



Conquest:
Earth

By

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Chapter One

Galen propped his hands behind his head and stared down his bared torso at Onyx's bowed head as she patiently stroked his flaccid member. He was bored with her, he decided, realizing he couldn't summon a flicker of warmth, let alone heat. Time was when she could've had him hard in five sects flat and gotten him off inside of five septs. At this rate, it didn't look like she was going to even manage to get a rise out of him.

"Admiral?"

Galen frowned as the voice of his first officer abruptly intruded. He couldn't have a few fucking minutes to himself, he thought, feeling a welling of resentment? *Nothing* ever happened on the gods damned ship that his officers weren't perfectly capable of handling on their own. "You'd better have a gods damned good reason for bothering me, Ken-so," he growled at the man's image that appeared on the intercom console across his cabin on his desk. "If it's another brawl among the colonists, send the peace keepers in—if it's the gods damned swab jockeys, send the PKs and leave me the fuck alone! I'm *off* duty!"

"Sorry, Sir! You asked to be informed when we received first reports from the scout ships."

Even knowing they were only going to be exchanging the deadly boredom of life on the ship for what promised to be an equally boring, but far more uncomfortable existence once they reached their destination, Galen felt his heart miss a beat with a brief surge of something akin to excitement. Disgust followed that he felt even that much for the headache ahead of him. His lips thinned. "Unless there's something pressing"

"The reports aren't good, Sir."

Galen stared at the first officer's face through narrowed eyes for a moment, trying to guess what might have brought about the look of panic in his eyes. A thread of uneasiness wafted through him. Ken-so was a soldier to the bone. He wasn't prone to get worked up over nothing. Abruptly, he sat up and shoved Onyx away from his lap. She sprawled on the deck beside his bunk in a tangle of lithe, naked limbs. He barely glanced at her as he grabbed his discarded uniform and shoved his legs into it. Standing, he pulled the suit up to his shoulders, shrugged his arms into the sleeves, and strode toward the door, absently smoothing the front edges of his uniform together.

"I'll be waiting here for you," Onyx cooed as he reached the door.

Having dismissed her from his mind, Galen halted abruptly in his tracks at the sound of her voice and swiveled around to look at her. His gaze flickered over her perfect face and then down her equally perfect body. He released a disgusted sigh. "Don't bother. We're done. You may return to the pool."

He realized as he strode purposefully down the narrow corridor to the lift that his pulse was pounding with far more excitement now than it had been when Onyx had been trying to arouse him. He supposed he wasn't really surprised. A steady diet of pleasure bots could put anyone off of them. It had been annums since he'd even been within sniffing distance of a real, honest-to-gods, flesh and blood female.

And, at that, he hadn't been much closer than that.

Not that that she-devil of an attorney he'd had actually qualified as female in his book. The conniving bitch had thoroughly screwed him over or he wouldn't be here now ...on the backside of nowhere, going nowhere.

Dismissing the thoughts as he felt his temper rising, Galen paused before the lift, stepped inside when the door dematerialized, and braced his legs slightly apart for balance, clasping his hands behind his back. "Bridge," he said in a clipped voice.

The sensation of movement was brief, the jolt when the lift stopped shimmying his knees despite the braced stance. Ken-so met him at the door as he stepped off.

Galen lifted his dark brows in surprise.

"We're missing a planet," Ken-so announced immediately in a low voice resonating with the panic Galen had seen in his eyes on the com unit, turning to follow Galen as he strode past him and headed toward the vid display.

Galen stopped and threw a disbelieving glare at his first officer, wondering if the wet-behind-ears recruits had wandered into the wrong solar system. "*Missing ...?* How the fuck could we be missing an entire planet? Computer malfunction? Are they even in the right gods damned solar system?"

Tale Ken-so nodded vigorously. "I checked, Sir. The coordinates are correct. There's no malfunction. It's the right system, alright, but the fifth planet's gone. Nothing but a belt of debris where it was."

Galen's lips compressed in a look of disgust. "Any idea when it happened?"

Tale shrugged. "The computer is calculating maybe ten or twelve thousand annums—give or take. The orbits of the third and fourth planets are stable."

"About the time they charted the system," Galen muttered after a quick calculation in his head, turning and striding toward the vid display to study the system they were approaching.

"Sir? Should I inform mission control?" Ken-so asked, following his senior officer and hovering near his shoulder as Galen studied the display and finally took a seat before the console to read the reports coming in.

"Do you think they give a flying fuck, Ken-so?" In any case, they'd know by now. The sons-bitches-had probably observed the collision—or whatever had caused it—before they were halfway to their destination if the calculations were right, since their home system was roughly that many light-annums from the target system.

The question shut him up, thankfully. He was a good officer, just too damned fresh faced and eager as far as Galen was concerned—and at that he was a sight more mature and level headed than the majority of the men under his command.

It was a motley crew of soldiers and colonists he was leading. About half of them were like Ken-so. Young, eager, and stupid, buoyed by dreams of glory, they honestly saw this as a grand adventure that would earn them a place in the history books. There hadn't been an attempt at colonization in centuries. Once all the prime real estate in the closest systems had been settled, the government had been content to reap the benefits and ignore the more distant systems as too costly to bother with, whatever they might have of value. The war had changed that and the eager young recruits that had volunteered to man the colonization mission to the new star system they were entering would be the first colonists in generations. They were going to conquer the universe and all that rot.

Another quarter were blatant undesirables, men who'd already proven they were virtually useless to society. He strongly suspected they had been rounded up from the prisons and workhouses, and probably from the streets, from the look of some of them.

The mission was a good way to take out the trash.

The rest were screw-ups.

And he fell into that category.

Not that he actually *had* screwed up his mission. He'd done exactly as he'd been ordered by his senior officers. Where he'd screwed up was in failing to consider that, as the youngest admiral in the entire armada, he was going to end up being the scapegoat when the shit hit the fan—particularly since he already had one strike against him—his birth.

It galled the hell out of him that the others had not only dismissed his input when they'd been planning their battle strategy, but then they'd closed ranks afterwards and set him up to fall for their piss poor planning.

And that had left him in the unenviable position of accepting the leadership of the colony armada or rotting in prison.

Staring at the preliminary data, he almost wished he'd opted for prison. Ten annums wasn't that much now that he thought about it. He would've still been young enough when he'd gotten out to start over, train for a different career.

The five annums he'd already spent in prison had been pure hell, though. When they'd offered to let him lead the expedition, to reinstate his rank, he'd been ready to jump at the chance. Anything, he'd thought then, would be better than staring at four walls all day long—when he wasn't beating the other inmates off his food—and his body.

He should have known they wouldn't have offered it if it hadn't been worse than what he was already enduring.

Fucking bureaucrats and politicians and their gods damned wars!

They were always hot to send someone else in to die for the 'greater good', meaning them and their credits.

He wondered if the rest of the crew and colonists realized those brides the government had promised were never going to materialize. Short of shipping them out in chains, that is, because no female in her right mind was going to actually volunteer to be shipped out to the frontier to co-habit with the dregs of society the government had rounded up to colonize the distant system.

They'd be damned lucky if they got more pleasure bots.

"The scout craft that was to have set down on the fifth planet has diverted to the fourth."

Galen didn't glance at Ken-so that time although his lips tightened in irritation. "I haven't forgotten how to read, Ken-so," Galen muttered. "It's probably just as well," he added after a moment, though more to himself than to his first officer. "Wonder of wonders it didn't fair well after the collision that took out the fifth planet—no plant life, very little air or atmosphere. It's going to take a hell of a lot to bring it up to livable."

"The third planet still looks good."

Galen got up. "The scout ship hasn't landed yet," he pointed out.

"Preliminary readings, though"

Galen shook his head. "We'll know when we know. It looks like we're going to be setting down on the third planet, though. Best-case scenario, it looks like it'll take a

couple of annums to make the fourth planet even tolerable. Run some figures for me, Ken-so and see if we've got the resources to set up a base there."

* * * *

The sound was like nothing Breanna Denton had ever heard in her life. Her heart contracted in her chest in response, squeezing the breath from her lungs. Instantaneously, adrenaline began to surge through her in waves of hot and cold. Paralyzed, for many moments, Bree could do nothing but absorb the chaos that suddenly surrounded her.

Deafening noise; an intense vibration that seemed to emanate from deep within the earth to rattle the house on its foundation and everything in it; and electronics gone suddenly berserk—her microwave, TV, radio—every light and piece of electronics in the house winked on and then off, over and over—screaming silence one moment and deafening noise the next.

She couldn't assimilate the source of the chaos. Her mind simply fastened on the one thing it *could* interpret—danger. Neither the word nor the concept actually formulated in her mind. Her brain simply ordered her body into motion. Without any clear idea of what the threat was or what direction it was coming from, Bree dashed out of her kitchen and raced toward the front door. She was out the door and halfway across her front lawn before she actually realized that she'd instinctively headed away from the noise that represented the threat, which almost seemed omnipresent once she'd left the house.

Halting when she realized she had no idea where to go to find safety, she lifted her head and looked around.

Her gaze was snagged almost instantly by the thing that filled the sky above her house. She stared at it blankly, in disbelief, unable to grasp that it could possibly be what it seemed to be.

It wasn't an airliner, although she realized, dimly, that, in the back of her mind, she'd been certain the screaming noise of something huge bearing down on her must be a plane going down.

It wasn't a meteor, although the thing still glowed from the heat of its entry and swift flight through the atmosphere.

It wasn't the space shuttle.

As it passed over her house and settled in her backyard, however, she realized that she wasn't hallucinating, and it wasn't a crash of anything that had originated on earth.

In point of fact, although the thing settled heavily enough the ground beneath her feet shook, it wasn't a crash at all.

It was the sound of jets overhead that finally penetrated Bree's stupor of stunned amazement. Her head jerked upwards automatically to survey the crafts that shot over her head, low enough she could read the numbers painted on the underside of the crafts. In the distance, she could hear the blaring horns and sirens of emergency vehicles.

Maybe she *had* been mistaken, she thought?

Something had gone down.

She didn't consciously make the decision to move closer for a better look. Her mind wasn't actually functioning on a level of conscious thought. Shock still gripped her. Her heart was pounding like a trip hammer. She had to remind herself to breathe.

As she inched around the side of her house to look behind it, more than half expecting any moment to hear a tremendous explosion, she saw that the thing had taken

out at least a quarter of her peach orchard. A great cloud of dust still lingered in the air, obscuring much of the craft, but there was no smoke as she would've expected to see if the thing had actually crashed.

She stared at the thing in consternation, wondering what she should do. Call 911? Run?

She looked down at herself, realizing she was standing in her front yard in her panties and the t-shirt she usually slept in.

The wail of the sirens was getting closer.

As she stood indecisively, the jets that had flown by before, or two more, passed overhead again and it finally dawned her that she was going to have people swarming over her yard at any minute and she was barefoot and half-naked.

She'd already started toward the house with the intention of running in to grab a pair of jeans and shoes when she saw movement on the craft. Halting in her tracks, she peered toward the ship, feeling Goosebumps ripple along her arms and then run down her spine as an opening appeared in the side of the thing. As she watched, a ramp descended toward the ground. Before it had even settled completely, a trail of metal monsters began to emerge like ants out of a stirred anthill, moving away from the ship in a wave.

Curiosity flickered through her, but she had no trouble squelching it. She'd stop to see what was going on when she was a safe distance away.

Galvanized by the realization that she was going to have to do her running on foot, and barefoot, if she didn't at least grab her keys from the house, she whirled and ran toward her front door, trying to remember where she'd left her car keys. Thankfully, they were lying on the hall table just inside the front door. Grabbing them up, she raced into her bedroom, grabbed the jeans and shoes she'd discarded by her bed the night before, and ran back outside. She skidded to a halt, however, when she rounded the side of the house and discovered that the machines she'd seen emerging from the ship were swarming all over her backyard.

One of the things stopped, almost seemed to stare at her, and then headed straight towards her. Uttering a shriek, Bree threw everything she was holding into the air, whirled, and ran. Relief flooded her briefly, for even as she turned to run, she saw trucks pulling into her front yard.

She hadn't managed to cover even half the distance between the machines and the soldiers piling out of the trucks when something snaked around her waist and jerked her to a halt. The metal tentacle tightened, coiling around her as it lifted her off of her feet. Dizzy and disoriented beyond the shock and terror, she hadn't even managed to assimilate what was happening when she found herself staring at the mechanical monster face to face.

Mindlessly, she began shoving at the tentacle, trying to pry it loose. It didn't yield at all, but, fortunately, the tentacle didn't tighten either. She was nearing blackout from her panicked breaths before it dawned on her the robot hadn't done anything else, that it was merely holding her captive.

Studying her?

* * * *

"We have a preliminary feed from scout ship one. It has successfully landed on the third planet and deployed the constructors."

Galen lifted a brow but he felt a lessening of tension. The scout ship wouldn't

have deployed the construction bots if the planet weren't within the preset parameters, which meant that it was livable.

"Excellent!" he said. "Bring up the data on the forward vid."

He narrowed his eyes when the data began to scroll across the screen, studying the components of the atmosphere critically and then the land mass/water ratio. The land mass to water ratio was a little daunting. Great to have water and all that, but they needed land to develop a colony. The next readings were more promising.

Despite the ratio, the planet was big enough to have some fairly extensive landmasses. Temperature good. Air quality not so good, but bearable. They were going to have to figure out what was causing the high levels of methane and carbon dioxide and clean it up a bit but ... it was certainly closer to the mark than the first planet they'd surveyed.

Methane levels certainly indicated a planet lush with life forms they were familiar with ... unless it was from some other source altogether.

"Any vids yet on our new home?"

A ragged hurrah went up from the men on the bridge.

Galen decided to ignore the breach in protocol. They had reason to celebrate. They'd been on the fucking ship for nigh four annums now—in status more than half that time, granted, but still long enough to be going stir crazy from being on the fucking ship and he hadn't been thrilled with the idea that they might have to look for another star system to settle.

He felt a rise in exhilaration himself. Whatever was down there, it still beat the hell out of canned air and metal decking beneath his feet.

Sky overhead—solid ground beneath his feet—real gravity—natural air

A view of bright blue sky suddenly filled the screen. Galen felt his stomach go weightless at the sight.

A collective gasp of appreciation went up from the men.

Galen frowned. Before he could direct their minds to the somberness of the situation, something flashed across the screen, too swiftly to actually identify the objects.

"What in the *fuck* was that?" Galen growled.

Ken-so turned a pale face toward him. "Unknown, Sir! The droids are still accumulating data."

The blue sky with its fluffy white clouds and the strange objects vanished. Flashes of scrubby green and brown vegetation filled the screen that had small pink globes hanging from them.

"Vegetation," Ken-so announced unnecessarily. "It would nice if we discovered the fruit was edible. There seems to be quite a bit of it in the area."

Galen was just about to comment on the unlikelihood that the scout ship had settled in the middle of edible, native vegetation when Ken-so exclaimed again.

"A biological specimen! Sir! One of the constructs has captured a creature."

"Let's hope it's edible," Galen growled instead of informing Ken-so that he didn't need a fucking play by play. He could see the gods damned vid as well as Ken-so could. "I've had about all the space rations I can handle."

"Bringing it up now, Sir."

The pinkish white blob that filled the screen was out of focus due to the proximity of it to the vid. Galen felt a jolt of shock run through him. Everyone on the bridge

reacted much as he had.

The vid lens adjusted, bringing the features into focus—two eyes opened so wide he could see white all the way around irises that were nearly the color of the vegetation they'd glimpsed. Thick black lashes on the upper and lower lid of the eyes. Short black crescents of hair above that, forming eyebrows. The nose was a long, straight bridge in the center of the face that formed flaring nostrils on either side of the rounded tip. Pinkish-brown lips surrounding an 'o' of a mouth that displayed a vibrating pink tongue, white flat-edged teeth. Long, reddish brown hair, whipped around the face by the wind. Tiny brownish marks dotted the skin across the high cheekbones and the narrow bridge of its nose.

Galen finally found his voice. "Tell the gods damned construct to pull back so we can have a look at the rest of it," he said in a hoarse voice.

When the image zoomed out, they saw two flailing, hairless arms and two hands, balled into fists. Mammary globes, tipped with dark pink points they could see through the thin material that covered the body—and when the vid panned down, two hairless, completely bare legs—also flailing.

"It's a... it's a ... it's a ... female!" Ken-so finally managed to get out.

A sense, almost of panic, swept over Galen when he heard the other men mumbling. Possessiveness swelled behind it. "It's *mine*, gods damn it!" Galen growled. "That's what it is!"

Chapter Two

“But ... but ... but, Sir!” Tale Ken-so exclaimed.

Galen bolted from his seat and strode closer to the vid, examining his prize with a heady sense of exhilaration. “I, Admiral Galen of the royal house of Drako hereby claim this star system in the name of the Royal Confederation of Star Systems! And that female as mine!”

“You think there’s more?” someone on the bridge murmured, sounding as stunned as he was.

It penetrated the heated fog of Galen’s mind, however. “Of course there’s more! There are bound to be more—but this one’s mine.” He returned his attention to the vid, admiring the beauty of the creature. It looked almost like them!

He couldn’t believe his luck! After all this time—a living, breathing—female-being!

He frowned, trying to recall if the scouting ship had the facilities to examine the specimen to discover just how compatible it was, physiologically, with their species—or, more importantly, him.

He couldn’t seem to direct his mind into any sort of order. “Ken-so! Are there facilities on the scouting ship to analyze the being?”

When Ken-so didn’t answer immediately, he turned to look at him, glaring when he saw his second in command was still white faced. His mouth was working, but he couldn’t seem to form words. “Well?” he barked.

“You mean ... dissect, Sir?”

Galen gaped at him. “Are you out of your fucking mind, man! What good is my bride going to be to me in fucking pieces!”

Ken-so gaped at him. “Bride?” he repeated as if he’d never heard the word.

Galen sent him a look. “We’re colonists. Brides? We didn’t bring any, if you’ll recall.” As if any of them could forget *that* little detail!

“Yes ... but ... It’s alien, Sir! We don’t even know if it *is* a female—or warm blooded!”

“It has mammary glands, dolt! Of course it’s female and warm blooded!” Not that he was sure he’d object if it wasn’t warm-blooded. The pleasure droids certainly weren’t—weren’t even living, and he hadn’t seen anybody objecting to cozying up to them. In point of fact, their pool of available sex droids seemed to be showing some distressing signs of over use and it occurred to him abruptly that it probably hadn’t been the best idea to send Onyx back to the pool. But then he’d completely forgotten, at the time, that more than half their sex droids had gotten caught up in the last riot and hadn’t weathered the brawl that well.

Ken-so shrugged uncomfortably. “It seems to be a specimen of an *intelligent* alien species, Admiral Drako. It may already be taken.”

Galen sent him a look of indignation. “By whom?” he growled, outraged that the man could suggest that anyone had a higher claim than he did, but then that was the

trouble with these fresh faced colonist recruits! They had no respect for their superiors!

“*Her* people!” Ken-so responded baldly. “Sir, what I’m trying to say is that we’ve had an analysis of those objects we couldn’t identify. They’re some sort of alien crafts—*flying* alien crafts. I think our colony is under attack.”

It took Galen a few moments to absorb that. They’d considered the possibility that any world capable of supporting life would already *have* life. It was almost inevitable that it would and something they’d actually counted upon. Of course, they’d brought everything they expected to need to produce their own food, but they’d known their chances of success were far better if they discovered a source of food already flourishing on the world they settled on.

They’d expected primitive life, however. Animals that might be domesticated.

It dawned on him abruptly that adequate consideration hadn’t been given to the possibility, indeed the likelihood, of the evolution of higher order animals ... because the gods damned system they’d been sent to colonize had been a very young system at the time it was observed.

He was no scientist! He was a gods damned soldier! It hadn’t occurred to him that the gods damned men of science might have screwed up!

He felt his belly tighten with a mixture of disappointment and frustration. After studying the pretty creature—who was still battering at the construct with her fists and screaming at it if her vibrating pink tongue was any indication—for a few more moments, he finally returned to his seat and settled in it heavily, massaging his temples and trying to rid himself of the headache forming there.

“So ... you’re suggesting that, between the time we left our system and arrived in this one, an intelligent, technologically *advanced* race has sprang up? Is that even possible?”

Ken-so frowned. “Considering the speed that light travels—yes. Clearly, we were studying the distant past of this star system—which we were aware of, of course. And the distance from our system, even with our sophisticated equipment, made it impossible to study anything so minute as the flora and fauna of the worlds that were possible targets.”

Galen drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. “But ... it only took us four annums—four of the most miserable fucking annums of my life—notice I’m *not* excluding the five fucking annums I spent in prison, Ken-so—to get here!”

Ken-so looked uncomfortable. “Yes, Sir. I know, Sir. But ... you see we were studying this system ten thousand annums ago—give or take a couple of thousand annums—when we first looked at it and it had already progressed ten thousand, give or take, so even though utilizing the worm holes allowed us to make the trip in a mere four annums”

Galen’s eyes narrowed. “There was nothing *mere* about it! I feel confident in speaking for everyone when I say this has been the most hellish trip ever conceived! And now you’re saying we’ve arrived and it’s already taken?”

Ken-so shrugged uncomfortably. “It’s beginning to look that way, Sir. Apparently, it was just ... uh ... providence that we happened to discover it just as a dominant species emerged.” Instead of trying to explain further, he turned to the vid display again and ordered the constructs to beam them a 360-degree view of the landing site. The moment the scene switched from their construct’s captive to an overview, they

saw the flying machines ... and far more.

The sight was appalling, to say the very least.

* * * *

Bree didn't know if her battering on the thing had finally resulted in a malfunction, or what, but she didn't wait around to find out. The moment the thing set her on her feet and uncoiled the tentacle from around her, she leapt away, managed two churning cycles with her legs, and sprawled in the dirt since she hadn't waited to regain her equilibrium before she tried to flee. Such was her terror, however, she didn't even feel the impact with the ground, didn't wait to regain her bearings. She bounded up as if the ground was a trampoline and churned up several more clods of dirt before she managed to get enough momentum and traction to shoot forward and away.

A growing wall of police, firemen, and soldiers had sprung up since she'd been grabbed by the mechanical beast, but she headed toward them without considering the possibility that she might be mown down by the guns they were aiming. Luckily, they seemed too stunned to do anything more than level the weapons at the invaders. One of the men from fire and rescue seemed to recover sufficiently when she slammed into him to grab her and shove her behind him, and she found herself passed from one to another until she was finally expelled from the rear.

Staggering when she suddenly found herself free of the pack, she managed to lock her watery knees to prevent herself from sprawling in the dirt again. Huffing for breath, both with terror from her narrow escape and exertion, she looked around dazedly for help. The rescuers—everyone—seemed too focused on what was going on to pay her any mind, however, and after a brief mental examination, she finally decided she wasn't actually injured—a little bruised, still terrorized, but she thought she was alright.

Two more troop transports arrived while she stood shakily at the rear of the force already assembled. As the soldiers boiled out of the backs of the truck and charged toward her, Bree managed to gather the presence of mind to move out of their way.

She was still too dazed with shock, however, to bring her mind to any sort of order, to think of what to do. Her house, she discovered when she managed to work her way through the fact that she was still virtually naked, bare foot and without transportation, was not only surrounded by the ground troops that had steadily been swelling, but it appeared that the metal beasts were taking it apart!

After bouncing up and down on her tiptoes for several moments, trying to see over the heads of the soldiers in front of her, she looked around for a vantage point to see what was going on. A row of tanks were just pulling into her yard. She gaped at them in disbelief as they crushed her pump house and flower beds and churned them into the dirt.

Rage abruptly suffused her, ousting the remains of her shock. "Hey! What the hell are you doing?"

A couple of the soldiers near the back glanced in her direction absently, but almost immediately returned their attention to the activity everyone was watching. The tanks advanced until they had formed a perimeter and finally stopped. Bree glared at the tracks through her front yard and finally stalked toward the nearest. Planting her balled fists on her hips, she glared up at the men on the top that had popped out of the ironclad beast like gophers to stare at the alien craft in her peach orchard. "Hey you! This is my damned yard! What the hell do you mean by tearing up my damned yard!"

The soldier glanced at her and did a double take. A scowl contorted his young

features. “Get out of here, woman! What the hell are you thinking? We’re about to have a battle here!”

Bree gaped at him. “I *live* here, damn it! You are *not* going to have a battle in my damned peach orchard! We’re right in the middle of harvest!”

“You’re in the middle of a damned war, idiot woman! Get your ass back or I’ll have you arrested!” another soldier bellowed at her.

She glared at the man furiously and finally turned away, trying to spot a man wearing an officer’s uniform. Unfortunately, she didn’t know dick about military men. She couldn’t see anyone that looked like they might be in charge.

Before she could decide whether to try to bulldoze her way through the men gathered at the front or try to find a phone, a soldier grabbed her, hauled her toward the dirt road that led up to her house and plunked her on her feet. “Town’s three miles that way! I suggest you start jogging! We’re liable to start trading lead any minute, lady!”

Bree gaped at the man in disbelief. “But ... I didn’t see a thing but robots! You’re going to shoot the robots?”

“Leave this to us, ma’am. It’s our job!” he said shortly, turning and marching away from her.

“But it’s *my* damned yard! My house! And my damned peach orchard!” she yelled at his retreating back.

He either ignored her or he didn’t hear her—no surprise considering the racket the continuously arriving trucks, jeeps, and tanks were making and the helicopters and jets as they crisscrossed the sky above them.

Unnerved by the massing military despite her anxiety about her property, Bree began to jog along the edge of the road, leaving the road to the military convoy streaming down it.

When she’d reached the edge of her orchard, she stopped to rest, leaning against one of the trees and staring with a mixture of alarm and anger at the steady stream of military vehicles as they went by. The soldiers stared back at her when they caught a glimpse of her although mostly they seemed too preoccupied to notice her. A few even had the audacity to offer up wolf whistles as they went by. She glared at them, resisting the impulse to shoot birds at them.

When she’d caught her breath, she pushed away from the tree, but then glanced up at it. It was too scrubby, really, to be much of a tree. She doubted it was much more than fifteen feet high to the very tips of its uppermost branches. It was one of the older peach trees, though, and the branches were fairly stout. Without stopping to consider it, she placed a foot in the crotch of a limb and the trunk and hoisted herself up, climbing carefully until she’d reached the highest branches that seemed likely to hold her.

The land had risen slightly—which accounted for some of her breathlessness—as she’d jogged away from her house. With the added height of the tree, she could just see the peak of the remains of her roof.

Dismay filled her. As she’d suspected, the damned robots were systematically dismantling her house—not simply demolishing it—taking it apart! As if there weren’t soldiers and war machines surrounding almost the entire perimeter of the space ship—and it *was* a space ship, unlike anything she’d ever seen before—the robots were as busy as they could be. They’d cleared about an acre—possibly more—of her prized peach orchard. They hadn’t simply leveled it, however. They were excavating!

As chaotic as her mind still was with shock, it settled in her firmly that they were constructing ... something.

* * * *

"I hesitate to point this out, Sir, but it occurs to me that we might have created an intergalactic incident."

Galen slid a sardonic look at his first officer. "You think?"

Tale reddened. "Should I contact high command, Sir?"

Galen drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair, thinking. Aside from the fact that he didn't particularly want high command to know they'd fucked up and landed their gods damned scout ship on a planet already taken by beings obviously extremely territorial, what would be the point? It wasn't likely they'd send out re-enforcements to take the planet—aside from the fact that it would take them annums to make the trip.

He needed time to consider the situation, he finally decided. From what he could see, the aliens seemed content, for the moment at least, to simply watch.

"Order the constructs to set up a perimeter shield to protect our property, Ken-so," he said abruptly.

Ken-so looked like he wanted to question the order, but he merely nodded and belayed the order to the techs that were monitoring the constructs.

Galen pushed himself from his command chair and strode toward the lift. "I'll be in my quarters. Inform me if anything happens that I should know about."

"Yes, Sir!"

He glanced toward the vid screen while he waited for the lift to arrive, scanning the crowd for any sign of the female he'd claimed earlier. He wasn't surprised when he didn't see her, but he was vastly disappointed. He glanced at the tech at the console nearest him. "Did the construct tag the biological entity he examined?" he asked as casually as he could.

"It's standard procedure, Sir!" the tech responded.

Nodding, Galen entered the lift as the opening materialized and assumed a wide legged stance and an expression of unconcern. He was fuming, however, as he stepped off of the lift on his own level and strode briskly to his quarters. He halted once he'd stepped inside and his door had closed behind him, staring at nothing in particular while he tried to sort through the tangled mess of the problem he was facing. After a few minutes, when he realized he was still too tense to make any headway, he turned to the com unit. "Send Onyx to my quarters."

There was a brief pause. "Onyx has been checked out, Sir. Should I recall her?"

Galen frowned. "No. Just send me Jaide."

Instead of the response he'd expected, there was another, longer pause. "Jaide's in the repair lab."

"Just send me a gods damned companion droid!" Galen snarled.

"Yes, Sir!" the man on the other end of the com unit responded.

Sprawling on his bunk, Galen stared at the ceiling, trying to untangle the mayhem in his mind. From the massing military presence beyond the perimeter of their colony construct ship, he was reasonably certain they'd stumbled upon a fairly sophisticated race of beings—clearly aggressive.

It seemed to also follow that they couldn't have the capability for space travel, or much in the way of space travel, or they would've encountered them before.

Of course they were from a different galaxy altogether than he was so it was possible they had space travel capabilities. They just hadn't devised, or discovered, any method of making the great leaps necessary for intergalactic travel as his own people had.

Getting up abruptly, he moved to the com unit. "Ken-so!"

"Yes, Sir!"

"See if you can put a report together for me from the scout ships indicating whether or not these people have intergalactic, or inner solar system, flight capabilities. If there hasn't been enough data collected yet, then have the scout ship on the fourth planet launch some drones to survey for any sign of them."

There was a slight hesitation in Ken-so's response, enough to alert him to the fact that Ken-so was struggling to contain his curiosity about the request. Finally, he merely affirmed the order, however, and said the report would be sent to him as soon as possible. "Anything else, Sir?"

Galen hesitated, wrestling with the impulse to ask where their biological subject was at the moment. He finally tamped it with the reflection that the military was likely to interpret the launch of scout drones as an act of war, as tempted as he was to order a search for her. "That will be all for now Contact me at once if there is any significant change in the situation with the forward scout ship."

"Admiral?" Ken-so asked hesitantly.

"What?"

"Should I order the constructs to cease preparations?"

A jolt went through Galen. "You mean to say that hasn't been done yet?" he growled.

"N-no, Sir," Ken-so stammered.

Galen ground his teeth. He was surrounded by idiots! "Then I think it might be wise to do so, don't you Ken-so? Or hasn't it occurred to anyone yet that we already have an incident on our hands?"

"Yes, Sir! I'll see to it at once, Sir!"

Releasing an irritated huff of breath, Galen scrubbed a hand over the whiskers on his jaw and then raked his hair from his face with his fingers, creating more havoc with his hair as he tugged on the locks. Frowning at the evidence of his unkempt appearance, he moved from the com unit to his shaving mirror and peered at himself. The face looking back at him came as something of a jolt.

He was a disgrace to his uniform, he thought in disgust—several days growth of beard—or maybe weeks—he couldn't recall the last time he'd shaved—and his hair was even worse. The neat military cut he generally wore—or had when he was actually a standing officer of the Royal Confederation of Star Systems—had completely vanished. There was no sign, now, that he'd ever shorn it. He distinctly recalled, though, that he had carefully shaved the hair from either side of his scalp and trimmed the black hair in the center to the required maximum length of three inches so that it formed a bristling cockade from his forehead to the hairline before he'd presented himself to the review board.

Of course, that was when he'd discovered the conditions of his re-instatement.

He had to suppose he hadn't cut it since, though he discovered he couldn't actually recall.

He'd spent the first week out 'celebrating' his release from prison by getting roaring drunk and lying in his cabin in a drunken stupor—at least a week.

Maybe a little more than that?

Shaking his thoughts, he studied the parts of his face that he could see for several moments—his forehead and eyes—and finally moved back to his bunk and sprawled on it again. He didn't just look like hell. He looked old! When the hell had that happened? While he was recovering from his wounds in the med center? During his hellish incarceration in the prison?

During the trip out to the ass end of the universe where he realized he had been banished for life?

He frowned, trying to calculate his age.

He wasn't old enough to *look* old, he finally concluded—nearly twelve annums older than he'd been when he'd first risen to the rank of admiral, but he'd been *young* then—no older than Ken—so was now.

A buzz at the door of his quarters finally distracted him from his unpleasant thoughts and he rolled up to a sitting position. "Permission to enter!" he barked at the door.

The panel vanished, revealing a trio of companion droids.

Galen stared at them blankly for a moment, having been so caught up in his thoughts he'd forgotten he'd summoned them. As he surveyed them, however, anger replaced his surprise.

The one in the forefront was smiling at him seductively—but her head was definitely listing to one side at an awkward angle. The one directly behind her seemed to be missing an arm. He scowled at them but lifted his hand and beckoned them inside. "Turn."

Obedient as ever, the three companion droids pirouetted for him and finally faced him again, their expressions expectant.

Galen sighed in disgust. "Were any of you, by chance, *not* involved in the brawl on C deck last month?" he asked tightly.

Chapter Three

Bree frowned in puzzlement as she watched the frenetic activity from the alien craft abruptly cease. For several moments, it almost seemed as if someone had switched the mechanical monsters off. They froze where they were, mid-motion, and then, after a few moments, they stopped whatever they'd been doing, turned, and began to head back inside of the ship.

That was almost as bizarre as their behavior before.

Crane her neck though she could, however, she couldn't see that there was anything the military had done to make the robots react in that manner. The soldiers had surrounded the ship and the activity around it, but they were merely gaping at the robots as she had. There hadn't been a single shot fired nor any demands from the military commanding them to halt and desist.

She discovered after a bit, though, that not all of the robots had returned to the ship. One, this one more humanoid in appearance than most of the others, had parked itself at the foot of the gangplank. As she stared at it, a voice emerged from it, magnified so that it echoed across her grove.

Whatever it was saying, however, was as much a mystery as everything else that had happened. *She* certainly couldn't understand the language.

When it stopped speaking, there was silence for nearly ten minutes. Finally, a man wearing an officer's insignia lifted a bullhorn and bellowed back at the machine. "You have invaded in the United States of America! State your intentions!"

The robot swiveled to face the man who'd spoken, but another ten minutes or so passed before it responded—in the same language as before.

Settling a little more comfortably on her tree limb, Bree listened to the 'conversation' for nearly an hour. The man with the bullhorn would bellow a question, or a demand, at the robot and the robot would, after a lengthy delay, spout a string of gibberish in response.

While she was perched in the tree, the redneck brigade arrived in beat up trucks, waving everything from hunting rifles to shotguns and beer bottles. Churning up the dirt in the ditches on either side of the road, which was still clogged with arriving military vehicles, blowing the truck horns and bellowing rebel yells, they skidded to a halt when they finally reached the barricade the military had devised and poured out of the trucks.

They were immediately met with resistance.

The soldiers gathered around to watch the proceedings in her orchard turned to meet the redneck 'army' and ordered them back. The rednecks protested, loudly, informing whoever was in command that it was their damned territory and they had the right to defend it from the alien sons-of-bitches!

Bree narrowed her eyes angrily. It was *her* damned territory! She'd inherited the farm from her parents and nobody had the right to be there but her—not the damned rednecks, not the military!

But they'd run *her* off—of her own property!

She saw they didn't chase off the redneck brigade. They were ordered back. They were told not to shoot until or unless an attack was commanded, but they were allowed to stay as long as they didn't get rowdy. The soldiers didn't even try to confiscate their guns!

She climbed down from the tree when she finally got tired of clinging to the limbs of her perch and settled at the bottom, trying to decide what to do. Now that she'd had time to calm down somewhat, she was excruciatingly aware of her state of near nakedness. She distinctly remembered that she'd dashed inside to grab her jeans, shoes, and her truck keys, but she couldn't remember what she'd done with them—dropped them, she supposed when that *thing* had grabbed her. As tempted as she was to march back to her place and demand that they allow her inside her house, the prospect of having to run the gauntlet of red-necks and soldiers was daunting to say the very least.

The alternative was to go to her nearest neighbor's house as she was, though, and that didn't appeal to her either. Finally coming to a decision, she got up, brushed at her butt to remove the debris from the ground and marched back toward her place. If nothing else, she was determined to get a few things from her place—whatever she could—and remove it from the path of almost certain destruction before she had to find some place to wait to see what was going to happen.

Aside from the landing itself and the damned robots that had wrecked her orchard and taken apart the back end of her house, there hadn't actually been any overt signs of attack. She didn't doubt that there still would be, and that was why she intended to grab anything she could *while* she could!

* * * *

Galen couldn't say that he was entirely free of his unaccustomed turmoil by the time he'd showered, but he felt more in command, more certain of the decisions that had been floating around in his head while he'd bathed. Striding decisively to his com unit when he'd exited, he summoned a groom and strode to his locker to examine his uniforms. His palace uniform caught his eye immediately. He studied it indecisively for a moment and then removed it from the locker. He couldn't make a more impressive figure, he decided sardonically, than to appear in all the regal glory of the empire.

When the barber arrived, he settled in his desk chair naked, propped his feet on his bunk and crossed them at the ankles.

"Clean shaven? Or would you prefer to retain the facial hair around the upper lip and chin?" the droid inquired politely.

Galen frowned, drumming the fingers of one hand on the arm of his chair thoughtfully. "Which do you believe would be most appealing to a female?" he asked finally when he discovered he felt uneasy about either possibility. He was in his prime, but the view in his mirror hadn't been particularly reassuring.

There had been a time when he had seemed to be personable enough to appeal to plenty of females—at least females from his own galaxy—but, with the war, and then imprisonment and finally the trip here, it had been annums since he'd even had the opportunity to discover if that was still the case. To him, it seemed the annums or the pain from his wounds, or both, had carved the lines around his eyes deeper, although he was obliged to admit anxiety over his appearance might not make him the best judge. Would that evidence of time merely make him appear distinguished? Mature and thus more desirable because of the stability it suggested? Or would shaving away the hair that

covered his face merely emphasize the fact that he was older than the fresh faced recruits on board?

It seemed important to make the best first impression he could—assuming the object of his desires was still around to see.

He was inclined, he discovered, to keep the hair in the hope that it would hide whatever flaws lay beneath.

On the other hand, although he hadn't paid that much attention to the males, it seemed to him that they'd been clean-shaven. And, dimly, he recalled that the females he had courted before back home hadn't been particularly pleased about facial hair. Their skin was tender. The coarse hair chafed them.

The question seemed to have thrown the robot completely. When he emerged from his own contemplation, he discovered the droid was still collating data. He blinked. "My data suggests that the majority seem to prefer clean shaven."

He was referring, of course, to their females, Galen thought irritably. They hadn't collected enough on the beings from this world to know *what* they liked.

The worst of it was that, once he allowed the droid to shave him, he was committed.

He frowned over his unaccustomed indecision and finally ordered the droid to shave him. He might as well know right off if the female had any interest in him. If she wasn't, well where there was one, there were bound to be others. If he discovered she had no interest, maybe he would allow the hair to grow back before he tried again?

He wasn't particularly satisfied with that decision. In point of fact, he felt downright depressed.

It was absurd! He'd done no more than lay eyes on the female! For all he knew she was completely incompatible with him in temperament.

There was just no getting around the fact that he'd liked what he'd seen, though—enough to feel an immediate sense of possessiveness. He was inclined to think that counted for a great deal when he hadn't had that strong a reaction to a female before.

Of course, he'd been focused on his career before—not settling down. It could be his mind set that was responsible for the powerful reaction considering he'd finally accepted that he was a colonist now—not a soldier. The only thing he *could* look forward to accomplishing, now, was establishing a household, and that required a companion, which wasn't likely to be supplied by the bastards that had sent them off, whatever the other men thought.

Not that there was any certainty that he could breed little Galens on the female—they certainly weren't the same species—but it would be a hell of a lot more pleasant trying than settling into a domicile with nothing for companionship, or comfort, but a companion droid. He wasn't even altogether certain he could handle having rug rats running around him, as far as that went, but then he was sure he could always find something to do to keep himself occupied if it transpired that his domicile wasn't much of a haven.

It would take a lot of hard work to establish a colony.

If they were allowed to establish a colony in this system.

When the droid had finished, he climbed out of the chair and flicked the random hair off that the droid had missed. Striding to his locker, he opened the door and peered at himself in the larger mirror critically.

His face looked gaunt and hard without the softening effect of the wild growth of beard, but he decided he actually looked more youthful. Deciding he was just disgusted and tired of life in general and that accounted for his first impression, he felt some of his old confidence returning.

By the time he'd donned his dress uniform and carefully attached the epaulettes of his rank and his hard won metals of valor, he felt considerably better.

He still looked like a tropical flitter in his royal dress, in his opinion, but there was no getting around the fact that he'd always caused a flutter of interest in the females at the palace whenever he'd appeared in the ridiculous outfit.

Almost as an afterthought, he moved to the case that held his dress swords and settled them into the scabbards on either side of his shoulders. They were more a symbol of his status as a soldier than anything else since swords hadn't been used in centuries, but the women seemed to find them thrillingly barbaric.

Reasonably satisfied with his appearance, he left his quarters and strode briskly to the lift. "Bridge," he said in a clipped voice once the doors had closed behind him, assuming a rigid military stance.

He caused a stir when he reached the bridge again. Ignoring the stunned looks of the men, he strode to his command chair. On second thought, however, he decided not to sit for fear it would crease the fabric.

"What's our status?" he asked Ken-so, whom he discovered was gaping at him with something akin to awe.

"Nearing the fourth planet, Sir!"

Galen nodded. "Are we in range to project a holographic image?"

"Coming up in twenty septs, Sir," Ken-so responded when he'd checked the data.

"Good!" Galen said briskly, striding toward the vid displays and studying them critically. Finally, he pointed with an index finger. "Target this spot."

"Uh ... Sir! We haven't managed to interpret their language, Sir!"

Galen turned and glared at him. "Well, what's taking so gods damned long, Ken-so? How the fuck am I supposed to communicate with them without a translator?"

"We're working on it, Sir!" one of the techs reported uneasily. "It's just that they haven't *said* much. It doesn't give the computer much to work with ... and we haven't found any keys yet."

Galen frowned. "They must have broadcast capabilities," he said finally. "They have the flying machines. How else would they communicate with them? Scan the radio frequencies and see what you can come up with."

He could tell from the man's expression that that hadn't occurred to him. Red faced now with discomfort, he and the other techs scrambled to scan various bandwidths for chatter. In short order, they'd discovered a wealth of verbal communications—too much. More time was spent trying to decide whether it was all the same language or various languages—which they discovered to be the case.

"Anything?" Galen asked irritably when, by his guess, at least another thirty septs had passed.

"A few words ... here and there," one of the techs reported uneasily.

Galen's lips tightened. "Keep working on it! Are we in range for a hologram?"

Ken-so, whom the last question was directed to, nodded.

Galen moved to a point between his command chair and the navigation console.

Assuming a comfortable military stance, he nodded that he was ready. A few moments later, he watched as his image was projected at the foot of the gangplank of their scout ship.

The reaction of the aliens wasn't quite what he'd anticipated.

* * * *

Bree's lips tightened when the rednecks started pelting her with wolf-whistles and catcalls. Ignoring them, she stalked toward her house. Two soldiers intercepted her.

"Sorry, ma'am! You can't go in there."

Bree glared at them. "It's my damned house! Just who the hell do you think you are to tell me I can't go in!"

The two soldiers exchanged a questioning glance. "It's not safe, ma'am. You'll have to move to the rear—further might be better."

"Just as soon as I get some of my things," Bree responded, trying to duck around the pair.

The soldiers each caught one of her arms and guided her around and away from her objective. Bree dug in her heels and started berating both of them at the top of her lungs. "I'll sue! This is *my* property! You can't do this, damn it! I just want to get my things before you blow it all up!"

The rednecks, who'd been annoying her a few moments before, began to pile out of their trucks. "Hey! Get your hands off of her!" one of the men, who looked like he might have easily weighed three hundred pounds bellowed.

"Yeah, you commie bastard! Let her go! You can't throw her off of her own property!"

Before Bree entirely knew what was happening, she found herself the center of a heated exchange between the military and the rednecks.

Someone bellowed at them through a bullhorn just as the situation was beginning to look like it might escalate into a brawl.

"Bring the woman here!"

The rednecks looked like they might object to that, too, but Bree was ready, willing, and able to fight her own battle. "Are you in charge?" she bellowed back at the man.

"That's General Moore, ma'am," one of the soldiers responded.

"Well, good! Just the bastard I wanted to talk to!"

The man, who looked to be around his mid-forties, or possibly a very youthful fifty, leapt down off of the tank he'd been standing on and marched toward her and her escort.

"I could have you arrested and jailed, woman!" he growled. "This is a military operation!"

"And I could sue the shit out of you, too!" Bree shot back at him. "This is my land you've destroyed with your damned tanks and trucks! And that's my house and I'm going to get what I can out of it before you wreck the rest of it!"

"Have you lost your mind? You've got an alien craft in your backyard, in case you haven't noticed!"

Bree slung one of the soldier's hands loose and poked the man in the chest with her index finger. "I noticed it a hell of a while before you got here! And they haven't destroyed half as much as you have!"

The man's face hardened. "Get her out of here. If she gives you any trouble, arrest her!"

Bree gaped at the man in disbelief. Before she could think of a suitable response that wasn't prefaced with a string of curses, however, their attention was drawn by a sudden commotion among the people around them. The hands of the soldiers gripping her went lax, but Bree hardly noticed. Like everyone else, her full attention had been captured by the column of colored light that had abruptly appeared at the foot of the gangplank.

As she gaped at it, the column took shape, solidified.

Bree blinked at the apparition that emerged from the light, more stunned if possible than she had been by the sudden appearance of the light. Her heart seemed to put on brakes for a split second and then surged painfully against her chest wall. Her lungs seemed to suspend at the same moment. It wasn't until a wave of dizziness washed over her and a sense of suffocation that she remembered to breathe.

The strangest sense, almost of awe, swept over her when she realized the being that had materialized out of the light looked like an artist's conception of a heavenly being—an angel.

The perception didn't last more than a few moments, no longer than it took to regain control of her involuntary functions and begin to breathe again, for her heart to jump start itself.

Beyond the fact that he had iridescent white wings and the strange garment he wore that covered him from waist to knee and looked as if it had been spun from pure silver, he looked far more war-like than angelic. Bands crisscrossed his bare chest and the hilts of two swords could be seen protruding above the epaulettes on each shoulder from which a purple cape was draped. His skin, which was golden, glistened in the light as if it actually was metal. Deep blue and silver highlights gleamed in the black, black hair that bristled from his scalp in a spiky two inch wide Mohawk that followed the center of his head from his forehead to the base of his skull.

She couldn't tell much about his face from the distance beyond the fact that it appeared to be the face of a man—and his features were hard and angular—but she had the sense that it was as breathtaking as the rest of him.

Even as she emerged from her stupor, everyone else seemed to awaken.

"Is it ... do you think it's real?" someone—one of the soldiers nearby—gasped in a breathless whisper.

Murmurs from dozens of other throats followed, too many at once to pick out more than a word here and there, but she heard the word angel more than once before a cacophony of shots rang out. Those galvanized everyone.

"Hold your fire! God damn it! Who's shooting?" the general bellowed as everyone around them ducked, or dove, for cover.

It didn't take him long to discover it was the redneck brigade.

Even the melee that followed failed to distract Bree completely from the being. In spite of the distraction, as she dropped to a crouch on the ground, she glanced toward him again—fearfully. The shots, evidently, missed their mark. He seemed unfazed, although he was glaring in their direction now. He took a step forward and stopped abruptly.

And Bree realized in that instant that he wasn't standing in her orchard at all. The

image ... flickered when he moved.

Still awed, but far less intimidated when she realized the being wasn't actually there, Bree glanced around at the soldiers. When she saw they were preoccupied with trying to bring order to their ranks, she hesitated and then strode boldly across the ground that separated her from the being, determined to see him a little more closely. She'd managed to cover half the distance before she was spotted.

"Get back here! Woman! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"It's a hologram or something like that," she flung over her shoulder, pausing only a moment to look back at the general. "And I wish to hell you'd stop calling me woman, damn it! My name's Bree ... Bree Denton."

"They're inside the damned ship, Ms. Denton!" the man bellowed at her. "And you're in the line of fire! Get the hell out of there!"

Bree stopped again, feeling uneasiness creep through her, both at the possibility that the being might be inside the ship and the realization that she was liable to be shot down by the eager beavers in the group. When she glanced back toward the being, she saw that he was staring straight at her and another wave of uneasiness went through her.

Chapter Four

Galen felt a dizzying wave of triumph wash through him when he saw the female walk boldly toward him. He flicked a glance at the techs when she stopped in response to something the man had said to her. “Any clues as to what they’re saying?” he murmured.

The tech frowned. “Something about flames.”

Galen slid the man a disbelieving look. “There are no flames!”

The tech shrugged. “The computer says it’s the word for fire.”

Galen thought it over and then rolled his eyes. “They’re holding weapons, idiot! And they already tried to shoot me! Clearly they’re hostile and threatening to shoot! Give me something to work with here, gods damn it! Something about peace!”

“Why not try hand signals?” Ken-so suggested helpfully. “The galactic symbol for peace should work.”

Galen’s lips tightened, but he could see the female was torn between fear and curiosity. He gestured toward the ship behind him and then brought his hands together, touching his fingertips and thumbs together in the galactic gesture of peace.

Bree studied his gestures, frowning. “What do you suppose he means by that?” she called back to the general.

The general, who’d followed her several yards beyond the others, studied the being through narrowed eyes. “Probably that they mean to crush us,” he said decisively.

Bree’s pulse leapt with fear at that, but she wasn’t convinced—particularly when he made the same motions—gesturing first toward the ship and then carefully placing his hands together again.

Galen was doubtful that he was getting the message across, despite Ken-so’s certainty that they must recognize the galactic gesture of peace.

“I’ve got it!” the tech shouted abruptly. “The computer says this means ‘we come in peace’! Repeat after me, Sir.”

Galen forced himself to relax, even managing a faint smile. “Pieces we be to come!”

The woman gaped at him blankly.

Galen frowned. “Are you certain that’s it?”

“Why not try it with the gesture?” Ken-so suggested helpfully.

Shrugging inwardly, Galen tried again, gesturing toward the ship and then forming the temple of peace with his hands. “Pieces we be to come!”

She blinked at him and glanced at the man behind her again.

“Maybe it’s the order of the words?” Ken-so said doubtfully.

“To come we be pieces!” Galen tried, an edge creeping into his voice as the certainty settled in him that, whatever it was that he was saying, it wasn’t what his techs assured him.

The female began to chew on her lower lip. When she met his gaze, he realized that she was trying to keep from smiling. “Peace?”

Relief flooded Galen. He nodded. "Peace. We be to come."

Bree covered her mouth with her hand, trying to fight off the urge to laugh. "I think he's trying to tell us they've come in peace."

The general didn't look amused or the least bit appeased. He gestured at the wreck of her orchard. "This look like peace to you?" he snapped. "They breached our air space! Landed on American soil! That's an act of war!"

Bree studied the man irritably. "Maybe they didn't know we were here? Maybe it's just ... an accident?"

Galen frowned at his tech. "Any idea what any of that was?" he asked out of the corner of his mouth.

"Accident! It means to err!"

"Accident," Galen repeated, relieved that they were finally making some headway in communicating.

Bree turned to look at the being again curiously, wondering if he was just mimicking what she'd said or trying to explain. Ignoring the general's demands that she retreat immediately, she moved closer. It might be her one and only chance to study such a being up close and she wasn't going to miss it just because she was scared half to death.

She discovered he was even more breathtaking up close than she'd imagined. A bodybuilder would envy the man's physique and, unless the projection made him appear taller than he actually was, he was incredibly tall—at a guess six and a half feet tall, because he towered over her and she was average.

His face was more intriguing than beautiful like the rest of him, but so human-like that she was amazed—and more than intrigued.

His eyes weren't as human-like as his other features. They glowed, almost like the 'night eyes' of a predator and she found it impossible to determine the color. She pointed to his wings. "Real?"

He frowned, obviously confused but he seemed to grasp fairly quickly what she was asking him, possibly because he realized she was curious because she didn't have them. He flexed them for her, flipping his cape back and turning slightly so that she could see they sprouted from his shoulder blades.

"Wow," she gasped, flicking a look up at him.

He was smiling at her.

Her heart skipped several beats and began to knock against her chest wall like a jackhammer. She decided she had to reconsider her first assessment—his face *was* as beautiful as the rest of him, especially when he smiled.

He was beyond handsome. He was absolutely magnificent.

Hesitantly, she lifted a hand toward him. Without surprise, but with something strongly akin to disappointment, she saw her hand pass through his image. "Hologram. Where are you?"

He frowned.

She pointed toward the ship behind him. "There?"

He followed her gesture, clearly struggling to understand what she was trying to ask him. She saw the moment her question connected in his mind, saw doubt flicker across his features. After a moment, he tilted his head and looked up at the sky. Lifting a hand, he pointed upward.

Uneasiness slithered through Bree. She pointed to the ship behind him again.

“Why is this here?”

He frowned, speaking again in his own language to someone she couldn't see as he had the entire time they'd been trying to communicate. “Scout,” he replied finally, seemed to search for another word and finally pointed at the ground.

“Good fucking god! It's a scout ship!” the general gasped. “Ms Denton! Get your ass back here or ... you're on your own!”

Bree turned to give him a sour look. She was on her own? Not, I'm coming to get you? The general was striding swiftly back toward the men, however. Bree studied him worriedly for several moments and finally turned back to the being. She could see consternation in his eyes and knew that he hadn't expected the reaction he'd gotten ... which seemed to her to mean the general had misunderstood. “Study this planet, you mean?” she asked when she'd considered what else he might have meant.

He hesitated for several moments and finally nodded. “Study planet” His gaze focused on something she couldn't see. “Place this live us.”

That threw her and she could see his expression harden with frustration. He gestured widely with his hands, pointed at the ship and then himself and pointed at the ground. When she still looked confused—because she was—he looked around again and finally pointed toward her house.

Understanding dawned. She nodded. “Looking for a place to live?”

He studied her for several moments and finally nodded.

Bree frowned. “You can't live here. Sorry. This is my backyard—my orchard actually. And your robots broke my house,” she added, pointing to her house as he had.

“Final warning, Ms. Denton!” the general bellowed at her through his bullhorn.

Bree turned to glare at him. “You can't be serious! He's trying to negotiate peace, for god's sake! Do you really want to piss them off when they have ships like this?”

“It's a scout ship! There'll be others!”

“He didn't mean it like that! They were looking for a place to live!”

“So he says!”

Bree stamped her foot in frustration. “Yes! That's what he's saying ... I think.” She muttered the last under her breath, though.

“Name,” the being behind her said, dragging her attention back to him.

She looked at him questioningly, but finally touched her hand to her chest. “My name?”

He nodded.

“Bree.”

He tilted his head curiously. “Bree?”

She smiled at him. “I like the way it sounds when you say it. What's your name?”

He smiled back at her and touched his chest. “Galen.”

Her smile widened. “A dreamy name. Why aren't I surprised?” She sighed. “I have to go. I think that idiot is going to try to start a war. I have to call someone and try to explain this to them.”

He lifted his head, scanning the soldiers through narrowed eyes and another finger of uneasiness slithered through her. “Place safe—you go.”

“I'll get help. I promise! Don't do anything bad ... please?”

She could see he didn't understand and what was worse, he *had* seemed to understand the threat of war.

Maybe because he'd already suspected as much?

"Place safe, Bree—you go!" he said and that time his voice was grim.

"Oh shit!" Bree backed away from him, wondering if both sides were about to start a battle.

He was studying her when his image abruptly wavered and then vanished.

Turning, Bree fled back to the line of soldiers, searching the men for some sign of the general. She didn't get the chance to look for him. As soon as she reached the soldiers, she was seized and marched through the ranks.

"Let go of me! Alright! I'll leave, but you can be damned sure you'll hear about this!"

"Sorry, ma'am. We have orders to hold you."

"You could at least have the damned decency to let me get some damned clothes!" Bree said angrily. "Just let me go in the house and grab a few things?"

"Sorry, ma'am. No can do."

Bree ground her teeth in frustration as they escorted her to a jeep parked on the edge of the road and made her get in. Almost before she'd settled, the two men leapt into the jeep with her, started it, and took off down the road.

* * * *

Galen watched until Bree disappeared, swallowed up by the wall of soldiers that had surrounded the scout vessel. He had the sense that, in trying to communicate with her, he'd only succeeded in causing her trouble and he felt his belly twist with tension. He turned away finally and surveyed the crew on the bridge, settling his gaze on the techs trying to analyze the aliens' language.

"Keep working on it," he said tightly. "Something tells me we didn't really get our message across." He glanced at Ken-so. "Are the shields up and operational?"

Tale nodded. "Affirmative, Sir!"

Galen sighed tiredly. "Good! I think we'll need them."

Ken-so, he discovered, had approached him. "If I may, Sir?"

Galen lifted his brows at his first officer questioningly.

"Maybe we should simply extract the ship? According to our data, the fourth planet isn't inhabited. We haven't found any signs that these beings have ever even visited it."

Galen's lips tightened. "The problem is, they'll still see us as a threat, Ken-so. Aside from that, we don't know what sort of weapons they have at their disposal. If we try to launch, they're liable to breach our shields and blow our construct to hell. Then where will we be?"

Ken-so paled. "We still have the second scout, Sir."

"But most of our supplies and most of our constructs and habitat materials are sitting there!" Galen growled, pointing at the screens. "We might be able to get by without them, but I sure as hell don't want to try when there's a chance we can negotiate a peaceful agreement with these beings. Besides which, they aren't likely to agree to trade for brides for us if we're at war!"

Ken-so looked uncomfortable. "They're aliens, Sir. I'll admit the female that has caught your eye is very lovely ... but the council assured us they'd be sending brides as

soon as we'd had time to establish the colony."

Galen released an irritated huff of breath. After glancing around, however, he decided it would be best to take the discussion to a more private place. "Accompany me to my quarters." Turning, he surveyed the bridge. "Taldon—you have the bridge. If there are any important developments, contact me in my quarters."

Galen strode to his personal bar for a drink when he entered his quarters. "Care for one?" he asked without looking around.

"Thank you, Sir, but no. I'm on duty until shift change."

Galen sent him a look. "You're on duty all the time," he said dryly. "Just as I am."

Ken-so wrestled with that for a moment and finally shrugged. "Thank you, Sir. I'll have one."

Galen poured two small drinks and handed one to Ken-so. Setting his own down on his desk, he removed his dress swords, examined each carefully and placed them in the case that hung on his wall.

"I'm as anxious for a bride as you are" Ken-so began.

Galen sent him a sardonic look as he retrieved his drink and settled in his desk chair. "I don't think so, Ken-so," he said dryly.

Ken-so reddened. "There's a lot of work to be done establishing a settlement before it would actually be safe or comfortable for a female, however."

Galen nodded. "True ... but there's always a lot of work to be done on something, Ken-so. If you live long enough, you'll learn that putting off life while you're getting ready for it just means you miss out. I wasn't ready to have my wings clipped when I was your age either—there always seemed to be more important things that needed to be done and, in those days, there were always plenty of willing females to warm my bed that didn't have expectations of a permanent arrangement.

"Companion droids are a damned poor substitute for the real thing, Ken-so, particularly the ones we have in our pool."

"But that's just it, Sir," Ken-so said earnestly. "The pool was expected to take care of our needs until the council could send *suitable* brides. We don't know anything about these beings beyond the fact that they appear similar to us in some ways. When a man takes a bride its with the expectation of producing a family."

Galen shrugged. "You have your expectations. I have mine," he retorted dryly. Taking a sip of his drink, he set it aside. "Exactly when do you think the council is going to round up those promised brides and send them along?"

"And, just supposing they actually do—and I don't mind telling you I don't fucking believe they have any intentions of it—are you willing to settle for whatever they send? There are three hundred men on this ship. You think they're going to find three hundred females willing to travel this far, settle in an outpost that's primitive at best, four annums from the families they've left behind, and take whatever male is available? Back home, they have everything their little hearts desire, and plenty of choices as far as settling with a man.

"The brides they send, *if* they send any—and that's a big if—are going to be females with few choices, or no choices, or they wouldn't be willing to take part in this."

Ken-so paled. Looking around a little vaguely for a place to settle, he finally propped his back against the wall when he saw the only option was Galen's bunk. As

appalled as he was with what Galen had pointed out, however, he wasn't so lost to the present to consider it acceptable to flop on his commanding officer's bunk without invitation. "I ... hadn't thought about it like that," he said after a few moments.

"No and, thankfully, nobody else seems to have thought about it so far," Galen said briskly, "otherwise we would be looking at more riots than we've seen thus far. In point of fact, I'd be willing to bet every credit I have—which isn't many—that they wouldn't have gotten half these males on the ship to start with if they hadn't promised brides.

"And yet ... four annums since we left and no ship even now on the way. Doesn't that little detail bother you? You'd think two annums, or even three annums head start would be all they'd expect. After all, the scout ships ensure that we have a livable habitat upon arrival, online and ready to begin producing—theoretically, at least," he added dryly.

Ken-so frowned. "But ... even if we could trade with these beings for females, or convince the females themselves, we might not be looking at off-spring. A colony has no future without that. Besides, the female would not feel fulfilled without a family to care for. They would become dissatisfied and leave."

Again, Galen shrugged. "I've considered that. I suppose the only option would be to import a male to impregnate her, or seed, at least."

Ken-so gaped at him. "But it wouldn't be yours!"

Galen's lips tightened. "If it's in my woman's belly, it's mine by damn! I'm talking worse case scenario here. As you pointed out, a female isn't going to be content without babes and a discontented female isn't any more likely to stay around than a discontented male is.

"Anyway, I don't see why it wouldn't work. Not that I've had the gods damned chance to check everything out, but I'm damned if I can see why it wouldn't. They aren't *that* different—a bit on the runty side if the examples we've seen so far are any indication, wingless, and their pigmentation might be a little hard to get used to, but damned close otherwise."

He grinned abruptly. "I'm ready, willing, and able to give it my best shot, anyway." His smile was fleeting. A frown replaced it. "That is, if I can convince her and get my hands on her ... or get my hands on her and then convince her.

"Damn it to hell!" he growled, surging to his feet and beginning to pace. "I don't see how the fucking scout craft could've fucked up like that! We're going to be damned lucky if we can get out of this without having a war on our hands, and I've had enough fucking war to last me a lifetime!

"To say nothing of the fact that a war would make it damned hard to get hold of her."

Tale digested that for several moments. "There's no getting around the fact that we didn't come with the expectation, or firepower, for a war. What do you have in mind, then ... if you don't mind me asking?"

Galen released an annoyed breath and raked his fingers through his scalp lock. "If we could convince them we aren't looking for a fight we might be able to establish a forward base there. I think we're going to have to settle the colony on the fourth planet, though. Either they can't get to it because they don't have the capabilities or they don't want it—which stands to reason all things considered. Either way, they haven't claimed

it so we can ... without expectation that they'll be able to put up much of a fight for it even if they wanted to."

"You don't think it would make more sense to look for another star system with a planet that has a more temperate climate and possibly better resources?"

Galen shrugged. "We can leave that option open, but we could run into the same problem elsewhere. Finding a planet as lush as the third one in this system, that isn't already occupied, isn't going to be easy. We already know that from past colonization efforts. The only time that happens is when they wipe themselves out, die out from some other calamity, or if we happen to find one just budding where an advanced species hasn't yet emerged. We could look for a while before we stumbled on something that met that criteria.

"There's no going back. That's for certain. They were too keen to get rid of us to take it well if we turned around and went back."

Settling in his chair again, he considered the situation. "That belt that used to be a planet—the one we had originally targeted—has some potential—maybe a lot of potential. Send some scout drones to the belt to survey the debris for useful resources. We can divert any we find to the planet for mining. It wouldn't put as much strain on our current resources and might make up for losses if we can't extract the construct without damage."

Ken-so nodded with barely suppressed excitement. "I spotted some that appeared to be primarily ice myself. It would certainly be good to have a close source of water."

Galen nodded. "Leave those for now. There doesn't appear to be any surface water on that planet and there's bound to be a reason there isn't. Until we've set up a way to extract and contain the water it could be an exercise in futility."

"Yes, Sir!" Ken-so responded, then frowned. "If we're going to be shooting asteroids at it ... should we hold off on the base?"

"Better to be safe than sorry," Galen responded dryly. "We already have one scout/construct in jeopardy. Let's not risk the other one."

When Ken-so left, Galen removed his dress uniform and dragged on a serviceable jumpsuit of the type they wore for fieldwork since it was all too true that he was always on duty and could expect to be called upon at any moment. Downing the last of his drink, he sprawled on his bunk tiredly, but soon discovered that even the lulling properties of the drink couldn't combat the restlessness that had coiled inside of him since he'd first seen Bree.

Waiting had never been something he was good at—which was one of the things that had made imprisonment so hellish and the trip out even more hellish—although he'd done his best to cultivate patience since it was an integral part of a soldier's duties, and he found, now, that he had less than usual. He needed action to combat the restlessness. He needed something to do to keep himself occupied with thoughts other than those frustrating him now.

It chafed him that there was nothing he could do but wait. He couldn't even begin to formulate plans until he had more information.

He couldn't begin to negotiate with the beings on the third planet until they had some hope of communicating. The last attempt had been worse than useless.

Except that it had given him the opportunity to study *her* better.

Her curiosity about him had thrilled him more than anything he could recall. He

didn't think his first time with a female had excited him as much, and he'd damned near embarrassed himself that time. For a few minutes, he allowed himself to imagine what it would be like to actually touch her, to taste her, to merge his body with hers, but that only made him more miserably uncomfortable than he had been before and that was pretty fucking miserable.

More restless than before he'd lain down, Galen sat up abruptly and threw his legs over the side of the bunk, hunching over and settling his face in his hands for a few moments, trying to convince himself that he just needed *a* female, not that one. He thought she was beautiful, and beyond that, he'd already seen that she was intelligent, curious, and brave, but that didn't mean there wouldn't be plenty of others that appealed to him.

Reluctance settled in his gut in a tight knot, though, when he considered looking for another.

It dawned on him abruptly that she might already be claimed.

He hadn't seen any sign of a male that appeared to consider her his, though.

Of course, that didn't necessarily mean she wasn't claimed—her male might have been gone for some reason.

She had had no babes, though. She would not have gone far from them. She wouldn't have boldly walked up to him, curious or not, and left babes unattended in such a situation.

And, if she did not have off-spring, her male could not have a very strong hold on her even if she *was* already claimed.

He pushed the thoughts from his mind as he pushed himself to his feet. The important thing was to claim her before anyone else could—which meant time was not on his side.

He glanced around his quarters, for the first time considering how it might appear to a female. It was comfortable enough—far more comfortable than his prison had been—but he couldn't convince himself that it would have much appeal to a female. And it wasn't large enough to give a female room to flush her nest out with things of comfort. She would want to do that, he was sure. *He* wanted her to be able to do that. He was tired of his bare bones existence.

He didn't just want a female in his bed at night. He wanted a pretty face to greet him when he came in from working hard all day, the sound of someone else's voice.

He was going to have to work on mastering her language. As much as he enjoyed just listening to the sound of her voice, it could make things damned uncomfortable if they couldn't actually communicate beyond hand motions.

His current quarters wouldn't do, he decided, searching his mind for any possibility aboard the ship that might be more appealing. Unfortunately, space was limited with so many colonists.

Reluctantly, he accepted that he couldn't realistically make an attempt to entice her away from her people until he had something better to offer.

The only option was to establish the colony habitats as quickly as possible.

The plan had been to construct one initially, for the men, and then to construct the second and third when the council began to send brides for them so that they would have room for families.

He wasn't inclined to wait, himself, on those mythical brides, particularly not

now. Even if he did believe it, which he didn't, he didn't think it was possible that any female they might send would appeal to him as much as Bree did.

That being the case, the sooner they started the colonies the better—and he thought they might as well shoot for establishing all three. Once he'd managed to get Bree—and he would, somehow—the others were bound to want the local females, as well. They could be bursting at the seams inside of an annum if the others were as enthusiastic as he was if they didn't go ahead with construction of the sister settlements.

The asteroids could be the key to getting what he wanted faster—or even at all if he couldn't negotiate to get their first scout ship back.

With that in mind, he settled at his desk and focused on examining the data that had been collected on the new world where they'd be building.

Chapter Five

The being prowling back and forth before what appeared to be a high level political/security meeting looked anything but angelic at the moment. Bree wasn't certain it was even the same one she'd seen before until he turned and paced in her direction.

Unless they looked a lot alike, it was definitely the alien who'd called himself Galen.

Bree felt a loosening of the tension that had gripped her since the stone faced men had appeared at her door and virtually dragged her to the chopper that had landed in the parking lot of the hotel where she'd been staying. They had unnerved the hell out of her, refusing to tell her what was going on or why she'd been practically kidnapped.

She still wasn't certain why they'd brought her since they hadn't bothered to explain, but she forgot her uneasiness over their secretiveness as she studied Galen.

She'd almost managed to convince herself in the weeks since their encounter that he couldn't possibly have been as magnificent as he'd seemed, but she saw her imagination hadn't exaggerated—far from it. It hadn't done him justice.

The clothing he now wore seemed, in some ways, to be less 'dressy' than the odd sort of kilt thing he'd worn before, and yet he looked just as wonderful in the one piece suit that seemed molded to his amazing form.

"Ms. Denton—they want you on the floor. If you'll come this way," one of the men who'd escorted her said, stepping to the door of the small room where they'd been waiting, she supposed, to be summoned.

She sent him a cool look—just to let him know that she was still thoroughly pissed off about their high-handed attitude. They'd just about scared the piss out of her! *Completely* unnecessary! If they'd just *told* her they were going to take her to see the alien again, she would've led the way!

Conversation ceased when the men escorted her through a door and she found herself in a room built much like a theater.

Galen had center stage.

He lifted his head when she started down the steps, abruptly as perfectly still as a hunter that had spied its prey. In some ways it was more unnerving than the first time she'd caught his attention—drawn it to herself by going close enough to study him—but it was sensual excitement that put every nerve ending into high alert, made her breath catch in her lungs and her heart race. It made her knees turn to water, made it nearly impossible to negotiate the shallow stairs downward without stumbling and rolling to the bottom.

It embarrassed her when she finally realized she'd completely ignored everything going on around her and gone as directly toward him as if he'd summoned her and she had no mind or will of her own. Coming to an abrupt awareness as she reached the level where his image had been projected, Bree stopped, feeling her face heat as she finally managed to break eye contact with Galen and glanced around at the other men in the

room.

“Why did you bring me here?” she asked without focusing on anyone in particular since she couldn’t tell who was supposed to be in charge.

A heavy set, white haired man responded. He looked vaguely familiar and she knew he must be a congressman, but she couldn’t seem to gather her wits enough to summon his name.

“We were given to understand that you managed to communicate with this ... being.”

Bree felt her embarrassment deepen at the comment. She wouldn’t have claimed such a thing herself. She *had* managed to grasp what he was trying to get across—she thought—but it wasn’t as if they’d had an actual conversation or that both of them had gone away from the meeting with a clear idea of what was going on.

She frowned. It was hard learning a new language with a teacher who had a firm grasp of both her language and the one she was trying to learn. It shouldn’t have surprised her, knowing that, that Galen was still having trouble with the language, but it did.

Wryly, she supposed that was because she couldn’t shake the sense that he was some sort of magical, immortal being because of his appearance. Or maybe just because she thought his people must be tremendously more advanced, and smarter, than her own because they’d come from somewhere else in the universe.

“I got the impression that they hadn’t intended for the ship to land on Earth,” she said finally.

“So he’s been trying to convince us,” the white haired man said dryly.

She sent him an irritated look. “And you’re having a hard time believing this because?”

The man’s face tightened. “It didn’t crash,” he said sarcastically. “Beyond that, it managed to elude our entire defense net!”

Bree considered that. “And the main thing you’re worried about is that it did, right?”

“It should be something you’re worried about, too!”

“I would be if they’d shown any sign of aggression!” Bree snapped. “It seems to me that the very fact that they shut everything down is proof that it wasn’t intended the way you took it.”

“Yet!” the man shot back at her.

“We didn’t have you brought here to debate with you over this situation!” the man to his right snapped impatiently. “We need to try to get to the heart of his intentions.”

Bree plopped her hands on her hips. “Now that you bring that up ... It seems to have escaped you that I have rights as an American citizen that you tromp all over when the notion strikes you! All you had to do, damn it, was ask! I don’t appreciate you sending your goons to collect me like some sort of Nazi secret police squad!”

“This is a matter of national security, Ms. Denton!” another man pointed out.

“Which does *not* suspend *my* rights!” Bree snapped back at him. “I’ve read the Constitution. There is nothing in there that says you have the right to suspend *my* rights any time you take the notion and it suits your purposes!”

The men at the table exchanged angry looks. Finally, the white haired man spoke

again. “Your country would appreciate your cooperation in this matter and any help you can give us in settling this situation,” he said tightly.

Not very graciously, Bree noted, and she didn’t know who’d died and made them gods anyway! When it came right down to it, they were just citizens the same as she was! They didn’t have *more* rights because they’d been voted into office!

She shook her anger off with an effort and turned to look at Galen again. “I don’t know how much help I can be, but I’m willing to try.” She frowned, turning to look at the men in the panel again. “What *is* going on? No one has let me go *near* my place since the ship landed.”

The man spoke into a microphone and a wide screen TV behind Galen lit up. It was an aerial view of her house and orchard—and the alien craft. Bree’s heart skipped a beat. After staring at it for several moments, she moved around Galen to study it more closely.

Except for the ship, her place almost looked completely untouched!

She glanced at the panel. “When was this taken?”

“It’s a live feed.”

Certain she must be mistaken, Bree stared hard at the screen, but she could see her house, which had been at least partially dismantled by the robots, looked completely untouched now. The huge holes the robots had been excavating had disappeared and the uprooted trees, looking a bit limp from being pushed over, were now upright again.

She glanced at Galen and abruptly smiled. “You fixed it! You told the robots to put everything back the way it was?”

Galen’s eyes gleamed as they skimmed over her. A faint smile curled his lips. He gestured at the image and spoke to her in his own language. She couldn’t understand a word of it, but she knew he must be explaining that he had, or asking her if she was satisfied.

She struggled with the impulse to race to him and hug him enthusiastically, reflecting that she’d really look like an idiot if she did since he was nothing but an image himself. “Thank you!” she exclaimed. “I thought it was ruined!”

She turned to grin at the sour faced men on the panel. “He fixed my house! He fixed my orchard!”

The main speaker didn’t relax by a fraction. “Yes. We put the military on high alert when the robots were activated again, but as far as we can see that’s all they did—clean up.”

His lack of enthusiasm tamped hers. She supposed she could understand that they didn’t give a shit that her home and her main source of income had been restored to her, but it seemed to her that they could at least appreciate the spirit of the gesture. “They made reparations! That should count for something! Don’t tell me you still think they’re invaders?”

The man gave her a look as if to say she was a moron. “They *did* invade, Ms. Denton! And we have a lot more to worry about than a few damned trees!”

Bree glared at him.

He gestured toward the screen again and when she turned, she saw the scene had changed. Her stomach went weightless when she found herself staring at a view of space.

“They’re out there. We just don’t have any idea of what they’re up to.”

Bree studied the screen in frowning concentration. She couldn't really tell much about it, however. "Is this a view from one of the satellites?"

"The telescope. We were able to realign it for a better view of the invaders."

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Bree turned and looked at Galen questioningly.

He strode toward her. Stopping beside her, he scanned the screen and finally pointed with an index finger. "Draken."

"Mars," the white haired man promptly contradicted.

Galen's lips tightened. He swiveled around and glared at the man. "Draken," he repeated grimly.

Bree glanced from one man to the other.

"That's as far as we've managed to get!" the speaker snapped. "Every time we point out that the planet he's talking about is called Mars, he gets furious and calls it Draken! They're doing something there. We can't quite make it out. The telescope wasn't designed for studying our solar system. It's designed to discover Earth-like planets around distant stars—but we can tell they've been damned busy around Mars and also the belt beyond it."

It struck Bree almost instantly what the problem was. It was the possessive way he said Draken, she thought. She thought if the panel hadn't been so busy claiming it themselves they would've realized before she did that he was claiming the planet.

They would've also realized what the activity around her place denoted.

She considered for a moment how to get her question across and finally gestured widely with her arms to encompass the building where they stood then pointed to him and then the glowing dot under dispute. "Building? You building there?"

He frowned, glancing around at the building. She saw when it clicked in his mind. "Ja. Building dere," he confirmed. "Need scout. Trade tings."

Bree nodded and turned to the panel. "I'm pretty sure he's saying his people have claimed Mars and renamed it Draken. They want their ship back—but they don't want any trouble. They're willing to trade for it."

She hadn't expected to create an uproar, but she hadn't even finished explaining when every man on the ten man panel began shouting angrily at once.

Taken aback, she gaped at them. It dawned on her after a few moments, though, that they'd suspected what she'd told them. They'd just been furious that he would *dare* to claim it.

She supposed she could see their point. She'd always thought about the entire solar system as belonging to the human race—birth right, she supposed—but the fact was that they hadn't actually claimed it because they'd yet to put even a single man down on the surface on any other planet to plant a flag and claim it. Clearly, she'd been dragged into the middle of a territorial dispute and she wasn't comfortable about trying to referee such a thing. She was no politician—thankfully!

She had a strong sense of fairness, though, and as far as she could see, like it or not, Galen's people had beat them to the next piece of real estate.

"Tell him he can't have it!" the speaker said angrily when the other members had quieted in response to his pounding on his gavel.

Bree stared at him in disbelief. "They claimed it."

"They didn't have the right to claim it! We have plans already years in the works to settle a colony on Mars ourselves!"

“Really?” Bree gasped. “I didn’t know that! Cool!” She stopped, frowning. “But ... we haven’t claimed it.”

“We have! We just haven’t settled it yet!”

Bree frowned, scanning her mind for some sort of precedent. “Don’t we have laws about squatters rights? Something about possession being nine tenths of the law?”

“*They* are aliens! Our laws don’t apply to them!” one of the men snapped.

“But they apply to us,” Bree argued. “Don’t we have to respect their right to Draken since they’ve claimed it and they’re settling there?”

“Mars!” one of the other men snapped. “We named it Mars!”

Bree shrugged. “What did the Indians call America before we claimed it and renamed it?”

One of the men actually had the grace to look uncomfortable. The others just glared at her like they wanted to pinch her head off.

“Who’s side are you on, Ms. Denton?” the speaker growled.

“The side of fairness!” Bree snapped. “It isn’t as if it was *ours* to give to them or deny them to start with! Aside from the fact that I don’t think you—or we—can do anything about it if they want to claim it! Don’t you think it would be a lot smarter to try to make friends with them than to try to start a fight? Especially since they seem to be content to take an uninhabited—and not especially great place to live—and not bother us?”

“How do we know they’ll be content, Ms. Denton? Do you know something we don’t? Because, claims aside, we don’t want them camped on our back doorstep!”

Bree gaped at him. “You’re absolutely *insane* to try to pick a fight with them!”

“We didn’t start anything! *They* started it by invading our solar system!”

Bree plunked her hands on her hips. “They obviously thought this planet was free for the taking or they wouldn’t have landed their construction ship on it! They obviously don’t want a war or they wouldn’t be willing to try to negotiate a trade to get it back! If you weren’t absolutely stupid and incompetent and completely willing to disregard the will and needs of the people for your own ends, you’d be trying to negotiate a peace agreement instead of trying to start a war we might or might not be able to win!

“I’m on *our* side—and by that I mean the people of this country—this world—not the side of greedy politicians with Napoleon complexes!”

“Trade tings!” Galen said, abruptly entering the conversation and drawing everyone’s attention. He made the gesture he’d made before when he was with her. “Pieces.”

He lifted his hand, then, and an image appeared in the air beside him—another hologram—which showed a far better view of the planet Mars—Draken—and the ships floating in orbit around it. As they watched, a huge meteor zoomed into view. Contrary to Bree’s expectations, however, it didn’t collide with the surface. It landed with a hard thump that threw up red dust in every direction, but not with the force one would’ve expected. Even before the dust settled, robots had appeared. Zipping purposefully toward the huge rock—which looked to be twice the size of the ship that had landed in her orchard, they began carving away at it with what looked like lasers, and probably were. Even Bree, who had no real knowledge of geology, could see gleaming veins of gold in the rock as it began to fall apart and she suspected there were any number of other valuable ores and minerals to be had from it.

She glanced at the panel of men to discover they were all slack-faced with avarice.

When she looked back, she saw a view of her orchard from ground level—probably from the robots around the ship.

“Trade,” Galen repeated. “Dis.”

She saw anger and resentment slowly replace the glazed looks of greed on the men’s faces.

“They’re mining the asteroid belt,” one of the men said tightly, clearly furious about it.

“It isn’t as if *we* could,” Bree said pointedly.

“In time we could have,” one of the other panel members said pointedly.

Clearly, language barrier or not, Galen hadn’t had any trouble deciphering the expressions of the men. “Trade womens also.”

Bree felt her jaw slide to half cock. She turned a wide eyed look of disbelief at Galen. Slowly, indignation settled in her as comprehension dawned.

A look of consternation flickered across Galen’s face. He studied her uneasily for a moment and finally focused on the men he was trying to negotiate with—barter!

“*What* did he say?” the speaker demanded.

Bree felt her face heat—mostly with anger. “He seems to think you’d be willing to trade them women for the ores, too!”

The men exchanged questioning looks. “What would they want women for?”

Bree gaped at him in outrage. “What the *hell* do you mean by that?”

The man reddened. “You misunderstand, Ms. Denton.”

“I guess I do. What the hell *did* you mean?”

“They’re aliens! What else could I mean? I’m just saying—I don’t understand what use they’d have for the women of this planet. He must have meant something else.”

Bree glared at Galen. “It seemed pretty clear to me!” Just to be sure, although she didn’t think she’d misunderstood, she touched a hand to her chest. “Women?”

His gaze flickered over her face. Abruptly, he reached for her. Bree didn’t flinch until his hand closed around her upper arm.

Sirens went off in her head, but such a jolt of shock went through her that he’d dragged her up against his length before she could wrap her mind around the fact that he was actually *standing* beside her—had been the entire time—when she’d thought he was just a hologram as he had been before. She was too stunned to even attempt to evade.

She wasn’t sure, afterwards, whether she would’ve tried to or not, but at that moment her senses had gone haywire with her shock. She felt the impact when her body collided with his only dimly, felt the arm he’d slipped around her upper back to lift her upwards to meet his descent only peripherally.

The moment his hard mouth settled over hers, though, what little wit she had completely deserted her. Everything inside of her focused entirely on his touch. His mouth was warm and hard and demanding. His breath and his taste invaded her before she had entirely grasped that it would and it was like downing a straight shot of liquor. Dizzying heat shot to her core and then blanketed her in a wave, drawing the strength from her muscles as it did.

He was breathing heavily when he lifted his mouth from hers. “Mine womens. Make fix tings, I come, ja. Take,” he said huskily.

If she hadn't locked her knees when he set her away from him, she was pretty sure she would've just melted into an insensible puddle at his feet. As she stared at him in blank shock, he seemed to disintegrate before her eyes. One moment, he was as solid as anything around her. The next, he seemed to waver like a static image on a TV with poor reception, and then he was gone completely.

Chapter Six

Bree discovered she wasn't the only one shocked by Galen's sudden disappearance because, apparently, she *also* wasn't the only one who'd thought it was a hologram they were talking to. It was the panic of the others that finally penetrated the blissful haze that had enveloped her in the wake of Galen's masterful kiss.

Drawing their guns, whipping their heads around as if they expected him to reappear any moment, the secret service hustled the 'important' men from the room, leaving her gaping at their backs.

The goons that had escorted her to the security meeting, grabbed her, hauled her out again, and deposited her on the steps of the building before she'd fully grasped that she'd been booted out. She didn't get anything but a 'thank for your services—they're no longer needed' muttered at her before they'd abandoned her and she was so shocked—both by what they did and what Galen had done that they'd almost made it back inside before she realized what was happening.

"Hey! How am I supposed to get home?" she demanded in dawning anger.

They didn't even glance back. She stared at them in complete disbelief and then glanced around to see if she could see any sign that someone was coming to pick her up. Aside from a few disinterested glances from people passing by on the street, however, there was no one.

With anger and anxiety surging through her, she rushed to the doors and discovered they were locked. When she'd beat on the doors for a few minutes and searched for a speaker and failed to find any way to summon anyone, she finally turned away and looked around the area uneasily.

"The bastards!" she muttered, struggling not to panic, trying to think what to do to get back 'home' when they'd hauled her off without a cent in her pocket. Finally, after her third try, she managed to talk a taxi driver into taking her back with the promise of payment at the end of the very long drive. It was extortionate, but she didn't have any choice. There was no way she'd get on a bus or train without money up front.

Settling in the back seat with relief warring with fury and the residue of her anxiety, Bree glared at the back of the driver's seat. "Just see if I volunteer to help those bastards again!" she muttered.

Not that she had, but she thought, maybe, it would be a good idea to hide from the government for a while so they couldn't 'volunteer' her services again. She hadn't considered that when she'd gotten the hotel room. The military wouldn't let her go home—even for any of her personal things—but they *had* unbent sufficiently to send a couple of soldiers in to rifle through her belongings and stuff a few things in a pillow case for her.

And then they'd escorted her to the edge of town and dumped her within a couple of blocks of several hotels.

She'd been more focused, then, on finding shelter than anything else. The media had found her by the following morning. They hadn't been able to get within miles of

her place to find out what was going on and they were in a pure frenzy to discover what they could. She hadn't felt inclined to enlighten them. As far she was concerned, the situation was volatile enough without adding panic of the general populace to the mixture. Anyway, she had a strong suspicion that they'd dismiss her tale as the ravings of a fruitcake.

Besides, she hadn't wanted to stir up more trouble for the aliens. She hadn't seen anything about Galen's behavior to make her feel threatened. Despite the military's slant on it, the landing hadn't had the 'feel' of an invasion. She wasn't certain she believed Galen's 'accident' story, but it did occur to her that it was possible the ship, obviously completely controlled by computers, had miscalculated somehow. Maybe it hadn't occurred to the makers that they'd encounter higher intelligence and the ship hadn't been programmed to look for it?

She wasn't sure they'd ever know since it was so hard to try to communicate with them.

She'd had to sneak out of the damned hotel in the dead of night to escape the media and find another place to stay—which turned out to be a really bad place since she couldn't find a hotel that would take her that didn't require ID *except* those that catered to the drug/prostitution trade.

The government people shouldn't have been able to track her down either!

She discovered when they finally arrived at the hotel that the manager had already cleaned out her room and taken her stuff. She thought she was going to have to get physical with the bastard to get her things, but the threat of calling the police did the trick. He coughed up her belongings. She paid off the taxi and sent him on his way—the thieving bastard!

She had to walk several blocks to a more respectable area of town to call another cab. When he arrived, she had him drive her to a cheap rental company and rented a car.

She didn't really have anywhere to go, she realized in dismay. Her parents were dead and her other relatives scattered. In any case, even if she did beg a place to stay from them, the damned media and/or the government could track her down.

Deciding she could at least make it harder for them, she drove to the next city. She didn't have any trouble finding the seedy part of town. She'd always had a special knack for ending up in the slums wherever she went and this time was no exception, but at least it was welcome for a change. When she'd found the best looking/cleanest slum hotel she could, she rented the room for a week and dragged her belongings in.

The 'incident' had been circulating through her mind along with dozens of other things the entire time she'd been trying to find a safe place to light. She'd been so worried, though, it hadn't stood out. She hadn't been able to focus on it—hadn't wanted to—but she discovered it had moved to the forefront of her mind while she'd showered.

She wasn't certain it would have then except that her skin seemed more sensitive than usual—or at least her awareness of her body was more marked than usual. She'd studied herself speculatively while she'd bathed, trying to recall how long it had been since she'd been aware of her femininity, thought about the fact that she was a woman and had needs.

At least three years, she finally decided. She wasn't actually clear on how long before her parents death it had been since she'd had a relationship of any description—even a brief hook up—but she thought it hadn't been long at all. She liked men. She

enjoyed dating, and she'd enjoyed the occasional, casual fling to scratch an itch. She saw no reason not to—even though her parents certainly disapproved. It wasn't their choice of lifestyle, but then it wasn't their life and she felt fully entitled to live her own life as she saw fit. As long as she didn't hurt anyone, she had the right to live her life according to her rules—not everybody else's.

The car accident had changed all that. Like most people, she supposed, she'd thought of her parents as immortal as if they were always going to be there. When they'd been torn from her so suddenly, she'd not only been devastated at the loss, she'd *felt* lost herself. She didn't think she'd ever actually even made the decision to take up their life. It had begun because she'd been told by the lawyer that she had to wind up their affairs for them since they hadn't had the chance and somehow she'd lost track of the time.

Three years. It came as an unpleasant jolt to realize she'd been coasting along for three years without any awareness that her life was passing.

She didn't see much in the way of change to her body. If anything, she looked more toned from all the hard labor it took to run the small farm/orchard. Her skin was browner—which dismayed her and made her wonder what her face looked like when she'd obviously been careless about sun damage—and dry.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd exfoliated and moisturized her skin. She hadn't even shaved her legs or pits! Luckily, her body hair was blond and fine—more like peach fuzz than gorilla hair, but it was still disturbing to think she'd lost interest in taking care of her appearance to that degree.

She hadn't once given a thought to what that beautiful creature must think of her appearance! She'd been too enthralled with him to think about it.

When she got out of the shower, she wiped the fog off the mirror and studied her blurry reflection, grimacing when she realized there were fine lines around her eyes and on her forehead from squinting. Otherwise there didn't seem to be much skin damage from exposure to the sun, but her hair had been bleached out to the color of a new penny and it had grown far longer than she'd let it grow since she'd been a little girl.

How old was she, she wondered abruptly, frowning as she calculated it.

Her eyes widened when she realized she'd passed thirty without even realizing it.

After looking around in a panic for several moments for something—anything—to repair some of the damage, she finally settled on the tiny bottle of lotion the hotel had put in the room and emptied it, slathering it all over her face and arms. There wasn't enough to put any on her legs, but that circumstance brought a return of sanity.

She wasn't going to undo three years of neglect with one tiny bottle of lotion!

She didn't even have a damned razor!

Sighing dejectedly, she patted her skin dry and went to see what she had to put on—worn bra and panties and worn jeans and a stained shirt.

She hadn't brought anything but work clothes! Actually, she hadn't made the damned choices. It seemed to her that the soldiers could have put forth a little effort to find something besides the clothes she worked in though!

Dismissing it after sulking over it for several minutes, she dressed and settled on the bed, thinking about the 'incident'.

She couldn't get her mind off the kiss for a while. She'd been too shocked at the time to really enjoy it, although she supposed it would be more accurate to say that she'd been in too much turmoil to *realize* she was enjoying it. Even all these hours later, she

was still more sensitive than normal and thinking about it made Goosebumps erupt all over her.

She'd liked it. She'd *really* liked it.

She shouldn't have, she decided. Wouldn't it have been a normal reaction *not* to like it? Sure he was beautiful and all that—built like a god—probably hung like one, too

...

She should *not* be thinking about that!

She didn't know what his genitals might look like! He was alien!

He'd seemed pretty interested in finding out if their genitals were compatible, though.

Or was she crediting him with her own feelings on the subject?

Maybe he'd just been tasting her to see if he'd like to eat her?

That was an unnerving thought, but when she'd considered it, she dismissed it.

That had definitely been a kiss of a sexual nature.

Pushing it from her mind with an effort, she grabbed a pen and small note pad from the dresser and settled on the bed again, thinking. What, she wondered, would bring aliens to their solar system?

Conquest. She'd ruled that out but it was still a possible motive so she wrote it down. Scientific research. They got lost. They were fleeing prosecution or persecution.

Frowning, she studied the list, trying to think if there was any other possible motive she could add and she thought about the mining operation they'd apparently set up. She added 'searching for resources'.

Galen had suggested trading. Irritation flickered through her at the reminder, but she tried to put it from her mind and consider whether the idea of trading had come about because their ship had landed on Earth and the military seemed determined to keep them from getting it back.

The robots had immediately began trying to build something. She'd realized that after the first shock had worn off. She supposed it might have just been some sort of facility for processing whatever they collected, but it occurred to her that it might have been for a colony.

The government dick-wad had said that the US had plans for colonizing Mars. Was it significant that the aliens seemed to have decided to rename it? Were they mining for minerals and ores to take back home? Or for things they'd need to build a colony? Or maybe both?

Frowning, she worked at her memory, trying to dislodge information she hadn't accessed in years—her history from school. The Spanish, English, and French had sent people over to the 'new world' for riches. They'd also used colonization to unload undesirables—the masses of poor. She distinctly recalled that Georgia had been settled with poor people. The British had emptied their poorhouses and debtors prisons to get rid of the overwhelming number of poor and make use of them. They could farm and produce products for the British and at the same time fight off the Spanish if they got too interested in trying to make war on the wealthier colonies up the coast from Florida.

Dead poor people wouldn't be much of a loss. They had plenty of them to replace the dead ones.

Could she realistically attribute human traits to these aliens, though?

She decided she probably couldn't, but that didn't mean they hadn't been sent to

colonize for some other reason—maybe just to expand their holdings and send back anything of value to them.

The question was, why had they gotten the idea of trading the US government for women? Or ‘womens’ as Galen put it.

She supposed she could’ve misunderstood, but he’d seemed pretty damned clear on that particular subject. Especially since he’d followed up by kissing her and telling her he’d decided she would suit him!

Admittedly, he’d blown her mind with that announcement and the kiss that followed, but she couldn’t think of any other explanation that fit. Actually, she thought it was *because* he’d blown her mind that it seemed so clear to her. She’d been more focused on his body language and his actions than on what he’d said and *those* had bridged the language barrier pretty damned efficiently. She didn’t know what the hell he’d been trying to tell her with that ‘make fix tings’, but ‘mine’ had been pretty clear and so had ‘I come’ and ‘take’.

A shiver skated through her that was almost equal parts thrill from the realization that he wanted her and a fear that he might decide to actually try it.

Because she was a *complete* moron or she wouldn’t be thrilled, at all, to think she’d attracted the interest of an alien, be he ever so magical looking!

Well! He sure as hell wouldn’t find her here! She’d covered her tracks! *Nobody* was going to find her here! She didn’t know what in the world she was going to do when her cash ran out. She’d just have to be really careful with it and make it last until the situation had been resolved and the aliens either gave up on trying to get their ship back or the government finally wised up and had enough sense to realize it would be better to make allies than enemies.

* * * *

Galen found himself wavering between doubt, frustration, and euphoria when he’d beamed back aboard the ship.

Actually, relief was a good part of it. They’d never tried using the particle beam over such a distance and nobody had been completely sure it could be safely done. When he’d finished checking all his parts, though, and found them where they were supposed to be, *then* he’d had time to feel the chaotic range of emotions that had sent him to his quarters to sort through them. It wasn’t until he’d tamed his raging lust, though, that he could think straight.

It occurred to him then, with a good deal of dismay, that he shouldn’t have told her he was coming after her.

She’d responded to him—he thought. He’d thought so at the time, anyway, but now he wasn’t as sure as he wanted to be and it had been that certainty that she was as drawn to him as he was to her that had inspired the moment of idiocy.

He stopped pacing and flung himself down on his bunk, trying to recall everything more clearly.

It didn’t help much. He didn’t actually know what the fuck he’d said to her, he realized. The techs had assured him that they were ninety-nine percent certain that the few words they’d managed to translate were accurate, but how much faith could he place in that?

And why in the hell had he tried wooing her when his grasp of her language was virtually nonexistent?

Because he was too damned eager and impatient, he thought with disgust!

He couldn't shake the fear that someone else was going to snatch her from under his nose, though!

Not that he was particularly worried about the men he'd brought with him. He was the admiral. He was in charge. He could make damned sure none of them got the chance to make a try for her interest, but he was at a distinct disadvantage when it came to the men of her own species. After all, they were her own kind and they weren't crippled with his inability to sweet talk her, gods damn it to hell!

Not that he had any idea that he'd be all that gods damned good at it anyway in the current situation, he thought morosely! He was soldier. He'd been a soldier from the time he was old enough to enter the military. It wasn't as if he'd ever had a lot of time for actual courtship.

Not that he hadn't gotten his fair share of females, but the objective, then, had been to see how fast he could coax them into his bed—so that he could get in as much fucking as possible while on leave. The women had been well aware of the game plan and they weren't interested in a companion. They were only interested in having a good time—and he'd certainly had enough practice fucking to have learned a few things about pleasing a woman—that way. He wasn't sure any woman could handle a steady diet of him outside of the bedroom.

Well, he'd face that hurtle when he came to it, he decided.

If he came to it, he thought angrily.

He supposed he could understand that her people were all stirred up and pissed off about the scout ship, and the difficulty of communicating with them wasn't helping worth a fuck.

Bree had already proven to be a definite asset, though, he thought, feeling a brief swelling of pride. She seemed able to understand—at least enough to attempt to explain things for him. He didn't know what she'd said, but he could see that she was arguing *for* them just from the reactions of her leaders. The idea of trading hadn't been a bad one, either. They were definitely interested. He thought they were still pissed off because they wanted to claim everything themselves, but except for a couple of robots—both non-functioning now—they hadn't found any evidence that Bree's people had reached their new world.

As far as he was concerned, that left it unclaimed and open for claiming.

He supposed they could've moved on and looked for something better, but ideal planets for beings of their biology weren't that plentiful. Thankfully, they'd anticipated having to do some terra forming and had brought the technology with them to help bring the world they settled on to a better comfort range.

It had been a stroke of good fortune that they'd found asteroids with gravity. Of course, they were going to have to be damned careful with them to keep from upsetting the balance of the planet or they were going to have to deal with major quakes and possibly volcanic eruptions, but they could have the robots bring them in and drop them at strategic points and that should do the trick. So far they'd only increased Draken's gravity by a hair, but they should have it up to something closer to what they were used to if they kept working at it.

It was going to take the ozone plants annums to bring the planet to a safer level from radiation and he wasn't crazy about the fact that they would have to live under the

domes that long, but it couldn't be helped. It was going to take time to build all of them, and more time for them to produce the layer of ozone they needed. That couldn't be rushed any more than he was already pushing.

He shouldn't have played his hand, he thought in disgust. She'd been angry. He wasn't certain if she was insulted about the bride price he'd offered—he had no idea *what* they valued or what sort of price they would place on it—or if he'd suggested something that wasn't their custom, but he'd seen she wasn't pleased about it.

Of course, he supposed she might not have welcomed an offer from *him*—for various reasons. He tried not to take it too personally. Granted, he'd been pretty distracted by his own reaction to her, but she hadn't clobbered him for kissing her. She hadn't even tried to shove him away.

She *must* have liked it, he thought irritably, and he didn't think he was being conceited to think she'd found his appearance to her liking.

Actually, he wasn't exactly sure about that either, he realized angrily. He'd been too wrapped up in examining her to pay much attention to her reaction to him. She hadn't been appalled about the wings, though, and as far as he could see that was the most obvious difference between them.

Skin color—well, that might take a little getting used to, but he liked the color of her skin. He liked the color of her hair even better.

Her eyes looked strange, too.

He frowned. If her strangeness didn't bother him, he didn't see why the hell she'd object to his appearance! It was a little disconcerting that she didn't have wings, but then they hadn't run across another species in their wanderings that did. He would've been thrilled if she had, but he wasn't really surprised or disappointed that she didn't.

It would make it a hell of a lot easier to chase her down if he needed to.

It galled him to think he might have to. He wasn't against a raid. They rarely did that anymore—not since they'd allied themselves with the peoples of the known worlds back home—but there was something to be said for taking a bride by storm like they had in the old days ... and occasionally still did.

A lot, actually, when there was a chance the bride might not be willing and her people might not be anxious to trade for her.

They hadn't liked that. It hadn't taken a great leap of understanding to grasp that much when they'd all turned stony face with anger at the suggestion of a trade for females.

The bastards! It wasn't as if they didn't have plenty! They'd spared a few drones to check out the alien world—which was appallingly overpopulated! There were females everywhere! More, it seemed to him, than males. Of course, he was willing to admit that he and the other colonists weren't actually interested in anything but the females, but he didn't think it was just his imagination.

Even if it was, they could damned well afford to trade a few off!

And if the aliens were too damned hardheaded to agree to a compromise, they'd just take a few off their hands, by the gods!

It would've made things a hell of a lot simpler if they'd discovered they looked more like the beings on Bree's world. There was no way they were going to be able to blend in and study their quarry. The men were just going to have to settle for whatever

they managed to grab—except him. Fortune had favored him. There was no doubt about that. He'd not only gotten first pick, the robot had tagged her!

She could run, but she couldn't hide!

Chapter Seven

Bree was restless. Partly it was the uncertainty of weeks of inactivity when she was used to being busy and not knowing when or if she'd be allowed to return to her home. Some of it was anxiety about her crop, although the orchard had already been mostly picked before the aliens had landed in her backyard.

Mostly, however, she was afraid it was because of Galen himself.

It some ways, it seemed to her that the incident had awakened her from a years long sleep to an awareness level she hadn't even had *before* her parents' death. Before the accident, she'd been mostly just coasting along, working on her career and enjoying life, taking pleasure in the 'dating/mating' game more than actively pursuing a partner. She'd dated plenty of men—slept with quite a few—but she hadn't found one that she felt like was 'the one' she couldn't live without, the one she wanted to settle down with, and she hadn't been particularly disturbed that she hadn't.

She'd figured she eventually would and, even if it didn't happen, it didn't matter that much. A home and family hadn't been her ultimate life goal—not one she'd consciously been aware of anyway.

She wasn't convinced she was thinking along those lines even now.

She was pretty sure she was thinking with her pussy.

Because she knew that most of her restlessness was just plain famine for male company.

What made her really uneasy was that she'd been fantasizing about Galen since she'd first encountered him. In her own defense, alien or not, what woman *wouldn't* fantasize about such a magnificent male?

Even so, she'd figured it was mostly because she hadn't had *any* male companionship in years. She'd told herself it was sort of in the nature of lusting over a handsome movie star—someone completely unattainable that a woman just liked to fantasize about—might not even *like* if she met him in person.

That kiss had really added fuel to the fire, though! As insulted as she'd been at the suggestion that her government might even consider trading her off as if she was an inanimate object, she hadn't actually been miffed about that very long, or pissed off about it enough for it to overshadow the embrace and the kiss.

She'd been trying to convince herself ever since that her imagination had blown it all out of proportion, elevated it to a fantasy level so far above what had actually happened as to place it in the realms of a fairytale. It hadn't been *that* good! It couldn't possibly have been.

Her fantasies over it were certainly making her antsy, however.

She thought it was a bad idea even before she hunted up clubs in the local directory and started a primping marathon. A night club wasn't the sort of place to look for a guy if a woman had any interest in seeking any kind of relationship.

Which she supposed meant that, deep down, she wasn't. She was just looking to get laid and hoping she'd get lucky enough to find somebody attractive enough to scratch

the itch that was starting to drive her nuts. Or at least a guy personable enough to fill the need for a little male company for a few hours.

At least it wasn't likely that she'd run into anybody she knew or, more importantly, that knew her.

She was standing in line waiting to get in when she heard the distant sound of thunder. Lifting her head, she looked up but caught only a bright flash far in the distance. Several more followed and everyone around her began to move restlessly and look around at the sky anxiously.

Abruptly, she heard someone ahead of her in the line exclaim and point at the sky.

For several moments, she merely gaped at the lights blankly. Then, suddenly, it clicked in her mind.

It wasn't thunder she'd heard at all. It wasn't even jets breaking the sound barrier, or at least it wasn't *just* that. It was explosions.

The aliens were leaving and the U.S. military seemed hell bent and determined to shoot the ship out of the sky.

* * * *

It was right about the time that Galen finally reached the conclusion that the leaders of the alien world had no intention of giving up the scout ship that he lost his patience, not just with attempts to negotiate a peaceful solution for retrieving their property, but with waiting period.

He wasn't the only one that was getting restless. The men had heard there were females suitable for brides on the alien world and that he, their leader, was attempting to negotiate a trade for them. They'd been delighted enough at the prospect, and with him, to begin with to vote unanimously to name their new world after him—Draken. They were far less thrilled when they discovered that Galen felt that they should finish at least one of the structures on the planet's surface before they collected their brides.

Even with the robots, that could take them months and nobody wanted to wait that long.

Galen didn't want to wait that long so he could certainly empathize with them.

The only thing that might speed things along in so far as building went, however, was the missing scout/construct ship and he wasn't making any headway in getting that back either.

Ordinarily, he would've dealt with the unrest with a judicious mixture of imprisonment and public punishment. That would've quieted things down to the occasional angry mutterings, but he'd run out of patience and decided instead to work their frustrations out in a more productive manner.

They needed that gods damned scout/construct! The aliens weren't going to give it up without a fight. Therefore, he saw no reason not to take advantage of the situation. They would simply summon the ship, order the robots to make the fastest ascent they could with full shields and evade anything the aliens lobbed at them that might penetrate the shields. They could use the diversion to make a little raid so that he could collect his bride.

It was going to be tricky, especially getting out again with their females, but he was fairly sure that the aliens' detection devices weren't sensitive enough to detect *them*. They could certainly detect the ships. The alien army wouldn't have arrived at the site where the scout/construct had landed so quickly if they hadn't detected it when it entered

the atmosphere. *They* would be far smaller targets, however.

Having decided, he put together a small raiding party and took one of the smaller ships to the edge of the third planet's atmosphere. There, they waited until they were sure that the alien forces were completely focused on trying to catch and blow up the scout/construct and then they penetrated the outer atmosphere and dipped toward the planet's surface.

Galen and his raiding party bailed out as soon as the ship had dropped to a more comfortable altitude for breathing and scattered. They had forty septa to grab a likely looking female and meet up again for the pick up.

It was, quite possibly, the most exhilarating—terrifying and death defying—flight he'd ever taken in his life. The air was still so thin when they bailed out that his lungs felt as if they were caught in a vise. Frost formed on his wings and he had the feeling that it formed on something a lot more important to his hopes for a future generation of little Galens. His cock and balls vied for dominance in their battle to climb into his belly.

The freefall warmed him—enough that he'd begun to seriously consider the possibility of catching fire, but he finally managed to unfurl his wings enough to begin breaking his fall. When he had, more or less, gained control of his descent, he used his communicator to check on the others.

They sounded almost as shaky as he felt, but they'd all managed to break their fall. "We may have to consider having the ship drop a little lower for pick up," he muttered. "We'll have the females, after all. I'm sure they won't be used to such altitudes."

No one objected or pointed out the obvious—that the lower the ship dropped through the atmosphere the higher the chance that the aliens would spot them and try to shoot them down. It couldn't be argued, though, that the air was so thin where they'd been dropped that they would have a hell of a time flying, especially burdened—they hoped—with females.

Dismissing the problem of a getaway for the moment, Galen focused on his tracker. To his surprise, Bree wasn't where he'd expected her to be—at or near her abode where the scout/construct had landed. He decided that was probably a good thing. No doubt the military had pulled out as soon as the scout/construct took off, but there had been no way to be certain that they would.

This was going to be *much* easier than he'd thought, he realized, grinning.

He was still smiling faintly in anticipation when he finally realized that the tracker was leading him to what appeared to be the very heart of a very large city. His smile faded along with the certainty that his mission was going to prove to be a lot easier than he'd expected.

The streets of the city, he saw as soon as he'd dropped low enough to see well, were thronged with people both on foot and in vehicles that zipped up and down the thoroughfares at surprising speeds. After circling the building where the locator assured him his woman was, Galen finally settled on the top of the building across the street from it to survey the area and formulate a plan. The other raiders dropped to the rooftop around him and moved to the edge to look down and study the problem as he had.

"This is not a very good vantage point," Ken-so muttered, disappointment evident in his voice.

Galen sent him an irritated look. He was already annoyed with his first officer.

He supposed he should simply have ordered him to stay behind, but he was actually a little fond of Tale. When he'd stepped forward first to take part in the raid, it had come as a surprise. Ken-so had seemed so certain the council would be sending brides to them any day that he would've thought he would be the last to volunteer for a raid.

Of course, he supposed it could've been youthful eagerness for the raid itself. Ken-so was young enough it seemed doubtful he'd gotten much chance to participate in a raid.

Or it could be that he'd decided he didn't want to wait for the promised brides.

He hadn't questioned Tale's sudden interest in the alien females.

"It is a good vantage point to see the lay of the land," Galen said pointedly.

Ken-so looked uncomfortable. "Sorry, Sir. I was merely voicing my thoughts aloud."

"Well, don't," Galen growled.

"But we can't tell any fucking thing about the females from here!" Dirk pointed out in disgust, prompting a round of grumbling assent from the others.

Galen stepped back from the edge and looked him over. "The only way you're going to get a close look at them is if we go down there. Once we do, you may be looking at their asses as they head in the other direction! We don't look like them! We don't know how they might react to being confronted by a dozen of us when they aren't familiar with us."

Dirk shrugged irritably. "Maybe so ... but I don't want one with a face that looks like the back end of a fucking humpalo! I'd figured we'd at least get the chance for a good look before we had to grab and fly!"

Galen could see his point. His Bree was pretty. They'd want a female they found to be appealing physically. Anything would do if the objective was just to grab a female for fucking, but this was a raid for brides. They were going to be stuck with their choices—or at least somebody would be, he added with a mental shrug and the reflection that someone among the colonists was bound to be smitten, whatever the females looked like. One man's junk was another's jewels.

Of course, if the females turned out to be totally incompatible they could always return them and try again, but it was bound to get harder as time went on. They might be able to get in and out this time without too much trouble, but they weren't going to manage it without being seen and that meant the aliens would be expecting the next raid.

"The females *inside* the building will be easier to catch and you can get a better look then, too."

"How do you know there will be females inside?" Blu demanded.

"They're lined up to go in, that's how!" Galen snapped.

"I wonder what they're doing in there?" Ken-so mused.

Galen shrugged. "It must be a social affair—a party of some kind."

"There seem to be a lot more women going in than men," Dirk observed.

"All the better for us!" Galen said pointedly. "Let's move to the roof of that building and see if we can find another way in."

The fates, Galen decided, had favored them. When they reached the roof of the building they discovered a door that obviously led down into the building. It was locked, but it didn't take a great deal of effort to break through. When they had, they charged down the stairs, expecting any moment to be met with some resistance. To their surprise,

the upper floors of the building seemed to be deserted.

Galen wondered if it had to do with the noise filtering through to the upper floors. They were barely halfway down when they began to feel vibrations through every surface. After a couple more floors, the rhythmic vibrations resolved into actual sounds and he realized it was music.

His heart seemed to take on the same beat as they bounded down the last two flights of stairs and found yet another locked door. They were more cautious about breaking that lock, but it seemed once they had that the precaution was unnecessary. The music was far louder once they'd breached the lock, making it obvious that no one could hear much of anything above that.

After looking up and down the corridor, Galen set off in the direction the music seemed to be emanating from. Pushing through another door, he found himself in a darkened room. Even *his* eyes had trouble adjusting and penetrating the gloom and he was fairly certain his own eyes had been far better designed for low light conditions than the aliens' eyes.

The music was so loud now, he had to use hand signals to communicate with the rest of the raiders. Some sort of bright, white light seemed to be pulsing to the beat of the music, nearly blinding him, giving him a bizarre sense of swimming as he strode along the corridor that seemed to have been formed with nothing more than some sort of thick, fibrous material. Finding an opening at last, he pushed through and found himself on some sort of raised platform that was deserted except for the man gyrating in some sort of strange mating dance near the front edge of the platform.

It clicked in his mind almost instantly that it *had* to be a mating dance.

The platform was surrounded by a sea of feminine faces, all of them screaming excitedly.

Rage surged through him when he glanced down at his tracker and confirmed that Bree was here—somewhere in the throng screaming encouragement at the nearly naked man dancing on the platform. He'd suspected, indeed feared, that Bree would find a male before he could return for her, but it infuriated him to discover he'd stumbled upon just that.

He'd told her he was coming for her, gods damn it! Granted, his grasp of her language wasn't very good, but he knew damned well he'd gotten it across to her that he intended to claim her!

He supposed he had—which might be why she was out looking!

Well, that was just too fucking bad!

Stalking forward abruptly, he grabbed the dancer by one arm and slugged him squarely in the jaw. The man flew backwards, slammed against the surface of the platform and then skidded several more feet.

The women fell silent so abruptly it was almost as deafening as the noise they'd been making before. The music continued to play for several more seconds and then it, too, died. When it did, the lights came on.

Narrowing his eyes, Galen surveyed the gaping faces of the women and finally pinpointed Bree.

* * * *

Bree's first thought, for about five seconds, was that the group of men that suddenly appeared on stage was part of the show. As she scanned the beautiful bods,

though, admiring the ‘costumes’ they were wearing—which was nothing more than something like a kilt that fit them from waist to knee, boots that ended just below the knee, crisscrossing straps across their beautifully sculpted chests, and wings—it dawned on her abruptly that they weren’t wearing costumes at all. Even as that hit her with the force of a sledgehammer between the eyes, her gaze locked with the man in the forefront of the group.

Recognition hit her with more force. She thought she might have been too shocked to react except for the fact that Galen was clearly *extremely* pissed off. The rage fairly rolled off of him and inspired two instinctual responses—guilt and the survival instinct. Even as she whirled to fight her way through the crowd and run, however, she heard a rustling sound and felt a puff of air. Several of the women in the audience around her screamed.

She knew without consciously acknowledging it, what the screams indicated. The fire hairs on the back of her neck prickled all the way down her spine and even across the top of her head. Panicked, she struggled harder to plow through the women, who’d finally gathered enough sense of self-preservation to try to run.

Two heavily muscled arms snaked around her, snagging her so effectively, her legs nearly ran out from under her. A confusing barrage of sights and sounds surrounded her, but it sank into her mind that she’d been captured and her captor was making off with her—and that she wasn’t the only captive. She didn’t know if the women screaming and stampeding toward the exit were merely running from the possible threat or actually in danger, but she couldn’t sort the blur of activity.

She was too stunned even to put up much of a fight and discovered even when it finally occurred to her to try that she’d lost the opportunity. She swung her legs wildly and tugged at the arms binding her, trying to free herself, but she couldn’t get any leverage. He hauled her bodily through the thinning crowd, behind the stage, and through an open door and then he was pelting up stairs with her.

A cacophony of sounds echoed around her. It sounded like a stampede of bulls was pounding up the stairs. There were feminine voices that told her she wasn’t the only captive—muffled screams and demands for release that went ignored. The jarring pace her captor set discouraged her from uttering much in the way of complaint. She bit her tongue with the first attempt. By the time she’d recovered from the pain, she was wary of trying again—and then they were on the roof.

The moment Galen set her on her feet, Bree caught her balance, glanced quickly around and darted toward the door they’d emerged from. Galen snagged her around the waist and brought her to a halt. She was still struggling to drag air in her bruised lungs when he flipped some sort of bindings around her. She screamed, trying to fight loose from them.

“Still!” he growled.

“I don’t think so, buster!” Bree snapped.

“Is Galen!” he snarled.

“I *know* who it is, damn it! I don’t know what the fuck you think you’re doing but I’m sure as hell not going to be a lamb to the slaughter!”

She heard him grinding his teeth as he fought her to get the bindings around her and finally jerked her flat against his chest and belly. It was then that she realized that whatever it was he’d bound her with he’d then attached to himself. She didn’t have time

to assimilate more than that. He'd scarcely fastened the ends behind his back and over his shoulders when he stalked over to the side of the building and leapt off.

Bree screamed.

And then clamped her teeth into one of his pecs since it was the nearest piece of flesh she could get between them. He uttered a yelp. She felt him falter and it suddenly dawned on her that he was flying.

And she sure as *hell* didn't want to distract him!

She let go of the bite of flesh and wrapped her arms and legs around him—as far as she could reach. She felt the feathers of his wings brush lightly over her feet and legs, but it didn't seem to interfere with his ability to fly and she wasn't inclined to let go.

It didn't come as a great surprise to discover she couldn't reach around him, but it was supremely disappointing at the moment. She could almost lock her ankles together—not quite—and she'd never been sorrier that she had short arms and legs. She didn't want to look down, but somehow she couldn't seem to prevent herself from taking a quick glance to see if she could tell where he was taking her.

Straight up, or at least it seemed that way to her.

She caught a glimpse of the other men, similarly burdened, but it didn't really register in her mind until the terror from that glance of the ground far below had reached a plateau. Squeezing her eyes closed, she searched her mind for some kind of prayer. She'd never been religious, however, and beyond that she was more terrified than she'd ever been in her life. All she could think of was smatterings of old children's prayers and that didn't seem terribly appropriate to her dilemma.

"Oh god! Oh god! Oh god! Now I lay me down to sleep ... Give us this daily Oh shit! Oh hell!" she muttered in a mindless litany until her teeth were clattering together so hard and she was so breathless that she couldn't talk anymore. She realized she was sinking into oblivion. She would've welcomed it except for the fact that she was afraid she'd lose her grip on him the moment she lost consciousness. It didn't seem to matter how welcome the state was, though. She drifted closer and closer to the darkness in spite of her determination to fight it off until it completely enveloped her.

Chapter Eight

She was roused what seemed to be only moments later by a sudden jarring thud. Her heart tried to leap into her throat, but she was still too sluggish to manage full blown panic ... until she felt the harness Galen had secured her with loosening around her. She screamed hoarsely, clawing at his back and trying to sink her fingernails to the bone to hang on.

He released a hiss of breath, peeled her loose and set her firmly on something solid. Every bone in her body, however, seemed to have turned to jellyfish consistency. When he released her, she settled in a puddle on the floor. After a few moments, though, her mind *did* register the fact that she was on a solid surface, and she peeled her eyelids upward enough to verify that she was no longer airborne.

She was sorry she had. Air rushed around her and she discovered she'd wilted on the floor of the yawning mouth of what seemed to be a plane. The thuds she dimly recalled hearing around her translated into more female jellyfish blobs. The half-naked male demons-from-hell dance review stood around them, but their attention seemed to be focused on something outside. More curious to know why the hell they hadn't shut the god damned door than what they were looking at, Bree lifted her head just enough to peer out into the blackness to see what the hold up was. She couldn't see much even though her eyes had adjusted to the gloom as much as they were capable of, but she could make out three winged things that seemed to be struggling mightily to reach the opening.

Galen dove out the yawning opening. When he did, two others leapt out behind him.

Bree felt her jaw sag in disbelief. Pushing herself upwards a little more, she watched as the three winged aliens dove toward those she could see struggling below. For several moments, it seemed like they'd engaged in an aerial battle and then the six began to climb, to come closer. A few moments later, they began to pile into the opening one after another and she saw that Galen and the others were now each carrying a woman—well, four of them were. Two of them climbed over the lip dragging a woman that was a good bit above average.

For a couple of moments, the two men lay gasping for breath. Finally, however, when Galen began to bark furious orders at them, they dragged themselves up and, each grasping one of the woman's arms, dragged her further inside. The door began to close even as they did so. It had barely sealed itself when Bree felt an acceleration of speed that plastered her to the floor again.

"By the gods!" Galen roared as soon as the door had closed. "What the hell were you men thinking! One! I didn't think I had to tell you numbskulls just to take one!"

The three men under fire, still fighting to catch their breath, exchanged uncomfortable looks with one another.

Ken-so sent him a mutinous look. "I only took one! You said grab the one that appealed the most, gods damn it ... sir!"

Galen glared at him a moment and turned to study his catch. It couldn't be argued

that she didn't look her best at the moment. Most of her hair was standing on end, and the locks that weren't were straggling over her face. Beyond that, she was as white as snow—and he didn't think it was her natural coloring. Mentally, he shrugged. "You should have picked a smaller one—or didn't it occur to you that you were going to have to carry her and it might be a little hard to carry her so far?"

Ken-so sulked. "I didn't have any trouble carrying her! I just couldn't fly as fast as the rest of you. I like my women with meat on their bones!" he muttered. "And I liked *her* the best, gods damn it! I didn't see any point in picking one I didn't!"

Galen let out an irritated huff of breath. "Point taken—I'll even agree she's pretty. I wasn't suggesting you take one of the scrawny ones ... never mind." He narrowed his eyes at the other two. "I suppose you two couldn't make up your mind and that's why you both grabbed two?"

Dirk shrugged uncomfortably. "Once they started screaming and running around in circles it was pretty hard to tell anything about them. I just figured if I grabbed two that there was a better chance that one of them would suit me."

"As long as you both realize you aren't going to fucking keep two! There aren't enough women to go around now! We'll have a mutiny if you two get it into your head that you get to keep however many you can drag off, gods damn it! To say nothing of the problems we could run in to in the next raid if all of the idiots are trying to grab up more women than they can carry!

"The aliens damned near caught up with us before we could get all of you inside! You risked everybody, *and* their women, by pulling that stupid stunt! I've a good mind to throw you in the fucking brig when we get back and not let you have *any* of the damned women!"

The two men stared at him sullenly, but when they noticed that all of the other men were glaring at them furiously, they averted their gazes.

Turning away from them finally, he looked around for Bree. She was still huddled on the floor—poor little thing! He'd known they wouldn't be used to flying but he'd taken the harnesses to make sure she could be carried safely. He'd thought she would *feel* safe. Crouching in front of her, he studied her pale face and wide eyes for several moments, trying to summon an appropriate word from his limited vocabulary, and finally gave up. Grasping her arms, he hauled her to her feet and then scooped her up, carrying her to the forward cabin and settling her in a seat.

She studied him in wide-eyed silence while he fastened her in. Frowning, worried now that he had her that he couldn't even explain to her what was going on, he finally dismissed it and strode to the front to see if they still had her people hot on their tail.

Relieved when he discovered they'd already reached space and left the two alien ships behind, he glanced back toward Bree. The other women had been secured in the seats around her, though, and they seemed to be more shaken than she was ... if possible. All of them were quaking with fright and most were either weeping quietly or loudly.

Deciding it might be best to give them a little time to settle their nerves, he took a forward seat with the other men.

* * * *

The bone deep terror finally began to wane after a while. It didn't vanish altogether. Bree had merely exchanged the sheer terror of falling to her death with a new fear once it settled in her mind that she'd been kidnapped—by aliens. The chaos of total

shock gave way to a modicum of order, however, once her fear was no longer uppermost in her mind, enough reason to allow questions to surface.

A glance at the ship around them wasn't terribly reassuring. In some ways, it didn't differ a great deal from a plane—which she *also* wasn't that familiar with—but she knew Galen and the others were aliens and she didn't delude herself into thinking they were on nothing more threatening than an ordinary jet.

Unless the entire episode at her place weeks ago was just some sort of elaborate hoax?

She banished the hopeful thought as soon as it occurred to her. She wasn't so far over the edge as to swallow that, not with everything she'd seen. If she hadn't been hauled off by government goons to some sort of secret meeting between government people and Galen, she might've been able to convince herself the crash was either a hoax or the crash of some kind of top secret military plane.

There was absolutely no doubt in her mind any longer that Galen was completely alien to Earth, however. The hologram might have been explained away. She knew there were people, on Earth, experimenting with perfecting the holograms. She'd also heard that there were scientists experimenting with particle transports, but she knew damned well they hadn't made enough progress in perfecting them to transport a human being.

In any case, she'd just been carried off by a winged man. She couldn't explain that away as much as she would've liked to.

"Where do you think they're taking us?" one of the women around her whispered shakily.

Dragged from her own thoughts, Bree glanced around, but since all of the women were huddled as closely together as they could get, it was hard to say who'd asked the question. "To Mars, I think," Bree whispered back, glancing uneasily at Galen.

Either he heard her or it was purely coincidental that he glanced at her the moment she spoke.

"I mean—Draken."

She discovered when she'd dragged her gaze from Galen that the other women were looking at her in wide-eyed terror and disbelief.

"Why are they taking us anywhere?" a cubby, baby-faced girl asked.

Bree looked at her uncomfortably as guilt swelled inside of her. It hadn't occurred to her before, but it dawned on her forcefully that the women might just decide it was her fault they'd been taken if she told them everything. It wasn't reasonable, but she supposed she wouldn't have felt guilty if it hadn't occurred to her that they *might* have been taken because of her.

Well, not really, but certainly in the sense that Galen had obviously been looking for her and the other women had been grabbed because they were in the same nightclub she'd decided to go to.

That still didn't mean they wouldn't be pissed off if she gave them something to blame her for.

She wrestled with her conscience for a moment and finally decided it hardly mattered. Galen hadn't come alone to grab her. He'd brought about a dozen men, and it seemed to her that that meant they'd come specifically for the purpose of taking as many women back with them as they could. Even if he hadn't found her—and she still hadn't

figured out how he'd managed that—they probably would have kidnapped *some* women.

"I don't know," she said finally. "But ... they haven't hurt us."

"That doesn't mean they won't!" one of the women hissed.

"Oh god! They're going to rape us and murder us!"

"Stop that!" Bree said sharply. "You're scaring everybody!"

The woman glared at her tearfully. "They're not scared already?"

"Yes, they are! You don't have to make it worse!"

"Maybe we can figure out a way to escape?" the cubby girl suggested hopefully.

One of the other women made a strange whinnying sound that was edged with hysteria. "We're in space!"

There was a collective gasp at that and everyone strained to look out of the porthole the woman was staring out of.

Bree couldn't claim to be surprised, but she was certainly far more dismayed.

After staring out at the blackness of space for several moments in shocked disbelief, the women turned to look at each other and then three of them burst into noisy tears. The others, including Bree, merely began shaking and huddled a little deeper into their seats.

Slowly, emotional exhaustion began to creep over them when hours passed and no new threat reared its ugly head. The men seemed inclined to keep to themselves—no great surprise since all they had to do was glance toward the group of women huddled in the back to inspire a new bout of gasps, squeals, and tears of terror. Bree surprised herself by dozing off with the others, but she certainly didn't feel refreshed when she woke some time later. She felt far worse than she had before she'd fallen asleep.

Discovering that most of the other women were still sleeping, she glanced uneasily toward the front of the ship again.

Her stomach knotted when she saw the red planet in the front viewing portholes. It seemed impossibly close. She didn't claim much knowledge of science or space, but she knew damned well they couldn't possibly have been traveling long enough to be nearing Mars—not with Earth technology, she reminded herself. These beings had obviously come from a world a very long way from Earth. Just as obviously, they had discovered a way to cover such vast distances in a much shorter time than it would've taken Earth people to travel.

And it still seemed impossible that they could travel from Earth to Mars in only a matter of hours.

The view was indisputable, however. Even as she stared at it in dismay, she saw that they were rapidly drawing nearer.

The other women awoke in time to indulge in another bout of hysterics shortly before landing. Bree admitted she felt a little prone to hysteria herself, but she was awed enough by what she saw to subdue the urge.

She'd seen photos of Mars and this, once they got close enough to see the ground, didn't look like the pictures she'd seen. It went beyond the fact that there was a domed city rising on the plain before them. There were what looked like puddles of water on the ground. The sky didn't look pink—it had a bluish tinge to it—and she saw little patches of green here and there.

It still looked more like a desert than anything else, but they'd either found an area that had some water on the ground and some plant life, or they'd somehow begun to

change the surface of Mars—Draken.

The other women had run out of tears and settled to sniffing by the time the ship dropped low and began to skim just above the surface, heading directly toward what appeared to be a huge hanger.

It proved to be just that. A door opened in one side as they neared it, the ship slipped inside, and then the door closed again. As the light from outside dimmed, lights above them flickered on, illuminating the huge terminal.

There was a veritable wall of winged men standing just behind a glass wall, Bree discovered when she and the other women had been herded reluctantly down the gangplank and into the hanger. She promptly put on brakes. Galen didn't seem to notice, although his hand tightened around her upper arm. Several of the other women not only put on brakes, but whirled in a mindless effort to flee. They were caught and slung over the shoulders of the men who'd caught them.

The cubby girl who'd been so hopeful they could find a way to escape was one of them. She kicked and screamed, but the man carrying her merely popped her soundly on the ass and kept walking.

Bree supposed, uncomfortably, that it wasn't nice to refer to her, even mentally, as 'the chubby' girl when none of the rest of them looked like they missed many meals, but she *was* bigger than the other women and, beyond that, everybody had been too terrified to get around to introducing themselves.

They had the chance of it once they were carried inside and the other winged men looked them over. She and the other women were taken to a large room that looked like a dormitory—or maybe a prison cell—and left there. No one knew whether to be more frightened or less so when they were left alone.

For a while, they merely huddled together in one corner.

"What do you think they mean to do with us?" one woman finally asked in a quavering voice.

Bree sighed. "What do men usually want with women?" she muttered when no one else voiced what was uppermost in everybody's mind, then was almost immediately sorry she had when the other women immediately began to squawk and cluck like terrified chickens all over again. "It doesn't look like they have *that* in mind at the moment, though."

When nothing else happened, Bree finally tired of cowering in the corner. She was sore from the flight from the nightclub to the ship and stiff from the hours they'd spent in flight from Earth to Mars. She got up and began to wander around, mostly just to work some of the soreness out of her muscles, but she figured she might as well look the place over.

The 'cubby' girl evidently had more 'balls' than the others. After watching Bree for a few moments, she got up and followed her in her wanderings. "I'm Marcy," she said when Bree glanced at her questioningly.

Bree smiled at her. "I'm Bree—Breanna actually, but everybody just usually calls me Bree."

The girl shrugged. "Everybody usually calls me Mar, but I like Marcy better."

"I imagine they usually call you butterball," one of the other women muttered loud enough for both Bree and Marcy to hear.

Marcy sent a disdainful glance in the direction of the other women. "I might be

fat, but you're ugly and I can lose weight. Ugly goes right to the bone."

Bree bit her lip to keep from smiling. "So true! I don't see anybody here that couldn't afford to lose a few pounds," she added pointedly.

"Including you!" the ugly woman shot back at them.

"I never said I couldn't!" Bree said coolly. "If it'll make you feel better to trade insults, I'm sure I could come up with something else, bitch, but it seems unproductive to me."

"I get the feeling that you aren't nearly as surprised by any of this as the rest of us are!"

Bree narrowed her eyes at the woman. "And your name is? Or should I just call you bitch?"

"My *name* is Julia!" the woman growled. "And you didn't answer my question!"

Bree planted her fists on her hips. "I didn't *hear* a question!"

"But you can call her bitch for short," Marcy quipped.

"Watch it, bitch! I'll stomp a mud hole in your ass!"

"You and who's army?" Marcy shot back at her.

The woman got to her feet, glaring at Marcy. "I want to know why we're here!"

"So ... trot your fat ass over to the door and ask the nice aliens!" Marcy shot back at her.

The woman flicked a glance toward the door where they'd entered and finally wilted onto the nearest cot.

Bree wrestled with her conscience, and her fear that all of the others would turn on her, and finally decided that she should tell them what she knew. Moving to another bunk across from the one Julia had claimed, she sat down. "The aliens landed in my peach orchard," she admitted. "So I did know aliens had landed on Earth. I don't know how the government managed to keep it a secret, but I knew because I was there."

The women gaped at her. "You're saying all that bullshit we've been reading in the tabloids isn't bullshit?" one of the women gasped.

"Obviously not," Bree responded dryly. "Although ... I haven't actually seen what was in the tabloids. The military arrived right after the ship crashed and put me off my land. Then, about a week ago, some government goons showed up at the hotel where I was staying and hauled me off. They were trying to negotiate with the aliens—or he, their leader—was trying to negotiate with them ... to get his ship back, I thought. Anyway, they can't speak English—no big surprise—so they were having trouble. They seemed to think I could understand what he was saying."

"Could you?"

Bree shook her head. "I don't speak their language. He's learned a few words and was trying to communicate with hand signs and the few words he knew. He seemed to be offering a trade with the government for the ship he lost in my orchard, but they didn't want to let him have it. I'm guessing ... and this is just a guess ... that they decided to grab some hostages to help negotiate for it."

"And they just happened to show up at the damned club where you were?"

Bree glared at the 'bitch'. "I guess they did! I sure as hell didn't tell them where I was hiding out!"

"They must have followed you somehow," one of the other women said thoughtfully.

“Well, I don’t know how! I don’t even know *why* they seem to have singled me out! I met the guy that seems to be their leader—twice—once in my orchard and once at the meeting, but he must know I’m nobody important.”

“They must have tracked you.”

“I guess so, but I still don’t know how ... or why.”

“Which means they grabbed us because they came after *her* and we were handy!” Julia said angrily.

Bree had known she’d be blamed, and it still pissed her off. “I doubt they grabbed you for your beautiful disposition!” she snapped. “Apparently, you looked snotty enough they decided you must be important!”

“I *am* important! My family has money! They’ll pay my ransom. You can be sure of that!”

Bree rolled her eyes. “Spoken like a true elitist! Exactly what do you think aliens would do with American dollars? It’s just so much paper to them. Fortunately for all of us, I don’t think they really want anything but their ship. And maybe, since we’re all lucky enough we’ve got Miss Gotrocks with us, the government will decide to cough it up and we can go home again!”

Julia, Bree discovered, wasn’t exactly miss popularity after her outburst. Although she could tell they were still somewhat suspicious of her and more than a little resentful that they’d been caught in the same net she had, they drifted away from Julia and settled on the other bunks nearer to her.

They’d just, sort of, settled down and begun to get comfortable when there was a knock on the panel of their ‘prison’. Everyone exchanged looks of surprise. Finally, Bree got up and went to the door.

She didn’t know what to think when she discovered it slid open as she reached it, whether it had never been locked at all, or the man standing on the other side had unlocked it just to make her feel stupid. She realized when she looked up at him that he was one of the men who’d taken part in the raiding party. He glanced over her head, his gaze zeroing in on Marcy. Marcy, Bree discovered when she glanced around at her, had retreated to hide behind the bunk beds and was peering at him owl-eyed.

When she turned to look at the young man again, his face was flushed. He also looked somewhat deflated. He bowed a little stiffly, touching his chest. “I Tale Ken-so. Peases come.”

Bree stared at him blankly.

He touched his chest again. “Tale ... Bree,” he added, pointing at her.

“Oh! Your name is Tale?”

He nodded, waved a hand to include everyone, and repeated the phrase.

“I think he wants us to come with him,” Bree said finally.

Chapter Nine

“Well he can want with one hand and shit in the other and see which one fills up first!” Julia snapped.

“I’m not sure behaving belligerently is a good idea,” one of the other women, who’d introduced herself as Barbara, said uneasily.

“She’s right,” Sheila agreed. “They haven’t gotten ugly ... yet. That doesn’t mean they won’t if we refuse to cooperate.”

Marcy inched out from behind the bunk. “You’re sure he didn’t just mean me?” Julia snorted.

Marcy looked like she was contemplating slapping the woman silly.

“He seemed to me to mean all of us,” Bree interjected before the two could begin arguing. She turned to the young man again and lifted a hand to her chest, then pointed to each of the other women. “All?”

It took a couple tries, but he seemed to catch her meaning. “All,” he responded, nodding.

Feeling more than a little uneasy, Bree summoned the others and followed him out into the corridor they’d been brought down when they’d first arrived. He waited until all of the women had crept out to peer around and, waving for them to follow him, started down the corridor. Nobody particularly wanted to follow him, but when they saw there were several of the alien men lingering at the opposite end of the corridor, they scurried after him.

He led them into what was clearly a bathing chamber designed as a community bath. Gesturing as he walked through, he demonstrated the workings of the fixtures. When he’d finished, he looked them over questioningly.

As *if* anybody could ask him a damned thing, Bree thought resentfully!

Apparently satisfied, he strode to a locker on one side of the room and opened it, removing a garment from a stack and holding it up in front of him.

“If he thinks for *one* minute I’m putting *that* on, he’s out of his mind!”

Bree eyed the garment doubtfully. It looked an awful lot like the garment she’d seen Galen wear before—a dressier version of the kilts they’d worn on the raid. Bree shook her head. “You wear it,” she said, pointing from the garment to him.

He shook his head. “You wear,” he said, imitating her gestures even as he repeated what she’d said.

Bree shook her head harder. “No! I’m not wearing that! My boobs would hang out, and my under boobs *and* my spare tire. No fucking way! Do you have a longer one? I could go for a neck to ankle sarong.”

He shook his head and pulled out several more just like the one he’d already taken out. “You wear. You wear. You wear.” When he’d made the rounds, he looked at her questioning.

Bree narrowed her eyes at him, but decided it wasn’t worth trying to argue with him in sign language. “I’ll take a damned shower, but I’m not putting that thing on and

that's final! I'll put my own clothes back on!"

He looked confused.

She shooed him toward the door.

Her shoulders slumped with relief when he'd left. "Community showers! Ok! Nobody look! I'm going in!"

She was nearly undressed when she discovered nobody else had moved. She shrugged. "Suit yourself. I don't blame you, but I don't know when we might get another chance at a bath and I'm not keen about being pinned up with all of you when you start getting ripe."

The other women glanced at each other unhappily, but they finally turned their backs on each other and pulled their clothes off. As uneasy as Bree was about the entire thing, she had to admit the shower was wonderful. They had hot water! She'd more than half expected that they would have some crazy futuristic sort of bathing apparatus that wouldn't be nearly as satisfying. The hot water soothed her and relaxed her muscles enough to ease some of the stiffness.

The bastard who'd brought them to the showers was just collecting the last of their clothes as she stepped out. "Hey! Those are mine!" she yelled at him.

He gripped the clothes more tightly, pointed an imperious finger at the kilts he'd pulled out, and then beat a hasty retreat out the door as the other women piled out of the showers and started screaming at him for stealing their clothes.

"Now look what you've gotten us in to!" Julia yelled angrily.

Bree gaped at her. "I got you in to?"

"You're the one that talked us into bathing!" Barbara snapped.

"Yeah!" Marcy seconded her.

"I was supposed to *know* that bastard was going to sneak back in and steal our clothes?" Bree demanded indignantly. "If it had occurred to me I sure as hell wouldn't have left *my* clothes where he could get them!"

"Well, what are we supposed to do now?" Sheila demanded.

Bree strode to the locker where Tale had gotten the kilts and snatched the entire stack out, looking each over. To her disgust, there didn't seem to be *anything* else in the damned locker. Were they supposed to drip dry, damn it?

"No towels."

"You have got to be kidding me!" Julia snarled.

For once, Bree was in complete agreement with her. Plopping the kilts down in the locker again, she searched the wall for another locker and finally found a second one that she managed to open. Thankfully, there were larger cloths in it that she was certain must be for drying. The other women surged toward her, grabbing at the lengths of fabric and struggling to cover themselves and dry off at the same time. Unfortunately, the damned towels weren't a hell of a lot bigger than the kilts and didn't cover much more territory.

Bree blotted her wet hair and skin irritably, wondering if they were going to be marched back down the corridor with nothing else to cover themselves.

* * * *

"What's taking them so long?" Galen demanded impatiently.

Ken-so sent him an uneasy look. "They seemed reluctant to don the wedding attire."

Galen frowned uneasily. He supposed it would've been better to give the women more time to calm down, but then that would've also given them time to think things over and, in his experience, it was never a good idea to give a woman too much time for thinking. Better to keep them off kilter, do the deed, and then let them get used to the idea when it was a done deal. A consummated binding in hand, so to speak, wouldn't leave him—them—in the position of having to convince Bree—their women—first. “You explained that they were supposed to wear them?”

Ken-so reddened. “I thought I'd gotten it across,” he responded a little doubtfully.

Galen released an anxious breath. Truth be told, he was more nervous than he could ever recall being, and that included every time he'd faced battle. This was something he'd never faced before, however, and he was equal parts anxious to get it over with and unnerved by the prospect.

It irked him that his bride-to-be seemed reluctant ... particularly when he'd snatched her directly from a mating ritual of her own people, gods damn it! If she was ready to take a gods damned mate anyway, he was damned if he could see why he wouldn't do! That male on the platform had crumpled with one damned blow! He hadn't even tried to get up, the worm!

Releasing a pent up breath, he debated briefly and finally pushed Ken-so away from the door. “I'm going in.”

Ken-so gaped at him. “But, Sir! It's bad luck!”

“It'll be worse gods damned luck if she refuses to take part in the gods damned ceremony, Ken-so! Maybe she's just confused about the robes,” he added as a muttered afterthought. “Their garments are not as ours are.”

The moment the door opened, he was greeted by a flurry of movement and screams. Ignoring the flapping women, he zeroed in on Bree and strode purposefully toward her. She sent him a wide-eyed look and froze.

Deciding to also ignore the fact that she looked like a bobbit caught in the crosshairs of a hunter's tazo, he caught her hand and led her to the locker that held the bridal robes. He had to pry her drying cloth from her fingers, but he pretended he hadn't noticed that either. Lifting the garment, he wound it around her waist and secured it and then pried first one arm and then the other from her breasts and arranged the sashes across her breasts, tying them behind her neck.

He stepped back to admire her when he'd finished.

His breath caught in his chest. She really was beautiful. His chest tightened as he studied her—with pride and desire. He lifted a hand to touch her cheek. “You are so beautiful you take my breath,” he said in his own tongue. Sucking in a shaky breath, he struggled to capture the same words in hers. “Mine Bree, boot-ful.”

She blinked at him, but to his immense pleasure he saw that she relaxed fractionally. A tentative smile curled her lips.

He smiled back at her, brushing his knuckles along her cheek and finally broke from her gaze to study the overall effect again. Frowning faintly at her damp hair, he took the drying cloth and used it to soak up as much of the moisture as he could and then left her to collect a brush. She reached for it when he returned, but he shook his head slightly, holding it out of her reach. “Let me. I am your man ... even if we are not bound yet.”

She looked surprised and a little doubtful—he knew she hadn’t understood anything he’d said—but she allowed her hand to drop and stood still while he carefully raked the snarls from her hair. It had begun to dry by the time he’d finished. He shifted the gleaming strands between his fingers with pleasure.

Shaking himself, he returned to the locker for boots and helped her into them.

He discovered when he glanced around that the other men had followed suit, helping their brides to dress for the ceremony. Shrugging inwardly, he reflected that, perhaps, it was time to start some new traditions of their own.

Their women were clearly unnerved by the entire situation, but at least they were ready for the ceremony. Relieved, he took Bree’s hand and led her from the bath and down the corridor beyond the quarters that was all that they’d managed to construct thus far.

They’d decided to hold the ceremonies beneath the great dome that *had* been completed even though the city that would one day be housed beneath it had not. No one was particularly happy about the fact that their new world precluded the traditional ceremony, but the dome would at least allow a facsimile of it.

He just hoped they could manage in such cramped quarters.

It was probably for the best anyway, he thought philosophically. The alien women didn’t seem to particularly care for flight.

Bree balked as soon as they stepped out of the building and found themselves beneath the Martian sky—protected only by a clear dome that seemed to be nothing more substantial than a bubble. Night had fallen in the time since they’d arrived and formed a black velvet canopy sprinkled with glittering diamonds that looked strangely different from Earth’s night sky. The view of the landscape beyond the dome was as alien, though she supposed it might almost have been mistaken for some desert on Earth if she hadn’t known it wasn’t.

It wasn’t the shock of feeling that she’d stepped outside—completely outside—that brought her to a halt, however. It was the discovery that there seemed to be *a lot of fucking aliens*.

It hadn’t occurred to her, although she had no idea why, that there would be so many of them—maybe not thousands, but there were hundreds most definitely.

Galen either didn’t notice or had no intention of allowing it. His grip on her hand tightened fractionally, but his stride didn’t waver. He led her through the throng—which seemed to be entirely men—and up several steps onto a platform. Completely disconcerted, Bree sidled a little closer to Galen when he finally stopped. As casually as if he’d done it a hundred times before, he lifted his arm and settled it around her shoulders almost protectively.

Bree glanced up at him and then toward the stairs, watching as a procession of the other women, each escorted by an alien man, climbed the stairs and came to a stop beside them.

Almost as if there was some signal she hadn’t detected, once the entire procession had assembled, the men turned to face the women they’d escorted.

Galen settled his hands on Bree’s shoulders. “Trust me, beloved.”

Bree studied him doubtfully as he stroked his hand down her arms and settled them at her waist, drawing her tightly against his length. Without any warning whatsoever, his arms tightened around her. His great wings arched and drew downward,

pushing a gust of air around her feet and the next thing she knew they were airborne. Sucking in a sharp breath, Bree grabbed frantically for a safer hold, coiling her arms around his neck and lifting her legs to wrap them around his waist.

He dipped his head, brushing his cheek against hers and then sought her lips.

Warmth instantly enveloped her as she felt his mouth on hers, throwing her completely off kilter. For many moments, she seesawed between abject terror at his aerial ballet as he flew with her in a dizzying circle and pleasure at his touch. She was still debating whether she actually wanted to yield to his kiss when she felt one of his hands coast along the cleft between her thighs—the first it had actually dawned on her that she was not only completely bare beneath the damned kilt, but completely exposed!

That shock had barely registered in her mind when a second, far more debilitating shock rolled over her as he replaced his hand with something that felt a *lot* like a cock ... because it was!

Except it felt ... She sucked in a sharp breath and tore her lips from his as he pressed deeper and she felt hard, almost spiraling ridges along his shaft. Pleasure registered in her mind before panic could take hold as he thrust again, sinking so deeply inside of her that she was gasping for breath. He swooped low and then upward again, driving into her in a cadence that almost seemed to match the beat of his great wings.

Her climax caught her unawares. One moment she was struggling to acclimate herself to the strange sensations, the next she felt her body convulse with pure ecstasy that dragged a cry of delight from her.

Galen expelled a hoarse breath, drove deeply and shuddered as he came. “Mine Bree,” he murmured raggedly against her lips, kissing her briefly and then swooping toward the ground again.

This time, he lit.

Bree’s head was still swimming both from her unexpected climax and the crazy flight around the dome. It took her several moments to realize they were no longer flying, had, in point of fact, landed on the platform.

She released her grip on him with her legs abruptly.

He allowed her to slip to her feet, but he held her close for a moment more before he stepped away from her and turned to face their audience. Lifting his head, he spoke in a commanding voice in his own tongue.

“All present, bear witness! I, Galen of the royal house of Drako, claim this woman, Bree, as my own, to cherish and protect forevermore.” He took Bree’s hand and lifted it to place it over his heart. “I have bestowed upon her my heart, and my seed, to ensure my line.” Bending, he flipped her kilt up to display his seed as proof that he’d consummated the merging of their lines.

Bree sucked in a sharp breath of absolute shock when he flipped her kilt up and displayed her bare pussy to the entire gathering of men. Collecting herself, she slapped at his hand and pushed her kilt down, feeling her face turn as red as fire. He sent her amused look. She narrowed her eyes at him.

A chuckle escaped him as the men around them began to roar with approval.

“Hoorah! Hoorah! May the gods ensure bountiful fruit of these pairings! A feast! A feast to celebrate the unions of these lines!”

* * * *

“What the hell just happened?” Sheila demanded in a hoarse whisper the moment

everyone had settled at the tables and server robots appeared, carrying trays laden with unrecognizable food—at least to the Earthlings.

Bree turned to look at her uncomfortably, feeling her face heat all over again at the reminder. “Uh ... I’m not sure.”

Julia gave her a look. “Well! I have to suppose from that that *yours* wasn’t hung like a horse! I know exactly what happened. I was raped!”

Bree eyed her indignantly. “I’ll have you know he certainly *is* hung like a horse!”

“Right!” Marcy snapped. “I heard you screaming ‘No! Don’t! Stop!’”

Julia glared at her. “I did *not* give my permission. Therefore it was rape!”

Barbara studied her blankly. “You make guys *ask* first? Doesn’t that sort of kill the spontaneity of the moment? I mean, I always hated it when a guy asked me if he could kiss me. It just ruins the mood ... for me, anyway.”

“There was no damned preliminary! I didn’t get the chance to object!”

“I had the chance to come. It seems to me that that was plenty of time for you to object,” Marilyn, a blond who looked to be around twenty, said pointedly.

“You’re all going to just sit here and tell me you *enjoyed* being mauled by the aliens? In that ... *disgusting* public display?” Julia demanded.

Bree considered it a moment. “Well ... I didn’t much care for the setting, but otherwise ... Yeah, I enjoyed it.”

“Yes, but why?” Sheila asked, determinedly steering the conversation back to her original question.

Bree stared at her blankly. “Because it felt good?”

Sheila uttered a huff of irritation. “That didn’t seem the least bit strange to anybody but me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I’m absolutely certain that that was the weirdest thing that’s ever happened to anybody here!”

“But ... has anybody got any idea at all what it was about ... besides fucking, I mean?”

The women all looked at each other questioningly and finally shrugged. “No clue,” Bree affirmed, “but I got the impression it was some sort of ritual thing.”

“Well, I for one don’t like it!” Julia said testily. “And I still feel like I was raped! And that’s all it takes to make it rape!”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire!” Marcy muttered.

“Just because you’ve never been laid before ...!”

Marcy glared at her. “I’ll have you know I’m popular with chubby chasers!”

“I’m not surprised.”

Marcy made an abortive attempt to stand up. Tale Ken-so, seated beside her, glanced from her to the other woman and settled his hand over hers, squeezing it lightly, and she subsided.

“Don’t pay her any attention,” Bree said soothingly. “She’s just a spiteful bitch. Her panty girdle is probably too tight.”

Julia sent her a narrow eyed look, but apparently decided to pretend she hadn’t heard the remark. Since the robots reached them and settled platters in front of them filled with a variety of exotic foods, everyone’s attention was finally focused away from the strangely ritualistic orgy to the problem of figuring out what the food was and whether or not they had the nerve to try it.

Bree was relieved. She would have far preferred to retreat to some quiet spot to consider what had happened and try to figure it out, but at least the other women had ceased with the questions.

Truthfully, she didn't know how she felt about what had happened. She was still in a state of shock. She supposed the others were, too, and that accounted for the urge to bicker among themselves—their uneasiness.

She thought a good bit of her discomfort wasn't anxiety at all but rather embarrassment over the very public sex she'd just taken part in, but there was something about it that made her more than just embarrassed and uncomfortable. It unnerved her in an indescribable way, made her feel as if something momentous had happened that had totally escaped her comprehension. The sense, almost of revelry, of the gathering compounded that uneasiness—that and the almost possessive gleam in Galen's eyes every time he looked at her.

She wasn't at all sure of what she'd found herself in the middle of, but she had a bad feeling that it wasn't something that was going to be as easily resolved as she'd first thought.

Whatever Julia said to the contrary, she didn't think any of them had actually *not* enjoyed their wild aerial romp with the aliens or that even Julia could possibly claim rape. True, there hadn't been any foreplay to speak of—no warning that she'd been aware of that might have given her a clue of what was planned, but as preoccupied as she'd been with what was happening between her and Galen, she didn't think anyone had actually been forced.

And there had certainly not been anything about their behavior—or at least Galen's—that had made her feel threatened or dominated.

Disconcerted, yes, but not brutalized either physically or mentally.

Galen had actually been oddly tender.

She was willing to bet from the behavior of the other women that the men who'd claimed them had been equally gentle.

So—not rape.

She just couldn't figure out what they *had* meant by what they'd done—if they'd meant anything at all by it beyond the pursuit of pleasure.

Chapter Ten

The feasting and revelry was still in full swing when Galen turned to her and took her hand, helping her from her seat. Mystified, but willing enough to go with him, Bree got up and allowed him to lead her back toward the only building beneath the dome other than the hanger where their craft was parked. It wasn't until they reached it that she discovered the other women had also been escorted back.

A vague sense of disappointment flickered through her. With it came the realization that, despite the way things had turned out, she was a long ways from shocked, appalled, and revolted by the events that had transpired beneath the dome. In fact, now that she'd had a little time and distance to consider it, she realized she'd been more thrilled than anything else from the moment he'd kissed her. She'd been wet for him when he'd penetrated her or he would've had far more trouble mounting her on that rod of his.

Surprise flickered through her when, instead of turning down the corridor toward the room where they'd been housed when they first arrived, Galen turned in the opposite direction. They passed a number of doors. Behind them, she heard the near silent swish of air as doors slid open and closed again. When she looked back, she saw their numbers were dwindling and her belly tightened abruptly with nerves.

She sent Galen an uneasy glance.

He released her hand and settled an arm around her.

She supposed it was meant as reassurance but it only made her belly tighten a notch more. They'd been walking perhaps ten minutes—the building was far larger than she'd first realized—when he finally stopped before a door. It opened. Lights flickered on, revealing a small bedroom with a very wide bed and then the door closed behind them.

Galen pulled her into his arms even as she turned to look up at him questioningly. Warmth filtered through her at the look on his face. He lifted his hands to her neck and she felt the ties there loosen as he jerked the knot free. Releasing them the moment he'd untied the knot, he reached for the waist of the kilt she wore, unfastened it and then, as it drifted to the floor, removed his own.

Bree's gaze immediately dropped along his chest to his belly and settled on the erection jutting toward her. It was an impressive appendage, but then she wasn't particularly surprised when she'd already felt it inside of her. She *was* a little surprised to see that his cock didn't look vastly different than any other man's member she'd seen.

There was one notable difference. Beneath the silky looking skin, she saw a faint ridge that seemed to spiral from just below the head to the root. A twinge of shyness assailed her, but she ignored it, reaching to touch him. He jerked beneath her curious touch. As her fingers closed around his length, she felt the ridge she'd glimpsed—felt before inside of her. It was hard, maybe something like cartilage, but she couldn't decide if that was what it actually was—natural—or some sort of enhancement.

It didn't really matter, either. The mystery was solved. This was what had sent

her into a shattering release so swiftly she hadn't even had time to realize what was coming.

She supposed it was better that she'd felt it before she'd seen it. It might have unnerved her otherwise.

She tightened her grip, pushing toward his belly and then stroking outward toward the tip again. Enjoying the sight of his cock in her hand and the feel of it along her palm and fingertips, she decided it was as beautiful as the rest of him.

He clamped his hands along her shoulders abruptly, dragging her attention upwards from his member to his face. His expression was taut, his eyes glowing far more than usual. Slowly, he glided his hands from her shoulders to her wrists. When she released her grip on his cock, he tugged her toward the bed and pulled her down with him onto the surface.

For several moments, they merely lay face to face, studying one another. Then Galen lifted a hand and settled it along the side of her head. Curling his fingers along the back of her skull, he drew her closer even as he moved to meet her. The meeting of their lips seemed to cause spontaneous combustion—at least in her.

His lips were hard—like everything else on him—and it sent a thrill through her the moment they settled against hers and she felt the pressure of his kiss. The gusty breath he released as he opened his mouth over hers went straight to her head when she inhaled it, producing a wave of dizziness. His taste filled her mouth as he stroked his tongue along hers, sending another breaker of desire through her.

There was a touch of the exotic even about his taste and scent that was a sheer delight to her senses, that was more potent than any liquor she'd ever imbibed. Drunk with it almost from the moment their mouths connected, she floated on a pleasurable, sensual haze, content to submit to his will and relish every touch he chose to bestow on her.

His hands glided lightly over her in what seemed a restless quest to familiarize himself with her body, her skin, all the while he explored her mouth with a thoroughness that took her breath.

She sucked in a shaky breath when he lifted his mouth from hers almost reluctantly and dove to explore her throat and then her breasts. His touch was slow, savoring in nature, and yet she sensed impatience in the tremors she felt rippling through his big body.

He dwarfed so completely that she wavered between a sense of alarm and a heady sense of ultimate femininity when her awareness lifted to encompass the sheer mass of the man coiled intimately around her. His touch was far more worshipful than threatening, however, and the alarm vanished like mist as he massaged and suckled at her breasts until she thought she would black out from the sheer pleasure of it. The fever rose inside of her until she felt as if she was baking in it, until every inch of her skin was sensitive almost to the point of pain and she found she couldn't lie still and merely enjoy.

She explored every inch of him with her palms and fingertips, urging him wordlessly to end her torment and join his body with hers. The language of mating seemed universal. The moment she managed to untangle her legs from his and opened herself to him, Galen slipped into the cradle of her thighs and pressed the head of his cock against her body's opening. The mouth of sex stretched deliciously as he penetrated her.

She sucked in a quick breath, squeezing her eyes tightly to focus on the sensation, lifting to meet him. The hard, spiraling ridges along his cock sent intense shockwaves of exquisite pleasure through her as he slowly conquered her channel with his wonderfully thick flesh.

“Mmm, Galen, that feels so good,” she whispered breathlessly.

He paused, lifting his head to study her face. Sensing his gaze, she pried her eyelids up a fraction to study his expression. He swallowed audibly.

“Gods! I wish to hell I knew what you were saying!” he muttered in his own tongue. Slowly, he curled his hips, delving her depths and then just as slowly withdrew until only the head of his cock was inside her. “Does that feel good to you, dear heart?”

Bree shuddered, gripping him more tightly and lifting to urge him to penetrate her again. “More!”

A tremor rippled through Galen. He felt his body lurch toward culmination. Releasing a harsh breath, he drove deeply inside of her and withdrew more swiftly. She uttered a throaty groan that went through him like a knife. He lost his tenuous grip on his control, thrusting into her again with hardly a pause between strokes, moving faster when he felt his body rushing toward release.

She stiffened abruptly, arched against him and then jerked, uttering a deeper groan. He felt the walls of her sex quaking around his flesh. His heart slammed against his ribcage, forcing a grunt from him as it seemed to knock the breath from his lungs. Sucking in a harsh gulp of air, he yielded his control to his instincts as his seed surged through his cock and into her, pumping into her desperately until his body finally ceased convulsing.

Dragging in a shaky breath of relief when it finally stopped, he slumped against her weakly in the aftermath, struggling to regulate his breathing and the pounding rhythm of his heart. A glorious sense of release spread through him, but an even more splendid sense of triumph overshadowed it.

He’d pleased her. He was certain he had and he was almost as relieved about that as he was exultant. He was doubtful he’d given her any pleasure at all when he’d consummated their binding. He’d been too needful. It had been far too long since he’d felt the warmth of a woman’s body wrapped around his flesh and beyond that, he’d desired Bree almost to a point of desperation from the moment he’d set eyes on her. There’d been no holding back, no hope of any kind of control. From the moment he’d plowed inside of her that first time, his body had exploded in a release so shattering he’d thought he would pass out.

It was damned fortunate he’d had the forethought to make sure that there were strong currents of air blasting near the roof of the dome to buoy them and allow the men to merely soar upon them. If he’d had to do more than glide in a circle, he wasn’t certain he could have held himself aloft, much less the two of them.

Sighing, he gathered the strength to move off of her and collapsed weakly on the bed beside her, studying her face a little anxiously for confirmation that he really had given her pleasure. The complete look of relaxation on her face seemed to support his belief, but when she smiled faintly and rolled toward him trustingly, he felt his chest tighten with an unaccustomed barrage of emotions—relief, triumph, and something he finally identified as happiness.

His cock swelled the moment he gathered her to him. He considered the urge to

make love to her again, immediately, and finally, reluctantly, dismissed it.

She was his woman now, he reminded himself sternly—his.

He examined the thought with an odd mixture of victory and fear. The sense of triumph, he understood. The fear ... he struggled with that for a while and realized that it wasn't something he wanted to examine too closely.

The need to know her mind suddenly seemed of paramount importance and a thought abruptly occurred to him that hadn't before.

Because he had been far too focused, he thought wryly, on getting his hands on Bree to allow for much beside that.

They hadn't managed to make much progress at all toward translating Bree's language ... because they lacked a key. But Bree *was* the key, or at least could give it to them.

* * * *

Bree woke with a delicious sense of well-being that lasted right up until she yawned, stretched, and came into contact with another body in her bed. The discovery jolted her wide awake and she opened her eyes and met Galen's gaze a little blankly.

He smiled faintly at her look of shocked confusion, lifting a hand to caress her cheek.

Dragging in a deep breath, he released it slowly. "I'd like nothing better than to spend the day making love to you until neither of us could move, but duty calls. If the colony was in better shape, I might be able to ignore it, but there's far too much that still needs to be done."

He tapped the end of her pert nose playfully. "And you have work to do, my bride. *You* are going to give me the key to opening this wonderful mind to me. I've no doubt I'll find it as delightful as the rest of you and can hardly contain my impatience to explore it ... but first a shower and breakfast. I need you to keep up your strength," he murmured, leering at her suggestively.

Bree looked at him curiously as he climbed from the bed and held his hand out to her. After studying his hand a moment, she placed her hand in his. Curling his hand around hers, he hauled her from the bed and tugged her toward the door.

She balked when they reached the door and he turned to look at her curiously. Shaking his head when it occurred to him that she had no idea what he'd said or what the game plan was, he gave her hand a sharp tug that brought her flying toward him. Scooping her up, he tossed her across his shoulder and popped her ass playfully. "Trust, woman! You'll have to learn to trust me."

They met up with a number of other colonists converging on the community bath. Galen frowned, wondering if there would be a long wait. Even after weeks of being on the planet—home—he hadn't yet completely acclimated to the day cycle. He supposed no else had either.

There was a line at the showers, but after glaring at everyone irritably for several moments, it finally dawned on him that they could use the time to take care of other pressing matters. Setting Bree on her feet, he ushered her toward the women's facilities they'd built before they'd headed to her world to collect their brides.

Women, he knew from experience, tended to be squeamish on the subject of bodily functions. They wanted privacy to take care of such things and he was pleased with himself that it was something he'd thought of to make the women feel more

comfortable. When they reached the door, he gave her a nudge to urge her inside and then strode off to take care of his own needs.

She was red faced when she emerged some time later. He repressed the urge to chuckle and dragged her into the shower he'd staked off for them. The bath almost proved to be too much temptation. He was so thoroughly aroused by the time they'd finished that it took an effort to fight the urge to pin her to the wall and fuck her senseless.

Promising himself that he would when he didn't have so many matters pressing, he shut off the water and led her to his private locker—theirs now. He studied her surreptitiously as he handed her a kilt. She looked it over doubtfully, dismay and reluctance evident in her expression.

He sighed. He knew it was different from what she was accustomed to, but it was all they had. She'd have to get used to it. She was a Valarian now of Draken—or maybe he should say Draconian?—not whatever she'd been used to thinking of herself.

When she'd donned the kilt and pulled the sashes up to cover her breasts, he pushed her hands out of the way and tied it for her. Touching her chin when he'd finished, he smiled at her reassuringly. “You're beautiful—whatever you wear—and more beautiful with nothing at all. If you aren't happy with this you'll have to learn enough of my language to explain what you want. Perhaps the weavers can produce it?”

She merely looked confused and, unable to resist, he dipped down for a quick taste of her pretty lips and then, reluctantly, drew away from her and led her to the hall where the colonists usually took their meals.

He frowned when he saw that the biggest majority of the men looked the worse for their celebrating the night before. He supposed he shouldn't have allowed them unlimited access to the brew. Most of them looked as if they'd never managed to make it to their beds. This was confirmed when he got his first glance at the city site beneath the dome. There were upwards of two dozen men still sprawled in a drunken stupor on the ground, rolled there no doubt, he thought wryly, by the robots when they'd collected the tables and benches and returned them to the dining hall.

Shaking his head, he led Bree to the techs, who were still struggling with deciphering her language, and explained to them that Bree would help them find the key to cracking it.

The men brightened immediately. Maalen, one of the youngest of the colonists, looked from him to Bree doubtfully. “She understands our language?”

Galen held on to his patience with an effort. “She has a superior intellect. She doesn't have to to understand what we need.” Touching her hand to get her attention, Galen led her to the center of the room. He touched his chest. “Galen.” He touched her. “Bree.” He turned and pointed to the men, naming each of them and finally pointed at Maalen. “Dumbass.”

Bree nodded but looked confused when all of the men began laughing and the one he'd called Sluzig turned as red as fire. She flicked a look around at the men and realized that it was some sort of joke—at sluzig's expense. She shook her head, then, smiling faintly. “His name isn't sluzig, is it?”

Galen lifted his brows questioningly.

“Name ... Bree.” She touched Galen. “Name is Galen.” Then she pointed to each of the men and repeated their names, each time saying ‘his name is’ until she got to

sluzig. "His name is *not* sluzig."

Galen chuckled, his eyes gleaming with both amusement and something else she couldn't quite define as he studied her. "Name not sluzig. Is Maalen." He turned from her to Maalen. "Now you see?"

Still more than a little miffed, Maalen grinned reluctantly. "Yes, Sir!"

Taking Bree's hand, he led her to edge of the room and placed his hand against the wall, naming it in his language. Bree obediently repeated it and then told him it was called a wall. He crouched and touched the floor.

Still uncertain of whether he was trying to teach her their language or wanted her to teach him hers, she moved from one object to another and touched each, carefully enunciating the word for them. When she looked at Galen questioningly, she saw that he was grinning at her in pleasure.

Casting around in her mind for something else, she used her arms to encompass the entire room and gave them that word and then waved her arms over herself. "I am Bree. Bree is my name. We called this planet, this world, Mars. We named it Mars. You named it Draken. My world is Earth. I am a woman from Earth, from the United States of America. We call ourselves Americans."

She could tell they hadn't understood half of what she'd said, but the men had turned toward the consoles in front of them and were rapidly patting the hologram keys before them.

Galen moved toward her, pulling her into a light, but possessive, embrace. His expression was hard to decipher, but he no longer looked amused. "Bree is Drakonian," he said, a harsh edge to his voice. "Mine womans."

Chapter Eleven

Bree was still reeling with the implications of that masterful speech when Galen released her and strode from the room. She gaped at the closed panel when he'd left, struggling for some moments to dismiss what she'd thought he was trying to say.

"Bree?"

Dragged from her state of turmoil back to the present, Bree turned at the sound of her name and stared at Maalen blankly for several moments. Realizing finally that he wanted more input, she struggled to shift gears and try to figure out what key words they would need to learn to understand, and possibly speak, English. Nouns were fairly easy. She'd named everything in the room that she recognized, though. Finally, she decided to give them a lesson in biology, naming most of the body parts. She wasn't sure of how useful they would find that—outside of the bedroom—but there was nothing else inside the room to name.

She decided she would have to demonstrate the verbs—or at least the ones she could. Fortunately, it didn't take them long to figure out 'to run' and 'running'. She stopped to catch her breath—which put her in mind of breathing.

She'd tired of the 'game' long before they were satisfied. It seemed to occur to Maalen that she'd run out of material, however. Taking some sort of instrument, he got up from his console and led her from the room. They toured the entire facility from top to bottom.

She caught a glimpse of Galen when they left the building. A trail of robots carrying building materials led from one end of the building to the other side of the dome where Galen seemed to be directing the construction. She wasn't particularly anxious to meet up with him at the moment, though. She was still wrestling with what he'd said to her and Maalen's determination to keep her focused on teaching him English made it next to impossible to work through it.

Glancing away from Galen when she saw him begin to turn in their direction, she sucked in a sharp breath when she saw the sun. It looked so impossibly small! Her belly cramped as it sank into her fully for the first time that she really was standing on another world.

And home was so very far away!

She shook the disturbing thought. *Not* impossibly far, she reminded herself sternly. She didn't think it had taken Galen's ship much longer to reach Mars than it would've taken her to fly around the Earth.

Not that she ever had, but she knew from what she'd heard how many hours a transcontinental flight took.

She'd thought she would be heading back that way before long, she thought in dismay. It had been easy enough to simply go along with whatever Galen seemed to want her to do when she'd thought she was only waiting for the government to give in to his demands.

Not but what *that* might have taken forty forevers considering how stubborn their

government leaders were, but ... weeks or maybe months!

Maybe she'd misunderstood him? He couldn't *actually* be thinking about keeping them indefinitely, could he?

She would've found that a lot easier to accept and believe if not for the tour, but then again it wasn't until she was finally allowed to return to the room she'd shared with Galen the night before that it dawned on her that she hadn't seen one single woman beyond her fellow captives.

* * * *

Realistically, and despite his turmoil over it, Galen realized that it was more likely that Bree's customs were as different from his own as her language was—as she was—than it was to have expected her to understand the binding ritual. He still couldn't shake his anger over it, or the certainty that she hadn't understood the ceremony the night before—at all.

Either that or she'd simply dismissed it since it wasn't her own mating tradition.

It made him vaguely nauseated, made him feel oddly threatened. He knew, though, that it was possible that every touch, every look that he'd interpreted as acceptance might have been nothing more than a reflection of his own desires.

He *knew* he'd given her pleasure. It had been a gods damned near thing, but he'd held his seed until she'd come.

Of course, very reluctantly, he admitted to himself that it hadn't been entirely selfless that he'd done so. In the back of his mind, he hadn't even been striving for his own pleasure so much as he'd been working to impregnate her. He knew, if he could make her come, that it would make her body that much more receptive to his seed. In culmination, her body sucked at his, worked instinctively to pull his seed deeper, faster and swallow it into her womb.

Because in the back of his mind he'd already been uneasy, worried that the ceremony wouldn't bind her to him in her own mind as it had bound him to her—because she was not Valarian as he was.

A child would.

The temptation was nearly irresistible to take her to the med techs so that they could study her, test her to see just how compatible they were—how likely, or unlikely, that they could successfully breed. It was easier to resist when he realized he simply did not want to know if it transpired that there was no way in creation that he was going to breed a child on her.

The morale of the men was going to take a nosedive if they discovered that they had no future.

He was concerned about it, but far more concerned about his own morale. No argument that he could manufacture changed the fact that he wanted a child—and he wanted it to be Bree's. He didn't just want 'a' child. He thought he could live with it if it didn't happen, but he was less sure that Bree could and he finally realized that was the main source of his fear—that and the certainty that failure meant losing her.

On some level, he realized he was damned near obsessed with her. He wasn't sure of why he was. He supposed much of it had to do with his annums of incarceration and the annums devoted to the trip out that had deprived him of any real female companionship. There was no getting around the fact that the sexdroids were a piss poor substitute.

He was just as certain that that wasn't the whole of it, maybe even not most of it.

If was nothing more than a churning need for 'a' woman, there'd certainly been plenty in that gods damned mating den where he'd found Bree—in every shape, size, color, and age imaginable. He'd been peripherally aware of that as he'd scanned the room for her, but if he'd just been needy, period, there would've been enough women there to distract him.

He'd barely even noticed the majority of them *were* women, however.

Shaking his thoughts, he returned his attention to the workers, studying their progress. The robots had been programmed to build the habitats—from the dome to the individual domiciles to the factories they'd need to turn raw materials into useable products, but they'd had to make some slight modifications in the programming due to the fact that Draken was a good bit different than the original target planet. The robots had artificial intelligence, of course, to adjust to unexpected changes. Otherwise they would've been almost completely useless, but their AI only took them so far. If they encountered a problem different enough to require research, they could be diverted by that need endlessly and the colonists couldn't afford to put more time into exploring their new world at this point than was absolutely necessary. The colonies had to take precedent.

Luckily, particularly since they'd ended up using it as a diversion, they'd managed to retrieve scout one without too much damage. Assuming nothing essential had been destroyed or damaged past use, the robots aboard scout one could begin preparing the second colony site.

The colony charter had dictated focus on one until it reached completion with an eventual goal of three—one hundred family units per settlement. But then again, the colony directors hadn't counted on the possibility of finding an intelligent species already occupying their target system.

He'd decided to accelerate the plans, since they had and everyone had agreed they were satisfied with the decision to choose a mate from the women available to them.

Well, somewhat available. The true test was going to be next raid to collect women. If the Americonians—or Earthonians—he still wasn't sure whether Bree's world was Earth or if that was her country and the world was called America—but if her people were prepared to repel them the next time, the first raid might be the end of their excursions for brides. The men—such as they were—were essential to the development of the colony. They couldn't afford to lose many and they couldn't afford to lose even one of their ships.

Especially since it seemed the Americonians were already hostile toward them. That was bound to escalate if they continued to poach their women.

He wasn't dead set against trying to negotiate peaceful relations with their nearest neighbors even now, even though they'd already proven belligerent and uncooperative. It could be beneficial to the colony if he could. It would certainly be far more pleasant for their brides if they could manage at least a tenuous truce between the two worlds. Otherwise, it would be near impossible for them to visit their families on America.

He had his doubts that he had the skills or the patience to manage it, regardless of the faith the colonists had placed in him when they'd unanimously appointed him as their ruler. He was a soldier, not a statesman—which was probably the only thing that had kept him alive—his complete indifference to politics.

He was so far down the royal line as to make it ludicrous to consider him any threat at all to the throne of Valara, but he certainly wasn't the first minor prince to end up in virtual exile and there'd been quite a few that had ended up dead under mysterious circumstances. Barring having been born as a female, he had a feeling if he hadn't displayed, early on, that he was more suited to the life of a soldier he wouldn't have attained his majority.

Truthfully, he'd thought he was a dead man when he'd been imprisoned. He'd lived five annums in that fucking hole expecting to run into an assassin's blade at any moment or wake up dead. He'd suspected when he was offered the 'opportunity' to lead this expedition that it was a trap, but he'd thought the odds were in his favor that they'd be satisfied just to have him far enough away not to be a threat of any kind to the throne.

Chances were, they'd hoped when they sent him off that he wouldn't make it and that would take care of the 'problem'.

Well, they could just go fuck themselves! He had every intention of making a success of the colony—even if that meant that he was going to have to learn to play politician to do it.

And he had a bad feeling that was exactly what it meant. Bree wasn't going to be happy if he set himself up as an enemy of her people.

He saw her when Maalen brought her out to show her the construction underway—no doubt to collect more data for the language project. He was fairly certain that she was deliberately ignoring him, though. It rankled, but he dismissed the temptation to approach her, deciding wryly that he'd rather be left in some doubt than to have all doubt removed.

He was certain it was for the best. There was a great deal that needed to be done, that needed his attention, even if he would've preferred to devote his attention to Bree. It couldn't be avoided, though, that he had virtually no weapons at his disposal for the campaign he was itching to implement—to win her affection if at all possible.

He wanted that. He supposed he would have to settle for tolerance if he couldn't manage it. There was no getting around the fact that bindings that were true bonds of affection were far more likely to result in happiness or at least contentment for both parties, though.

He didn't generally entertain a lot of doubts about his appeal to the opposite sex. His birth and rank as an officer, if nothing else, insured a certain appeal. He wasn't as convinced as he'd like to be that it was his face, form, personality, and facile tongue, or any combination of the four, that won them over, however, since it was widely known, at least on Valara, that he was a member of the royal house. And in this particular case, he wasn't sure his rank would impress Bree and his birth sure as hell wouldn't when she had no idea who was—and probably wouldn't care if she did. His first infatuation had taught him a hard lesson—that females dazzled by his bloodlines weren't necessarily enthralled with him. He thought he was a fair hand at winning over the female heart, though, regardless of that early disappointment.

He might as well have been fucking mute at the moment, however.

He studied her as she stared at the distant sun and it dawned him abruptly that she missed her home and her people. As keen as his sight was, he was too far away to see her expression, but her entire attitude seemed to convey her yearning to return to the world known to her.

He was going to lose her if he couldn't find a way to capture her heart as he had her.

* * * *

Bree was not only exhausted when Maalen finally escorted her back to the room where she'd spent the night with Galen, she was damned near hoarse. She sank gratefully on the bed when she saw she had the room to herself, curled up with a pillow and dropped off to sleep. She awoke disoriented sometime later, wondering at first where she was. She'd spent so many weeks sleeping in first one and then another hotel room that her mind tried, at first, to recognize it as one. Even as it sank in that the room was far too clean to be one of the rooms she'd stayed in, she realized that it was Galen's return that had awakened her.

He'd stopped about halfway into the room, she discovered, and was studying her. It brought to her mind their last 'conversation' and she gazed back at him a little warily. Apparently deciding her occupancy of the bed was an invitation of sorts, he moved toward her and settled on the bed, leaning back against the wall at the head of the bed and crossing his legs.

"I'm guessing your day was as tiring as mine," he muttered, rubbing a hand over his face wearily.

Bree frowned, trying to decide if she recognized anything he'd said, but realized it was useless. It was odd how speech in a language one didn't understand just seemed to be a string of sounds rather than individual words, she thought. She liked the sound of his voice, though, and the sound of his language. It had a melodious flow, reminding her, in a way, of French, although, naturally enough it *wasn't*.

Not that she was sure she would've understood him if he'd been speaking French. She'd taken it in high school, but she hadn't used it since, or heard it spoken.

From the tiredness around his eyes, though, she thought that might have been the subject of his monologue. She tilted her head at him. "Tired?"

He dragged in a heavy breath that could've meant anything, his gaze flickering over her face.

"I begin to wonder if I wouldn't be far better off not learning your language," he muttered. "At least now I haven't a fucking clue what you're saying, or vice versa. If I learn, will you then demand to be returned to your people? Will you tell me I'm a barbaric bastard for snatching you away?"

Bree shook her head. She had no idea what he was saying, but she decided he looked tired and the impulse struck her to offer a soothing rub. Taking his hand, she tugged on it until he'd scooted down on the bed and then pushed at him until he rolled over on his stomach.

The wings disconcerted her. After studying the 'problem' for a few moments, she finally pushed at them until he spread them and straddled his hips, settling her rump on his and leaning forward to rub his back. He tensed, glancing back at her over his shoulder almost warily. "Does that hurt?"

His brows rose questioningly.

"Ow?" she asked, pretending pain. "Pain? Hurt? Or does it feel good?"

He looked disconcerted for a moment and then his lips tipped up at one corner.

She wondered if he remembered what she'd said to him the night before. Something about the gleam in his eyes made her think he did.

“Fel goot.”

She chuckled. “Lay down, then and let me work the kinks out.”

He settled his chin on his fist and she focused on massaging the muscles of his back and shoulders and the back of his neck, studying the flesh as she squeezed it with her hands. His skin almost felt silkier than hers, she thought ruefully, although there was nothing soft about the muscles beneath. She supposed the well developed muscles might have to do with his ability to fly, or the result of it, but she thought his back was as beautiful as his chest.

He tipped his wings upward after a few moments, almost as if he was stretching them.

A strange sense of unreality washed over her as he curled his wings around her. She studied them for several moments and finally lifted a hand and lightly brushed a finger along the feathery covering of his wings, discovering they felt rather a lot like hair—soft, and yet somewhat spiky, not like down. He was watching her when she glanced at him again.

Folding his wings again, he used one to sweep her from his back and on to the bed. He was grinning when she landed flat of her back. He lurched upward and over her, pinning her to the bed with his chest, his eyes gleaming with emotions she couldn’t quite interpret as he stared down at her.

“I seem strange to you, don’t I?”

“I must seem strange to you,” she murmured at almost the same time. “I can’t imagine why you’d think I was beautiful.”

“Mine Bree, boot-ful,” he murmured.

She couldn’t help but smile. “You might not be able to say much I can understand, but you’ve definitely got the right idea. I’ll bet you’re very good with the ladies back where you come from.”

He shook his head, leaning down until his lips just brushed hers and nibbling at her lips. After teasing her for several moments, he deepened the kiss. Closing her mind to the doubts that had been circulating in her head since that morning, she lay passively while he kissed her, simply enjoying. She wondered if he was actually as good as it seemed to her, or if it was just that he kissed just the way she liked to be kissed—warm, enthusiastic, but not too wet.

Or maybe it was just that his mouth seemed to fit hers just right?

She was disappointed when he lifted his head and leaned away.

“Hungry?”

She lifted her brows.

His brought his hand to his lips in an eating gesture that was easy to understand.

She grinned at him wryly. “I have a feeling you’re talking about food. Not exactly what I had in mind, but I suppose my growling stomach is hard to ignore. It gave me away, huh?” she asked, placing her hand on her stomach.

Chuckling, he rolled off the bed and helped her up.

It wasn’t until he’d guided her toward the door that it occurred to her to wonder if they had the same thing planned for the menu tonight that he’d served up the night before and uneasiness began to creep into her.

Chapter Twelve

Bree could've relaxed far more if she'd had any idea of what to expect, but so far everything that had happened since Galen had snatched her had been completely unexpected. She didn't know whether to be relieved or not when he guided her toward the same room where they'd eaten that morning.

She noticed the other women looked equally uneasy when they came in with the men who'd captured them and settled at the same table with her and Galen. She relaxed fractionally when they sat, though. Obviously, public fucking wasn't first on the menu for the night.

Marcy and the man called Tale Ken-so settled across from them. Marcy leaned toward her. "I don't suppose you have any idea whether we're going to get fed, then bred, or bred then fed tonight?"

Bree reddened. "I was just wondering."

"I guess that means you still don't know what that was about last night?" Sheila asked, settling next to her.

Bree shifted uncomfortably and glanced at Galen. "Uh ... I'm not sure."

Barbara and her man settled next to Marcy and Tale. "Meaning you think you might know?"

Bree shrugged. "If you set aside the embarrassing aspects of it ..."

"Something pretty damned hard to do if you ask me," Julia muttered.

"Setting that aside," Barbara prompted, giving Julia an irritated look.

"It seemed ... very ritualistic, didn't it?"

"We already established that," Sheila said dryly.

"Well ... uh ... I was just thinking about something I'd read about medieval times."

Barbara, Sheila, Marcy, and Julia stared at her blankly.

"How could that have anything to do with what happened last night?" Julia demanded indignantly.

Bree held onto her patience with an effort. "They had a bedding ceremony when they got married and the next day they displayed the sheets to show that the woman was a virgin."

The women all looked shocked and revolted except Marcy. "I read that!" she exclaimed.

Bree shrugged. "Well didn't that little 'display thing' they did after the ... uh ... flying around and 'doing it' seem a little like that? Or is it just me?"

They looked even more horrified as they digested that. "You're saying ... you think ... They think ..." Sheila was obviously having a hard time putting her feelings into words.

"I'm just guessing!" Bree exclaimed. "I don't know anything!"

"Yes, but ... you think they have some idea that that ... what they did was like a marriage ceremony?" Marcy asked in a horrified whisper.

"I'm not sure I think that," Bree said unhappily. "I was just wondering if any of you had that feeling. I mean ... Don't they seem just a tad possessive?"

"So you're saying, now, that you don't think they're holding us hostage to get their damned ship back?" Julia demanded indignantly.

"But ... they're not medieval men! I mean, they don't seem barbaric! How could they have this kind of technology and have the idea that they could just ... kidnap us and *marry* us!"

Bree rubbed her temples. "I don't know any more than you do! I'm just trying to figure it out. Anyway, you can't compare them to us! They're aliens. We don't know anything about the world they came from. Maybe it's an accepted custom where they're from?"

"Well! It would have to be for them to think it would be alright to do it here, wouldn't it?" Marcy pointed out.

"Well it's not alright, damn it!" Julia exclaimed. "And it can't be legal! I didn't agree to it and I'm already engaged!"

The other women turned to look at her with varying degrees of disapproval.

"What were you doing watching the male strippers at the club if you're engaged?" Barbara asked curiously.

"I was having my bachelorette party!"

"Oh."

Sheila frowned. "Your fiancé didn't mind you going to a strip club for your bachelorette party?" she asked curiously.

"Why should he? I know damned well he had strippers at *his* party!" Julia said with a sniff.

"Two wrongs don't make a right," Marcy muttered.

Julia glared at her. "It was all in fun," she said somewhat defensively.

"I just don't think you should be blaming Bree for getting you in to this when you didn't have any business being there to start with," Barbara said.

"I'm not married yet!"

"Well, doing something like that is no way to start a marriage!" Marcy said.

"How can you be committed to your fiancé, or vice versa, and both of you out checking out other people just before you get married?"

"Like anybody ever asked you!"

Marcy sent her a look. "Tale did," she said complacently.

"You call this a marriage proposal?" Julia gasped.

"I call it romantic!" Marcy snapped. "He picked me out of all the women there!"

"He probably picked you because you were the slowest runner!"

"*Must* you be a bitch?" Bree snapped. "Marcy is pretty and sweet and Tale obviously noticed that right off and that's why he picked her to kidnap!"

Marcy smiled at her. "Thank you, Bree."

"She's just saying that because she's trying to sound nice," Julia said waspishly.

"It wouldn't hurt you to try it, Julia ... not that anybody's likely to believe it," Sheila said coolly. "I feel sorry for your man."

Julia ground her teeth, obviously torn between wanting to inform Sheila that he didn't need her pity and wanting to inform her that he wasn't *her* man. Slipping her arm through Dirk's, she smiled up at him with false sweetness. He blushed faintly, but

grinned at her. “Dirk’s perfectly satisfied with his choice, aren’t you sweetie? Not that he actually *is* my man, mind you. Derrick, my fiancé, is an investment banker.”

“La-te-da!” Marcy muttered. “Never let it be said that Julia’s a materialistic bitch!”

Barbara poked her finger in her mouth, making a gagging noise. “Poor man! He just doesn’t know any better because he can’t understand the venom that spews from your mouth every time you open it.”

The comment reminded Bree of how she’d spent her day. She shifted uncomfortably. “Uh ... Actually, although I think you’re probably right, I have a feeling it won’t be long before they understand everything we’re saying,” she confessed.

“What makes you think that?” Barbara asked.

She smiled at Barbara a little weakly. “I spent most of the day helping them with their English translations.”

They all stared at her in dismay for several moments.

“Honest to god, Bree! What *were* you thinking?” Barbara demanded.

“I don’t know—that it would be easier to communicate if they could understand us?”

They mulled that over for a few minutes. “She has a point,” Sheila said finally. “As it is, we don’t have a clue of what’s going on. Maybe she’s right about that thingy last night, and maybe not. It could’ve just been some sort of initiation ... or something.”

“Like maybe they just wanted to fuck?” Julia asked cattily.

“There must be something to it,” Marcy said unhappily. “Tale doesn’t mind doing it in bed. Why would he do it like that?”

“Just to prove he could get your lard ass up there and still have enough breath to screw you?” Julia asked with false sweetness.

“Alright! That’s it! You say one more snotty thing to me, you bitch, and I’m going to knock your head clean off your shoulders!” Marcy said angrily.

Tale abruptly struck the table with his fist, glaring at Dirk. “I don’t know what that female of yours is saying,” he growled, “but I don’t like the way my Marcy looks when she speaks to her.”

Dirk looked slightly taken aback, but then he glared at Tale. “I don’t know what she’s saying either, gods damn it! But your woman keeps speaking to her. How do you know she’s not the one causing the trouble?”

“Because,” Galen growled, “you have only to look at her face. That one is a trouble maker.”

Dirk’s face tightened. He wrestled for several moments with his temper and his reluctance to speak disrespectfully to their ruler, but he realized that he’d already begun to suspect the same thing they did—She smiled at him, but it rarely reached her eyes. She often smiled whenever she said things that made the other women angry or look hurt and he’d begun to suspect she had a streak of cruelty. “I took her as my bride,” he said finally.

Galen released a pent up breath, struggling with his own anger. “Perhaps she just needs time to adjust and accept. The women are all rattled from being captured, but you should guard your heart, Dirk. I have a bad feeling about your chosen.”

Dirk nodded, focusing on his food, although he had little appetite for it. It was all very well to tell him to guard his heart—now—when he had already bound himself to

her. "She looked sweet," he muttered finally.

Galen shrugged, managing a faint smile. "They all do ... and I am fairly certain that's deceptive," he said wryly.

Dirk sent him a look of surprise, but he realized it made him feel better that Galen had pointed out that they had no way to judge what sort of women they'd taken beyond their appearance. He supposed he should have suspected that a female as beautiful as his Julia might not be as beautiful inside as outside, but he'd thought that Bree was beautiful, and she seemed to be as sweet as she was pretty. "It might be easier to understand if I could speak their language."

"I think we might not have to wait long for that now," Galen responded. "Bree helped the techs unravel the language. They're making progress now. I'm not certain it'll remove all problems In fact, I'm sure it won't, and things could become a good deal more difficult than they are now, but we all need a better understanding of one another regardless."

Tale studied Marcy a moment and looked at Galen. "You think they'll demand to be returned to their home world?"

"I think it very likely," Galen said dryly. "And then we won't be able to pretend we don't know what they're asking. On the other hand, we might be able to clear the air. I think once we explain that we're willing to pay their families the bride price—any price their family demands—then they might be more agreeable. In that sense, it would make courting them far easier."

Tale brightened immediately. "There is that. They're bound to feel better about the raid if we can explain that we never intended to cheat their families of the bride price. And, of course, knowing the language will make it far easier to negotiate with their families and settle it to everyone's satisfaction." He frowned. "I'm not sure the other men will be particularly pleased. It might be easier to gain a bride by simply bartering, but it seems to me that it's far less exciting than making off with them."

"There is that," Galen agreed dryly, "but I'm not sure the brides were actually thrilled with it. I've begun to suspect that that's one tradition their people don't share with ours."

Tale lifted his brows, but then he shrugged. "Very likely you're right. It seems to me that I heard that that was what actually started the war with Meridian. Your cous" He stopped, turning red.

"The Emperor decided to raid Meridian for his bride," Galen agreed, "and they didn't take it very well."

"You mean that wasn't merely a rumor?" Dirk demanded in stunned amazement.

"No, it wasn't. To do him justice, he did try negotiating first." As he had, he added mentally.

Tale's eyes widened. "And they refused?" he asked indignantly. "Our Emperor?"

Amusement flickered through Galen. To his knowledge Tale had never even met his cousin the Emperor. He'd only met him a few times himself—most notably when the Emperor had presided over his trial and sentenced him to ten annums in prison—but he supposed Tale's outrage was a matter of national pride. No one else had taken Meridian's scorn of Lexon's proposal well either. "Exactly. He couldn't let that insult pass," Galen said dryly. "Let us hope we don't find ourselves in a similar situation."

* * * *

Bree was fairly certain she wasn't ever going to get used to the showering arrangements. Aside from the fact that she wasn't at all comfortable prancing around naked with so many strangers looking at her, she didn't want to see them naked.

Alright, so it wasn't altogether appalling to see the alien men naked—she hadn't seen any of them that weren't built well and most of them were downright stunningly perfect, but she didn't want them looking at her because she was a hell of a long way from stunning or perfect.

Maybe she was stunning in her imperfections, which was mostly what bothered her. If she'd felt perfect, she might have enjoyed it.

But she still didn't like being naked around the other women, especially Julia, who was so judgmental.

She was still feeling thoroughly ruffled when Galen escorted her to their room.

He looked at her askance as he reached to pry the towel from her fingers that she'd refused to give up after her bath. Reluctantly, she let go of it.

He moved closer, cupping her face in the palm of one hand and forcing her to look up at him. "Why do you cling to this so determinedly? You aren't afraid of me. You never were, and you've certainly no reason to be now."

Frustration flickered through him at her look of incomprehension. There was so much he didn't understand about her, and yet he wondered again if knowing would be better or worse. Would he actually be able to understand her better once he understood her language? Or would he discover that that alone wasn't enough?

She seemed ... uncomfortable, he finally realized. Not so much now, but each time they went to the bath. It relieved him that it didn't seem to be him, but he still couldn't understand what there was about the bath that bothered her beyond the inconvenience of not having a private bath.

Pushing it from his mind, he gathered her close, enjoying the feel of having her standing within his embrace. He didn't think he would ever tire of that. It was more than sexual. He enjoyed the way she excited his senses, aroused his desire, but realized he enjoyed simply holding her close, feeling her warmth against him. It was oddly comforting just to know her nearness, to feel her arms settle around him in return. However tentatively she offered her embrace, she offered it.

It was a start, he realized. Maybe she hadn't understood the binding and maybe she hadn't yet accepted him completely or that she would stay with him, but she'd accepted him warmly as a lover and he thought she at least trusted that he wouldn't harm her in anyway.

That was something.

He pulled away slightly after a moment, lifting a hand to smooth his palm over her bright hair. When she looked up at him curiously, he caught her hands and led her to the bed, curling up with her. It occurred to him as he lay beside her, stroking her soft skin with his hands, that he felt more relaxed than he could ever recall. Despite the frustrations of his day, in spite of all the problems that seemed to be clamoring at the back of his mind, he felt completely relaxed, totally content to set them aside to be tackled at another time. He was aroused lying next to her, felt desire beginning to accelerate his heart rhythm, and yet no compulsion to rush.

"This is a new experience," he murmured with a touch of amusement, scaling her

arm from the crease at her elbow to her shoulder with his lips. “I’m generally more inclined to gobble my desert and be done with it than to savor it. You’re a tasty little morsel, though. Maybe I’ll just see how long I can suck on you before my hunger gets the better of me?”

He seemed to be in a strange mood, Bree thought hazily, drifting rather lethargically in the warming pool of sensuality Galen had evoked with his measured caresses and slow, nibbling kisses. It disarmed her. She’d more than half expected that he would try to resume their ‘discussion’ from that morning, but maybe this *was* his way of expressing it?

There *was* no other way to interpret what he’d said, she’d finally concluded. He might not have a grasp of many words in her language, but ‘mine’ was pretty hard to misconstrue even without the tone or the possessiveness of his touch. She wasn’t sure she agreed with him ... in fact, she was prepared to demonstrate in no uncertain terms that she was a person with a mind of her own. He couldn’t simply stake his claim upon her and expect her to bow down without a whimper of protest.

She already *had* a life and, as boring as it was, she still wasn’t sure she wanted to give it up ... especially for the unnerving unknown that Galen and his people and his colony represented. They didn’t make her feel threatened, and yet she had no idea what their ultimate intentions were. It presented a big question mark in her mind—were actions more to be trusted than words? Or could one only trust words that were backed up by actions that didn’t contradict them?

She didn’t know, but she did know that she was a long way from being convinced that what had happened to her was a good thing.

She didn’t feel any inclination to protest his lovemaking, however. With the exception of that weird little quirk of theirs of publicizing their intentions—she wasn’t ‘in’ to exhibitionism—she hadn’t found anything else to object to ... beyond not having been asked, which she felt she had to forgive when he didn’t have the ability to ask and he hadn’t exactly tried to hide his intentions.

In any case, there was no denying that Galen pleased her senses on the most basic, chemical level. Every nerve ending seemed to quiver with vibrant expectation with his nearness. His practiced caresses only amplified a process already begun whenever he entered her sphere. The synapses in her brain began firing a dizzying electric volley as if his kisses orchestrated a symphony of one of John Philip Sousa’s liveliest marches, endorphins flooding her mind until she was so drunk and weak with pleasure she could hardly breathe, let alone think.

And she didn’t want to think.

Tomorrow all of this might vanish as if it had been nothing more than a fantastical dream. She might find herself once more in her orchard, picking peaches, watching her temporary help to make sure they weren’t sneaking off to nap in the shade, and counting baskets for market.

She might have nothing more in life than the ordinary, the mundane, the comfortingly familiar. This could become nothing more than one extraordinary footnote in a life that varied so little she sometimes felt suffocated by it.

It was almost frightening to think of returning to the norm and at the same time, almost more terrifying to try to envision a future filled with so much unknown.

In time his caresses drove even those fleeting, contradictory thoughts and fears

from her mind. Her skin reached a point of saturation that made it ultrasensitive, not merely sensitive, that made her feel feverish. She moved restlessly beneath him as he suckled her nipples to the point of torture, until she began to utter pained/pleasurable sounds almost incessantly, began think she would come without penetration.

Loathe to waste what promised to be an exceptional climax, she began tugging at Galen in demand, began twisting and wrestling with him in an effort to mount his cock herself. She gave up after a few frustrating moments' struggle, realizing his body was too much longer than hers for her to manage it.

Her battle didn't go unrewarded, however. He caught the desperation in her, moved over her. She spread her thighs eagerly, lifted her hips in invitation, gulping for breath. She was so wet for him, he sank nearly a third of his shaft inside of her the moment he speared into her, driving a choked grunt of appreciation from her. She dug her fingers into the small of his back when he arched to withdraw, planting the soles of her feet on the bed and lifting even before he drove into her again.

The spiraling ridge along his cock almost made her come the moment it rubbed along her g-spot. She panted, trying to focus her mind on something else. She discovered it was impossible. From the moment he plumbed her depths, she was fighting a losing battle with her climax. She couldn't redirect her mind from the glorious waves of pleasure that echoed through her with each stroke, in and out. The only thing that kept her teetering on the brink without pitching over was his measured strokes and she found she couldn't endure the torture of that long without demanding that he move faster to bring the quakes closer and closer together.

He became caught up in her desperation, began a swift rhythm that set every nerve along her channel to jangling with incessant stimulation. The first concussion of her climax seemed to knock the breath from her lungs. She froze, waiting breathlessly for the next shockwave and began to groan with the intensity of it when it struck. Her mind seemed to shatter in sizzling fragments. She gasped his name in a throaty groan of praise as she was swept away on the fiery tide of her climax. He shuddered, hesitated, and then began to drive into her with the wild, irregular cadence of his own climax as his body pumped his seed into her.

She released a long, drawn out breath of relief when the convulsions finally began to subside, drifting away on a cosmic tide of ultimate bliss.

Galen stilled in his own aftermath, gasping hoarsely for breath, shuddering from time to time, drifting, she supposed, in his own euphoria. In time, however, he shifted just far enough to settle the bulk of his weight beside her. One hand drifted over her and settled on her belly.

For many moments, she was still too detached from her body to really register the touch as anything more than mere happenstance. As his fingers curled into her soft belly, though, his large hand cupping her, uneasiness began to trickle through her. Abruptly, his focus seemed way too pointed.

Chapter Thirteen

Shivering slightly as her body cooled, Bree struggled to close her mind to the dark thing teasing at the fringes of her consciousness. She'd just experienced the most wonderful climax ever. She didn't want to think. She wanted to drift away on the cloud of intense satiation that still gripped her into the realm of dreams where Happy Land lay.

She didn't want stark reality to intrude.

But it did.

Galen's hand drifted to her waist and then down again, coasting over her belly as if commanding it to rise, summoning forth ... creation.

Her heart skipped a beat, drummed in treble for several moments and then skipped several more beats while she cast around in her mind a little frantically in search of information that didn't seem forthcoming.

When was the last time she'd taken a birth control pill?

She jackknifed upright abruptly, staring down at Galen owl-eyed as it dawned on her that she couldn't remember because it had been forever ago. She didn't think she'd thought of her birth control even once since her parents' accident.

Did he know something she didn't, she wondered, panic-stricken?

Galen studied her expression through narrowed eyes for several moments and finally rolled away, staring at the ceiling and trying to convince himself that wasn't panic written all over her face. The sinking sensation that swept over him gave the lie to his efforts to convince himself it wasn't. Deep down, he knew that was exactly what it was, a complete revulsion of the possibility that he might have found fertile ground within her.

He struggled with the anger that began to rise in the wake of an understanding he wished he didn't have, tried to convince himself it was merely surprise, or perhaps even nothing more than the fact that she wasn't mentally prepared for conception at all.

It was hard not to take it personally, however, when she was lying in *his* bed.

"I see the idea thrills you," he muttered, settling an arm across his eyes and resolutely struggling to put it from his mind. "Don't get too worked up about it. Chances are probably about a million to one that my seed is even compatible with yours."

He wanted it to be, though, gods damn it to hell! There'd been damned few times in his life that he'd felt a yearning for anything. Few things, in all honesty, had been beyond his reach, or seemed to be, that he'd cared enough about to feel a great hunger to have.

He hadn't realized himself that there was a great, gaping hole in his life that was the root of all of his dissatisfaction, his frustration, his impatience. He hadn't realized it until it had suddenly ceased to ache for fulfillment. It was the absence of it from the moment he'd bound himself to Bree that had even made him aware that it had existed before, the sudden cessation of an ache that had been with him so long he'd ceased to notice it at all.

As absurd, or insane, as it might seem to anyone else, Bree completed him. It had taken no more than that first look at her to *know* she was what he wanted, what he'd

always needed.

How ironic was it that he'd traveled light-annums to find it with a being alien to him, who clearly didn't see, or feel, the absolutely perfect fit that he did?

Bree frowned as she studied Galen, feeling her first shock dissipate. If he'd leered at her in triumph, she thought she might have felt compelled to do something physical—and probably very unwise. There was something about his attitude, though, that made her ache inside despite the lingering fear that she might need to be very worried.

Was it even possible, on a genetic level, for the two of them to procreate?

She wondered if the certainty it wasn't had been in the back of her mind all the time and that was why it hadn't occurred to her to worry about the possibility—of catching *anything*.

How incredibly stupid was that? It wasn't likely that he'd have any human sexually transmitted diseases, but he could easily have alien sexually transmitted diseases that she could get—maybe. She didn't know anything about him—them—not even what they called themselves, except that he had wings and that meant he damned sure wasn't human.

She settled down again on the bed, staring at nothing while her thoughts tumbled around erratically in her mind. Did he just think he could get her pregnant? Or did he *know* he could? Did he want to? And if he did, *why* did he want to? Experiment?

She had the distinct feeling that he wanted to. More than that, the way he'd touched her belly seemed ... wishful. But was that because he had it in his mind that that would tie her to him irrevocably? Or was it just ... some sort of primal need to procreate?

It *would* tie her to him if it were to happen, she admitted. It wouldn't necessarily tie her closely enough to stay with him, but she'd never be able to look at any child they made together without thinking about him.

And, my god! What would it look like? Him?

What if it had wings and freaked everybody out that looked at him ... or her?

What if it had wings, she thought in sudden fright, and flew away? Jesus! She'd be like a chicken trying to raise a duck! Unable to fly and catch up with a rambunctious toddler that could take to the air any time the notion struck him!

It was just too bizarre to assimilate.

And maybe she was scaring herself for nothing?

She was as certain as she could be that she wasn't terribly fertile in the first place. She'd been sexually active for a very long time without an 'accident'. Granted, she'd been on birth control, but she hadn't always taken it like she should. She hated the side effects and she tended to go off them unless she was sexually active or contemplating being sexually active. She'd, basically, been playing at Russian roulette for years and nothing had happened. She knew, in the back of her mind, that she'd accepted the strong possibility that she wasn't fertile enough to conceive and that was part of the reason she hadn't settled on marriage and a baby as a life goal. If there'd been any yearning for it, she'd firmly trapped it beyond her conscious mind.

Which made it all the harder to decide how she felt about the possibility now.

She decided after a little while to dismiss it. Whether his goal was to try to impregnate her or not, was immaterial. Very likely he couldn't even if his species was

compatible enough with hers for it to happen. The other women might or might not be in danger of it—she sure as hell wasn't going to point *that* out to them!—but she doubted she was. Repeated exposure over a very long period of time might be disastrous, but that wasn't likely to happen either. Whatever their reasons for taking her and the others, they were going to find it very uncomfortable to become enemies of the United States. It was in everyone's best interests to become allies, even the winged aliens', be they ever so much more technologically advanced.

It made her feel curiously sad that it was unlikely she'd conceive even though it relieved her.

She decided it was because she felt badly that he seemed to want it.

How often did a woman get the chance to be with a man who actually *wanted* her to have his baby? She had to give him a lot of points for that even if she did feel like it wasn't in her best interests for it to happen.

Turning onto her side, finally, she moved against him and draped her arm across his broad chest. He lowered his arm from his eyes, studied her warily for several moments, and finally shifted onto his side, drawing her closer.

She could get used to this, Bree thought whimsically as she felt herself drifting off, anchored by the arms of a winged alien from some far distant world. It wouldn't be hard at all to become a groupie for an alien who seemed almost the embodiment of a heavenly being, she thought with a touch of amusement. It was almost like sleeping with a super rock star.

* * * *

Galen was overseeing the manufacture of the third and by far the largest of the domes when he received a report from Maalen that they'd put together enough data, they thought, to manage a reasonable translation of Bree's native language. He tamped the mixture of elation and anxiety that flooded him at the news. "Define reasonable," he said irritably into the com unit in his helmet.

Maalen cleared his throat a little uncomfortably. "It's a difficult language. There seems to be a very large vocabulary and many words for almost the same thing. It's the subtle differences that worry me ... that and the fact that there seems almost to be a language within the language that sends the computer into a tailspin whenever it tries to interpret it."

Galen frowned, watching the robots critically as they began to inflate the enormous 'bubble' that would harden into a shell once it was fully expanded. They had the precision no biological entity could manage, and yet even so it wasn't unheard of for the alloy, extremely fragile in its liquid state, to rupture and ruin the entire process.

"Do you think you could manage to be a little more specific?" he asked dryly.

Maalen, visible to him on the holo-projection on the faceplate of his helmet, frowned, obviously struggling to explain something he didn't fully understand himself. "As soon as we were certain we had enough key words to decipher the language, we began inputting data from their communications to add to the data base since, the more there is, the more likely we can figure out unknown words by usage."

"And?" Galen prompted when he halted again.

"Well ... the public transmissions seem to be pretty straightforward. The private communications are ... cryptic."

Galen frowned, feeling uneasiness waft through him when it immediately

occurred to him that it might be of a political nature given the behavior of their leaders. “You think this is deliberate? Some sort of ... espionage or perhaps subterfuge only for their protection from their government?”

“Hard to say ... but I don’t really think so. Pretty much everyone seems to use these cryptic references to different things and nothing we have been able to figure out seems the least bit ... sensitive or of a political nature. It isn’t verbal communications. They’re writing messages to one another. We just can’t figure out what these messages are—they don’t seem to be actual words, just groups of letters. Some of them we’ve figured out are actually words—just spelled differently. Others ... we haven’t been able to decipher them at all. The computer keeps trying to link them to words we’ve already translated. For instance OMG appears to mean Oh My God.”

Galen lifted his brows. “Interesting. You’re certain its god, not gods?”

Maalen shrugged. “As to that, I’m not absolutely certain. But they seem to only have one deity they actually refer to as a god. Are you interested in the aliens’ mystical beliefs?”

Galen shrugged. “Not especially ... unless Bree is.” He didn’t know what to think about a society that appeared to be so advanced and yet still seemed to worship mystical beings ... unless they were like the Valarians? Perhaps, like them, it was only remnants from the time when they were more barbaric and ignorant and needed to find an explanation for things they didn’t understand and feared? Was it significant, he wondered, that his people had once believed in many deities and the Americanians only seemed to believe in one? In how many other ways did their cultures differ significantly?

He dismissed it. It wasn’t relevant as far as he could see. Of course, if Bree was a worshipper of some kind of deity, he might have to pacify her by going along with it, but he thought she was far too intelligent for that. In any case, it seemed to him the tendency to use such phrases as OMG indicated a lack of any real significance to them beyond using it to emphasize shock or surprise or anger as the Valarians did.

“We’ve also picked up a good bit of verbal chatter than defies our efforts, thus far, at translation. The words appear to be English—many of them at any rate—but the usage is confusing. It doesn’t match the definition of the way it is generally used.”

“Just ignore it for now. It’s possible, once we understand their language we’ll begin to understand these sub-languages. Any idea when we can expect to begin uploading the information you’ve gathered?”

“I believe we have enough now, Sir, for a basic understanding of the language. Should I expect you to drop by for a link-up?”

Galen considered it, wondering if the tightening in his belly was anticipation or uneasiness. “I’ll probably be late getting back to base. Expect me in the morning.”

Returning his attention to the project, he saw that the dome was nearing maximum inflation. A mixture of excitement and uneasiness warred within him for dominance.

There had never been a plan to erect so ambitious a city on their new world. Even he had thought it unlikely they’d ever get around to establishing more than two since, without brides, they would really have no need even for two beyond the additional room it would give them to spread out and not be under each other.

It was ironic that the one mistake none of them had expected had, in the blink of an eye, changed everything.

He had Bree now, and maybe, if fortune favored him only a little more, he would have babes on her. The simple colonist domiciles they'd planned wouldn't do for his princess. She should have her royal abode—she, and perhaps a little prince or two and maybe a little princess, should enjoy what his birthright entitled them to.

Odd that he'd never really given his connection a great deal of thought beyond the trouble it had caused him and now that he was light annums from his family he felt more connected to his lineage than he ever had when he was on Valara.

He supposed it was the hope he'd begun to feel that he might have babes of his own.

Doubt wafted through him, but he grimly set it aside and strode toward the glistening dome as he saw the alloy begin to react and the shield begin to lose some of its sheen as it lost elasticity and began to harden. The damned gravity was still light, he noticed as soon as he took his first step, still too light. Even in his pressure suit, he felt awkward and he stopped well away from the dome, which was still fragile. Lifting his wrist, he studied his chronometer. The robots would have to hold it just so ten more septs and then they could begin to decrease the pressure inside until it reached the pressure they would need to sustain. Of course, it wouldn't reach maximum strength for another three days. The robots would have to monitor it carefully until then and make certain nothing struck the shield hard enough to crack it, but once it reached maximum strength, little short of a massive meteor or an antimatter bomb could damage it.

He had expended the last of their alloy on it to make one so large. He hoped to hell he didn't live to regret it. If it failed, there'd be no third settlement of any description unless they were fortunate enough to find the raw materials they needed in the asteroid belt.

His thoughts didn't bring him any comfort, but he set it from his mind once the most critical time had passed and focused on studying the terrain of the site he'd chosen.

There wasn't a great deal of beauty on their new world, but he thought the gently rolling plain had potential. He'd already begun working on the design for the royal palace, his and Bree's. He'd chosen the site because he had instantly been captivated by the notion of building theirs on the rise in the center. The royal abode would be the centerpiece of this, the ruling city of their realm. He would have the thoroughfares lain out in concentric circles around it with the main trading centers behind it and the centers for learning and the arts before it. They would erect the med center to the east and, to the west ... gardens, he decided.

They would have to raid Bree's world, he decided, for plant life familiar to her. Their private apartments would face that direction and Bree could look out over the gardens and see the things familiar to her. It would make her feel more at home, he was certain.

Turning away from the dome and the image his mind had overlain of the city he meant to build, he studied the sun for a moment and the dome in the distance where Bree waited.

A sense of urgency settled in him to get back before the sun set. He didn't want to miss sharing the evening meal with her. It was the one time that she was always animated, when she had the other women to talk to, and he enjoyed listening even though he didn't understand any of it—even when, as often happened, the women seemed to talk about things that distressed them.

He frowned thoughtfully as he started back on foot. The air was still too thin and the currents too unpredictable to fly. It could be many more annums before it was possible to walk outside without a breathing unit and pressure suit, or fly. It chafed to be so restricted, even though flying was hard work at the best of times and under the best conditions, it was irritating not be able to whenever the whim struck him. Of course, the domes allowed for a little exercise but it was hardly satisfying to fly so low and in tight little circles and they might not even be able to that once the domiciles began to go up.

They would have to search for the materials for the alloy, he decided, so that they could connect the settlements with pressurized tubes. It would make travel between the settlements far more comfortable and convenient. And he didn't want any of the settlements, or the inhabitants of them to feel a sense of isolation.

The royal city would be the Mecca of arts and sciences and entertainment—everything that the combined knowledge and technology and talents of the species of Valarians and Americonians could produce.

Drakonians, he reminded himself. They were all Drakonians now.

It put him in mind of the fact that the settlements had yet to be built or named.

He decided they would name the royal city Breezian for his princess. He would allow the other colonists to name the sister cities.

* * * *

"The colonists are becoming restless," Ken-so said quietly when they'd settled at their table to eat the evening meal.

Galen immediately felt his belly tighten with tension. "I would think they would be too exhausted from all the work to have time to get restless," he muttered, releasing a disgusted breath that he hadn't even had the fucking chance to take a bite of food before having to face yet another problem. "What is it now?"

Ken-so shrugged. "They want to know when we'll go raiding again."

Galen relaxed fractionally, frowning thoughtfully. "It hasn't been long since we had the first raid. We have to give the Americonians time to begin to feel confident we won't try it again," he said dismissively.

"It's been almost a month, sir ... by the Draken calendar. I think if they just had some idea of when another raid was planned they'd settle down. They'd have something to look forward to, then."

Galen sent him a startled look over the top of Bree's head. "That long? You're certain?"

"Three weeks and two days ... going on a month, Sir."

"I suppose we'd best get busy planning another raid then," Galen said irritably. "I'll mention it to Maalen when I go in for a link-up. That should seem causal enough, and the techs are bound to get the word out."

He noticed Bree was studying him quizzically when he glanced away from Ken-so and discomfort wafted through him. Nearly a month. How long since he'd been informed that they'd broken the code to Bree's language, he wondered?

He'd focused on the royal city almost since the idea had come to him that it was a waste of time and resources to build the 'temporary' settlements that the council had planned when they all knew this was a permanent situation. The barracks they'd built could work well enough as temporary shelter. It would be more practical in the long-run to live there and work on comfortable living quarters, to begin right off as they meant to

go on when they were likely to live in whatever they built for the term of their life-spans. If they utilized his plan, then by the time the first babes were born they would be ready to settle their new families in a home.

He recalled that he'd been notified while he was monitoring the erection of the third dome that the techs had managed to translate enough for a working knowledge of the language. He also recalled that he'd decided there was no sense in wasting time uploading incomplete data when they would have a far more complete data base in a matter of days or perhaps weeks.

And then he'd put it from his mind.

It was almost inconceivable that so much time had passed without an awareness of it.

Well, there was no putting it off any longer to focus on construction. He needed a facility of the language to try to negotiate a truce with Bree's people or perhaps an alliance of sorts. He wanted to make another attempt to reason with them and set up some sort of trade agreement before he led another raid. They might not have to do anything so risky if he could negotiate a trade agreement and he wasn't as inclined to take chances they didn't have to.

* * * *

Bree focused her gaze on her food, but her mind was busy trying to untangle what the discussion between Galen and Tale had been about. In sheer self-defense, she'd been struggling since she'd been taken to try to figure out their language. Wryly, she had to admit that she hadn't managed a great deal of success and the worst of it was that they didn't seem to be going out of their way to make it difficult.

Maalen and the others that worked with him had seemed perfectly willing to give her lessons when she sought them out during the mid-day meal since Galen was never around at that time. *They* seemed to be learning her language a lot faster than she was learning theirs, she thought disgustedly.

Even Galen seemed to have picked up more than she had and he didn't even seem to be putting much effort in to it. From what she'd been able to determine, he spent his entire day, every day, overseeing all the construction that was going on—when he wasn't doing something in his office.

Regardless of how busy he seemed to be, he always took the first and last meal of the day with her, and they always retired afterwards to his quarters. Most of the time, he didn't seem to have anything on his mind, then, but making love to her. She considered that and mentally revised it to much of the time. Almost as often as he dragged her into his bed and made love to her, he simply curled up with her and talked to her until he fell asleep.

And, to her mind, he'd *still* managed to pick up more of her language than she had his.

She wasn't actually surprised that he seemed to be so busy. Even she could see that there was a lot to be done and not nearly enough hours in the day to do it. And she'd realized from the start that he must be their leader.

What was surprising, and a little irritating, was that he'd picked up so much English when she hadn't picked up much of anything. She was still reduced to trying to decipher body language and the tone of his voice.

That meant that she wasn't any closer to actually figuring out what was going on

than she had been when she'd first been taken.

She had an idea, but without being able to actually ask, it was still just guessing.

Regardless, she didn't think she was the only one of the 'captives' that had begun to be more and more convinced that this wasn't a hostage situation. By her reckoning, they'd been on Draken nearly a month and none of the men who'd taken them seemed to be waiting on anything. Like Galen, they spent most of their day working on building what she could only describe as a city. It didn't look the least bit temporary to her, which shot down her theory, as far as she could see, that they were only here to extract whatever valuable resources they could.

It seemed more and more certain that they were here as colonists, intent on building a permanent residence, and if she accepted that, then it almost seemed to follow that she and the other women were also, now, considered colonists.

Chapter Fourteen

Galen felt his belly tighten with nerves as soon as he entered the communications center. Actually, even before that. As soon as he'd made the decision that it was long past time he presented himself for the link-up, he'd begun feeling tense about it. That had increased the closer he came to the time to do so.

Most of it was due entirely to the process. Like every Valarian, he'd used it many times since he'd attained the maturity to do so. The process wasn't utilized on children for the simple reason that it was more dangerous on an immature brain and it had been decided long ago that the risks outweighed the possible benefits, particularly when young minds so easily soaked up knowledge anyway. The link-ups were for higher learning, or for a career change when an individual couldn't spare the time for a slower learning process, or any time a great deal of knowledge was needed very quickly.

The side effects were unpleasant—sometimes extremely unpleasant—and that was the main source of his anxiety at the moment.

On a wider scale, he was also anxious because of Bree. Once he had the knowledge, he would have to deal with problems he could only imagine at the moment. He wouldn't be innocent by virtue of ignorance.

He'd stolen her from her home. He was going to have to deal with that, to try to negotiate a peace between them that they could both live with.

And he dreaded that.

He thought in some ways that the time they'd spent together might make that easier, more likely to turn out the way he wanted it to, but there was no getting around the fact that he'd also given himself the time to become even more wrapped up in her.

As if he hadn't already been lost!

Nodding to Maalen and the others, he strode decisively across the room to the link-up couch and settled in it. "I've come for the link-up," he said without preamble. "I'll need to be able to address our issues with the Americonians and try to work out a trade agreement."

Maalen looked surprised but pleased. "We've made a great deal of progress since I gave you my initial report—very few gaps now, although we still haven't figured out much of the sub-languages I told you about."

Galen nodded, trying to ignore the sinking sensation in his belly as he watched Maalen prepare the equipment. "You've done a link-up for the data?"

"Oh, no sir! We thought it would be inappropriate for anyone else to go before our prince!"

Galen managed a sickly smile. Nothing like being the first lab animal! "You *have* done this before, though?"

Maalen gaped at him blankly.

"The link-up," Galen prompted.

"Oh!" Maalen chuckled. "Of course, sir. I'm certified! I've done plenty of link-ups."

Galen studied him while he worked at the console. “How many?”

Maalen glanced at him absently. “At least a dozen—Well, half of that was simulated.”

Galen’s belly clenched hard enough to send a wave of nausea through him. He supposed it wasn’t any worse than using the particle transport when he’d known the distance was a good deal further than had been tried before. On the other hand, if it hadn’t worked he probably wouldn’t have known the difference.

And, in that instance, he’d known there was a chance Bree was waiting at the other end. Even the possibility of it was enough to make him dismiss the dangers.

Of course, if the fucking link-up malfunctioned he’d end up a slobbering idiot and he didn’t suppose he’d know that either, but the difference was that his body would still be around for everyone to gape at in revulsion.

“It’ll be safer to limit input,” Maalen said as he prepared the needle. “I’ve set the program to quarter the data for you, so this is only the initial link-up. You’ll need the other three to have a complete file.”

Galen nodded, clenching his teeth and resisting the urge to command Maalen to get it all over at once. It was daunting to think he was going to have to present himself three more times for this procedure, which bordered on torture.

Tilian approached the couch and began strapping him down in case there were convulsions, and then inserted the mouth piece to be certain he didn’t bite his tongue in that event.

Moving behind him, Maalen pushed the hair at the base of his skull to the side to reveal the port. After disinfecting both the probe needle and his scalp, he began to slowly insert it, watching the vid display to monitor the insertion.

Galen concentrated on trying to regulate his respiration and heartbeat, partly because he didn’t want to embarrass himself by making it obvious to the techs monitoring him that he was scared shitless and partly because he knew it wasn’t likely to be nearly as unpleasant if he could manage to relax.

His tension eased somewhat when the needle was fully inserted with a modicum of discomfort and then he focused on relaxing as completely as he could.

“Set,” Maalen said calmly. “Ready, Sir?”

Galen nodded instead of trying to speak around the gag.

In spite of all he could do, he tensed as he heard the command entered. An almost electrical jolt went all the way through him as his synapses began firing with the input. His mind instantly descended into chaos with the flood of data. He closed his eyes, trying to focus on relaxing. The lab around him receded. His hearing diminished and he could feel his body jerking, not with convulsions per se, but with the occasional random stimulation of nerves leading to other parts of his body. There was very little discomfort with those sorts of incidental stimulations.

The convulsions were another matter. There was always the possibility of them during the procedure, even if one had had it before and not experienced that particular side effect, and those could be excruciatingly painful. It was that possibility more than anything else that made him dread it, but he was fortunate. There were no seizures.

Just the blinding, stomach churning headache that was almost always a result of the link-up.

“How’s the pain? Manageable? Or do you need something?”

Galen leaned over the side of the couch and threw up as soon as he'd been freed of the restraints.

"Guess that answers that," Maalen said cheerfully. "I'll get you something for the pain."

Galen wanted to object. He'd be incapacitated for hours, maybe for an entire day, if he accepted it, but Maalen had already injected him before he'd recovered enough from throwing up to manage speech.

He was sinking toward oblivion when medbots arrived with a transport for him, but he'd managed to rinse the foul taste from his mouth and check himself to make sure he wasn't going to arrive in his quarters lying unconscious in his own vomit. Not much was clear to him at the moment, but the anxiety of presenting such a revolting sight to Bree was strong enough even to penetrate his pain.

Not that there was much dignity to be had when one was completely unconscious!

Maybe, he thought dimly, he would be lucky and she would be out wandering around the colony? Or visiting with the other women?

* * * *

It had become a habit in the time they'd been on Draken for the women to gather in the dining hall between meals and talk when they had nothing else to do. Having managed to rest their clothing from Tale Ken-so a few days after the bizarre ceremony they'd taken part in, they usually returned to their quarters and discarded the damned kilts and dressed before returning, though. Intent on changing quickly and rushing back to see if anyone had any idea what the discussion had been about the night before, Bree was just leaving Galen's quarters when she spotted two odd looking robots coming along the main corridor. Moving to one side of the corridor, she studied them until they drew close enough that she could see that there was a man lying on the gurney between the robots.

She recognized him at almost the same instant that she realized the robots were moving an unconscious man and her heart leapt into her throat with sudden fear. Rushing to meet the moving gurney, she stared down at Galen in dismay, searching him for injury.

"What happened?"

Naturally enough, the damned robots didn't answer her. That only increased her fear and frustration, but she followed them until they'd entered Galen's quarters. Aligning the gurney with his bed, they grasped his shoulders and ankles, moved him to the bed and then left again.

Bree rushed anxiously to the bed as soon as the robots moved out of the way. After studying Galen in consternation for several moments, trying to decide whether she should touch him at all, she finally yielded to temptation and lightly touched his cheeks and forehead, testing for fever.

He seemed hotter than normal, but she realized she wasn't any closer to knowing whether he had a fever or not. He always seemed a little warmer than she was, but he was unconscious. Shouldn't he be cooler?

There was no sign of an injury. She didn't dare even attempt to turn him over to see if his back was as unmarred as his front, but she couldn't imagine any sort of injury he might have gotten in the short time since they'd parted ways. She didn't think he'd even left the main building.

She didn't see a sign of blood or any kind of cut.

Chewing her lip, she studied him indecisively, torn between an urge to rush off and try to find someone who could tell her what had happened and an equal anxiety about leaving him alone. Discovering she was close to tears, she finally decided against leaving him. It seemed unlikely she would learn anything and she just couldn't bring herself to leave him alone.

Instead, she moved closer. The robots had settled him on top of the made bed. Unwilling to try to move him and fairly convinced she couldn't even if she did try, she moved around the bed and pulled the coverlet loose to drag it over him. She felt a little better for having done that much, but not a great deal.

It ate at her that she couldn't *do* anything but stand and stare at him worriedly. Finally, feeling weak and weary from her worry, she pulled his desk chair to the side of the bed and sat down, resisting the urge to join him in the bed and cuddle next to him because she was afraid if he was hurt that she might make it worse.

He didn't so much as twitch in all the time she watched over him and, after a while, when she'd tired enough that her anxiety began to level out, she realized that he was either comatose or he'd been given something to make him sleep. It wasn't a natural sleep. She was certain of that, and although she couldn't dismiss the possibility that he was in a coma, she managed to convince herself that that wasn't likely when she couldn't see any sign of an injury.

Why would anyone have drugged him into unconsciousness, though?

Had he suddenly fallen ill? And if so, with what? What could possibly have brought him down so quickly when he'd seemed perfectly alright the night before and even at breakfast?

He'd seemed preoccupied, but then he usually did.

Maybe he hadn't actually been preoccupied so much as he'd been feeling badly, though? Maybe he'd already been coming down with whatever illness it was and she just hadn't noticed because she'd dismissed it as absentmindedness because he was wrestling with some sort of problem?

Frowning in concentration, she went back over the night before. There'd been something about the conversation between him and Tale that had bothered her. She hadn't understood a word of it, but she knew just from the tone of their voices and their body language that, whatever it was, it was a significant problem. Galen hadn't just seemed irritated about it. Afterwards, he'd seemed almost as if he was worried about something.

He'd dismissed it once they'd reached his quarters, diverted her from it by the sheer hunger of his touch. She'd been a little surprised at the sense, almost of desperation, in his kiss and his caresses. They hadn't had sex the night before, but it hardly seemed likely that he could be so horny as to feel desperate after missing only one night, particularly since they often did and sometimes didn't have sex for two or three nights running.

She had, in fact, worried about that, although she thought she was an idiot for doing so when she should've just been relieved.

Everyone had their own appetite for sex, of course, and it wasn't unreasonable to think that Galen might be completely satisfied to have sex only a few times a week. He seemed young, although she didn't have a clue of exactly how old he was, but mature,

and she knew from personal experience that it was usually only the very young men that thought they had to screw constantly.

To her mind, they tended to be too damned greedy and demanding. It was no wonder they wouldn't settle long with one woman when they seemed determined to wear it out. It got old to *her* in short order when they didn't allow enough time between to get even a little hungry. Without an appetite, the most scrumptious cake was hard to choke down when someone was constantly shoving it at you.

She didn't have that problem with Galen, however. She'd never been with any man before that she seemed to want more every time they had sex. Not that he didn't thoroughly satisfy her, but he satisfied her so well she was afraid he'd become a habit. She was almost disappointed when he didn't initiate sex and, more than once, she'd considered initiating it herself.

The main reason she hadn't was because she was worried that it might be an indication that she'd lost her fucking mind—as in Stockholm Syndrome. She shouldn't *want* to have sex with a man who'd kidnapped her. She should feel like a captive. She couldn't even convince herself that she was going along with what he wanted to protect herself.

She supposed it was his fault. Beyond the kidnapping itself, he hadn't once treated her like a captive. Every time he touched her, even when she sensed that he was hungry to the point of impatience, she *felt* like he was making love to her, not raping her and not even just fucking her because she was handy.

She wasn't the only one, but that didn't make her feel a lot better. At least half the women had admitted that they were worried because they were enjoying their captivity way more than they thought was mentally healthy. She thought most of the others just didn't want to admit it.

Even Julia.

Dirk seemed to have screwed the bitch out of her, although she would never have thought it possible.

Everyone was worried about their families and their jobs, but that didn't change the fact that they'd gone from terror at being captured to being merely bored and then to tentative acceptance in only a matter of weeks.

She wondered if the others had begun to dread the 'end of paradise' as much as she did.

It was odd that the moment she began to admit to herself that she wasn't at all sorry Galen had kidnapped her that she also began to be convinced that it wasn't going to last. As long as she was scared she hadn't been able to convince herself that it wasn't a permanent arrangement, but as soon as she'd begun thinking in terms of staying, she'd started worrying that she'd been right to begin with. They'd only been taken as bartering chips to get the spacecraft back.

She was going to miss Galen terribly, she realized, feeling a hard knot of emotion form in her throat when she finally accepted it. She might have been able to convince herself she wouldn't if she hadn't been forced by Galen's unconsciousness to admit to herself that she cared about him. There was no pretending he didn't mean anything at all to her, though, when she was sick with worry about him.

Unable to resist the urge to touch him, she reached for his hand after a while. At first, she merely slipped one of hers beneath his. His warmth instantly began to filter into

her, though, and soon it wasn't enough to feel the weight of his palm against hers. The urge to climb into the bed with him grew stronger. Struggling with it, she lifted his hand with both of hers and settled it on her knee.

His arm was amazingly heavy. She supposed, given how muscular he was, she shouldn't have been surprised, but then she'd never completely lifted it on her own before. Unconscious now, his entire arm was dead weight and it settled so heavily on her knee that it quickly became uncomfortable. Sighing, she lifted his hand and placed it on the bed again.

A tap on the door distracted her a little later. Rising stiffly, she moved to it. Marcy and Barbara were on the other side. They looked startled when they caught a glimpse of Galen in the bed.

"Sorry!" Marcy apologized quickly. "We didn't realize ... uh"

Bree felt her chin wobble. "Something's happened to him. I don't know what. I'd started down to the dining hall when I saw two of the robots moving him here."

Barbara and Marcy both immediately looked shocked and concerned. "You haven't talked to anybody?" Marcy asked.

Bree sniffed, struggling to control her wobbling chin. "Who? Nobody here understands half of what I say except y'all!"

"I'll go find somebody and see if I can find out what's happened," Barbara said decisively.

"You think you can?" Bree asked hopefully. "I mean ... I don't want to leave him like this. I'd really appreciate it if you can find out anything. I'm worried sick about him."

It wasn't until they'd left that Bree realized what she'd admitted, but she also realized she wasn't particularly embarrassed that she had.

Neither one of them had seemed the least surprised, though, or even disapproving.

Galen stirred, opening his eyes briefly when she approached the bed again.

Bree's heart skipped a beat with excitement. She rushed the last few feet, leaning down to touch his cheek.

His eyes flickered open again, but she didn't see any recognition in them. A sob escaped her in spite of all she could do. "Galen! What's wrong, baby? What's happened to you?"

He didn't open his eyes again, but he mumbled something unintelligible and shifted onto his side. It gave her the opportunity to examine his back for injuries. She didn't know whether to be relieved or not when she didn't see anything.

After wrestling with it a little longer, she climbed on the bed beside him and slipped her arm carefully along his waist, resting her cheek against his wings, folded tightly against his back.

It was almost weird that it didn't occur to her that it felt strange snuggling up against a winged man. Aside from being disappointed that she couldn't rest her cheek against his back, though, it felt completely right. It comforted her to hold him. She didn't know if it did him or if he was even aware of it.

She dozed off while she was waiting for Marcy and Barbara to get back with news. They roused her when they tapped at the door again. A little sluggish from being awakened, she nearly fell off the bed, staggering a little as she went to answer the summons.

Marcy, Barbara, Sheila, Cindy, and Donna were standing outside in an anxious knot, she discovered.

"In all honesty, I couldn't make heads or tails of what anybody said, but we found Tale and he didn't seem concerned about it and I think, whatever it is, it must not be something too bad," Barbara announced.

Bree didn't know whether to be relieved or not, but it seemed to her that Tale and Galen were pretty close. She decided she was relieved. "What did he say?"

Marcy shrugged. "Sick in head." Barbara glared at her and Marcy shrugged. "Well, that's what he said!" she added defensively.

"I think he was trying to say it was something like a migraine," Barbara volunteered. "I mean, Tale would've been concerned, don't you think, if it was anything more serious? And it makes sense when you think about it. If they gave him something for the pain then it would probably knock him out. My sister has migraines."

It was comforting ... in a way, but Bree wasn't particularly happy to think it might be a migraine. She didn't know anyone personally that did, but from what she'd heard it was no small thing.

Still, it beat the hell out of an aneurism, stroke, brain tumor, or anything like that.

"We brought food—both for you and the invalid—in case he wakes up hungry."

Surprised to discover she'd missed the mid-day meal, Bree gratefully took the tray Sheila was holding, thanked them all and told them she'd see them later if Galen was up to eating in the dinning hall that evening.

She discovered she didn't have much of an appetite. Their food wasn't actually all that bad, and she'd come to recognize a good bit of it in the time she'd been there so that it wasn't as hard to choke down as it had been to begin with.

It still wasn't something she actually looked forward to, though. The only thing she really looked forward to at meals anymore was sharing them with Galen.

Setting the tray down on his desk, she went back to the bed. Since Galen still had his back to her, though, she decided to climb between him and the wall so that she could cuddle from the front for a while. She dozed off again almost as soon as she found a comfortable position.

Galen woke her when he stirred. It took her a few moments, though, to assimilate that there was an actual reason to be glad, that it wasn't just happiness to awaken beside him. When it dawned on her that he'd hardly moved since he'd been brought back to the room unconscious, she tilted her head back and looked up at his face hopefully.

This time, she saw recognition in his eyes. He was staring down at her in some confusion, though.

Smiling her relief, Bree lifted her hand to his cheek to test it for warmth and then lingered to stroke his face. "Hello handsome," she murmured teasingly. "Feeling better?"

His confusion seemed to deepen instead of vanishing—which didn't surprise her. Scooting up close enough for a kiss, she placed a light peck on his lips and then nuzzled her face against his. "You scared me. I thought there was something terrible wrong with you," she whispered, hugging him briefly before she pulled away to study his face again. "I'd feel better if I knew you were alright."

Chapter Fifteen

Galen frowned, trying to sort through the garbled sound of Bree's voice and find solid ground. Slowly, like his eyes adjusting after exposure to too much light, or too much darkness, the sounds began to form in his mind as words that he realized he recognized. His throat felt as dry as dust, though, and when he tried to speak he discovered that, as clear as the words seemed to form in his mind, he couldn't seem to wrap his tongue around them. "Alright," he managed finally.

Bree uttered a choked sound that seemed half way between a chuckle and a sob and flung her arms around him again, tightly this time.

As welcome as it was, it was also damned confusing. She enlightened him.

"You were unconscious so long! And I didn't know what might have happened. It scared me so bad when I saw the robots bring you in and then you were so completely unresponsive, I thought you were in a coma from something. I couldn't even ask anybody what had happened. I was worried sick!"

He'd caught just enough, and understood it, to feel embarrassment at the discovery that Bree had evidently seen him when they'd brought him back from the lab. That was so acute that it took him many more moments to translate anything else. The final comment added both a sense of guilt and hopefulness that made his throat close even tighter.

She pulled away, caught his face between her palms and kissed him on the tip of his nose. "Thirsty? You must be. You were out for hours!"

Climbing from the bed without waiting for a response, she crossed the room to a tray that he saw sitting on his desk.

That explained the sense that his stomach was caving in, he thought wryly. Undoubtedly, he'd slept through the mid-day meal. It gave him a jolt, made him wonder if he'd even woken up on the same day, but he decided, as disoriented as he felt, that it wasn't likely he'd missed an entire day.

His head swam when he sat up. Following that were enough hard pounding jabs of pain that he clasped his head between his palms, countering the pressure. When he opened his eyes again, Bree's worried face swam into view. Her chin wobbled threateningly. Her eyes glistened and he realized she was on the verge of tears.

He didn't know whether to be flattered or more embarrassed.

The prospect of seeming weak and helpless to her was humiliating enough to anger him, though. Gritting his teeth, he took the vessel she offered and downed the contents, shuddering slightly at the discovery that it was tepid.

Bree took the vessel when he'd emptied it. "Would you rather have water?"

"No," he said a little brusquely, leaning back against the pillows and massaging his temples. The pain wasn't nearly as excruciating as it had been, but his head still throbbed.

"Are you hungry?" Bree asked when he opened his eyes again, making a motion of feeding herself with her hand. "You want something to eat? You haven't eaten since

this morning.”

By the gods! If she meant to feed him he didn't think he could handle that, he thought angrily! Instead of answering, or telling her that he could understand most of what she'd said without the hand signals, he glared at her and rolled onto his side, putting his back to her. He was hungry, but he sure as fuck wasn't going to lie in the bed like a gods damned invalid and be fed!

In any case, his head was still pounding enough that he felt vaguely nauseated and he'd starve before he chanced throwing up all over her.

She hovered anxiously beside the bed for a few minutes but finally seemed to grasp that he preferred to be alone and left him.

He regretted his surliness the minute the panel closed behind her, began to feel abandoned, and misused because he did.

Dragging in a shaky breath, he lay with his eyes closed until his head stopped swimming and he could think about something besides battling the pain and the nausea. It dawned on him then that Bree had no idea what had happened. She'd told him, twice, that it had scared her.

It should have occurred to him that it might be frightening to her when she was so dependent upon him.

But then he'd thought, hoped, she wouldn't see him like that and he hadn't allowed himself to consider that she might or how it might affect her.

Not that he could've explained it to her before, but he supposed he could've tried if he'd been able to think beyond his own anxiety about the procedure and he'd considered that it might not be something she was familiar with.

That thought reminded him that he still had to look forward to at least three more and that was enough to distract him for a while. His mind moved back to Bree again almost the moment he managed to get past his revulsion of what he still had to face.

Very carefully, he pushed himself upright. After waiting for the pounding to stop and the dizziness to pass, he slipped to the edge of the bed and threw his legs off. He nearly blacked out again when he stood.

As luck would fucking have it, Bree took that moment to come back.

Her gasp was enough to startle him into whipping his head around way too fucking fast. She bounded toward him and grabbed him.

Mistake! The little idiot!

When he fell heavily on the bed behind him, he took her with him. She knocked the breath from him when she sprawled out on top of him and he had to battle for air and fight the threat of unconsciousness at the same time since he'd managed to bang his already throbbing skull against the wall when he fell.

“Gods damn it!” he hissed when he'd caught his breath.

Bree pushed herself up and looked down at him. “Poor baby! I'm so sorry. I thought I could catch you. Now you've bumped your poor head!”

And what had made her think she could catch him, Galen wondered irritably? The fact that she was about half his size should've given her a clue it wasn't likely!

He wasn't particularly pleased to have her calling him ‘baby’. Gods damn it! His head hurt! How the fuck did that translate to him suddenly being relegated to an infant?

“You shouldn't have tried to get up! That was stupid! Now you've probably hurt your head worse!”

Galen narrowed his eyes at her. Somehow when he'd envisioned being able to understand her he hadn't considered that it would put her in the position of being able to insult the fuck out of him! "Not hurt!" he managed to grunt out sullenly.

He couldn't manage more than that with her elbow planted firmly in his solar plexus and his head pounding until it felt like his skull was going to explode.

To his relief, that was enough to encourage her to remove her elbow from his stomach and he managed to drag in a decent breath. She stroked his cheek. "You *are* hurt! Stop trying to be so macho about it. I think food would make you feel better. Why don't you stop being such a baby about it and lie still and I'll go get something for you?"

She bounded off of him and flitted out the door again before he had time to do more than glare at her. He lay still after she'd left, sulking over it, but he just gods damned well wasn't going to lie in the bed like an invalid from nothing more than the worst headache he'd had since the last fucking time he'd let them hook him up to that gods damned machine!

He was more careful when he got up the second time. Heading for the door, he paused in it warily and searched the corridor for Bree before he headed for the bath. He'd managed to relieve himself and get into the shower before his nemesis caught up with him again. The walk, or the hot water from the shower, had cleared his head somewhat, though, and mellowed his temper.

He'd had time, in fact, to realize that Bree still hadn't tumbled to the fact that he understood her. Well, much of what she was saying. He could comprehend enough words here and there to have a fair idea of what she'd said ... just enough to tantalize and make him wonder how much more she might say that he might understand before she realized he'd learned her language.

It had occurred to him that she was bound to be pissed off once she learned how long he'd been listening to her and the other women, understanding what they said.

It could jeopardize his relationship with her, but then there might not actually *be* a relationship beyond the belief in his own mind, he told himself. It might transpire that it was the only way that he could be certain that he had honest answers to the questions in his mind. Once she knew, if she had anything to hide, she would and he had no idea how good she might be at that. In a way, if she knew he could understand her, it seemed to him that he might be less likely to learn what he wanted to know.

The question was, could he carry it off?

He had so far. She hadn't shown any suspicion that he understood her. They'd gotten into the habit of talking to each other even knowing they weren't understood, but adding gestures and the few words they did know to get their meaning across when they wanted to.

They didn't need verbal communications in their bed at night, in any case.

Ultimately, he didn't decide to deceive her. The data that had been downloaded directly into his brain was still spotty. At a guess, he figured he understood about every third or fourth word. The rest he had to piece together, which meant he couldn't be absolutely certain that he understood what she was saying even half the time.

When he'd downloaded enough information to feel more confident than he currently did that he understood her, then he would decide whether it was wise to continue to pretend ignorance.

Bree gave Galen a censorious look when she found him in the shower. "I really

don't think you should be up and moving around. What if you'd fallen and hurt yourself worse?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Is alright, I be!" he said testily.

Bree chewed her lip, fighting the temptation to smile when he was obviously in a foul mood and wouldn't appreciate her amusement. From the hardening of his expression, she didn't think she'd been very successful. "Stubborn man! Fine! We'll do it your way, but if you fall on your ass, don't blame me!"

He didn't know whether to be irritated or not when she left him bathing and returned a few minutes later with a drying cloth. Arriving just as he shut the water off, she held it out of his reach and dried him off herself. His irritation deepened at her determination to treat him like a helpless babe, but reluctant amusement joined it that she didn't seem to realize how ludicrous it was for her to be trying to 'mother' him when she was half his size. Yielding to the temptation to annoy her in return, he waited until she'd moved to his side and then flexed his wings and shook them vigorously, pelting her with a shower of water.

He almost burst out laughing when she lifted a dripping face to glare at him through one eye.

"Very funny!" she snapped, drying her face and dabbing at her clothes.

It drew Galen's attention, for the first time, to what she was wearing. His amusement vanished. Reaching out, he plucked at the top she was wearing. "Wear dis?"

She sent him a look that was a mixture of guilt and wariness, then lifted her chin at him. It occurred to Galen forcefully that he'd seen that look of stubbornness on her face more than once. He'd simply dismissed it because he hadn't understood why she was doing it—and it had usually been directed at someone else.

"It's my damned clothes! And I happen to be more comfortable this way than half naked, thank you very much!"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Draconian no Americonian."

She stared at him blankly. "Ameri ...?" She frowned. "*You* might be beautiful enough not to worry about being naked, but I'm not!"

Galen frowned in confusion. "Bree boot-ful. Galen no. Is male!"

She blushed slightly, realizing he'd understood her better than she'd expected him to, but rolled her eyes. "There must be something wrong with your eyes," she muttered, but she didn't feel like arguing with him about it. "I suppose you're determined to go down to the dining hall to eat?"

It took him several moments to translate that. By the time he had, she'd strode to their locker and removed a clean kilt for him. He took it from her resolutely before she could decide to dress him.

She seemed irritated with him as they headed out of the bath and turned toward the dining hall. He *was* annoyed with her if it came to that, but he settled an arm around her, drawing her closer. She glanced up at him, but wrapped an arm around his waist.

He couldn't decide if it was reciprocation of his affection or if she thought she was helping to support him and it annoyed him that he couldn't.

He regretted his determination to go to the dining hall to an extent. The noise made his head hurt more. On the other hand, for the first time he managed to pick up some of the conversation between the women and grasp at least a part of it.

The other women seemed surprised to see him up and about, which didn't help his

feelings. He wondered if there was any-fucking-body in the settlement that wasn't convinced he was at death's door only because he'd gone in for a gods damned link-up.

"Your bride was concerned about you," Tale murmured the moment he settled.

Galen grunted in response, but turned to study Bree with a touch of surprise. "I went in for a link-up," he said finally. "Worse fucking head ache I've had in a while."

Tale nodded. "I thought as much, but *they* didn't understand," he said pointedly. "Had them all in a flutter—including Marcy, and I didn't much care for that I don't mind telling you. I suppose it was because Bree was so worried and upset."

Bree glanced at Tale when he spoke her name and then glanced at him questioningly. He shook his head at her.

Frowning, she looked away, but he could see that it bothered her to know she figured into the conversation and not know what the conversation was about.

"He still looks a little pale," Barbara commented.

Bree shrugged. "He's pig-headed. He was determined to come."

"Did you ever figure out what it was?"

"Not really. I suppose your guess was as good as anything—the migraine. He still seems dizzy and I can tell his head still hurts, but I didn't see anything at all that might suggest a head injury."

Sheila nodded, toying with her food. "You seemed ... really upset. You ok now?"

Bree shifted uncomfortably. She supposed it was too much to hope that they wouldn't have noticed she was about to fall apart because she'd thought Galen was hurt. "It just scared me."

She discovered several knowing looks when she glanced up.

"I don't suppose anyone's heard or seen anything that might give us a clue of how long they mean to keep us here?" one of the women a little further down the table, named Nancy, asked.

Everyone looked around questioningly but, clearly, none of them had a clue.

Julia uttered a deep sigh. "I really miss real food," she said glumly.

"It doesn't taste bad," Marcy defended immediately, "... once you get used to it."

Julia's lips tightened, but she didn't respond.

"I'm not sure I'll ever get used to it," Sheila said a mournfully. "This is the best diet I've ever been on—unidentifiable food that doesn't taste like anything familiar."

"I get the feeling they don't actually plan to take us back—not sure what I'm basing that on anything besides the fact that Blu seems to think I belong to him," Barbara said. She swallowed a little convulsively. "I miss my mom, and my brother and sister—and I can't even get along with them half the time!"

Sheila sighed. "I miss my family, too. I know they probably think we're all dead by now! How awful is it that we can't even let them know anything so they'll stop worrying?"

"You actually think they'd worry less knowing where we are?" Julia snapped irritably.

Sheila's chin wobbled. She sniffed.

"Sorry!" Julia muttered. "But it's the truth."

"She's right," Nancy agreed. "I think, if anything, my folks would have a pure cow knowing I was here. My mom would be imagining me being tortured. Maybe it's

better if they do think we're dead if we're never going to get back? At least then they could get over it."

"You never get over it," Bree said solemnly. "If you'd ever lost anybody close to you, you'd know that."

Nancy stared at her in dismay. "I'm so sorry. I just wasn't thinking."

Bree shook her head. "It's been three years since my parents were killed. I guess the first year is the worst. After that you don't think about it as much ... but you don't forget either. It just gets a little easier after a while."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but do you think we could talk about something a little less depressing?" Marcy asked.

Bree glanced at her sharply, but she could see her point. She managed a faint smile. "How about them dawgs!"

Marcy stared at her blankly for a moment and uttered a watery chuckle. "When's the last time you saw a football game?"

Bree grinned. "They play *football*?"

Barbara uttered a snort of laughter. "You don't follow sports much, do you?"

"I don't follow sports, at all, if I can help it, but you know how men are! The last guy I dated, eons ago, was a sports nut. That didn't last long, I can tell you. A girl just can't compete with a damned TV set!"

"Hear! Hear! And amen to that!" Shirley agreed heartily. "When my ex planted his butt on the couch and glued his eyes to the TV, I could dance naked in front of him and not get a rise out of him!"

"I miss TV," Marcy said mournfully.

Bree laughed and threatened her with a glob of food. "Don't start! We're supposed to be trying for cheerfulness here." She thought it over. "I think the real problem is that all of us are used to having too much to do and now that we don't have anything to do we just dwell on the negative."

Julia sent her an indecipherable look, but she refrained from commenting.

"She's right," Barbara agreed. "It was great at first—after I got over being scared shitless, that is. Almost like a really long vacation except without all the work of trying to pack as much fun into two days as possible. I'd actually like to have something to do so that I wouldn't spend all of my time thinking!"

"There shouldn't be a problem finding something to do," Shelia said. "The guys work all day."

"I vote that we corral one of the guys and make him teach us how to speak their language," Nancy said. "It'd make things a hell of a lot easier. And then, maybe, we'd be able to find out exactly what their intentions are."

Marcy snickered. "Screwing."

Even Julia laughed. "We *know* that! Besides that!"

"More screwing!" Barbara added, straight faced.

Donna piped up. "And then more fucking."

"Eew!" Sheila complained. "I never liked that word! It sounds so ... nasty!"

"I always figured you might as well call a spade a spade. You know what they say ... shit by any other name is still shit!"

Bree chuckled. "I think it was a rose ..."

"Same difference."

"I kind of like nasty," Julia murmured, giving Dirk a sultry look.

He looked startled and then his face started turning red.

Bree made an attempt to turn her chuckle into a cough.

Everyone else—the women—pretended to cough, looked everywhere but at Dirk and finally focused on their food. When the men took up their conversation again, they decided they'd pretended long enough that they hadn't noticed Dirk's embarrassment.

"Shame on you!" Bree said, amusement threading her voice. "Embarrassing the poor guy!"

Julia shrugged but grinned unrepentantly. "He *should* be ashamed. Nasty boy!"

Bree felt her own face heat up at the comment, which brought way too much to mind. She grinned, though, when she noticed the other women had also blushed. "I guess we can't say the guys are the only ones with fucking on their minds," she murmured. "*Aside* from that ... and possibly learning a few words of their language, any other ideas? Because I have to tell you, I don't seem to be doing well at picking up their language and it gives me a headache to try."

Nobody else seemed able to come up with anything. "I hate to say it, but besides work and then home work, and partying on the weekends, I didn't do much besides watch TV or read—and eat and sleep. I haven't seen any books. There aren't any TVs. They won't let us anywhere near their damned computers—I've tried, believe me. The robots do all the cleaning around here, and there isn't much to clean anyway," Nancy said. "These guys are almost like ... neat freaks, you know? I guess it's because they're military, or something like that."

"Or maybe its just because they don't have that many *things* to strewn around?"

"Or much room to do it?"

"I'm just about bored out of my mind, too," Sheila agreed. "Not that I don't enjoy sitting around half the day trying to think up conversation with you guys, but I'm starting to run low on material."

Barbara added her complaint to the pot. "Me, Marcy, and Bonnie have actually taken up working out ... and there isn't much I hate more than working out."

"That's actually not a bad suggestion," Bree said. "It certainly couldn't hurt to get into shape. You never know when you might need to run like hell."

They all looked at her owl-eyed. "You think we might need to run?" Marcy asked uneasily. "Because I have to tell you I don't think I'd make it."

"I didn't actually mean it like that, but there *is* that. We could do something fun instead of just exercising, like maybe a dance routine?"

"No music," Nancy said glumly.

"So maybe we could sing *and* dance?"

"I only have enough breath for one or the other. I couldn't do both," Julia objected. "I've taken singing lessons, though. I could sing and you guys could work out. And then somebody else could sing."

"Hey! We could do karaoke without the music, you know?"

Everyone looked at Kelly speculatively.

"It was just a suggestion," she muttered defensively. "Y'all were asking for suggestions."

"Well, it isn't bad one, except I'm god awful at singing," Bree said. "And I don't think I could remember many lyrics—or sing an entire song—especially without music."

“So we could look around and find some things to make music with—or something close to at least manage a rhythm.”

“I wish I had something to write all this down. What day of the week do you think it is?”

“That’s anybody’s guess.”

“It’s Sunday ... or it would be if we were on Earth,” Barbara volunteered. “It was a Friday when they abducted us and I’ve been keeping up.”

“Well, it’s Sunday here, too,” Bree said firmly.

“Really?” Marcy asked, surprised.

Everyone looked at her pityingly and she turned red. “Oh. You mean we’ll just say this is Sunday?”

“We’ll start counting from here,” Bree said firmly. “So, tomorrow’s Monday and that’ll be our dance day—Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays we’ll spend the morning doing a workout and the afternoons trying to see how many entire songs we can remember. Tuesday we’ll take a tour of the colony and see if we can see something that we could do that we might actually enjoy doing, or that we feel like needs doing. Maybe we could figure out how to get the robots to give us something we could carry food in and have a picnic out under the dome when we get tired?”

Nobody seemed extremely enthusiastic but since no one could think of anything else to do, they all agreed on it.

* * * *

Galen was thoughtful as he walked Bree to the bath after they’d eaten. Between the conversation he’d been trying to keep going with the men and his miniscule understanding of their language, he hadn’t actually managed to grasp much of what they were saying beyond the fact that they were restless from having nothing to do. It was yet one more detail that he’d overlooked, he thought irritably.

It hadn’t occurred to him, though, that the women would be bored. He’d thought they would find a way to occupy themselves. The women he’d known generally did. But then he realized he was thinking in terms of the old world, the civilized world where life had an established routine and everyone had a place. Here, he and the men had more than their usual jobs—new jobs to take the place of those they’d had on the ship and in most cases they still had the other tasks to do, as well.

It probably wouldn’t have been an issue if they’d had the colony well established by the time they’d taken the women. The women would’ve had their households to attend to. There would’ve been some entertainment because there would’ve been free time. They didn’t have any free time now to be worried about entertainment themselves.

What he didn’t understand but wished he did was some of the things they’d mentioned that were familiar to them. He wasn’t prepared to go back for another link-up to find out, however—not so soon. In any case, it wasn’t safe to do so. He’d have to recover a day, at least, before he could do it again, aside from the fact that he had too much to do to spend that many days incapacitated.

It wouldn’t hurt to drop by communications and see if they could pull up the meanings of the words he hadn’t understood, though.

Chapter Sixteen

Galen debated whether to go straight to his office after the morning meal and work on reviewing Valarian law or to head to communications to try to unravel the mystery words that had taunted him most of the night. He finally decided to head to communications. He still had a slight headache and trying to read law and comprehend the elaborate wording was bound to make it worse.

Ken-so, he discovered, had arrived before him to link-up for his first download. He considered heading to his office to give them time for the procedure and then returning but finally settled in a chair instead to wait.

It wasn't a pleasant sight. It brought far too vividly to mind his own experience the day before and the three sessions he still had ahead of him. Not surprisingly, though, Ken-so weathered it somewhat better than he had.

No one had quite pinpointed why it was that age seemed such a strong determining factor in the aftereffects of the procedure, but it was a known fact that the older the recipient the more discomfort and Ken-so was a good ten annums younger than he was. Of course there was also no disputing that everyone was different and any procedure varied widely according to the individual.

He doubted Ken-so would agree—now, he thought wryly, but give him a few years and he would see it for himself.

Luckily for Ken-so, he didn't lose his meal. He also seemed more cognizant of his surroundings than Galen knew he'd been the day before, but he was in enough pain he didn't argue when Maalen offered the medication.

When Maalen had administered it and summoned the robots to remove him from the couch and return him to his quarters to rest, Galen got up from his chair and explained what he'd come for and Maalen set to work trying to track down the meaning of each of the words Galen recalled. It wasn't as simple as Galen had expected. He could recall the words. Inside his mind he recalled the pronunciation of the words, but wrapping his tongue around them and pronouncing them himself seemed a nearly insurmountable task.

After picking apart the sounds and matching them to what they felt were the appropriate letters, they stood watching the vid display as it pulled up word after word as possibilities.

Frustration flickered through Galen. He was about to suggest they try one of the other words when a feminine screech from down the corridor sent a jolt through all of them.

It was like having an electric jolt shoot down his spine. Galen straightened jerkily, whirled on his heel and raced to the door. The techs were right behind him but he didn't order them back since he had no idea what the scream might indicate. They all checked at the door when they saw the women gathered in a knot down the corridor. The pretty plump woman Ken-so had taken as his bride was wailing and blubbering at the top of her lungs. Bree and one of the other women—he thought she was called Sheila—had

their arms around her and were trying to comfort her, but he could see that all of the women were white faced with fear.

He was instantly torn. The sense of urgency their distress communicated made his heart thud sickeningly in his chest, urging him to rush to their aid—to see what was wrong. The wailing and weeping instilled an equal urge to retreat in the other direction.

He yielded to the first and, after that brief hesitation, raced down the corridor to try to discover what had sent all of the women into an uproar. As he neared them, however, he saw that Ken-so, blissfully unaware of everything around him since he was unconscious, was the center of the turmoil. It didn't take a great leap from there to understand at least some of what the flap was about and impatience welled inside him to displace the fear that had sent his heart to hammering in overtime.

His face hardening now with his growing anger, he plowed through the throng, waving them out of the way and ordered the robots to continue with their burden. The women immediately began to pelt him with a barrage of exclamations in their tongue that he couldn't grasp at all. It seemed clear, though, that it was Ken-so that had upset them.

"Is alright! Go! Is alright!"

They didn't move. They merely turned to stare at him with expressions he couldn't begin to understand. Anger seemed a common thread, however, and fear. He didn't understand either one, gods damn it! The man was merely resting.

Bree left the wailing woman and rushed toward him. "What's wrong with him, Galen? My god! Is it some kind of disease? Is he sick? Is it catching?"

Galen glared down at her, trying to decipher what she'd asked, more irritated because he couldn't grasp it and whatever it was she'd said seemed to upset the other women even more. "Is alright!" he repeated, trying to figure out what 'wrong' had to do with the situation even after he'd finally figured out the meaning of the word. Beyond the panic in the women, he couldn't see that there was anything 'wrong' in the situation.

Bree backed away from him, looking at him in a way he found impossible to interpret, although it made his chest tighten with an unnamable anxiety. He tamped his anger with an effort. "Is alright."

She didn't look convinced and she didn't react to his attempt to control his temper as he'd expected. Instead, she stared at him for a long moment and moved further from him, turning finally and speaking to the other women. All of them sent him looks that seemed reproachful and then the entire group followed Ken-so and his woman down the corridor.

Galen watched in consternation until they'd crowded into Ken-so's quarters and then turned to look for a target for his wrath. Maalen and the other techs were still standing around him, gaping after the women. "What the fuck was that about?" Galen growled.

Maalen shot a gaping glance at him. "I ... don't know, Sir!"

Galen narrowed his eyes. "You're senior communications officer, gods damn it! It's your fucking job to know! Find out what the fuck that was all about and report to me in my office!" He glanced at his chronometer. "I'll expect a full report in one sept! Is that clear?"

Turning away, he plowed through the other men and stalked down the corridor to his office. He discovered once he'd reached it and sprawled angrily in his chair that he couldn't focus on the files he'd been trying to read, however, and after a few minutes of

trying to calm himself enough to understand the text, he got up to pace, going over and over the scene in his mind and trying to figure it out.

More specifically, he wanted to understand Bree's reaction to him.

He'd been angry.

Small wonder when they'd scared the piss out of him, he thought resentfully! Gods! What *was* it about a woman's scream that turned a man's knees to jelly? The fear clear in all of them, especially Bree, had gone straight through him—not the least because he couldn't figure out what the 'threat' was that had scared them all.

It dawned on him after a while that what was really bothering him was that he sensed that he'd somehow failed Bree. That was what was in her expression that bothered him so much, almost an accusation.

Was it the anger? Or was it something else?

She'd wanted reassurance, he realized after a while. If he hadn't been in so much turmoil, angry because their fear had affected him and because he was confused and couldn't understand what had caused it, he would've noticed.

And his anger had made her retreat from him.

It made him feel a little sick to his stomach when he realized he'd scared her instead of reassuring her. It would've been bad enough to have failed to give her the comfort she'd sought, but to make her afraid to come to him

She couldn't be afraid of him, he assured himself.

When he'd struggled for a while to view it from her perspective, though, it occurred to him that she might have felt she had reason to. She was such a dainty little thing. He towered over her. She had to know her limitations even though she'd never shown any sign that she doubted her ability to protect herself.

He intimidated the *men* under his command when he lost his temper, he realized uncomfortably.

They had reason to be worried, though. Not only was he their commanding officer, and now their ruler, which meant he wasn't just responsible for their lives, but held their lives in his hands. There wasn't even a handful among them that he would have any doubts of the outcome if he found himself in the position of having to face them in a battle. He thought it would be fair to say that the men were well aware of it, too.

Gods damn it to hell, though, he cherished his Bree! Not that he was prepared to tell her and place that weapon in her hands when he didn't know how she felt about him, but he had been gentle enough with her she should trust him. She should know he wouldn't harm a hair on her head! Granted, they hadn't been together long, but it had been weeks. She must know he didn't have a cruel streak even if she doubted his affection for her.

Of course, he couldn't tell her even if he had the facility to do so, but he wouldn't even consider punishing her if she broke the law of the land. It might present some problems with the other colonists, but then he didn't expect that come up and if it did ... well, he might have been at the bottom of the royal pyramid. But it was easy enough to see from that viewpoint that his royal cousin wasn't above manipulating the laws to suit himself when the need or desire arose.

Not that he intended to model himself after his cousin, but he sure as hell saw no point in taking on the headache of ruling if his position didn't allow him to protect his own!

Maybe he'd been mistaken? He hadn't understood one word out ten that any of them had said.

Maalen, to his relief, arrived in time to interrupt the useless cycle of doubts, sweating bullets and white faced. "Sir! I have studied this as carefully as possible in the time allotted. I cannot be absolutely sure, but I'm *reasonably* certain that the women have somehow gotten the idea that there may be a contagious disease striking the men down."

The intelligence sent a jolt of shock through Galen, but it didn't last long. He narrowed his eyes at Maalen. "Somehow? And you don't have a fucking clue what might've made them think that when you've paraded both me and Ken-so down the main corridor unconscious in the space of two days?"

Maalen gaped at him. "But, Sir ...!"

Galen waved away his explanation. "Find a recovery station near the communications room or remove the equipment to another location that will allow room for cots for recovery, Maalen. I'll admit it hadn't occurred to me that they might interpret it that way, but then they obviously aren't familiar with linking-up to acquire knowledge. I should have thought of that before. It'll be more comfortable for the men anyway. I wasn't too fucking pleased to discover Bree hovering over me as if she expected me to croak any minute, I can tell you!"

Maalen grimaced. "It hadn't occurred to me that it might wound the royal dignity," he murmured uncomfortably.

Galen sent him a sour look. "It's a wound to *any* man's fucking dignity, Maalen—laid low by a headache, of all things! There'd be some pride in it if it was a battle wound severe enough to warrant bed rest! I wouldn't have minded her clucking over me like a meecheen with one" He stopped abruptly as the phrase 'meecheen with one chick' struck him in a whole new light. "You're dismissed, Maalen."

Settling at his desk, he examined the sudden thought. Turn it though he might, however, it struck him that she had been worried and anxious. He'd realized that at the time, of course, despite his splitting headache. He just hadn't tumbled to the fact that it couldn't be interpreted any other way than concern and, if she was concerned enough about him to get that upset

He sat still for a time, drumming his fingers on his desk top while he reviewed the memories over and over. Finally, he sat forward decisively and hit the button on the com unit. When Maalen's image appeared, he asked him if he was still working on trying to translate the words he'd given him.

Maalen looked uneasy. "I'm not sure we can narrow it down significantly without your input, Sir. We'll need the context of the usage."

Galen wasn't terribly pleased about that, but his thoughts had improved his mood enough that he merely told Maalen to keep working on it and that he would drop by later to see if he could add anything that might help in resolving the puzzle.

Settling back in his chair, smiling faintly to himself, he pondered what he might do to mend his fences with Bree. Dragging her off to their quarters and making love to her until she passed out topped his list, but he wasn't so enamored with the idea that it didn't occur to him she probably wouldn't be very receptive to the notion just at the moment. He was going to have to smooth the waters, he thought wryly, before she would be willing to yield to him now.

He'd fucked up royally, he realized, wondering wryly if one had to be royal to fuck up quite that badly. He should have pulled her into his arms when she'd come to him for reassurance. He was going to have to work twice as hard to gain her trust now, gods damn it to hell!

* * * *

It would've been a lot easier to calm everyone else down, Bree reflected, if she'd felt more confident herself. As it was, from the moment Nancy had suggested the possibility that they'd either introduced some alien virus to their lovers that was going to kill them or Galen and Ken-so had been struck down by some Martian virus, she hadn't been able to convince herself that it was ridiculous to think such a thing. She was too afraid herself to dismiss it with reason.

It *wasn't* reasonable, she assured herself. It might be true that they, as humans from another world, were very likely carrying germs that could be extremely harmful to Galen and his people. It might also be true that there were living organisms on the new world that could wipe them all out, but Galen's race was clearly a very advanced one. They would *know* about such things. They would have checked. They would've taken preventive measures, or at least be looking for such things.

She didn't believe for a moment that Galen would've just dismissed their anxiety.

His anger had thrown her, though. She'd never seen him really angry—annoyed, yes, but not directing anger toward her.

Well, he hadn't seemed to focus on her until she'd drawn his attention to herself.

As much as that had unnerved her, though, she was more alarmed by the possibility that his anger was a sign of *his* anxiety about it. If he'd been calmer himself when he'd kept assuring them that it was alright, she would've had an easier time believing him.

There still remained a niggling doubt that Galen wasn't well himself. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out he hadn't been at all pleased about her attempts to take care of him and now she was worried that he was too damned hardheaded to take care of himself. Because it had certainly occurred to her that his temper could be a sign that he still wasn't feeling well. Otherwise, she would've been comforted by the very fact that he was up and about and seemed to be back to normal.

It didn't make her feel any better that he'd pushed her away when she'd wanted to nurture him, but she would've at least been easier in her mind if she could've convinced herself he really was alright, not just pretending to be because he had some *stupid* idea that she would think he was weak.

Men, she thought irritably! Contrary to what he apparently thought, she didn't consider him impervious to pain, sickness, or injury just because he was swinging a dick!

A very nice dick, which he hadn't favored her with the night before, either because he really was sick or because he was angry with her.

In some ways, she was almost accustomed to the fact that communicating was next to impossible and she wasn't certain even when they did that she'd actually gotten her point across. In others, it was still unnerving and very disturbing.

Like now.

And the worst of it was, none of them could do even as well as she and Galen were managing. Somehow—at least it seemed so to her—it was almost as if she and Galen had some special sort of link that transcended, at least a good bit of the time, the

inability to actually talk to each other.

Unfortunately, that wasn't currently the case. Or rather, he had made it abundantly clear that he didn't appreciate her and the other women going all emotional on them over what he considered 'nothing'. For a fairly sensitive and intuitive man, he could be a real dick sometimes.

* * * *

Galen studied the display in front of him absently, but he knew he'd lost any chance of actually absorbing anything he read. He hadn't been able to get Bree out of his mind since the incident and that was saying something. He *usually* had Bree on his mind, but, ordinarily, he still managed to concentrate enough on what he was doing to accomplish it.

Uttering a disgusted sigh, he leaned back in his chair again, rubbing his eyes tiredly. He needed to appoint a parliament, he decided. If the colonists weren't satisfied with his appointees, they could hold an election in a year or two and pick their own representatives, but he needed to put together men now to examine the Valarian laws. They had the unique opportunity of reviewing what had already been set down—and tried—and eliminating the ones that either had no bearing on them here or had already proven to be useless, unfair, or simply too burdensome to allow enough freedom for healthy growth.

He was all in favor of a bare minimum to keep order. Simple was usually best. There didn't seem much point in loading everyone down with so many laws that they couldn't keep up with all of them or would need a man of law just to explain them to them.

Closing the file, he opened his plan for the royal city, studying the mansion he had planned for Bree and himself. As he did so, it occurred to him that he didn't know Bree well enough to understand her particular needs or desires. Reluctance immediately assailed him as he toyed with the idea of getting her input. He'd wanted to surprise her. He'd envisioned taking her there only when it was complete and showing her around, but was that really the best idea? Regardless of his desire to surprise her—actually, *due* to that fact—she was going to live there, too, and he couldn't be sure it would be a pleasant surprise if he didn't find out what she wanted.

She wanted something to do, he reminded himself. More than that, she needed something to make her feel a part of the colony, a member, a contributor.

He was still reluctant to tell her when he'd wanted it to be a gift.

It occurred to him after a little while that he could find another gift—maybe even the garden could be the gift she'd enjoy the most?

He shook the thought, and his reluctance, off. He would find something else, he decided. It would be far better all the way around to get her input in the structure. Maybe it would even help to mend things between them?

He just hoped she wasn't already questioning whether she really wanted to live with him or not.

Chapter Seventeen

Bree wasn't sure of what to expect when Galen joined her at the noon meal. He never had before and it added to her uneasiness.

She was even more mystified when he indicated that he wanted her to go with him afterwards, but somewhat relieved, as well, thinking that, maybe, he meant to try to explain what it was that had happened to both him and Tale that had everyone so worried.

Instead, he took her to what was obviously an office. Urging her to take the seat behind his desk, he dragged up another chair close enough to bump knees with her and then pulled a diagram up on the virtual display. Baffled, Bree studied the diagram for several minutes, trying to decipher the strange symbols on the display before it finally dawned on her that she was looking at the floor plan of an enormous building.

"Building?"

Galen's brow cleared. "Yes."

Unfortunately, that didn't tell her what kind of building it was, although she assumed it was something for their base. More interested once she realized what it was, although she was still completely in the dark as to why he'd decided to show it to her, she leaned closer to study it. Naturally, closer didn't help her read the symbols. She pointed, tracing the lines in the air with one fingertip. "Room?"

Galen nodded, gesturing around at the room they were in.

She nodded that she'd understood, but then frowned, wondering how she could find out the purpose of the room.

Galen caught her chin, forcing her to look at him. When she did, he pointed to the desk, the chair, and the storage locker across the room.

"This room? You don't just mean 'a' room. An office? Like this?"

He nodded and then pointed to another room, closing his eyes and tilting his head to one side. When he saw she still looked confused, he repeated the mime and then uttered a fake snore.

Bree bit her lip. "I'm guessing you don't mean morgue," she said chuckling. "Sleeping? Bedroom?"

He nodded again, pointing with his index finger. "Slep dere, dere, dere, dere, n dere." He mimed bathing. "Dere, dere, dere, dere, n dere."

"Good god!" Bree exclaimed, looking at the diagram wide-eyed now, wondering what sort of building it was. Five bedrooms and five baths? Well, that certainly beat the hell out of the community bath they had now ... and then some. She supposed he meant that they were going to have private baths, but it looked like a huge building for only five people. She mimed eating and he pointed to an enormous room that looked to be the size of all the bedrooms put together and then to a smaller room that looked to be around the size of the largest bedroom.

Kitchen and dining hall? Surely he hadn't meant two different rooms for dining ... unless it was sort of an officer's dining area and then one for the other men? It was

still odd that there were so few bedrooms, though. She supposed the largest bedroom must be for him. The others all looked to be about the same size. She pointed to the large dining room. "All eat here? Everyone?"

He frowned, but she couldn't tell whether he was confused about what she was asking of if he'd understood—and she hadn't. She gestured wide with her arms. "All?"

He shrugged, still frowning as if he was searching for something. "Sometimes," he finally said, his frustration evident now.

Bree thought that over. "Special times? Parties?"

That didn't seem to register. She reddened slightly. "Like when we flew?" She pointed at both of them and then waved her hand to mime soaring.

His eyes gleamed. His lips curled upward. "Special."

She thought that over, trying to decide whether he'd agreed that it was for special dinners or if he was just remembering that night.

He pointed to the screen and then lifted her hand to settle it over his heart. "Galen, Bree" He released her hand and made a cradle with his arms.

Bree stared at him blankly, feeling her face flash red and then white. The gesture was hard to misinterpret. He couldn't possibly mean what she thought he meant, though.

Unless he thought he'd gotten her pregnant?

She thought that was doubtful, particularly since her tummy was starting to take on the damned bloating that said 'imminent down time'. She'd been worrying about it ever since she'd noticed—partly because it meant she was going to be out of commission and partly because she didn't know what the hell to do about it.

Embarrassing as it was, if she and the other women couldn't think up something to do for their periods, she was going to have to try talk to Galen about it and she really didn't want to.

Casting around in her mind for an alternate explanation it finally occurred to her that she'd decided they must be colonizing and, if she was right, then he might be trying to say it was a family dwelling.

"Family? Man—woman—baby?"

He studied her for a long moment and finally caught her wrist, drawing her from her seat and onto his lap. "R family—here. Galen, Bree n baby."

Bree felt a flash of heat and then cold—and a buzzing in her head. She couldn't think of anything to say. Her mind had gone chaotic and she was still more than a little convinced that she had to have misunderstood him.

He caught her face, forcing her to look at him, his gaze flickering over her face as if he was trying to interpret her expression.

There couldn't be much expression to read. She felt so perfectly blank with shock that she didn't know how she felt. She supposed, uppermost was disbelief, the sense that she'd misunderstood everything he was trying to tell her.

He released his hold on her after a moment. She followed the movement of his hand as he reached toward the console again and tapped at the virtual keyboard. The diagram disappeared. The image that he pulled up next made her suck in her breath sharply. It was a city within a bubble—like the dome above them—but this was an image of a fantastic futuristic city. He touched the virtual screen, pulling up first one close up view of a building and then another. Finally, he zoomed the view in on the elaborate structure that was in the center, situated on a slight rise.

Bree stared at it, enthralled. It wasn't like anything she'd ever seen before, and yet she thought it was beautiful, breathtaking. "It's beautiful," she whispered.

"City Breezian—Bree n Galen's palace."

Bree turned to gape at him. Goosebumps erupted all over her. Abruptly, she felt like she couldn't breathe. Scrambling from his lap, she rushed toward the door, trying to escape the sense of suffocation that swept over her. She paused there and turned to look at him wide-eyed. "This is too much," she said, her lips feeling awkward and numb. "Too much."

When the door opened behind her, she stumbled out, looked around a little wildly and then rushed mindlessly down the corridor. Galen followed her out, called to her, but she ignored him, running faster.

She had no idea where she was going until she stumbled into the room she'd been sharing with him and halted, trying to catch her breath. Shivering, feeling as if she was going to pass out, she moved to the bed and sat down, trying to figure out why she felt so peculiar. Realizing after a few moments that she was hyperventilating, she curled up on the bed in a fetal position, cupped her hands tightly over her nose and mouth and tried to gain control of her breathing.

She was still fighting the darkness when, dimly, she heard the door open. She opened her eyes when she felt Galen's presence, but she couldn't see him. The darkness had enveloped her so profoundly that she couldn't see anything else.

"Bree!" He pulled her hands from her face. "Wrong?"

"I don't feel well," she said in a slurred whisper, giving up on fighting the darkness.

Galen stared at her in consternation when her eyes rolled back in her head. Surging to his feet, he reached the com unit in two strides. "Medic! Gods damn it! Get someone in here. Now!" he roared.

He moved back to her as soon as he'd called for help, crouching beside the bed. She felt so cool to his touch it alarmed him more. Dragging the coverlet off of the bed, he tucked it tightly around her.

Her eyes fluttered as the medic dashed in and skidded to a halt by the bed. "What happened?"

Galen swallowed a little convulsively, feeling his face heat. "I don't fucking know. I was showing her ... something and then she turned white and began to breathe very quickly and then she ran off. She was lying on the bed when I found her."

"Unconscious?" the medic asked sharply.

"Not entirely."

The medic took a hand scanner from his kit and slowly waved it over her, frowning as he checked the readings.

"Well?"

The medic glanced at him. "I don't actually know—she's not Valarian, Sir. The scanner's set for Valarians. At a guess ... a fright or a shock. I think she just fainted. She seems to be coming around. I should take her to the med center and run some tests."

Galen nodded, settling his hip weakly on the top of his desk.

He didn't feel particularly well himself, not after Bree's reaction to his 'surprise'. He supposed, a little sickly, that it was just as well he hadn't decided to wait to surprise her with his gift.

Coward that she was, Bree kept her eyes closed even after she'd regained consciousness, listening to the exchange between Galen and the unknown man. It was only that she still felt weak, she told herself, but she wasn't tempted to face Galen at the moment. She was almost sorry she'd feigned a prolonged faint when robots arrived and lifted her from the bed to a gurney.

She debated, briefly, whether it was a good idea to 'come around' and finally decided against it, squeezing her eyes closed as the damned robots hauled her away.

The stranger leaned over her when the robots stopped and peered down at her.

"You might as well open your eyes," he said dryly. "I know you're conscious."

Bree didn't understand what he'd said, but she didn't have any trouble grasping the sarcastic tone and the very fact that he'd spoken directly to her made it clear he wasn't fooled. She opened her eyes and looked up at him and then looked around the room she found herself in.

It was alien, but it was clear enough that it was some sort of examination room.

She sat up abruptly. "I'm fine!"

The stranger planted a palm in the middle of her chest and shoved her flat.

"Stay!"

Bree glared at him.

Ignoring her, he moved to a computer console and tapped at the keys. After a few moments, he turned to look at her ... and spoke to her in his language.

Just as she opened her mouth to inform him that she didn't have a damned clue what he'd said, a mechanical sounding voice spoke—English. "Need run tests."

Bree blinked rapidly, glancing around for the source of the voice.

The man—whom she supposed was a doctor—spoke again. "Why faint?"

Bree glared at him. "Aren't you supposed to figure that out?"

A gleam of amusement entered his eyes when the computer translated for him.

"Bree want tests?"

"No, I don't! I'm fine now ... really."

"Why faint?"

Bree sucked in a deep, calming breath. "I don't know," she muttered. "I hyperventilated."

He studied her thoughtfully when the computer translated but moved toward her, examining her head with his hands and then her lymph nodes and throat. "Fall?"

"No."

"Sick?"

"No."

"Frightened?"

Bree considered that in frowning silence. *Had* she been frightened? She didn't honestly know—shocked, for certain. Galen had had *no* business pulling that on her without any kind of warning, she thought irritably. It might be true that she'd begun to strongly suspect that Galen had the idea that he was keeping her, but she supposed she hadn't actually accepted the possibility.

Well! If he was building a house for her and *four* children, she supposed that answered her question!

"No," she muttered finally, studying her hands. "Just ... surprised, I guess."

"No good surprise," the medic observed dryly.

Bree reddened. “Actually ... I suppose it was. I don’t honestly know how I feel about it ... beyond stunned.”

“Need run tests. Prince disturbed Bree faint.”

Bree sent him a sharp look. A wave of shock went through her. “Prince?”

The medic sent her a piercing look. “Your man.”

Bree reddened. “Galen, you mean?”

He shook his head when the computer translated. “Have other?”

Bree glared at him. “Very funny. Never mind! I guess there’s no damned getting out of this?”

“No,” he said cheerfully and rose, moving away from her. As she watched him with a mixture of curiosity and dread, he rolled a strange machine toward her. He looked down at her as he positioned it. “No move. Still.”

Releasing a huff of breath, Bree nodded, deciding it must be something like a cat scan—although she’d never had one. “This is a waste of time,” she muttered.

“Still!” he repeated. “Eyes closed.”

Bree obediently closed her eyes a few seconds before a bright light hit her eyelids.

“Bree good pretend faint.”

“I *did* faint, damn it!”

“Still! No talk! Wreck scan. Now start over.”

Bree pursed her lips, but she refrained from arguing with him anymore. It took an effort to lie perfectly still while the thing slowly moved over her. She wasn’t certain if she was supposed to hold her breath or not when it passed over her chest, but she did, releasing it slowly after the scanner moved past her chest and over her belly. She tensed to sit up as soon as it reached her feet.

“Still!”

Releasing an impatient huff, she held still while the damned thing moved up again. Finally, he moved it out of her way and she sat up. Her head throbbed in complaint when she did and she lifted her hands to massage her head, wondering abruptly if she’d contracted whatever Galen and Tale had.

She dismissed it about the time the thought got her heart revving. She *knew* why she’d fainted and it hadn’t had anything to do with any sort of attack—except nerves. She’d had an anxiety attack, plain and simple, hyperventilated, and then passed out because she couldn’t control the panicked breathing.

“I suppose you’re going to stick me now?”

He looked at her in surprise.

She mimed a shot. “Blood work?”

He frowned in confusion but shook his head. Moving back to the console, he tapped at the keys and brought up a display—of her. Curious, Bree moved a little closer and peered at it over his shoulder. Unfortunately, she didn’t know what it was supposed to look like. “Everything alright?” she asked when she ran out of patience.

He didn’t even glance at her.

The time he spent studying her brain made her really uneasy, but finally he shifted to her throat and breasts. It was actually kind of cool, she decided. The image didn’t look like any x-ray or sonogram she’d ever seen. It looked—almost like a photograph of her inside—colored even! And she could see the blood flowing through her veins.

Actually, it was a little more creepy than cool.

It made her feel breathless when he sat studying her lungs. “Not breathe,” he commented.

Discomfort fluttered through her. “I didn’t think I was supposed to. You said be still.”

He seemed way too interested in her damned abdomen and pubic region. She didn’t know if he actually did spend more time studying that area or it just seemed that he did. Finally, he lifted his hand and pointed to her womb. “Closed.”

“What does that mean?”

He flicked a glance at her for the first time and then pointed to the screen again, or more specifically a small spot that looked darker. “What’s that?” Bree asked breathlessly. “Something bad?”

“Seed grow.”

Bree blinked rapidly. “What?”

He turned to look at her. “Babe.”

Bree stared at him in shock. For a split second she thought he was *calling* her babe. As it dawned on her what he *was* saying, she felt panic wash over her again. A look of consternation crossed his features. Rising abruptly, he caught her shoulders and made her lie back. After glancing around, he grabbed a mask and placed it over her nose and mouth. She gulped several times and tried to push it off. “No air!”

“Too much air!”

He held it in place until she stopped gasping and the darkness that had begun to descend receded.

He looked at her disapprovingly when he removed the mask, reaching up to tap his head. “In head. Must calm.”

As *if* she didn’t know a panic attack when she had one! She’d had her first when she learned about her parents and had them for months afterwards until she’d finally managed to get a grip. She didn’t need him to tell her that she was allowing panic to overtake her.

He patted her arm. “Need rest.”

She felt the sudden urge to cry. She didn’t know if it was the sympathy he’d shown her or the fact that she felt battered by the things she’d just learned, but it took all she could do to keep from bursting into tears. He moved away from her again and returned with a strange looking instrument.

Sniffing, she watched as he pressed it to her arm. A puff of air hit her skin and then he moved away with the instrument.

Within moments, she began to feel an odd floating sensation. She closed her eyes as a wave of dizziness washed over her and then a sense of heaviness. Her last thought before she fell into the abyss was that she hoped it wasn’t something that was going to kill her ... or the baby.

* * * *

Lerrin studied Galen with more sympathy than he’d ever expected to feel for such a man. Not that he had anything against Galen or felt that he was lacking in any way—far from it. He admired their prince as much as the next man. It wasn’t just because he’d had the good fortune of being wellborn, he was an extraordinary individual in his own right—not the sort of person one generally felt any pity for. Bree’s attack had clearly

scared him very badly, though. He looked ill himself and the medic wondered if he should suggest an examination. "She's fine. I gave her something to help her rest."

Galen nodded. "You ran tests?"

Lerrin considered his words carefully. "Yes. She's strong and healthy as far as I can see. You know we don't have any real data on them ... yet, but I can't see that there's very much difference between their species and ours."

Galen nodded again. "That's a relief anyway."

"I think she's probably experiencing a hormonal imbalance and that probably accounts for her ... the fainting. It isn't uncommon when a female breeds."

If possible, Galen turned paler than he was before. He glanced around a little vaguely for support and finally plopped down on the medic's stool. "She's breeding?" he asked hoarsely.

Lerrin nodded. "A couple of weeks according to the computer's calculations."

"So ... there's no doubt it's mine?"

"No doubt at all."

Galen tried to decide how he felt about it, but he discovered that he felt oddly numb. He had since Bree had fled from him. Leaning forward, he settled his head in his hands. "I don't think she wants it," he muttered.

"Why would you think that?"

Because she didn't want him. He swallowed a little sickly and lifted his head. Instead of answering, he pushed himself to his feet. "I'll check on her later."

He was dismayed to discover a veritable mob outside the med center, all of them pelting him with questions. Assuring them she was alright, he pushed his way through and strode toward his office.

Chapter Eighteen

Galen hadn't actually set out to get stupid drunk. When he returned to his office, he'd settled behind his desk with the intention of working to take his mind off of what had transpired. He'd finally decided to have one tumbler of brew to calm his nerves when he couldn't stop pacing long enough to focus on the work waiting for him. Before he knew it he was so inebriated that taking a nap on the floor to sleep it off seemed like the best idea when he couldn't negotiate the distance between his desk and the door, let alone between his office and his quarters.

The headache he woke with was so reminiscent of the blinding headaches he usually got from linking-up that he thought at first that that was what had caused it. By the time he'd managed to make his way to the bath, however, he realized he'd gotten stinking drunk.

Disgusted, he bathed and changed, and headed out to check the progress of construction. The sun was blinding, however, and he couldn't take much of that before he was forced to retreat to his office again.

Once there, he toyed with the idea of presenting himself for another link-up session and finally decided if he was going to have a blinding headache anyway, he might as well get drunk again. He completely lost track of the days and nights after that. At one point, however, he reached a decision he'd been completely unaware that he was working on, mostly because he was in a semi-stupor or unconscious while he was trying to work his way through it.

Bree did care for him ... at least a little. Maybe she wasn't ready to commit herself to him totally, but she felt something and that meant he had something to work with.

He decided he wasn't going to give up without a fight ... mostly because no amount of brew that he could choke down served to drive the misery away or the certainty that no other woman would do for him.

Getting resolutely to his feet when that decision finally managed to form in his fogged mind, he set out to court his woman and win her heart. He headed directly for the bath since it occurred to him that he stank of brew and he couldn't recall the last time he'd bathed. He thought for a little while that he was going to be forced to crawl. The bath seemed much further from his office than he recalled.

Perseverance finally paid off. Although he'd taken a few wrong turns along the way, he made it to the bath, crawled into the shower and sat on the floor until he decided he'd soaked long enough. He was tired when he got out, felt weak and washed out from the length of time he'd lingered beneath the water and he decided he simply wasn't up to drying off or dressing again.

He was halfway back to his office when it dawned on him that he'd had another destination in mind altogether. Stopping to think it over, he finally remembered he hadn't taken but one session and he hadn't been able to speak to or understand Bree a lot better after that than he had before. Turning, he looked around for a few minutes, got his

bearings and headed for the com center.

Maalen looked alarmed when he presented himself for his second session.

"Need another link-up," he said pleasantly, staggering toward the couch and sprawling into it face first.

"Sir?"

"Link-up, man! You hard of hearing?" Galen muttered against the padding on the couch.

"Are you drunk, Sir?"

"Hell no!" He thought it over. "I had one or two sips of brew a few hours ago."

"Why don't you get comfortable, Sir? I'll ... uh ... get everything ready."

"Am comfortable."

"You ... uh ... want to link-up like that?"

Gale thought it over. "Don't work like this?"

"Ordinarily, the subject lies on his back on the couch."

"Oh. Give me a minute. Need to rest up."

Maalen, fighting panic, left Galen struggling to roll over and rushed to the com unit. It took him several moments to think of someone to call but finally he decided this would probably fall under the heading of a medical emergency and he contacted the med center, or more specifically, the head of it—Lerrin Ap-Cald. "The Prince is here for another session, Sir. And he isn't in any condition for one. What should I do?"

"Why isn't he in a condition for a session?" Lerrin demanded impatiently.

"He's drunk, Sir! He can't *have* a session in his condition. It's too dangerous and I don't think I can talk him out of it. If it was anyone else, I would've just summoned the PKs"

"Do it—whoever is closest and make sure they send three or four men ... just in case. I'll be right there."

"You think that'll be enough?" Maalen asked doubtfully.

"It will be if he's as drunk as you've suggested."

When Galen finally managed to turn over on his back, he found himself staring up at the head medic, Lerrin, and three white faced peacekeepers. He frowned. "Did I get the wrong fucking room again?"

Lerrin flicked a look at Maalen. "Yes, Sir, you did. We're going to help you to the right room if you'll permit?"

Galen thought it over but decided he was tired of looking for the right room.

"Sure! Why the fuck not?"

The PKs helped him to his feet. He shook them off once he was standing and headed toward the door. He was glad he'd summoned them when they'd started down the corridor. He discovered he was still having problems with all the weaving. The PKs on either side of him each hooked an arm beneath his and kept him in a straight line, which he discovered took a hell of an effort since his feet and legs felt rubbery. "I believe I need a little more brew. I'm thirsty."

Lerrin, marching on the other side of one of the PKs, glanced at him. "I'll send a man to fetch you some," he said calmly.

"Good idea. I can rest while I'm waiting. I'm fucking tired, I don't mind telling you."

* * * *

All Bree had wanted after the shocking revelations that had hit her one after another was time alone to think things over. She got far more than she'd bargained on.

She actually felt surprisingly better after the induced sleep the medic had forced on her, enough that she wasn't inclined for more than a few moments to blast him with her temper. She felt more rested and relaxed than she could recall in years, in fact.

That didn't alter the fact that she wasn't currently in the mood to confront Galen or any of the women. They were bound to pelt her with questions and she didn't want to 'share' until she'd had time to decide herself how she felt about it.

She'd feared she might run in to Galen when she headed to his quarters, but since no other possibility of finding privacy presented itself, she went, deciding that if he was there, she'd just leave again and hunt another place for the solitude to consider. She was relieved when she discovered the room was empty.

Curling up on the bed, she began trying to sort through everything that had happened. Galen's scent mingled on the bed linens with her own, though, and that made it hard to concentrate on reviewing events with any kind of detachment. She got up to move restlessly around the room after a while, replaying the incident in Galen's office more than anything else.

In spite of all she could do, she couldn't put the expressions that had flickered across Galen's features from her mind and no amount of effort could convince her that he hadn't been hurt. The guilt that swept over her every time she remembered the look on his face made her want to cry and after a while she yielded to the need and cried her eyes out.

It didn't make her feel any better or make it any more possible to simply erase the memory from her mind. She felt awful in every way possible.

It shouldn't have been such a shock to her, she realized, to make her behave the way she had. There was no getting around the fact that it had, though, otherwise she wouldn't have.

The question was *why* had she panicked? She *needed* to know why because it was at the heart of everything.

It wasn't the baby. She hadn't even realized she was pregnant at that point.

It wasn't Galen. She hadn't even tried to lie to herself about Galen. She'd been purely in awe of him from the first moment she saw him and it hadn't been limited to a desire to merely worship at a distance. His first touch had thrilled her as no one ever had. She was completely enthralled with him.

But if there was nothing about Galen that she disliked, or that she was afraid of, what was there about his suggestion that they were going to live together and raise a family that had sent her into a blind panic?

Her body answered for her. The thought of it alone was enough to send her into panic mode all over again.

Commitment.

That was absurd! She'd never actually put a lot of thought into having a family of her own, but she'd figured she probably would ... eventually.

Except that she was already in her thirties and she hadn't found a single man that she was willing to consider on a permanent basis.

A little more thought produced the reason she was afraid of commitment—fear of loss. She didn't want to tie her heart so completely to anyone that it would be ripped out

if they weren't equally committed to her. She didn't know where it had come from. It wasn't as if she was from a broken home. Her parents had been happily married until the day they died.

No one she knew, no one in her circle of friends or acquaintances, had that, though. She'd watched them date, fall in love, get married, and then get divorced—some of them within a year, most of them within a few years at most.

She hadn't been willing to expose herself to the roller coaster everyone else rode. She was content. Why screw that up by settling down and inviting heartbreak and misery?

And what Galen was asking seemed so permanent when she was a world away from her home and everything she knew that it was purely terrifying. What if it didn't work out? What if she opened herself to him completely, fell madly in love with him, and then he became dissatisfied and dumped her?

Marcy and Barbara brought her food when she didn't show up for the next meal. She was grateful, assured them she wasn't sick, and shooed them away as politely as she could.

It was a while before she realized it was late enough Galen should've come back to the room, at least to sleep. When he didn't, it worried her and it made her angry that it did.

Despite her troubled thoughts, she wasn't unaware of the time passing. She spent two of the most miserable nights of her life completely alone with days to match. Three days after their 'blow up', someone tapped on the panel. Prepared to snub Galen when he came in, she marched to the door and then gaped at the group outside.

Lerrin nodded politely and stepped back, supervising the two men who dragged Galen in and carefully settled him on the bed. Fear instantly replaced her justifiable anger, but as soon as she'd crept close enough to get a better look at Galen she knew he wasn't sick.

Shocked when she realized he was dead drunk, she turned to look at the other men accusingly. "He's drunk!"

The men exchanged looks. She knew they didn't know what she'd accused them of, but it was equally obvious that they not only realized they *had* been accused of something, they felt guilty.

"Slep," the medic said succinctly. "Be alright den."

"Yes, but, damn it! Where am I supposed to go while he sleeps it off?"

The three men that had accompanied—actually hauled Galen in—retreated. The medic bowed politely and took off behind them.

Galen, Bree discovered when she turned to look at him in dismay, was awake, studying her owlshly. Dragging his gaze from hers after a moment, he looked around the room, obviously surprised and not terribly pleased to discover where he was. He sat up, tossing his legs off of the bed purposefully.

"Oh no you don't!" Bree exclaimed, rushing toward him and planting her hands on his shoulders. "Lie back down before you fall down."

He resisted her attempt to push him back down on the bed.

"Fine! Be stubborn! But don't expect me to get you up off the floor if you fall on your face, because I couldn't if I tried, and I'm not going to try!"

He subsided, but he didn't lay back down. Instead, he sat glaring at her morosely.

“Why?” he demanded finally.

Bree frowned at him questioningly. “Why what?”

He glared fiercely at the floor, angrily enough it unnerved her. “No want,” he said finally.

Bree stared at him blankly. “You don’t want what?”

He studied over that a moment and shook his head, and then caught his head between his hands as if he thought his head was going to fall off. He still looked angry when he looked at her again, but there was tremendous hurt and sadness in his expression, as well. “Why no want? Say!”

It occurred to Bree abruptly that he was asking her why she didn’t want him. Guilt flooded her at the hurt in his eyes, but it wasn’t as if she could explain anything so complicated to a man that didn’t understand her language worth a damn! She decided to pretend she had no idea what he was talking about. “I don’t understand,” she said uneasily. “Look ... I’m going to go get you something to help sober you up, ok?”

He caught her hand before she could retreat. Shoving to his feet, he looked at her, listing dangerously from side to side for a moment before he managed to catch himself.

He lifted his wings, curling them forward. “Dis?” he demanded. “Dis why?”

Bree gaped at him. It was amazing, really, that curling his wings like that looked downright threatening. She wasn’t sure why ... except that it made him look about twice as broad as he was already and there was something about his stance that seemed belligerent.

Regardless, she felt her heart squeeze painfully in her chest, wondering how he could possibly think she didn’t want him just because he was different. If anything, that was part of the reason she *did* want him. Beyond that, it hurt her to see him so vulnerable when he was so proud. She didn’t think if he hadn’t been three sheets to the wind he would ever have admitted to anyone, let alone her, that he was hurt by her rejection.

And he *was* hurt. She could see that. It wasn’t just his pride. She wasn’t even sure his pride entered into it, but there was no getting around the fact that he *was* a proud man and that what she’d done had probably wounded that, too.

She sighed, deciding she couldn’t continue to pretend she didn’t understand. “It wasn’t because you’re different,” she murmured, cupping his face in her hands and meeting his gaze steadily. She was on the point of telling him that it wasn’t him at all, it was her, but it occurred to her that that was what women said so often when they just didn’t want to hurt a guy’s feelings. In this particular case, it might be absolutely true, but if he understood he would think she was just making an excuse when what she really meant was that they didn’t click. “I like everything about you. I’m just ... scared. Can you understand that? I’d be scared if you weren’t an alien and we were on Earth. It’s just that much more complicated here. What if it doesn’t work out? What if you decide you don’t really want me? You have plans for a huge house and lots of children. I’m not young anymore. I’ll be lucky to have this one without any problems. What if I can’t conceive again? Aren’t you going to be disappointed in me? What if ... something’s wrong with the baby? And what if it’s *my* fault there is?”

“I’m afraid I’ll disappoint you,” she said, surprised to realize that that was the main reason she was afraid—that he’d realize she wasn’t good enough for him and he wouldn’t want her anymore. She could handle leaving him a lot easier than she could handle him turning away from her.

He studied her face earnestly for many moments, struggling, she could see, to try to understand what she'd said. She knew he couldn't possibly, but just as obviously he saw that she wasn't angry with him. He settled his hands on her waist, dragging her closer.

Or, Bree thought wryly as he dragged her down on the bed and rolled on top of her, being a man—and he *was* a man—he figured sex was the ultimate argument ender.

"No scared, Bree," Galen murmured, nuzzling his face gratefully against hers, wishing to fuck he could tell her she had no reason to be afraid. "No hurt ... swear—never!"

Bree was about to point out that she wasn't afraid of him physically. She didn't believe, as dangerous as his temper could be at times, that he ever would hurt her in that sense. She didn't get the chance, however. Galen was focused completely on convincing her the good old fashioned way. He planted his mouth over hers the moment she opened it, plowing into the moist cavern with his tongue. The taste of whatever he'd been drinking was bitter, and nearly overpowering, and he still managed to distract her within a few moments.

She gave up the fight without a whimper, curling her arms around him more to soothe than because she was aroused, but in a few moments he'd distracted her even from that. There was an edge of roughness to his caresses, of desperation, that diverted her from his unaccustomed clumsiness. She was wet for him before he entered her and gasping in delight within a few moments as he glided his hard flesh in and out of her in forceful, jolting strokes.

She'd been certain his state would make it hard for him to reach his climax, but as quickly as she rushed toward completion, he nearly outpaced her. He began to shudder and jerk with his release before she'd pitched over her peak. For a few moments it was touch and go, but she crested and came shatteringly ... and was still shuddering with shockwaves when he finished and slumped against her so heavily she knew he'd passed out.

Grunting, she shoved at him until he roused enough to roll off of her, but he didn't move after his back hit the bed.

He commenced to snoring.

Biting her lip in amusement, Bree sat up to study his slack face for a few moments, but she didn't have the heart to wake him up again. He needed to sleep it off.

In any case, contrary to what he obviously believed, a good fuck wasn't what they needed to settle things.

Chapter Nineteen

The women looked torn between relief when Bree arrived for the evening meal and fear. “You aren’t sick?” Sheila asked uneasily.

Instantly aware that everyone had assumed that she’d been taken with whatever it was that had laid Galen and Tale low, Bree sent her an uncomfortable look. “I had a panic attack,” she muttered. “The doctor gave me something to help me sleep.”

The women all glanced at each other questioningly. “I hadn’t noticed you were prone to them,” Marcy said after a few moments.

Bree released an irritated breath. “Because I’m not—not ordinarily, anyway. I’d never had one at all until the wreck. I had a problem for a little while afterwards, but I pretty much managed to get on an even keel after a while. I haven’t had one in at least two years.”

She could tell the women were dying to know what had brought it on, but she didn’t really want to tell them. She finally decided she might as well blame it on her discovery that she was pregnant. After all, it wasn’t entirely a lie. She’d almost had another one when the medic had told her. “I’m pregnant,” she said baldly.

She thought for several moments that every woman at the table was going to have a panic attack. All of them turned white faced, but she didn’t delude herself into thinking it was concern for her. She could see every mind working calculations, could tell which ones had suddenly realized they might be in the same boat as she was.

“You think it’s his?” Julia asked, a thinly disguised note of hysteria edging her voice. “I mean—they’re a different species, right? They couldn’t get us pregnant—I mean you.”

“Obviously, they can. The medic showed me and I haven’t been ‘exposed’ to anybody but Galen in years,” she said dryly.

That comment *did* cause an uproar, and it wasn’t squeals of delight.

“Were you on birth control?” Barbara demanded. “I mean ... do you think they can shoot right past it?”

“No, and I don’t know. I told you I hadn’t seen anybody since before my parents died. I’ve been out of circulation. I didn’t see any point in taking the damned pills when it seemed completely unnecessary. They have side effects, you know,” Bree said defensively.

That comment weeded out the women who were on something besides the pill, although they didn’t look convinced that the ‘supermen’ who’d abducted them weren’t capable of penetrating their defenses.

“Oh god!”

The exclamation was uttered by a chorus of women up and down the long table.

“Where is the medic?” Sheila demanded.

Bree glanced around the cavernous room. “That’s him sitting at the end of the third table over.

Marcy, Sheila, Nancy, Julia, Kelly, and Bonnie bolted up from their seats and

sailed across the dining hall, surrounding the poor man and pelting him with questions he couldn't possibly understand. Their men gaped at them and then looked at Bree accusingly.

She shrugged and ducked her head, focusing on the food the server bot had placed in front of her. They wouldn't have dared to look at her so accusingly, she thought uneasily, if Galen had been seated beside her, but then he was still sleeping it off as far as she knew. And the worst of it was that she couldn't even defend her damned self!

They'd discover soon enough that it wasn't *her* that had gotten the others all stirred up, though, because, unless she was mistaken, there were going to be a lot of unhappy men very shortly.

Or maybe not. Maybe they'd still think it was her fault. She couldn't imagine that yelling at them would get the message across any better.

After a few minutes, the women returned to their seats, but she could see they were wired ... and pissed off because they were afraid they were pregnant, too. They kept glaring at their men. The men kept glaring at her, and she decided to curtail her dinner and head back to her room.

At least, she thought philosophically, it had effectively turned their mind from fears of catching a horrible disease—and, incidentally, her strange behavior earlier.

No one seemed to notice that Galen was conspicuous by his absence lately.

Not that she had any intention of sharing such a personal matter as a complete falling out with Galen, but that wouldn't stop them from trying to get the details. It wasn't as if they had a lot to interest them.

Galen was gone when she got back. She was relieved—a little. She knew, somehow, she was going to have to resolve the situation, but she didn't know how. She thought she'd figured out why the idea upset her, but even if she could've actually discussed it with him she didn't know what she wanted to do.

She didn't even know if she had any choices.

* * * *

As impossible as it seemed, Galen felt worse when he woke than he had the time before. He lay still for a while, fighting the rolling nausea and his pounding head. In spite of everything, however, his mind slowly cleared and memories flooded back that he would've preferred not to remember.

He lay with his eyes closed, searching his surroundings for any indication that Bree was in the room with him. When he realized he was alone, he rolled onto his face and groaned.

Gods! He'd made a complete fool out of himself! He would've liked to think the memories weren't memories at all, but rather brew induced nightmares, but he knew it was brew induced stupidity.

He lay still, raging against fate and wallowing in mortification as the entire episode replayed itself in his mind over and over as if it was on an endless loop. Finally, feeling as if the nausea was going to get the best of him, he lurched from the bed and headed to the bath as quickly as he could given that every step jolted his head and made it hurt that much worse.

He felt well enough to die by the time he'd emptied his stomach. When he'd lain on the floor for a while with his forehead pressed against the cool floor and death didn't take him, he got up and headed to the shower to bathe. The water revived him. In point

of fact, by the time he'd finished cleaning up, he was stone cold sober—and he didn't like it worth a fuck. It made it that much harder to bear the images that continued to circulate through his mind.

He resolved, however, to eschew the brew thereafter. If the only 'help' it was going to be was to help him make a bigger fool out of himself, then he sure as fuck needed to leave it alone.

He found his chronometer when he moved to the locker to dress. After studying it for a while, he finally decided it was evening, not morning. The only thing he wasn't certain of was what day it was or how many days he'd devoted to feeling sorry for himself.

As empty as he was, the thought of food didn't appeal, and he bypassed the dining hall where he heard everyone gathered and headed to his office. Before he reached it, he decided to head to the med center in hopes of finding something for his stomach or his head or maybe both. The med center, not surprisingly, was empty since everyone took their meals at about the same time. After searching the medical stores, he finally found what he was looking for and helped himself to a low dose of painkiller and something to settle his stomach. He didn't want anything strong enough to knock him out, just enough to knock some of the pain down. He didn't want to sleep anymore. He'd slept enough.

He'd already started to leave when another thought occurred to him—or rather a memory surfaced.

Bree was breeding—his child—and he was fairly certain she didn't want it. He considered for several moments and finally sat down to type Lerrin a memo.

If Bree decides she doesn't want to carry the babe, put him in one of the artificial wombs for me. It's my firstborn.

After studying over what he'd typed, he decided it was sufficient instructions and used his seal to direct it to Lerrin's eyes alone.

It was the first time he'd officially used the seal of the office the colonists had conferred upon him.

The message depressed him, but he dismissed it. One way or another, he was keeping his child. It wouldn't have as much of a chance in the incubator as it would in its mother's womb, but it would at least have some chance.

When he left the med center, he headed to the communications center and settled on the couch to wait for the techs to return. He'd made arrangements for failure, but he wasn't going to accept defeat, by the gods! So he'd made a fool out of himself! If he lived with Bree long enough, it was doubtful that would be the only fucking time.

He just wished he knew whether Bree had actually made love to him when he'd made love to her, or if she simply hadn't been able to fight him off. He was pretty sure she hadn't put up much of a fight, but he was also sure she hadn't exactly welcomed it either.

Small wonder when he'd been drunk as hell!

What there was about brew that made a man feel like the world's greatest fucking lover when he could barely find the damned hole was a mystery to him!

He doubted he'd ever fucking performed worse in his life and if there'd ever been a time when he'd needed to be at his best, *that* had been it!

He'd be gods damned lucky if she let him within twenty paces of her after that stupid stunt!

The only thing worse was that he had a very bad feeling that he'd been too close to begging to make a hair's worth of difference. *That* was the excruciatingly humiliating part about the whole thing.

He wasn't sure he would have felt so much agony over it if it had actually worked, but it sure as hell didn't help his feelings that it hadn't.

Maalen looked like he was going to faint or run when he stepped into the communications center and saw him waiting on the couch. "Sir!"

Gale released an irritated breath. "I'm sober—too fucking sober," he muttered. "Run a test if you're in doubt."

Looking more than a little relieved, Maalen approached him and studied him critically. "Pardon me for saying so, but you don't look to be feeling well enough for a session."

"I'm not likely to be feeling better any time soon. Just run the test and give me a fucking session. At least this way I won't be wasting another entire fucking day."

Maalen looked extremely uncomfortable, but he ran the test to make certain Galen's system was clear of intoxicants before he prepared the system for a link-up.

"Lest it slip my mind later," Galen said as the techs strapped him down. "I want the com department to begin working on a meeting between me and the Americanians tomorrow—not those jerk-offs I spoke with before. Go to the top man—whoever their leader is. We've got enough of the language now to take a stab at working on a trade agreement—but see if you can set it up for after my final session."

If anything the session was worse than the first one, but Galen was obliged to admit that he had only himself to blame. If he hadn't spent so many days drowning his sorrows in brew, it might not have been any worse.

The timing, at least, was better. At least he was incapacitated at night when he would've been sleeping anyway and it was an excuse to avoid Bree at least part of the time. Since he could only take the sessions every other day, he simply worked in his office until he was certain Bree was asleep, climbed in beside her for a few hours rest and then left before she woke in the morning.

As much as he dreaded the news, he contacted Lerrin the morning following his second session, partly to make certain he'd read the memo and partly discover if Bree had been in to request that he remove the babe from her.

He was relieved when he discovered she hadn't. Even though he told himself that didn't necessarily mean she wouldn't, it was still something that she hadn't dashed right down to rid herself of it after their last encounter.

The other women had poured into the clinic, however—all of them, waiting anxiously for the news of whether or not they were breeding.

Galen didn't know whether to be pleased or not when he discovered they had no less than six babes on the way, including his.

He decided to reserve judgment until he discovered how well the women had taken the discovery.

The tension in the dining hall the following day when he finally decided to present himself for the meal instead of taking it alone in his office as he had been doing seemed to bode ill for their little colony. All of the women were either weepy or pale and shaken or chafing for a fight. Their men were bewildered, sullen, or struggling to keep from looking jubilant in the face of their woman's reception to the idea.

He supposed that meant that at least some of the men had been informed and the others were still trying to figure out why the women who'd been smiling at them fondly were now looking daggers at them.

As for him, he thought wryly, he supposed he fell into the category of wary. It was the first time since their last humiliating encounter that he'd seen Bree. He'd been damned careful not to see her ... or at least not to be seen by her.

She had issues with him that he'd always been aware of and done his best to avoid in the hope that they would go away if he ignored them long enough. They hadn't. They'd blown up in his face, making it clear that it was a minefield he was going to have to negotiate his way through if he had any expectations of a victory where Bree was concerned.

She looked somewhat wary herself.

He wasn't certain why until he finally remembered the incident in his office that had thrown him into despair to start with. *That* had been so overshadowed by his drunken plea for understanding and acceptance that it had slipped to the back of his mind.

It occurred to him to wonder if he hadn't been suffering needlessly over the incident. If he'd made as big a fool of himself as he'd thought, wouldn't she be angry, or embarrassed for him, rather than wary?

He frowned thoughtfully, wondering if it was actually worse than he remembered. Had he done something *then* that made her wary of him now? Or was she wary because she thought he was furious over the incident in his office?

He *had* bellowed at her, he recalled suddenly, feeling heat creep into his face. He'd been alarmed, though, by her reaction, not furious.

Alright, he'd been a little pissed off.

Actually a lot now that he thought about it.

He was so deep in thought that it was a while before it dawned on him that he could understand what little conversation there was between the women at the table as well as he could understand the nearly non-existent conversations between the men.

It was a pity, now that he'd tortured himself with the gods damned link-up sessions until his brain felt fried that the women had suddenly decided they didn't fucking feel like talking!

Tiring of the tense silence, he finally glanced over Bree's head at Ken-so. Ken-so, he discovered, was focused on his food as if he was alone in the world.

Apparently Marcy was no happier to discover she was pregnant than Bree was, he thought wryly. "Any problems with the men I should know about?"

Ken-so straightened, looked at him with an unfocused gaze for several moments and then seemed blink into focus. He frowned. "Not that I've noticed lately," he responded finally.

"So ... you think the word's gotten around that I'll be trying to work out a trade agreement with the Americonians and things have settled?"

Ken-so reddened. "I've been a little preoccupied lately, Sir," he finally admitted. "I'll take a stroll tomorrow and see what I can pick up."

Irritation flickered through Galen, but he merely nodded. He could hardly reprimand his first officer for inattention to duty when he'd been out of it for days.

Since he couldn't think of anything else to talk about that they couldn't more easily discuss elsewhere, he turned his attention to his own food, trying to decide whether

he should head for his office after the meal or if it would be too uncomfortable to go to his quarters with Bree.

He was sick of hiding out in his damned office, though! Tired beyond belief from all the hours of work he'd put in to catch up after his drinking binge and also to avoid any possibility of a confrontation with Bree. He wanted to relax. He wanted to sleep with Bree even if she wasn't agreeable to anything else.

He'd grown accustomed to sleeping beside her. *Not* sleeping beside her was almost the most miserable fucking part of their separation.

He was still trying to decide whether to chance a snub or not when they left the dining hall and Maalen came rushing to him from the communications center red faced and breathless with excitement.

"We've had contact, Sir!"

Galen frowned at him. "From the Americonians?"

Maalen shook his head. "It's a starship, Sir! The Aurora has reached the outer rim of the system."

Galen felt a coldness wash over him. "A ship from home?"

Nodding eagerly, Maalen grinned. "Brides from home!"

Naturally enough, he was overheard by the men nearest them. The news spread like wildfire and elation with it. "Gods fucking damn it, man!" Galen growled in a low voice. "You'd better be gods damned sure of your information or we're going to have a fucking riot on our hands!"

Maalen's face fell. "Pardon, Sir! But I am certain! I wouldn't have told you if I hadn't been."

Galen tamped his anger with an effort, deciding to have a long talk with Maalen at the next opportunity about the merits of discretion. Since there seemed no hope for it, now, a general announcement needed to be made. "How many aboard?"

Maalen's enthusiasm waned. "Twenty, Sir."

It took an effort to refrain from punching the man in the face. Twenty! And he had close to three hundred men champing at the bit! Gods! He was surrounded by morons!

Lifting his communicator, he barked orders into it. The PKs sprang into action at once, herding the emerging colonists back into the main hall and striding up and down the rows between the tables in an attempt to restore order. Galen glanced at Bree's white face and, fully expecting resistance, pulled her close. To his vast relief, she cuddled close to him willingly.

"What's happening, Galen? What's going on?" Bree whispered shakily.

"It's alright. Nothing to be alarmed about," he murmured absently, stroking her back soothingly. "You and the other women should go to your quarters, though, in case this gets ugly."

Bree pulled away and looked up at him in shock. "You've learned English?"

Galen reddened. He hadn't even realized he'd spoken in her language. "I'll explain later. Right now I have a mob to deal with. Take the women and go," he said firmly.

She looked like she wanted to argue, but she turned away after a moment and rounded up the other women.

Relieved once he saw them head down the corridor, Galen went back into the

dining hall to address the men.

Leaping up on the nearest table since there was no podium to speak from and no time to waste in setting up a holo broadcast, Galen shouted for order, waiting until the entire room had fallen silent before he spoke.

“As you will all have heard by now, the *first* of the ships promised when we left Valara is even now approaching our new world. I’m told we have twenty willing brides who will be arriving in a few hours. I’m sure they will be delighted by their reception.

“However, I’m equally certain that they will be far more impressed and delighted, and have only good things to report back home, if they arrive to discover an orderly colony fully prepared to receive them and give them comfort after their long journey.

“Those of you whose duty it is to make arrangements should leave in an orderly manner and see to your business. The rest of you may go to greet the new arrivals at the terminal as long as you curb your enthusiasm and behave yourselves.

“If there are any ugly incidents upon the arrival of our new brides, be certain that the men at the heart of it will be dealt with swiftly and severely and you will *not* be allowed to take part in the festivities that we’ll be planning for a few days hence to properly welcome our women!

“Peace keepers, see to it that the hall is cleared in an orderly manner and then report to your patrol posts!”

Chapter Twenty

Thoroughly rattled, Bree rushed to gather up the women and headed to her quarters. Of one mind for once, they all piled into her quarters with her and immediately began to pelt her with questions she couldn't answer.

"I don't know any more than any of you do!" she shouted above the din.

They quieted, looking around at each other.

"But ... Galen told you to bring us here!" Barbara objected. "He didn't say anything else?"

Bree shrugged. "Actually, he didn't tell me to bring everyone here. He said we should go to our quarters. I think he mostly wanted to make sure we didn't get hurt if the men became too rowdy."

"Why would they do that?" Sheila demanded.

Bree shook her head. "I already told you I don't anything more than you do ... I'm just guessing because Galen looked worried and the crowd seemed stirred up about something Maalen had said."

"You think it's an attack?" Marcy asked shakily.

"Maybe they sent a rescue ship for us?" Kelly volunteered.

Bree frowned, feeling a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. "I don't know Do you think it's possible a ship could've come from Earth in this length of time? We've only been here a little over a month. I don't know that much about space travel, but I don't think we have a ship that could get to Mars that fast."

"She's right," Donna agreed. "It would take longer—months—depending on the position of Mars at the time of launch. It couldn't possibly be anyone from home ... even if they'd left from the moon station."

The looks everyone exchanged at that told its own tale. Relief was far more evident than disappointment.

It sent a jolt of surprise through Bree even though she had to admit that she was more relieved than upset that it wasn't likely to be a rescue mission. Right up until she'd thought the cavalry was about to arrive, she'd thought she would be relieved to be heading home at the very least, maybe even ecstatic.

In all honesty, she wasn't sure she would've been relieved or happy about it even from the first. Granted, she'd been unnerved, but she thought it was the abduction itself that had scared the ever loving shit out of her. Once she'd gotten over that insane flight to the edge of space hanging onto a winged man, she hadn't been nearly as frightened.

She didn't think she'd ever really been afraid of Galen—which, maybe, was an indication that she was certifiable.

She missed home, missed all sorts of things, but did she miss them enough to want to leave Galen and return? What were *things* compared to someone who made her feel as if she belonged for the first time since her parents' death?

On the other hand, Galen had spoken to her in English. Granted, it had been very bad English, so heavily accented it had taken her a few moments to even realize it *was*

English, but it certainly hadn't been the halting one or two word communications of before, and it was clear from what he'd said that he'd understood her.

How long had he been able to completely understand and speak her language?

And, if he'd been able to right from the start, how much could she trust him?

Even if he hadn't been able to right away, he'd clearly been hiding the fact from her that he was beginning to understand and she had to wonder why.

"Maybe if we all calm down and think we could get a better idea of what's going on?"

"We could calm down a hell of a lot easier if we knew what the fuck was going on!" Julia said angrily.

Bree frowned at her, but decided to ignore her. "Maalen seemed excited about the news," she said. "He didn't seem to be alarmed. Surely that means it was good news, not an imminent attack?"

"Hump!" Bonnie snorted. "You don't know men very well if you think they wouldn't be thrilled at the prospect of a fight!"

"There is that," Bree conceded. "I don't think Galen would've just sent us to our quarters, though, if that was the case. I think he would've seen that we were escorted here, or, more likely, to a safer place."

"If they had one," Cindy said pointedly. "We've all toured this place from top to bottom. If they have bunkers or something like that, *I* certainly haven't seen them!"

"I still think we can rule out an attack from outsiders," Bree persevered.

"Well, I don't see why he would've insisted that we go to our quarters if there wasn't any danger!"

"I didn't say that, but I don't think it was from outsiders—as in an attack. The men immediately got stirred up as the news made the rounds. I think, whatever it is, Galen was more worried about the rowdy crowd. You know how dangerous a crowd can be when they get stirred up. People have gotten trampled to death at concerts, for god sake!"

The women all looked horrified at that, but somewhat less anxious.

"So ... you think we don't really have anything to worry about as long as we stay in our quarters?"

Bree didn't like the idea of suggesting anything of the kind when she didn't actually know herself what was going on. "I think, if there was any real danger to us here the men—our men would be with us, don't you?" she asked uneasily. "I mean—they seem protective, right?"

She could see nobody wanted to dispute that. They seemed in no rush to head to their own quarters, though. After glancing around, they began to settle on the floor around the room. "I think I'll stay here and wait for Dirk to come get me," Julia said when she sat down. "If you don't mind?"

Bree didn't particularly want to be alone herself. "I don't mind. I think we'll all feel better keeping each other company until we find out exactly what is going on."

* * * *

When he'd watched the men disperse—grumbling but fairly orderly, Galen leapt down from the table and headed briskly toward the communications center. He was somewhat relieved that he'd managed to calm them a little but still furious and worried.

The key word as far as he could see was ‘yet’. They hadn’t rioted yet. That didn’t mean they wouldn’t.

Twenty women! Gods damn it to hell! They were going to be damned lucky if the men didn’t tear the place apart in their disappointment. If they had been only soldiers, he wouldn’t have been overly concerned. As young as his men were, they were well disciplined and well trained and many of them had actually seen action and were seasoned troops.

Generally well disciplined, he amended with disgust, remembering Maalen’s breach of protocol.

It was the volunteers that worried him. These men were not soldiers and had no discipline. In numbers, they made up a full two thirds of his colonists, and he’d had ample opportunity to observe their temperament on the trip out. There was a rowdy faction among them that tended to stir up trouble on a regular basis over seemingly insignificant incidents.

This wasn’t insignificant.

If it hadn’t been sprung on him without warning

But there was no point in thinking about that. He had the situation to deal with now.

Twenty—what did so small a number signify, he wondered? Women who already had some attachment to some of the men who’d come with him?

The thought had occurred to him as a strong possibility when there were so few and they’d arrived so quickly behind them, and that could mean even more trouble. As disappointed as the men were already, the arrival of women who weren’t actually available could make things considerably worse in a very great hurry.

He had Maalen hail the Aurora as soon as he reached the com center. A jolt went through him when the ship’s captain appeared on the deck. She’d matured significantly since the last time he’d seen her—no great surprise when she’d been little more than a youngling at the time and it had been annums, but recognition was instantaneous.

Apparently on both sides ... unless she’d known all along that he was heading the mission.

“Hello, Admiral Drako. How pleasant to see you. It’s been a while.”

* * * *

Galen was far from reassured at the news he’d managed to gather from Maaya Marlo. She’d seemed far more intent on flirting with him than supplying him with the information he’d needed.

He *thought* she was flirting. With Maaya, it was always hard to say. Actually, she was a born flirt. What was hard to determine with her was whether or not she actually meant anything by it or was simply enjoying the challenge of twisting a man around her fingers. There was no doubt in his mind she thought it was her just due. As the beautiful, pampered daughter of a very wealthy Valarian, she’d been twisting men into knots almost from birth ... and discarding them as soon as she was sure she had them firmly captivated.

He should know as well as anyone. She was the first woman he’d fallen head over heels in love with and the last ... until Bree.

It wasn’t anything he wanted to dwell on. She’d crushed him pretty thoroughly. He’d long since gotten over it, realized it had been nothing more than an infatuation that

wouldn't have gone as far as it had if she hadn't so thoroughly enthralled him. He'd been too young and inexperienced himself then to realize that he'd fallen for an ideal and that Maaya wasn't the woman he thought she was. When he'd finally recovered enough to realize that he'd been more in love with the idea of being love than he'd been in love with the real Maaya, it had ceased to haunt him—she had.

It had been a damned painful lesson, though, and it had ripped away his innocence forever. He'd been too wary, and too jaded, to fall for artifice again.

There was nothing artificial about Bree. He didn't know if he'd instantly realized that or not, though.

Maybe he had. Maybe he'd instinctively sensed that she was as real and honest as any woman he would ever meet. She had no idea who or what he was in his own world, couldn't have. When she'd looked at him with such frank curiosity and interest, with such open admiration, he'd known immediately that it was *him* she'd appreciated and been intrigued by—not his birth or family—*him*. He thought he'd been as captivated by her view of him as he had been by his appreciation for her, although that was a debatable matter. He thought it was entirely possible that he would've been hers even if she'd screamed and run the other way.

Fortunately, she hadn't.

It remained to be seen, though, whether she appreciated him enough to actually accept him as her life partner.

He'd screwed up again with her, he thought in disgust. He could see it in her eyes. Now she was wondering if he'd deliberately deceived her.

So he'd thought about it, he thought irritably. So it had crossed his mind! He hadn't done it. He should get some fucking points for not actually taking advantage of the situation!

Now he was going to have to try to convince her that he'd only just completed the final session and hadn't had the ability to deceive her if he'd wanted to—which he had, but he saw no benefit in admitting *that*! It would just piss her off more and make her less likely to believe him.

He had one unbreakable alibi, though. If he could just convince her he hadn't known before, then she'd have to see that he hadn't been around her enough since he'd taken the other sessions to deceive her whether he'd wanted to or not.

Thrusting that problem aside for a later time, he entered his office and sat down to try to unravel the latest potential for disaster. He hadn't been able to determine from anything Maaya had divulged whether or not the women she'd brought with her had come looking for their lovers. Maaya certainly hadn't. She discarded men almost as quickly as she captivated them. He couldn't imagine that she'd been so attached to any of the men he'd brought with him as to convince her to take such a trip. Beyond that, Maaya wasn't the sort of woman who would consider bestowing herself upon anyone without rank or privilege, and no one among the colonists fit that description. For the most part, the civilians were fortune seekers themselves. If they'd had wealth and privilege back home, they wouldn't be here on this gods forsaken rock, light annums from everyone they knew.

He didn't know that he could judge the other women by Maaya, however—not that he could figure out what had brought her.

It seemed certain the council hadn't actually sent them. He thought they were

assholes to a man, but they would have reported something about sending brides, he was sure, if for no other reason than to take credit. The ship they were in was smaller and swifter than the ships that had brought the other colonists, but they would still have had to have left not long after the first ships. That would've given the committee for colonization time enough to notify them that the women were on their way.

He still didn't know whether that meant he had twenty brides coming who would refuse to consider any of the men except men they'd specifically come for. There was bound to be some trouble either way because there were so few, but he thought the men would be pacified enough if they thought there was a possibility of capturing the interest of one of the women.

He'd reprimanded Maalen for his breach in protocol and given him notice that, if that breach resulted in rioting, he could expect to be sitting in jail with the rioters for quite some time.

Leaving him to try to contact Valara and discover what he could about the ship on approach and if there were any others en route or proposed, and when they might be leaving Valara, he'd returned to his office to wait for a response.

He hoped to have something to calm the waters before the women actually arrived in port, but he didn't actually expect to.

He'd charged Maalen to attempt another communication with the Americonians, as well, to see if there was a possibility of setting up talks that might lead to a trade agreement. If that failed, he wasn't going to have any choice but to lead another raid ... without the sanction of the Americonians.

With that in mind, he settled to thinking in terms of worse case scenario and began working on a plan for another raid.

* * * *

The women began to trail off by ones and twos to return to their own quarters as time passed and nothing alarming happened. Weary with waiting and worrying herself, Bree wasn't inclined to object. She was glad to see the last depart.

She was determined to sit up and wait for Galen's return as long as it took to confront him about what she'd discovered and also to find out what it was that had sent such a shockwave through the colony, but she discovered that she couldn't outwait him. She finally grew so tired from pacing and worrying that she decided to lie down and rest for a while and almost as soon as she did, she fell asleep.

She aroused when Galen finally did return, but she was so groggy with sleep her mind was too fuddled to furnish her with the questions that had been circulating before she'd fallen asleep. All she could think as she studied him in the dim light was that he looked terribly tired and worried. It made her ache for him.

When he climbed in beside her, stretched, and then turned over to face her, pulling her carefully into his arms, she sighed and snuggled closer. He brushed his lips along her forehead and then relaxed and dropped to sleep even before she'd dropped off the edge again herself.

Irritation surfaced as soon as she woke the following morning and discovered he'd disappeared. She was slightly appeased when she reached the bath and discovered that only the women were there. Undoubtedly, they'd all overslept if everyone was there without their man.

It had occurred to her that Galen had slunk off to avoid a confrontation, but she

supposed she might have misjudged him. It was possible he was still focused on whatever had happened the night before. She dimly recalled thinking how exhausted and worried he looked when he'd come in and undressed.

They *still* needed to talk, but she wasn't comfortable with the idea of adding anything more to his current burden. Personal matters, she decided, could wait until he had less on his mind. It would probably be for the best anyway, she thought. Their discussion was liable to get heated without any outside stress to add to the problem.

She realized as she joined the other women and headed toward the dining hall in search of food that she didn't really believe that he'd been deceiving her. She'd been trying to learn their language and hadn't made much headway. Undoubtedly, he was smarter than she was, but he'd still had to learn and she couldn't recall a single incident before when he'd seemed to understand her without them having to resort to gestures and miming.

In fact, their 'big' blowup might have been due to that lack of understanding. She'd finally accepted that it was possible that she'd misunderstood. She realized she didn't actually want to think she had now that she'd had a few days to mull over it. True, the idea had sent her into panic mode, but, as much as it still scared her, she'd realized that she was going to have a miserable life if she couldn't bring herself to take a chance on someone—especially when it was someone as wonderful as Galen.

How likely was it that she was going to find anyone else that made her feel as he did?

Astronomical, she'd concluded.

He was so handsome he still took her breath. He was a generous, thoughtful lover, and he really rang her bell. He wasn't the only man she'd ever been with who'd been a considerate lover, but he *was* the only one who could've thrown her down on the bed without any preliminaries whatsoever and *still* brought her off. She loved the foreplay, but there was no denying that he turned her on just looking at her the way he did.

Beyond that, she could tell he *wanted* her to have his baby. After she'd had time to think it over, she'd realized how badly she'd hurt him, and that, before she'd acted like a complete idiot, he'd been thrilled and excited at the prospect of building a home for the family he wanted with her.

She still needed to make him understand that their customs were clearly very different in regards to courtship. She had a mind of her own. She was a person, not a thing, not a pet. He couldn't just decide to take her and keep her hostage and screw her brains out until she fell for him!

Of course he had, but she had to make it clear that that wasn't acceptable. They couldn't just snatch women from Earth.

She was smiling faintly at her thoughts as they entered the dining hall. Sheila, who was in front of her, came to such an abrupt halt that she ran smack in to her. Wondering what had caused the sudden pileup at the door, she craned her neck and pushed at the women blocking her view until she could see whatever it was that had made them stop so abruptly.

There were winged people seated at one of the long tables, a lot of them. That was strange in and of itself since they seemed to be the only ones there and everyone else had apparently cleared out.

It took her several moments to figure out why they looked so strangely out of place.

It was women—females of the same race as the men.

Such a shockwave went through her when her mind finally assimilated that it was women that it took several more moments for her outrage to catch up. By the time it had, she discovered that she was not only surrounded by Earth women fully as angry as she was, but the group of alien women seated at the table looked to be just as outraged.

Chapter Twenty-One

“*That* is what had the men all stirred up last night?” Julia snarled. “I will *kill* Dirk Valle! I swear I will! That bastard never made it back to our room last night. *Now*, I know why!”

“Well! I’m not going to just stand here like a knot on a log, as if we’ve no right to be in here!” Barbara announced with a huff, stalking toward the nearest table and plunking down on the bench.

Bree followed her after a moment and then the others. The hair along the back of her neck prickled when she’d sat down and she was immediately sorry that she’d taken a position with her back to them. She didn’t actually want to make a point of getting up again and taking a place on the other side of the table, though, so she worked at trying to ignore the burning sensation of having what had seemed to her a couple of dozen alien eyes boring in to her.

The server bots appeared shortly after they’d settled, serving them, and she managed to at least pretend to be eating. Her mind was a buzz with questions, though—as in *what in the fucking hell* were these women doing here?

She was afraid to guess, but she fully intended to get some answers!

Apparently the alien women were finished when they came in. They’d barely been served when the other women got up and wandered over for a closer look. She didn’t understand anything they said, but obviously jeering didn’t require a language bridge. Despite the curiosity in their eyes, they’d clearly figured out what *they* were doing there and they weren’t happy about it. In fact, they were downright nasty.

They whispered and giggled among themselves, making it obvious that they were discussing how ‘strange’ the Earth women were. Bree struggled to ignore them for a few minutes and finally lifted her head and glared them. “It’s really rude to talk about people like that. Obviously none of you have any manners!”

She felt like being as childish as they were and pointing and giggling but insulting them for their appearance would be tantamount to insulting their men, and she wasn’t about to do that.

She wanted to strangle them, but she wasn’t going to hurt their feelings by implying that she thought *they* were strange looking.

One of the women, a tall woman built like an Amazon warrior, with waist length, almost blue-black hair, looked her over speculatively when she spoke. She said something snide directly to Bree, but naturally Bree couldn’t understand anything beyond the sentiment behind it. “Yeah? Well, back at you bitch! If you want to insult me you’re going to have to learn to speaky English!”

The woman’s eyes narrowed, but apparently she decided it wasn’t worth it to trade insults that neither party understood. She led the way out but, as they passed, all of the women flicked their wings at them as if trying to shake a pesky fly.

Bree *knew* they’d been insulted. The gesture had been too pointed for it not to have been. She lifted her bird finger. “Fuck you, too!”

"I suppose it's ridiculous to be so pissed off," Sheila muttered. "I don't even know why I am when I've never been sure if this was supposed to be permanent or not, or even if I wanted it to be. But I can't help it!"

Bree knew why she was pissed off. She felt threatened.

The damned women looked like the men—well, not *like* the men—but like them as in as beautiful as the men were and as well shaped. The Amazon that had caught her attention was probably the most beautiful of all, and probably had the best figure, but none of them were exactly shabby—or even plain. She stared glumly at her plate, toying with the food. "I hate to say it, but I don't think we're going to be much competition for them and I'm pretty sure they know that. Not only are they gorgeous, but *they* have wings!"

It was clear from their expressions that most of the women agreed with her. They hated it, but they weren't blind to their shortcomings.

"Actually, I hadn't decided to stay anyway," Donna said numbly. "I'll admit the thought had crossed my mind, but really there's just so much I miss back home"

"That's all very well for you to say!" Marcy snapped tearfully. "But *I'm* pregnant! I can't take a half alien baby back with me—what if it's born with wings?—and I'm sure as hell not leaving my baby here! Besides, I love Tale! I'm not giving him up to those bitches without a whimper of protest! So they look better than I do! He picked *me*. That has to count for something."

"Well, I think we might just be jumping the gun. I mean, we all feel like our man is the most gorgeous, I'm sure, and it's natural to think those bitches would go for them, but they're already taken, right? They must be here for some of the other men."

"Yes ... but ... do you think that was *all* of them? What if they sent one for every man here? You think the guys are just going to take us back and dump us? What are we going to do if they do that? Like Marcy said, I'm pregnant. There has to be a chance the baby will look just like the father and then it'll just be considered a freak back home! We don't even know that our government wouldn't try to take them away from us since they're half alien."

Everybody stared at Julia in horror for several moments and finally looked at each other, as if searching for answers.

"That settles it!" Bree said emphatically. "We're staying. They'll just have to deal with it. I'm not giving up my baby for anybody! Once they're born, if they look human and not—whatever *they* are—then maybe at least some of us will have choices to make. For now, I'm not budging."

"But *I'm* not pregnant! And I don't want to go home either. You think they'll just take the ones back that aren't pregnant?"

It all boiled down to whether or not they had a say in the matter, and none of them, including Bree, knew whether they did or not. They hadn't been give a choice of whether they wanted to come in the first place or not. Bree thought Galen wanted her to stay, or at least had before she'd hurt him and before the women from his own world had shown up. Now, she wasn't so sure he did. Even if he'd been willing to forgive her and take her back before the other women arrived, would that have changed things?

Why would he want her—why would any of the men want them—when there were women of their species and culture that were prettier and could speak their language and understood their culture?

She felt so low after thinking it over, she didn't really want to confront Galen about it at all, particularly since she felt like they needed to make up before she was in any position to make any kind of demands. She didn't want to put it off, however. Finding out how things stood *before* she was dragged to the damned ship and hauled back to Earth seemed like the best thing to do. If that was the plan, she could at least keep her tattered pride intact.

* * * *

Galen had opted to attend the talks seated in the chair of his office. There were distinct advantages to towering over the Americonians—the intimidation factor, for one—but he also thought there was an advantage to addressing them while seated—it would present him as someone of importance. It would also show them that he wasn't concerned that they might try to intimidate him.

In any case, he was exhausted and his temper was wearing thin. He thought it was better to rest while he spoke to them because he was tired enough that he might lose his temper if he had to stand to talk to them for hours on end.

As soon as his hologram was beamed into the man's office, other men in dark suits immediately rushed toward him and waved their hands through his image. He looked at them irritably until it dawned on him when he caught sight of their weapons that they were undoubtedly guards of the leader and were wary that he'd used the particle beam to attend.

Not likely, he thought wryly, when he'd stolen nearly a dozen of their women. He might be cocky, but he wasn't stupid. They'd tried to fill him with holes the first time he appeared to them—and that was *before* he'd actually done anything to warrant hostility.

He bowed his head slightly when he had the leader's attention, forming the sign of peace. "Peace, President. I am Galen of the royal house of Drako—now ruler of the world we have claimed in this star system once called Mars—now Draken."

The man favored him with a smile that didn't meet his eyes. "I'm John Mercer, President of the United States of America on the world we call Earth ... in the star system we have been in the habit of thinking of as our own."

Galen met his gaze steadily. "And yet the world we have claimed was open to us. Beyond a couple of robots, there was no sign of habitation or exploration that would put you in the position of ownership. To claim, you must hold. We intend to hold."

The man's face tightened. "That's clear enough. Exactly what is it that you hope to accomplish with this meeting?"

"Peace. A mutually beneficial trade."

If anything, the man grew angrier. "Your people abducted American citizens from American soil! There will be no discussion of peace or trade agreements until we have this resolved! We want to know what you've done with them and what your intentions are!" He picked up a paper from his desk and read off the names.

Galen frowned. "You did not name my bride, Bree Denton," he said tightly. "She is Americonian—*was*, as well."

The man stared at him blankly. "*Brides?*"

Galen nodded.

"You must have a different definition for brides than we do," Mercer said almost dismissively.

Galen blinked at him, thought it over, and shook his head. "It is not just the same, but in practice, there is little difference. We raided for brides ... as our people have many times in the past whenever there was a need and desire for brides not available." He shrugged. "We are colonists—only men. Without brides, there is no family, no future, and no true colony. What would be the point of striving without a woman to give all those things only they can give and children to take our places when we are gone?"

He could see the man was wrestling with his temper.

"That is one of the things I came to resolve. We were prepared to trade, but the difficulty in conversing made that impossible. We're still willing to pay a handsome bride price to the families. We have no desire for the women to be estranged from their families or shamed because we took them without compensating the families for the loss of their daughters."

Mercer reddened. "This isn't our custom," he said tightly.

Galen's brows rose. "You don't pay a bride price?" he demanded, outraged. "Have they no value to their families then?"

"We don't put a price on the value of our citizens," Mercer growled, then struggled to tamp his anger. "I see. What we have here is a misunderstanding because of cultural differences. The women must be returned. They were stolen, taken against their will. The women have the right to *choose* the men they marry. No one bargains with their families for them. It's just not acceptable ... not in America. Granted, there are some cultures on Earth who do practice similar customs—although it isn't acceptable, *ever*, to steal the bride and bartering our women certainly isn't acceptable to us."

Galen had to wrestle with his own temper for a few moments, but there was no fucking way he was giving up his Bree. "Regardless of the difference in customs, the women are content. They are carrying our babes. We will not return them."

"Jesus fucking Christ! You *raped* them?"

Galen surged to his feet before he thought better of it. "It is an insult even to suggest that we would misuse the women in our care! We bound ourselves to them according with our traditions and took them as our brides!"

Mercer studied him furiously, but he could see he was also alarmed and that didn't augur well for a happy resolution. Tamping his own temper with an effort, he settled in his chair again, considering the mess they'd made when they'd raided for the women.

He hadn't been far off, he realized with disgust, when he'd likened the raid to the infamous raid on Meridian that had brought the Empire to war. This, too, could bring war and Bree, he was sure, wouldn't be happy to have her man warring with her people.

Not that he was sorry that he'd done it. It pissed him off, though, that the Americanians knew he had, and he was now in the position of having to placate the interfering bastards.

"As insulting as I find it, I will make the concession of allowing you to send a representative to speak with the women."

"And if they want to return?"

Galen swallowed a little sickly. "Then we will agree to abide by *their* decision," he said pointedly, making certain the man knew it was *their* will that was the only thing of consequence to him, not the threats of their leader. "They will be returned."

Mercer nodded. "If this is resolved to everyone's satisfaction and we're certain

the women are willing to stay, and not hostages, then we will certainly be open to negotiating a treaty between our two peoples. There is the little matter of how to get a representative from here to Mars.”

“Draken,” Galen said grimly.

Mercer’s lips tightened. “Draken.”

Galen nodded, considered offering to use the particle transport and then discarded it. All that was needed to create a complete disaster was a malfunction. The representative would end up as just so many mismatched pieces, and that wouldn’t please anyone. “I will send transport.”

“When should we expect the transport?”

“When will your representative be ready to depart?” Galen countered.

“At your convenience.”

Galen tapped the arm of his chair, thinking. He was in no great rush to have the representative nosing into his affairs, particularly when he wasn’t as confident as he wanted to be that Bree would stay. He wanted time to resolve their issues, but would a few days more make any difference at all?

If she decided to return to her home, should he take that as an irrevocable no to his suit? Or would she at least allow him to court her and try to convince her to return?

He didn’t know, but he realized they had to resolve their differences. If she didn’t want to stay, he couldn’t truly hold her—not as he wanted to.

“Fifteen Earth hours,” he said finally. “We could not possibly make the trip any sooner. The ship must be prepped and a crew assembled.”

Mercer paled, but he merely nodded. “I’ll appoint a representative and have him ready.”

Nodding, Galen signaled for Tale Ken-so to cut the transmission.

“I didn’t understand the entire discussion,” Ken-so said tentatively, “but it didn’t seem to go well.”

Galen snorted in disgust. “No. I think they would far prefer to make war upon us than have peace.”

Tale paled. “They weren’t appeased at the offer of bride price?”

Galen drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. “No. It isn’t their custom.”

“They want our women back?” Tale demanded indignantly.

“Something like that,” Galen muttered. “They want to send a representative to make certain the women are willing to stay.”

“And if they aren’t?”

“Then we may have a war on our hands. I hope not.”

“You’re concerned about a war?”

“I don’t give a flying fuck about warring with them! I’m concerned that Br ... the women may decide to go back with the fucking bastard. I agreed that we would allow it if that was what they wanted.”

Ken-so nodded unhappily. “If I may be excused, Sir?”

“Dignity, Ken-so!” Galen snapped. “If you haven’t convinced her yet, begging isn’t going to help!”

Ken-so reddened. “I only thought I’d present myself for another session. I’ve only had two. How long do we have?”

Galen resumed his drumming. “Just under two days. I told them we had to prep

the ship and find a crew. I didn't want them to know I was stalling. Find our slowest ship and a crew to man it ... and tell them if they're back in less than thirty hours I'll throw them in the fucking brig to rot!"

Ken-so nodded. "I might be able to squeeze in the last two sessions," he mumbled to himself.

"And waste valuable time that you could put to better use? Don't be a dunce! You'd be better off spending the time convincing her!"

"But, Sir! I can't understand half of what she says and she can't understand me at all!"

Galen rolled his eyes. "Suit yourself, but if I were you I'd spend that time in bed convincing her."

"Is that what you plan to do?"

Galen stared sullenly at the floor at his feet. "I would if I could convince Bree. Fuck! I'll have to deal with the gods damned brides! When do we have the courtship and binding dance scheduled?"

"Three days—Friday."

Galen grunted with disgust. "You'll need to post the stats so that the men can review them—when you're done with that, you can take leave to be with your woman."

* * * *

There were two hard faced guards stationed on either side of Galen's door that Bree had never noticed before. They certainly hadn't been there the day Galen had taken her to his office. It was a little unnerving, particularly when there seemed to be guards posted conspicuously all over the colony that she'd never noticed before.

It occurred to her that, just maybe, Galen wasn't ignoring her or avoiding her. She didn't believe he would've ordered the guards to patrol if he hadn't been concerned that there might be trouble. Feeling less confident than she had before she'd decided to beard the lion in his den, Bree hesitated, wondering if it would be better just to wait until that evening. She didn't want to discuss anything private in the dining hall, but surely he'd go with her to their quarters afterwards?

She couldn't count on that, though.

Besides, she was already standing outside of his office. "I'd like to speak to Galen," she told the guards firmly.

The two men glanced at her and then at each other. "No" The guard who'd spoken hesitated, obviously searching for the word he wanted. "...bodder. Vorking."

Bree gaped at him, mentally deciphering his accent. Red faced the moment she realized she'd been informed not to bother him, she glared at the guard. "Fine! I didn't want to talk to him any damned way!" she snapped, turning on her heel and stalking off.

She met up with Marcy and Barbara as she neared the dining hall again.

"Find out anything?" Marcy asked sharply.

Bree blushed. "He's got two damned guards at his door. They wouldn't let me in to talk to him."

Barbara grabbed her hand, dragging her into the dining hall. "You'll want to see this."

There was a virtual display in one corner of the room that she hadn't noticed before. She didn't know if that was because it had just hadn't been used before or because it hadn't *been* there before. The women were all gathered in front of it,

however, making it difficult to see what was being displayed until she got closer.

The image of one of the alien women, full sized, hit her like a ton of bricks. She stared at the woman without recognition. She knew, though, that it must be one of the women she'd seen earlier.

She thought it must be—unless Marilyn was right and they hadn't seen them all. There were bars of symbols across the image that she knew had to be their written language, even though she had no idea what it might say. While she watched, the image changed.

She recognized the new display. It was the woman who'd talked so nasty to her.

"What do you think it means?" she asked numbly.

"I think it's a display for the men, that's what I think!" Barbara snapped. "And I'd be willing to bet money all that gibberish down there is their personal ad. They're shopping for husbands! That's what they're doing here!"

Bree frowned, feeling a sinking sensation. "Maybe it's just so they can get to know everyone?" she said hopefully.

"They have these all over the damned colony!" Sheila said. "And every one we've seen, except this one, is surrounded by a knot of men, gaping at them like they've never seen a damned woman before!"

"And they're setting up for something under the dome! Something big!" Bonnie added.

Bree felt a headache coming on. "That doesn't mean any of our guys are interested. Have any of you seen any of the men watching the displays?"

Marcy's chin wobbled. "Not yet, but then we haven't managed to find them at all. We did go outside, though. The men and the robots are working like there's no tomorrow ... on something."

"And those *females* are out there, prancing around and looking everything over like they *own* the place!"

Indignation swelled in Bree's bosom. "Well, what are *we* doing in here?"

The women all stared at her blankly for several moments and then exchanged looks. "Yeah! We should go out there, too ... just to see what's going on."

Construction, they discovered, near frantic construction. The last time Bree had been outside under the dome, there had been only about a half dozen of the small dwellings under construction. Now those were complete, or at least looked like they were, and there were that many more in various stages of development, as if they'd sprung up overnight like mushrooms. Feeling more than a little dismayed to see the men working so feverishly to get more dwellings constructed when it didn't seem, before, that they were in that big a rush, the women stared for a while and finally found a place to sit and watch.

If that wasn't bad enough, every time one of the winged women strolled by and stopped to look the work over, half the men on the crews went as rigid as hunting dog for a space of seconds and then began to ... show off for the damned female! It might have been laughable if they'd been in any mood to appreciate it, but none of them really felt terribly amused.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Bree had never felt more abandoned than she did that evening when, once again, Galen failed to show up to escort her to the evening meal. That made it almost a complete week. She tried to tell herself that he was just busy, but it didn't help her feelings.

She arrived to discover a party atmosphere in the dining hall—the perfect foil for her mood! Contrary to what she'd expected, though, the enclave of Earth women were working hard to be just as cheerful and flirtatious as the new arrivals.

Their men, looking torn between pleasure and confusion, were beside them.

Small wonder they were confused! Before the arrival of their rivals, the women had still been wavering between whether they wanted to go home or stay. Those who'd discovered they were pregnant were upset and angry that they were and that their condition limited their options. While the women who'd found out they *weren't* pregnant were undecided as to whether they wanted to get that way or not and how they were going to prevent it if they didn't want to.

Now no one seemed to be in any doubt that they wanted to stay.

If it came to that, she'd firmed her own decision. The problem was she couldn't catch up with Galen long enough to convince him that she was way more desirable—right!—than the bitches with the wings.

She was greeted with smiles by the enclave of Earth women, and everything from cool looks to glares from the alien women.

"Where's Galen?" Marcy asked brightly the moment she settled.

She managed a tight smile. "Still working, I guess."

"De Americonian man come two days," Tale volunteered. "De Prince vant ta show him de trades goods. Make talk."

Bree lifted her brows at him as her brain slowly translated. She couldn't decide whether she was more intrigued by what he'd said or the fact that he'd obviously been able to follow the exchange between her and Marcy. "You're learning English!" she exclaimed.

He flushed. "Ya. Tree link-ups now. De fourth, I hab all de words."

Marcy and Bree both stared at him, blinking while they tabulated that. "What's a link-up?" Marcy asked curiously.

"Download from computer," Dirk offered from across the table. "Me, I do tree, too. One more and no more headache." He grimaced.

Bree frowned. "You have some kind of learning method with the computer, you mean?"

Tale thought that over. "No learn. Just put in brain. Den, it's dare."

A wave of cold washed over Bree. "You ... link-up with the computer and download directly into your brain?"

Tale, Dirk, and Blu all nodded.

"Faster," Nal offered. He turned to smile at Sheila. "Den can talk to my

woman.”

“That’s what that was all about?” Donna gasped with sudden enlightenment, staring at Tale wide-eyed “When you and Galen were unconscious? My god! Is it that bad?”

Tale shook his head. “Head hurt, very bad. Take meds for pain—knock out.”

Bree suddenly felt like crying. Galen had looked so terrible! It had scared her half to death to see him like that. And he’d done it so he’d be able to talk to her and she’d thought terrible thoughts about him!

She was *such* a bitch! She didn’t know why he liked her at all when he’d worked so hard to please her and she’d just trampled all over his feelings, she thought glumly!

Almost as if her thoughts had conjured him, he strode into the dining hall. Her heart skipped several beats at the sight of him. He met her gaze, quirking an eyebrow quizzically, and she smiled at him hopefully.

The longhaired alien bitch waylaid him before he could get to the table. The movement as the woman made a beeline toward him caught both her attention and Galen’s at the same time. A rush of heat and then cold went through Bree as the woman met up with him with every appearance of someone absolutely certain of their welcome. She didn’t see Galen’s reaction. She was blinded by rage.

She’d jolted up from her seat before she even thought about it and stalked halfway between the table and the couple. Galen looked surprised and, to Bree’s mind, a little wary when she reached them. Without hesitation, however, he slipped an arm around her.

“Thank you for the invitation, Maaya, but I usually sit with my bride. This is Bree ... my bride.” Looking down at Bree, he switched to English. “This is Maaya Marlo, Bree, an old friend from home.”

Bree wanted to demand to know just how damned close a friend she was, but as angry as she was, she didn’t want to embarrass Galen in front of everyone. She pasted a tight smile on her lips. “We met earlier.”

Galen lifted his brows and looked from one woman to the other questioningly. “You met Bree earlier?” he asked Maaya coolly.

Maaya shrugged. “Hardly that. I couldn’t understand anything any of the aliens were saying ... and I doubt they could understand us.”

Galen narrowed his eyes at her. “She’s my bride and now the Princess of Draken. You should consider acquiring the Princess’ language. If you’ll excuse us? I’ve been too busy with affairs of state to spend much time with her lately.”

Bowing politely, he escorted Bree to the table and helped her sit. “I apologize for being late,” he said tiredly, his voice still more than a little stiff and cool.

Bree studied him. “Tale said something about some man from America?”

Galen slid a look at Ken-so, but as irritating as he found it that Ken-so had told the women, it wasn’t something that could be kept secret for long. He shrugged. “Your fellow Americonians are sending a representative.”

Bree smiled faintly. “American,” she corrected him.

He seemed almost relieved, smiling faintly at her in return. “American.”

Bree considered asking him what the visit was about, but decided against it. She was fairly certain he would’ve offered the information if he’d wanted to share. It still made her vaguely uneasy, but Galen was clearly exhausted and hungry. She didn’t want

to spoil his meal.

"We've been trying to figure out what's going on," she said slowly when Galen had been served.

"Valarian brides," Galen said shortly. "The timing could have been better."

The comment about brides sent flickers of alarm through her, but she tried to dismiss it with the reflection that he didn't exactly sound thrilled about it. "Better in what way?"

He flicked a quick, speculative glance at her. "In every way. The main problem, though, is that there are only twenty and Maalen announced their arrival before I had the chance to assess the situation and decide how best to handle it." He shrugged. "The trip here took us four annums—years—Valarian years. Somewhat longer than Americanian—American years."

Bree frowned in confusion. "Earth years, you mean?"

Galen frowned. "The world is called Earth? And the empire American?"

"Earth is the world. The *country* is America—actually, the United States of America. And you're a Valarian?"

He grimaced. "Was. Now I'm Draconian—for better or worse."

Bree discovered she'd lost interest in her food. She stirred it around on her plate while she toyed with the idea of apologizing for her behavior the day she'd taken flight. The dining hall, with everyone listening in, seemed too public for such a conversation, though. "I suppose you still have work to do?" she asked as causally as she could.

"No more tonight. I'm exhausted. It'll still be there tomorrow."

Bree's pulse leapt, but then took a nosedive when she realized he wasn't going to work anymore because he was too tired. "A hot shower would help you to relax," she suggested as casually as she could.

He looked down her speculatively. "Will you join me?"

Bree felt her face heat with pleasure. "I think you could persuade me."

His gaze flickered over her face. "How would I go about that?" he murmured.

She chuckled huskily. "You already did."

Galen looked down at his half-eaten meal and settled his eating utensil on the table. "In that case we should leave now—in case anyone else has the same idea."

"Eat. You'll need your strength."

His eyes widened slightly, but he chuckled. "Lady, I have all the strength I need," he murmured, getting up decisively and helping her from the bench.

Waving a triumphant goodnight at her friends at the table, Bree sidled closer to Galen as he escorted her out. Any ideas she'd had of seducing Galen once they arrived at the bath went right out of her head, however, when they reached the showers.

Galen dragged her inside the moment she'd discarded her kilt—before the water temperature had even adjusted, and pushed her against the back wall, covering her mouth hungrily in almost the same fluid movement. Raging heat washed over her as their mouths melded and his tongue danced along hers. Gasping in delight into his mouth, she twined her arms around his neck tightly, levering herself upward and pressing herself against him. He cupped her buttocks, boosting her higher, and Bree lifted her legs to wrap them around his waist. He penetrated her almost at once, spreading her flesh delightfully with his hardened member. She broke the kiss, tipping her head back, squeezing eyes tightly to relish every inch he gained inside of her.

It was a wild ride, but she had no complaints. From the moment he managed to gain complete possession of her passage, she was rising toward her climax. She flew so high so fast, she might have had some complaint about the swiftness of her rise except that her climax was explosive enough to blow her mind. She cried out at the force of it as it hit her, biting down on his shoulder to try to muffle the sounds. He uttered a choked breath even as her first convulsion hit her and then drove deeply, jerking with his own release.

Weak in the aftermath, they leaned together tightly for several moments and finally parted. Smiling up at him a little shyly, Bree took the foamy soap they used for bathing and washed Galen while he bathed her.

When they'd dried each other, they headed for their quarters and made-love again, more leisurely and finally snuggled together beneath the covers.

Now, Bree thought sleepily, was the time to tell him how sorry she was for behaving so stupidly, to try to explain why she'd panicked and tell him she wanted more than anything to build a home with him. She struggled for a while to think of how to begin, what to say, and then fell asleep.

* * * *

Bree decided she didn't especially like the representative that had been sent to question them. She wasn't exactly sure, but she thought it was mostly because, regardless of his claim of having come to verify their welfare, he seemed way more interested in the Valarians.

He'd set her back up the moment he'd come in, briskly professional, and plunked a thick file down on the table in front of her. His attitude had instantly made her feel like a criminal being interrogated rather than a victim giving her statement.

Not that she *felt* like a victim, but in the eyes of Earth law she was.

He flipped open the file and scanned it for several moments before he seemed to recall he hadn't even given her the curtesy of introducing himself. He flicked a quick glance and a brief, fake, smile at her then. "I'm Clint Mason ... with the state department."

Bree merely stared at him, fuming as it occurred to her to wonder if he was from the same branch of the government that had kidnapped her, taken her to Atlanta, and then abandoned her to find her own ride home.

"And you are?"

"Wondering why you're really here," she said dryly.

He looked startled then his lips tightened with obvious annoyance. "The President appointed me to ascertain if you were being well treated and whether or not you were being held against your will. You are ...?"

"The woman the government's Gestapo goons kidnapped, took to Atlanta to interpret for a secret committee, and then left stranded in Atlanta to find my own damned way home!" she snapped. "And I have to tell you I didn't appreciate it worth a damn! And you can go back and tell those bastards that I didn't appreciate it and the only reason I didn't tell the news-people about your highhanded tactics is because y'all had managed to keep everything so secret I knew they wouldn't believe me!"

He stared at her for a long moment. "On their behalf, I apologize. This is a matter of national security and we have to act in the government's best interests."

"The government is just there to represent *us*, damn it—the citizens! In other

words *our* best interests. Y'all seem to forget just who the hell you're working for."

She could see he was grinding his teeth. He finally managed another tight smile. "We seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot. I've come to protect your rights as an American citizen. I need your name so that I can notify your next of kin that I've spoken with you."

Bree eyed him resentfully. "Bree Denton."

He studied his list, his frown deepening. "You're not on the list. Evidently, you weren't reported missing. I have the names of ten women." He named them off. "Can you verify for me that this is all of the women? Or are there others not on the list?"

"That's everybody ...except me."

He didn't look convinced. "You're certain? There wouldn't be any other place where other women might be held?"

Bree had already opened her mouth to inform him that the facility where they were was the only part of the colony that was actually finished when it hit her like a ton of bricks that he didn't give a shit if there were other women or not. He wanted to know the size of the colony and the number of Valarians they were up against. "Everybody gathers here regularly for meetings and that sort of thing. If there'd been any others, I'd know it."

Irritation flickered across his features, but he merely nodded and made some notations. "We're trying to ascertain just how trustworthy this alien dictator is," he said with feigned casualness. "The President worked out an agreement with him to release all hostages. We want to be sure he complies."

Anger instantly welled in Bree. "Galen isn't a dictator and, unless he made demands you haven't mentioned, *we* aren't hostages!"

He lifted his brows at her but shrugged. "Captives, then."

Bree wasn't about to address that. In point of fact, she hardly noticed. She was too pissed off about the insulting way he referred to Galen. "Galen is a highly respected military leader—both here and where he came from. His men look up to him. They wouldn't appreciate the President, or anybody else, insulting him."

Mason's lips curl in an expression of contempt. "As far as we can see, he's a petty dictator of a ragged handful of misfits calling themselves colonists. That doesn't give him a lot of stature in the eyes of the American government."

Bree almost lost her temper then. There was something about the look in his eyes, though, that told her he'd deliberately provoked her. She'd made it clear that she empathized with the Valarians in general and Galen in particular. He was trying to use that sympathy against them to get information out of her.

He probably wasn't a government official at all, she realized abruptly, but maybe a spy? An interrogator?

She snorted. "You don't honestly think this is the only facility? This is just one of the smaller ones. They have dozens more going up all over the planet. And, of course, they have space flight capabilities that are amazing. Another shipload of colonists arrived just a few days ago. I mean, I've no idea how many of them are already on the planet, settled, but they have a regular supply line from their world and more colonists all the time. I suppose it's still a little raw. They haven't been here long, anyway. Even with the construction bots it takes a while to build a city, but it would be a mistake to dismiss Galen as a petty dictator and his colonists as riffraff. I understand that

he's going to appoint a parliament, but that's just to get things sorted through. They'll be holding an election in a year or so."

He leaned back in his chair, studying her through narrowed eyes. "Am I to assume from your vehement defense, Ms. Denton, that you've opted to remain? I have to caution you that this is very likely your only chance to return home. If you're under any sort of duress and afraid to speak your mind, just say so."

She gave him a look. "Do I seem to be under duress? Thank you for your warning and for your interest in my welfare, but I'm staying—not because I'm being forced to. Because I want to."

She got up, ending the interview, and stalked out. The other women, waiting to be called in, looked at her questioningly. "He doesn't give a rat's ass about any of us," she said tightly. "He's just looking for something to use against the Draconians!"

Mason emerged so quickly on the heels of her comment that her heart skipped a beat, but if he'd heard her he gave no indication of it. After studying his list, he called Barbara.

Barbara sent her an indecipherable look as she stood, and then followed the man into the interrogation room. As soon as the door closed, the other women hopped out their seats and rushed Bree, pelting her with questions.

She shook her head. "He's smart. I can't put my finger on it, but I'm as sure as I've ever been about anything that the government didn't send him just for us. Maybe they figured they'd kill two birds with one stone—'rescue' us and spy on the Valarians at the same time—but he's a lot more interested in the Valarians than he is us. He's good, too. If you don't watch yourselves, he'll pry information out of you that could cause trouble."

Marcy looked worried. "You think they might be thinking about attacking the Valarians?"

Bree shrugged. "I don't think they have the capability of coming here to do that and that's part of the problem. I think they're still pissed off about what they considered an invasion of American territory—more because it makes them feel vulnerable than on our account per se. I don't have a problem with a determination to protect America, mind you, but *we* know there's no threat to America—and there won't be if our government doesn't start something. I think we can better protect our country by not giving our government anything to start a war over."

Several of the women, she saw, looked worried. "You're that certain that these people won't attack our people?" Nancy finally asked.

Bree looked at her in surprise. "Aren't you? I mean, would you be considering staying with them if you believed—deep down—that they were like that? They could've attacked the minute they arrived if they were ... here for conquest, and probably would've. They could have taken us completely off guard. I don't think they were ever interested in anything except finding a home and raising families."

Julia snorted. "Well! They obviously have conquest in mind or they wouldn't have snatched us," she said with wry amusement. "Just not the kind of conquest our government seems to think."

"So he's come here to take us home?" Bonnie asked.

Bree studied her for a moment. "I'm not trying to scare anybody, but I'd think long and hard before I took him up on his offer. I've heard 'national security' one time

too many to trust the bastard. Anybody that takes him up on the offer is liable to find themselves in a very unpleasant interrogation.

“I think you’d be much better off, if you don’t want to stay, to ask Galen to send you home. I think he would and then you’d at least have the chance of avoiding an unpleasant investigation.”

* * * *

Galen felt his lips curl in a smile as he watched and listened to Bree and the other women. It was more than relief. He felt a euphoria that was hard to contain ... and pride in his Bree. He didn’t know how he’d managed it—maybe there *were* gods after all and they were smiling down on him—but he couldn’t have chosen a woman more perfect for him.

She was smart and she would be far better at diplomacy than he was.

He glanced at the other men around him who’d gathered to hear whether their women would stay with them or not. They were still waiting anxiously to know, though, and hardly noticed when he let himself out of the observation room and strode cheerfully to his office to go over the details of the grand ritual scheduled for the following day.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Bree eyed the wings Marcy and Kelly had presented to her a little doubtfully.

"Everybody's going to wear them," Kelly said a little defensively.

Everybody meaning the Earth women?

"Well ... they're beautiful!" Bree said with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. It wasn't a lie. They *were* beautiful.

The thing was they looked more like fairy wings than the wings of Valarians.

"We all got together and decided to wear them in honor of the Valarians—to show our support, you know?"

Bree managed a smile. "I'm sure they'll appreciate that. Do you think they'll realize that's what they're for, though? I mean—they don't look much like their wings ... even though they're really pretty."

Marcy and Kelly studied the wings a little unhappily. "It isn't like we could get feathers around here. We were lucky we managed to get the materials to do these."

Bree set aside her misgivings. "Well, y'all did a beautiful job! Really! I think we're going to look more like fairies, but hopefully they'll get the idea." She just hoped it didn't have the opposite effect of making the Valarians think they'd put them on to make fun. "Maybe we should just tell Galen so that he can make sure the colonists realize we decided to do this in their honor? Just so there won't be any misunderstanding?"

"Oh! We already did that," Bonnie said dismissively. "Not that we told him exactly what we had in mind. We wanted it to be a surprise. We just told him that we'd decided to dress in honor of the Valarians to show our support. We thought after the way that guy Mason behaved we really should do something to promote peace, you know?"

"That's good, then," Bree responded, relieved.

"It'll be kind of like a masquerade," Marcy said enthusiastically. "I've never been to a masquerade ball, but I always wanted to."

Bree managed a smile instead of telling Marcy that that was exactly what she'd been afraid of, that the Valarians wouldn't see it as a gesture of friendliness and support, but a pointed reminder that *they* saw the Valarians as different.

She dismissed her qualms when Kelly had helped her attach the wings with the straps and she'd examined her reflection, deciding that the sparkling, colorful wings made her feel and look a little magical. Better than that, they made her look 'special' and she wanted to look her best. That was why she, like the others, had chosen to wear the special kilts they'd worn the first night they arrived. She thought she and Galen were well on their way to patching up their little misunderstanding. Even though she hadn't actually gotten around to *verbally* apologizing, she had hopes that he'd understood when they'd made love that she was asking for forgiveness and another chance.

She still owed it to him to try to explain. More than that, she didn't want the doubts she'd planted in his mind to remain and possibly fester. She needed to clear the air no matter how uncomfortable it made her to think of trying, or how worried she was

that she would only make things worse.

Maybe, once the big party welcoming the colonists was over, she'd get the chance? Hopefully, things would settle down and he wouldn't be so tied up with other things.

She was almost lightheaded with nerves and excitement as she followed the other women down the corridor to the exit that led to the dome where everyone else had already gathered. Her stomach cramped with nerves when they reached the door and paused—because everyone else was as nervous as she was.

There was some 'safety' in numbers, though. They managed to bolster each other's confidence, opened the door, and stepped out.

Bree dragged in a quick breath of wonder when they did. All signs of construction had been tidied up and greenery was everywhere, as if the world had been transformed in the blink of an eye from desert to lush paradise. There were even exotic flowers here and there—or what looked like flowers. Stars twinkled in the night sky above the dome, but nearer than the stars were artificial twinkling lights that lent the entire dome an almost magical air. Music she'd never heard before, played by instruments equally exotic, wafted through the night air, winding almost sinuously among the voices of the colonists gathered beneath the stars.

To their delight, they found that their men were loitering near the exit, waiting for them.

Bree didn't know if she was more relieved or thrilled when she met Galen's gaze. She sent him a questioning look when his gaze had traveled over her and met hers again.

His lips curled in a smile. He strode toward her, stopping when he was almost toe-to-toe with her and studying the wings on her back. "This is what the secret was?" he murmured.

Bree looked at him skeptically. "Somehow, I doubt it was much of a secret from you. They had to have help to get the materials."

He shrugged. "I was told it was to be a surprise," he said with a chuckle, his eyes gleaming in a way that spoke volumes, reminding her of the night before when she'd suggested a hot shower to 'unwind'. "I happen to like surprises. I told the techs to give them what they wanted and not ask questions." He tilted his head. "There are beings on your world with wings like this?"

Bree blushed. "Only in our fantasies."

His expression urged her to elaborate.

"There are stories about fairy folk. In them, the fairies had magical powers and wings like these. Everyone's always loved the stories, but they're entirely made up. As far as we know, they never existed. I suppose it might have arisen from the fact that mankind has always sort of envied birds ... who had the ability to soar above while they were tied to the ground."

Galen chuckled. "But not you."

Bree couldn't help but smile. "I wouldn't have been so terrified if *I* could fly. That's the main reason I don't like airplanes."

She discovered when he finally stepped back and offered his hand that most of the others had already left to take their seats at a table that had clearly been reserved for them.

She heard a feminine snicker as Galen escorted her to the table and stiffened. Galen tensed, as well, glancing around. The alien woman who'd giggled so nastily widened her eyes at his expression and looked away quickly.

It wasn't the only insult, unfortunately. By the time she'd reached the table, she realized that all of the alien females had noticed their fake wings and were amused at their attempts to be like Valarians. The other women at the table were trying to pretend they were unaware of the sly looks and snide laughter that erupted around them, but their men were looking downright angry.

Galen brushed a kiss along her temple as he helped her into her seat and then stepped away. Moving to a place on the other side of their table, he nodded to Tale, who was operating some sort of machine. Almost instantly, a gigantic image of Galen was projected at one end of the dome.

Bree sucked in her breath sharply as the sheer size of it that made it seem almost as if a god had suddenly appeared at their festivities. The party beneath the dome slowly quieted.

"We gather tonight beneath the dome in the new city of Marciana—named in honor of my first officer's lovely bride. To celebrate our triumph in carving out a new home for ourselves. To honor our brides, to welcome our new colonists and to enjoy the time honored ritual of courtship and binding," he said in English and then repeated the message in his own tongue. "Let the festivities begin!"

A great hoorah went up from hundreds of throats, almost deafening in enthusiasm.

The server bots appeared and began to move along the tables with platters of food covered with domes to retain the heat. The music swelled, however, and when it did the men began to drift away from the tables.

Curious, feeling a little uneasy when their own men joined the others, Bree watched as the men gathered and began a strangely compelling and exotic dance. It unfolded in a way almost like a story being presented in dance.

It was hard to define the emotions that went through her as she watched them perform the dance that seemed strongly reminiscent, to her, of Spanish dances she'd seen—with the exception of the fact that these men were winged and their wings came into play as they danced. The men drew themselves up rigidly erect, expanding their chests. Or maybe it only seemed that way because of their posture when they threw their shoulders back? Regardless, it made their broad chests seem that much broader and more intimidating. The steps, at first, were measured and sharp and almost threatening, particularly the way they held their wings—lifted upward at the shoulders to form almost a hood while they held them closely along their backs. It made them seem almost a foot taller and they were already tall. As the music changed, so did the dance. With leaps and kicks and sharp jabs of their arms, it almost seemed as if they were miming a battle, and then the music changed again and the dance more closely resembled a highland jig.

When the music changed yet again, they soared upward, performing almost an aerial ballet and finally lit again on the ground, standing at rigid attention.

Bree wasn't certain whether she should clap or not.

The alien women surged onto the 'dance' floor while she was still debating—the center to be exact, where they were surrounded by the men. As Bree stared at them almost opened mouthed with surprise, the women began their own dance, weaving in out

among the men as if to entice them. Galen glanced toward her just as the black haired bitch she wanted to snatch bald began to pirouette around him.

Fury surged through her. Standing abruptly, Bree stalked back toward the building. With angry exclamations, the rest of the Earth women followed her.

“Cast her off,” Maaya purred, moving seductively around Galen and stroking him with her wings. “She snubbed you. In any case, a man of your stature needs a *real* woman, a woman to give him an heir.”

Galen’s face tightened. “I have a bride, Maaya ... who’s carrying my heir. I’m honored, but I have to decline.”

Without waiting for a response, he shot upward in a curving arch and landed solidly in front of Bree.

Bree stopped abruptly when Galen landed in front of her, gaping at him in stunned surprise. Her anger vied with dawning uneasiness at the hard, uncompromising expression on his face. The sharp gasps of the other women followed by hard thuds told her that all of them had been surrounded, their escape effectively cut off.

Without a word, Galen stalked toward her. Bree retreated without even realizing she was. He herded her determinedly. Each time she attempted to dart around him, he threw up his wings, blocking her path. Before she knew it, she found herself in the center of the dancers.

The anger left Galen’s features. He moved closer, caging her with his wings to prevent her escape.

“What are you doing?” she demanded in a hoarse, shaking voice.

“Claiming my woman for all to see.”

Bree blushed at the ‘threat’, suddenly remembering their first time together. It wasn’t fear that made her heart race, however, or even anger. “I’m not a *thing* you can just take, Galen Drako!” she said. “You stole me away from my home.”

The look of hard determination left his features. He swallowed audibly. “You stole my heart. I couldn’t live without it.”

Bree felt a knot the size of a golf ball swell in her throat. It took several tries to actually speak around it. “You really mean that?”

Instead of answering, he reached for her. She flinched, but he only took her hand, lifting it to place her palm on the center of his chest. Then he lifted his head and his voice. “All present, bear witness! I, Galen of the royal house of Drako, renew my vows to my bride. I claim this woman, Bree, as my own, to cherish and protect forevermore. I have bestowed upon her my heart, and my seed, to ensure my line.”

Bree felt her cheeks heat but such joy raced through her that she thought she was going to burst into tears in spite of all she could do. *That* was what he’d said the first night he’d brought her here? She might have doubted the possibility that he could’ve loved her then, but there was no question in her mind that he’d done his best to uphold his vow from the first—cherishing and protecting her.

She stared up at him through a blur of tears and then she reached for his hand and pressed it to her heart. “I, Bree, Earth woman, am of Earth no more, but Draken. I give you my heart, forevermore, knowing I can trust you to keep it safe.”

She could tell by his expression that her impromptu vow took him completely off guard. He moved closer, pulling her tightly against him, and she suddenly knew what he had in mind. Lifting her arms, she wrapped them tightly around his neck, and when he

lifted her up with his hands, she coiled her legs around his waist. He bent his head to meet her lips as he sprang upward with a mighty downward thrust of his wings.

She smiled against his lips as the sudden move nearly made them miss locking lips.

"I'll teach you to laugh at me, woman!" Galen growled, covering her mouth with a sizzling kiss as they reached the maximum height the dome allowed.

She was so breathless, weak, and dizzy when he broke the kiss, it took an effort to cling to him. "Teach me more," she whispered huskily, arching her hips against him.

He rolled with her and then settled in a wide glide. When he'd leveled them out, he reached between them and guided the head of his cock into her opening, thrusting to seat his flesh deeply inside of her. It was the most wonderful thing she'd ever felt with him. The terrifying sense of soaring through the air connected with him vied for dominance over the pleasure and yet, somehow, seemed to magnify it at the same time. The rush of air around them made her skin tingle all over.

She moved with him when he'd settled into a rhythm, attaining her peak, groaning with the rush of ecstasy that tore through her, clinging tightly to him as he, too, reached his climax and spilled his seed inside of her.

She was still gasping for breath when they landed with a jolt that nearly tore her grip from him. His arms tightened briefly and then he allowed her to slip to the ground, holding her in the circle of his arms.

When Bree had caught her breath, she glanced up at Galen. He met her gaze. "I love you, Earth woman," he murmured, dipping down to kiss her again.

"Draconian," she corrected him as she met his kiss.

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Bree eyed the baby's crib in absolute horror when she saw that the door was open and the crib empty. She'd been more than a little disturbed when Galen had first presented it to her—it looked more like a bird cage than an infant's crib—but she'd learned to be grateful for it.

The problem was, Gabriella was an escape artist!

"Galen! She's figured out the new catch and gotten out!"

Galen, only a few paces behind her, tilted his head back and surveyed the top of the room. "Bad girl!" he said sternly. "Come down from there!"

Bree tipped her head back and gasped. "Don't scare her, Galen! She's liable to fall!"

Galen sent her a look and bounded up, scooping the baby off of the top of the armoire. "Bad girl!" he repeated sternly.

She grinned at him, fluttering her baby wings. Bree couldn't help it, she looked so adorable—like a baby cherub—that she found herself grinning, as well.

Galen's lips twitched with amusement as he handed the baby to her. "She's beginning to think 'bad girl' is an endearment."

Bree snorted. "Beginning? When you're always grinning at her telling her she's daddy's bad girl?"

He shrugged, moving past her to examine the latch on the crib. "I think we're going to have to try a new latch ... better yet Wait here."

Frowning, Bree moved to the rocking chair and settled in it with the baby. In spite of her effort to hide it, the baby had given her a real fright. If she'd known when

Gabriella was born that those tiny little wings were going to be such a headache, she didn't think she would've thought they were so cute.

Galen strode purposefully into the room a few minutes later and settled on his knees. "Hold her still."

"What are you doing?" Bree asked uneasily, watching him with a vague sense of horror as he clipped the tips off of the lower feathers of the baby's wings.

"Clipping her wings so she won't be able to get airborne," he said absently. "I hadn't realized they'd gotten long enough or I would've trimmed them before."

"Oh. Does it hurt?"

He flicked a sharp look at her, but smiled at the worried look on her face. "No more than trimming the hair or nails—and a lot less than falling off the top of something. I don't even know how she managed to get up there to start with. I wouldn't worry about it if she was walking—or flying—well."

"She's too young even to walk," Bree complained irritably, not without a touch of pride. "I know she shouldn't be walking this young."

Settling the trimmers on the floor when he'd finished, Galen cupped Bree's chin and kissed her lingeringly. "She's too much like her mother—very curious and very intelligent."

Bree blushed at the compliment, but chuckled. "She looks just like you."

"Gods forbid! We'll never find anyone to take her off our hands if she looks like me!"

Bree rolled her eyes. "You *know* she's beautiful ... and don't be talking about anybody taking her off our hands when she's just a baby! Give her a few years."

Galen took the baby and pulled Bree to her feet. "Take a walk with me in the gardens?"

"You have time?"

He sighed. "I always make time for the best things in my life," he murmured, pulling her tightly against his side and brushing a kiss along her forehead. He curled his arm around her and rubbed his hand over her belly. "How's the baby?"

"Practicing somersaults," Bree said dryly. "I'm sure this one will be a boy."

Galen chuckled as he walked her out onto the balcony beyond their private apartments in the royal palace and then guided her carefully down the stairs. "I'm not sure I want competition for your attention."

Bree shook her head at him. "I've got enough love for all of you."

Galen's smile faded as he looked down at her. "I never doubted it ... And yet, somehow, I can never get enough."

They strolled through the garden at a leisurely pace and finally climbed up a short flight of steps to sit in the gazebo Galen had had built for her that overlooked the sprawling city that had her name. Beyond the dome, what had once been nothing more than a red desert, burgeoned with life. The air was still thin and the pressure wasn't just right, but it was already safe enough and comfortable enough for short walks outside the domes with the new terra forming technology the Valarians had sent them. In the distance, they just could see the dome that sheltered the colony Galen had allowed the Americans to establish in exchange for the American goods he'd had imported from Earth to make Bree, and the other Earth women, feel at home.

"When do you think the raiding party will get back?" Bree asked after a while.

Galen chuckled. "I'm expecting them before morning with the newest colonists."

Bree smiled at him. "That was a brilliant idea, by the way, but then you're always coming up with brilliant ideas."

Galen shook his head. "Not really, but I'm glad I thought of it since it makes everybody happy."

Bree's smile faded. "Do you think the guys have figured out that the 'mating den' they keep raiding is only attended by women eager to be captured by handsome, strapping Valarians?"

Galen laughed outright at that. "I think they have their suspicions. Some of them, anyway," he amended. "Some jackass hatched the brilliant idea of making it more realistic the last time and shot off fireworks, from what I'm told. The men were furious about it—both when they thought they were dodging actual artillery fire and when they discovered it was a prank. I pity the idiot that thought it up if they ever catch up to him."

Bree tsked. "It was probably nothing but a bunch of kids."

Galen grunted. "Maybe, but I don't think the male Earthlings are too keen about having their women snatched."

Bree shrugged. "If they appreciated them more, they wouldn't have to worry about it ... as much." She thought it over. "Alright, well maybe they still would. There's nothing more exciting than a Valarian ... unless it's the Valarian courtship and binding ceremony."

Galen's eyes gleamed as he looked at her. "Maybe we should renew our vows again?"

Bree chuckled. "You're *just* as exciting in a nice soft bed!"

The End