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# CAPTAIN GARETH'S MATES

TERRAN BORDER PATROL



## Terran Border Patrol

# Captain Gareth's Mates

As far as Captain Krys Gareth is concerned, life is perfect. He's happily commanding a ship for 24th-century Earth's Border Patrol, and his relationship with another man, the alien ambassador Brennar, is hotter than a supernova.

Then his ship is summoned to Anubis, a small planet facing an attack by space brigands. In exchange for his help, the ruler awards the captain his daughter's hand in marriage. Gareth and Brennar both know that refusing could result in diplomatic chaos.

To Gareth's surprise, marriage with the feisty Princess Izbal is better than he imagined. His new bride is even willing to accept a relationship with both men, and before long, the trio has bonded both physically and emotionally. One obstacle remains, though: duty soon calls Gareth back to his ship and Brennar to his home planet. Now the three mates must find a way to stay together without risking intergalactic peace.

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**Cassandra Pierce**

**MENAGE AMOUR**



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With deep gratitude,

Cassandra Pierce

## **DEDICATION**

This book is for anyone who ever gazed at a star-studded night sky in all its mysterious beauty, sighed, and wondered how many hot aliens were getting jiggy up there!

# CAPTAIN GARETH'S MATES

*Terran Border Patrol*

CASSANDRA PIERCE

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## Chapter 1

Krys Gareth, captain of the Terran Council vessel *Wayfarer*, stood in the center of his stateroom and examined his surroundings with a critical eye. Though this evening's mission was of a personal nature, he applied to it the same attention to detail that had served him so well in his military career, enabling him to vault through the ranks of the Interplanetary Border Patrol until he'd achieved command at the astonishing age of thirty-four.

So far, everything had proceeded according to plan. The room's sparse decorations had been polished and straightened, the furniture had been rearranged to accommodate a guest, and the food generator blinked and hummed as it prepared a special meal. Gareth had spent hours researching the Shibian ambassador's native culture, studying its dietary customs, and programming the synthesizer to emulate several of its most popular dishes. Hopefully he—and the computer—had gotten them right.

As the first covered plate dropped through the chute, Gareth suppressed a grimace. The meal didn't look particularly appetizing. It consisted mostly of oddly colored plants chopped into various shapes, doused in even stranger sauces that gave off a strong, vinegar-like smell. All Shibians were strict vegetarians, so, in order not to offend

Brennar, Gareth had ordered a meatless lasagna for himself. Not that the computer offered real meat, since everything they ate on board the *Wayfarer* was synthetic. Still, he wanted his guest comfortable with everything on the table...and with him.

With the meal fully rendered, Gareth carried the plates to the table and arranged them on the genuine linen tablecloth, the sort his ancestors used on special occasions and seldom seen in the twenty-fourth century. As a final touch, he lit an old fashioned candle and stepped back to survey his work. Having been a soldier for half his life, he had little experience with this sort of thing, but with any luck his extensive preparations would appeal to the diplomat's refined tastes.

Satisfied with his efforts, he fished a remote control out of his sofa cushions and flicked on some music. He chose an old Earth form called jazz, which would create a more relaxing atmosphere than the modern cacophonies preferred by his crewmembers.

At last, the expected buzz sounded at his door. He used the remote to slide it open and then watched the ambassador stroll in.

Gareth couldn't stop himself from smiling. Brennar looked exotic and handsome in a high-collared jacket adorned with bell-shaped sleeves and a line of gold clasps down the front. His native costume also included colorful leggings, tight enough to show off every curve in his muscular calves, and cloth boots that seemed to melt around his long, slender feet. A shimmering, metallic belt adorned his trim waist.

In contrast, Gareth wondered if he might be a bit underdressed, having traded his uniform for a plain white shirt, black pants, and ankle-high boots. When he saw the alien ambassador's look of pleasure, however, his chest muscles loosened up in relief. Brennar's reaction confirmed what Gareth had sensed from their first meeting 140 Earth hours earlier. He knew that Brennar was as attracted to Gareth as Gareth was to him.

Even now, a hard lump was swelling between the captain's legs as his gaze roved over Brennar's tall, lean body. The ambassador's pale

skin held a slight tint of blue, as delicate as a watercolor painting, while his eyes glinted like twin polished sapphires. The platinum hair that just brushed his shoulders would be exquisitely soft to the touch, Gareth suspected, unlike his own dark, spiky mop. Before the evening was over—maybe before the meal was over—he planned to find out how accurate his expectations were. He intended to touch every inch of that otherworldly skin, either with his hands, his tongue, or some other sensitive body part.

“I’m glad you came,” Gareth said, motioning him inside.

Brennar inclined his head. “I was honored to receive your invitation this evening, and I am even more honored that you wish to consider me among your friends.”

“I do. You did me a great service by warning me of Xaal’s incursion. We would never have been ready for him without your information.”

“Mine are a peaceful people, Captain. We want the same for others. Though politically I must appear neutral, the invasion of an unarmed settlement in order to steal resources is not something I could permit in good conscience.”

“Please, call me Gareth. All my friends do.” Gareth swept a hand toward the table. “Let’s sit.”

They took their places opposite one another. Brennar lifted his silky brows at the array of delicacies spread in front of him.

“I am most flattered at your attention to my dietary needs, Cap—Gareth.” Brennar ladled some samples onto his plate and eyed the lasagna with curiosity. “I hope I can learn to appreciate Terran dishes as well. At least those that do not contain meat.”

“None of them do, if you want to be technical,” Gareth said. “All the food on board this ship, or in any industrialized setting, is synthetic nowadays. Most of my fellow Earthers wouldn’t recognize real steak or chicken if they had it. They probably wouldn’t even like the taste.”

“Still, the flavor does not appeal to me, whether or not real animal flesh is involved. Fortunately, it seems many Earth dishes are made from interesting plants. These I should like to sample sometime.”

“The lasagna contains a vegetable called spinach,” Gareth said, pleased with his own foresight. “I would be delighted to introduce you to it. The recipe has endured for centuries, though many Earth children have traumatic associations with that particular ingredient. Human parents once believed it conferred incredible strength on their offspring. A charming myth designed to trick them into eating well.”

“Perhaps that explains your fortitude, Captain,” Brennar suggested with a sly smile. “From the moment we met, you have impressed me as a man of decisive action but also refined thought. You possess strength both of body and of mind...a rare and admirable combination.”

Gareth reached for the decanter beside him and tilted it against Brennar’s glass and then his own. “Will you share some wine with me? That’s another Earth treat I hope you’ll come to appreciate.”

“I have sampled wine on one occasion and found it most refreshing. I did become somewhat lightheaded, though.”

“Well, I won’t give you too much, then.”

They spent the next few minutes eating and drinking in quiet enjoyment, each sampling the cuisine from the other’s world and politely expressing their mutual appreciation. Eventually, inevitably, the conversation turned to the crisis at hand and the emergency summit meeting on Anubis, which the *Wayfarer* was presently orbiting.

To Gareth’s relief, the small planet’s single functioning city had been receptive to his warning. If the threatened invasion took place, the people were prepared to defend themselves with their weapons of choice. For them, such tools were primitive firearms, bows and arrows, and, if need be, bludgeons made of whatever they found handy. Since none of these would prove the least bit effective against

Xaal's laser-wielding mercenaries, he hoped such a battle would never happen. He couldn't help admiring their pluck, though.

"What was your impression of Grand Potentate Zimeon?" Brennar asked.

Gareth grinned, recalling the overstated entrance of the colony's hereditary leader, complete with floor-length robes and a coterie of women who followed him to and from the council chamber, single file and silent.

"He puts a lot of stock in ceremony," he mused, "but he wants to protect his people, even more than he wants to retain control of his phytronium mines. I can respect that."

"Yet, you find certain other aspects of Anubian culture more difficult to understand," Brennar guessed.

"I can't deny that." Gareth took a gulp of wine. Brennar was right. The income from the sale of phytronium had made their planet one of the wealthiest in the sector, yet the people there clung to a simple way of life that reminded him of the medieval period on Earth. Technology was something they chose to profit from but not adopt for themselves. That attitude puzzled him, especially with respect to the patriarchal nature of their society. From what Gareth had seen, Anubian females functioned more as ornaments than participating members of a self-sustaining government. Earth women would never stand for such exclusionary treatment.

"Their ways seem eccentric to me, too, though I have certainly seen stranger. For the most part, they appear to be a benevolent race."

"Well, it isn't my place to judge. I have one job to do, and that is to guard the planets—and the people—in my district."

"Not to mention the largest supply of raw phytronium in the sector," Brennar observed.

"No doubt the Council would hate to lose access to a resource of that magnitude. I can promise you that my first concern is the protection of that colony, whether I share their social values or not."

Brennar set his wineglass down and fixed Gareth with a penetrating stare. "I believe you."

"Enough of business." Gareth broke their locked gaze with difficulty, mesmerized by the sudden intensity that seemed to crackle between them. "According to our calculations, we have several hours before Xaal and his goons arrive. Tonight, we relax."

"Agreed."

Gareth held out his glass, and, after a moment's hesitation, Brennar clicked his against it.

"Earlier, you spoke of friendship. The truth is, Brennar, I would be equally honored if you would call me your friend. I would like it even better if we could become something more. I think you know what I'm talking about."

Brennar's bright, sapphire eyes narrowed slightly, that sly smile stealing across his lips again. "I must admit I find the male of your species more to my taste than the female. I am not sure why, but from the moment we met I suspected you shared my preference."

"I do," said Gareth. "Or, to be more specific, I don't distinguish between the genders when it comes to sexual interest. I admit I have found pleasure with women in the past."

"On my planet, preferences like mine are admittedly in the minority, but they are accepted and in most cases respected. I have heard that it is not always so among your people."

"At one time, that was true. Fortunately, humans have grown more enlightened about many things. I do exercise a certain amount of discretion, of course. I never take pleasure among my own crew, which would compromise my authority, but that doesn't apply in this case. You're a guest on board. And it wouldn't be right to offer you anything less than my full hospitality."

"In your travels, I suppose you meet many men who stir your blood?" Brennar rolled the rim of his wine glass over his lower lip.

"A few." Gareth felt the bulge behind his fly shift uncomfortably as he imagined his own mouth taking the place of the glass. He

wondered if he were revealing too much, but he felt it best to be honest. To his relief, Brennar didn't seem to mind his mention of other partners.

"And do I stir your blood?"

"And other things, too." Gareth rose and crossed to Brennar's chair. His fingers stroked the ambassador's chin and gently tilted his head back. "I hope to introduce you to more than just Earth's culinary delights this evening," he said. Then he bent down for a kiss.

Brennar's butter-soft, wine-flavored lips opened willingly against Gareth's mouth. After a day of longing that had been intense enough to cause him physical pain, the captain found it difficult to pace himself and not dive in with savage abandon. However, he was an experienced lover and knew that the greatest fulfillment came after the longest buildup. Reluctantly, he broke away after a few moments, though his hand remained on Brennar's cheek.

"On my planet, affection is shown somewhat differently," the ambassador whispered. Reaching up, he slid one arm around Gareth's neck and drew him close. Instead of bringing their mouths together, he touched his forehead to Gareth's.

"I like that," said Gareth. He closed his eyes, luxuriating in the warmth of Brennar's skin and the faint but rapid throb of his pulse.

"I like your way, too," Brennar replied. As if to provide proof, he raised his head so they could kiss again.

Without breaking contact, Gareth pulled Brennar to his feet, and they moved to the bed. This, too, Gareth had prepared in advance. The crisp new sheets were turned down invitingly, the pillows freshly fluffed. A discreet jar of lubricant sat on the nightstand.

Brennar began to remove his clothes. Gareth reached out and covered the slender hands with his own. "No," said Gareth, "please, let me. On Earth, this is considered one of the most pleasurable steps in the seduction process."

"Very well." Brennar smiled. "As a student of other cultures, I look forward to learning more."

## **Chapter 2**

“Have you been with a human man before?” Gareth asked as his fingers worked at the shiny belt the ambassador wore. The clasp was unusual, but he managed to undo it without too much fuss.

“No,” Brennar confessed, “nor a human woman.”

“We’re not so different, as far as I can see.”

Brennar’s palm strayed across Gareth’s chest. His shirt hung partway open now, exposing one nipple and a light thatch of hair between his well-defined pectorals. “True enough. Your body is thicker, heavier than mine, made of muscle. My species requires little physical strength, so we have lost much of it over the generations. We are a cerebral people.”

Gareth had guessed that from the forehead-touching ritual. Did Brennar’s people also have sex in an equally detached manner? He hoped not. Intellectualism had its place in a relationship, but he liked things a bit rougher in his bed.

He spread his hands as if to open his body to Brennar’s exploration. “Well, I think it’s safe to say you can’t hurt me, so feel free to do whatever strikes your fancy.”

They undressed each other slowly, with great enjoyment, stopping every few moments to kiss again. When Brennar was naked, Gareth paused to run his palms over Brennar’s smooth skin. Shibans were completely hairless everywhere except their heads, rendering the ambassador’s skin more like a soft, sheer fabric than flesh. In contrast, Gareth’s body was rigid with muscle, painstakingly hewn in his ship’s physical training room, and dappled with coarse, dark hair.

Brennar seemed to find their differences as fascinating as Gareth did. His more delicate fingers roamed through the hairs on Gareth's chest, tracing a path down his abs and finally to the thick patch at his groin. There he stopped, whether from shyness or a desire to prolong their teasing, Gareth wasn't sure.

No matter. Wrapping both arms around the ambassador's waist, Gareth swung him onto the mattress and crawled up beside him.

Unexpectedly, Brennar took control, pushing Gareth's legs apart and positioning himself between them. Gareth moaned as Brennar began to tease his cock with a pointed tongue long enough to curl all the way around his shaft. He stroked and squeezed until Gareth was on the verge of exploding and then slithered upward to repeat the process on the captain's tiny dimpled slit. His saliva was glossy and cool, like a burst of fresh water poured over Gareth's body.

"Wait," Gareth gasped, reaching down to still Brennar's bobbing head. "Not yet. I want this to last."

Brennar smiled with understanding. He didn't protest as Gareth got up on his knees, rolled Brennar onto his stomach, and began to kiss his way down his smooth, bluish back. He took his time, tasting and caressing, his lips savoring each delicate bump on Brennar's spine. When he reached the cleft of his buttocks, Gareth parted them with one hand and reached for the small jar on the bedside table. He'd bought it on a whim during a layover at a distant space station, at a shop that catered to the carnal needs of a variety of species. Until now, he'd tested the substance only on himself, but he suspected it would work much better when shared.

Sure enough, Brennar murmured in pleasure as he lubed him up. The gel tingled audibly against the tender skin between his legs, making a gentle, singsong noise as Gareth rubbed some in. He knew from experience that it also provided a unique tactile sensation, like thousands of tiny fingers pressing down on sensitive nerve endings. He let Brennar bask for a moment and then knelt between his spread legs, where he positioned himself for a long awaited entrance.

Whether the tightness he encountered was a result of Brennar's inexperience or a natural feature of his alien physiology, Gareth couldn't tell, and he didn't care. Combined with the delicious sting of the alien lube, he'd never felt anything half so gratifying. He arched his hips forward and inched his way into Brennar, forging ahead with small but intense jabs. Brennar shifted under him, wriggling his body to take more of him inside with every thrust.

"Does this hurt?" Gareth asked. "I can stop if you want me to."

"No," Brennar croaked. "I...find it...stimulating. Please... continue."

Gareth was more than willing. He bucked faster, driving his cock all the way into Brennar's taut orifice. The lubricant eased his journey and stimulated his lust-hardened flesh all at once, rendering the act doubly pleasurable. When he was all the way inside, he stretched his body out on top of Brennar's, running his palms down the alien's slender shoulders, sides, and straining thighs.

"I could stay like this all night," he whispered. Since that wasn't possible, he soon returned to a rhythmic thrusting. Brennar met each push with an undulating movement of his own.

They rocked together, joined and happy, for as long as Gareth could hold out. Then, sensing the end was near at last, he reached out to wrap strong fingers around Brennar's cock. Like the rest of his body, his organ was longer and more slender than a human's, but the basic equipment was the same. A few expert squeezes and rubs, aided by the lubricant on Gareth's hand, and Brennar was coming along with him. His lukewarm seed flooded Gareth's palm just as Gareth's all-too-human liquid lust splashed inside his shuddering chasm. Their helpless cries mingled with the jazz on the speakers and the strange music of the exotic lubricant to create a unique song of bodily bliss.

Afterward, they lay side by side, limbs curled together and fingers idly stroking any place that brought pleasure.

“I’d like you to spend the night with me,” Gareth whispered. “Just so everything is out in the open, though, I warn you that I might not stay asleep the whole time.”

“I commended your strength earlier, but I see you have reserves I never suspected.”

“It was all that spinach I ate as a child. I tried to warn you.”

Brennar laughed and snuggled closer to Gareth. He rested his cheek against the captain’s chest and traced the outline of his blunt nipple with his tongue. In spite of his intention to continue their romp, Gareth closed his eyes and slept soundly for the first time in a long while.

\* \* \* \*

The intercom beside the bed shrilled a few hours later. The voice of his second-in-command, Lieutenant Erril, rudely interrupted a very wet dream.

“Paging Captain Gareth. Captain, please respond.”

Though she used standard protocol to address him, he could tell by her tone that this was no casual summons.

Gareth rolled over, disentangling himself from Brennar’s sleep-sodden form. The murmur of soft jazz still filled his quarters, playing on a continuous loop that had lasted all night. He switched the music off before he hit the intercom button. He made sure to choose the “voice only” and not the “video conference” option.

“Go ahead, Erril.”

“Captain, General Xaal has acknowledged your request for a face-to-face interrogatory, and he will comply. Please report to Landing Pad Four in twenty minutes.”

“Understood. I’m on my way.” He rolled off the bed, accidentally waking Brennar. “They’re here,” he said.

Brennar’s only response was a groan.

“Back to business.”

The enemy had arrived. The time for pleasure was over.

\* \* \* \*

Gareth and Brennar met the *Wayfarer's* grim-faced security team outside the landing bay.

"His travel pod has just arrived," one of the men informed Gareth. "The general and two of his men. We're body-scanning them for hidden weapons right now."

"Good work," said Gareth.

"All's clear, Captain," called another guard over the intercom. "Exiting now."

The doors slid open to reveal three more of Gareth's security force plus three visitors. It wasn't hard to identify General Xaal. Enormous both in terms of height and breadth, he wore leathery armor over his chest and forearms and affected a ceremonial sash over his right shoulder. His bewhiskered face was covered in battle scars. Two scowling and now weaponless bodyguards flanked him.

"Welcome, General," said Gareth, activating the translation device he wore on his own chest. "I appreciate your cooperation in boarding my ship."

Xaal made no attempt at a courtly salutation. "I understand Border Patrol wishes to have words with me. Fair enough, as I have plenty of words to speak."

"Shall we proceed to a more suitable area? No guards, though I request permission for Ambassador Brennar to be present. He is a neutral third party who has no official connection to the Terran Council."

"I have no objection. In any case I doubt we shall need a mediator, since I am not here to negotiate a compromise."

Xaal motioned for his bodyguards to remain where they were, and Gareth did the same. The landing bay doors slid shut on them. Two others kept a respectful but watchful distance as Gareth, Brennar, and

Xaal moved up the corridor to a briefing room and entered without guards.

They took seats around the conference table. Brennar shot Gareth a curious look when he noticed that a carafe of wine and three glasses had been set up in advance. For the moment, Gareth ignored him and instead addressed Xaal.

“I don’t have to tell you that you are encroaching on restricted space, and you need not pretend that your visit here is either friendly or benign. I prefer directness.” He reached for the wine and a glass. “May I interest you in some refreshment?”

Xaal bristled. “I never dine with my adversaries.”

“Suit yourself.” Once again ignoring Brennar’s shocked expression, Gareth poured himself a generous amount of wine and tossed it back in a single gulp. After banging down the empty glass, he settled back in his chair with his hands folded and a smirk on his lips. “You may explain yourself at any time now.”

“You prefer directness? Very well, then. The planet we are presently orbiting supplies the Terran Council with raw energy in the form of phytronium, which the colonists mine for your exclusive use. As it happens, my ships are also in need of this substance. I have therefore arrived with my fleet to...shall we say...liberate the contents of those mines.”

“Yes, I know,” Gareth said with a shrug. “My sensors have picked your ships up. But I’m afraid I don’t quite understand the basis of your claim to a Terran Council energy source. Please explain this quaint notion.”

“My claim is a simple one. On my world, the stronger party takes what it needs to survive.” Xaal punctuated his statement by banging a gloved fist on the table. “Right now, I am in need of new energy reserves for my ships. I have therefore decided to take yours. Four ships, each with a full crew of warriors, are just beyond orbit. At my signal, they will destroy your ship and take the phytronium by force.” He paused and then theatrically softened both his tone and expression.

“However, I am at heart a reasonable man. I am willing to return to my own sector without incident if you will arrange to have all the available energy stones transferred to my fleet’s cargo holds immediately.”

“I can appreciate your position. I know from experience how much energy it takes to maintain just my ship’s processing facilities, climate controls, and so on.” Gareth poured himself another generous helping of wine, smacked his lips after a long swallow, and set the glass on the table. “That being the case, I’m afraid we can’t spare any of our resources, especially for a hostile invading force. The Council would become a laughing stock, not to mention a magnet for every pirate and con artist in the sector. Had you requested aid in returning to your home planet and remaining there, I might have reconsidered. However, the manner in which you ask has already determined that I must refuse you in no uncertain terms.”

Xaal blinked, his jaw flexed in an outraged scowl. “You are hardly in any position to deny me, Captain. I can send men to the planet and take what I need, enslaving your colonists in the process. Quite simple.”

“I would be delighted if you would send your men to the surface.” Gareth barked out a coarse laugh that made Brennar flinch. “Unfortunately for you, they would never return with the phytronium.”

“And why is that?”

“The Terran Council is primarily an agent for peace among the sectors, but, as we all know, the price of peace can be steep. For some time, our scientists have been busy perfecting a new weapon, and I have the honor of carrying its prototype on board with me.” Gareth extracted a small, narrow device from the lining of his belt and placed it on the table beside his wineglass. “What you see before me has the power to destroy not only Anubis’ mines, but the planet itself and every being that dwells there. A simple numerical sequence will initiate detonation.”

“And why should I believe you?” Xaal scoffed. “The Terran Council would no more destroy its own resources than you would destroy your own ship, to say nothing of the colonists on the planet.”

“You are mistaken. As far as our resources go, we would rather destroy them ourselves than give in to our enemies and let others learn that we were bullied into emptying our holds. With respect to the miners, I agree that the loss of sentient life would be regrettable. However, you and I are men of war. We cannot base our command decisions on sentimental bias.”

Beside him, Brennar stifled a gasp. “Captain...surely there is another way.”

Gareth pretended not to hear him. “The Terran Council has no shortage of immigrants who will gladly toil for us in exchange for political asylum. Anubis is not even especially rich in raw materials compared to some of our other less developed sites. You’ll forgive me if I keep their locations secret.” His smile returned as he picked up the slim gadget and turned it over in his hands. “Besides, have you any idea how boring it is to command a border patrol vessel? Obliterating an entire planet can give me not only prestige, but a bargaining chip. One Earth year from now and I may be sitting at the highest position the Council can offer. And I will institute new, effective ways of dealing with brigands like you.”

“Another bluff,” Xaal grumbled.

“I assure you it is not. The Council had planned to use this weapon defensively, but use it we will.”

“You would destroy so many lives, even an entire civilization, to prevent a rival fleet from powering its vessels?” Brennar’s horrified gaze moved from Gareth to Xaal and then back again. “I can assure you that the Shiban people could never countenance such a rash act.”

“I doubt the Terran Council will approve, either, but fortunately I’m in a position to act on my own in this case.” Slowly, Gareth stroked his thumb along the side of the device. The translucent buttons began to glow. Both Xaal and Brennar flinched in their seats.

“But very well. Your pleadings move me to make one conciliatory gesture. Xaal, I offer you enough energy to get you back to your own sector. If you ever venture into my territory again, I will see to it that your ships are destroyed on sight.”

Abruptly he stood, cradling the detonator against his chest. “My offer is good for exactly twenty minutes Earth time. Ambassador Brennar and I will withdraw to give you a chance to consider. I must inform you that you will be monitored while you are in this room. Any attempts to contact your fleet will be regarded as an overt act of hostility.”

Turning, he strode from the room. Brennar hurried after him.

“I call that a good day’s work,” said Gareth once they were past the earshot of the security guard who remained at the door. “He’ll take the deal, of course. Every one of his ships is too depleted to do more than hang in space. He would have already attacked us otherwise.”

Brennar shook his head. His face was drawn, and his eyes bulged, as though he was fighting off both emotional trauma and physical illness. “I must admit that I am aghast at your negotiating techniques, Captain, though perhaps your liberal intake of intoxicants has clouded your judgment somewhat. And I am even more astonished that the Terran Council is developing such deadly weapons in secret.”

“Oh, this?” Gareth held up the detonator, and Brennar jumped a step backward. “My so-called weapon is only dangerous if you hold the volume button down too long.” He tossed the device in the air between them and caught it on the flip. “Don’t you recognize the remote control for my quarters’ sound system? It was on the bedstand beside me all night. And as far as the drink goes, that wasn’t real wine. I knew neither you nor General Xaal would want to share. A harmless ruse. It caught him off guard, don’t you think?”

Brennar’s mouth hung open for a moment and then closed and curled upward in an admiring smile. “I see my regard for you was not misplaced after all, Captain.”

“We’ll go down to the planet together and share the good news in person, and I’ll want the colony on guard in case this sort of thing happens again. The word is out about the phytronium, apparently.”

“An excellent idea.”

Gareth glanced up and down the corridor to be sure no one was watching them. Discreetly, his hand strayed down the front of Brennar’s loose-fitting garment and squeezed the tender mound between his legs.

“I suggest we confer privately first,” he whispered. “After all, someone has to help me write up my report for the Council. I sense my explanation will require the use of some diplomatic language.”

“Agreed...on both counts.”

Gareth winked and dropped his hand back to his side.

The security guard approached them. “General Xaal is requesting that you return to the conference room, Captain. He says he is ready to accept your deal.”

### **Chapter 3**

To celebrate his colony's deliverance from the threat of invasion, the grand potentate declared a full day's rest from the mines. Instead, the entire village joined in the creation of a festival honoring Captain Gareth and his crew.

The first time he had visited Anubis' surface, Gareth had found the streets quiet and the citizens devoted to their daily tasks. Now, with the impromptu holiday in full swing, the atmosphere had changed. Jugglers and dancers frolicked across the town common while acrobats in colorful costumes turned somersaults on the grass. Spicy wine gushed from giant barrels, and servers carried huge plates of native delicacies through cheering crowds. In keeping with the spirit of the event, Gareth had issued shore leave for his entire crew, allowing them to visit the surface in shifts.

Only his second-in-command, Lieutenant Erril, declined the opportunity to leave the ship. Her excuse was that Xaal might reappear, but Gareth suspected she simply enjoyed being in charge. In some ways, she was more suited to command than he was, finding pleasure in even routine administrative tasks. Her willingness to stay behind proved fortunate, since as the guest of honor he saw no hope of getting away before nightfall. He and Brennar walked together through the throngs of revelers, accepting thanks and good wishes and sampling the refreshments. Briefly, a circle of young women surrounded them, dancing and flashing suggestive smiles. Their costumes were tighter and cut lower than the types of garments Gareth had seen other natives wearing. Glowing energy stones on rough cords adorned their bared necks.

“Each of those necklaces could power a spaceship for a month,” he murmured to Brennar. “That’s what Xaal was after.”

“Most impressive,” Brennar agreed.

The women danced closer, pretending to reach for him. Gareth couldn’t help but admire their strong muscles and lively manner. He felt certain any of them would welcome him into her bed for the night or maybe even for the remainder of the afternoon. Though the patriarchal nature of the colony didn’t appeal to him, he understood why the men here found it to their liking. Suddenly, the dancers moved away with chastened expressions as another woman in finer, more modest garments approached them. Gareth recognized her as one of those who had followed the grand potentate into the meeting two days earlier. Even then, her appearance had made an impression on him, though he’d been distracted by other things, such as her bright, intelligent eyes and the full lips she’d scarcely moved as she sat in silent attendance. In contrast to her smooth, pale skin, her dark brown hair fell in a luxurious wave over her left shoulder. This time, she traveled alone.

“I’m sorry if they embarrassed you. Anubis gets few visitors besides the brokers who arrive on mining business, and the people are seldom granted holidays. Their enthusiasm must seem a bit excessive to you.”

“Not at all,” Gareth said with a guarded smile. Was she the grand potentate’s wife or perhaps one of several? If so, he had no intention of causing an interplanetary incident by even appearing to flirt. “They were charming.”

“This is your friend?” the woman turned and eyed Brennar, clearly intrigued. The inhabitants of Anubis, whose ancestors had emigrated from Earth centuries before, retained a humanoid appearance. Gareth speculated that their contact with outworlders was perhaps limited to associates of the Terran Council, most of them human as well. No doubt Brennar appeared as strikingly exotic to her

as he did to the captain himself. Her gaze lingered on him a beat longer than was strictly polite.

“Yes, and I might mention that he deserves as much credit as I do for repelling the attack on your colony.”

She extended a hand. “Then I do thank you on behalf of my people and my father, the grand potentate.”

“Thanks are unnecessary.” Brennar pressed her fingers briefly in his.

“Ambassador Brennar has devoted his life to doing what is right simply for the sake of promoting good,” Gareth explained with admiration. “He expects nothing in return. Anyone would be privileged to call him a friend.”

“Then I hope I may count myself among that number,” she said, her lips curving as a blue tint rose to Brennar’s narrow cheeks.

“Surely friends share names, even on this world?” Gareth prodded.

“My name is Izbal. And of course your name is already well known here, Captain Gareth.” She tilted her head toward the village green, where a large number of men and women were assembling in two long lines. “I would be pleased if you would dance with me, my lord.” Gareth bit back an uncomfortable scowl, but Brennar tapped him on the arm to reassure him. “By all means, go. It would gratify me to see you enjoy yourself for a change. The captain is an exceedingly serious man, Lady Izbal. I look forward to seeing whether you can lighten his mood.”

“I shall put forth my best effort.” Izbal’s smile widened. She held out her hand a second time. Gareth took it reluctantly, sparing a backward glance at Brennar as Izbal dragged him onto the green. They took a spot among the line of other couples. Izbal tucked her forearm under his.

“I don’t know this dance,” Gareth protested.

“Imitate what the others do,” she whispered as a rustic flute began a cheerful tune. “The steps aren’t difficult.”

Easy for her to say, Gareth thought as he struggled to keep up with the half steps, exaggerated strides, and full turns that made up the procession. Long ago, as a cadet, he remembered attending an ancient play called a Shakespearian comedy. He felt that he had blundered, unrehearsed, into the climactic scene of a similar production.

Izbal, however, seemed comfortable enough to dance and converse simultaneously. “So I admit to being curious, my lord...exactly how did you and Ambassador Brennar convince General Xaal to turn his ships away from our planet? Even my father knows nothing of the particulars, though of course he is bursting with gratitude toward you.”

“Call me Gareth. We don’t use titles like that on Earth any more. ‘Captain’ will be fine.”

“Do you wish to avoid my question?”

Gareth cursed her persistence. He’d thought it best not to describe his performance as a megalomaniac eager to destroy their entire planet. He feared the mention of a superweapon, even a fictional one, would spark distrust between Anubis and the Terran Council. He pretended to struggle with a few more dance steps while he considered his response.

“There was no secret to my strategy. I presented myself as someone Xaal had no choice but to respect. Then I gave him the chance to retreat and save face. He accepted.”

“No doubt you command respect wherever you go.”

“Not always.” Gareth frowned. “Look, I don’t require all this adulation you’re showering on me. My sworn duty is to protect you and your resources, and that’s exactly what I did. The fact that Anubis is safe is reward enough for me.”

“Apparently your friend Brennar is not the only modest one aboard your ship,” Izbal reflected.

Thankfully, the dance came to an end, and Gareth led her back to their former spot before the next set began. Brennar had waited for them, a gleam of amusement in his sapphire eyes.

"I must leave you now," Izbal said, executing a quick curtsy and slipping into the crowd.

"Do you find her charming?" Brennar asked as Gareth's gaze followed her until she vanished.

"I admit I do. Something tells me she would make a fine addition to my crew. It saddens me to see a sharp intellect languish in a place offering so few opportunities for females."

"Every culture makes its own opportunities. We simply may not recognize them as such. Besides, they probably say the same about ours."

"Women should be equal. History teaches us that."

Brennar shrugged. "Agrarian societies present a unique case. Brawn alone confers power when intellect is not needed for basic survival."

"I suppose you're right." Gareth nodded. "I could never be an ambassador. My opinions are too strong. If I disapprove of what I see, I say so."

"Personally, I find your outspokenness one of your most appealing attributes. However, I must agree that it would be a definite hindrance in certain situations."

Gareth laughed. His gaze strayed past the crowd on the green, now performing a far more complicated set of steps. He'd gotten away just in time. Beyond them lay a wooded area, thick with colorful tree trunks swathed in unusual flowers and vines. He'd fought the urge to be alone with Brennar for hours, and he was eager to end the charade.

"Would anyone notice or mind if we slipped away for a bit?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Brennar caught his meaning. "I am sure we could manage a few moments to ourselves."

They walked toward the forest together, taking a circuitous route so no one would take note of them. Up close, the shady forest's peculiar beauty startled Gareth for a moment. Floral life had evolved far differently here than it had on Earth, as evidenced by both its shapes and colors. Gigantic blood red leaves, startling yellow vines, and scaly purple tree trunks swelled up around them in a bizarre kaleidoscope.

"I'm glad I didn't destroy this place," Gareth joked.

"It is lovely," Brennar agreed.

"I'm sorry we couldn't dance together before. Believe me, I wanted to." Gareth settled his back against a thick tree, reached out, and pulled Brennar close.

"It is all right," Brennar said. "We must follow the customs of the land, and gender roles seem rigidly defined here."

"Well, now that we're alone, perhaps we can start a new custom."

They kissed, hungrily and feverishly. In a bold move that took Gareth by surprise, Brennar reached between his legs and rubbed the straining material in the crotch of his pants. "I hope you are not in pain," he said. "I have studied human male physiology, and I understand that long periods of sensual deprivation can lead to distress."

Gareth laughed. "Not to put too fine a point on it, but I'd say my balls are as blue as your skin by now. But never mind. I can wait until we get back to the ship. Waiting a bit longer will only make me want you more."

Their lips met again, and Gareth moaned as Brennar's fingers grew insistent against his fly. Soon they had wrenched open the buttons and were peeling back the fabric. Gareth's cock, stiff and throbbing, jabbed the balmy air between them. Its swollen tip wept for Brennar.

Brennar knelt and slid his tongue under Gareth's distended organ, coaxing it all the way into his mouth. Before long, Gareth was amazed to experience another feature of Shiban physiology as he

found himself lodged deep in the back of Brennar's throat. The tiny muscles there rippled, tightened, and squeezed, as dexterous as an expert masseuse's fingers. In no time at all, a beam of lust shot from the tip of his cock to the center of his balls with laser-like precision. Grabbing Brennar's shoulders and bucking his hips, he unloaded a furious volley into the velvety receptacle.

Exhausted, he sagged against the tree and fought to recover his composure. His mind spun and his senses reeled as if he had blacked out for a moment. The orgasm had been that intense.

The eerie squawk of some alien bird jarred him out of his reverie. He looked down to find Brennar refastening the front of his trousers.

"We should go back," Gareth panted, shifting his hips in discomfort once the buttons of his fly were closed again. "Someone could come wandering over at any moment."

"True enough," Brennar agreed with a sigh. He stood.

"I'll pay you back when we return to the ship, which should be pretty soon. We can't be expected to hang around down here much longer, can we?"

"I am afraid we are invited to dine with the grand potentate in his private hall," Brennar informed him sadly. "A messenger approached me while you were entertaining Lady Izbal. I expect he will also insist we take rooms here for the night. To refuse would seem discourteous in the extreme."

Gareth raked a hand through his hair. "I suppose you're right. Well, we'll think of something, I'm sure. Just don't forget I owe you one. A big one."

"I assure you I will not."

They headed back and lost themselves among the revelers until the sun was about to set. At that point, they were escorted to the grand potentate's private dining room, where an impressive feast had been set up on two parallel tables. Zimeon himself was in his finest robes again, strolling around with the same entourage of women and advisers behind him. Gareth spotted Izbal among them. She flashed

him a discreet smile as she took her place, not at the long table laden with food but against the wall behind her father's chair. Ten women of various ages stood with her, no doubt her sisters and other relatives.

Once the grand potentate had been seated, Gareth and Brennar took places in the center of a second table that sat opposite his. To Gareth's surprise, Izbal herself came forward to pour his wine.

"My father wishes to show you every honor," she explained. "He has decided that no ordinary serving girl will wait on you this evening, but a princess. Don't worry. I am happy to do it. Choosing me shows his respect."

"You seem capable of more important duties," Gareth said as she began to cut his food for him—real meat, he noticed with dismay, not the synthetic kind they served on the ship. Fortunately, there were plenty of fresh vegetables as well, so Brennar wouldn't go hungry. "What is your role in the community on regular days?"

"As the grand potentate's eldest daughter, I take a somewhat maternal stance toward my father's subjects. I lead them in rituals, I tend to the sick, and sometimes I assist in the birthing of a baby."

"And your husband?"

"I have no husband, my lo—Captain Gareth. Though I am more than old enough to wed, the grand potentate has so far identified no man on this world worthy of me. Though I cannot agree with him, I confess that no one in the village has snared my affection."

"I can envision you far away from here," Gareth whispered with thinly disguised indignation at the menial function she had been forced to perform. "You have a sharp mind. I can see that in your eyes, hear it in your voice. Have you never wished to leave Anubis?"

"No." Her face pinched with sudden distress. "I have my place in life, just as you have yours. We couldn't very well swap, could we?"

"I suppose not. Still, there is always the possibility for change."

Izbal's words, like her expression, grew heavy. "Not on this world, I fear."

She retreated hastily, and the dinner continued. As Gareth had expected, he found the taste of real meat jarring after years of eating nothing but synthetics. Brennar, luckily, had been spared any awkwardness by requesting and receiving a plate heaped with garden produce. Izbal returned three times to freshen their wine and ask if they required additional foodstuffs but engaged in no further conversation. Once or twice, Gareth spotted her father watching them from across the room. On one occasion the grand potentate leaned over to whisper something to the older woman, presumably his wife, seated beside him.

Gareth wondered if he and Brennar would ever find their way out of this interminable evening. After all, his stomach was full, and his eyelids were heavy from the wine. His sac was full, too, and his cock restless. He couldn't wait to get back to the ship and bury it inside Brennar's willing body.

Finally, to his relief, Izbal returned with a bowl of sweet pudding for him, presumably the dessert. When Zimeon rose to speak to everyone assembled, he saw a much welcomed end in sight.

"We have come together this evening to celebrate a brave and honorable man," Zimeon began, lifting his glass toward Gareth. "Unlike many in his position, he uses his power and technology for good. He uses his considerable intellect to outwit evil. Most importantly, he has shown respect and caring for our world, even if our ways seem strange to him."

He paused for the others in the room to applaud and salute Gareth, which they did with enthusiasm. Gareth felt himself blush. He only hoped he wouldn't have to stand and make a speech of his own.

"We can never repay him for his brave gallantry," Zimeon continued, "but we will reward him with our most cherished possession." With a sinking feeling, Gareth saw him turn to Izbal. Mortified, he heard the dreaded words in his head a moment before Zimeon spoke them aloud.

“I hereby grant him my oldest daughter in marriage. May they be happy and fertile together.”

The applause this time rang even louder. Everyone turned to Gareth again, obviously expecting him to make some appropriate response. Even if he could have found the right words, he could never have spoken them.

His mouth was hanging too far open.

## Chapter 4

Gareth sat in shocked silence until the cheers quieted and the guests at last began to file from the room.

“He can’t be serious,” he managed to whisper to Brennar.

“I assure you he is,” Brennar answered, leaning over so they wouldn’t be overheard. “In feudal societies, the giving of one’s eldest daughter, along with an appropriate dowry, is a recognized way of paying tribute and securing an ally. In Zimeon’s view, you saved his colony and his world. He wishes to honor you in the best way he understands.”

“An extra dessert would have sufficed. Guess I’d better go up and talk to him.”

“Agreed. Under no circumstances should you refuse him outright, however. After such an insult, his good will toward the Terran Council could evaporate in an instant.”

“And there goes a lifetime supply of phytronium.” Gareth nodded. “Understood.”

His legs felt numb as he approached the grand potentate, who stood beside his chair receiving well-wishers. His daughter waited beside him. Her neutral expression turned apologetic when Gareth approached.

“Sir, I think we should speak in private,” Gareth said.

“Agreed,” Zimeon boomed. “You may attend also, Izbal, since this matter concerns you. Captain, please bring your friend. Witnesses should be present for our negotiations.”

He motioned for Gareth and one of his councilors to follow him, and the five of them passed into a lavish receiving room hung with

tapestries and dominated by an enormous hand-carved chair. Zimeon settled into it and held out his hand for Izbal to take. She did so, dropping a quick curtsy to her father as a dark blush spread over her cheeks and forehead. The councilor stood off to one side, hands clasped behind his back.

After exchanging an anxious look with Brennar, Gareth approached the chair.

“I thank you for the generous offer to become part of your family,” he began. “I can hardly find words to respond.”

“A response is unnecessary. You will do me great credit as a son-in-law, and Izbal is well past the age when she should be continuing my royal line. I have indulged her thus far because, as my oldest, she is dear to me and makes herself useful in the community. Once she is married, she must retire from public view and take a more domestic role. However, I am prepared to endure the loss for so noble a cause.”

“But with all due respect, Grand Potentate, how do you know I don’t already have a mate?”

“What of it? I myself have seven wives. My life is all the richer. Yours will be, too. You may trust my advanced years and my wisdom on this matter.”

“I..I do, sir,” Gareth said with a backward glance at Brennar. “But that isn’t generally the custom among my people.”

“On my world, you may live according to my laws. When you are away, you may do as you please. Who will know any different?” Laughing, the old man dropped Izbal’s hand and heaved himself to his feet. “I will leave the two of you to make your own arrangements while I instruct my ministers to begin preparations. Your ceremony will be the concluding event of the festival already in progress.”

“Did he just say I have a wedding scheduled for tomorrow?” Gareth asked in astonishment after the grand potentate had sailed from the room with the councilor in his wake.

“It would appear so,” Brennar replied.

Izbal stood beside her father's empty chair, her hands clasped together in distress. The three stared at each other for a long, uncomfortable moment.

"Well?" Izbal finally asked. "Is it true? Do you already have a wife?"

Gareth couldn't bring himself to lie. "No," he admitted. "I have no wife."

Izbal sighed in relief. "I apologize for my father's behavior. Please believe me when I say this was his idea and not my own. Apparently one of his ministers saw us dancing on the common this afternoon, and he seized upon this strange notion that you should become my husband."

"I don't blame you." Gareth shook his head. "Surely you don't want to marry me. You know nothing about me. You certainly don't love me."

"True. We don't know each other well enough yet. However, a woman in my position doesn't marry for love. Her father would always choose her mate...my mate. And I must confess, you are the only man I have ever truly admired."

"Thank you. I'm flattered, really, but surely you can see that it's impossible."

"For us to be together? Perhaps. But as far as fulfilling my father's orders? I believe we can. And what he has proposed is, in fact, an order. Make no mistake. He spoke to you as he did because you are men, and you are his guests. With me, earlier, his words were somewhat different."

Brennar spoke up. "What would happen if the captain refused?"

"My father would be most displeased. He would blame me." She lowered her eyes, her blush returning. "Captain, I am well aware that your real life lies elsewhere. I have no wish to intrude, but I am accustomed to doing what I must for the good of my people. This may be the most important task I will ever undertake. I only ask you to

consider my position before you refuse to do what my father has asked...or rather commanded.”

“Well, I suppose I have little choice. I just think...” Red-faced, he floundered for words. Should he confess to her that he had no wife, but he did have a male lover, who was in the room with them? Would the truth matter?

Once again, Brennar came to Gareth’s rescue. “May I consult with the captain privately for a moment?”

“Of course. I must retire for the evening in any case. We can continue discussing this matter tomorrow morning.”

When they were alone again, Gareth paced the room. “They’re pretty serious about this marriage stuff.”

Brennar folded his arms and pretended to examine the chair. “Indeed, and you should know that rejecting Zimeon’s offer will bring terrible shame to Izbal. She might even be deemed unmarriageable or handed off to some acquaintance of her father whom she, and probably we, would find unsuitable.”

“Of course I don’t want that to happen. You know how I feel about such barbarism. Any woman deserves better. Especially Izbal.”

“Then I might also point out that marriage to you would considerably enhance her position in her father’s household. Clearly your status here is of an elevated nature—for the moment. As your wife, Izbal would share your celebrity and your prominence.”

“Well, what about the Terran Council? Don’t you think we should run this by them? I mean, if they refuse to go along, no one could blame Izbal.”

Brennar sighed. “If I had to predict their reaction, I would expect it to be positive or even celebratory. Let us not forget what brought us here in the first place—the promise of a continued energy supply. I daresay you would almost be performing a diplomatic function on their behalf.”

“So I’m trapped any way you look at things.” Gareth scrubbed an agitated hand over his face. “On the bright side, I do like her...though

not in the same way I like you. And I get the distinct feeling that you think I should go through with it.”

“To be perfectly truthful, I can see more advantages than drawbacks.” Brennar flashed him an enigmatic smile. “Marriages of convenience are not unknown in the world of interplanetary relations.”

Gareth lowered his voice. “You mean you’d still be willing to fool around with a married man?”

“Diplomats have been called upon to do far worse in the interests of maintaining peace.”

“My new father-in-law did extol the virtues of polygamy,” Gareth mused. “I doubt you’re what he had in mind, though.”

“I would expect not.”

“I’ll still need some more time to think everything over. Why don’t we go back to the ship and, ah...sleep on it? Zimeon can’t object. I’d need to make some arrangements of my own, anyway.”

Brennar crossed to the door. He paused with one hand on the ornately carved knob. “I will inform him that we shall both return in the morning.”

Gareth nodded. “Meet you at the travel pod in ten minutes.”

As he watched the door close behind Brennar, his bewilderment returned. “Krys Gareth” and “marriage” were words he had never expected to hear used together, much less speak himself.

At least Izbal understood, as he did, that what they were entering into was a business arrangement. She might even prefer a chaste, long-distance relationship. She’d already agreed it was impossible for them to stay together. He had his role in life to play, and she had hers. They both understood that, which made them compatible in an odd way.

And he wouldn’t have to give up Brennar.

Maybe he could pull this wedding thing off, after all.

\* \* \* \*

The following afternoon, the entire village turned out for a ceremony that thankfully proved as brief as it was tasteful. Gareth had never envisioned himself married, but he found himself moved as Izbal held his hand and recited vows of love and, not to his surprise, obedience. Still, by playing along with her father's game, he was setting her free from her culture's chains in a way a man of her own world would not.

Brennar stood beside him as he swore his own oath to her, serving as both witness and confidant. Gareth wondered how the assembled guests, not to mention his bride, would have reacted had they seen the way the two of them had spent the night before the wedding. He'd heard of an old Earth tradition called a bachelor party, but he doubted it had involved the groom banging away on top of another man or gulping down a thick, creamy cock and relishing every inch as it massaged his throat.

"I'm sorry," Izbal whispered as she dutifully tied the traditional marriage band around his wrist and then held out her hand so he could do the same. "A wedding was not among your plans when you came here. Please believe me when I say it was not mine, either."

"You have nothing to apologize for," Gareth whispered back. "I suspect your father usually gets what he wants."

The ceremony ended without a kiss. Gareth and Izbal turned from the elderly man who had officiated and walked through the cheering crowd, arm in arm. Brennar followed at a respectful distance, and behind him came the dozen women who had attended Izbal.

They crossed the village common, passing the spot where they had danced together as strangers only the day before. This time they were led to a pair of specially decorated seats from which they watched others dance for their entertainment.

Gareth caught a glimpse of Brennar being led to one of the many tables set up outside. The ambassador took a spot among some of the grand potentate's older councilors, who seemed to be quarrelling.

Brennar would be bored by them, Gareth suspected, though perhaps not bored stiff. At least he hoped not. Stiffening would be his job, later.

“We’re not expected to participate?” Gareth indicated the young people who pranced before them. As awkward as he’d felt yesterday, he would have preferred some activity to lounging on the periphery.

“My rank makes it unseemly for me to dance now that we are wed,” Izbal explained. “A married princess is expected to dance only for her husband, in private.”

Gareth was troubled to see color rise to her cheeks and her pupils dilate slightly. The question he dreaded rose to her parted lips.

“Would you like me to dance for you later?”

He was spared the necessity of answering right away when a servant brought goblets of wine. He spent longer than was necessary thanking her and tasting the offering.

When he looked back at Izbal, he found her still wearing that faraway expression. He could almost hear her pulse quicken when their eyes met. Or maybe he was hearing his own.

He couldn’t allow her to want him. Such a path, natural and tempting as it seemed now, in the heat of the moment would only lead to sorrow and embarrassment.

“Izbal,” he said slowly, resting his goblet on his knee, “yesterday we agreed that our wedding was a duty to fulfill. We followed through knowing full well what would happen afterward. You realize I plan to return to my ship as soon as this...event...is over.” He struggled to keep his tone neutral. Surely she understood the need to place diplomatic duties above personal concerns as well as he did.

Izbal’s eyes widened. “Has no one told you?” she asked in wonder. “I suppose we all assumed...”

“Told me what?” Gareth demanded, alarmed. “What did everyone assume?”

“That you knew the full scope of the marriage ritual. The ceremony and the feast are but a prelude. Within the hour, we will

both be led away from here to a place specially prepared to receive us. We must spend one week together in complete isolation from all responsibilities and from the rest of the community. It is a sort of bonding ritual for the newly married couple. Anubians have practiced it from our earliest days on this world. There is no changing now.”

“A week?” Gareth erupted. “I’m expected to stay another week? What about my ship? My duties?”

“I’m sorry,” Izbal said. Her eyes grew bright with worry. Gareth hated himself for bringing her to the verge of tears yet again. Somewhat clumsily, he wrapped his free hand around hers.

“It’s all right. I probably have at least a year’s worth of shore leave stored up anyway. We’ll get through this, Izbal. Don’t worry. I won’t shame you or make your father angry.”

“I knew you were a man of honor, Captain Gareth,” she said, her voice cracking with strain. Then, before they could discuss it any further, the women came forward and surrounded her. One took her hand and tugged it gently away from Gareth’s.

“Plenty of time for that later,” one of the women said with a wink. Possibly she was one of his new sisters-in-law. Izbal had so many of them, he hadn’t learned to tell them apart yet. “We’ll get her ready for you.”

Gareth stood as they led Izbal away. He saw Brennar, along with many of the other guests, rise to watch the bride’s retreat. Gareth managed to catch the other man’s attention, but Brennar only smiled and gave a slight shrug.

Then a group of young men surrounded Gareth, and he, too, was whisked away.

## Chapter 5

An hour's walk through the forest brought Gareth and his escorts to a spot that would have fetched a handsome price from a Terran Council official seeking a rustic, otherworldly getaway. Cut into the side of a mountain, the structure featured simple but comfortable furniture, a fireplace big enough to sleep in, and an enormous bed replete with fresh, embroidered linens. Outside, a sparkling waterfall cascaded into a stream that meandered through a maze of thick, colorful trees.

He could hardly think of a more perfect setting for a couple to get to know each other. He cursed himself for wishing Brennar, and not Izbal, would soon join him.

A group of women followed the male attendants into the dwelling, carrying various jars, jugs, and covered dishes. An older matron took charge, directing them to spread the items out on the carved stone table in the corner. A few others got busy sweeping out, restocking, and lighting the fireplace.

"These supplies should last you for the full week," she informed Gareth. "You will want to supplement them with what you can harvest from the forest. Izbal can show you what fruits are safe to consume."

"Where is Izbal?" he asked, looking around to see if she had accompanied the serving women.

"Your wife will be along shortly. You need to be patient while we prepare her for you." The woman smiled. "Clearly, you know nothing of our customs. But you will learn." She pointed at the bed, then at

him. "We might as well start at once. Go over there and take off your clothes."

Gareth didn't think he'd heard her right. "What?"

"No need for modesty. I am the grand potentate's body servant and have prepared him for each of his wives on their wedding nights, not to mention many other men over the years. Unless you are built differently than most, I have no particular interest in what you hide beneath your clothes. Now do as I say, so you are ready when your bride arrives."

Gareth opened his mouth to argue, but the stubborn woman standing in front of him with her arms crossed would not be dissuaded from her task. Resigned to his fate, he dropped to the edge of the bed, kicked off his shoes, then began to unbutton his dress uniform. Without expression or comment, the older woman grabbed each article of clothing he shed, handing it off to a younger woman who suppressed a titter as she stuffed everything into one of two woven baskets at her feet. Soon, he stood up and pushed down his trousers, baring himself to all of them. The older woman remained stone-faced, but he was acutely aware that her younger charges were staring at him and whispering among themselves.

"Enough!" The matron clapped her hands, and the noises stopped. "If you are through arranging the table, you may leave. He is not yours to look at. You all will have to wait until you find your own husbands. Now go."

Reluctantly the servant girls filed out. The matron pushed aside the basket containing his uniform and reached inside the other one, drawing out a small clay jar and what appeared to be a sponge.

With an air of brusque indifference, she poured a scented liquid from the jar onto the sponge and began to scour him. Gareth had to admit the sensation was intriguing, as the coarse sponge deposited a soft unguent that sank into the skin of his chest and back. He flinched, though, when she moved to his front and dipped between his legs.

“Keep still,” she admonished. “You want to be ready for your bride, I assume? If you are to enjoy one another’s bodies, your bodies must be worthy of being enjoyed.” The touch of the oil-coated sponge on his groin prompted an involuntary, but not entirely unexpected, physical reaction from his lower region. The matron smiled and took a step back to admire him. “Ah. Izbal should enjoy her wedding night immensely.”

“Do you mean she’s undergoing the same...ah...preparations?”

“The procedure is a bit different for a woman, but yes. She will come to you ready to consummate your union.”

The matron stepped away and removed a bundle of cloth from the basket. As the oil on his skin dried, she unfurled a hand-stitched robe to wrap around him. Finally, she motioned for him to wait on the bed and left him to his own thoughts.

He paced for a few moments in agitation, but somewhat to his relief Izbal did not immediately appear. Gareth stretched out, hands behind his head, and tried to plan his next move. His first impulse was to slip away and find some method of returning to his ship, after which he could send some reasonable excuse and a request for annulment back to Izbal’s father. The only thing stopping him was the thought of her disgrace, perhaps even punishment, for driving him away. On the other hand, spending a week in isolation with a woman—a wife—he didn’t love weighed on him like a prison sentence. Suspecting she was attracted to him, as he now did, made the situation far worse.

If only he’d found a way to stop the madness before things had spiraled this far out of control. His sole remaining option was to find a way to let everyone down easily and extract himself from this world and this marriage without causing undue pain to the people involved. How to accomplish that, he hadn’t the faintest idea.

He sat up when he heard a rustling sound at the entrance to the dwelling. Three figures stepped inside—Izbal and two of the serving women, one on either side of her, holding her arms as if they were

afraid she might run away. Gareth scowled, wondering why they saw the need to restrain her, even if her expression did suggest distress and embarrassment.

He understood when the two women suddenly nudged her forward and held her in place, presumably so he could inspect her.

Izbal was garbed in a dress unlike any he had ever seen before, even in space station bars with questionable reputations. Shaped like a simple tube, it dipped in the front not only to expose both her breasts but to cup them so they tilted toward him in a blatant offering. The front of the garment, too, was split to cover nothing but her hips and a small portion of her thighs. An inverse “V” framed the naked place where her legs came together.

“Izbal,” he whispered, both astonished and embarrassed—and, he couldn’t deny, aroused by the sight. His guilty eyes trailed up her long, shapely thighs, over the downy triangle between them, and higher, to her taut, cinnamon-colored nipples. The fabric of his own robe stirred and stretched as his erection climbed from beneath. Beads of sweat popped onto his brow as he looked from one serving girl to the other. “Go!” he barked.

The two of them released Izbal and withdrew. Izbal’s hands moved to cover herself. Flames of humiliation blazed across her face and chest.

Gareth jumped up from the bed and wrapped a blanket around her.

“I am sorry,” she wept, pressing herself against his chest. “I did not expect this, or I would have warned you. The details of the bonding ceremony are kept secret from the unmarried. I never meant to cause you such discomfort.”

“No, Izbal. I’m the one who should apologize to you. I would have forbidden them to treat you this way had I known. Come and sit down.” Wrapping an arm around her now blanketed shoulders, Gareth turned to guide her to a seat and paused. The only suitable place was the enormous bed he’d just left. He settled her on the pillows and then stepped back to give her some privacy.

“So what is this place?”

Izbal shrugged. “My father had it built some time ago. He has brought each of his wives here. I was likely conceived in this very bed. My mother and stepmothers described the basic features of the structure to me as they prepared me for our wedding. They did not, however, tell me everything.” She looked down at her body, now discreetly covered, and the color returned to her face.

“No wonder your father has taken so many wives. I can see how it would be enjoyable to stay here,” he admitted, looking around. His attempt to make her smile succeeded at least partially. Her body seemed to relax a little under the blanket, and the stress faded from her voice.

“We are fortunate, of course. Each couple’s family is responsible for preparing their own refuge. This one is far nicer than most, befitting the household of a grand potentate. I hope you enjoy yourself here, my lord.”

“I’ve asked you not to call me that. Especially now that I am your husband.”

Izbal frowned. “Do you have another name besides Gareth? I have wondered.”

“Yes. Krys. I’ve never liked it, though, and after so long in the military I’ve just stopped using it in my daily life. Everyone calls me Gareth now.”

“If that is what you prefer.”

“It is, and I have no title where you are concerned.”

“On the contrary. You are now the son-in-law of the grand potentate, and a powerful Anubian lord in your own right. My father expects you to rule this world one day, as he has no legitimate son. Only daughters.”

He couldn’t hide his troubled expression in time. Izbal dabbed tears of guilt from her eyes with the edge of the blanket. “Traditionally, the couple is expected to do no work other than, well, be together during this first week. We’re to be left completely alone

for the next six moons. Not even the servants will disturb us. I hope you'll find it...and me...tolerable."

Touched by the sadness in her voice, Gareth moved to the edge of the bed and sat down beside her. "I find your company more than tolerable, Izbal." His thumb lifted to stroke her cheek, brushing away the remnants of her tears. "And though I don't understand or approve of all your customs, I will never dishonor you. I promise."

"No one would blame you if you did. You have been saddled with a wife you neither love nor find attractive. The fact that you have stayed even this long fills me with wonder."

Gareth's brows rose. "What makes you think I don't find you attractive?"

"A woman knows, my lo—I mean, my husband. I have never known love, but I have observed such emotion in others. I see no desire in your eyes when we speak or touch. I see no pleasure when I approach you." With a resigned sigh, she straightened her shoulders. "No matter. I have lived without love until now, and I will continue to do so. We will be kind to each other and pass the time as best we can, both now and in the future. Soon enough, you will return to your other life. It is not unusual on my world for husbands and wives to lead separate existences. No one will suspect that anything is amiss."

His thumb slid down her cheek as he cradled her face in his hand. "Izbal, I do find you beautiful. The problem is...well, there's a complication. You wouldn't understand."

She looked up at him with dawning comprehension. "Your heart belongs to another, perhaps?"

"Yes." His shoulders sagged in relief that she had spared him the necessity of going into detail. "Yes, exactly. My heart belongs to another. It happened before we met. I tried to tell your father, but he insisted it didn't matter."

"It wouldn't to him. That is not his way. My mother and his other wives accept his varied interests...and I can, too, my l—Gareth. Can

you not make a little space in your heart for me as well? I have no desire to push the other woman out.”

“You are amazing, Izbal,” he said sincerely. “I am proud to call you my wife.”

“Thank you, my lord. I am honored to call you my husband.”

Her words had caused something to tighten in his chest and make his heart thud a little faster. His hand remained on her face, tilting her chin until their faces were only inches apart. He smelled the sweetness of the perfumes her servants had adorned her with, as they had him. Was it possible those oils contained some type of pheromone or aphrodisiac? Something about her certainly had a strong physical effect on him.

Leaning in to kiss her seemed the most natural thing in the world.

So he did.

She responded with an enthusiasm he hadn't expected. Her mouth gripped his in a warm, moist embrace, tasting and caressing. Gareth let his tongue skim over her bottom lip and then prod further until it touched her teeth. Izbal murmured with enjoyment, parrying his tongue's incursion with a playful thrust of her own.

As the kiss deepened, Gareth shifted on the bed and caught his robe between his thigh and the mattress. The front parted accidentally, revealing a sliver of the entire length of his body. Izbal went still against him, and he heard her suck in a nervous breath. When he broke the kiss and leaned back to study her, the longing on her face was palpable.

He couldn't help but enjoy the strength of her desire for him. Thoughts of Brennar warred with the intense physical reaction racking his body. He and his male lover suited each other, without question, and Brennar had made his approval of the marriage plain. Surely he had no objection to Gareth finding pleasure elsewhere, just as Gareth would not object to Brennar doing the same. Among the three, only Izbal had not yet experienced the transcendent delights of

humanoid sexuality. He wanted her to know them. As her husband, was it not his duty to show her?

When she spoke again, her voice had deepened with arousal. “Would you like to look at me?” she asked.

“Yes, I would,” he admitted, “and you can look at me as well.”

Izbal tugged away the blanket that covered her at the same time Gareth shed his robe, leaving him even more exposed than she. He saw her eyes widen as he lay back on the bed in a submissive pose.

“Go ahead,” he coaxed. “Touch me anywhere, and in any way, you like. After all, this is our wedding night.”

With growing confidence, she brushed a palm over the center of his chest and then moved lower. Her fingers hesitated when they reached the hard-muscled plane of his groin.

“Are you sure?” she asked shyly.

His arousal was plain, the veins up and down his cock throbbing with need and the skin a dark, mottled red. His shaft and tight sac still glistened with the unguents the matron had applied earlier. Small wonder Izbal found his erection intimidating. He could only dimly recall his reaction the first time he’d seen a full, hard cock waiting for his own ministrations.

“Yes,” he said. “I think continuing would give us both pleasure. Don’t you?”

“I’ve...never been with a man before, but I’ve dreamed of what sex would be like. I long to discover if my dreams were accurate.”

“I have a hunch you’ll know soon.”

Her fingers slid lower, trailing over the scruff of dark hair between his legs, and gingerly encircled his cock. Gareth gasped as a bead of hot fluid seeped from the head and trickled onto her skin. She didn’t pull back, as he’d half expected.

“Does that mean you are pleased?” she asked.

“Yes. Your touch is gentle. Arousing.”

“I am glad. What would you like me to do next?”

“Well...you could take it into your mouth.”

Izbal's brows lifted in surprise. "Very well."

Had she never heard of this particular act? Still, her determination both to shed her virgin status and to satisfy him seemed to override any qualms.

Lowering herself onto the bed beside him, she used her fingers to tilt his straining erection toward her. Gareth caught his breath when her wet tongue tip flicked against his tender flesh and then withdrew just as fast. A moment later, however, she was back again, this time cradling his shaft on the flat of her tongue. Her lips tickled him when she closed them and rubbed him up and down a few times.

"Yes," he moaned in encouragement. "Just like that. Wonderful, Izbal."

His words inspired her to work harder. Opening her mouth wider, she eased him in another inch or so and began a steady up-and-down motion with her tongue flat against his shaft. The sensation was so intense that, for a moment, it took him to another place entirely. He seemed to float far away from Anubis, and the *Wayfarer*, and everything that weighed down his mind and conscience. Nothing mattered now but her, and him, and the beautiful stroke of her mouth against his cockflesh. When an orgasm bubbled up into his groin, he gave himself over to complete physical bliss, bucking and thrashing in total abandon.

Izbal sensed when the time came to stop and let him rest. She pulled away, stretching out alongside him with her head on his chest, and waited for him to stop shaking.

"Did that make you happy, my lord?"

His arms reached out to encircle her. "Extremely. You are very talented, Izbal."

"I'm sure I am not. Your excellent tutelage is the reason for my success."

"I doubt that, but I'm glad you liked it. You did, didn't you?"

A naughty smile stole across her lips. "Extremely. Is it now your turn to pleasure me?"

“I think so, yes.”

Though he could have taken her while she still wore the specially tailored dress, considering that all the relevant areas lay open to siege, he nonetheless took the time to peel the garment off her. In the amber light of the fireplace, now crackling steadily beside the bed, her body looked lovely, so pale and clean and untouched. The scent of perfume and her arousal tantalized his senses, making him hard all over again.

“I’ll need to get you ready first. I have to warn you that you may experience some discomfort.”

“I trust you.”

She didn’t resist as he parted her legs and positioned himself between them, his fingers stroking her feminine cleft. She writhed with enjoyment, and her moans deepened when he replaced his hand with his tongue. He hadn’t tasted a woman in a long time, and he was glad to find that he still enjoyed that particular act. The way the female body yielded and melted when touched just right was, in his opinion at least, something that couldn’t be replicated with another man.

When he felt she was ready, he laid on top of her and positioned his cock at her entrance. Using his fingers to pave the way, he guided himself in, an inch or so at a time. Izbal gasped and shuddered as he reached the halfway point. Her inner muscles pulsed around him, exquisitely tight and wet, as though her body didn’t quite know how to react to the sudden intrusion.

“Should I stop?” he whispered.

“No.” She swallowed hard, fighting the discomfort. “Please continue.”

It took a little effort to push in the rest of the way, and he gritted his teeth with the strain. Finally, he was fully encased in her soft, hot flesh. Izbal was grimacing, obviously in some pain. But he sensed she wanted him to go on.

Slowly, cautiously, he began to slide in and out. The friction aroused him, but he still feared hurting her. In an effort to ease her

acceptance of his full length, he reached between their bodies and began to massage her swollen bud.

She seemed frightened at first, and Gareth knew she was struggling to reconcile the excitement she felt with the ache of losing her innocence in the rawest physical sense. Presently, though, he saw her eyes darken and her mouth open as the pain turned to an obvious and fulfilling pleasure.

Almost too soon, her body spasmed and then clamped down and pulled him all the way inside. Gareth knew the feeling of the two of them exploding together would be something she would never forget, whatever might happen to either or both of them before this whole bizarre adventure concluded. And, in truth, he wanted to lose himself one more time tonight, to experience that heady whirlwind of consciousness-blotting gratification.

Just when he began to fear it wouldn't happen, it did. Grunting with release, he unleashed a bolt of fire that left him slumped over her, exhausted. Unable to do much else, he cuddled her against his sweat-slicked chest.

"Well? Was it the way you had dreamed?" he asked.

Izbal considered his question. "In some ways," she decided. "Only much, much better."

They laid in silence for a while.

"My lord—er, Gareth—do you think I'll be with child now?"

He shifted his weight and slid down beside her, stuffing a pillow under his head. "No. The men on my ship, along with the women, consume a substance every month to prevent unwanted births." The flash of disappointment in her eyes made him marvel again at how different their cultures and expectations were. "Is that a problem for you?"

"Having a child would give me great prestige in my community," she said wistfully. "I suppose it's much too soon to speak of such things, though."

"Agreed."

Content, warm, and more than physically satisfied, Gareth laid back and closed his eyes, stroking her hair until her breathing told him she had fallen asleep. He, too, drifted away a few moments later.

## Chapter 6

Gareth jerked awake at some point during the grayness of early morning and was startled to find someone other than Brennar sleeping beside him.

The memories flooded back as the fog of sleep dissipated. Apparently what he had mistaken for a dream really had taken place. He had consummated his marriage and enjoyed doing so. His groin still tingled with the aftermath of at least one climax so fierce it had strained his thigh muscles.

He got to his feet, careful not to rouse Izbal, and found his discarded robe. Without bothering to tie it, he walked outside and gazed up at Anubis' three moons, still visible in the silvery-pink haze.

It struck him that for the rest of the week he had literally nothing to do. No planetary boundaries to guard, no invasion or smuggling plots to foil. His only assigned duty was to eat the provisions left for them, lounge in bed, and have sex with his new wife as often as he wanted. He had no idea if such forced inertia was something he could get used to, but for Izbal's sake he had to try.

A short distance from the dwelling, a burbling stream opened into a sweet-smelling lagoon ringed with thick growths of leaves, flowers, and vines. As he approached, he heard a series of tiny splashes as various amphibious creatures traded the lush, overgrown banks for the safety of the water. A swim did seem appealing, and in any case he and Izbal were apparently expected to shower in the waterfall outside their door. This way, they could both wash in privacy.

He reached for the front of his still-open robe and started to shrug it off, planning to stash the garment on a tree limb and plunge in. A

crackling in the brush, too loud to come from any of the tiny froglike animals, made him pause and look around. He heard it again—definitely the sound of someone or something heavy, headed right for him.

Hastily Gareth tied his robe and reached over to snap a thick, scale-covered limb off a nearby shrub. He held the branch across his chest, ready to defend himself against a marauding beast or even an angry humanoid if he had to.

The leaves moved in front of him, and a shadow fell across the path he'd blazed only moments before. Gareth dropped into a crouch, holding his makeshift weapon taut and ready. Just as he was about to launch himself forward and gain the advantage of surprise, he stopped.

Brennar stood half concealed behind a bright orange shrub, wielding a stick of similar length and width.

"I thought no one was supposed to disturb the happy couple," Gareth said, laughing. "How did you find us?"

"Two groups of ten people or more tromping through the brush was not difficult to track," Brennar replied dryly. He tossed his branch away with a grimace and wiped his hand on his tunic.

"I didn't think you'd still be on Anubis. I figured you went off with the ship."

"Acting Captain Erril informed me that she does not require a diplomat in order to conduct a week's worth of border patrols. Your new father-in-law, however, offered me a room at the keep. I thought it prudent to accept."

"I hope they treated you right."

"Yes." Brennar paused to blush. "In fact...the grand potentate sent a woman to my bed last night."

Gareth's brows shot up with interest. So much for Brennar never having been with a human woman, perhaps. "Oh? And?"

"I admit I was curious. You were, after all, on your wedding journey..."

“You don’t owe me any explanation. I only hope you found the encounter agreeable.”

“I believe I did. In truth, I am still processing the experience psychologically. In some respects, I may have disappointed her. I did not actually...ah...enter her, but...she was a professional, if you grasp my meaning.”

“I certainly do.” Gareth smiled. The grand potentate had plenty of wives, but no doubt he kept a small army of concubines at the ready as well. Gareth had to admire the old man’s stamina. “Potent” was the word, all right.

“The entire time, I thought of you,” Brennar confessed with a guilt-stricken expression. Gareth reached out and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“I thought about you, too.”

They walked to the lagoon together and settled themselves on the rocks. For a moment, they gazed at the water, breathing in the fragrant air and thinking.

“The woman who came to me wished to learn more of my physiology,” Brennar said at length. “I suspect she found my appearance more curious than appealing.”

“Well, like you said, she was a professional. I’m sure she’s used to disengaging her emotions to some extent. Don’t take it to heart.”

“She may have been somewhat afraid, too. For all the Anubians know, sex to me might mean something very different than it does to them.”

“True. I’m glad I wasn’t too nervous to find out for myself.”

Brennar smiled and cautiously threaded his fingers through Gareth’s. “You have bedded Izbal?”

It was only partially a question. This time Gareth blushed. “Yes. Do you mind?”

Brennar shrugged. “Of course not. I am sure the temptation was very great. You are only human, after all.”

“I can’t deny that.” Grinning, Gareth stood. He stripped off his robe and tossed it aside in a decisive motion. He was gratified to see that, married man or not, he still inspired undisguised longing in Brennar’s eyes. “Do you swim? Because I’m ready to test these waters, so to speak.”

“Swimming is not a common recreation for Shibans. Instinctively we tend to fear cold water, perhaps due to our sensitive skin. We feel things more intensely than humans do.”

Gareth didn’t miss the hidden meaning in his last observation. “Well, if you decide to join me, I promise to protect you.” With a wink, he raised his arms and launched himself from the highest point of the rock he was balancing on. His body split the clear water, and his graceful dive carried him halfway across the lagoon. He bobbed back up inside a halo of floating flowers.

“It isn’t cold,” he shouted to Brennar. “Trust me. You’ll love it. Come on!”

From his perch on the rocks, Brennar winced and extended a hand until the tips of his fingers were submerged.

“Well?” Gareth urged.

“The temperature is not to my liking, but since you have promised otherwise...”

Gingerly he stood, his legs shaking a little, and began to pull off his tunic and leggings. Gareth floated in the water, watching the naked alien tremble as he psyched himself up enough to take the plunge. Finally, he stretched out one foot in a single, calculated step only to lose his balance and pitch clumsily forward. With a mortified howl, he hit the water sideways and disappeared beneath the surface.

When he reappeared, he was gasping and uttering a series of sounds Gareth interpreted as curses in Brennar’s native tongue. He swam over, struggling not to laugh, and wrapped both arms around Brennar’s waist. They floated together, Brennar clinging to his shoulders and moaning with cold while Gareth rubbed his palms over the lean, bluish body to impart what little warmth he could.

“You...you find this state of immersion agreeable?” Brennar asked in wonder.

“Of course. Plenty of humans would pay good money to frolic in cool, natural water. Some even prefer it colder.”

“Bar—barbaric!” Brennar complained through chattering teeth.

“Give yourself a few minutes,” Gareth advised. “You have to adjust. Maybe this will help.”

He tightened his arms to draw Brennar’s body closer. Then he bent his head and captured the alien’s lips in his own.

The time apart had left them hungry for each other. Recovering from his chill, Brennar devoured his lover’s mouth, snaking his tongue around Gareth’s and squeezing it against his own. Grasping fingers slid down Gareth’s back and clawed at his naked rear end while desperate legs curled around his waist. A strong swimmer, Gareth kept both of them afloat while they kissed and fondled one another. He waded to shore with Brennar still wrapped around him.

Back in the shallows, Gareth leaned Brennar against the rocks with his legs submerged to mid-thigh. Then he knelt and cupped the alien’s soft blue sac in one hand while he used the other to angle his cock into his mouth.

Yes, he thought as he sucked Brennar all the way back to his throat, they’d definitely been separated too long. As much as he’d enjoyed Izbal, and as satisfying as it had been to bury his hard length inside her, Gareth didn’t think he would ever be able to give up his desire for other males and for this one in particular. Though he did experience a flash of guilt when Brennar arched his back and started to climax with the same breathless abandon as his wife, he reminded himself that in a week he and Brennar would leave the planet together. Izbal, presumably, would remain in the only home she’d ever known. His two relationships existed on two different planes, in two different worlds. There was no rational way, or even a need, to compare or reconcile them.

Brennar's hands gripped the sides of Gareth's head and held him in place as he began to buck his hips and wail. A hot bullet of alien cream splashed his tongue. Suddenly a distinctly feminine gasp intruded on the rougher sounds generated by their coupling.

The men looked up, startled.

Gareth's new bride stood only a few yards away, barefoot and wrapped in a robe of her own. She stared at them in total astonishment.

"Izbal." In a flash, Gareth was out of the water and crossing the bank toward her.

"I...I was just on my way to bathe," Izbal said when she recovered her voice. "I thought I would look for you first. However, I see that you did not wish to be found."

Pivoting, she walked stiffly away while Gareth stood, gaping. Soon the bushes swallowed her up.

By then, Brennar had hurried over and placed a comforting hand on Gareth's shoulder. With the other, he held out the discarded robe. Gareth held it limply at his side. His eyes still followed Izbal, though she had already disappeared from view.

"I was afraid this would happen," Brennar said. "I should not have come...should not have interfered."

"No," Gareth sighed and slid on his robe. "In a way, I'm glad our relationship's out in the open. I couldn't have kept it from her anyway."

"You care about her. I can tell."

"Does that bother you?"

"No. I expected as much. Strange as it may seem, it only makes me love you more."

They paused to embrace before heading back to the dwelling. When they got there, Brennar waited outside while Gareth walked in. He found Izbal, freshly bathed and dressed, changing the bedclothes. She pretended not to see him at first, but he waited in the doorway,

watching her tuck and smooth each corner with exquisite care. Finally she flung down her work and turned to face him.

Her voice held no anger or reproach, only surprise and confusion.

“He is the one who holds your heart?” She shook her head in wonder when he nodded. “And to think that I imagined...”

“A woman? Yes, I know. I didn’t contradict you when we spoke about this before. I’m sorry. I just didn’t think you would understand.”

“Love between two men is not unknown in my world, though I cannot say it is encouraged. Nonetheless, we do not judge or punish the participants. The sages tell us it is a fact of nature, just as some flowers grow red and others yellow. I do confess that I could not quite imagine such a thing...until now, of course.”

“My situation is a little different from the one you describe. I can’t say I have a strong preference for other males. I simply don’t deny myself when I feel an attraction toward one. I like females as well. One in particular.”

Gareth approached the bed. She didn’t pull away as he slipped one arm around her shoulders and lifted her against his chest. When she looked up at him, he wiped her tears with an index finger.

“Do you hate me?” he asked.

“Of course not. You are my husband. I knew all along that you also had a life before you came to this world. And I must confess I had a clue. During the feast...you and Brennar walked into the forest together. I followed for a bit but turned back. I saw nothing resembling proof, but I wondered.”

“Would you like me to leave this place? I understand you can never trust me again. You can hide the truth from your father, if you wish. I’ll tell him urgent business called me back to the ship. No one will blame you.”

Izbal closed her eyes, and Gareth held her as she wept silently. When she raised her head again, she met his worried gaze with a look of resolution.

“No,” she decided. “I want you to stay. Brennar, too. Clearly love exists between you. Who am I to interfere? Still, I wonder...could there ever be such love between us?”

“I think there already is. An unconventional kind, maybe, but real all the same. I can feel it just as you can.”

She tugged away from him and crossed the room. “No doubt you want to go and be with him.”

“Right now I want to be with you.”

“Are you telling the truth?”

“I promise.”

Izbal crossed her arms. Gareth saw a flash of her father in her sudden determination, not to mention her imperious tone of voice. His innocent bride had become a different woman in the space of a few hours. “Bring him here. I wish to question him myself.”

“All right. If you insist.”

Brennar entered fully dressed again, no doubt expecting to be sent on his way. He shifted uncomfortably from one slippered foot to the other. “I should go,” he said. “I have done enough harm here.”

Izbal held up a hand to stop him. “If your company pleases my husband, it pleases me as well.”

Brennar stared in obvious confusion. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She indicated the stone table in the corner, which she had cleared and set for three. “I was just about to prepare the morning meal. You will join us.”

Without another word on the matter, she set out preparing slices of bread and edible leaves. They took their places on the curved bench beside the table, Gareth and Brennar next to one another and Izbal across from both of them. She watched without expression as they ate. To his relief, Gareth found that she had set out a jug of wine to go with the food. After everything that had happened in such a short span of time, he certainly needed a drink.

Izbal initiated the conversation, but the topic veered far from the neutral banter Gareth had hoped for.

"I should like for you to explain yourself, Ambassador," she demanded, every inch the daughter of a king. "I wish to understand your way of mating."

Brennar swallowed and looked at Gareth, who shrugged. "I confess I have always been more attracted to other males," the ambassador explained, "though I have on occasion coupled with females."

"I see. Is this sort of union common on your world?"

"Shibans have no concept of marriage as a legally binding arrangement. Though most choose a partner, our society exerts no pressure to do so, and the partner can be of either gender, so I am not considered an anomaly."

"Most intriguing," she said. "Your people are quite unique."

Gareth took a hasty gulp of wine. "Who knows? Maybe their way is more sensible than ours."

"Perhaps. So far, I have seen nothing to indicate that the ambassador is anything less than honorable."

"True enough," Gareth agreed. "After all, I was the one who snuck out on you."

"That in itself is not especially troubling to me. My mother long ago became accustomed to watching my father slip away to one of his other wives or concubines. Absolute fidelity does not guarantee happiness, especially in a royal household. Power breeds a taste for variety, at least in men." She paused to scrutinize Brennar. "It is obvious that my husband loves you, so it would benefit me to discover why. Meanwhile, I would be happy to call you friend."

"And I you," said Brennar.

"I will now turn my earlier question around. What makes you love my husband?"

Brennar folded his hands on the edge of the table. "Perhaps because he is so different from the men of my world. We are an even-tempered race, not given to impulse or rash behavior. Captain Gareth is passionate about all he does. Therefore, I find him exciting."

Izbal nodded. "I sensed his virility from the moment I first saw him in the council chamber with my father. Even then, I had no doubt that he would easily find a method of repelling General Xaal."

"The less said about Xaal, the better." Gareth finished off his wine and set the cup down in front of him.

"I have no desire to discuss battle strategies and diplomatic maneuvers," his wife informed him. "I want to understand your connection with Brennar. Why don't you try to explain it now?"

Gareth shifted. Discussing emotion, or even sex for that matter, didn't come naturally to him. In fact, he didn't think anyone had ever asked him such a question in his life.

"First, I want you to know that what Brennar and I share has nothing to do with you or with anything that might happen between us. Perhaps the analogy of your father's additional wives is an apt one. Did your mother feel any less loved because he sometimes visited another bed?"

"No. But his inconstancy caused her pain over the years."

"I'm sorry," Gareth said. "I wish I could fix things so no one has to be disappointed or hurt. Unfortunately, I can't think of any way. Human emotions and desires are just too damn complex."

He poured himself another glass of wine.

"I can think of a way," Izbal announced after a few tense, silent moments.

Gareth looked up. "Oh? Tell us, then, by all means."

"I want to watch you kiss Brennar."

## **Chapter 7**

Her request, expressed so casually, stunned Gareth. “Izbal...I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not? I want to see the two of you together again. I want to get a sense of the emotions involved. As we all know, the things we fear most are those we do not understand. This will help me understand.” She gave a rueful laugh. “Trust me. I am well beyond jealousy, which is not a quality cultivated in Anubian women to begin with.”

The determined glint in her eyes never wavered. Sighing, Gareth turned to Brennar, who looked as baffled as he did shocked. Before he could lose his nerve, he leaned over and pressed his lips against the other man’s.

Brennar responded with an admirable show of zeal. Gareth did his best to emulate a genuine kiss, assuming Izbal would notice any subterfuge and make them start over. He didn’t use his tongue at all, and his hands remained innocent at his sides until they broke apart. Izbal stared at them with the detachment of a scientist inspecting a previously unknown specimen.

“Brennar’s mouth looks quite soft,” she said after a pause. “Does it feel so to you?”

“Yes,” Brennar answered on his behalf. “Shibans are possessed of hypersensitive skin. The tips, fingers, and...ah...more private areas tend to be especially sensitive.”

“May I try?” Izbal asked Brennar.

“As I am in your house, at your table, and have already been discovered taking intimate liberties with your husband, I can hardly refuse,” he responded.

Gareth had to admit, his answer made sense.

Izbal got up, came around to the other side of the table, and seated herself beside Brennar. Perfectly emulating Gareth’s movements, she bent forward from the waist up, keeping her arms at her sides, and opened her mouth against Brennar’s.

She kissed him with the same systematic objectivity, as if mentally noting every aspect of the experiment. Brennar kissed her back, and Gareth saw no sign of discomfort.

Suddenly, he knew what to do. The solution to the entire dilemma was, literally, right in front of his face.

The three of them would learn to enjoy each other.

Tilting his body forward, he encircled Brennar’s waist with one arm and extended his other hand to stroke Izbal’s rich, brown hair. While Izbal kissed Brennar’s lips Gareth began to lick and nibble the back of the other man’s neck. He couldn’t be sure how either of them would react.

Then, his wife’s slender fingers crept along his thigh and slipped under the hem of his robe. At the same time, Brennar reached backward and hooked one hand around Gareth’s waist, pulling him closer.

They stayed like that for a few minutes, kissing and touching. Finally Gareth extracted himself from the tangle of limbs and stood. The two of them followed him to his feet, and then to the bed.

Gareth lay down first, shedding his robe and stretching out in the middle. Without hesitation, Izbal dropped her garment, too, and crawled on beside him. Only Brennar seemed uncertain, standing with both hands on his shirt and an obvious bulge in his tight hose.

Gareth curled one arm around Izbal’s shoulders and pulled her close to his body. She immediately reached for his hard cock, stroking the length in her fingers until his pulse thundered in his ears.

With his other hand, he reached out toward Brennar.

“Join us, Brennar,” he urged. “Trust me. This can work.”

“It seems a somewhat irregular solution,” Brennar confessed. “However, I see a certain wisdom in the arrangement you suggest.” Slowly, he raised the top of his tunic and peeled it off over his head.

Waiting for Brennar to join them, Gareth and Izbal continued pleasuring each other. Bolder than she had been the night before, she reached down to knead his shaft, teasing him with long, languid strokes until his cockhead grew moist and purplish, the veins pulsing against his taut skin.

When he thought he couldn't go another moment without exploding, Izbal released him and turned onto her back. She opened her thighs to him, revealing the swollen, ripe fruit inside. Gareth eased his solid frame on top of her, planted his arms on either side of her body, and burrowed into her.

She moaned, accepting him fully, her inner muscles pulling him into her core. He knew his own climax was too near to drag things out for very long. Rather than stroking in and out, Gareth kept himself buried while he began a side-to-side rocking motion with his hips.

Meanwhile, Brennar stood beside their heaving bodies, watching them with an intense expression. His clothes were off, and his hand stroked his own cock until it stood perpendicular to his groin. The skin around it was turning dark blue, and the spasmodic jerks of his fingers suggested he would not be able to ignore his own needs much longer.

The bed sagged as Brennar knelt beside them. Gareth heard him begin to breathe rapidly as waves of excitement coursed through his trim body. The alien inched closer until the smooth skin of his abdomen pressed against Gareth's buttocks. Eagerly Gareth tilted his hips upward without dislodging himself from Izbal's clenching center.

Gareth tilted his head back and moaned, delighted to be trapped between their sweating bodies. Brennar, now fully aroused, positioned himself to take possession of Gareth from behind, yet he still seemed

hesitant, his fingers dancing over Gareth's hips instead of taking a firm hold.

"Do it, man," Gareth urged. At last, Brennar reared back and rammed into him in one powerful stroke. His upper body flattened against Gareth's back, his knees clamping down on the other man's muscular legs, his cock nestled inside his hungry crevice. Their hips worked together, Brennar's pushing against Gareth's and Gareth's against Izbal.

To Gareth's surprise, feeling Brennar inside didn't detract from his enjoyment of Izbal one bit. If anything, the dual stimulation from both of his partners made him even more aware of every movement and every sensation. Izbal, too, was clearly responding to the added momentum of his thrusts. The power of their union was unlike anything he'd ever felt. It even seemed to set off a buzz in his head. If they could harness and replicate the energy they generated, no one would ever need to mine phytronium again.

He steeled his muscles against the roaring orgasm already starting to wash through him, but he couldn't hold back for long. As he and Brennar began to come at the same time, Gareth eased out of Izbal until only the tip of his cock remained inside her. When he sensed that she, too, had toppled over the edge of ecstasy, he drove himself back in even deeper than before, letting his orgasm drain him to his last reserves. At the same time, Izbal crashed over the precipice, her body shuddering involuntarily around his.

The three of them writhed and groaned for what seemed like a delightful eternity. Then, all too soon, the moment passed, and they slumped together on the mattress.

His idea had worked to perfection, Gareth thought as he closed his eyes and basked in the lingering heat of the most unique sexual experience of his life. Instead of choosing between them, he could choose both of them. And they, in turn, could choose not only him but each other. It was the ideal compromise...for the next week, at least.

His eyes opened again, dread stirring in his chest. Five more nights would come and go quickly. Then he would return to the *Wayfarer*, and Ambassador Brennar would board with him, *en route* to his next diplomatic assignment. He knew too little of Izbal's culture to guess at her future, save that it most likely would not include him in any meaningful way.

As a military officer, Gareth had learned to accept that no situation, and especially no relationship, could last, let alone forever. Until now, that had never bothered him. He was accustomed to living in the moment and moving on without regret or a specific plan for his next escapade. For the first time, he wondered if a better way might in fact exist.

\* \* \* \*

A few hours later, Brennar returned to the palace to avoid speculation as to his whereabouts. He promised to come back in the evening, when he was less likely to be missed by the grand potentate and his various attendants and wives. Gareth suspected he wasn't unhappy to go, probably needing time alone to process all that had happened and to consider what might or should happen next.

On their own again, Gareth and Izbal passed the day walking through the forest, cooling themselves in the waterfall, and comparing the various features of Anubis and Earth.

"How unfortunate Brennar is not here to share his perspective as well," Izbal mused, stretching out on the blanket they had carried outdoors and had spread on a patch of bright red vegetation. Its short blades resembled grass, only softer. "I would enjoy hearing more about his planet. It seems unlike anything I've ever imagined. Have you visited there?"

Her bare skin and loose hair gleamed in the strong sunlight of late afternoon, a few clear droplets of water clinging to her shoulders and

breasts. Gareth, also still damp from their recent swim, leaned over to lick them off.

“No. I’m curious, too,” he admitted. Gareth had avoided speaking Brennar’s name, waiting instead for Izbal to mention him on her own. He was relieved when she did and with no trace of bitterness or envy. “Somehow, I don’t think I’d fit in too well. The people seem a bit too...analytical for my tastes.”

“Brennar’s nature is quite intellectual, true. If he remained on Anubis, he would find his place among my father’s chroniclers and the scholars who prepare lessons for our young people. I suspect that would not make him happy, though. Part of him craves novelty and adventure, just as you do.”

“I suppose you’re right. The diplomatic corps must appeal to him for some reason.” Having kissed her upper body dry, Gareth moved his mouth lower, trailing his tongue down her middle. “And what about you, Izbal? What do you seek on your life’s journey?”

“You are the first person ever to ask me such a question,” she said, laughing. “Women have but two goals on my world. One is marriage and the other is strong sons to work in the fields or the mines. I suppose most are content with their lot, but, if not, no one will be sorry for them.”

“Could that ever change? I mean, on Earth, hundreds of years ago, women and even entire races of people were undervalued and even abused. Once they fought for change and won it, everyone saw just how foolish those restrictions had been.”

“To hear my tutors explain such things, the loss of appropriate hierarchies left your planet in chaos and resulted in more misery than they had caused in the first place. My father, like every grand potentate before him, is determined never to replicate that mistake.”

Frustrated to hear of such attitudes thriving in the modern age, Gareth scowled. “I can’t deny that Earth has gone through some dark periods, but I promise you that equality for all people, men and women alike, is the only sure path to social progress and peace.”

Izbal frowned. "I would advise you not to express such opinions in front of my father. He sees you as someone who shares his values and will uphold his laws if you ever take his place here."

"Me? Become grand potentate? If that weren't so outrageous I would laugh."

"Why? I told you before—my father has many wives, but as yet no son. That may change, or one of my sisters may take a husband who would challenge your right to rule. But barring those circumstances, it is not at all unlikely that you will one day rule Anubis. Perhaps Brennar could be your chief consul."

"Damn." So much for Brennar's insistence that he refrain from judging the cultures he visited. Under the right conditions, he could reshape this one entirely to his own tastes. He imagined the looks on the faces of the highest-ranking members of the Terran Council when he informed them he was resigning his border patrol to take up his new position as a king.

Izbal's hand came to rest on his neck. Her fingertips massaged him softly. "Does the idea appeal to you at all, my lord?" she asked quietly. He heard the note of hopefulness in her voice.

"Only if you were to rule by my side as my equal," he said. "After all, you're the grand potentate's firstborn. The office should be yours by right."

"Had I been born male, it would be." She rolled closer to him, her body open to his touch. "However...there are times when I cannot regret being female in the least."

"I must admit that I agree." Smiling, Gareth used his index and middle fingers to part her moist folds and pressed his mouth to the velvet tucked inside. She tasted fresh and cool, like the waterfall. He extended his tongue and flicked it a few times to tease her. Then he moved in with a more serious purpose. Izbal whimpered as he licked, sucked, and even nibbled her until her hips were shaking and her most intimate muscles pulsed feverishly around his lips and tongue.

Just as he sensed she was about to lose herself in utter bliss, a new sensation between his own legs took him by surprise. He couldn't mistake the vigorous pull of an unusually long and dexterous tongue or the graceful pressure of those narrow fingers on his swollen sac.

With Izbal so close, he couldn't lift his head to verify his suspicions. Instead, he surrendered to a detonation only slightly less potent than the one he'd created for General Xaal's benefit. He drifted through what he envisioned as a starless white space, filled with light and warmth and sustained by the current of unselfish emotion that radiated from their three conjoined bodies.

When he opened his eyes again, he was on his side with his head still propped on Izbal's thigh. Brennar was crouching at his feet, his clothing in a small heap beside him. To Gareth's amazement, Brennar was also being satisfied by Izbal herself. Though he'd been too busy to notice, Izbal had apparently angled her body so that she could reach Brennar with her mouth, repaying him in kind for the favor he'd done Gareth. He watched, fascinated, as his wife brought his lover to fulfillment without a hint of shame or resentment. If anything, she seemed as enthusiastic as Gareth had been toward her. He didn't think he'd ever admired her so much as he did in that minute.

When it was over, each of them claimed one edge of the blanket to rest on.

"How did you manage to get away again so soon?" Gareth asked Brennar. "We weren't expecting to see you until dark, if then."

"After a few hours' audience with Izbal's father, I excused myself to spend the rest of the evening fasting and meditating. No one questioned my need for absolute silence and solitude. I have every reason to expect that my chamber door will remain undisturbed for quite some time."

Gareth grinned. "Good thinking. They don't know enough about your customs to question anything you say. Before long you'll be able to fib as effectively as I do."

“I should add that I recovered your equipment and spoke with Acting Captain Erril on board the *Wayfarer*. She sends her regards and assures me that the sector has been clear during your absence, with no sightings of General Xaal or any members of his fleet.”

“Good.” Not for the first time, Gareth cursed the male attendants who had prepared him for the wedding, stripping him not only of any weapons but of his hyperspace communications device as well.

Brennar regarded the blanket and their relaxed state of undress and raised a silvery eyebrow. “I see you found a way to entertain yourselves in my absence.”

“We did,” Izbal said. “However, we spoke of and thought about you the entire time. I think I can say without any fear of contradiction that we are both glad to have you back.”

“And I am glad to be back,” Brennar assured her with a smile. “I am afraid I could hardly concentrate on any of the entertainments provided for me at the keep. Your father must think me a little deaf, as I lost the thread of our conversation many times.”

Izbal stood and shrugged on her robe. “I hope you weren’t serious about fasting. I was just about to prepare the evening meal. It will be nothing fancy, but it should prove nourishing all the same. Gareth and I gathered some fresh *quiegivi* berries that should garnish our plates nicely.”

She left them alone, and Brennar’s expression turned solemn.

“I neglected to convey one part of Lieutenant Erril’s message because I thought it might distress Izbal,” he admitted. “She still plans to return at the appointed time to take you to the ship. As much as she enjoys command, she will be grateful to welcome you back to your post.”

“I see.”

“It will be difficult to leave Izbal behind, will it not?” Brennar pressed with genuine concern in his eyes.

Gareth frowned. “We’ll discuss it later. The food will be ready in a minute. Izbal is very efficient about such things.”

“Perhaps we should go and assist her,” Brennar said, reaching for his tunic.

“Ask her to bring it out here,” Gareth called after him as he walked toward the dwelling. “I’d like to enjoy the sky a little longer.”

Izbal welcomed his suggestion, and the three dined on bread, fruit, and wine while the warm air caressed their skin. By the time Anubis’ three moons had climbed into place above them, they had shed their clothes again and loved one another as simply and zestfully as wild, native creatures who had never known any other way of life.

That night, all three of them slept in the enormous bed and learned about pleasing each other well into the next afternoon.

## Chapter 8

Gareth lay on his back and imagined himself floating in warm water. Izbal straddled his hips with her legs flung wide around him, lifting herself slowly up and down on his rigid erection. Brennar stretched out beside him, idly massaging his balls and licking at his thighs. Gareth had only to turn his head halfway to extend his tongue and sweep Brennar's cock into his mouth. He did, savoring the exotic flavor of his alien lover's flesh and delighting in the sound of his satisfied murmurs.

The first time they'd come together, they'd had a week to figure out their future. That had turned into four days, then two, then one more night, all of them fraught with the excitement of Brennar slipping back and forth from the keep and the thrill of welcoming him back into their bed. Now their last afternoon in the woods had arrived. Where had the time gone? More and more frequently, Gareth experienced moments when he never wanted to go back.

Like now.

Izbal reached her apex first, arching her back and grinding herself against his torso. A moment later Brennar followed her into blissful oblivion. Gareth held out the longest, desperate to ensure their total gratification, but soon enough he, too, lost his bearing and plummeted headfirst toward paradise.

Afterward, the three of them curled together and rested.

"We have to get ready," Izbal said with a sigh. "The villagers will be here to escort us back."

"Another tradition?" asked Gareth.

“Yes. Usually the couple returns to the community, sets up a household with everyone’s help, and begins a life together. In our case, things will necessarily be different.”

“I’m sorry I can’t give you a normal life among your people,” Gareth said, stroking her hair.

“I knew that was impossible from the beginning, and I don’t mind. Being different opens up different possibilities.”

“You are an amazing woman, Izbal. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise, ever.”

“If we are about to be interrupted, I had better excuse myself,” Brennar observed. He got up and began to dress, while Gareth and Izbal rested a moment with her head on his chest.

Only seven days ago, Gareth marveled, he’d longed for an easy escape route or at least for the week to fly by. He didn’t feel that way now. For the first time in his life, love had entered his heart and left him a better man.

After Brennar had slipped away through the forest, Gareth and Izbal washed and dressed with a strange shyness of one another. Perhaps both felt the loss of Brennar, he thought, or perhaps facing a group of visitors as an established couple made them nervous. It seemed somehow dishonest not to be able to acknowledge Brennar, but his role in the marriage was a secret they would have to live with for now.

“Brennar is a good man,” Izbal said, seeming to read his mind. “I know why you are drawn to him. I’ve come to care about him, too.”

“I can see that,” said Gareth, “and I’m glad.”

From the distance came the sound of boisterous singing.

“The villagers,” Izbal said.

They watched from the window as the procession of men and women, some of whom looked familiar, moved through the trees toward them. Izbal flung open the door, only to be draped in a celebratory wreath and surrounded by a group of young women who joined hands and turned an admiring circle around her. Some of the

older members of the group moved directly into their sparse living space, gathering their clothes and possessions into baskets for transport. A good deal of muted giggling resulted when they noticed that many of the clothes had not been worn.

Gareth and Izbal set off within minutes, walking back to the colony hand-in-hand with the procession now behind them. The moment they returned, one of Zimeon's advisors came forward to greet Gareth.

"The grand potentate would like to speak to you," he said, ignoring Izbal.

"Very well." To much applause, Gareth raised Izbal's hand and kissed it before letting her go and following the older man into the keep. He soon found himself in the same tapestry-strewn room in which the marriage had originally been contracted.

Zimeon relaxed in his chair, his wrinkled cheek propped on a bony fist. He looked as though he had aged in the past week, or perhaps Gareth had never noticed the hint of frailty before.

"Izbal no doubt told you that I have no male heir," he began without preamble. "You can see with your own eyes that I am old and will not always have the energy to rule this place. You, on the other hand, are young and strong, capable of protecting all that I have built here. Your acceptance and care of my daughter show me that you are a man of honor as well. I have therefore decided to make you my successor."

Ever since Izbal had explained the situation to him, Gareth had expected to hear those very words. Actually having to respond to them, though, proved daunting.

"Your faith in me is certainly flattering, Grand Potentate, yet I'm sure I don't have to remind you that I have commitments elsewhere."

The old man lifted a gnarled hand and waved it dismissively. "I am not ready to die just yet, nor am I asking you to abandon your ship and crew. However, no adventure can last forever. Perhaps it is time to use your strengths in a different way."

“I promise to consider it, my lord.”

“Then, for the moment, I will ask nothing more of you. I accept your word that you will give my proposal the serious thought it deserves.”

“Thank you, and now I shall ask one favor of you as well. I must return to my duties before the sun sets tomorrow. Will you look after my wife while I am away? Treat her with the same honor I would?”

Zimeon nodded. “I understand that she is no longer my dependent child but a woman with a home and responsibilities of her own. She will take the honored place of a married princess in my court, even if her lord is not present to govern her. You, too, have my word.”

“Thank you.” Gareth gave a respectful half bow. The lack of equality for women in this culture still rankled him, but he accepted that change would come slowly, if at all.

“Then again, I had begun to hope that you might take her with you,” Zimeon added.

Gareth’s brows rose. “A border patrol ship is small, cramped. It can also be a dangerous place under certain conditions.”

“As you wish. A woman’s place is beside her husband, adversity notwithstanding, but it is of course your decision.”

Gareth gave another bow. “Again, I thank you for your kindness, my lord.”

On his way out of the grand potentate’s chamber, he wondered if the old man would be so eager to send Izbal off with him, much less install him as the next king, if he knew exactly what sort of pleasures he had introduced his favorite daughter to.

Then again, in Zimeon’s view, Izbal was Gareth’s property, to do with as he liked. Not once had he inquired after his daughter’s happiness or satisfaction with her new station in life. Apparently, as far as the grand potentate was concerned, such trivial details as a woman’s emotions didn’t matter.

Luckily for Izbal, they mattered to Gareth.

\* \* \* \*

That evening, Gareth and Brennar lay on adjoining tables in the grand potentate's private spa, having their bodies oiled and rubbed down by the same matron who had prepared Gareth for his wedding night. She made no secret of her fascination with Brennar's blue-tinted skin as she briskly rubbed his shoulders and then returned to Gareth's. The scented oils she used felt wonderful after so many days in the harsh sun with little or no clothing on, and Gareth could see that Brennar also enjoyed the massage.

"Your wedding week tired you out, did it?" the woman asked, skimming her palm over his naked rear end.

"Yes." Gareth fought his embarrassment as her fingers dug deep into the tired muscles of his buttocks and then stroked up his back. When she finished with him, she moved back to Brennar.

"The grand potentate's daughter is a spicy dish, I take it?" she asked while she kneaded Brennar's shoulders.

"Very much so," Gareth admitted.

"I suspected so. The quiet ones are often filled with fire. I've known her since she was a girl, of course. I could see it even then. She has a streak of her father in her, that's for certain."

"I noticed that, as well," Brennar agreed.

"The two of you are good together. Everyone says so. You have done very well in your choice of a wife, Captain Gareth. And you are also fortunate to have such a loyal friend at your side." Playfully she patted Brennar's backside.

Gareth glanced over and smiled at Brennar's mortification. "I completely agree...on both counts."

"I am gratified to hear you say that, my lord." The hand that returned to Gareth's back to smooth on a fresh dollop of oil felt different...smoother, lighter. And more familiar.

Gareth rolled over to find that Izbal had taken the place of the older woman, who had apparently withdrawn to give them some

privacy. Standing with one hand on his shoulders and one on Brennar's, she smiled down at both of them.

"How long have you been here?" Gareth asked.

"A while. Aarisa let me hide in the back room until you were ready for me. So I am a spicy dish, am I?"

"One I never get tired of tasting." Gareth sat up on the table and pulled her between his bare legs. Half-turning, Izbal held out her hand to Brennar. The three of them clung together in silence, none wanting to acknowledge that this was likely to be their final night together.

At least for a while.

But, Gareth decided, their separation wouldn't last forever. He'd find a way to ensure that.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, Gareth stood beside his packed bags and straightened the front of his uniform. It hung looser on him than when he'd first arrived. A diet of leaves, berries, and fruit had melted a few excess pounds off his trim frame. Lieutenant Erril would tease him about that, he expected, making jokes about an athletic honeymoon without suspecting how close she was to the truth.

Back in his own room across the hall, Brennar would also be getting ready to take his leave. He would remain aboard the *Wayfarer* for a week or so, until they reached the nearest space station. From there, he would embark either to his own world or his next diplomatic adventure.

Izbal entered the room.

"It's time?" she asked quietly, eyeing his luggage.

"Soon."

"You look very handsome." She touched his uniform tunic, smoothing the sleek, red piping that decorated the front. "I wish I could come with you."

"I know. But life on a border patrol vessel would never suit a princess. It takes even an experienced crewman years to adjust."

"I suspect missing you will cause me far greater pain."

"I know." The concept of missing someone was foreign to Gareth. In the past, he'd indulged himself, pleased others, even loved...for awhile. When the time came to move on, he'd cut ties without pain.

This time would be different. He knew that already.

"You could live in comfort here, yet you choose to return to much rougher conditions," Izbal mused. "I suppose you love the adventure that comes with your duties on the ship."

"Yes. Or at least I thought I did."

"Adventures exist here, too, you know, though on a smaller scale. Building the community, attracting and welcoming new settlers, mining and selling the phytronium. Such tasks probably seem hopelessly unsophisticated to you."

Gareth shrugged self-consciously. "Your way of life doesn't sound so bad. In some ways, it seems as though it could be quite pleasant."

Izbal chewed her bottom lip. "Krys...when you are far from my world, will I still be your wife?"

So many years had passed since anyone had called him by his first name that he almost didn't recognize it. "Yes. Of course." Gareth reached up to cup her chin in both hands. "Izbal, I want you to wait for me. Because we both know I will be back. It's just a matter of when."

They heard a brief knock, and Brennar entered the room, also dressed for travel. Gareth saw the pain in his wife's eyes when it struck her anew that Brennar would be going back to the ship with him while she could not.

"I, too, must return to my regular life," Brennar reminded her gently. "When all this began, I was a passenger on the *Wayfarer*. I shall be one again, though temporarily."

“I know.” She bit off the words as she fought back tears. Brennar took her hand while Gareth stood alone, in torment, his hands at his sides.

“Yet,” Brennar continued, “I have been thinking.”

“About what?”

“Your future.” He glanced at Gareth. “Our combined future, if you will. Obviously, Captain, you have an established career with the Terran Border Patrol. However, have you considered using your talent and experience to enter the private sector?”

“What do you mean?”

“After I returned to my room last night, I laid awake for several hours. Ultimately I began to envision a transport service and security force for the mine on this planet. At present, the operation is small and, as we have seen, vulnerable to attack. A full-time sentry would deter such occurrences in the future and would assist in developing and marketing Anubian resources.”

Gareth scowled, turning the suggestion over in his mind, but the skepticism did not quite reach his eyes. “That’s an ambitious project. We’d need at least two ships to start out and more later on.”

“Don’t forget, my planet has a stake in the mine, too. I feel confident that the Shibans would donate at least one of their own decommissioned vessels to the cause. The rest will fall into place as time goes on.”

“My community is not poor,” Izbal put in with sudden enthusiasm. “We live simply, by choice, but my father has managed our earnings from the mines for decades. You know he would deny you nothing if it meant you would join forces with him.”

“You should think it over, at least,” Brennar said.

“I will,” Gareth said. He was careful not to betray any hint of optimism to Brennar. If the plan proved impossible after all, the disappointment to all of them would be too great. He checked his communications device. The message he’d been dreading flashed on the tiny screen. “Come on. Our transport pod is waiting.”

They walked out of the keep to find the entire village, including Izbal's father and his ministers, assembled on the commons to bid them farewell. Seeing the crowd, Izbal no longer bothered to hide her tears.

Pausing at the top of the stone steps, Gareth looked from her to Brennar. "It would take a few months to resign my commission and get a replacement set up," he said under his breath.

"And perhaps longer for me to disentangle myself from the diplomatic corps. Still, a solid foundation results in a stronger building."

"Lieutenant Erril is ready to take over the *Wayfarer*. She has been for a while. She probably realized that last week."

Brennar nodded. "Most likely she will request a command of her own as soon as you return."

"It wouldn't be right for me to stand in the way of her career." Gareth smiled. "And there's one other thing. Since I don't plan on staying with them much longer anyway, I think the Terran Council can tolerate my wife being on board the *Wayfarer* for a while. If not, I can resign even earlier."

"I think so, too," Brennar agreed, "and let us not forget, you do have a diplomat at your service. You might be surprised what a little rhetorical agility can accomplish."

"In that case, Izbal, I'd like to invite you to come with us." Gareth said, low enough that the assembled audience could not hear. He held out his hand to her. "I should warn you, though—on my ship, women have just as many rights and responsibilities as men. And we'll have a lot more freedom in terms of whom we spend our time with. Brennar won't have to sneak in and out the way he does here. Think you can handle all that?"

"I can only try my best, my lord," she said as she curled her fingers around his. "But, as you have often assured me, I am a strong and intelligent woman. Somehow, I think we will all manage."

**THE END**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cassandra Pierce has been a fan of Gothic literature for most of her life, even studying the origins of the genre in college and graduate school. Before long, she got the urge to create paranormal romances of her own and is now hard at work on the third Darkisle novel (among other projects). When she is not writing, she teaches English (including a course on Vampire Lit) at a small New England college and is active in a charity that rescues and rehomes abandoned pets.

Read more about Cassandra's upcoming books at [www.CassandraPierce.com](http://www.CassandraPierce.com), and visit her on Facebook!

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