



ELLORA'S CAVE  
*Quickies*

Dominique Adair  
**Blood Law**  
Xantra Chronicles, Book 1

BLOOD LAW: XANTHRA CHRONICLES, BOOK 1  
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XANTHRA CHRONICLES, BOOK 1**

**By Dominique Adair**

## **Chapter One**

There was a dead woman piloting his ship, only she didn't know it yet.

Admiral Zane el Ranuth shook his head to clear it of the residual effects of Clariform drops. How dare this woman drug him then steal his ship. Didn't she know who he was?

*Well, you did let her on board...*

Zane scowled at the intrusive, inner voice. When he'd granted her permission to board his ship, he'd assumed his twin had sent her as a going away present. The woman had been dressed in the scanty red and gold trimmed robes of a Lyrian love-partner. With her pale blonde hair, large green eyes and a body created for sin, she'd slipped past his defenses with a sexy smile and impressive cleavage.

Women were never to be trusted.

Rage burned hot as he pulled on the restraint cuffs that held him tight to the solid steel wall. There was no way he'd be able to break their hold, as it had been too long since he'd last fed. The timeline for his diplomatic mission had been seriously compressed thanks to the increasing tensions between the Aranians and the Mengalors. His job was to prevent all out warfare between the two peoples and he'd been pushing himself to be ready on time and consequently had neglected to slake his thirst for nutrition and sex.

As a venerated Lorai warrior, he'd been trained to ignore all forms of discomfort while in pursuit of a goal. The vampires recruited for the Lorai were some of the most feared warriors in the galaxy. A humorless smile curved his

mouth. To look at him now, bound and helpless as a child, one would never guess he was a member of their exalted ranks.

Rejecting that ego-crunching thought, he closed his eyes and concentrated on his body. He had a slight stinging sensation on his throat where she'd sedated him with the injection dart concealed in her hand. His shoulders were sore from hanging from the wall for who knew how long, but other than that, he was in fighting form. He opened his eyes.

Most of his clothing lay in a pile on the other side of the narrow hall. His gun belt was on top and he scowled when he saw the empty holsters. Even his com-link had been removed from its clip. She'd stripped him down to the regulation loincloth, but why? He curled bare toes against the cool steel grate beneath his feet.

As a vampire, Zane didn't need many weapons. His teeth and superior strength were enough to quell most species, especially humans. The fact he was a vampire was enough to repulse some while others acknowledged his reputation as a much-decorated warrior, and that was sufficient to keep even the most curious at bay. He fixed his gaze on the closed door that separated him from his kidnapper.

What would drive a mere woman to face his inevitable wrath?

\* \* \* \* \*

Ilsa closed the navigational control panel. She'd re-routed the command center to bypass the security controls in order to guarantee the ship would follow its course no matter what her captive tried. She rubbed the back of her hand across her forehead. It had been a more difficult task than she'd anticipated. His ship contained a number of non-traditional modifications she hadn't expected. Though she was several hours behind schedule she'd completed the job and now

his voice and palm prints were worthless, as the computer would recognize none but hers. Only a nuclear blast could deter this craft from its course.

She tossed the screwdriver into her tool kit. She had only one more task to fulfill before she could sit back for the duration of the flight.

She had to seduce her victim.

Ilsa shoved off her magnification goggles and tossed them onto the console. Seduce was probably an inadequate term for what she must accomplish. Since the lives of her clan depended upon her becoming impregnated by the future King of the Xanthra, it didn't matter if he wanted sex or not as she moved forward with her plan. In reality, her actions would be tantamount to rape.

She winced. Crown Prince Loren el Ranuth, the next in line for the Xanthra throne, was well known for his diplomatic expertise, level head and handsome physique. However, out of the public eye, his sexual escapades were legend. It was rumored that he'd take two and three women into his bed and satisfy them all. In light of his unrestrained sexual appetites, surely he wouldn't object to having sex with her. But he couldn't know that her ultimate goal was impregnation and the union of the Xanthra with her clan.

She rubbed her hands over her nervous stomach. An alliance, one in accordance with the Laws of Blood as handed down by the Unified Council, would ensure the future of her people. Ilsa was the last member of the Royal house of the Shanart and it was her task to reunite them. A royal union, one that no one could put asunder, was her duty to her people. Thanks to the Mengalor power struggle, her tiny kingdom was on the verge of collapse and it was left to her to save them.

The Mengalors had been their enemy for many years. They coveted the only tangible asset her people controlled, the Aloein mines. Aloein was the central ingredient in modern fuels and it was found in abundance in her lands. For

hundreds of years, her people had harvested the mineral and sold it to various nations throughout the galaxy.

Her people were simple farmers and miners, neither warriors nor diplomats, and when her father had refused the Mengalors an offer of exclusive alliance, they'd withdrawn all friendly overtures and had turned to guerilla warfare. In the last few months, the attacks had become increasingly hard to ignore and lives were being lost in greater numbers. Her father had been one of their latest victims, killed while boarding a diplomatic transport to address the Unified Council. As his heir, the future of the Shanart rested in her hands and it was up to her to rectify the situation and restore her homeland, no matter the personal cost.

After taking a few seconds to calm her wild heartbeat, Ilsa's palms were slick when she opened the steel door of the navigation deck and she scrambled down the three steps and into a short hallway. Her captive was pinned to the wall, thanks to a pair of heavy-duty restraint cuffs. As her foot touched the steel grate of the floor, his head turned.

The vid-archive didn't do the Crown Prince justice. He was gorgeous. His hair was long, hanging several inches past broad shoulders, and it was so black, it had bluish tints in the harsh lighting. His sharp eyes were pale blue and seemed to penetrate her robes to the woman beneath. His nose was straight and proud while his mouth was full-lipped and sensual, unusually so for a man. His limbs were muscular and his arms flexed beneath her gaze. His broad chest was lightly sprinkled with dark hair between flat nipples. A thin line of dark hair dissected his stomach to vanish beneath his amply filled loincloth.

Very amply filled.

Her stomach clenched. She forced her gaze to meet his. "Prince Loren, I'm terribly sorry to put you through all of this. I hope you aren't terribly uncomfortable?"

For a second, he looked confused and she wondered if he spoke universal second-dialect English. Then his eyes narrowed.

“Indeed.” His fists clenched and released. “Just who the devil are you?”

She frowned. His voice was different than what she’d memorized from the vid-library. It was deeper, more gravelly and definitely sexier. Was this a possible side effect of the sedative?

“My name is Ilsa and you’ll be accompanying me on a short journey.”

“Our destination?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

His brow rose. “You’ve stolen an Imperial Starship and kidnapped a member of the Xanthra royal family so you could take me on a day cruise?” His sarcasm was thick enough to cut with a knife.

“I suppose to you it looks like that.” She unhooked her utility belt and dropped it near his clothing. He might be restrained, but she didn’t want to get close with a weapon on her person. “I can assure you that, once you’ve fulfilled your duty, you will be released.”

“What kind of duty?”

“Sex. With me.” Her hand slid to the tie on her skimpy robe and she had to bite her tongue to keep from laughing at the shock on his face. She released the tie and allowed it to slide to the floor.

Ilsa knew she was beautiful, she’d been told this all of her life, but the look in his eyes when she dropped the robe was flattering nonetheless. Very few men could resist a Shanart female in full estrus. They were coveted mates, so much so that, many years ago, they were hidden when visitors arrived for fear they’d be kidnapped. She knew her skin glowed with good health, her breasts were pert and her nipples were hard as diamond points. Her vagina was already puffy and moist, though he wouldn’t know that, and she ached with the need to mate.



Since she was still liro, a virgin, she'd been taught that her first time would probably be less than pleasurable and she was eager to have done with it. During this trip she'd make sure they mated as much as possible to ensure her impregnation, but now she had to get through this episode without making a fool of herself.

"You went through all this to get laid?" His tone dripped with scorn. "Babe, with tits like yours, all you had to do was visit Seventh Heaven and you'd have men lining up to fuck you before you'd even removed your boots."

She flinched at his sharp tone. Her nerves were tight enough and she now wished she'd gagged him. She pasted a smile on her face and hoped it looked sexy, then shook her head and approached him, careful to keep her movements slow and careless. "I don't want to get laid by just anyone." She placed her hand on his chest and the warmth of his skin radiated up her arm. "It's you I want, Prince Loren."

His nostrils flared and his head jerked, connecting with the wall with a tinny thud. He'd no doubt caught her mating scent. He licked his lips. "Why me?"

"Your sexual prowess is legendary." She slid her hand around the back of his neck as she pressed her body against his. His skin was so warm and she was chilled, thanks to the over-processed air. Already she could feel his growing erection against her lower belly and a rush of victory streaked down her spine. "With your reputation, what woman wouldn't want to lay with you?"

With her other hand she reached for the tie on his loincloth. The muscles in his hip jumped beneath her touch as she released his thong.

"A woman can get just as much from a pleasure toy or you can hire a 'droid to fuck you until you come a dozen times." He shrugged. "If you can afford it, you can hire a human male, so you don't need me, Princess."

The use of her former title threw her and, for a second, she thought he'd recognized her. But his mocking expression told her that he was using the term in a derogatory fashion. It was clear he didn't know who she was.

"I realize 'droid sex is all the rage," she slid her hand between his legs and gave a gentle stroke, "but I need a real cock, not a plastic one." Unable to resist, she kissed him where his pulse beat at the base of his throat. He jerked as if she'd stung him and she smiled. He wasn't as unmoved as he was pretending to be. She released him then slid to her knees, careful to keep her body in contact with his as much as possible.

With his legs spread and his ankles restrained with metal cuffs, his cock and testicles hung heavy between his thighs. She wrapped her hands around his thick shaft before running her thumbs across the broad head. As if by magic, his cock lengthened and thickened with each stroke. A drop of fluid appeared at the tip and he made a sound when she dipped her head and licked the tiny opening. Her tongue swirled across the broad head and she reveled in the unfamiliar taste of him. Teasing, she looked up to see his eyes were closed and hunger filled his handsome face.

With one hand she continued stroking his cock, while she removed a slim plastic packet she'd tucked into her thick bangle bracelet with the other. Holding it with her teeth, she tore open the packet and a thick, oily substance oozed out. Catching it with her fingers, she spread her thighs and applied the oil to her outer vagina as she'd been taught.

When she was ready, she wrapped her slippery hand around his cock and lubricated him as well. When his hardened flesh was shiny with oil and pulsing with arousal, she rose and his eyes opened. His pupils were huge and, in their pale blue depths, she saw desire and something else she wasn't sure she wanted to identify. She had the feeling this man saw a great deal too much when he looked at her. Suddenly nervous, she released him and turned her back to him.

“Where are you going?”

“Nowhere. I thought it might work better like this.” She spread her legs, then reached between them to grasp his cock. She guided it toward her slick opening.

“You could let me go, you know.” He sounded pained.

“I could.” She flinched as his broad head touched her vagina and she licked her lips. No man had ever been this close, this intimate. She’d been taught to revere her pristine state, and now she was going to give it away to a total stranger who didn’t even know her last name. “But where’s the fun in that?” Her voice was shaky.

To her surprise, he chuckled. “Indeed.”

She gritted her teeth as his cock parted her flesh and he slid in a few centimeters. She winced at the increased pressure and wondered if he was too big for her. She pressed back and he slid in a little further. Who knew it would be so hard to get him inside her? Maybe she didn’t use enough lubricant?

“You’re tight, Princess,” he said. “Are you sure you’ve done this before?”

Half afraid she’d done something wrong, she closed her eyes and let her weight carry her down his length. His cock split her with a wave of pain and a slight tearing sensation, then her breath left her lungs in a rush. With her buttocks snug against him, she braced her hands on shaky knees and closed her eyes. The Prince was inside her; half of her mission was complete.

“Are you done?” His tone was dry.

She rotated her hips. “The question is...” She moved forward, then back. “Are you?”

He moaned and she felt the slide of his cock against her slick flesh. Relieved that the pain was nearly gone, she began moving as she’d been taught. The sensation of his cock impaling her was odd, though not unpleasant. She felt stretched, filled as never before. As she moved against him, his hips began to

move and his cock plunged in and out in accompaniment to her movements. She realized she was receiving no clitoral stimulation so achieving an orgasm was out of the question. Then again, considering the circumstances and the fact she was practically raping him, achieving satisfaction would only have compounded her guilt.

Behind her, his body tensed and his breathing grew harsh. He was close now. She pressed against him, determined to give no room to pull out of her at the critical time. Rotating her hips, she reached between her legs and cupped his testicles.

“Ye Goddess, woman...”

She gave a gentle squeeze and his hips jerked wildly out of control. His sac tightened and he gave a hoarse shout as he came, his hot seed filling her hungry womb.

After a few moments, the tempest passed and Ilsa released him. She braced her hands on her knees and allowed her head to drop forward. She’d fulfilled her duty to her people, so why did she feel so empty?

## **Chapter Two**

If he wasn't mistaken, his kidnapper had been a virgin.

Zane watched the simulated star field on the ceiling overhead. He lay in one of the crew bunks, one that was barely wide enough to accommodate his broad shoulders and, to top it all off, he was forced to lay on his back since his left wrist was held fast to the steel wall with a restraint cuff. He was still naked and he'd kicked the sheet off within minutes of being forced, at blaster point no less, to lie down.

He'd fully expected Ilsa to release him after their odd sexual encounter. Instead she'd pointed her pocket-sized fission blaster at his crotch and moved him into the crew quarters where she'd restrained him and left him alone with a tray of sustenance within arm's reach.

He scowled at the tray filled with synthesized nutri-bars and a power shake.

He needed food but not human food. What would Ilsa do when she found his stockpile of frozen blood products? Would she guess he wasn't Loren? If she did, what would happen then?

With his cuffed hand he made a fist then wrapped his free hand around it. Using his full body weight, he pulled against the cuff but it remained stubbornly attached to the wall. He needed sustenance and, until then, he'd remain pinned like some sort of lab specimen. He grunted with displeasure. The moment she got within reach, he'd feed then free himself.

As if on cue, she stepped through the narrow door of the crew compartment. She was dressed in the red robe again and the light behind her made the material translucent, outlining her womanly curves. Her scent curled around him and he

inhaled deeply. It was unlike any other woman's he'd encountered. Her fragrance was rich and feminine, yet there was something dark and compelling as well. Kidnapper or not, he wanted her. His cock stirred.

"You haven't eaten," she said.

"I'm not hungry." He yanked at the cuff. "It's hard to enjoy a meal when I'm held captive like some animal."

Her smile was cool as she walked toward him. "I'm really sorry but it's necessary."

"Haven't I fulfilled your duty?"

She shook her head. "We have twenty-three star hours to travel yet, so I thought maybe we could...have sex again."

She wanted sex. Now?

It had only been a few hours since their hallway sexcapade and he knew she'd not achieved orgasm. Indeed, it seemed she'd received no pleasure at all from their brief encounter, so why was she back for more?

He forced a lazy smile as he jiggled his pinned arm. "Since I'm a little incapacitated, you'll have to do the honors."

Her smile instantly brightened. "Of course."

She shed her robe and her unearthly beauty struck him like a blow to the gut. There was something regal about the way she held herself, her head high and her slim shoulders back. Her pale blonde hair was arranged into a long braid, accenting the elegant structure of her face. Her breasts were full and her nipples erect, their dusky rose a sharp contrast to her pale skin. Her waist was slim and her hips flared the way a woman's should. The patch of pale hair between her thighs was curly and he wanted to part that female flesh and feast. Their first coupling had left him feeling cheated, as he'd been unable to feel her other than the grip of her pussy around his cock. This time he had one hand unbound and

he could tease those beautiful breasts and stroke her wetness as his cock sank into her —

“Do I need to pin your other arm?” she asked.

“Are you asking if I’ll hurt you?” He glanced down at his rising cock. “Not unless I fuck you to death.”

She glanced at his straining flesh then away, her cheeks pink. “Even if you overpower me, I’ve re-routed the navigational computer to override any commands you attempt to give it. The ship will only respond to me so there’s no use in fighting for control.”

*Like hell there was...*

“Indeed?” His eyes closed to slits as she climbed onto the bunk and straddled his thighs. His hand landed on her bent knee and he stroked her silky skin. Little did she know he had a few tricks built into the ship she’d never be able to decipher. “So you’re a resourceful kidnapper, then?”

“I try.” She wrapped her hand around his cock.

“Not like that.”

She released him. “What’s wrong?”

“You want the full experience, right? That is why you’ve kidnapped me, isn’t it, Princess?”

Indecision washed over her face to be replaced with a brilliant smile. “Of course, Prince. Why else would I have gone to such great lengths to get you alone?”

*Why, indeed...*

“Come here.”

She scooted closer several inches.

His brow rose. “Why so timid, Princess? You’re a woman of the world.” He urged her forward. “A woman of experience who knows what she wants.” She

settled her beautiful body over him; his cock nestled between her damp nether lips. "Now, cover me."

Her eyes gleamed as she lay over him, a sexy, fragrant female blanket. "Is this what you mean?"

"I'd like a kiss."

Her eyes widened and she reared. Before she could move away, he caught the back of her head with his free hand. She made a sound of protest and tried to push free but he forced her down and their lips met. Her mouth was soft and closed so he took his time. His tongue snaked out for a taste, stroking and teasing until she opened to him.

Inside she was liquid silk, warm and sweet, and their tongues tangled, sliding and seducing each other. She shuddered as he sucked her tongue and her hands clutched his shoulders as he teased her unschooled mouth.

He'd only intended to bring her closer so he could feed on her flesh and, instead, they fed on each other's desire. He wasn't prepared for the surge of heat between them as their tongues mated. He changed angles and went deeper, losing himself in the lush sweetness of her mouth. His heart pounded and his blood thrummed in his veins when she made a soft sound of acquiescence.

He slid his hand from the back of her head down the smooth line of her back. She arched like a cat, pressing into him as she mimicked his actions and sucked his tongue. He followed the curve of her hip then gave her buttock a gentle squeeze. Her scent was stronger, much more so than earlier.

Her head came up and her expression was a mixture of wonder and shock. "Oh my," she breathed.

He squeezed her buttock again. "Oh my, yourself," he said. "Now raise up so I can taste those nipples of yours."

A soft flush moved across her cheeks and she averted her gaze as she brought her breasts within range of his mouth. He paused, waiting until she met



his gaze before he stuck out his tongue to tease her erect pearl. She quivered at his faint touch and her breathing deepened. With tight licks, he moved around her nipple, tasting and teasing her areola. She moaned in protest when his tongue brushed her erect flesh and he resisted the temptation to take her into his mouth.

He subjected her other nipple to the same torment until she did protest and pressed her nipple into his mouth. He smothered a smile against her pale flesh and suckled her. Her fingers tangled in his hair, holding him a willing captive against her breast. He rolled her hardened flesh against the roof of his mouth and she made excited little noises. After minutes of the exquisite torture, he switched to her other breast and repeated the process before releasing her to admire his handiwork.

Her nipples were rosy and damp from his mouth and they stood out in sharp relief against her pale skin. Her dark eyes were on him and she licked her lips as her hips nudged his.

“Impatient?” he teased.

Ilsa gave him a soft smile and something tightened in his chest. He pushed the feeling away as he reached between them. His hand slid over her soft belly and into her nest of curls. Her flesh was damp and this time he was sure it was her arousal, not the oil she’d used earlier. He zeroed in on the seat of her desire.

Her eyes widened when his thumb brushed her clitoris and she jumped. She pushed up, bringing her lower body into closer contact with his hand.

“Oh!” she said.

Her hips rose and fell in answer to his touch. Her head tipped back and her eyes drifted closed. She raised her hand to her mouth and bit a finger as if to stifle another cry. Her other hand locked around his wrist as if to keep him in place, though he had no intention of leaving her, not yet anyway.

Her teeth released their grip on her finger and her hand traveled over her throat, then down her chest. Slowly, as if underwater, she cupped her breast. Her thumb teased her nipple with a slow stroke as she continued to ride his hand.

Silently, Zane cursed his cuffed arm. He should be the one playing with her nipples, though he couldn't deny how sexy it was to watch her play with herself. He changed the angle of his touch and she moaned in response. Her fingers twisted her nipple and her movements grew more erratic. Her thighs tightened and her nails dug into his wrist as a startled cry broke from her lips. Her body jerked and arched then she came against his hand.

After a few moments, her eyes opened and their gazes met. Her eyes were liquid soft and a little bit dazed.

"Take me inside you," he commanded.

Ilsa moved until his cock sprang free between them. She rose over him, her body ripe with arousal, and guided him to her damp opening. She rubbed his thick head against her damp flesh before taking him inside.

Her pussy was slick from their play and he wasted no time. As she lowered, he thrust upward. Caught off balance, she clutched at his shoulders. Her body gripped him tighter than a glove and he grit his teeth against the delicious friction on his cock. His body slipped into the familiar rhythm and the room sounded with the slap of flesh against flesh and the grunts and sighs of their spiraling arousal.

He wanted it to last but he knew it wouldn't, not like this. Not with her lush body moving over him and her breathy cries ringing in his ears. Her beautiful breasts jiggled with each movement. Her head tipped back and her eyes closed, that dreamy smile curving her sweet mouth. She was every man's hottest fantasy.

A rush of sensation streaked up the back of his legs and he knew he was going to come. He'd already emptied his seed into her once, and he had no

intention of making that mistake again. When she rose, he reached between them to withdraw from her tight body.

Startled by the intrusion, her eyes flew open and she saw what he was about to do.

“No!”

She pushed his hand away and took him deep, her thighs tightening around his hips.

“Ilsa, I don’t want to—”

“I want you inside me.” Her hands clamped down on his hips and there was no escape.

She flexed around him and, almost against his will, his hips bucked, pounding into her once, twice...until he came. Her body arched and she shouted, her body shuddering with her release. Their cries mingled then hushed, leaving behind the sound of ragged breathing.

Zane opened his eyes. Ilsa lay over him, her face tucked into his neck. Why in the devil had this woman wanted him to come inside her? Surely she realized she could become pregnant—

*Damn...*

That was what she’d wanted. She’d kidnapped someone she believed to be the Crown Prince of the Xanthra and she wanted to become pregnant with Loren’s child. He frowned. But why? What would she gain from it? An illegitimate child? Both he and Loren had always been very careful, not wanting a child from the wrong side of the sheets to make an attempt for the throne of one of the most powerful nations in the galaxy.

Did she seek money? Fame?

He needed answers, but first he had to gain his freedom.

Before she could move, he caught her shoulder. Her head came up and there was a sleepy, playful smile on her lips. "Again?" she purred. "Don't you need some time to rest?"

He nuzzled her throat and she tipped her head to allow better access. His teeth extended before he put his mouth to her flesh. The moment his sharp canines pierced her skin, she jolted into full awareness. Her nails dug into his skin and her legs thrashed as she began to scream.

## **Chapter Three**

Zane barely resisted the urge to slam his fist into the navigation console. Ilsa had destroyed his ship. No, wait, his new ship. He'd purchased the Merry Chase from Loren not more than a week before and it had been in tiptop shape. Now it was a disaster.

He stared at the jumble of wires she'd used to bypass the standard circuits. She'd done a damned fine job of it too and he felt an unwanted rush of pride at her accomplishment. It was obvious she knew what she was doing when she'd bypassed the complicated security system. He and his brother had designed and updated it just prior to the sale. He knew their changes hadn't been documented, so how had she known what to do in order to avoid the collapsible circuits?

"Fuck."

He slammed shut the access door and reached for the navigational command board. Punching up the star charts, he learned that their destination was the planet Verison in the Gamma quadrant. He brought up a detailed map of the planet in question. Why were they headed to such an insignificant planet? Verison was the home of the Shanart, a peaceful clan of farmers and miners. The only notable features on the planet were the Aloein mines and a modern UC outpost. As traders to numerous nations under the Council, a new outpost had been negotiated to handle the influx of import and export traffic.

Their destination made no sense to him. If she wished to hold him for ransom, she'd picked a bad location. Verison had no means of protecting itself. The Shanart had a royal family but no armies or satellite protection grids.

Unfortunately for Zane, she'd destroyed his com-link and disabled the communications system on his ship. That left him with only one option. He opened the console panel, then swore under his breath when he saw the slim, lime-green box installed next to the voice module. Judging from the size of the box, she'd wired enough C-16 explosives in the console to blow his ship to space dust. He allowed the panel to slide shut.

He was well and truly trapped.

His fists clenched. There was no worse feeling than helplessness. After his kidnapping and subsequent imprisonment by the Selan government during the steel wars of thirty-two, he'd learned to never take freedom for granted. It was the main reason he'd opted to become a Lorai despite considerable opposition from his family. It was an unheard of move, a member of the royal family becoming a vampire warrior. But by doing so, he'd virtually guaranteed invulnerability...until now.

His gaze fixed on the steel door as if he could see through it to the room beyond and the woman who'd caused all his problems.

He rose from the captain's chair and stomped to the door. After he slammed his clenched fist against the access panel, the door opened with a slight whisking sound. He jumped down the three steps to the floor grate and stalked to his cabin, his boot heels echoing off the steel walls of the hall. The door was open as he'd left it and his gaze narrowed on his captive.

Ilsa lay in the middle of his wide bed, her arms and legs restrained by the same cuffs she'd used on him. She'd been a busy woman in his absence. Her wrists were red and irritated from an effort to free herself.

"You're wasting your time." His tone was clipped.

"We'll see about that," she grunted as she concentrated on freeing her left hand.

“Why did you do this?” He stopped near the bed, towering over her, hoping to intimidate her with his proximity. The fact he was fully clothed and his side arms were in place should be enough to throw her off. He was very aware she was nude under the thin gray sheets and her thrashing had uncovered one delicious breast.

She ignored him and continued struggling with the cuffs.

Irritated, he grabbed the sheet and whisked it off her body.

“Hey,” she protested. “Give that back.”

He held up the sheet, dangling it from one fist. “What are you going to do? Fight me for it?” His gaze moved over her luscious curves and she tried in vain to cover up as much as she could though it was a fruitless exercise. With her arms and legs spread, she could do no more than twist against the bed, her hips moving only a few inches from side to side.

“What do you hope to gain from humiliating me?” she snapped.

“Looking at you is humiliating?” he asked. “You were quite willing to share your body a few hours ago when I was cuffed. You could hardly wait to fuck me then.” He flung the sheet to the side.

Her cheeks were red with exertion and possible embarrassment. She looked away.

“So what’s the difference now?” He sat on the bed, his hip nudging hers even though she tried to move away. “Our positions might have changed, but our desire hasn’t.” He covered her breast with his hand, noting that her flesh was sweaty. “Our bodies know each other.” He teased her nipple into full awareness. “We continue to want each other.” He gave her a gentle tug, wrenching a whimper from her though she kept her face averted. “We can bring each other satisfaction the likes of which—”

“What do you want from me?” Her voice was low.

“Answers.”

“What good will the answers do? As I’m sure you have already found out, I’ve rigged the ship to take us to Verison and nothing you do can alter our course. If you attempt to remove what I’ve installed, the ship will blow up.” She turned her face to him and he caught a spark of triumph in her eyes. “You’re trapped.”

His eyes narrowed. She’d done no more than confirm what he already knew. “What are your plans once we reach Verison?” He released her breast.

“You’ll take part in a ceremony then make a holo-transmission to your family,” she said. “After that, we’ll let you go.”

“Who is ‘we’?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“What ceremony? What transmission?”

She looked away.

He ground his teeth in frustration. Ilsa was possibly the most beautiful, most exasperating female he’d ever had the misfortune of meeting. If they weren’t in such an adversarial relationship, he might have pursued her for a sexual partner, as they were certainly compatible in that area. Since they had approximately twelve star hours until they reached their destination, he might as well enjoy the situation she’d left him in.

His gaze roved her body before coming to rest on the soft curls at the apex of her thighs. With her legs spread and her ankles bound, she was completely at his mercy. He’d be a liar if he didn’t admit the thought of having sex with her restrained didn’t excite him.

“Are you still wet for me?”



Without waiting for an answer, he sank his fingers into her warm, damp flesh. Her body arched and she made a sound of protest as she strained against the cuffs.

"No," she moaned.

Her pussy was tight around his fingers and the gush of liquid heat told him she was turned on by her forced captivity.

"Liar," he said. He stroked her damp flesh, wrenching a moan from her when he centered his touch on her clitoris.

"Bastard," she panted.

He chuckled. "Isn't this how you fucked me in the hallway? Bound? Helpless?" He withdrew his fingers then rose to strip off his clothing. He flung his boots across the room where they hit the floor with a noisy thud.

"You've never been helpless a day in your life."

"Oh, you're wrong about that." He withdrew a small remote from the breast pocket of his flight suit and set it on the bedside table. "I've been at your mercy from the moment you set foot onboard my ship, until now." His gaze roamed her lovely face and he gave her a cruel smile. "From here on out I have the upper hand."

"You won't win. I won't let you." Her eyes widened and she renewed her struggle against the cuffs.

"You don't know much about me, do you, Princess?" He stepped out of the suit and tossed it over the foot of the bed. "I always win." He climbed onto the bed between her thighs. "And I take what I want. You started this game and I'm going to finish it. We have twelve star hours until we reach Verison and we're going to spend that time fucking each other blind, Princess." Zane plunged his fingers into her vagina and her hips arched automatically to take him deeper. She may have been a virgin a few hours ago but she'd learned very quickly. "Isn't this what you wanted?"

Before she could answer, he lowered his mouth to her hot sweetness. She screamed and thrashed as he lapped at her flesh and her rich flavor rolled across his tongue. He placed his arm across her abdomen to hold her in place, then began his assault. Using his lips, teeth and tongue, he closed his eyes and poured himself into his task as he stroked and suckled her needy flesh.

Soon he lost track of time as again and again he heard and felt her reach release. He quit counting after the first few times as her body had become a vessel for their mutual sexual gratification and he was intent upon partaking of her bounty.

She was sobbing when he brought her off for the final time. He raised his head, his mouth damp with her juices. He rose to his knees and looked upon what he'd created. Her skin was pink and damp with perspiration and her breathing was ragged. Her eyes were closed and her lashes damp.

He quashed the feeling of regret at the sight of her tears. She wasn't hurt unless one counted too much sexual release.

"Ilsa, look at me."

Her lashes fluttered and it took a moment for her to focus her gaze on him. He saw a mixture of confusion and desire in their depths.

"I always win, Ilsa. Say it."

She shook her head, the movement faint.

"Say it, woman."

"You always win." Her lips barely moved.

"I've beaten you."

"No," she whispered and her eyes flooded with tears. "You haven't."

"Yes, I have."

He covered her and took possession of her mouth. She opened beneath him and their tongues mated in a kiss that was pure, raw carnality. He explored the

terrain of her mouth, ferreting out her secrets. Their tongues tangled and her mellow flavor seduced him into slowing the kiss.

He nipped her lower lip before pulling away. She was a beautiful mess. Her cheeks were damp with tears and most of her hair had escaped her braid to create a tangled halo. Her eyes were luminous and her lips plump from his kisses. He'd done this. He'd created this beautiful sexual creature beneath him and no man had ever had her before him and none would have her after him.

A feeling of possession swamped him and he pushed her thighs farther apart with his knees and plunged into her. Her wet, welcoming heat surrounded his cock as he slid deep inside her. She twisted beneath him and her breathy entreaty urged him on. Putting aside all attempts at finesse, he hammered into her with mounting mind-numbing pleasure. The push and pull of her body as it grasped him turned his brain to mush.

Their sensual interlude seemed to go on forever with Ilsa reaching release several more times, each one bringing him closer to orgasm. Sweat gathered on his brow as he increased his breakneck pace, his hips moving of their own volition. He held her shoulders with a bruising grip as his testicles tightened and with a thunderous cry, he came deep within her. Wild aftershocks of release reverberated through his nervous system and he collapsed across her, gasping for air and thanking the Goddess for the most amazing sexual interlude of his life.

After a few minutes, he managed to raise his head. Still semi-hard and buried deep within her, he reached for the remote to the restraint cuffs on the bedside table. He clicked the master button and they released their grip on her limbs.

Ilsa moaned, but didn't move. He tossed the remote aside before catching her wrist to inspect the damage she'd inflicted upon herself. Shallow red lacerations marred her skin and they'd bruise within a few hours. When he could convince

himself to move, he had ointment in the med bay that would help her injuries. He kissed the inside of her wrist where her pulse beat against his mouth.

She sighed and wrapped her free arm around his shoulders. Together they rolled to their sides, their bodies still tightly entwined. He placed her hand palm down over his heart.

Then he closed his eyes, not sure if he'd won or lost that round.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sound of running water roused Ilsa from her deep sleep. She forced her eyes open only to shut them again. Why were the lights so bright? She wanted to pull the pillow over her head and return to sleep but knew she had to get up. They'd be arriving on Verison soon and she didn't want to greet her Counselors naked and thoroughly debauched.

She opened her eyes and stifled a moan. Her body was stiff from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. She blinked several times, allowing her eyes to adjust to the intrusive overhead lights. When she decided it was safe to move, she rolled to her side, ignoring the overused muscles in her thighs and back. Out of the corner of her eye a movement caught her attention.

In the corner bathing stall, the Prince was taking a shower. It was backlit and, from her perspective, she could see every inch of his body through the glass door. Tall and muscular, he was more than enough male to ignite the fantasies of every woman he met. Water ran down his muscular back, tight buttocks and long, lean thighs. In that moment she knew she'd never forget how he looked...a vision of proud, alpha male.

He turned and she saw the jut of his cock. He was still semi-hard and her throat went dry. He certainly knew what to do with that magnificent cock of his. They'd spent the past eleven hours in bed and very little of that time had been spent sleeping. Her cheeks warmed.

Nothing in her sexual training could have prepared her for the raw sensuality of Prince Loren in full rut. He was a man of magnificent appetites and he'd coaxed her into sexual positions she'd never seen in the vid-files. He'd taken her on back, her side, face down in the pillows and from behind. Their lovemaking had been fun and quirky, deeply sensual and rough and ready all at the same time. And she hadn't objected, not once. Every time he'd reached for her, she'd willingly opened for him, taking him deep into her body, and in return he'd branded his essence upon her soul.

Suddenly warm, Ilsa rolled to her back. Prince Loren wasn't quite what she'd expected. The vid-files and intelligence reports had conveyed he was well educated, intelligent and the consummate politician. This man, however, would wreak havoc in many diplomatic situations with his arrogance and mastery. He surely had some powerful advisors working with him before each public appearance.

The image of him leaning over her, commanding her to acquiesce came to mind and she pushed it away. He was a hard man, strong and commanding, though not cruel. It was easy to see why his men respected him. But he was a vampire, an immortal. She frowned. How could she have missed that? She'd heard his younger brother was a Lorai, but no mention had been made of Loren making this same controversial decision. She'd seen vid-files of him at official functions and it certainly appeared to her that he'd consumed the food in front of him. Among his people, vampires weren't considered common, though there were quite a number in comparison to her own people. How could this fact have been missed in the newsreels?

"Are you awake?" His deep voice intruded upon her musing.

She rolled to her side. He stood in the open shower compartment; water droplets gleamed on his dark skin. His muscles rippled as he exited the shower and headed for the drying booth.

“You might want to think about dressing.” He punched a few buttons on the panel of the booth. “We’ll be arriving within the hour.”

The air came on to blow dry his body. He raised his arms and turned this way and that, and Ilsa could barely tear her gaze away from him. Unable to stop, her gaze devoured him. In the unforgiving bright light of the overheads, every muscle, ripple and mound of muscle was clearly defined, creating a display of masculine beauty that made it hard to breathe. Her gaze followed the furrow of his spine down to the mouthwatering dimples just above his buttocks.

Suddenly he turned and a soft male chuckle had her gaze darting to his face. His eyes were on her and her cheeks warmed. He’d caught her staring at him like some lovesick fuzz-pup.

She swallowed hard and reached for the sheet to cover her nudity. Busying herself with tidying the pillows, she heard the blower tube turn off and he walked past her. The scent of his body, mixed with the soap he’d used on his hair, made her stomach flip-flop with pleasure.

He walked to another panel and pushed a button on the wall. A door slid open to reveal a neat row of black flight suits with the Xanthra insignia on the shoulder. He pulled a pair of black, long-legged shorts from a drawer before snagging one of the flight suits from the hangers. With quick, economical movements he dressed without once looking at or speaking to her. When he was done, he left the room.

Feeling chilled, Ilsa sat up slowly. The formal Crown Prince of the Xanthra had replaced her miraculous lover of only an hour ago. Her heart ached at the thought of what was to come. Before she’d met him, she’d only thought of him as a means to an end, a man with more money and power than she could ever hope to attain on her own. This man held the resources to save her people in the palm of his big hand.

Everything was different now. She could see the man who stood behind the crown. The commander who would, only through treachery and force, save her people from their fate at the hands of the Mengalors.

She frowned. Maybe there was some other way to save them. Maybe there was something else –

*No, there wasn't.*

Her shoulders slumped. Her Counselors had spent countless hours wrestling over ways to save her clan. They'd needed a plan that would risk the least amount of lives and save the thousands who depended upon her. This plan, their only viable option, put only two lives at risk, hers and Loren's.

There was no turning back.

With leaden limbs she rose from the bed and a slight dizziness assailed her. Her breath left in a rush and she sat down hard on the bed. She'd done it. She was pregnant.

Ilsa placed a shaky hand over her abdomen. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the flicker of life she felt beneath her hand. She smiled. It felt like a small bug tickling her palm. Her smile faded and her chin dropped to her chest as sadness enveloped her.

Now there was another life at risk. Her child.

## **Chapter Four**

The moment the ship docked and the landing bay was pressurized, a swarm of warriors in mismatched uniforms bearing an insignia Zane didn't recognize surrounded the ship. Judging from their faces, many were old, too old to be warriors, while others looked to be just out of the schoolroom. What kind of army was this?

Ilsa stood beside him on the Nav Deck. She'd clothed herself in a long-sleeved white dress with silver trim and a royal blue velvet cape that swept the floor. Her hair was tamed into a long braid woven with narrow silver ribbons while a slim, silver band perched on her brow like a crown.

"Who are they?" he asked.

"This is what remains of the royal guard of the house of Shanart." Her tone was remote and her face expressionless. "These are my people...what's left of them anyway."

He heard the sorrow in her voice and wondered at it. What had happened to the Shanart people? While they had a royal family, they held no position in the UC nor did they offer council in any matters of importance.

The Shanart were always a bit of a mystery to the other nations in the Council. Preferring to remain neutral, they sold the minerals their planet possessed but they'd made it clear they neither needed nor wanted any outside interference. His father had proclaimed King Falkes, the ruler of the Shanart, to be a brilliant scholar yet naive in the matters of politics outside of his own world. Loren believed their King's political shortcomings would someday mean the downfall of the Shanart people.



Eager to meet the King and find out what had happened on Verison, he touched her arm. "Come, Princess, let us greet our welcoming party."

She gave him a short nod then fell into step behind him. When they reached the egress chamber, he held his hand to the palm reader to trigger the outer hatch.

Nothing happened.

He waved his hand over the scanner again and the stubborn light remained red. "Cursed thing—"

Ilsa stepped around him and held her palm before the scanner. The light turned green and the door opened.

His jaw was tight when he took her arm. "You'll restore my ship to its former state, Princess?" His words were forced between his teeth.

"Of course." She gave him a faint smile.

The metal walkway extended and together they headed down the ramp. Zane was acutely aware of the numerous blasters pointed at his head. Even though he was now armed, with his ship in its current condition, it would do no good to try and make his escape. Even if he won, which was unlikely given the numbers against him, he couldn't escape the planet with a ship that regarded its commander as an interloper.

When they reached the end of the ramp, three men in ornate robes approached. The tallest one glanced at Zane then away, effectively dismissing him.

"Queen Ilsa, I trust all is well," he said.

*Queen?*

"Indeed, Counselor Rachmin." She inclined her head toward Zane. "Counselors, may I present—"

“Your mission was accomplished?” The short, round man with a bald head interrupted. The front of his robe was stained with what looked like his lunch and he grabbed Ilsa’s arm before placing his hand on her abdomen.

She stiffened and tried to pull away but the man refused to let go as he continued to grope her lower belly.

“Unhand her.” Zane released her other arm and stepped forward.

“Counselor Shadras, you forget yourself.” The third man, a slim, nondescript man with pale brown hair and even features, moved to separate Ilsa from her tormentor. “You cannot manhandle your Queen.” His dark gaze swung toward Zane and he gave a sketchy bow. “Welcome to Verison. My name is Counselor Boock. Who might you be, sir?”

Ilsa made a sound of impatience. “This is Crown Prince Loren el Ranuth.”

The three men glanced at him, at each other, then to Ilsa.

“This isn’t him,” the tall one said.

“This is his brother, Prince Zane,” Counselor Shadras said. “Is the Crown Prince still on board?” He leaned to the side as if to catch someone lurking behind them.

“What do you mean this isn’t him?” she asked. “The physical description is correct although his hair is longer. Our vid-files must have been a few months older than we’d thought—”

“Prince Zane is Prince Loren’s twin,” Counselor Rachmin interrupted. “The younger of the brothers.”

“But this is Loren’s ship, the Merry Chase—” Ilsa turned to gape at him and Zane couldn’t help but feel amused by her confusion. The presumptuous chit had never bothered to ask him who he was. She’d just assumed he was Loren.

"I bought the ship from my brother last week." He gave her a small smile, enjoying the myriad of emotions that crossed her face. "You never stopped long enough to ask my name, *Queen Ilsa*."

Her eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

"Prince Zane el Ranuth, third in line for the throne of Xanthra and an Admiral in the Legion of the Lorai." He gave her an abbreviated bow, then straightened. "Loren is my older brother." He crossed his arms over his chest.

Her blue eyes were stormy with anger. "And you never said a word—"

"Like I said, you never asked." He shook his head. "Assumptions are a dangerous thing, Princess—"

"You knew I thought you were Loren and yet you never said a word." Her face went pale and her look of betrayal was heart wrenching. Dark circles under her eyes were in sharp contrast to her pale skin.

"Deception goes both ways—"

Her skin flushed and her lip curled. With her fingers bent into claws, she flew at him. "You bastard!"

Her nails connected with his cheek before he could stop her and he gritted his teeth as her nails raked his skin. He caught her wrists and twisted, pulling her tight to his chest with his arms wrapped securely around her torso to restrict her movement.

"No, I never said anything, Princess." He whispered in her ear so no one else could hear him. "I never had the chance. Remember? You were too busy crawling into bed with me to ask questions."

Ilsa straightened her back until she was so taut he thought her spine might snap. The rage faded from her face and a cool remote mask took its place. She raised her chin and focused her gaze somewhere over the heads of her Counselors. "Unhand me."

“Are you going to try and claw my eyes out again?” he asked.

“You’re not worth my time,” she spat.

He chuckled. “Not unless I’m between your thighs.” He nipped her earlobe and felt her shudder. “With my face buried in your pussy...”

She yanked hard and he released her, not wanting to hurt her any more than necessary. Her cheeks were red with humiliation and, for a moment, he felt sorry for her. Though she’d kidnapped him and stolen his ship, he’d knowingly deceived and publicly humiliated her. His mother hadn’t raised him to treat women badly. There was no doubt in his mind that she’d box his ears when she heard of this escapade.

Counselor Rachmin cleared his throat and Zane caught the speculative looks on the faces of the three men. The tall man turned to the short dumpy one. “Is she breeding?”

“Yes.” The short man’s tone was sour. “She’s been impregnated by the wrong man.”

Zane felt as if his entire body had been dashed with ice water and his jaw clenched. He shot a glance at Ilsa’s remote expression.

“This is a disaster,” Counselor Rachmin exclaimed. “Her stupidity has ruined us all.”

Zane stepped in front of Ilsa. “Why don’t we go somewhere private and talk about what you’d hoped to accomplish with this foolish plan? Once I understand what’s at stake, I might be able to assist you.”

“I think you’ve done quite enough.” Counselor Shadrax shot a contemptuous look at Ilsa.

Counselor Boock stepped forward and elbowed the short man out of the way. “Come, Prince Zane, let us indulge in refreshments and discussion.” He

gave Zane a broad smile. "Your reputation in the galaxy is legendary and together we might be able to rectify this dreadful situation."

Without a backward glance at Ilsa, Zane followed the flowing brown robes of the Counselor. Finally, he'd get straight answers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ilsa had never felt more unwanted in her life.

For the first time ever, her advisors were ignoring virtually everything she said. Granted, she'd barely been able to squeeze in a word as Zane was throwing questions at them left and right. Every time she opened her mouth, she'd received a cool response with as few syllables as possible.

On one hand, she couldn't blame her Counselors for adopting a dismissive attitude with her. If she'd sent one of her Corporals on an important mission where thousands of lives were at stake and they'd screwed it up as she had, she'd strip him of his rank faster than he could repeat his name and military number. After that she'd ship him to the Vineria, the farthest outreaches of their lands where he'd be charged with tending herds of fuzzy Caseis, the goat-like creatures that provided wool for the Shanart weavers.

But that didn't change the fact that she was the Queen of the Shanart, their leader. They should at least listen to her.

"So you'll contact your brother about sending forces to help us regain control of our lands and stop these invasions?" Counselor Shadras asked.

Zane nodded. "I'll contact Loren immediately and we can have a legion here in two days, three at the most."

"We would be most grateful—" Counselor Rachmin spoke.

"What I don't understand is why didn't you contact us before now?" Zane asked. "We could have sent assistance months ago."

"We did," Ilsa broke in. "We petitioned the Unified Council more than a star year ago and received no response. We sent multiple holo-messages then resorted to messengers...men who never returned from their missions."

He shook his head. "We never received any communications from your planet."

"Then what happened to my messengers?" Agitated, Ilsa rose from her chair and began to pace. "Who could have intercepted them? We sent at least a dozen messages to the Council and several to your brother in particular. I don't understand how this could have happened."

"Ilsa." Zane rose and stepped in front of her. "I'll look into it personally." She shivered as his pale blue gaze moved over her face. "You can trust me. I'll get to the bottom of this."

She swallowed hard, suddenly exhausted. Ever since the first Mengalor attack months ago, she'd been working long days and had been terrified half out of her mind more often than not. For a moment, she wanted nothing more than to hand the responsibility of the welfare of her people to someone else for a change. Let them worry while she took a long nap. Zane's broad shoulders would fit the bill perfectly.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Their gazes met and a slow tingle ignited low in her belly. Heaven help her, she still wanted this man.

"We still have another issue to settle, Prince Zane," Counselor Rachmin interrupted.

Ilsa jumped and her cheeks burned. What had she been thinking? Zane's expression was unfazed and he caught her hand and raised it to his lips. A shiver ran down her arm when he kissed her knuckles.

"What might that be, Counselor?" His gaze didn't leave hers.

"The matter of our pregnant Queen," he said. "You'll have to marry her. It's the proper thing to do."

Stunned, she pulled away from Zane and shook her head. "There's no need to marry now. Prince Zane has agreed to help us and he's an honorable man. He'll do as he's promised—"

"You're still pregnant with my child," Zane said.

"But you don't want to marry me," she said, desperate to stop the looming disaster. "You don't even like me."

"It doesn't matter what I want, does it, Princess? You took this decision away from me the moment you drugged me and stole my ship." His expression turned hard. "You're pregnant with my child and I'll not allow him to grow up with the stain of illegitimacy on his soul."

"What if it's a her?" she shot back.

He leaned toward her and his tone was silky. "Then I hope she doesn't have your temperament—"

"Not to mention the fact that your child," Counselor Boock interrupted, "is the future ruler of the Shanart, Queen Ilsa. In order to assure a smooth ascension to the throne, you must marry Prince Zane. Without that binding contract, one of your cousins is sure to challenge the succession. The Laws of Blood as laid down by the UC are very clear on this matter."

"You must do it for the sake of the royal family," Shadras spoke. "Your family has ruled for over a thousand years and it is your duty to protect that legacy for future generations."

Inside Ilsa wanted to start screaming and never stop. All of her life she'd been schooled to do her duty and never shirk her sacred responsibility. She and her family had sacrificed everything, even their lives for their clan. It struck her as being unreasonable that she was being asked to sacrifice yet again when it wasn't strictly necessary. The Prince had promised to help them...

Her head swam and her knees wobbled and, for the first time in her life, she thought she might just faint.

Zane took her arm and she could hear him speaking, though she had no idea what he was saying. Before she knew it, he'd ushered her into a chair, then unceremoniously shoved her head down between her knees. After a few minutes, the shaking had passed and she began to feel better. She raised her head.

"Are you okay?" Zane leaned against the Council table, his arms crossed over his broad chest. While his posture was relaxed, his expression was anything but.

Ilsa tipped her head back against the chair. "What do you want from me, Zane? We're virtually strangers and I've wronged you terribly. What would be an acceptable arrangement to you?"

"We'll marry. I've informed your advisors and they're procuring a cleric to perform the ceremony. Once that's complete, I'll contact Loren and we'll move to deal with the threat from the Mengalors."

Her eyes filled with tears and she looked away. She didn't deserve this...didn't deserve his kindness. She'd treated him badly from the beginning and he was riding to her rescue.

She sniffed. "I don't know what to say."

"How about yes?" His tone was amused. "I won't lie to you, Princess. We're strangers to each other in all but the most elemental sense. There'll be plenty of bumps in the road ahead, but we'll work our way through them."

Ilsa gave him a watery smile, then scrubbed her cheeks with her palms to dry them. She was lucky she'd kidnapped a man with a soul, as a cruel man could have taken advantage of her in this untenable situation.

She forced a bright smile that she didn't quite feel. "I guess the answer is yes, then."





## **Chapter Five**

Something wasn't quite right.

Zane watched the Counselors as they assembled for the wedding. The three men stood in a row on the right side of the room. Counselors Shadras and Boock were smiling and chatting as the room filled with members of the royal household. Counselor Rachmin looked as if he'd just swallowed something unpleasant. His gaze was contemptuous as it moved over the crowd.

Next to him was an armed guard and the Counselor leaned toward him and made some sort of hand gesture that was partially concealed by the voluminous sleeve of his robe. The guard caught the movement and gave the Counselor a quick nod then exited the room as if his heels were on fire.

The back of Zane's neck prickled.

He cursed his weapon-less state. For proprieties' sake, both Shadras and Boock had insisted his sidearms be removed for the duration of the ceremony. Propriety be damned, his warrior's instincts had never led him wrong and they were telling him something bad was brewing. He wouldn't relax until he was fully armed and had dispatched the message to his brother.

Ilsa stood by his side, relaxed for the first time since they'd met. She was smiling as she chatted to a dark-skinned Algehi woman dressed in red silk from head to toe.

When Zane turned, the stranger offered him a formal curtsy. "I wish you happiness in your marriage." Her voice was low and sensual and she gave him a bright smile when he bowed in return.

"I thank you, Mistress, for your good wishes." He took Ilsa's hand and rubbed his thumb over her fingers. Her skin was cold.

A short man dressed in the gray and black robes of a cleric rushed into the room, his cheeks ruddy from his haste. "Excuse me, Your Highness," he panted. "I was administering to the ailing this morning and it took a while for the messenger to find me."

Ilsa gave the man a soft smile. "It's fine, Father Bregard, no harm is done. The sick must come first."

He swiped his sleeve over his forehead and fairly beamed at his Queen. "Well said, Your Highness." He bowed. "If you'll permit me, we can begin immediately."

Ilsa glanced at Zane and he nodded.

"Please, whenever you're ready, Father," she said.

Father Bregard opened an ancient, black leather book then motioned for the spectators to quiet down. As he chanted the familiar words of the marital ceremony, Zane forced his attention away from Counselor Rachmin and onto the little cleric. Within a few minutes and with little input from either he or Ilsa, they were bound, married in the eyes of the Shanart people, Universal god and, most importantly, the Unified Council.

Shouts sounded as he touched his lips to hers. He felt her smile against his mouth and slid his arm around her waist to give her a quick, one-armed hug. A sense of rightness descended upon him.

*She's mine.*

Before he could fully grasp that thought, the crowd surged forward to congratulate them. In the next few chaotic moments, Zane was thumped on the back so many times he thought he'd be bruised come the morrow.

He accepted a glass of Dryian wine and out of the corner of his eye he saw the guard that Counselor Rachmin had spoken to enter the room. He made a beeline for the Counselor's side and whispered something in his ear. Counselor Rachmin nodded and, for the first time, he smiled and Zane's skin crawled. The guard handed the Counselor a small wrapped bundle, which he quickly secreted within his robes.

It was time to move.

He caught Ilsa's hand as Father Bregard tried to pull her to the side. He dipped his head and whispered in her ear, "We need to send that message to my brother."

She smiled at the Father and gently removed his hand from her arm. "Of course. We can go through here."

She led him to an arched doorway. The guard standing in front of the door opened it and saluted as they passed.

"The communications center is down here —"

"Queen Ilsa!" They turned to see Counselor Shadras bustling toward them. "I've just been informed that the communications system is down. They're having some sort of intermittent electrical problem. It could be a storm in the upper atmosphere." He shrugged. "They said it might take the rest of the day and evening to fix it."

Over his shoulder, Zane caught sight of Counselor Rachmin hovering in the background. The Counselor's eyes widened when he realized Zane watched him and he quickly masked his surprise. With a false smile pasted on his homely face, he gave Zane a small nod before he moved out of view.

Something definitely wasn't right.

\* \* \* \* \*

Given the hasty circumstances, Ilsa was impressed with the wedding banquet that had been prepared. She and Zane sat at the head table that was piled high with dirty dishes. Zane had supped on only a single glass of freeze-dried, reconstituted blood while she'd gorged herself silly on roasted fowl, fresh greens and roasted baby potatoes.

She ran her hand over her abdomen and a tiny thrill snaked down her spine. They were so close to ensuring the safety of her clan. This had to work...it just had to. Before her, the members of her household celebrated the marriage of their Queen and for the first time in almost a year they were optimistic about the future, thanks to her new husband.

Husband.

Her stomach gave a nervous twist. During the time they'd been planning this mission, she'd never given ample thought to actually being married at the end of it. Married...her.

She looked down at the simple gold band on her finger. Now all they had to do was contact his brother and he'd send the legion, and her people and lands would be safe. Hopefully the Mengalors would realize her people now had skilled protection and back off without starting a war. If they persisted in their attacks and a war began, many more lives would be lost.

She shuddered and shot a glance at her handsome husband. He was silent beside her and his dark gaze never stopped scanning the crowds as if he were looking for something or someone. She saw nothing out of the ordinary. Her people were feasting, her advisors were at their accustomed table and Counselor Rachmin looked as sour as ever while the other two were as drunk as most everyone else in the room. All was as it should be with the exception of the communications glitch. That was unusual but Counselor Shadras had assured her that it was being worked on. She wouldn't rest easy until that communication was sent—

"Ilsa."

Zane's lips brushed her cheek and she turned toward him.

"Can we send a communication from my ship?"

She frowned and started to pull back, but he caught her chin with his hand.

"Whatever do you —"

"We're being watched."

She leaned closer and her hand came up to cover his. To anyone in the room, it would appear as if their King and Queen were sharing a private word.

"Explain yourself," she hissed.

"Not here. Can we send a message from my ship? Is the communications system working?"

She nodded. "It will be once I fix it."

"How long will it take?"

"About an hour, maybe less."

"I think we need less."

Her pulse jumped and he released her. Their gazes met and she saw he was as serious as she'd ever seen him.

"Let's go then." She started to rise and he stopped her with his hand.

"Kiss me," he hissed then rose to his feet.

She stood and her breath caught as he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her into his arms. His mouth descended and she lost herself in his masterful touch. The crowd roared as he possessed her mouth, their tongues tangled, and she leaned into him, her knees suddenly weak.

Without warning, he broke the kiss and swept her up into his arms. As her feet left the floor, she heard several loud, bawdy comments being shouted from the men and she blushed. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he carried her from the room and into the corridor.

The hall was deserted and Zane whispered, "Which way?"

"Left, then right."

He swung her to her feet and took her hand, and together they headed down the corridor.

"You realize they'll think we're ravishing each other." She laughed.

"That was my plan. I figure I bought us a few hours at least."

She struggled to keep up with his long-legged stride. "What's going on, Zane?"

He slowed to match his gait to hers. "How much do you know about Counselor Rachmin?"

She shrugged. "He was one of my father's trusted advisors and he's been around since before I was born." They turned into the corridor that led to the landing bays. "Why?"

"I believe he's behind some of what's going on with the Mengalors. I think he's the one who's been hampering your communications to the UC. There might also be someone on the inside of the UC who's giving him a hand. Call it a feeling, if you will."

"I find that hard to believe. I mean," she placed her palm over the palm scanner and the door to the bay opened, "he's been around forever. What would he have to gain from hurting the people he advises?"

"You tell me." As they entered, Zane pulled one of his sidearms from its holster. "Just keep your eyes open as we send the communication. Once the legion has arrived, we'll see what he's up to."

\* \* \* \* \*

It took almost two hours to restore the communications system in the Merry Chase. The moment Ilsa pronounced the system up and running, Zane took the

helm. Seating himself in the Captain's chair, he punched in the coded IS address of his brother's personal communicator before turning on the mini-cam to record a holo-message. When the green light of the mini-cam flickered on, he spoke.

"It's me, brother. I don't have time to explain, but I need a legion of warriors dispatched to the planet Verison in the Gamma quadrant. There's an overthrow being planned by the Mengalors against the Shanart and they're in dire need of assistance. Also, I think there's someone filtering your messages. Queen Ilsa has assured me she's sent numerous missives and messengers to ask your support yet none of these messages have gotten through." He glanced at Ilsa. "Is there anything you wish to add?"

She gave him a faint smile, her eyes were awash with tears. "Thanks?"

Zane laughed and pulled her into his lap and in front of the tiny camera. "Brother, this is Ilsa, my wife. Say hello, Ilsa."

"Hello, Ilsa," she parroted with a big watery grin.

"Watch your back, brother." Zane hit the STOP button and the camera light switched off.

"It's really done, isn't it?" she whispered.

"As soon as we send it." Zane pointed to the SEND button. "Do you want to do the honors?"

"I'd be honored." She reached for the button when a voice sounded behind them.

"I wouldn't do that, Queen Ilsa. Someone has a blaster pointed at your pretty head."

Zane cursed under his breath and swiveled the chair around. Counselor Rachmin stood in the doorway to the Nav Deck. Beside him was the guard from the wedding. His fission blaster was trained on Ilsa.

"Drop your weapons, Zane," Counselor Rachmin commanded.



“What nonsense is this?” Ilsa was outraged and her slim body quivered in his grasp. “I am your Queen and I demand you put that weapon away immediately before someone gets hurt.”

“That’s the point, you stupid creature,” the Counselor spat. “I’m going to blow your empty little head off your shoulders.”

“Why you—”

“Can you get up, darling? My leg’s going to sleep.” Zane kept his tone deliberately mild. “I think you’ve gained weight with your pregnancy.” She hadn’t but he needed to free his hands and right now they were full with his indignant wife.

“Oh no, I think she’s fine where she is.” Counselor Rachmin gave them a cold smile. “This way it will only take one shot to kill you both.”

“How efficient,” Zane drawled. “However, I can’t drop my weapons when I can’t even reach them.”

The Counselor offered a cool smile. “You have a point. You both may rise, though I’d be cautious about how far you move. I’d hate to kill you before it’s time.”

Zane kept a firm grip on Ilsa and together they rose. “That would be a shame.” He withdrew his sidearms and held them high where both men could see them before laying them on the floor at his feet.

“Kick them over here,” the guard ordered.

Zane kicked them, but not far enough for the guard to easily reach them.

*Let him walk a bit.*

He turned his attention to the Counselor. “Maybe, before you kill us, you could tell us why you’re about to commit treason and kill your Queen and a royal member of the UC?”

His lip curled. "There are numerous reasons." His beady little eyes moved over Ilsa and the distaste was evident. "The first being the fact that she's pregnant with your mutt. The very idea of the Queen of the Shanart carrying the child of a blood drinker is repulsive." He shuddered. "It cannot be allowed. The child must die and, along with it, the mother. Our beloved Queen." He placed his hand over his heart.

"You're mad." Ilsa spread her hands over her abdomen where Zane's child – their child – was safe and warm.

"It gets better." He rubbed his hands together gleefully. "The tragic truth, as I have crafted it of course, is that she'll be killed by her new husband because he decided he cannot remain in this situation knowing she deceived him. You see, I've fashioned documents that allude to the fact that Queen Ilsa has sold her people to the Mengalors for the riches of the Aloein mines." He pointed a bony finger at her. "It will look as if you've sacrificed your own people for money, blood money."

"You bastard," Ilsa lunged and Zane grabbed her by the waist to keep her at his side. "You sold your people for money, not I. They know me, they love me and would never believe your despicable lies."

"They will if it's in writing, by your own hand." His expression was smug.

"And what do you get out of this, Counselor?" Zane asked. He was careful to keep Ilsa's body shielding his right arm until he could withdraw his pocket blaster from the custom holster in the small of his back.

"I, of course, being the head of the royal Advisors will step forward to placate the clan. Naturally they will turn to me for guidance in their time of turmoil." He held his hands in a prayerful posture.

"Why are you doing this? What did we ever do to you to cause this betrayal?" Ilsa's voice shook with barely contained rage. "You were one of my father's most trusted advisors and –"

“You should’ve been born a boy,” Rachmin spat. “We would never have ended up in this mess if you’d been born a man rather than a weak, helpless female who didn’t have enough sense to not fall for a vampire. Then, after you were born, your mother became barren and no more children were possible. Your father, a soft-hearted man, wouldn’t set her aside for a fertile wife. Instead he remained bound to her until the day she died and we were stuck with you,” he sneered.

“He loved my mother—”

“They both were fools,” he spat. “My father advised yours to set Queen Marg aside or to breed upon another woman but he refused. He said you were enough and he’d never humiliate the mother of his child.”

“My father was a good man.”

He waved her words away. “He was a weakling who cared only about his books until it was almost too late. The Mengalors offered riches beyond imagination and he turned them down. My family has been advising the royal family of the Shanart for a thousand years. And what did we receive in return? Nothing. We were never elevated above our current station—”

“You received the gratitude of the king, my father,” Ilsa shouted. “Public service has nothing to do with status; it’s about serving those who depend on you—”

“I’ve heard enough.” The Counselor nodded toward the guard. “Kill them both.”

The guard pointed his weapon at Ilsa and Zane gave her a powerful shove to the side. She screamed as she flew across the room and he raised his blaster. Pulling the trigger, a sharp hum sounded and a blast of white light appeared. The guard flew back into the wall with a bone-crushing thud. A hole the size of his fist smoldered in the center of his chest. His heart had been dissolved.

“No—” Counselor Rachmin whipped open his robes to reveal a small lime-green box strapped to his waist. “If you shoot, I’ll destroy us all—” His hand wavered over a tiny red button on the top of the box. “Drop the weapon.”

Before Zane could respond, another hum was heard and a Krylierian laser blade flew past him. The glowing blade hit the Counselor in the throat, neatly severing his head from his neck. His head hit the floor with a hollow thud while his body wavered for a moment before it too crumpled.

Zane shoved his blaster into its holster and retrieved the blade before it could do any more damage. Pushing a switch in the hilt, the blade vanished and he pocketed the weapon. He turned to see Ilsa staring in repulsed fascination at the Counselor’s head in a spreading puddle of blood.

He stepped over the grotesque sight and approached her, pausing only long enough to hit the SEND button on the missive to his brother. “You’ve got a wicked throw.” He grabbed her under the arms and pulled her to her feet. “I need to sign you up for our holo-ball league. You could be our star pitcher.”

She gave a shaky laugh. “I’ll pass for now as I’m pretty sure I’m going to be sick.”

Taking one look at her pale face and haunted eyes, he scooped her up and ran, just managing to reach the facilities in the nick of time. He crouched beside her as she emptied her stomach and his gut rumbled in sympathy. When she was done, he retrieved a bathing cloth, which he’d dampened with cool water.

“Feeling better now?” With gentle strokes, he rubbed the cloth over her sweaty face.

“Yes, much.” She closed her eyes and leaned against him, her body limp. “I can’t believe my own Counselor betrayed me.”

“Unfortunately, it’s common in the UC.” He tossed the cloth into the sink. “Every quarter I hear about someone plotting to take out someone else for personal gain.”

“So much for being unified.” Her smile was weak. “How can you live like that?”

“We don’t. My family has worked hard for unity among the Xanthra and I think we’ve succeeded.”

“I’m so tired,” she whispered.

He kissed her on the forehead. “Let’s get out of here. I’ll notify the guards and your remaining advisors while you rest.” He placed his hand over her abdomen. “You need to think of our child.”

She raised her face from his shoulder and, even pale and washed out, her beauty struck him anew.

“Are you disappointed?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Never. The question is, are you?” He brushed damp tendrils of her hair away from her face. Her crown was askew and her hair was tangled but she’d never looked more beautiful to him. “You thought you’d kidnapped Loren. Instead you ended up with his younger brother, a vampire at that.”

“Lucky for me my eyesight was off.” Her smile was wan. “No, I kidnapped the right man.”

Zane tipped back his head and laughed, his heart lighter than it had ever been.

## **Chapter Six**

Ilsa slid her mouth over Zane's beautiful cock, taking him deep into her throat. She loved doing this to him, bringing him to heel as it were. She swirled her tongue about his broad head before shooting a glance at his face. His eyes were closed and he had a look of dreamy intensity. She ran her teeth along the underside of his cock and his lips pursed.

Liked that, did he?

She was about to repeat the movement when a resounding crash thundered through their sanctuary and the door to her outer chamber blew inward. Before she could react, Zane sat up and grabbed her arm and pulled her to him, keeping her close to his side.

"Hold, little one." He had an amused smile on his face and he nodded to the door leading to the outer chamber. "I'd like you to meet my siblings."

"Oh my..." Ilsa dove for the sheet to wrap around her nude body.

A tall man stood in the entry and he looked exactly like her husband with the exception of his hair. It was a short military cut. Beside him stood a slim, pixyish creature with short, dark hair and familiar blue eyes. Behind them stood several armed guards bearing the royal Xanthra crest on their sleeves and helmets.

"What the devil is going on here?" Prince Loren scowled at his brother. "I get some sort of half-assed message from you, then nothing. I thought you were dead."

"As you can see," Zane looked down at his erect cock, "I'm very much alive."

The young woman laughed and Loren rolled his eyes then ordered his guards from the room.

“You might want to leave, Zoe,” Prince Loren said to the young woman. “You’ll see more than you bargained for.”

The beautiful Zoe rolled her eyes and flounced off, pocketing her blaster as she did so. The crunch of retreating footsteps over broken glass told them they were alone.

“Does Mom know you’re running around the galaxy with ZoZo?” Zane asked.

Prince Loren shook his head. “She’s been cast out of her third college this quarter and I picked her up on the way here.” He slid his blaster into its holster. “What is going on?”

Ilsa shivered. Loren was indeed handsome and, now that the brothers were together, the slight differences between them were noticeable. While they looked almost physically identical, Loren was lean while Zane was broad. The younger brother had been raised a warrior while Loren was the obvious diplomat.

“You’re early, brother. I was about to fuck my wife,” Zane said. He pulled her in front of him, using her body to cover his nudity. “Queen Ilsa, please meet my rude brother, Prince Loren el Ranuth.”

She tried a queenly smile, knowing it probably came out shaky. Right now she was feeling anything but queenly. “How do you do, Your Highness?”

Loren smiled and came forward to drop a quick kiss on the back of her hand. “I’ll give you a proper greeting later when you’re both dressed.” He shot Zane a loaded look.

“Brother,” Zane placed his hands around Ilsa’s waist. His thumbs caressed the undersides of her breasts and she flushed and clutched the sheet tighter, hoping her new brother wouldn’t notice. “Unless you want to watch...”

“I fly halfway across the galaxy to save your sorry ass and all you can think about is your dick?” Loren threw up his arms as if to admit defeat. He shook his dark head and gave Ilsa a quick bow. “Madame, you have my sympathies for marrying my brother. You must have been drugged.” He pointed at Zane. “You have fifteen minutes.” He glanced at his watch. “Starting now.” With that, he turned and stalked from the room, slamming the door behind him.

Ilsa released the breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. “Is he always like that?”

“Tedious, isn’t he? If you’d managed to kidnap him, you’d have been bored within an hour.” Zane swung her to the bed and pulled the sheets away from her body. “Not to mention he’s not nearly as good in bed as I am.” His heated gaze moved over her and she went liquid soft. “So, how many orgasms do you think you can manage in fourteen minutes?” With a wicked smile on his handsome face, he scooted down the bed. “Let’s see, shall we?”

The first touch of his tongue reinforced what Ilsa already knew. She’d definitely kidnapped the right man.



## **About the author:**

Dominique Adair is the pen name of award-winning novelist, J.C. Wilder. Adair/Wilder (she chooses her name according to her mood - if she's feeling sassy and brazen, it's Adair - if she's feeling dark and dangerous, it's Wilder) lives just outside of Columbus, OH where she skulks around town plotting her next book and contemplating where to hide the bodies (from her books of course - everyone knows that you can't really hide a body as they always pop up at the worst times).

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