

He surprised her on the way back from the grocery. She didn't like being surprised, and things were only going to get worse.

"Widow. Hey, Black Widow!" A fervent whisper from an alleyway near her apartment complex caught her attention.

Jane Mallory – aka Black Widow – peered into the nighttime murk, trying to identify the speaker without approaching. Very few people knew that name, and most of them were attached to the nearby Jannisary campus outside Dubai, so who whispered her name in this unconventional setting?

"Who is it?" She asked, ready to drop her bag of yogurt and roast lamb and fight. The question evoked only silence, and Jane cursed her curiosity as she tentatively stepped into the darkness.

"Get away from the street. I need to talk to you." The harshly whispered voice belonged to a man, but sounded no more than vaguely familiar, if that.

She stopped, halfway between the scanty streetlight of a deserted main road and the absolute darkness of a stinking alley. "This is as far as I'm coming," she insisted.

"Good enough."

Unnaturally fast, an arm reached out for her and before she could react – which was very little time, indeed – Jane found herself pinned up against mud-brick wall and a familiar face glaring at her.

"Hiya, Widow. Remember me?" He asked unnecessarily.

Rather than replying, Jane struggled for a moment – long enough to realize that struggling was futile. "Hi, Seeker," she said, finally. "Are you on the welcome wagon?"

His grip tightened – Jane tried to suppress a wince of pain – and he snarled, "You're a funny lady, Widow. Always with the jokes."

Jane remembered an incident that marked her arrival to the Janissaries two weeks ago. A gesture she'd made could have been construed as gambling with Seeker's life. *I should have realized that would bite me on the ass.*

"I'm sorry about that-" she began.

"No, you're not." He snapped. "I can smell the truth and it ain't on you. I don't appreciate being someone else's...teaching aid. I didn't like that at all." He shook her slightly, for emphasis.

Jane realized that any indication of fear would make things worse, so she chose bravado. "You seemed to get into it." She replied, sharply.

"Sure. *Before* I found out that you've got a poisonous tongue. You could have killed me, you bitch."

*And no-one would have missed you, except maybe payroll.* "I doubt that. I hear you're the toughest nova around." That was true, also.

Seeker sneered at that. "Yeah. One of the strongest, too. Wanna try getting away again?" He pushed the full length of his body up against Jane. "That was kinda cool."

Revulsion joined the tiny, irrepressible sense of panic in Jane's mind. That Seeker was enjoying himself was quite obvious. She wished she'd worn heavier clothes, despite the oppressive humidity of Dubai, even at night.

She tried a new tack. "Jesus, Seeker, if this is just about getting your rocks off in some kinky way, why didn't you say so? Bullshit is not a viable form of foreplay."

Seeker laughed at that, a quiet chuckle that disturbed Jane far more than any words. He leaned in towards her, already too close for her comfort, and inhaled deeply. "Nice try, Widow.

But you're scared. I can *smell* that, too. You can't lie to me. No-one can." He laughed again. "I like that, too. C'mon..." He moved against her again, a parody of passion.

The disgust and fear were getting harder to hold back and – worse yet – Seeker seemed to know it.

"Been a long time since someone's held you down, huh, girl? Mm, I bet it is. Gal like you is used to being on top, aren't you?" There was some truth in that, but Jane didn't want to think about it right now. "Maybe you'd get off on it. Maybe *you're* the kinky one." He taunted.

"You've had plenty of time to knock me down with that killer tongue of yours."

Jane struggled again, still in vain, and wondered how long it would be before Seeker's grip broke her arms. "God *damn* it! Enough is enough. Let me go... please."

"Now she's polite!" her assailant told the deaf air. He grinned at her, letting her see how much he enjoyed her discomfort. "Ask me again."

Her words emerged from between gritted teeth. "Let. Me. Go." Pause. "Please."

"Sure thing, sugar, if you do one little thing for me."

*Christ...* "What?"

"Like you said, I'm pretty strong. Tough, too. But I'm also curious. Ain't much out there than can take me down, I don't think."

"Get to the point – ow!" Seeker casually slammed Jane against the wall.

"Getting there, Widow." He paused for a moment, just to draw things out. "What I want is for you to hit me with that luscious, deadly tongue of yours."

Jane's thoughts stopped cold for a second, shocked into stillness. "I think you're the kinky one here, Seeker."

To her surprise, Seeker kept his reply verbal. "No. Just curious." His expression became one of easy confidence, one quite unsuitable to their situation, Jane thought. "I'm sure I can take it," he asserted. "I just want to *know*."

Jane had difficulty finding words. "There are better ways to ask."

"But this has been so much *fun*. And you owe me some fun."

Jane's stomach turned. *Easy, Jane. Keep it together.* "If this is what you consider fun..." she tried to shrug. "So be it." At this point, it seemed like a small price to pay.

Jane didn't bother to warn him, but lashed out across his face, thinking poisonous thoughts. To her immense relief, he immediately let go of her and fell to the ground, convulsing. Jane knew that she should run, but her own – morbid – curiosity had kicked in. For a few moments, she thought that Seeker's confidence had killed him, but he surprised her by drawing a wheezing breath and rolling on to his side.

Despite herself, Jane was impressed. An ordinary human would be dead by now, and most novas, too. She was impressed by Seeker – and worried. He'd made it to all fours now, and was vomiting noisily on to the cracked concrete at her feet.

Jane frowned. If he died, she was probably going to be in a great deal of trouble – with payroll, if no one else. But it seemed that her worry was groundless. He'd found the wall and was trying to pull himself up, but was being somewhat hampered by an attack of dry heaves. "Better get going, Widow." He gasped, "I'm getting up and then," he retched again, "we're gonna keep talking about which one of us is *really* messed up."

Jane didn't need telling twice. Abandoning her groceries, she ran out of the alley and towards home.