



DEMON POSSESSION

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SHADOW QUEST BOOK 1

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by
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Dear Reader,

You should only read the below preview of Demon Possession if you are 18 years old or older, as it contains mildly sexual content and adult language. Whereas the rest of the book is sexually explicit.

Chapter 1

Analia crouched in the shadows of the docking bay—shaking with fear, anticipation—hidden behind a large pile of cargo. Heavy adrenaline coursed through her body. Damp blond curls tangled around her face, hanging toward her ragged excuse for clothing and dirty bare feet. She struggled to steady her breathing, afraid someone would hear her. Her body threatened to collapse under the weight of the ship's artificial gravity, as fatigue began to set in.

The sounds of the ship, like a living thing, enveloped her, embracing her both as an old friend and hated foe.

Soon she would be free. She hoped. It was the only thing that drove her on.

Analia had known that a merchant ship would be docking today. Two or three ships were scheduled every few days, in order to maintain a variety of stock. In space, no two ships offered the same supplies, which meant many ships were often commissioned simultaneously. She watched the blond guard with frustration as she retraced her steps, hoping she hadn't left traces of her spontaneous and unplanned escape.

As usual, she'd been in the middle of a punishment. Locked in a room for two weeks—no food, and little water—with another week of the same to look forward to. The punishment had been the result of trying, and failing, again, to refuse Darius's advances—Captain Darius of the Extarga, a.k.a The Hell Ship. He'd become full of rage at her continued resistance and ordered her locked away until she could accept her lot . . . accept him. Something she would never do.

She could never give herself—heart, body, and soul—to someone like Darius. He was heartless and brutal.

A man had entered her cell, she'd seen him before, he'd tended to her many times, each time she'd attempted a conversation with no reciprocation.

Darius strove to keep her isolated on Extarga, hidden away from most of the crew. Those who had come into her presence—to bring her food or a fresh change of clothes, or perform a variety of tedious tasks—were ordered not to speak with her, or be disciplined. None had risked themselves for her conversation, not that she didn't try. She'd always been desperate for communication; speaking to anyone who entered her room, babbling about nothing if she had to. "How is your day" she would say as they performed whichever task they were meant for. It was a phrase she'd heard spoken before, through stolen moments from the ship's surveillance. "What is your name?" She would ask, hopeful for a response. When they ignored her she would only continue as if the conversation were two-sided instead of one, telling them anything that popped into her head. Her thoughts of whatever room she was in at the time. How she missed the view of space, she hadn't been allowed to see it in decades. She drew some satisfaction from the one-sided conversation, if only

a little. It always meant something to her when they lingered slightly, as though they were listening.

But at that moment she wasn't interested in conversation, eyeing the scraps of food the man had brought for her. Scraps of food not even fit for an animal, but she'd take it. She was growing thin from hunger.

Though he hadn't said a word, he had watched her as she ravaged the scraps. The first bit of food she'd eaten in a week and it was not enough to fill her belly. She'd barely tasted it, which, by the looks of it wasn't a bad thing.

When she finished she looked up at the man, expecting him to walk away as quickly as he had come, but he remained. There was something in his expression she had never seen before. Was it sorrow? Shame? Did he pity her? Probably. Who wouldn't?

Analia wondered what she must look like in her tattered dress, and unwashed state. Her feet were bare, her nails were dirty and bitten, and her lengthy blond hair hadn't been brushed in a week.

When the man turned to leave the room he hadn't left as normal, by closing the door tight and double-checking that it was locked. Instead, he opened the door wide, and withdrew in a rush, without a backward glance, allowing the heavy door to fall closed from its own weight.

Analia didn't know what had compelled her to act in that moment, just that she did. Rushing forward Analia inserted her fingers in the doorframe, just before it shut her in for another lonely week or more.

Stifling a scream when the hard door came crashing down on her, she had to resist the strong urge to remove her hand and cradle it to her chest.

Grinding her teeth she waited.

One heartbeat. Two. Three. Her breathing was labored. The first rush of adrenaline entered her system, and the spark of an idea. Her heart began to race at the possibilities. The man hadn't returned to make sure the door was fully closed and locked behind him. She was alone.

Think. What do I do now?

Then she'd remembered that several merchant ships were scheduled to dock. Perhaps . . . if she were lucky. If she could only make it to the docking bay. If a ship was even there, it was possible she could escape Extarga.

That's a lot of ifs.

She thought of the consequences if she went through with this. A stream of horrific images entered her mind. She would suffer for days, weeks, maybe longer this time if she were caught. Never had she done anything so bold as to try to escape. But if she didn't at least try, she knew she would regret it for the rest of her life, no matter the consequences. There may never be an opportunity like this again.

Hope flooded her, made her feel light. The idea of freedom, a better life, possibly being within her reach, was a heady thought.

What if I do get free and it's worse out there?

The idea spread through her like a poison. If she did escape, and found herself on a merchant ship, what if the people on board were worse than Darius? She pushed the thought from her mind. It couldn't be possible. Could it? Dark images swirled in her mind picking at her resolve. Or, what if they found out about her gift? Perhaps her unusual pointed ears were a clear sign of what she was.

Maybe under different circumstances she would have embraced her ability, but for so long she had suffered because of it and only wished it gone. Unfortunately, as far as she knew, that was impossible. It was a part of her, through and through, blood and bone. And it was the reason Darius kept her as isolated as he did. To him she was just an object, a piece of machinery.

Perhaps her gift was a normal trait of her people. If so, it was the only connection she had to them. She had no idea what she was or where she came from. No memory of her people. Analia had been a child when Darius had claimed her.

Analia knew what awaited her here on The Hell Ship—a lifetime of suffering until Darius had siphoned every last drop of her will in his attempt to break her. Eventually he would succeed.

When Analia was sure that the man had truly gone, she braved a peek.

The hallway was empty, almost void of all sound. It wasn't unusual, the ship was a huge beast. Some hallways less traveled were left abandoned for days at a time. Hopefully this was one of those days.

Before Analia moved through the door, and allowed it to close behind her, she prayed for the luck of the gods. Easing the door shut she heard the soft click of the lock move into place. Any decision she might have made to turn back was destroyed in that moment.

Analia easily glided through the corridors, toward the docking bay. Her bare feet made little to no noise as she went. She knew this ship better than anyone. She knew it better than Darius himself—a benefit of her gift.

When Darius had her hooked up to the ship, Analia had the ability to tap into the ship's heavy surveillance system. It was as though the images from the cameras were displayed directly into her mind and she could see everything all at once.

The pain of being hooked up to the ship was nearly blinding. The feel of her energy being drawn out of her and into the ship's power storage system was agony. To take her mind off the pain she distracted herself by watching the crew through the cameras, envying them their freedom. It was her only joy, but right now it was her greatest enemy. The surveillance system would need to be taken care of.

Making her way to a small control panel—for once her ability would benefit her—she went to work, using it to infiltrate the surveillance system.

Being hooked up to the ship, it was as if she were part of it, like one colossal machine working in unison.

Analia shook her head and frowned in disgust. She really was a piece of equipment.

Everything that was in the ship's database was her playground. Every piece of information, every secret, and every code belonged to her. If Darius ever found out about the extent of her gift he would surely use her to spy on his crew. There were not many under Darius's command who spoke highly of him in *tete-a-tete*.

With the ship at her command she proceeded first to clear an easy path to the docking bay, by unlocking any door that might be locked, and checking to see if any crew members would be in her way. After ensuring she had a straight path, Analia erased two solid weeks of recorded surveillance. Then she shut it down completely and locked the system, changing the codes before continuing toward the docking bay.

The system was only checked once every few months, and anything recorded was only viewed when there was a discrepancy. No one would think to check it until long after she'd gone and if they wanted, in they were going to have to hack the system in order to gain

access. And because she was the system she knew they would have a hell of a time of it.

Only once, as she carefully traversed the maze of passageways, did she come across trouble—a couple of crew members, advancing toward her. She heard them before she saw them. Their footsteps were not intended to be hidden like hers. They walked confident and loud, boots thudding on the hard shiny floor.

Dread engulfed her, almost overtaking her senses. After a moment of pure panic she was able to calm her emotions, knowing she needed to find a place to hide. The voices were close, laughing and talking with ease. Just before they entered the corridor she dove for a door to her right, propelling her body through it. Inside, the room was small and dark like a closet, but empty and unused. Her body had begun to tremble with worry; her hands were the worst, shaking uncontrollably. Opening, closing, and rubbing them she tried to relieve the tremors.

The voices became loud, just outside the door. She froze, her breathing stopped. Only when the voices and footsteps continued past the door did her body relax. She was tired, so tired. The couple of weeks without food had greatly weakened her. And with nothing soft to sleep on or cover her chilled body, she had slept badly on the cold iron floor, sometimes only falling asleep when exhaustion overruled the chill in her bones.

She pushed into the now empty corridor and continued with caution. The hallways remained absent of life. The path she had hacked allowed doors to open at her approach. With each threshold her anxiety was reborn. Her feet, numb from cold, were quiet against the hard floor. Each hallway was like a repetition of the first, there was nothing distinguishing, nothing but gray walls illuminated by dim overhead lights.

With her nerves grated she had finally made it to the docking bay.

Yes! A merchant ship was indeed docked, both ships connected and open to each other. She'd almost cried out with a surge of an unfamiliar mixture of emotions.

Joy. Relief. Anticipation.

That is, until she spotted the guard blocking her path. A large, strong looking male, a bored scowl etched in his features. Spiky blond hair framed his face and a black short-sleeved shirt revealed his muscular arms and chest. Black pants and a pair of black boots covered his lower half. Watchful, he leaned against the wall of the ship, wearing an aura of danger. Like he could rip you apart with his bare hands, while maintaining that look of boredom.

Luckily he hadn't seen her. She was already halfway hidden behind large piles of cargo. The stack of boxes was large enough to hide a body three times her size. She had to hold her nose to contain a building sneeze as she caught a whiff of spices.

Analia didn't know how much time had passed in her semi-hidden position. Any minute now the docking bay would be flooded with workers, sent to gather the goods. She could only wait and hope for an opportunity, the perfect moment when no one was watching so she could hide herself away on the merchant ship. She prayed for a distraction.

The docking bay was huge. The ceiling stretched far above Analia's head, the walls covered in white. Three floors tiered around the great round room. Massive machines used for lifting heavy cargo loomed above her, bolted to the thick retaining walls. No one was currently manning them.

Usually a slave or two was brought with each delivery, though Analia didn't see any this time. Darius liked to acquire things, people included. Though most of the crew were free, many, like her, were slaves, most of them women. And though they were treated just

as poorly, they were rarely kept as isolated as she was.

Each crew member, slave or not, was handpicked by Darius, selected for their great strength, knowledge, or beauty. Darius demanded only the best at his command. However, slave or free they all had one thing in common, they feared their leader.

Darius was a ruthless tyrant, and wasn't afraid to dole out pain whenever he pleased. When he wasn't punishing her for some perceived infraction, he often forced her to watch—what he referred to as discipline—as someone else suffered. In order—she suspected—to frighten her into submission. It worked.

She was once forced to witness a group, made up of one female and three males, being disciplined. One of the men had been condemned to death, the other three were ordered to take his life or die themselves. Analia never learned what they did to deserve such a punishment. They were given no weapons to carry out the act. Horrorstruck, Analia watched as they pounded at the condemned man with only hands and feet, to save their own lives. If she didn't watch, if she closed her eyes, then she knew she would be on the receiving end of her own punishment.

Analia shook the memory away. This was her first real attempt at escape. She'd thought of it many times before, dreamt of what it would be like to be in possession of her own life. To do what she wanted when she wanted. Oh, how she craved freedom. To think, act, and speak with no fear of consequence. No one forcing her to use her ability until her body—drained of almost all its essence—gives out in exhaustion. No man to encroach on her body, when she hadn't the energy to fight him off. She shook her head.

Focus.

She peeked from behind her hiding spot. The guard was still there, blocking her escape. He hadn't moved from his position since she last chanced a look. She'd never seen the man before, which meant he was a member of the merchant ship, and was there for the sole purpose of keeping people, such as her, from trespassing.

Her plan had been simple, well . . . in theory. She planned to sneak onto the merchant ship, hide until it next docked, and then sneak off the ship, disappearing forever from Darius' reach. Easy right?

She just needed a little more luck, just a little to get her on that ship, one step closer to freedom. She deserved it, dammit! How much more should she be made to suffer? How much more could she take?

"Calic!" a male voice shouted. Analia jumped at the sound. She peeked to see the guard's attention diverted to something inside the other ship.

"What?" was the blond guard's clipped reply.

"The last load is stuck!" A voice yelled. "We can't get it through the doorway! It won't fit!"

"It helps if you're smarter than the door," The blond guard muttered under his breath before yelling back, "We got it in there didn't we?" He sighed before disappearing into the ship and out of Analia's view.

Her heart beat heavy in her chest. She waited a few seconds expecting him to quickly return. When he didn't she sucked in a breath and moved forward, hesitant at first, and then dashed for the opening. She could hear nothing but the rush of blood in her ears and the quick thud of her wild heart.

Closer. Closer.

When she crossed the threshold onto the other ship her breath caught. No sign of the

blond guard. Immediately she took in her new surroundings. The room was significantly smaller than the large one at her back, suggesting that the merchant ship as a whole was a fraction the size of The Hell Ship.

There were two doorways to choose, one to her front and one to her right. When voices came from the right she sprang for the opening to her front. Spying ahead first, she moved through the door and into a long hallway. The air was warmer here, and a soft tan carpet tickled her feet. She was shocked by the sight of color on the walls, a mocha brown warmed by the touch of soft overhead light.

Ignoring the exhaustion and hunger that loomed over her she moved quickly, seeing no promise of shelter. She was exposed and if anyone spotted her now all would be lost.

After passing through a few empty corridors, guided by instinct alone, she spotted an open doorway. From her position she could see the hint of a window, beyond it, a sight she hadn't seen for a very long time. Disbelieving, she was drawn forward. The room was rounded with computer consoles wrapped around the edge of the room, a center console near the back wall to her left stood alone. A large window blanketing more than half the room and revealed a sight she'd callously been deprived of, a sight she had longed for. Awe overpowered her as she gazed through it.

Space!

Black. Deep. Vast. Space, speckled with pinpricks of light. Endless possibilities masked in darkness. The power of it held her where she was. Her tightly wound emotions nearly exploded at the beauty of it. Only one thing was able to tear her eyes away and bring her back to reality.

She was not alone.

His back to her, a young dark haired male sat facing the encompassing window. His attention was on his computer console, clicking away, oblivious of her sudden appearance.

"Cargo's unloaded!" A distant voice came from behind. Someone was coming toward her. "The captain wants the ship ready to go as soon as he returns!"

Her stomach tightened, she felt a bead of sweat run down her spine. Silently she edged away from the door and crouched behind the main console, the only place where she could hide. Unfortunately she was only partially hidden. The approaching male might not see her upon entering, but if the other man sitting at his station turned, he would spot her instantly. She watched him intensely, holding her breath.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

After glancing around, realization hit her and her throat went dry. She swallowed hard, taking in the rest of the control room. The heart of the ship! A room that will soon be filled with bodies ready to take their stations. And the console she was crouched behind, considering its location in the room, must belong to the captain!

In a panic she searched for another escape. There were no other doors. There was nothing else to hide behind, in, or under. The console that she was crouched behind was only a few feet from the back wall, which was the only flat wall in the room, connecting it to the rest of the ship. She studied it for a moment, feeling that something was there. Something she's not seeing.

Then she caught it from the corner of her eye—a small latch near the floor, not too far out of reach.

The male entered the room. "Did you hear me?" He said to the other man. "Call the

crew back to their stations. We'll be departing as soon as the captain returns."

"Yeah, I heard you."

Analia scooted out of view as the male advanced into the room to attend an unoccupied console next to his colleague, leaving his back to her.

Ready to move she slowly reached out and gently lifted the latch. There was a soft click. Her breath caught at the sound. Glancing at both men, they didn't seem to have noticed the noise. She pulled gently, half expecting the tiny door to squeak from lack of use. But it silently revealed a small opening just big enough for her to fit through. Shuffling through the space Analia pulled the door closed behind her. Click. She almost growled at the sound, which seemed louder this time.

After a moment of bloodcurdling stillness, she released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding and surveyed her surroundings. It was a small cramped space, seemingly for maintenance purposes. Tubes of varying thickness ran along one wall, slightly lit by a dim line of lights. The room was about four feet by three feet. Enough room for her to lie down with her knees bent, which, at the moment, seemed like a really great idea. Every muscle in her body was pulled tight, her heart still pounded with adrenaline.

Making herself as comfortable as possible she fought against an exhaustion that threatened to drag her into oblivion. Passing out right now was not a good idea. Once she felt safe she'd relent, but danger still loomed. The ships were still attached and everything could still go wrong. She tried to listen to what was happening outside her tiny enclosure. Nothing it seemed. She pictured the two men clicking away at their computers.

Light and dark spots began to star her vision, indicating that she was losing her battle against the overwhelming exhaustion pressing down on her. She had succumbed to exhaustion enough times to know that she was lost. Still she strained to stay awake, rubbing her eyes to reinvigorate them, in a near useless attempt to keep them from closing again. Her brain pounded with the need to shut down. Only now did her heart begin to slow. Breathing was becoming easier. Body relaxing, her head lulled.

Stay awake.

Vision blurred.

The last thing she heard was the voice of a man, someone who had just entered the control room. She was unable to make out what was said, but the deep masculine timbre seemed to ease her in some way. She allowed it to roll over her, a vibrating energy that wrapped her in a cloak of security. Or was that just exhaustion making her delusional? Still, she couldn't deny the energy she felt from him, even from within her enclosure. His rumbling voice boomed again, to her tired mind there was no making sense of his words.

She closed her eyes as she felt her body falling into blackness.

Chapter 2

Sebastian Uthair sat in the all-too-familiar spot, across from Darius in a chair similar to his, but slightly lower to the ground. Darius sat behind the large dark wooden desk, as usual. Wood was difficult to acquire in space, vastly expensive in its raw form. Fully crafted it sold for astronomical prices, and was acquired as a means to display status or wealth. Wealth Darius had, which was made obvious by the overabundance of wood furnishings and expensive tapestries decorating his office. But status in space was meaningless. Space was a hostile environment that required a sharp and cunning mind over prestige any day. That and a shit load of weapons.

Most of the items in Darius's office were displayed to exude a sense of upper-class and distinction, objects placed meticulously to build a sense of importance. Sebastian saw it for what it was; a facade of an egotistical man. This man was no more important than a leaf on the wind. As a merchant, Sebastian had to deal with these all-too-self-important types constantly.

Darius dressed—same as he decorated his office—with the purpose of seeming more important than he was. His suit, expertly tailored, was made from the finest fabrics one could come across. Shoes, buffed to a perfect shine. And his coffee-colored hair was molded neatly, framing his face.

Silently, Darius sipped his cup of steaming liquid while he, in turn, scrutinized Sebastian. Sebastian's clothes were simple. His style was more wear-whatever-you-grab, and less preconceived, although today he put a little more thought into his dress. A pair of black pants—riddled with pockets, buckles, and secret places to hide his weapons—a pair of thick black boots, scuffed with overuse, and a dark coat, lined with a light-gray faux fur, over a simple white shirt. Around his neck he wore two heavy silver chains, which could double as weapons if needed. His short coal-colored hair was purposefully messed, allowing his horns to peek out. He too knew how to put on a show. His appearance projected danger and reinforced the common knowledge that you don't want to piss off a demon, especially this one.

Darius sat silently, giving off his usual air of superiority. Sebastian matched him with a quiet reserve, knowing what was about to come, as he had grown to expect it.

Negotiation time.

"I'll give you half the agreed price." Darius finally declared, in a tone meant to end the conversation there. He put down his mug and picked up his pen, readying to draw up the new contract.

Two items missing from the load and the bastard thinks he should get half off! Stifling his annoyance Sebastian replied, "That would not even cover my costs." His voice was calm, a slight lift at the corners of his lips, his face a mask of arrogance. It was the only way

to deal with the obdurate bastard.

“A few of the items I requested are missing from the load. I cannot pay the full amount we agreed upon. If I did that, every one of my merchants would bring me only half of my order and demand full price.” Darius tsked.

“There are only two items I was unable to acquire and those items are damn near impossible for anyone to get. I would have to risk my life or the lives of my crew, and you are not paying me enough for that.”

“I disagree.” A knowing smile played across his lips. “A few short weeks ago, a competitor of yours, Kierok, I believe was his name, was able to bring me one of those items, and charged me less than you quoted.” A steely pause, “Perhaps I should do more business with *him*.”

Sebastian knew Kierok, a rival merchant and a heartless creature. He also knew that Darius was waiting for some kind of outburst at the prospect of losing him as a customer. He probably expected Sebastian to crumble at his words and beg for whatever pay he was willing to offer. But Sebastian could not care less if he and Darius did business. There was something abhorrent about the man. Sebastian sensed he needed to tread cautiously around him, always kept his guard up, as though he were a snake in the grass waiting for the perfect moment to strike. *It takes one to know one*. Sebastian himself was one to be wary of. When a snake strikes, you strike back harder.

“Kierok doesn’t give two shits about his own crew and callously risked their lives to procure your goods. I don’t work that way.”

Darius studied him for a moment. Frown in place. “Kierok could provide me with *all* the same services as you,” He pushed.

Sebastian only smiled, never taking his amber eyes from the man in front of him. “If that’s how you feel I will have my men pack up the cargo and we’ll be on our way.”

Darius tried and failed to hide a sneer before saying, “Unfortunately I cannot wait for Kierok. But I will not pay full price for partial delivery.” He slammed his hand down on his desk to emphasize his point.

Sebastian shrugged, unconcerned. “I will offer to take three percent off the agreed price.”

Darius, visibly agitated now, leaned back in his chair. “Make it thirty percent.”

“Eight percent.”

Through clenched teeth Darius replied. “I will accept no less than twenty percent off.”

Sebastian pretended to weigh his options. “Then I am sorry, I’ll have to decline your offer.” He stood, indicating the end of negotiations and his patience. Sebastian had many other contacts that would pay adequately for his supplies. He held out his hand in a businesslike gesture, resolution covering his features.

Darius eyed his outstretched arm with disgust. “Fifteen percent,” He growled.

Offering him a fake look of indecision, Sebastian pulled his hand back and contemplated the new offer. If he had more time he would have argued further, but he needed to be on his way. “I think I can deal with that.” He didn’t offer his hand again, and neither did Darius.

Darius reached to unlock a drawer low on his desk, lifting from it a small black box. Reaching in, he counted, then recounted the correct number of chips before tossing them on the desk in front of Sebastian.

Sebastian gathered the payment, bid Darius farewell, and proceeded back to his ship, passing a handful of bodyguards on his way out. He couldn’t wait to get back. Next stop

promised to be a big job, one of their biggest. Sebastian was about to negotiate a contract with the Serakian's—an ancient and wise race, known for their peaceful and gentle nature. When riled, however, they proved to be exceptionally fierce.

To anyone who chooses to accept, the Serakian's were offering a generous sum to transport a curiously small amount of cargo. He'd received the notice just after he'd negotiated the contract with Darius. Now that the contract was fulfilled, he and his crew would head straight to the Serakian rendezvous point. Luckily it wasn't too far from their current location, and should only take a week or so of travel.

The commission from this coming job could feed his crew for months, maybe a year. Sebastian was protective of his crew. He was their leader, their captain. Every action he took affected them as much as it did him. Many in his crew were next to family. Of the more than two-hundred crew members more than half were loyal friends, but only two were blood relations—his sister Sonya and his brother Calic.

With a sense of satisfaction, Sebastian crossed onto his ship. Calic grunted a nod at him. Calic was his second-in-command. He was a tough leader, and an even tougher adversary. When they would spar Calic held nothing back, as if he possessed a deep rage clawing for release. Calic demonstrated a ferocity Sebastian had never seen the likes of.

Sebastian had the same rage bubbling inside him. However, he was able to focus it differently. Focus on the survival of his crew, and on each commission.

Sebastian understood where the malice came from. They'd both been betrayed by the women they loved. Both Calic's beloved mate and their own mother had turned their backs on them at the worst possible moment.

Calic had loved his mate, trusted her completely. He'd been devastated.

As a result, both Calic and Sebastian kept their women at a distance. Only using them for what was necessary and discarding them the moment after. The only difference between the two was that Sebastian never slept with anyone aboard the *Marada*, though more than enough women lived on the ship—a few had even propositioned him. It was a strict policy he tried to enforce with everyone, including Cale. But, like many, Calic refused to submit.

“Is everything unloaded?”

Calic nodded. “Yeah, how did it go with Darius?”

“He got fifteen percent off.”

“Huh. Not too bad.” Calic pressed a series of buttons on the control pad and the docking hatch began to close. Metal screeched against metal as the heavy locks moved into place and a faint hiss as the door sealed shut.

They made their way to the bridge, where Sebastian claimed his position at the center console. As ordered, the crew was at their posts with the ship ready for departure. Suddenly, an unfamiliar fragrance filled the space around him. He sniffed the air, it was feminine. “Cale! Have you had a female in here?”

Calic laughed carelessly. Self-conceit dripping from his words, “Depends on when you're referring to.”

“Keep them out of the control room,” Sebastian scolded. If he was going to consistently break the rules, there were plenty of other appropriate places to do it.

So help me, if he had her on my console!

Calic just shrugged in response.

Not soon enough the ship roared to life. Sebastian was eager to get to the rendezvous

location and accept the contract before anyone else beat him to it. His ship was fast, but they'd been delayed due to the contract with Darius. In hindsight he regretted accepting the commission, but the deal had been struck and Sebastian always fulfilled his contracts. He just hoped the delay hadn't cost him.

Sebastian wasn't *too* worried however. The Serakian's stipulations were extreme to say the least. Even though the pay was great, he doubted many would be eager to take on the job.

His crew barked out their actions as the thrusters fired, surging *Marada* forward. With the course set Sebastian eased into his seat. The crew seemed to relax along with him.

For a long while he watched the stars, twinkling like trapped firebugs, thinking over his checklist of supplies. Previous to the meeting with Darius they'd made several stops, stocking up in preparation for the long trip ahead. He wasn't certain how long their journey would take, just that it would be a great distance. That could mean weeks or months, or gods forbid, years. He wanted to make sure they were fully prepared for whatever was required.

Even though they were currently better stocked than they'd ever been he would still barter for more supplies from the Serakian's. Being over prepared would set him more at ease with what he was about to put his crew through.

* * *

Analia woke. The unfamiliar rumbling of the ship reverberated through her core. How long had she been asleep? Obviously long enough that the scraps of food she'd last eaten were all but consumed by her body. The ache in her stomach punished her for it. She was weak, struggling to even move her arms, wrapping one around herself for added comfort. Icy chills racked her. Shivering she stifled a groan, remembering where she was. A strange ship and an unknown crew. Her heart jumped as realization hit her.

I'm Free.

It was done. She was no longer on The Hell Ship. Grinning stupidly, tears began to stream down her temples. She had to keep herself from laughing out loud. A weight seemed to have lifted from her chest, making her feel lighter. *Freedom*, her mind repeated the word.

Her joy was cut short, feeling herself going weaker by the minute. Her already cramped space seemed to grow smaller by each breath, the already dim light growing dimmer. Shifting her body in an attempt at a more comfortable position, she rested her head on the crook of her arm and stared at the blank gray wall. Once more, her stomach growled. She clutched it tightly in an attempt to silence it.

She could only hope they docked soon so she could escape *this* ship and disappear into a faceless crowd. Her pulse jerked at the prospect. Being away from The Hell Ship was nearly intoxicating. But she knew even though she'd escaped she wasn't safe yet.

Getting on this ship had been easier than she could have imagined. Surely it would be just as easy getting off, Right?

At the thought of Darius she grinned anew, imagining the look on his face when he found that his precious Analia was missing.

Did she just giggle? It was possible she was becoming delusional from thirst and hunger.

Just once, she would have loved to see the look of defeat on his face. To revel in the fact that she alone had bested him. Would he be engulfed in rage? Would he regret his treatment of her? *Doubtful*. Or would he set out straightaway to find her. Fear prickled her and she lost her good mood. That's exactly what he would do.

They *had* to pull into a port soon. This was a merchant ship after all.

Thinking back, did she cover her tracks well enough? Would the search take long enough for her to carry out her plan, or was he already on his way to claim her once more. She bit her lip with worry. There had been other ships to come and go that day. Hopefully he would seek them out first.

Please let him check the others first.

She found it was becoming harder to keep her eyes open. Voices trailed through the small grated door. To stay awake she tried to concentrate on the conversation outside. It must be the captain's voice that she heard the loudest. His words were muffled. She scooted closer to the door to listen. Someone was saying something about . . . wards?

"Once the wards are in place, you may begin your long journey." This came from a commanding voice, a female voice.

"My men are gathering the supplies you promised." *The captain?* "They should be back shortly." He paused. "Is this it? Is this all we are to transport?"

"That is all that was requested of us. It is enough," The woman's voice proclaimed. "The contents of this box are without price. Irreplaceable. This is a very important task you undertake. Ethanule's reasoning for choosing *you* above all others is . . . beyond me. Know this . . . if this box does not reach its intended destination you will face the wrath of my entire race as well as Ethanule's."

Analia's curiosity was piqued.

"I assure you, Lady Hieskita, we are excellent at what we do. There is no doubt . . ."

"You understand your journey will take you through the warring territories. Have you no reservations about that?" The woman interrupted.

"There are ways around those zones. It would only make the trip a little longer to avoid them. And if we must, we have maneuvered those territories many times before." The captain's reply sounded as though he was smiling at the challenge.

"You fully understand the wards then? What will happen if they're breached?"

"Yes," He tried to conceal the exasperation in his tone. "If anyone leaves or enters the ship before the package is delivered the contract is annulled . . . and we are still required to deliver the package, *without pay*," he said robotically, emphasizing the last words. "Or risk war from both you and Ethanule."

Lady Hieskita humphed and said nothing more.

Analia laid back, alarmed by their words. *Wards? Long journey? No one on or off the ship!* She had to make her move now. But how? Her mind felt dull but she could tell there were many people out there. Too many for a clean escape, especially with her slow reflexes and weary body. More than that, she had no idea where they were. How far had they come? Realizing now that she had no experience with new places, new cultures. She'd have no idea how to act, who to trust, how not to get herself killed.

Maybe she could wait it out. How long could this trip be?

Over her long life—and thanks to Darius's favorite punishment—she found herself able to go without food for longer and longer periods of time. But how much longer could she last? Furthermore how long had it already been? She had no idea how long she'd been

asleep. She was losing track of time. By the ferocity of her hunger she didn't think she could hold out much longer.

By the sound of soft approaching voices, the decision to stay and wait-it-out was made for her. It seemed the crew had returned with the awaited supplies.

The captain took one last moment to reassure the Lady Hieskita.

"I pray for your safe journey," She replied. Then the room went silent until she began chanting. Ancient sounding words that dripped with power and energy filled the empty space around her. Energy slithered and writhed around her, it clung to her—tiny tendrils clamoring, seeking a way inside. At first she resisted, using her own energy to push against it, but it pushed harder. The power didn't feel malicious, just strong. Analia relaxed a little, allowing the strange energy to do as it wished. Flittering through her like a warm embrace before dissipating.

When the woman's chanting died out she said simply, "The wards are in place."

The captain said his good-byes and thanked the woman. After a short while, a great sound rumbled the ship.

The ship was on the move once again.

Analia's body felt colder and weaker than before. Her initial resistance to the odd energy had cost her. Breaths coming in short spurts, she curled into a ball in an attempt to warm her shuddering body. When that didn't work she allowed the weariness to overcome and she welcomed the cradling arms of unconsciousness.

* * *

Sebastian was damn curious about that box. Never had a job been racked with such complications. His crew was used to docking at a space city every-so-often for supplies, equipment, and entertainment. They'd never gone more than a few weeks without stopping for some reason or another.

They were stocked to the brim for this trip, but it will be a trial for the crew, being onboard the ship for so long. After receiving their intended destination from Lady Hieskita he figured the trip could take a little more than eight months, maybe ten. Once the job was completed he would make sure they all had some much-needed time away from the *Marada*. Maybe find a cozy planet, brimming with fresh women.

The wards spooked him, knowing they were there yet unseen, like a parasite attached to his beloved ship. In the past he had refused many jobs, due to such restrictions in the contract. This one however, promised to pay the equivalent of more than ten commissions combined, nearly double what he'd first thought it would be. He couldn't refuse.

To his utter shock, Ethanule had personally requested the *Marada* for this mission. *Why?*

Ethanule was the leader of a small faction of pirates. They'd done one job for him in the past, a small commission at that. There was nothing challenging about it, nothing that would prove any real worth as a merchant or a cargo ship. And Sebastian hadn't hid his distaste for pirates. His family openly disliked them, since their father had been brutally murdered by pirates.

But sometimes, a job is just a job.

His thoughts drifted back to the parcel. What could be so important that came in such a small package? That which could invoke the wrath of an entire race? This commission

could either be a great achievement or his utter destruction.

Calic eyed him warily, possibly thinking the same thing. “Our course has been downloaded into the ship’s navigation system, Captain.”

“Good. Let’s get going then. Cale, take command.”

Calic nodded and assumed control of the bridge.

Sebastian left, taking the stairway just outside leading up to his quarters. His was the closest room to the control room, just above it in fact. If he were needed, he wanted to be able to take command as quickly as possible.

A large, domed window, covering half the room, ceiling to floor, revealed a vast spacecape. Unlike the one in the control room, this one did not double as an oversized communication screen, just provided a great view.

The *Marada* itself was complete with luxuries, unusually so for a typical merchant ship. The previous owner—an extravagant and apparently rich individual—had adorned the ship with every luxury one could think of. There was a spa room with an oversized pool, a built in pub separate from the galley and salon. There was even a large room dressed with soil, live plants and an artificial stream of recirculating water. The place reminded many onboard of their home planets.

But what was most amazing was the *Marada*’s water recycling and regeneration system, unusual for such a large ship. Where many ships used the more economical powder enzyme shower systems, *Marada* used real water. The system allowed for an abundant use of water—one of the scarcest commodities in deep space—over long periods of time. Water could be used and recycled many times over without contaminants entering the system. The only drawback was every few decades, fresh water needed to be added to the system, siphoned from a planet that was overflowing with it.

Everything about the ship was made to provide a sense of comfort.

Even though it was constructed like a cruise ship, great attention was paid to the internal workings of the ship as well. It was state-of-the-art in defense and weaponry, as well as navigation. The ship came complete with an extensive database of galaxies, solar systems, stars, planets, different races, and extremely detailed information about places, far out of reach.

Yes, the day he, Cale, and their sister Sonya had stolen it they found that they had acquired a good ship indeed. It had been five hundred years ago, the day of the betrayal, and the beginning of the war that ultimately destroyed their home planet. It was a war between his people and the warmongers who called themselves Kayadon.

The Kayadon had come in fast, without warning. Only a select few had known what was coming, and many of those who knew chose to betray their people and their planet, in favor of the infidels. People like their mother and Calic’s mate. He thought of them now with venom in his heart. *Cowards*.

Shortly after the war had begun he and his brother had received word that the fighting was nearing their village. After a quick meeting among the elders, all able men were called to arms. The brothers hadn’t hesitated to join the fray, to protect their homes and families.

Sonya had spent hours begging to come along. She wanted to fight as badly as they had. Sebastian, being the eldest male in the family—seven hundred at the time—refused. Not that she couldn’t take care of herself. She had always been a strong fighter, trained by Sebastian himself. Her speed was incredible. She was faster than anyone in the village, including Cale. He wouldn’t let her fight because he couldn’t stand the thought of losing

her in battle. He had always been fiercely protective of her. Both he and Calic still were.

Readying their battle gear, Cale and Sebastian were unaware of the danger in their own home. The two women had approached as if to kiss them goodbye, instead, injected them with a poison that wouldn't kill them but would render them weak and therefore useless in a fight. The poison was nearly instantaneous. Both men—disoriented, muscles slack and weak—howled in rage at the women. Sonya too, screamed her horror. *What have you done!* He recalled her saying over and over again.

“The Kayadon have come to lead us,” their Mother had ranted in a radical tone he'd never before heard her use. For the first time he noticed the glossy glazed look in her eyes. Fanatically she spouted her support for the Kayadon.

The brothers, along with Sonya—seething with anger, and a newfound hatred—had left the two women behind as they made their escape. The fighting was close and they could not defend themselves. Survival instincts had taken over.

They thought to hide out in a cave, or the woods till the poison passed through their systems, and they once again regained their strength.

That's when they came upon *Marada*, belonging to a solitary Kayadian nobleman waiting to stake a claim on their home planet. The interloper had landed his ship far enough away from the war zone to not get involved but close enough that he could join in the victory when it was over. The bastard never lived to see the end of the war.

After Sonya slit the man's throat Sebastian and Calic readied the ship for take-off. There was a short period of trial and error with the controls. Their kind had always been swift learners.

The Kayadon had swiftly won the war. Their weapons had been far more advanced at the time, and they had the element of surprise. Soon after their victory, they had scorched the demon planet to the point of being uninhabitable. The Kayadon had taken what they could and enslaved many of his people.

Sebastian shook away the memories of that terrible day. He hated, that after twelve hundred years, it still haunted him. Sebastian could see the anger festering within his brother too, and it had only grown over these long years. He feared that one day his brother could be lost to the rage forever.

Sebastian showered quickly, and dressed before setting out for the pub.

At present Sonya was in charge of *Marada's* pub. She seemed happy there. But, every once-in-awhile he would see in her eyes the same look that he sometimes caught in his own, or Cale's. A deep mourning for the loss of the home they would never know again.

Sebastian entered the pub—Sonya liked to call it *The Demon's Punchbowl*—and took a seat. Sonya spotted him and waved while attending Bertok, a trusted crewmember who has been with them for years. Bertok shifted to nod a silent greeting at Sebastian, then turned back to his drink.

“Hey!” Sonya smiled sashaying toward Sebastian. Her thin tail—a trait of female demons—swung side to side as she walked, making her look more seductive. Sebastian grinded his teeth at that, he suspected she did that intentionally. Amazingly the men on the ship were smart enough to stay away from her. They understood that he or Cale would kill anyone who dare hurt her. He also knew that Sonya resented their over protectiveness. Sebastian smiled as she approached.

“Hi Sunny,” he liked to call her that because she hated it. To his amusement she scowled.

“What can I do for *Bastard*?”

He smiled wider. “I’ll take some of that new stuff you got in.”

“Ah, The Raging Inferno, it’s pretty strong even for us demons.” Demons had a larger tolerance for alcohol than most others.

“Good, the stronger the better.”

Sonya poured him a generous glass and then poured a shot for herself. She lifted the tiny glass expectantly. It was a ritual that they’d brought with them from their home planet. Whenever an unfamiliar drink was imbibed, it was always done in the company of a friend or loved one. The practice arose following a string of serial murders through the use of poison mixed with foreign alcohols. Turned out an insane member of the demon community was going around killing off his friends. Imported alcohols had been used because a demon could easily detect poison through taste, but with previously unconsumed substances that talent was nullified. Now, the simple ritual was a sign of trust and friendship.

Sebastian raised his glass.

While Sebastian sipped his drink Sonya downed hers in one gulp, slamming her glass on the counter. “Good stuff,” she declared. Sebastian nodded his agreement. “So,” she continued. “We’re stuck on the ship for some time I hear.” Again Sebastian nodded. “Well, it’ll be good for business.” Perking up she poured herself another shot.

Even though Sonya was much more lenient with her pricing than the larger pubs in the space-cities, whenever they docked she always lost her clientele to the more lavish entertainment the cities provided.

Sonya had made a profitable business out of her pub, wisely saving for her own future, not that she was leaving her boys anytime soon. Rather than use the ship’s funds she used pub profits to purchase whatever supplies she required, leaving herself independent of her brothers. That seemed to be important to her.

She also insisted on paying rent for her space. Sebastian had refused but Sonya was persistent, giving him ten percent of her earnings each month. He saved everything she gave him, planning to give it all back to her one day—which, if he knew Sonya, would surely piss her off. Sebastian chuckled out loud at that. When Sonya gave him a questioning look, he just shook his head and went back to his drink.

“So what’s the load this time?” She asked.

“Don’t know, something very small. Too small for the pay if you ask me. But the package is sealed and the contract is void if we take even a peek.”

“Hey, sometimes the best things come in small packages. Just look at me.” She did her best I’m-just-a-cute-little-demon impression, which always made him laugh. For a female demon Sonya was on the small side, a meager five foot four. So was Sebastian for that matter though he towered over her with a height of six two.

“You’re right,” he said, ruffling her long, black-as-pitch hair. She bellowed out a curse in demonish, their native language, while swatting his hand away. Vainly, she rushed to fix the disheveled mess. Her violet eyes blazed with irritation, and a little amusement.

Sebastian continued to sip his drink reflectively, as Sonya went about her business, refilling glasses and seeing to anyone who entered.

He hoped the decision he had made to accept this commission was the right one. Sonya’s words repeated in his mind. Whether or not the package was large or small it was significant to someone. Significant to a lot of someone’s, it seemed. He couldn’t help but wonder why they would trust *him* with it?

Finishing the last of the raging inferno Sebastian waved his goodbye to Sonya. Calic would be in charge for the next few hours so he had some time to kill before he took command again. In the gym he worked out some of his pent up energy. A few hours later he took a dip in the pool, swimming laps for about an hour. Most days he hated his downtime, always felt he should be doing something. After the pool he felt relaxed, and headed to his quarters for some rest before it came time to relieve Cale.

Chapter 3

Nearly a full week had passed and all was calm.

Sebastian had been working his crew hard. Round-the-clock detail. Each day brought them closer to their goal.

No one had complained. Everyone seemed as eager as he to get this one over with. Maybe they sensed what he did. There was something different about this commission. It was taken more seriously by everyone. Even the most careless of the crew were noticeably working harder.

Sebastian was at his command center, checking the status of their progress. For the last week *Marada's* engines had been churning at nearly constant full speed. It wasn't fast enough. He had hoped to be further along than this.

Sighing out loud he settled into his chair, watching the vision of space at his front. It was stoic, calm, and never ending—deadly, if you weren't careful.

He imagined how different his life would be if he still lived on his home planet. If the war hadn't destroyed it, and if he'd never been betrayed by those closest to him. He would have found a woman, he supposed, made a family. He would have built them an adequate home on his ancestors land, and he would have strove every day to keep it up. Life would have been . . . boring.

As it was he loved his adventurous existence, leading his crew, and meeting all the strange races of the universe. Learning and mastering all the different languages and cultures. It gave him a purpose.

A faint groan jarred him from his thoughts, barely audible against the steady rumble of the ship, but distinct. Sebastian looked around. No one else seemed to have heard it.

Another moan, this one even quieter . . . anguished. His brows drew together. He had definitely heard something. Sniffing, there was something different in the air. Had been for a while but Sebastian hadn't thought much of it.

He stood, concentrating on the source, opening his ears to the smallest noise. All he heard was the hum of the ship. The sound had been very close. He thought it had come from behind, but the only thing back there was the bulkhead and a small maintenance compartment.

Approaching the wall he stood silent, a rasping sound came from the other side. He bent down to open the door to the small compartment and staggered back in shock as a pair of tiny bare feet came into view.

"Who's this?" He bellowed, his voice a mix of threat and confusion. His horns heated as his body reacted to the flood of demon rage.

The owner of the wee feet made no move.

Sebastian bent closer, cautiously placing his hand on a thin ankle—still no movement—

he began to pull until a fully feminine body emerged from the small space.

The first thing he noticed was how thin and frail she looked, as though she would break with a light squeeze. She was marked with dirt from head to toe. A dingy, piece of cloth clung to her like a second skin, barely covering her.

He moved his gaze to her face. Her skin was pale but flawless, pouty lips, full and a tempting shade of pink, blond curling locks draped over her bare shoulders. The female shivered.

“Who are you?” He ground out, finally pulling himself from his stupor. He realized he was holding her upper body in his arms. *When had he reached for her?*

At his booming voice her eyes flew open—if he wasn’t already on the ground he would have fallen to his knees—Sebastian was instantly lost. The ship fell away and there was only her. The blue of her eyes was indescribable, so light they unabashedly pulled him in. No color imaginable compared. Her eyes turned pleading, for what? He didn’t know, but at that moment he would have given it to her.

What was wrong with him?

Too soon the color dulled and her head lolled before she slipped into unconsciousness. Sebastian, alarmed more than he should have been, felt for a pulse.

Faint but still there.

The natural sounds of the ship slammed into him, as his surroundings came back into focus. Some of the crew had already gathered around, apparently repeating questions he hadn’t heard them ask. They looked at him expectantly, and at her with curiosity.

Lifting her off the ground Sebastian took note of her weightlessness.

“Back to your posts!” he ordered, and then carried her out of the room without another word. The crew must have been as shocked as he was, to find this tiny creature, because none of them moved at his command. He didn’t care, his only focus was getting her to the doctor—so he could find out how she was able to get onto his ship, not so he could see the vivid color of her eyes again.

Racing down the hall he hardly noticed people stopped to stare at the stranger in his arms. The elevator made him impatient, moving slower than he remembered. He should get someone to look at it. Finally he reached the deck housing sickbay. A few more passageways and he was there, the doors parted for him and he carefully laid her on one of the cots.

From a desk in the corner of the room, Dr. Oshwald looked up. He was a thin lengthy man from one of the short lived races.

It seemed to take the doctor a moment to comprehend the sudden disturbance before he rushed to Sebastian’s side surveying the situation. His jaw dropped.

“Where . . .? Who is . . .?” He studied her as Sebastian had, prickling his ire.

In a pointed voice Sebastian replied. “I don’t know who she is. I just found her hiding in a maintenance compartment. She looks on the brink of death.”

With a skillful determination, Dr. Oshwald went to work while Sebastian leaned against the wall, arms crossed, and watched. The doctor came from a race of healers, their unique gifts worked on most but not all. Sebastian had no knowledge of the mechanics behind the doctor’s invaluable gift. He’d asked him about it once and the doctor had told him that it was like looking inside the body with his minds eye. Oshwald could search out the problem and then fix it as needed. That’s what he was doing now, searching through the female’s body, all the while intermediately checking her vitals in stony silence. Sebastian made his impatience known, and the doctor finally began his healing touch, placing a hand near her

heart and the other at the crown of her head.

He stayed like that for a lengthy time. The whole while she didn't stir, didn't make a sound, the breathing movements of her chest were light and barely noticeable.

A sheen of sweat began to glisten on the doctor's forehead. Finally he removed his hands, and slumped in his chair with obvious exhaustion. With effort, he wiped his forehead before he spoke. "She will live." The words were heavy. "If she'd been brought to me any later, there would have been nothing I could have done for her." Again he paused to catch his breath. "Forgive me, she took much of my energy."

Sebastian waited patiently for him to continue at his own pace.

"I've healed her body but she has been without nourishment for a long time it seems."

"Are you saying she was in there starving to death?"

The doctor nodded.

"How long?"

"I couldn't say for sure. So many different races so many different dietary needs. We won't know until she wakes and can answer for herself."

Sebastian knew that many races could survive long periods without food. A demon could go three or more months without nourishment. You would have yourself an irritable demon, but he would be alive. If this creature was anything like a demon she could have been hiding on his ship for months.

As the doctor continued his business, fury began to rise in Sebastian. Before, irrationally, he had felt compassion for her. Now he had regained his senses and was livid at her trespass. How dare she think to steal herself onto his ship? Then a thought burned through him, settling deep in his gut. *What of the wards?*

* * *

Analia fell in and out of blurred consciousness, the muted gray maintenance compartment tightened around her. She had waited too long and had run out of time, her body was giving up. She knew she had only two choices ahead of her. Make her presence known within the tiny compartment, or resign herself to death. At least it was *her* choice to make and though she was dying, she basked in that thought. No matter what she chose, her last action would be that of a free woman.

Inside the cramped box she felt herself trying to leave her body. But she fought it. *Why?* Death would be so much easier. Suddenly there was a warmth around her ankle, and then strong arms around her torso. A voice called her from the darkness. She sensed the presence of others with her, but strangely she didn't feel threatened. *I must finally be dead.*

When she opened her eyes she saw the most beautiful male she could have ever envisioned. He had the blackest hair, and a contrasting golden shade of eyes that shimmered with some kind of emotion she was not familiar with. His features were exquisite, and he was so warm pressed against her freezing skin. She wanted to stay in his arms forever. He must be a being of the afterlife, come to guide her through death's doors. Her body still hurt with a lingering grasp of life, but that would soon be gone.

When the man began to fade, she begged with everything she had left for him to stay with her. But he was soon gone, a dark abyss taking his place.

* * *

Fuzzy, she awoke. Awareness came to her slowly as her mind brushed away the thick haze. She was no longer curled in a ball on a cold hard ground. Keeping her eyes closed, she accessed her other senses to evaluate her situation.

Her chest hurt and her limbs were heavy and unresponsive. She was lying on something that was soft but firm. A musky fragrance lingered nearby. Cautiously, she peaked from underneath her lashes.

The beautiful being that she had thought would guide her through the portals of death, loomed over her. No longer were his eyes warm, but an immense coldness covered his features. She realized then that she must be alive. Fear swept through her with renewed strength, and her heart sped. His eyes flickered toward her as he noticed she was awake.

In a deep too-calm-voice he asked, "Where did you come from?" It unnerved her because Darius would sound that way when the pain was about to start. She stifled a whimper, seeing this man as her newest threat. He could be just like Darius, especially if he found out about her gift. She wanted to curl up into a protective ball but her arms and legs felt like lead.

Growing visibly impatient the man waited for her answer.

She didn't know how she *should* answer. Would he take her back to The Hell Ship if she told him? She thought he might. He did business with Darius and would want to stay on good terms with him. Yes, he would definitely return her to hell.

Maybe she shouldn't answer at all. Pretend ignorance of his language. Pasting a look of confusion on her face she shook her head as if to say *I don't understand*. The small movement was painful, causing her eyes to go temporarily blind. She let her head drop to the soft pillow beneath it.

"Sebastian, she's still recovering. She could still be in shock." A voice offered from her right. Her gaze darted painfully to the other man, she recognized him as a doctor.

Sebastian's harsh gaze didn't waver. It became darker as he silently demanded an answer from her.

Analía decided to remain quiet.

"When did you sneak onto my ship?" He emphasized the word *my*. When she didn't answer he leaned his body over her, bringing his face close to hers, his hands landing on either side of her head, boxing her in. Two inches was the only thing that separated them. "You will answer me."

The warmth of his breath rolled over her and stroked her skin making her shiver. She stared, wide eyed. His golden glare bore into her, demanding obedience and surrender. Something protruding from his hair caught her attention. *Horns?* Her heart picked up a notch and her breath hitched. His features were godlike, perfectly shaped. She felt the need to touch his face but her arms still would not respond. Then for some reason she became hypnotized by his lips. As she inhaled his delicious scent her mouth watered for a taste. Ever so slowly she inched forward. His lips parted slightly, encouraging her. With a start she realized she was becoming . . . aroused?

"Can you speak miss?" Thankfully the doctor interjected, freeing her gaze and putting an end to . . . whatever it was she was about to do.

Sebastian pushed away from her with a growl.

They must have given her something, she rationalized, some kind of drug. Darius never hesitated to keep her drugged for long periods of time. Grinding her teeth she thought, this was turning out to be just another hell ship.

Then she realized why she couldn't move her arms or legs. She was strapped down. All thought left her and she cried out, struggling against the restraints. Anger soon turned in to panic as she fought uselessly to free herself.

The doctor placed his hands on her shoulders to hold her still. "It's okay. We only strapped you down so you wouldn't roll off the bed." His attempt to calm her didn't work. As she continued to flail she could feel the skin around her wrists start to break and bleed. Breathing was becoming labored as the panic grew like a virus inside her.

"Calm yourself woman." Amazingly she stilled at Sebastian's clipped words. His voice, still commanding, held a hint of concern. Or was she imagining that? Staring straight at the ceiling, drawing in deep breaths, she contemplated how that one phrase had diminished her distress. *The drugs?* She quickly surmised. The concern in his voice was only for his equipment, and not for her wellbeing. She registered the feel of hot tears streaming down her face. Sebastian continued, "The restraints will stay until I receive answers."

"How do you feel?" The doctor resumed his questioning, as if he hadn't stripped her will away with his drugs.

She locked her jaw and stubbornly refused to talk.

He then focused his attention on Sebastian and they began speaking as if she wasn't there. "I've healed her as best I can, though I suggest she get some sustenance in her, so her body can take over the healing process. I'm not sure what species she is. The shape of her ears should give us a clue."

Analia knew her ears were abnormal, pointed with a slightly rounded tip. She had never seen anyone with ears like hers. It was the one thing that made her feel more alone than being locked away in isolation.

"What of her blood sample? Have you found anything there?"

Blood! Analia again became alarmed. Would they be able to determine her ability though her blood? Would there be something different about it? How could there not be? Everything about her was different!

Sebastian keenly noticed her reaction to his words and gave her a crooked smile. She hated herself for thinking it sexy.

"So you *can* understand us." It wasn't a question. "Then you can answer my questions. Where did you come from? When?"

Analia nibbled her bottom lip, sickened at not being able to better control her emotions.

Impatient, Sebastian grated. "Tell me, damn you . . . What is your name?" She flinched. He took note of her reaction and calmed his tone, "Just give me a name."

A name wouldn't hurt. It wouldn't tell him anything about where she had come from. She hesitated for a moment and then opened her lips to speak, stopped however, at her dry cracked throat. She had to swallow several times before she could speak.

Noticing her discomfort the doctor lifted a glass of water to her mouth. She turned her head away, refusing to drink. The last thing she needed was more of their drugs in her system. Shrugging he put the glass back down.

"My name is Analia." Her voice was pained.

"Analia," Sebastian repeated in his deep rumble. She stifled another shiver at the sound of her name on his tongue. "Let the doctor give you some water Analia."

"No." She cleared her throat, trying to summon her own moisture.

"Why not? You must be thirsty."

“Because you’ve most likely drugged it. You’ve already given me something, I can tell, it’s making me react . . . differently.”

Sebastian glanced at the doctor. “Have you given her anything?”

The doctor shook his head. “Nothing out of the ordinary.”—pause—“But, again, I haven’t been able to determine her species. She may be having a reaction to one of our medicines.” Focusing on her again the doctor asked, “How are you feeling exactly?”

“I . . . just . . .” She couldn’t tell him that she seemed to desire his captain. “I just feel strange.” Her head fell back and she allowed her eyes to close as a wave of dizziness washed through her.

“You need to drink some water. It will make you feel better” Sebastian commanded again.

Again she refused with a simple shake of her head.

“We haven’t drugged it, I promise you.”

“I have no reason to take your word on it”

A tick started in his jaw. She got the feeling that he wasn’t used to being disobeyed. He reached for the glass and took a swift gulp. Analia watched the thick muscles of his throat work as he swallowed. “There, is that enough proof for you?”

“You could be immune,” She rasped.

Growling he shoved the glass at her. “Drink it or I’ll make you drink it.”

A hard dry gulp stuck in her throat. She tried to reach out for the glass but her bindings held her tight.

Frustrated she began struggling again. Sebastian placed his hand on her stomach, and she froze completely, shocked at its gentle weight.

Afraid to look at him—and risk becoming entranced again—she kept her gaze on the ceiling. Her stomach quivered under his hand. “Remove your hand” she managed, though her voice was less commanding than she meant for it to be.

“If you promise to stay calm and take a drink, I will free you from your restraints.”

Slowly she nodded, not trusting him in the least. He began at her feet, his hands lightly brushing her skin. Leaving trails of warmth followed by a lingering coolness. Where he touched her she felt a jolt of energy.

To her humiliation her body began to react again. What did it think? That he was going to take her here? On the table? In front of the doctor? The thought sobered her. She didn’t want anything to do with him. He was just another obstacle keeping her from her freedom. After he unclasped her wrists, she sat up and allowed her legs to drop over the edge of the bed. As if to say *a deals a deal*, he held out the glass and she took it. Bringing it to her lips she took a small sip. It tasted . . . okay. The small amount of liquid was quickly absorbed and she took another sip. Soon she was gulping back the cool drink with fervor, barely taking a moment to gasp for air. She hadn’t realized how badly she was in need of it.

“Good girl,” Sebastian said when she set down the empty glass.

Unexpectedly he scooped her up in his arms. She’d been so taken by surprise at the sudden action that she’d actually wrapped her arms around his neck for support. When she realized what she was doing she weakly pushed away from him. She wasn’t long in his grasp, as he had only crossed to the other side of the room, and set her down on a thin cot within a small alcove—which became like a small room when a solid beam of energy flashed between them.

A force field? It was clear with a slight haze, masking everything outside of it in an

auburn hue.

She rolled her eyes. *From one prison to another!*

“There. You’re free of your restraints.”

She made a rough noise in her throat. “You call this free?”

“It’s as free as you’re allowed on my ship. You’ve committed a serious crime by smuggle yourself onto my ship. It requires serious punishment. I’m willing to be lenient, though. If you tell me where you came from I promise to take you back there unharmed.”

“I’d rather die.” She supplied.

He raised an eyebrow at that, and waited a moment before speaking again. “You’re in luck then. The punishment for your crime *is* death.” He scanned for a reaction. When he didn’t receive one he continued. “If you don’t tell me where you came from then your only other option is to be released into space. Actually, you’d be releasing yourself into space. In my culture it would be seen as an honorable death.” He crossed his arms in expectation.

Analia considered his words carefully. He was offering her death at her own hand. She’d considered suicide before—many, many times before. But, as closely guarded as she was, she had never been given ample opportunity. Now it was being offered to her on a silver platter. Thinking over her life, she could only call up memories of suffering, and sorrow. There wasn’t a single moment that brought her joy. No memory she invoked sparked a hint of happiness to make her want to cling to this existence. Could she really push the button that would end her completely?

Yes.

Shoulders slumping ever so slightly. *At least I had tried.* Her greatest, and sadly, soul achievement was her escape from The Hell Ship. If she were dead Darius could truly never hurt her again. The time she had spent in the small maintenance room had changed her completely. Even though she was technically still trapped, it was a small taste of what true freedom could be. It had been her choice, her decision and no one else that brought her here, now. She had felt the power of freedom and knew she could never go back. The moment she set one foot back on the hell ship would be the moment her spirit broke completely, reducing her to a mere shell of herself.

And here she was, locked up at the amusement of yet another arrogant captain. If she couldn’t be *physically* free, then his offer was the only way to end her suffering. With her decision resolved she met Sebastian’s gaze, “I accept your offer.”

“Good. First tell me the moment you came to be on my ship.”

“No. I accept your other offer.” She almost smiled when his jaw dropped.

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