turned in front of Jones, went left.

Cambria moved to the corner and saw Jones push off from the glass and follow them.

"Support teams to move ahead of the target, keep out of sight." She murmured.

"Confirmed. Accessing support teams to watch but take no action."

She breathed deep. Now or never. And she kept her steps light as she jogged up behind Jones, her hand cupping the hilt of her knife.

She paused behind him as he slowed his steps and she removed the ear-piece, jammed it into her jacket pocket. The Nexians would still pick up any conversation.

He knew she was there. Cambria saw it in his posture and he whipped around, his knife extended. But she wasn't within reach.

"Hello, Jones. Did you miss me?" She smiled, surprised at her own audacity, but her fear of him was a distant thing, kept under control by determination.

His eyes widened slightly. "How did you...? You should be..." His mouth twisted with bitterness but he didn't relax his stance. "The Gardishans had a personal SVT routed back to Corporate headquarters."

"Yep."

"Little bastards. They constantly chatted to each other, repeated *everything*. Do you know what I've *been* through?" He demanded.

Cambria clicked her tongue. "I can imagine. I had enough of them and I just walked them to the cage. I would have gagged 'em."

"Bastards tried to bite me, every time I came near." His stance relaxed. "I had to punish them."

"So you've already handed them over. I don't suppose I'm on the bounty application?"

Jones grinned at her.

"No, I didn't think so. You are so *greedy!*"

"Why share when you don't have to." He shrugged. "But now that you're here, we can come to an arrangement." He relaxed a little further.

"Yeah? How so?"

"If I promise not to kill you," he nodded, "I'll give you an allowance; just enough to play with, but not enough to do any damage."

Cambria snorted a laugh. "Jones." She drew out his name.

"Walk with me?" He invited and gave her a smile.

Cambria glanced at the Nexians moving up the street. "What? So you don't lose sight of your next victims?" She shook her head. "Jones, it wouldn't be good for you to start a murder spree here *until* after you get your money."

He shoulders drooped. "You're probably right. So," the knife lowered a fraction, "what shall we do while we wait?" He asked and a predatory gleam came into his eyes.

The fear tried to burst free and she firmly suppressed it under memories of Major Caparossi. "Do you honestly think I'm going to give you the opportunity to stick me again?"

"Come on, you know you loved it, every time, Cambria. You loved the pain, loved me fucking you while you bled."

She sighed. "Oh, Excalibur, you said I had a fever, that I'd been ill. You wanted me to think that I'd dreamed it, when in reality..."

He shrugged. "I'm the most important thing in your life, Cambria, you should never refuse me. As you found out, refusal has *consequences*. I wouldn't have to punish you, which I enjoy, if you'd just understand I am your all. "

Her control slipped a little more. "Yeah." She dropped her gaze from his. "You'd think I'd learn. But if I acquiesced all the time, became totally passive, you'd get bored with me."

"True. So, are we good, or are we going to have it out on the street in front of God and everyone? Where there are civilians – or you'd call them victims, wouldn't you."

"I would." She watched the knife, knew he wouldn't hesitate to use it, he never did and she never wanted to be within distance ever again. Yet, if she was to do this, she had no choice. "We don't need to involve them at all."

"Will you sacrifice yourself for them?" He asked softly and she lifted her startled gaze to his.

"What?" She stared and the trembling began. *Control, stay in control, dammit!*

"If I promise not to hurt any Nexians, will you take their place? Until the bounty is paid?" The side of his mouth lifted.

Cambria's feet felt as if they were made of cement as she moved a little closer, stepped within reach of the knife. "Let me be real clear on your deal: You want *me* to be your sex slave, to be abused, raped, cut and beaten maybe, so *you* won't go out and slaughter Nexians. Until you receive your money and bugger off. Is that what you're demanding?"

Jones licked his lips and she saw the press of flesh against his trousers. She knew what he was thinking, what he was remembering, because she was remembering, too.

"As long as you keep me satisfied, no Nexians will be harmed. You have my word."

And she also knew how much his word was worth, which was nothing.

She lifted her right hand, met his gaze and pushed the blade aside with a finger, shuffled forward and cupped his erection, rubbed against him as he

rested his knife arm on her shoulder. "And if you do harm a Nexian? What do I get?" She asked in a low, seductive voice.

"My most sincere apology." He smirked and tapped her upper back with the tip of the blade. He slid a hand to her waist, to her belt, fingers outstretched. Then he smiled as he discovered no knife sheathe hanging from her belt. "But I guess it will be up to you to keep me occupied. Think you can do that?"

"After you've apologised." She said and stroked him.

He sighed, dug the tip of the blade through the denim jacket and her shirt, nicked her skin. "What for? You know I don... *rarely* apologise for anything."

She winced as the tip dug deeper and her fingers squeezed a little harder.

He moved into her hand. "Oh, I like that." He murmured.

"You're apology for sticking me, for abandoning me? The rest well..."

His grey eyes stared down into hers. "I love looking at your eyes, Cambria. You have starlight in them, passion, for me, in them. I have taught you to kill; to fear and love only me, to accept me and what I am. I won't apologise for doing what comes naturally, sweetheart, I'd end up saying sorry every day for the rest of my life."

"No," she gave him another rub, another squeeze, "I guess not. I can't say I'm disappointed."

"So, are we agreed? You keep me happy between your thighs and I'll not hurt the Nexians." He smiled. "I'll be too busy with you. And I'm going to enjoy our new game."

Cambria hesitated and he took the opportunity to jab her again.

Her left hand shifted, dropped and the hilt came into her hand from the vertical sheathe attached the *left*-handed shoulder holster. "Yes, Jones, I can keep you busy."

"You are such a..." His eyes widened and his smile dropped away.

She slowly pushed the Bowie blade into his stomach, twisted it slightly. Hot blood flowed over her hand.

"But you're... *right*... handed." He gasped. "You can't... do this... to *me*."

"Too easy, Jones, I thought better of you, that you understood I was coming to kill you when you stepped over the line. Your reign of terror is over, Jones."

"No, no. *No*."

She could feel him weakening, feel the weight of him press down on the knife. She eased it out slightly and stared into his eyes. "Yes, yes, *yes*, Jones. Warrant. *Executed*." And she rammed the blade up through his diaphragm, under his ribs and into his heart.

His knife clattered to the ground behind her and his legs lost their strength. His clawed fingers dug into her shoulder as he went to the ground. Then he looked up at her, desperate confusion in his eyes. "Love. Only. *You*."

She leaned down got in his face. "No. Longer. *Caring*."

And his breath sighed out, the life in those beautiful, rain-coloured, grey eyes faded.

Excalibur Jones, serial killer, was finally dead.

Chapter Twenty

Cambria cleaned up in the law officers' washroom, the one she'd used before. She rid herself of Jones' blood, rid herself of touching him and shuddered under the steam.

For the past three years, Jones had been the bane of her existence, her lover, her killer, her rapist, her saviour. But one act of redemption did not make up for years of killing, for the body count he racked up.

She stepped out and dressed in dry, clean clothes, went to consult with the Nexians.

She was guided into Operal and Oberan's office and she slumped down into the visitor's chair.

The Nexians were tight lipped. "We are..." Operal began, but stopped.

"Without words for Hunter Soderling's behaviour." Oberan finished.

"We have never heard such a conversation."

"His name was Excalibur Jones, Milldarishans. A killer, a thief, an abuser of women. Long have we Hunted him, long have *I* Hunted him. He was..."

She clicked her tongue. "It matters not. He is dead."

The Milldarishans glanced at each other. "Will you take the remains back to Earth?"

Cambria shifted in her seat. "I don't think so, better he stay on a world that appreciates perfection, because he was damn near the perfect killer. I doubt anyone on Earth wants him back." She rubbed her bottom lip. "I guess it depends on how you disposed of deceased Nexians."

She studied the pair. They looked... uncomfortable. As if they wanted to ask a favour, a big favour, but didn't know how. She waited for them to compose themselves, to discuss whatever it was.

Operal folded large hands on the desktop, regarded her with a serious expression. "As you may have noticed, we Nexians are of similar

appearances. What you may *not* know, is that we are the result of clone technology. As the years progress, more and more of us come closer to the same Nexian. At a very minute level."

Cambria nodded and had a vague idea where this was headed.

"We would ask for the remains of Excalibur Jones to add diversity into our population." Operal said and her jaw dropped.

They wanted to harvest genetic material from... *Jones*... to introduce into their own genome? Were they insane? They hadn't sorted out their own genetic issues and they wanted to add *more*?

"I..."

"Before you answer, Hunter, please be aware that any genetic material will not be of a *personality* nature. We are looking for height, for example, for the *physical* appearance. *That*, on a genetic material level, is easy to locate. Until we understand how personality works, we do not want to experiment with another species." Operal said.

That was refreshing, she thought. And Jones had a lot to offer: height, musculature, eye colour, skin colour... a lot of physical attributes, used in the pursuit of physical diversity in a species that idolised perfection.

Oh, the irony. She thought with a grin. And then she sobered. This was serious business for the Nexians and a way to avoid a total clone society. And what of Jones? What would he think?

He'd be pissed at first, but then he'd think of himself in others, think his legacy would live on. If his spirit was out there, he'd either be watching with smug arrogance or furious outrage.

"Milldarishans, I believe this may be your solution. We are similar in appearance, it is true, but very different in how we interact with each other." She pushed out of the chair. "Please accept the remains of Excalibur Jones and use him in good faith. But," she said with a small smile, "should you

find yourselves with troublesome Nexians, give us a call, we'll come to your aid; *I will come.*"

Both Nexian's shoulders slumped with relief.

"You are indeed a true ally. Allow us to escort you to the port."

The Nexians entered into a discussion about the fall of the Gardishan Corporate empire. How the name would be struck from the registers, much to the horror of all Gardishans.

At the portal, Oberan held out the translator. "I believe this belongs to the Earth authorities. We have copied the contents and will take steps to recompense or adjust the Spatial Vortex Transporters listed."

Operal sighed. "We cannot take back what has been done. The expense, the shame is..." He shook his head. "It does not bear thinking about. But we will do what we can."

"As will we. But we start on Earth to track the corridors – as we call them – punish those who knew they were illegal. Thank you, Milldarishans, for your assistance." She smiled at them and they bared their baby teeth.

Cambria stepped into the SVT and walked to the door opposite. The ride was smooth and she opened the door.

Major Caparossi waited with a solemn expression.

She held out the translator. "Mission... accomplished, sir."

Caparossi took the device and handed it to a waiting tech. "Welcome home, Hunter Petersen."

"It's good to be home." She said and then squeaked as he wrapped an arm around her waist, hauled her close and laid his lips on hers.

Joy surged through her and she draped her forearms over his more than capable shoulders.

She broke away and licked her lips.

Best of all, he tasted of coffee.

Epilogue

Nexus True's premier gene researchers, Onjaria and Onjeria Bandarishan of the Bandarishan Genetic Facility, studied the naked male specimen laid on the metal table.

"Human." Onjaria murmured as she resumed her examination of a blood sample beneath a scope.

"Yes, human." Onjeria replied and looked at the DNA strands swirling on a screen. "The genetic similarities are pleasing. We will have many combinations to integrate into our own genome."

Onjaria lifted her head and studied her Pair. "Is there information about this donor?"

"The donor is of the human species, given freely by the World Council, for the purposes of re-introducing genetic diversity." Onjeria replied. "There is no further information."

Onjaria rose, shuffled to the table. "I think this human was deliberately terminated. Take note of the wound pattern in the male's torso." She leaned in close. "Yes, this appears to be deliberate, with bruising around the wound. But it is of no consequence to us how this male was terminated. We are only interested in the harvest of genes."

"No, not a consequence at all. We have many combinations to use." A gleam came into Onjeria's eyes. "*Many* combinations."

Onjaria sucked in her lips. "We will re-introduce new genetic combinations with this gift. I do not think the humans understand the value of this male. Humans are most compatible. And we, the Bandarishans will receive many accolades for our work."

"Most compatible. We are indebted to this male." Onjeria's expression wasn't so easy to decipher, her eyes held a gleam of excitement.

“What do you suggest?” Onjaria asked, then backed away as she understood her Pair’s intentions. “We do not clone other species. They are imperfect.” She waved a dismissive hand and went back to her examination of the DNA, selected a sequence that would give the Nexians a more reasonable height.

“We do not clone aliens.” Onjaria repeated. “We are Nexus True’s premier geneticists. We are grateful to have the opportunity to re-introduce diversity, and yet we have not yet thanked the progenitor of our new diversity of this gift. The progenitor of a new era of Nexians, a more perfect Nexian.”

Onjaria paused in thought, then leaned back and slowly turned to her Pair. “We are responsible for the creation of many Nexians. What you suggest will take time.” She said, doubt heavy in her tone. “We would need to set aside facilities for the progenitor.”

Onjaria nodded. “We are free to explore many combinations. And the gift deserves our thanks.” She urged persuasively.

Onjaria pursed her lips as she considered the idea. “A secondary project? We cannot delay the new Nexians. Our primary objective must be diversification. Will we have the time to do this?”

Onjaria walked over to her Pair, placed a broad hand on her shoulder and regarded her with seriousness. “We cannot delay the new Nexians. We will have time to do this. Nexians created the perfect civilisation – *except* for diversification in the genome, and we are shifting towards perfection in that field. A secondary project will be most satisfactory. And when the time comes, we can thank the donor in person when he comes out of the gestation tank.”

Onjaria considered the options. "He deserves the life that was taken from him through termination. He deserves the right to fulfil his life expectancy. He deserves our solemn thanks for the donation."

"The secondary project will remain between the Pair. *Our* gift to the progenitor. It will hurt no one and the progenitor will be most grateful for the renewal."

Onjaria relaxed and smiled. "The secondary project will remain between the Pair." She agreed. "And the donor will be grateful for a new life. It will hurt no-one."