

Chapter One

“Seduce her.”

Savan Bardan’s head snapped up. Was this a joke? He stared at the holo-com of his boss, but Kolar looked his usual unsmiling self. “You can’t be seri—”

“Soften her up, Bardan. Get her to like you.” Kolar leaned forward, his three-dimensional image flickering a little. “Your entire world is depending on you to secure this new power source.”

Savan bit back a curse, swiveling in the pilot’s seat of his interstellar tradeship. Kolar was a master at “motivating” his negotiators.

And he wasn’t finished.

“If these fusion crystals are half as powerful as the Permans say they are, we need them. The Permans are as icy toward Rendar as their gods-forsaken planet.”

Savan knew the Permans still resented his planet. They blamed Rendar for barring their way into the Galactic Trade Guild five stellar years ago. “They weren’t ready. We had good reasons to delay their membership.”

“Well, they don’t see it that way. Especially Negotiator Fjord.”

Yes, Perma’s top negotiator was very vocal in her dislike of Rendar.

An image of Brinn Fjord flickered into his mind—moon-pale skin, blond hair and ice-blue eyes. He’d noticed her the first time she stepped onto the Trade Guild Space Station two years ago as a newly minted negotiator. He’d been a part of some fierce negotiations with her.

She was young for a negotiator, smiled too easily and laughed too much. But she was surprisingly ruthless. The Guild could swallow up the naive and inexperienced and spit out their broken bones. But Fjord held her own at the trade tables.

Somehow Savan doubted there was anything he could do to get Fjord to soften up. He wasn’t known for his charm. He’d been a trade negotiator for ten stellar years and was damned good at it. He closed his deals with hard negotiation and tough bargaining. Not by being nice.

“I’ll get the contract. There’s no need for me to...seduce Negotiator Fjord.”

Kolar sighed. “You see all that behind me, Bardan?”

Savan let his gaze drift to the window behind his mentor. While Savan was seated in his ship, Kolar was several light-years away in his office high above the megacity that covered their home world.

Buildings speared into the sky. Everyone on the metropolis world lived, worked and played in skyscrapers hundreds of stories high. Parks and gardens had died out centuries before, when the planet’s water had dried up.

As the population had grown, every available space was needed for housing. Now even the empty ocean space was covered in buildings.

Aerial traffic filled the sky like a swarm of insects. Smaller personal transports zipped between buildings while larger public transports lumbered between rooftop stops. Neon signs flashed and blinked from every available space—advertising everything from the latest personal Sync devices to the Interplanetary VelocityBall Championships.

“Everything out there is dependent on energy. Without a new power source, Rendar and her people will grind to a halt.”

Kolar’s words rang through Savan’s head. He knew everything they used was powered—transports, housing, holo-com projectors. Even the food units that made the tasteless cloned food

Rendarians ate consumed vast amounts of power.

“Your world is depending on you.”

A heavy weight settled on Savan’s shoulders and he scraped a hand down his face. He’d felt this demanding responsibility before, while fighting in the Galactic Wars for Rendar’s survival. Leading his men into hopeless battles that got them slaughtered. His fingers gripped the chair’s armrests.

Kolar linked his hands and rested them on his desk. “Fjord will make things difficult. She’s already tried to push this visit out another stellar month. She’ll either try to deny us the crystals or sell them to us for an outrageous price.” He leaned back. “And there are plenty of potential buyers waiting for us to fail. The Tauvi put up a huge fight to stop us from getting the right to first-offer.”

Savan had been at the meeting. The aggressive Tauvi, from another energy-dependent world, had been bitter losers.

“You know I’m planning to retire soon?”

Kolar’s pronouncement jerked Savan back to the present. This was the first he’d heard of retirement. Part of him had always thought his mentor would die at the trade tables.

“If you secure this deal for the right price...this seat will be yours,” Kolar said.

The breath caught in Savan’s throat. *Rendar’s head negotiator.*

The respected role brought power and prestige. It would be the pinnacle of the career he’d been building the last decade. The peak of life on Rendar revolved around career success. Mediocrity was considered as bad as failure. Everyone on Rendar lived to be the best.

And Savan owed it to Kolar—the man who’d taken a chance on a burned-out space marine looking for a job with no blood, death or violence.

“Are we clear, Bardan?”

Savan gave a tight nod. “I’ll close the deal.”

“Excellent. Good luck with the negotiation.” The holo-com blinked off.

With the image gone, Savan could once again see the view screen and the planet he was orbiting.

Perma was an unbroken pale blue. Too far from its sun to sustain vegetation, there were no forests or jungles. Luckily for its inhabitants, the planet had substantial geothermal energy below its icy surface.

One of the gifts that geothermal energy had given them were crystals that held the most amazing, inexhaustible energy.

Energy Rendar needed.

Comfortable in the pilot’s seat, Savan engaged the controls. Time to head to the Perman spaceport and hammer out a final deal for Rendar.

And face Brinn Fjord.

An edgy anticipation snaked through him. He flexed his hands on the controls. It was the thrill of the upcoming deal, not because he was going to see a woman he found a challenge. A woman who hated his guts.

He had far too much riding on this deal to fail.

He would succeed. At any cost.

Brinn Fjord watched the sleek, black Rendarian spacecraft touch down in a cloud of superheated steam.

The ship reminded her of the man she was waiting for—striking, cold and merciless.

Her stomach filled with knots. She couldn't believe that of all the worlds in the galaxy, Rendar had won the right to first-offer on Perma's fusion crystals.

Supercilious Rendar, who'd kept Perma stuck in the dark ages. Her gut churned. The arrogant bastards had even insisted the deal go ahead today—on Yule's Eve. Right in the middle of Perma's most important winter holiday.

So instead of celebrating Yuletide with her family—eating her mother's cooking, drinking her stepfather's homemade ale and trading teasing barbs with her brothers—she was stuck with the most ruthless trade negotiator this side of the Hadron belt.

Savan Bardan. He had a poker face everyone in the Trade Guild envied. She'd never once seen him smile, or show anger or pleasure. The guy could pass for a syndroid.

Five years ago, he'd been one of the Rendarian traders who denied Perma admission to the Guild. Her fingers curled. He'd denied them the chance to trade for technology they needed for their people.

And people had died.

Brinn pressed a hand to her chest and the throbbing pain there. Because of Bardan, her father was dead.

By Odinn's fury, she missed her father. She sucked in a breath of cold air. Had it really been four years since he succumbed to a disease that was now eradicated with drugs they bought from a neighboring planet?

He'd never had the chance to see her join the Guild, to make a name for herself helping Perma acquire new tech.

A large gust of freezing air nipped at her. She pulled her beret low over her hair and drew the collar of her thick ursus coat up to her chin. The wild animals lived on the northern pole, and the plush fleece made the warmest coats.

Summer on Perma was cold, but winter was bitter. Even though it was lunchtime, the distant sun was already headed for the horizon. The icy wind swept across the spaceport tarmac, its cold fingers searching for bare skin. The perfect welcome for Bardan.

Brinn let the wind cool her heated cheeks. She'd make Rendar pay for their arrogance. If they wanted the fusion crystals, they'd have to pay for them.

She'd secure a damn good deal. For her father and for Perma.

Looking up, she saw Savan striding toward her.

She hadn't seen him since the negotiation for right of first offer, and damn the stars, she'd forgotten how eye-catching the man was.

Permans were tall, but he topped her by several centimeters. He wore a sleek, all-in-one black jumpsuit with silver accents at the collar. Boy, did that suit leave little to the imagination, the fabric stretched over hard muscles. He had the body of a fighter, not a trade negotiator.

She shoved her hands into her pockets to keep them still. He had a mixed heritage, common for the melting pot that was Rendar. Hair the color of the darkest winter night was just long enough for a woman to run her hands through. The tips of his ears were more pointed than hers, and his stunning bright green eyes were tilted at the edges, giving his face an exotic look.

And those eyes. They were the color of the night-sky lights in the north.

Hell, why couldn't he have been short, overweight, ugly? Her spine stiffened. It didn't matter what Savan Bardan looked like. He was a job. A man she detested. Nothing more, nothing less.

She'd take the man on a tour of the ice mines, get the final deal sorted for the benefit of Perma. Then Bardan and his striking eyes and cold heart could go back to Rendar.

His eyes locked on her as he closed the last few meters between them.

The too-familiar anger filled her throat. *Be professional, Brinn.* She repeated the words over in her head.

"Negotiator Fjord." He slung the small backpack he carried over one shoulder. "A pleasure to see you."

His Perman was perfect. The result of the lingual implant all Guild negotiators had implanted at the base of their skulls.

She inclined her head. "Negotiator Bardan."

He offered a gloved hand.

She knew Rendarians didn't like to touch. Handshakes were a Perma custom. He was either being polite or trying to unsettle her.

She eyed his large, black-clad hand. She couldn't ignore his gesture...that would go against everything in the Trade Guild Code of Conduct.

And it would smack of cowardice. She placed her own in his.

Brinn wore wisent leather gloves, but she still felt the compelling heat of him through the supple leather. She looked up and saw him watching her, an unreadable look in his nebula-green eyes.

The two of them stayed there for a second, the cold air swirling around them.

She gave his hand a quick shake, then snatched her hand back. "You aren't dressed for a Perma winter." Against her better judgment, her gaze drifted down his long form.

"My suit's made of aramide. It maintains my body heat."

"Really?" She eyed the fabric. It was plain, with the faintest sheen. She hated to admit it, but she envied the Rendarians and their technology.

"I'd be happy to discuss a trade."

Oh, she just bet he would. Was everything a deal to this man? "I'll keep that in mind." She gestured toward her transport. "I'm sure you're eager to see the ice mines. I thought we'd head straight into the mountains, visit with the elders who own the mine and then see the crystals."

"Visit the elders?"

His cool tone irritated her. "It's expected. It shows respect, a concept I know is foreign to you Rendarians."

"Ah, I was wondering when your claws would show." His face was expressionless. Like nothing she said bothered him.

It just itched at her. He was colder than the Kjolen ice peaks. What did it take for this man to show some emotion?

She huffed out a breath. "Don't worry, I won't waste your precious time. I'll have you back at the spaceport by dinner."

"So eager to get rid of me?"

Opening the door to the transport, she forced a smile. "Yes."

He shook his head. "I know you were denied trade and the comfort it brings for a few extra stellar years, but haven't you held your grudge long enough?"

Brinn choked. "You think this is because Perma couldn't trade for Chanalian fine wine or pleasure syndroids? You supercilious, ignorant bastard."

She thought she saw a flash of something in his eyes. Good, she wanted a fight and she was

happy to stir a reaction in the coldest man in the galaxy.

But before he could respond, there was a loud bang behind them. They both frowned and started to turn.

The world exploded in a flash of flames and bright white light.