

Æquana

A Fantasy Romance Novel

by

Linda Mooney



PublishAmerica
Baltimore

© 2007 by Linda Mooney.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publishers, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a newspaper, magazine or journal.

First printing

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN: 1-4241-4006-4
PUBLISHED BY PUBLISHAMERICA, LLLP
www.publishamerica.com
Baltimore

Printed in the United States of America

For Meg

Assignment

John Eagletalon swiped his card in the security box, and punched in the numbers he'd been ordered to memorize. The clear nipple to the side blinked green, and he heard the lock slip in the door. As he shoved open the heavy steel door, he could hear hydraulics hissing. The portal slid smoothly, albeit ponderously, before it slowly closed behind him. Another hiss, and the solid thunk of the lock biting back into place, and he was inside.

Slowly he walked down the hallway, eyes sweeping over the tiny imprint on each doorway he passed. The hall was painted an off-white, ecru color. The doors were barely a tint darker. The floor was a passé linoleum tile of nondescript white. The sameness of everything was almost enough to make a person sick.

Take a right at the first intersection. Pass three more intersections. Hang a left. First door on the left. He reviewed his instructions as the heels of his boots clicked a steady rhythm on the tiles. Faintly his mind kept the beat, putting it to a song he enjoyed by a hard rock band. As the melody ran through his head, punctuated by

the riff, he steadily made his way through the corridors until he reached his destination.

The nameplate was nondescript. **Corinth, D. E.** Talon knocked. The door opened almost immediately.

"Ah! Glad you could make it! Come in!"

The man greeting him wore his uniform like most people wore casual shorts and a t-shirt. Talon wondered if the Rear Admiral ever took it off, or if he just removed the starched tie, polished his one star, and stretched out in his BarcaLounger when he called it a day.

Corinth shook hands before retreating back behind his big walnut desk. "Did you have a good flight?" he asked in an attempt at civil conversation.

"Knock off the BS," Talon replied softly. Wearily. "I'm here. Isn't that what you wanted?"

The expression on the Rear Admiral's face went cold, stern. The man threw pretense out the window. "Why don't you take a seat, then?"

"If you don't mind, I'd like to stand for a bit. I've been sitting down on a plane since six this morning."

It was a little past two. And with the exception of three cups of in-flight coffee, Talon had eaten nothing all day. At least there would be some good to come out of this last-minute call to D.C. There was a great steakhouse not two miles away.

"Suit yourself." Corinth half-shrugged. Reaching down to the side file drawer in his desk, he pulled out a blue folder and casually tossed it onto the big desk where it slid to a stop.

Glancing down at it, Talon lifted his gaze to stare at his superior officer. "Just give me the bottom line."

Corinth studied the man standing across the room as he leaned back in his chair. For a long minute both men remained quietly at odds, until the Rear Admiral snorted and smiled. "Talon, have you ever heard of a scientist by the name of Isak Van Der Beek?"

"Nope."

"Then, do you remember a little device called a 'regenerative oxygenator'?"

This time Corinth was delighted to see a spark in the man's black eyes. Although Talon gave away nothing outwardly, the Rear Admiral knew the man had the bad luck of revealing himself in his eyes. It had always been his weakness, his only weakness, in his otherwise perfect countenance.

Nodding, Corinth laced his fingers together and parked his hands on his abdomen. "I know the Navy has only been testing the device for a couple of years. How did it work for you when you used it?"

"Exceptionally," Talon admitted. The Rear Admiral had yellow-level clearance, but it was surprising to know he was aware of the top-secret project. "But what does this have to do with me? There's got to be at least a dozen other men who've used it, not counting my teammates. And I haven't been part of the corps in over a month."

"Yeah, I know. By the way, how are you doing? Any problems since your release?"

At the mention of his hospitalization, Talon felt the ghost of pain in his back. "No. None. So far."

Again, Corinth saw the fleeting glimpse of remembered agony in the black eyes. This time he managed to hide his smile. "You know, you were one of our best. Shame you were attacked like that. Damn shame. I'm certain the corps misses your skills. In fact, your entire team is going to be sorely missed."

"Did you call me here to discuss my disability? Or was there a purpose to the threat you hinted at to get me here in the first place?" Talon's tone was dark. Threatening. The Rear Admiral knew it brooked no further tip-toeing around the subject matter.

"Very well. Bottom line. You were given a medical discharge, but you still owe us fourteen months, Talon. You signed a contract that states we have the right to call you back in under an emergency ordinance, if we see fit. After nine-eleven, there's no

such thing as a permanent discharge if you haven't served your full enlistment."

Black brows lowered. "I'm already disliking this. And, for the record, it's exactly four hundred fourteen days."

"Right. Four hundred fourteen days." Corinth took a deep breath. "And your government wants every one of them."

"Bullshit. I've done my tour. I lost a kidney for my country," Talon hissed. "If they're wanting the rest of my enlistment, tell them to send me a bill. Better yet, tell them to send a couple of their elite over, and I'll show them how they can collect!"

The man started for the door when Corinth stopped him in his tracks. "I specifically asked for you, Talon."

"What?" The man's tone of voice had changed. No one requested a specific ex-operative by name unless there was a damn good *valid* reason.

"I asked for you. By name. I have a proposition for you, and if you're agreeable to it, you can work your four hundred and fourteen days off rather pleasantly." He tapped the blue folder on his desk. "That scientist I mentioned to you? He's dead, by the way. Died two months ago."

"Sorry, but I never got the memo so I could attend the funeral," Talon remarked sarcastically.

"I'm sending you over to another department. To a man named Slaw. In the meantime, take this folder with you. You know what to do with it once you've finished learning it." He leaned over and shoved it a bit further toward the man.

Talon gave it a cautious eye, as if the paper had the ability to bite without warning. "You have yet to come clean with me," he warned Corinth.

"Yeah, well, this is it in the nutshell. Van Der Beek had a daughter. She's belonged to the Navy since her birth. We've trained —"

"She's *belonged* to the Navy?" Talon interrupted. He was stunned by the comment. "Since when did the Navy start trafficking in human flesh?"

"You don't know the details, so shut up and listen first. Then you're welcome to spout off all you want," the Rear Admiral snapped, face flushed. "Her code name is 'Æquana.' She's a...she's a very unique individual."

A shudder went through him at the thought of a child being forced to grow up among what the government called its "parental task force." "Individual. What is she? An infant? Teenager?"

"Oh, she's a full-fledged woman," Corinth said. He lifted a corner of the folder to double-check. "She's twenty-three. Anyway, after her father died, she was assigned a partner to aide her in her missions."

"Her missions? What is she? Some sort of female SEAL?"

Corinth continued as if he hadn't been interrupted for the second time. "Unfortunately her partner is now unable to work with her, and she's currently looking for another partner. With your talents, your special abilities and skills, I thought you would be a perfect complement."

"Oh, you did? Sorry, but I didn't come all the way here to be told I was going to partner up with some scientist's little braniac daughter, and be stuck in some lab."

"She's part of Special Ops, Talon. Covert in the uppermost echelons." Again, he tapped the folder. "Give it a try. Go over and meet her. The worst she can say is to tell you to be on your way." He paused to let that one sink in, adding, "Æquana has the last word on whether or not she'll take you on. If she closes the door on you, you can go home. No more, no less."

"But if she says I stay, I give her my fourteen months, then I'm out of there. Right?" Talon questioned, just to be absolutely sure.

"Right. Four hundred and fourteen days, and then you can say *adios*, and she can begin to interview for another new partner."

Another look flashed through the dark eyes. It was something Corinth hadn't expected. Nor could he be certain he recognized it for what it was.

"What happens to her?" the man inquired. "Does she ever get a reprieve from the government? Or will she always 'belong' to the Navy?"

"That's really none of your business," the Rear Admiral told him curtly. "Better get going. I told them you'd be there before three. The address is on the inside of the folder."

Talon snatched the folder off the desk with a growl. "Have I ever told you I hate it when someone decides to dictate my life to me?"

A slow grin spread over Corinth's face, and Talon felt his anger heating up even more.

"Well, that's why you joined the Navy, wasn't it? Oh, don't forget to leave me your card before you go."

He chuckled as the bit of plastic embedded itself in the leather upholstery not two inches from his head. In Talon's hands, even a credit card was a lethal weapon.

Once the man had left the room, Corinth placed a phone call to the man waiting for his answer. "He's on his way," he told him. "And, yeah, he's pissed. Oh, so she's pissed as well? Too bad I won't be there when they meet. I've always loved a good fireworks exhibition."

After hearing the man's response on the other end of the line, the Rear Admiral let out a hearty laugh. "Sounds good to me, David. Just keep me posted, all right? Thanks." He hung up, still chuckling.

Earth and water. Fire and ice. Dark and light. Talon and Æquana.

What he wouldn't give to be there when they clashed.

Partners

It was already twenty minutes after three, but Talon wasn't ready to go inside. Not just yet. For the umpteenth time he flipped over the eight-by-ten to look into the cold, pale blue eyes staring down the photographer. If the woman was anything like the ice queen she portrayed in her photo, he knew this new assignment would not bode well.

And if the snapshot didn't give him a warm feeling, neither did the details in the skimpy reports in the folder. There was a lot more to what he'd been given. Talon would bet his years on it. He was being given the rock bottom, absolutely barest minimum he'd need to make his decision. That's the way it was, and the way it would always be when working on these hush-hush government backroom projects.

Muttering a favorite expletive, Talon finally got out of the rental car, fingering the lock in the door before slamming it shut. The Feds could pay four hundred dollars for a toilet seat, but they couldn't afford a rental with a keyless entry on the chain?

The receptionist coolly glanced over at him as he sauntered through the glass doors. Nodding to him, she waved at the elevator. "Third floor. I'll let them know you're here." Talon refused to answer her. She wouldn't have expected one, anyway.

The elevator doors opened to a plush, carpeted hallway facing another bank of glass doors. Another receptionist slash secretary d.b.a. executive assistant was seated at a desk just beyond. A male this time. He gave a nod of his head to let Talon know to go ahead and go in.

Talon tossed the man the blue folder. "Burn this. Cigarette lighter in the Buick wasn't working," he drily ordered before turning his back on the help. Grabbing the curved, teakwood handle, Talon mentally steeled himself and went in.

Immediately his hackles were raised. The tension in the room was palpable. There were three people present: another one-star rear admiral seated behind his specially-ordered desk; another man he didn't recognize standing to one side of the room, away from the rest; and the woman slouched in her chair beside the desk. The woman in the chair was giving him the same ice-blue look of disdain as she'd given the photographer who'd snapped her photo.

For several seconds he locked eyes with her as he took in the rest of her. Her taste in clothes was impeccable, if the clean lines of her pants and Chinese silk blouse were any indication. She even wore seven-hundred-dollar Ginobli slippers. One, at least. The other was tucked underneath her. The only thing out of place was the expensive red silk scarf tied about her neck—red silk, red flag. Talon knew what she was hiding under it. The folder had made that part sparkling clear.

But, with the exception of the stare he was receiving in kind, all resemblance to the picture ended. The photographer was either an amateur, or simply hadn't taken the time to capture the porcelain features of her heart-shaped face. She was wearing her snow-white hair in a loose knot at the back of her head with a

pair of those lacquered Chinese chopsticks stuck into it. Loose tendrils of hair framed her temples and cheeks. Unless her lips really were that shade, she wore no makeup whatsoever. And with her pale gold brows and lashes, she was stunning without the enhancement.

A watch was her only piece of jewelry. Without a doubt, Æquana bore her Norwegian heritage as proudly as he bore his own.

"Glad to see you finally decided to join us," Rear Admiral Slaw muttered as a form of greeting.

Talon broke his gaze away to acknowledge the man. "I read the folder. I'm here. Now what?"

"If you insist on making this harder than we need, I'll just call everything off, Talon. Then you can go home to your little cabin in the woods and wait to see what else we can think up for you. And you know we will," Slaw snapped. Waving at the man on the opposite end of the room, he introduced him. "Morgan Draybeck. John Eagletalon."

Draybeck extended a nervous hand. Talon took it, and they shook. In the back of his mind, Talon took note of the softness in the man's muscle. A typical governmental pencil pusher. Talon immediately wrote the schmuck off.

"Morgan works with our sciences division. They're the ones overseeing Æquana."

Knew it. Talon mentally patted himself on the back.

Slaw motioned to the woman in the chair. "Æquana. John Eagletalon."

He watched as she reluctantly got to her feet and approached him. Her gaze was sweeping over him with frosty blue eyes the color of glaciers, taking in his casual attire, his darker coloring, his long black hair tied behind the nape of his neck.

He was determined to give as good as he got, and Talon returned the sweep. She wasn't as tall as he'd first believed. Five-six or seven at the most. But she was whip thin. Personally Talon liked his women with a little more substance on them...

but this one was going to be his partner, his conscience suddenly chided him.

The shock of realizing where his thoughts had unexpectedly taken him gave him pause. He blinked as the woman slowly moved behind him and out of view.

"Talon? Why do they call you Talon? Why not Eagletalon?" she softly questioned. She had no accent. Of course, having been raised around governmentally appointed babysitters all her life, she wouldn't have one.

"Fewer syllables. Easier to say," he answered. "Why Æquana?"

"My father named the project," she replied, equaling his emotionless response. Coming back around to his other side, she stopped her perusal and turned to the Rear Admiral. "I want it on the record that I've objected to this ever since you first proposed it, Slaw." The venom in her remark was undisguised.

Slaw appeared nonplused. "Just put up with him for the required period, and then you can slam the door on him. Talon can tell you, that's the only reason he's here as well."

"There are a couple of missions coming up where you'll need Talon's skills," Draybeck said.

Æquana glanced back at the man standing with his arms crossed over his chest. "Yeah, you've told me about these special skills. Special Ops. Covert training. Ex-Navy SEAL. Tactical expert. But they discharged you." Now she was speaking directly to him. "Medical discharge. Why? What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing, now. I took a bullet in the back on my last outing, and it cost me a kidney. Since I'm no longer one hundred percent, Uncle Sam put me on the injured reserved list. Until I fulfill my contract, I'll belong to them." He cast his dark eyes at her. "Just like you."

Her reaction was a high pink flush to her face. All the way up to the roots of her milky-white hair. Talon grinned. It looked good on her. Gave her some color.

"I don't want somebody who's insolent, Slaw. Send him away. I'll wait for your next inane choice."

She started for the door when Talon drawled, "I'd rather be insolent than a cold bitch."

Æquana whirled on him in a heartbeat. "I'd rather be a cold bitch than an incomplete has-been. Slaw, you couldn't find anyone better? Someone with at least a modicum of personality?"

For some reason, Talon found the whole scenario hilarious, and he threw back his head, laughing. His reaction infuriated her further.

"You *sonofabitch!*"

"Keep it up, Ice Queen. There's a fire in your belly, and that's what you're going to need if you plan to work with me."

"I'm *not* working with you! I'm not going to spend a year of my life having you hovering over me, dictating to me, deriding me."

"Oh? So you're telling me your life so far hasn't been any of that?"

"No!" she practically shouted at him, moving closer so Talon could see how dark her eyes got in the heat of anger. God, she was stunning when she went for the kill. "Geoffy has been the best partner I could ever want. Could ever ask for. I didn't ask for this... this... *shit!*" She looked to Draybeck. "I don't need a partner. Let me work solo, Morgan! *Please!*"

"No can do. You know that." He shook his head adamantly. To Talon, he gave a nod in her direction. "We'll give you a week's probation. If it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out. Will that satisfy you both?"

Talon cut his eyes to the woman standing beside him, nearly touching. This close he could smell her. No perfume or cologne, but there was a unique scent that threatened to send him into overdrive if he wasn't careful. He wondered if she also realized her proximity to him. "A week won't kill me. At least, I don't think it will."

Draybeck looked to her. "Æquana?"

"A week. From right now?" She glanced at the Buegentine watch on her arm. "Three-fifty p.m." At Draybeck's nod, she relented. "One week." A glance at Talon. "One week," she re-emphasized, holding up an index finger.

Talon silently took in the fact that her nails were not manicured. It puzzled him. As carefully dressed and coiffed as she was, to not have her nails polished would be the same as finishing a fine piece of jewelry, then not buffing it so people could admire it. It didn't make sense.

"One week," he repeated.

Slaw got to his feet, pleased at this small success. "Talon, we've put the two of you up at the Four Seasons. Your first mission will be waiting for you when you check in. Plane will pick you up at oh-five-hundred. Any questions?"

"Yeah." He raised an eyebrow at Æquana. "Are you hungry?"

Surprisingly, she suddenly appeared to wilt at his inquiry. "Yeah. I'm famished."

"Good. 'Cause I know a good steakhouse a few blocks away, and I haven't eaten all day." Walking over to the door, he held it open for her, making an exaggerated gesture to let her know she should proceed him. Then another thought came to him. "Unless you're one of those vegans," he began.

Æquana shook her head, gathering her purse where she'd left it in the chair. "No. I'd like a steak."

They left the room together. Once the door was firmly shut behind them, Draybeck looked to the Rear Admiral. "Do you think they'll make the entire week?"

"They'd better," Slaw said. "This makes the fourth new partner we've tried to settle her with, and she's shot down the other three in less time. I'm getting sick and tired of her little acts of defiance." He scratched his chin. "But Talon's different. He's... he's..."

"He's an Indian, isn't he?"

"Native American, yeah. Those two couldn't be more opposite, in temperament *or* in looks."

Draybeck nodded. "Amen. Maybe that's why it could work this time."

Slaw scowled. "Let's hope. Otherwise, she's not going to like what we've got planned for her if she doesn't."

Dinner

She watched him from the corner of her eye. Watched how he handled the wheel. How he concentrated on the road, even as he fought staring at her. She knew a thousand questions were probably going through his mind right at this moment. Well, they had a week to talk. To work together. To see if this arrangement could possibly extend into a full year.

Correction. Fourteen months. Talon owed fourteen more months of his life, and then he could kiss it all goodbye.

Lucky bastard.

The steakhouse he drove to was one where patrons could throw their peanut hulls on the floor as they waited to be seated. Æquana continued to stare at her new, temporary partner. Okay, granted. She was just as curious about him as he was about her. She hadn't been given the benefit of a folder, telling her about him. On their way to the office, Draybeck only mentioned a few of the more necessary details, to let her know Talon's qualifications, and why he'd been selected. He'd left out one or two she wished she'd been forewarned about.

Like when this man had walked into the office acting as if he owned the whole damned building. She'd been stunned. He wasn't a tall man, but he projected big. And strength. And self-assurance. And all sorts of positive vibes that sent shivers down to the tips of her feet, back up her spine, and shooting into places in her body she didn't want to think about.

He couldn't be more than six feet tall, but he was solid across the chest and back. Muscular and trim. Not an ounce of extra fat. His skin was the color of creamed coffee, and the hair tied behind his head was long, thick, and straight, and as black as midnight. As black as his eyes.

They couldn't be more opposite in appearance than if it had been planned that way.

Æquana paused. Correction. Maybe it had been planned that way.

A hostess showed them to their booth and handed them menus before asking for their drink order. Talon dropped his menu on the table without looking at it. "Tea, no lemon."

"Water only," Æquana requested. She opened the menu to peruse it.

"So, tell me something," Talon began.

"What?" She continued to scan her choices, although she was aware of how his eyes tended to study her. She was surprised to find him more interested in watching her face than her body. Or her neck, especially.

"Why are you so mad at me, before you've had the chance to get to know me better?"

This time she did look up. "I'm not mad at you."

"Oh, yes, you are. Why? You think I'm trying to take your old partner's place? 'Cause if you do, that's never been the case."

The observation hit too close to home. "I'm sorry. It's been... it's been a dreadful past couple of months." She peered at him. "You weren't the most agreeable yourself, you know. So the government still has you by your crown jewels and won't let go for another fourteen months. They've caught us both in a

scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours situation, Talon. I agreed to give it a week to see if we can still stomach each other by next Monday. In the meantime, no one said I had to give you any more information about myself than what you've already read."

Closing her menu, she gave the waitress a soft thank-you for the drinks.

"Ready to order?" the young woman asked.

"Yeah. I'll have the porterhouse, medium-well. Baked potato, loaded," Æquana told her.

"And you, sir?"

She noticed him giving her an odd look. "The same, but medium-rare," he replied. "Let's have a half-order of the onion rings, too."

The waitress nodded and left. Æquana watched as the man across from her dropped a pink packet of sugar substitute in his tea before stirring it with his knife. "All I know about you is what I've already mentioned. Would you object to me evening the playing field?"

"Whatever floats your boat."

"You're Indian? Or, what is it you label yourself?"

"Native American. Half Navajo, half Ute. I have a little place in Colorado I call home."

"Colorado?" A tiny smile graced her lips. "I bet it's nice this time of year. Fall leaves turning colors and all."

Talon shrugged. "It stays cool at night. The daytime still gets hot, however."

Æquana sighed. "Half and half? Isn't that... unusual?"

He put down his tea. "My mother was Ute. After she died, her father, my grandfather, raised me. He has a little tourist trap where he sells rabbit skins and dreamcatchers and the like just off the highway."

"Your father was Navajo, then?"

"He was a test pilot for the Navy, which is what got me interested in joining in the first place."

The onion rings arrived. Talon dove into them. To further his surprise, so did she.

"Where is your father now?" She lifted an onion ring over her head and dropped it into her mouth. Talon found the habit endearing. The woman may look like she stepped out of *Vogue* magazine, but she was willing to let her hair down. That little bit placed a check in her plus column.

"He died when I was six. The plane he was testing blew up over the Atlantic."

She paused, a pained expression flashing briefly on her face. "I'm sorry."

"S'okay. Buck's been my surrogate."

"Buck?"

"My grandfather. Mother and I went to live with him after the funeral." Talon slowly shook his head. "I wanted to be like him. My father. That, and the fact that there have been generations of my family working for the military. There was even an Eagle Talon working with the Marines as a Windtalker back during World War Two."

He noticed how her nose squinched up in puzzlement. "Code talker," he added. When she still seemed confused, he shook his head. "Never mind."

Their meal arrived, and they spent the next few minutes eating in silence. A little more than halfway through their steaks, and after the waitress had refreshed their drinks, Æquana resumed their conversation. "When did your mother die?"

"When I was twelve. Like I said, I was raised by my grandfather."

"Buck."

"Yeah."

She grinned at him. "Buck what?"

Talon saw the glint of amusement in her now sky blue eyes. "Actually, his first name is Conrad. Conrad Slow Deer."

"Conrad?" She started to giggle. Then she remembered the rest of the man's name. "Oohhhhh! Okay. I get it now. Buck." She giggled again.

"Now it's my turn," Talon warned her. "Tit for tat." Inadvertently his eyes swept to the red scarf around her neck. Æquana saw the drift.

"You'll get to see them soon enough," she commented softly.

"Just tell me one thing." His voice was hard again. Commanding. No nonsense. "Were you born that way? Or were you... created?"

Pushing her plate away from her, Æquana leaned back into her seat and sighed. "I wasn't created, if that's what you're worried about. I'm not some science experiment gone awry, or gone well, if you want to think of it the other way. Listen, Talon. Every fetus, when they're just a small embryo just beginning to multiply, they reach a stage where they look like a little tadpole. You know, with gills and fins and the like. It's part of the process. Pretty soon, that development shifts, and you begin to take on more human-like features. Well... my mother's body must've hiccuped or something at that point in my development. Daddy never understood the whys and how-comes. He studied it, of course, but if we could understand every reason why there are birth defects and the like, we'd be more like God, wouldn't we?"

"Why did he give you to the Navy?"

"He didn't *give* me to the government. Not like that. You make it sound so callous."

"Enlighten me, then," Talon challenged her.

The waitress came to see if they wanted dessert. Declining for them both, he gave her a credit card to make the girl go away.

"Daddy worked for the Navy. Research and development. Mother was a technical assistant. They met, fell in love, got married... had me." She paused to wipe a water ring off the table with her napkin. "She caught that Hong Kong flu that was going around when I was two. It turned into pneumonia, and

she didn't respond to the antibiotics. I don't remember her very well, except for the photos Daddy kept of her." She was lost in her memories, and almost missed Talon's next soft comment.

"I was told your father recently passed away. My condolences." He was not surprised to see tears swimming in her eyes. She flashed him a rueful smile.

"Thanks. It was two months ago. And then Geoffy got sick...." Her voice trailed off. She was close to breaking down. Thankfully the waitress brought the receipt for him to sign. Taking care of it, Talon got to his feet, signaling it was time to leave.

They got into the car without another word. By the time they reached the hotel, he saw that she had erected her cool exterior once again.

The desk gave them adjoining rooms. Talon hoisted the duffle bag he'd thrown in the trunk, and wondered if she'd have any luggage. She didn't seem worried about it, so neither would he.

His room was a typical suite—a king-size bed, small fridge, and microwave. The view from the window looked out over the distant Washington Monument.

Another blue folder sat on the writing table, near the telephone. Someone had conveniently provided a Bic lighter and a fireproof waste can.

He knocked on the door between their rooms. After a minute, Æquana opened it. She'd let her hair down, and his eyes were drawn to how it went down to the middle of her back like another silk scarf. Talon wondered if it also felt like one.

"Time to get down to business." He waved the folder in her face. She gave it a caustic look, then turned and walked over to perch on the edge of the bed. Talon took the chair.

"All right. I'm going to ask some rather simple questions. You're going to think I'm a total dunce, but I wouldn't be asking unless I wanted to make a point absolutely clear. None of this ambiguous crap. I don't like surprises when I'm out in the field.

I like everything spelled out, with there being no questions about what, when, where, and how. Got that?"

"Go on," she told him.

"How does this partnership work?"

"You mean, how did Geoffy and I handle it?" At his nod, she continued. "He was the initiator. He got the orders. We both figured out the details. He made the arrangements. I did the job. He reported in. Next case."

"You did the job?"

"Yeah. Mostly I picked up stuff. You know... people or bodies... merchandise..." She glanced up at him. "Information."

"Any problems when you were on a case?"

She squinted at him. "What kind of problems?"

Talon knew he had to be honest with her. "How long have you been working for them? Total?"

"Not quite two years. Why? What are you getting at?"

"It sounds to me like they've been testing you all this time. Seeing how well you keep up your end." He tapped the folder. "This isn't your walk down to the corner. These other guys they tried to hook you up with before me, were they specialists as well?"

She sneered. "Yeah. Purple Heart recipients. Navy Cross. You name it, they probably had a drawer full of them. Why?"

"Why'd you write them off?"

"Because they were assholes," she scathingly bit back. Talon remained unmoving and waited for her to give him a more definite reason. "Okay. They were interested in only one thing, and it had nothing to do with completing the mission."

He raised a dark eyebrow at her, still waiting.

"They wanted to get into my pants," she finally answered. "They wanted to be able to write my name on their wall of conquests. They wanted to be able to brag to their beer buddies that they'd gotten a piece of the little mermaid. Is that clear enough for you?"

She was more than angry, Talon noticed. She was furious. Hurt. She'd been degraded. "So why did you relent with me?" he inquired in a casual tone of voice.

Æquana looked down at her hands. "Because you were the first one to insult me."

"Beg pardon?" The remark made him chuckle.

"Yeah. Like that," she pointed out. "You didn't try to sweet talk me in that cloying, saccharin way, to convince me to give you a chance. You called me a bitch, and I knew right then and there I wanted to see if you'd last the week."

"Fair enough. I take it Geoffy called you a bitch as well."

At his remark, her smile was genuine. "We've had our share of fights."

"Where is Geoffy now? Why isn't he here with you instead of me? Instead of those assholes they tried to set you up with in the first place?"

The question hit a nerve. "He was diagnosed last year with testicular cancer. He underwent chemo, but it's spread. A couple of months ago he told me he could no longer manage. That's when I started looking for a new partner."

Talon tapped a finger to his lips as he observed her. A comment from their dinner floated back to him. *It's been... it's been a dreadful past couple of months.*

Her father. Then her partner. *Damn.*

Taking a deep breath, he opened the folder and sat back in the chair, crossing one jean-clad leg over the other. "All right. Here's the lowdown on what they want us to do." He quickly glanced up at her to see she'd wiped away her tears on the cuff of her shirt and was giving him her full attention. For the first time, she no longer appeared to be the stubborn ice queen, but rather an emotionally fragile young woman caught up in so much government brouhaha. Their patsy. Their tool.

Their little mermaid.

He was damned if he'd let them get away with it.

Recovery

The plane took them to a small airport in a small coastal town in Virginia. Very out of the way. Very indiscreet. It was the lumbering Black Hawk 'copter waiting for them that appeared out of place.

Æquana took Talon's offered hand, and he lifted her into the cargo bay. She was wearing a halter top and a pair of shorts, along with a scruffy pair of blue Keds. A pink bandanna was tied about her throat. At first he couldn't believe she'd dress that way for an operation, but he quickly reminded himself that he was the new boy on campus. She'd been doing this sort of thing for nearly two years. She knew what she was doing.

Their orders were simple and direct. During a training mission the Navy had accidentally dropped an unexploded bomb just outside the three-mile limit, in international waters. Æquana was to find it and attach a signal buoy to it so it could be unobtrusively retrieved that night. Personally, Talon couldn't foresee any problems, but one never knew.

The helicopter would take them out and drop them. They would be given the equipment they needed, plus a life raft and a few supplies to tide them over until the boat arrived to pick them up. In the meantime, they'd have to babysit the bomb to make certain it didn't get lost again.

They didn't speak to each other as they were flown to the coordinates. Talon double-checked to make sure all the equipment was accounted for as the aircraft hovered less than thirty feet above the stilled waves.

Once they ejected the raft, Æquana flashed him a smile. "See you below!" she yelled above the din of the engine, and dove headfirst into the waves, executing a perfect swan before entering with barely a splash. Talon stared over the side of the doorway, waiting for her to emerge, until he remembered and mentally kicked himself. He hurried to toss out the rest of the stuff once he'd checked the air vests, making sure they were inflated around the cargo so they'd float once they hit the water. When he was done, he gave the lieutenant helping him a thumbs-up and jumped, entering the water feet first.

The ocean was cold. Bracing. The 'copter was gone by the time Talon surfaced and began gathering the stuff they'd need, tossing it into the raft. A moment later he saw a pair of eyes staring at him from the other side of the raft. "'Bout time," he commented. "Make me do all the grunt work before you show."

"Chill, Talon. You have to be good for something on these assignments," she teased. She continued to tread water nonchalantly as he snatched the last of the cargo. Talon was very much aware of her scrutiny. For some odd reason, he knew she wasn't checking him out to see how well he was handling the job. Her inspection was on a more personal level.

"You know, you have that wet puppy dog look down perfectly," she teased as she climbed into the raft. She began to dig around until she found what she was looking for. By then Talon had retrieved everything, and pulled himself inside the raft to join her.

As he lay there, catching his breath, he watched in fascination as she removed her halter and shorts. She wore no underwear. Unconsciously his eyes drifted to the snowy triangle between her legs, and he fought the unbidden image that came to mind at the discovery. It wasn't that he had ever doubted she was a natural blonde. But, damn, how more perfect could the woman be?

Another shock went through him when he finally noticed the five small slits running down both sides of her throat. *Auxiliary breathing apparatus*, the report had called them. No shit. They were gills.

Æquana pulled off her tennis shoes, and Talon found himself staring again. *Reduced development of metatarsal bones and phalanges, resulting in the subject having the ability to run and walk upright, but not able to stand on tiptoe or move using the ends of her feet.*

She had flippers for feet. The bone structure was there, but hadn't developed into toes.

As she pulled out the thin material from the small box noted with the large white letter A, she explained to him, "I call this my second skin. It's made of a material Daddy created just for this. He called it Plasti-Sheen." She gave it shake, and it opened up. Talon could see it was skin-toned, and so lightweight and transparent he could see the bottom of the raft through it.

Watching her slipping into it was like watching her transform from a human being into a creature of mythology. Her feet slid into the tail-like lower portion. The skin encased her legs, holding them firmly together. It eased over her hips and buttocks, and the upper portion came up far enough to cover her small breasts, but no further. There was nothing around her neck or shoulders to restrict arm movement or block the flow of water from her gills.

"Take a picture. It'll last longer," she mentioned softly. It was enough to draw him out of his stare.

"How does it stay on?" His eyes were drawn back to the deceptively thin sheet of skin-like material covering her. Now he understood why she'd been mentally evaluating him. Even with the suit on, she had no protection from prying eyes. If she were around others, there would be no way they couldn't see every curve and secret of her naked body. Talon wondered how the other partners she'd been strapped with had reacted.

"The inside is coated with a microscopic layer of adhesive," she told him as she propped herself into a sitting position. "I have to be wet for it to stick." The ends of her tail fins flopped onto his shoes.

"Can you swim without it?"

"Yeah, but not as well. Not as fast, I mean."

"It is insulated?"

"Not really," she admitted with an odd note in her voice, "but I'm not as likely to get pruneey when I have to stay submerged for long periods of time. At least, not my feet and legs. My hands and arms are another story."

"You'd think he would have made it more opaque."

Æquana bit her lower lip as she observed the hooded stare he gave her. She couldn't read him. Not just yet, anyway. But she had to learn to trust him. At least for the next week.

"He tried, but it made the skin too thick. Too cumbersome to move in. That's why I do all my work solo, or as far away from others as possible. You understand, right, Talon?"

So far, so good, she told herself. He hadn't made any sarcastic or stupid remarks about her abnormalities, which was a relief. Neither had he made any sexist remarks when he'd seen her naked. In a way, it put her more at ease.

"What do you want me to call you?" he suddenly asked her. The out-of-left-field question caught her off-guard.

"Call me?"

"Æquana is your code name, but it's too awkward. You need a nickname. What did Geoffy call you?"

"He called me by my first name," she said softly.

Talon mentally kicked himself again. Of course he would. "Which is Maja, right?"

"It's pronounced Mah-yah," she corrected him. From the tone of her voice it was clear she'd corrected people all her life.

"Maja," he repeated. "Isn't that a form of Maria?"

She literally lit up with a smile. "How'd you know?"

He shrugged. "Lucky guess. But if you're going to call me Talon, my using your first name is too personal. Best if we keep our business arrangement businesslike and stay away from the first names. No, I need to give you a handle that's short and simple. Like... MG." He brightened and snapped his fingers. "That's it. I'll call you MG."

She frowned. "MG? To me MG sounds like 'my God.'" And then it struck her. "Oh! MG. Mermaid girl?"

"I take it you can't walk in that thing," he grinned at her.

She shot him a non-humorous look. "You're funny, you know that?" she accused. "Time for chit-chat is over. Time to get to get to work."

Before he knew it, she'd slipped over the side and was gone. He hastily grabbed a face mask and dipped his head below the surface to watch her go down. She moved like he thought a mermaid would, all grace and smooth movements as her whole body undulated downward. Talon found himself enthralled, watching her disappear into the depths.

An hour went by. Then two. Talon had to keep reminding himself she could breathe underwater. She could live down there and never have to come up for air. It was a realization he knew would take him more than a single day to accept.

Noon came and went. He ate an MRE, and deduced that if he was going to spend the majority of his fourteen months sitting around and doing nothing, he might need to start bringing along a paperback to help him pass the time.

It was a little past one when his sixth sense kicked in, and he started watching the water for whatever it was that had alerted him. A half-dozen heartbeats later, a pale form launched itself

out of the water less than fifty yards away, arms spread outward, as she arched out over the waves before diving headfirst back into the ocean. A few moments later, she came up to the side of the raft and hung her arms over the side.

"Welcome back," he greeted her.

"Hi. Got some water?"

"Is that supposed to be funny?" Talon asked, reaching anyway for a bottle.

"Please tell me you're joking. I can't drink this brine, any more than you could, and it's made me parched." She took the bottle and drained nearly two-thirds of it. "God, that tastes good."

"Did you find it?"

"Yeah, but be sure to tell the Navy their coordinates were off just a teensy bit... say, about two miles."

"Two miles? Geez, no wonder it took you so long to find it. What do we do now? Do I need to row over to where it is, or what?"

She shook her head. "No need. I brought it with me. It's just below, on the floor. I came back to get something to drink and eat before taking the rope down to mark it. Move back a bit and I'll come in."

"Need a hand?" he asked as she swam away from the raft.

She shook her head, then disappeared from view. Within seconds she had launched herself into the raft, much like a dolphin onto a platform.

"This day has become a learning experience," Talon admitted, handing her an MRE. He watched as she opened the pack and started to eat. She was shivering slightly, and he wondered how cold it was in the dark depths below. "How far down is that thing?"

"I don't know exactly. About a couple hundred feet. We're above a small shelf."

He paused. "How far down did you have to go to find it?"

Again she shrugged. "Maybe five hundred feet."

"Five *hundred* feet?" His eyes raked over her thin body, and it was if someone had turned on the light in a room, allowing him to see things he'd never been aware existed before. "MG, are you prone to broken bones?"

She paused in licking the spork from her packet. "Yeah. So?"

"What's the farthest you've ever gone down? What's your limit?"

She didn't have to think. "Nearly eleven hundred feet."

Damn! No wonder she was built like she was. Her body had to withstand a tremendous amount of pressure to be able to go down that far. "Is it difficult to breathe when you go to those depths?"

"Oh, yeah, but the cold is the worst. It's like walking outside on a snowy day without a stitch on, and then staying out in it for a half-hour or so." She shivered again, and Talon wondered if it was from the memory, or the real thing. Until he saw the gooseflesh rising on her body. Quickly, he pulled a blanket from a waterproof pouch and draped it over her shoulders. Æquana tugged the ends closer together. "Thanks. Got another one of these?" she asked, holding up the empty MRE.

Handing her another, Talon snorted softly. Now it made more sense, seeing how she ate. She probably had a metabolism rate that was off the charts. He was staring out over the waters, lost in thought, when she softly asked him, "What are you thinking?"

"I was thinking about going down and checking out that bomb for myself." He looked up at her. "Two hundred feet, you said?" Without waiting for her answer, he reached for the wetsuit he'd set aside and started to peel down. Æquana stared at him in shock.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"It wouldn't hurt to check, make sure the thing's not gonna blow up under our butts." Thank God someone had had the sense to pack a full-length suit, including gloves and hood, although Talon opted to forego them this time around.

"Was your checking on it part of the instructions?" she asked.

Talon looked up to see her eyeing him with undisguised astonishment. "The Navy has a bomb. They lost the bomb, but didn't tell anybody. Now they want us to find it for them, but they don't want us to recover it ourselves. You said you managed to drag it back here, so I'm assuming it's not very large."

"About three, four feet long," she told him. "With that bullet-shaped nose, it was easy to wrap my arms around it and pull it along."

He snapped on the straps holding the air tank. "Yeah, but the question remains, why couldn't we recover it? We have the means to get back inside the three-mile limit. If nothing else, you could tow us back. So why are we having to wait until the cover of night for them to come back for us and it?"

After checking the air hose, Talon spit into his mask and rubbed the saliva into the glass underwater before pulling it over his head. "Coming with me?" he asked, grabbing the buoy rope and falling backwards into the waves.

A moment after he cleared the raft, Æquana dove in with him. Talon allowed himself the momentary luxury of watching how her gills opened and closed like tiny dancers gracefully moving in unison. Her mouth remained shut, making him believe she was breathing through her nose. One day, he told himself, he would get the whole scientific explanation of how she was able to do what she could do.

He started downward, following her lead. This close to her, he was amazed at how lithe she was, how she seemed to bend like oil in water. Talon knew he was a good diver, but she was swimming rings around him with little effort. Once she paused, and her ponytail spread out behind her head like a white, lacy halo.

As she'd told him, the bomb was directly below the surface where the raft waited. Once they got within a dozen feet of it, Talon motioned for her to remain where she was. Inwardly he

cursed himself for forgetting to bring along the underwater slate he'd seen packed.

Once he was certain she would remain where he'd told her to, he proceeded over to check out the slender cylinder. A quick glance told him it was a standard-issue, underwater, jet-propelled torpedo, used by submarines. Nothing fancy. Nothing out of the usual. The Navy had used them for years during war games. It had a basic explosive charge embedded in the head, but unless its trigger was set by the gunner on board the sub, it wouldn't go off.

Talon rolled the bomb over to check out the little window in the nose, just to be on the safe side. The light inside should be green.

Every nerve in his body turned ice cold.

Before he was aware of it, years of training and reflex took over, and Talon began racing away, keeping along the bottom of the shelf. He pushed himself, swimming as fast as he could, and soon Æquana had joined him, casually keeping up with his frantic pace. Her face mirrored her question and worry. Talon threw an arm forward in a sign he hoped she'd interpret as his urgent need for them to *RUN!*

She cast a glance backwards, when it dawned on her. Grabbing one of his hands, she squeezed it tightly and literally began to drag him through the water at a rate of speed he couldn't even begin to comprehend. Dimly, he held up his other hand, and felt it being snatched when she took it as well.

Now they were flying through the water. Her body was pumping faster than he believed was humanly possible as she pulled him along under and behind her.

One minute passed. Then two. Before the end of the third minute, the world around them exploded in a thunderous roar of pressure and inescapable fury. Talon felt himself being lifted as the cataclysmic tidal wave slammed into them like a concrete wall. Somehow he managed to hold onto Æquana's hands as she was thrown over his head.

The backwash hit them, lifting them upward, and Talon realized he was going to lose consciousness. There hadn't been enough time for him to acclimate to the lower pressure, and without a doubt he knew every blood vessel in his body would burst from nitrogen overload before he reached the surface.

Closing his eyes, John Eagletalon waited for the bends to send him over the edge.

Chances

A pair of lips were clamped over his. Warm air pushed into his lungs, slowly inflating them. Then a cool hand pressed down firmly over his mouth, allowing the air to gradually seep out of his body. Soon after, the lips were back, giving him life. Giving him air.

His body felt detached. Weightless. And damn cold.

Talon opened his eyes to a world of whiteness floating in his field of vision. White hair, coating the mask. He moved his head slightly, and instantly a familiar face bobbed into sight. At this depth her eyes were a sea green blue.

Æquana shook her head, motioning for him to remain still. Didn't matter. He needed to get back on his tank.

Talon tried to reach behind his head for the mouthpiece, when she snatched his regulator and held it up for him to see. The dial read zero oxygen. The tank was empty.

His body said to breathe; his lungs searched for air. He must have made a movement, because she pressed her mouth over

his again. Talon forced himself to remain relaxed as she breathed for him, pushing warm and moist air into his lungs. This time, though, she didn't put her hand over his lips to hold the air in.

He glanced upward. They were nearly to the surface. Another twenty feet or so, and they'd breach the waves.

How long he'd been out, he had no idea, but he was already feeling the hot flush of embarrassment starting to singe his face. By the time they broke through the top, Talon was silently cursing himself for his stupidity. Pulling his mask to rest on top of his head, he looked at the woman staring at him with undisguised worry.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

"Yeah," she finally answered. Talon immediately knew she was hedging.

"Oh, God, you had me so scared for a minute there, Talon. What the hell happened?" Her expression grew stern. "And don't tell me the obvious."

They were floating with the current. The sea was calm, giving them a clear view of the horizon. However, not a soul was in sight. Not even their raft. After the explosion, Talon wouldn't be surprised if some of their equipment ended up in Polynesia.

"Are you okay?" he asked her again, since she hadn't given him a straight answer the first time. "Yeah," she finally answered. Talon knew immediately she was hedging.

"Where are you hurt?" He resisted grabbing her. With her bone structure, it could be anything.

"I think I twisted my back a bit," she admitted, "but I can still swim."

"Without any pain?"

"Not much."

"Not *much*?" He stared at her. "We need to get you to a hospital and get you checked out."

His comment made her laugh, but there was no humor in the sound. "Yeah, right. Like I can go to the nearest emergency room and say, 'Hey, I was just in an underwater bomb blast and I think I wrenched my back. So could you take a look at it, and just ignore the fact that I have these little gills in my neck?'"

"All right. Then we'll call this Draybeck guy and have him run a diagnostic on you to make sure it's nothing serious."

"You haven't answered my question, Talon. What happened down there? Did you set that thing off?"

He shook his head. "No. You did."

She backed away in anger, slapping him on the shoulder. "Did not!"

"Yes, you did. Inadvertently, though. The bomb had an automatic depth regulator on it. Now I know why we were told to mark it and leave it be. *Fuck*, I can't believe how stupid I was not to follow through!" He shook his head, gritting his teeth. Taking a deep breath, he continued. "When you brought it up from where you'd found it, it sensed the change in depth and pressure. That triggered the explosive mechanism, starting the timer. If it had remained where it was, the thing would have never blown. I was just damn lucky to turn it over in time to see the light in the nose window."

"You mean the little brownish light?"

He gave her a thin smile. "It may have been amber when you were carrying it, MG, but by the time I got to it, it was red. It went red at the five-minute countdown. We were very, very lucky to have had enough time as we did, and you had the speed to get us as far away from it as we were able to. Otherwise, right now there would be little bitty pieces of us scattered all over this part of the ocean." Reaching up, he touched her cheek with two fingertips. "You saved my life twice today. That puts a big burden on me."

"How?"

"Old custom among my people says you own me now, until I can repay that debt."

Æquana smiled rather lopsidedly. "What if I just settle for a lobster dinner at the swankiest restaurant in D.C.?"

Talon groaned loudly as he continued to tread water. "Don't tell me. Fulcet's? Their wine list sucks."

"I don't care. I don't drink wine."

"How about at The Bandyman?"

"Never been there," she admitted.

"They have an all-you-can-eat crab and oyster buffet on Saturdays. And their wine list is decent."

She smacked him again on the shoulder. "All this talk is making me hungry, and we're stuck out here in the middle of nowhere. On top of that, I'm thirsty!"

"We won't be stuck for long," he assured her.

"Oh, really?" Æquana gave him a narrowed look. "Have you happened to look around? Do you see any rescue boats on their way to us, Mr. Expert?"

"You forget one very important thing, MG." Talon grinned at her and held up the small, blinking object he'd stored in his weighted belt. The transmitter was still pulsing out its signal to let the rescue team know where they needed to be picked up. "I used to be part of a squad of very prepared boy scouts."

She was so surprised, she gave a little squeal of relief and hugged him. Talon twitched abruptly away from the impulse to hug her back, but kept his reaction carefully concealed from her.

Whether it was because of the transmitter, the explosion, or both, it wasn't quite a half-hour later when they heard the sound of engines coming toward them. A sixty-foot Coast Guard trawler picked them up as the accompanying chopper watched from above.

Before they arrived, Talon squirmed out of his wetsuit and had Æquana zip herself into it after she'd doffed her second skin. Their mission may have been a wash-out, but he still had to protect her identity. That would always be his priority.

An hour later they were back on land. Æquana quickly phoned Draybeck, who sent a jet 'copter over to get them and deliver them to the small clinic back in D.C. where she could be checked out. Once they arrived, she was hustled away by two guards, leaving Talon to be ushered into a small antechamber where he was quickly examined by an intern.

As Talon put on the white jumpsuit he'd been offered, he investigated the place with a trained eye. It didn't take him long to realize that the clinic cum lab was as sterile and unwelcoming as every other governmental facility he'd visited. To think that this place was what Æquana considered to be home left a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Mr. Eagletalon?"

A young female associate gestured to him from the doorway. He followed her to an antiseptic examination room not far from where he'd been taken. Æquana was sitting up on the table, holding a white sheet about her, as Draybeck and another man were discussing her nearby.

Talon walked over to notice the weariness on her pale face. "What's the verdict?" he asked.

"Pulled back muscles. Nothing serious, thank goodness. How about you?"

He shrugged. "I'll live. I phoned Slaw to let him know how badly we handled the mission."

"What did he say?"

"Well, believe it or not, it's not going to be a black mark on our record. Our assignment was to locate the bomb. We did that. Having the damn thing go off wasn't part of the job, but they were going to detonate it anyway. And since there wasn't an immediate loss of life or property, and the papers or news isn't aware of it, we're still in their good graces."

"So, what are the chances they'll give us another assignment real soon?"

"I have no idea, MG. We told them we'd give us a week. My guess is they're going to try and find something else for us to do as quickly as possible, just so they can get their week's worth out of us."

He saw her sigh. Her gaze was leveled over his shoulder, but by the glaze over her eyes Talon could tell her sight was drawn inward. "A week... and we barely lived through one day. Doesn't that tell you something?"

"Yeah," he agreed, dropping his voice. "It tells me you need me for your partner."

This time her eyes looked up at him, a question so obvious in their light blue stare. Talon answered her before she could voice it.

"Think you can put up with me for four hundred and four—shit, no, thirteen days?"

He didn't know how bright her laughter could be until he heard it for the first time that afternoon.

Memories

She was back in her own small bed in the little room located near the rear of the clinic. There were no windows to let in the moonlight, or any other outside source of light, but tonight she wanted the total darkness. Tonight they couldn't see her as she lay in bed listening to the familiar sounds surrounding her. The soft hush of the central air conditioner. The screech of Montago's parrot he kept in the next room because his landlady wouldn't let him keep it at his apartment.

She touched her lips, remembering. Remembering his. Remembering the brief, almost unconscious response he'd given her when she breathed more air into him after he'd come to.

Kisses of life. That's what she liked to think of them as being. She'd given him kisses of life. And for a split second he'd almost, *almost* kissed her back.

Æquana shuddered. Somehow he'd managed to keep his grip on her hands as the tidal wave threw them back and forth through the frothing ocean like so much flotsam. Otherwise she

knew he would have been tossed to the surface in the back surge, and he would have died an agonizing death from nitrogen narcosis. When she'd realized he was out cold, she'd felt the most horrible sensation. It was as if her stomach had shrunk into itself, drawing all her insides in with it. But he'd continued to breathe, and as long as he did she knew she could gradually and safely bring him back topside.

Only when his tank had run dry, and his body had convulsed as it tried to breathe on its own did she panic again. She'd never had to give air to another person before. Not seriously. Oh, yes, there was that one time she and Geoffy were goofing around after that one mission down in the Florida Keys, and he'd wondered if she could breathe into his mouth. If it hadn't been for that time, she wouldn't have known it could be done. It wasn't anything the scientists had wanted her to test before then.

Breathing for him meant touching him. Touching his wide, muscular chest. Touching his warmth and his strength. And his scars.

Oh, Jesus. The scars. His body bore almost a dozen scars, or at least the parts she'd seen. Battle wounds. Visible medals of honor. There was a particularly interesting J-shaped one, like an inverted hook, right above his left nipple. They all looked painful.

A flush of heat went through her. He had so nonchalantly stripped in front of her when he'd put on his wetsuit. At first she'd been stunned beyond words. Of course, she'd stripped first, but that was expected, in order to put on the second skin. After her brain had absorbed the sight of the wall of ripped muscles, it had taken her a few more seconds to realize he was wearing a pair of Lycra jammers under his jeans.

They left nothing to the imagination. Could men really be that big? She blinked, remembering Geoffy. Remembering her one time, her one other observation of the equipment. Between Talon and Geoffy there was definitely no comparison.

But what drew her more was the smooth ripple of his mocha-colored skin. His body was totally hairless, enticing her hands to reach out and feel the smoothness of his stomach and abs, wondering if they was as rock hard soft as they looked. Even the chocolate brown nipples gave her pause.

Æquana reached out in the dark, imagining. Recalling. Her hands traced the air as she remembered the width of his arms. His hands were large and long-fingered, with blunt nails. Warm hands. Calloused hands. Hands that had killed. He'd touched her face, and her cheek still burned where he'd caressed it.

He'd caressed it.

His first words hadn't been about where they were, or what had happened. He'd asked about her. About how she felt. He was worried for her.

Was he worried about her because of *who* she was? Or *what* she was?

"John."

She spoke his name softly. There were microphones in the room, but they wouldn't be able to catch what she said. She'd make sure of it.

Æquana couldn't remember when she'd ever been so terrified as she'd been today. It had been her fault. She should have never moved that bomb. But Talon had taken the fall for her. He'd been the one to admit screwing up. Geoffy had also covered for her in the past. It was something partners did for each other, right? Next time, if it was her fault something went wrong, it would rightfully be her turn to shoulder the blame.

She rolled over and hugged the pillow closer to her. A twinge in her back reminded her of the muscles she'd pulled, but the relaxer was doing its job... too well. It was hard to stay awake.

She'd have sweet dreams tonight. Dreams of a café au lait man with eagle wings swooping down to lift her above the waves. When he'd shown her the transmitter, just when she was about to break down crying, she couldn't stop herself from hugging him. She wished, though, that he'd put his arms

around her and held her. Held her and hushed her and reassured her they were safe, and they would always be safe as long as he was there to protect her.

Four hundred and thirteen days. He promised her four hundred and thirteen more days. After that....

The first surge of tears overwhelmed her. Quietly, so as not to alert whoever was on duty to watch her, Æquana wept into the pillow, muffling her sobs.

Damn her, but she wanted his mouth. She wanted his kisses, and she wanted to be held in those strong, safe arms. She wanted to be protected. And maybe, with luck, a little honest love or affection. Why he had affected her this way, she had no idea. But for some unexplainable reason, Talon had somehow managed to touch that part of her she'd shown to only one other person in her life. Somehow, he'd eased around her Ice Queen façade and seen the real her. And still he had wanted to stay. With her. The freakish mermaid woman.

"John."

If life would grant her one wish, and only one, she would wish that at the end of his four hundred and thirteen days he would re-think about staying on. That, in the end, he would decide he didn't want to leave. That he wanted to stay on and be her partner. Permanently. That's all she'd ask for. Just that... and maybe one little honest kiss.

Heaven knew she had never wished for anything so hard before. Wasn't it time she was due?

Dreams

The look of relief on her face had been too raw for him not to have noticed. She'd laughed when he'd proposed staying with her for the full term, and it had been a genuine laugh of delight. Her face had lit up like the sun, her hair like soft clouds around her angelic face. The Ice Queen melted, leaving behind an exquisitely rare and beautiful young woman.

One day. They'd had one day together and nearly gotten themselves blown up. But that one day had been all the time Talon had needed to know he was committed far deeper than he could ever have imagined.

Dammit to hell. He should be frightened out of his ever-loving mind. He should have backed off the moment he touched her face, and then cursed himself for the images that had flooded his thoughts. He should have ended everything—the week's probation, everything—the moment she hugged him, and he felt his body responding. Not with lust. Not with a sexual fever. But with the overwhelming desire to hold her. To enfold her and keep her against him, and to never let her go.

Talon touched his mouth. The memory of her lips was still fresh. The ocean had been cold, but her mouth had been as warm as the breath she'd given him. She'd held his head between her palms and covered his mouth with hers. To give him life. To keep him alive.

Oh, God, he wanted to hold her, but she was a fragile, unique creature. The daughter of both man and sea. He was afraid one day temptation would be so great that he'd accidentally hurt her. He feared damaging her, breaking a bone, or possibly injuring something to the point where she could no longer be that breathtaking being he saw ribboning her way through the water and over the waves.

But he had his dreams.

Talon rolled onto his back and closed his eyes. Tomorrow morning he would be taking the nine o'clock flight back to Colorado Springs. The knowledge was only made manageable by knowing that he would be called back. And soon. He hadn't called Slaw to let him know they'd decided to forget the week's probation nonsense and go for the whole enchilada.

Four hundred and thirteen days. He'd have a little over a year to be with her. And when his contract was up....

Her hair was like soft down. Even when it was wet, it swept over his bare skin, leaving little trails of pure fire in its wake. Remembering its texture, Talon could feel himself respond. The tightness in his groin reminded him of other things.

He'd seen her body. He couldn't help but realize that, for all her slimness, she was perfectly proportioned. Talon had always believed he was a boob man, eager for the sight of a nice set of double Ds. How wrong he'd been. It wasn't the breasts. Or the legs or the ass. It was the whole package. The sculptured face with eyes so transparent he could see all the way into her soul. The graceful yet surprisingly muscular body with firm thighs. Her small but beautiful breasts with their dusky rose-colored buds. His hands clenched involuntarily as he wondered how they'd feel in his grasp. Talon found no fault with her body. No

more than he could find fault with any other part of her. Because the more he came to know her, talking to her, and learning about her, the less he found that he could use as an excuse to turn his back on her.

You need me for your partner. Damn right she did. If that Geoffy guy had still been with her, the Navy would be combing the waters for some sign of them right now. He'd found her... or, rather, she had been offered to him when she most critically needed his expertise.

Flipping open his cell phone, Talon punched the number two and waited for the circuits to connect. Three rings later, a beloved voice came over the line.

"Buck's Emporium."

"Hey, old man."

"Hey! How ya doing, Johnny? How'd the trip go?"

He always told Buck everything. Everything. The old man was wiser than any dozen governmental desk jockeys put together, especially since he knew his grandson's exclusive line of work. They would talk in code as long as Talon had to use the emporium's land line. He never took chances, in case someone ever decided to put a tap on the number. "Trip went well. I'll be coming in tomorrow. How's the weather holding out?"

"Hotter'n hell. Bringing me back a souvenir?"

Talon laughed. The old geezer wanted to know if he'd be bringing back any juicy gossip. Man, was he going to get an earful. "Oh, yeah. A whole suitcase full," Talon promised.

"Well, I'll have a pot of coffee waiting on you, then. Have a safe trip!"

"Thanks. See you soon."

He hung up, laying the cell on the bedside table. The digital clock near his head read a little after eleven. Talon wondered what Æquana was doing.

Maja. Mah-yah. Van Der Beek.

She'd pulled some muscles in her back. She was probably sound asleep, dutifully medicated. More than likely she'd still be comatose by the time he caught his plane.

Shit. He didn't even have a number where he could reach her. But Slaw would.

So would Geoffy.

Talon bolted upright in bed. Turning on the overhead reading lamp, he searched the nightstand for the phone book. For the first time in his life, Talon was going to start taking advantage of the numerous contacts he'd made during his years in the service.

First, Johns Hopkins.

"Hello, I need the number for Dr. Giles Millerby's answering service. Yes. Thanks."

Then, the second call.

"I need to leave a message with Dr. Millerby. Yes. Tell him the Captain requests information. Yes, that's right. Give him that message. He knows the number. Thanks."

Talon sighed as he hung up his cell. Lying back on the bed, he held the phone in his hands, waiting for it to vibrate with an incoming call. He hoped it wouldn't be a long wait. Wouldn't matter anyway if it was. God knew he wouldn't get much sleep that night. Every time he closed his eyes, his inner sight saw a pair of sea-blue-green eyes surrounded by a wealth of foam-white hair.

Maja.

Fuckaduck. What the hell was he getting himself into?

Visitation

Visitation was from nine to ten in the morning. It was the only chance he'd get to talk to the man before he had to catch the next plane for home.

Millerby had called back within twenty minutes. Five minutes later, Talon had the information he was needing. Oddly, once he'd made his mind up what his next plan of action was going to be, he'd had no difficulty falling asleep.

But he'd had those dreams. And his body remembered them as well.

The hospice was a two-story affair that had once been an off-campus dormitory for the learning hospital. The man he was looking for was on the first floor, in the next-to-last room of the east wing.

Talon knocked softly on the door before walking in. Geoff Buehrig eyed him carefully from his bed.

"Who are you?"

"Name's John Eagletalon. I came to talk to you about someone we both care about."

The man hesitated for only a second. "Maja." Talon nodded, taking a seat by the bed. "You her new partner?"

"Yeah."

The terminally ill man coughed slightly, and reached for the glass on the table beside his bed. Talon watched as he took a sip. His lips trembled on the straw. Once he replaced the glass, he gave Talon a long look. "She told me about you. Said you called her a cold bitch."

"Yeah, I did."

"Good for you. She can be one when she wants to be."

Talon smiled.

"She also told me she trusted you. How'd you manage that, Mr. Eagletalon?"

He could feel the small knot inside his chest tightening up. "When did you talk to her last?" he asked.

"Last night. She calls me, or I call her, about every other day. Or she comes by to visit." Buehrig coughed again. "So... you gonna answer my question?"

"She trusts *you*, doesn't she?" Talon replied defensively.

"Yeah, but it took us a good month before I was certain. And you did it in, what? One day?"

Talon shrugged. "Go figure. Guess when two people find themselves almost blown up by an underwater explosive, it creates a bit more trust than usual."

As he expected, the man's eyes widened considerably. "No shit! Is she okay? She sounded a bit... wuffy."

Talon chuckled. "Wuffy?"

"Woozy. Breathly. They must've dosed her up good."

"She pulled some back muscles, but nothing serious," Talon assured him.

Buehrig nodded slowly. He was tired. But then, the man was battling inoperable cancer. Talon's source had let him know that, even after losing both testicles and a part of his colon, and undergoing several months of chemotherapy, the cancer had

reappeared in three more sites. The man was slowly being eaten alive. His time on earth was measured now in days, not months.

"What did you want to know?"

"You worked with her for two years. What services did you bring with you?"

Talon was met with an amused grin. "What services?"

"I mean, were you part of the Green Berets? The Marines?"

"I was an intern."

"Intern? Of what branch of medicine?" Talon pressed.

Buehrig gave a watery chuckle. "No, you don't get it. I was an intern. A go-fer. I worked for Senator McCauley." Seeing the confused expression on the man's face, he grinned. "I was delivering an 'eyes only' message to Rear Admiral Slaw from the Senator. I was told to be bullish, to get an answer back to him before the hour, even if I had to barge through closed doors. Hey, when you're allowed that kind of power, you don't screw around, you know? Anyway, I barged into this big office, and there's this loud argument going on. At the time I didn't know who everyone was, but it was Æquana, the Admiral, Draybeck, two grungy-looking, testosterone-overloaded military types, and Dr. Shipp. Next thing I knew, Æquana grabs me and says, '*This* one! I choose *him*!'" The chuckle turned into another cough. "Lordy, if I'd only known what I'd set myself up for!"

"You became her partner then?"

"Yeah, but they had to put me through a bit of training, so I'd understand some things. It wasn't until a week or so later before she explained how they'd given her an ultimatum. She had to choose one of those men... no, wait... they told her she had to make up her mind and choose a partner. Yeah, that was it. In those words. Pure happenstance."

"Do you regret any of it?"

This time the look he got from the patient was filled with anger. "Regret any of it? Hell, no! I know guys who'd give their right ball to have the chance I was given. The missions were sheer misery, but we had our fun."

We had our fun. Talon felt a coldness come over him. He swallowed hard. "Your missions were misery, eh?" he repeated, forcing himself to smile.

Nodding slowly, Buehrig reached up with a hand ravaged by the wasting effects of the disease and adjusted the air hose in his nose. "You'll need to get her to tell you about some of them. All in all, I think we were battling about a good six or seven hundred series before I got sick. We went on that last assignment down in the Keys, and that's when I realized I couldn't go on." His heavy sigh was filled with more than regret. "God, I miss her."

"You're still in love with her." Talon was careful to keep any inflection out of his voice.

"Yeah." A simple, direct answer.

Talon felt his hands clench and unclench in his lap. "Buehrig, I'm going to ask you a question that you have every right to decline to answer. But I have a very good reason for asking you this."

Brown eyes drifted back to him.

"Did you ever sleep with her?"

The last thing he expected was the laugh that erupted into a hacking fit of coughing. It took a good minute for the man to recover enough to look back over at him. "I don't know whether to answer you, or to ask why in the hell do you want to know. Oh, fuck it. I'll do both. Yeah. We did. Once. Just the once. It was... it was New Year's Eve. I took Maja out to one of those nice restaurants for their champagne dinner. She'd never had champagne before. She doesn't drink alcohol, in case you don't know that already. Anyway, after two glasses, she was feeling ripe. I'd had a few more, and I was getting pretty randy, too. You have to remember, Talon, we'd been working together for a little over a year by this time. She was hungry. And curious. I'd been hot for her for months now. I wasn't going to turn her away. We went to my place."

Buehrig paused, reliving the moment in his memory before he continued in a softer tone. A sadder tone. "Nothing.

Absolutely nothing. We didn't click. I mean, I got off, but she didn't. We loved each other, but not like that. More like brother and sister. We didn't understand it at first. Not until later. Do you get what I'm saying?"

"Yeah," Talon nodded, feeling the knot inside his stomach slowly loosening up. "You thought you loved her romantically, only it didn't turn out that way."

"Yeah. Exactly."

"Were you her first?"

A darkness seemed to descend upon the man. Anger so thick and potent clouded his face to the point where Talon grew alarmed. "That's a double-ended answer," Buehrig practically spat. "Technically, yeah. I was her first. But she wasn't a virgin, if that's what you're wanting to know. Not after what those bastards did to her."

The knot became a clot of cold iron. Talon felt himself growing nauseous. "Did they hurt her?"

Brown eyes, now nearly black with his pent-up hatred, pierced Talon. "Promise me one thing, would you? Grant a dying man a last wish?"

"I'll do my best."

"If there's any way in your power... if you have any say-so, any pull, any connections you can call on, get her out of there. Get her away from those fucking scientists so she can lead a halfway normal life. Promise me?"

"What did they do to her?"

"*Promise me, damn you!*"

"Tell me what I want to know first, and then I'll let you in on a little secret," Talon promised.

The man was breathing heavily. His anger was agitating him to the point where Talon was afraid he'd have some kind of reaction.

"When she was eighteen, those bastards wanted to see if her abnormalities were a birth defect, or if there was a chance they could be genetic."

"Oh, Christ..." Talon wasn't aware of the blood draining out of his body until he glanced down to see his hands clenching the arms of the chair until his knuckles were white.

Buehrig nodded. "They artificially inseminated her. She got pregnant, but she miscarried in her fourth month. Of course, they had to bust her cherry to get the fetus out and clean her up.... It was a little boy, very normal, no gills, no flippered feet. Thank God they decided not to go that route again, but it scarred her. She's buried the memory deep inside herself. Please don't let her know I was the one who told you."

Talon raised a shaky hand to his forehead. It was too much to assimilate at the moment.

"Your turn. What were you going to tell me, Talon?" The man was wanting his reward for going first.

"In four hundred and thirteen days, my term of service will be over, and these bureaucratic military types will no longer have any control over me," Talon told him. "My record is spotless, Buehrig. My contacts are far-reaching, and I've been trained to protect... and kill, if necessary. In four hundred and thirteen days, I'm walking away from D.C. without ever looking back. And on that day, I'm taking Maja with me."

Conversations

“Hey, M! They’re calling for you up at the front desk.”

Before she could ask who was needing her, the young medical grad had disappeared from sight. Sighing, Æquana closed the newspaper, folding it slowly to leave it on the table. She carefully got to her feet and reached for the robe on the hook behind the door, tying the sash around her waist as she headed for the front entryway.

He spotted her before she saw him. “Hey, MG. How ya feeling?” he drawled.

Æquana froze in her tracks. “Talon?” Her first response was to break into smile. He was dressed in jeans again, but this time he had on a nice long-sleeved dress shirt. His hair was pulled back into its usual ponytail, but that was okay. He looked good. In fact, her second response would have been to rush up to him and give him a hug, but he crossed his arms before she could do so. “Didn’t you have a morning flight to catch?”

“I had some last-minute details to take care of first. Is there some place where we can talk business privately?”

"Yeah. Sure. Follow me."

She led him into an antechamber off of an examination room. It held two chairs, a small end table with a stack of outdated magazines, and a floor scale. The small alcove behind the door held an assortment of medical supplies, including a stethoscope and blood pressure cuff. It was almost identical to the room he'd been examined in when he'd brought her back the day before, Talon realized.

Æquana took the closest chair. Talon noticed her slow, smooth movements. "Still feeling a bit of pain?" he asked softly as he took the other chair.

She flashed him a gentle smile. "You're a big boy to have to drag so far and fast through the water."

"I'm sorry," he chuckled, and immediately she knew he wasn't.

"What did you need to discuss?"

Her eyes grew wide when he produced the cell phone from his shirt pocket and handed it to her. Their hands touched, and his warm fingers shot sparks all the way into her lungs. The air grew warmer, thicker. Almost too thick to breathe, like when she was in deep water.

Talon saw the rise and fall of her gills as her cheeks went pink. "Are you okay?" he softly asked, wondering why they would act that way when she wasn't submerged.

He had to keep their conversation low; she may not think the room was bugged, but one could never be too careful.

"Yeah. Fine." She remembered she hadn't answered his first question. "I got a good night's sleep, thanks to whatever Dr. Shipp gave me. I'm supposed to take it slow for another day, just to make sure." She glanced at the phone in her hand in puzzlement. "Talon, I already have a cell."

"Not like this one. It's one of those prepaid, disposable jobs. It's untraceable and untrackable. I have one, too. I've already programmed two numbers in it. The first is to my disposable. The second is to my grandfather's store. If you ever need to call

me, MG, for anything, anytime of the day, doesn't matter, use this phone when you do. If I don't answer, don't be alarmed. Cell usage is sporadic in Colorado; you might or might not be able to reach me. If it's an emergency, call Buck and he'll come get me. There's a scenic overlook off the highway, about six miles from my place where I know I can get a good signal, and I'll call you back."

His eyes were soft as they looked at her. For the first time she saw they weren't really black in color, but a dark, rich brown that almost appeared black. "I can call you for anything? At any time?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

His chuckle came from deep inside his chest. Sitting this closely to him, the both of them hunched over to where only a few inches separated them, Æquana was intensely aware of the warmth emanating from his body. He had a clean, earthy smell to him. For a moment she closed her eyes and wished she could lay her head on his shoulder, just so she could breathe him in for a few minutes longer. Or for a few hours longer.

The chuckling stopped. "Why? Because we're partners now. We need to get to know each other better if we're going to put our lives in each other's hands. Did you ever read *The Odyssey* by Homer?"

"Oh, heavens, don't tell me you're going to quiz me on something I had to read years ago," she grumped, adding a grin. "Helen of Troy and all that stuff, right?"

"Somewhat. What I was getting at was there was this guy named Odysseus. He went on this long journey and was gone for twenty years. When he got back home, he found his wife was being forced to find another husband by this group of scoundrels."

"Gee. Sounds like what the government is usually up to," she teased softly. Her remark earned her another laugh.

"Anyhow," Talon continued, "he went up to his wife and told her to cease her looking because he, her husband, had returned. She took one look at this scraggly beggar and said she had one question for him. One question that only her real husband would know the answer to. So she asked him."

"And he knew the answer, right?" She perked up. "Something about the bedpost on their marriage bed being carved out of a living tree, wasn't it?"

Talon smiled. "Atta girl. That's right. And that's why I got these phones for us. So we can talk. Learn more about each other. Then, in case something should happen, and we need to confirm ourselves to each other, to be absolutely certain we're in contact with each other, we'll be able to ask that one question only the other would know the answer to." He paused for a second. "Colorado is quite a distance away from D.C. If we're supposed to be partners, we going to need to keep in contact, and not lose touch."

Reaching up to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear, Æquana started to ask a question, but stopped herself, biting her upper lip instead. Talon saw her reaction.

"What? What did you start to say?"

"How long will you be gone?"

"Can't be too long. I haven't told Slaw we're going the entire year, so he's still thinking we're doing the week's probation thing. It's going to be all right, MG. Listen. I'm going to give you a third number. It's not programmed in, so you're going to have to memorize it. Don't write it down. Don't put it anywhere except right here," he told her, tapping her forehead. "Use a mnemonic device if you need."

"What's the number to?"

"To my personal cell. Only a handful of people have the number. Guard it carefully, and don't use it unless it's absolutely necessary, and you can't get me either through this cell or through Buck. Okay?"

She nodded, and he slowly gave her all ten digits. She repeated them twice, then closed her eyes and tried to find a pattern to help her keep it stored. When she was certain she had it, she opened her eyes. He was checking his watch.

"I need to be going. Are you going to be all right while I'm gone?" he asked softly.

She nodded as she replied, "Yeah." But already she could feel the tightness in her throat. Swallowing didn't help, and before she knew it the tightness had gone down into her chest.

Talon saw the fluttering of her gills, and finally understood what their movement meant. She was upset. Their wavering was as damning as tears.

Slowly he drew in, bringing his face closer to hers. Æquana closed her eyes, waiting for his goodbye kiss. Hoping for it. She literally shivered when she felt his lips on her cheek, and disappointment flooded her like a drenching storm. When he pulled back, she had to lower her eyes so he wouldn't see the quickly rising tears.

"Talk to you later, MG. And, remember, don't let anyone get their hands on that phone. When you've used up all the minutes on it, don't throw it away. Burn it, and make sure it's totally incinerated. I'll get you another phone."

She nodded, keeping her head down. It wasn't until after he had left that she pressed a fist against her mouth and let the warm tears fall into her lap as she fought the gray darkness that wanted to wrap around her.

What had he done to her to make her this emotional? She'd only known him for a little more than twenty-four hours, and already she felt as if she were losing a large part of herself. It was like he was holding a chunk of her and taking it with him, and it hurt like hell.

It was several minutes before she felt enough in control of herself again. She went over to the small sink in the alcove and threw cold water on her face. Taking a deep breath, she hurried to her room and turned on her computer, quickly scanning the

internet for flights from D.C. to Colorado Springs. With his credentials, she knew he would be able to slip onto the plane without having to go the security routine regular passengers were forced to take. There was a plane leaving at eleven. The airport was less than ten minutes away. Æquana smiled. She knew his flight, his arrival, and his one stop-over. Now it was simply a matter of waiting.

The phone rang twice before his familiar chuckle came over the line. "What are you doing? Stalking me?"

"You said I could call anytime for any reason. That extends for no reason at all, doesn't it?" she replied petulantly but with a definite tease in her tone of voice. "How's Dallas?"

"Crowded. Boy, you must have some good contacts to be able to track me down this quickly."

Æquana laughed. She couldn't believe how happy she was just to hear his voice. "You're such a dunce. It's not hard to google all flights from D.C. to Colorado, and make an educated guess which one you were going to be on."

He chuckled again, a deep, throaty sound. He'd been teasing her as well. "Oh, I forgot to mention earlier, the phone's programmed to vibrate when it rings. No sound. You'll have to have it on you to know when I call... *if* I call."

"You bastard," she murmured softly, smiling.

"Give me my number," he abruptly demanded. She spouted it off without having to think twice. "Good. Intelligence works on you."

She frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well," he drawled slowly, "seeing as you're blonde...."

If he had been with her, she would have slugged him. "Keep it up, bub. The cold bitch still lurks beneath a very thin surface." She got an open laugh from him for that one. "So how long is your layover?"

"I'm heading over to the gate now," he told her. "I need to speed it up. They should start boarding in another ten minutes."

"How long can we keep talking?" she wanted to know. Already she knew she didn't want to lose contact with him again, even though it was unavoidable.

"You mean, how long before I have to hang up? Until the flight attendant comes over and reminds me to shut it down."

There was moment of silence between them. In the background she could hear the hustle and bustle of the busy airport. She gave a deep sigh. "Talon?"

"Still here, MG."

"Thanks for the phone. It was a good idea."

"You're welcome. Have you taken any more muscle relaxant?"

"No. Stuff makes me loopy. I won't take it until tonight. Have you had anything to eat?"

"Buck will have something for me when I get home."

A sense of fogginess, of un-belonging rose up inside her. Home. He had a home to go to. And someone waiting for him when he got there. Someone he loved and cared about, and who loved and cared about him in return. For her entire life, all she'd known as home was the clinic and the labs. And although she had tried to make her small, private bedroom as personal and secluded as she could, it would always be a converted storage closet at the rear of the building.

"Talon... tell me about your cabin. Tell me about Colorado."

"Oh, geesh. I only have another fifteen minutes. Twenty, tops," he laughed softly. "Well, I'll give you the *Reader's Digest* version. Buck owns about three hundred eighty acres up in the mountains outside Pueblo. The land's been in the family for generations. My mother was his only child. I lived with him and worked at the emporium until I graduated high school. Went directly into the Navy the week after. After I was assigned to Special Ops, I was injured during my first assignment. During my convalescence, Buck carved out a chunk of land and gave it to me to put a house on. I cleared the land and built the cabin

during that time, so I'd have a place to call my own when I was between assignments. Took me about six months to get the foundation and outer walls done, and another two years to finish the interior. So, there you have it, in a nutshell."

"You said it was a house, then you called it a cabin. Which one is it?"

"A log house, actually. Two bedrooms, two baths, kitchen. You know."

"No," she said softly. "I don't know, Talon, but it sounds like... like heaven. Does Buck live with you?"

"No. He has this mobile home behind the emporium. He's lived there as long as I've been with him," Talon told her.

"How far is the emporium from your place?"

"Six point two miles exactly."

"And the scenic overlook is six miles away, as well?"

"In the *other* direction, MG."

"Oh," she giggled lightly. In her ear she heard a popping sound, then a click. There was a sudden damper to the noise in the background. "Talon, what was that?"

"Just buckled my seatbelt. Miracle of miracles, looks like we're going to be leaving on time. Hate to do this, but I'm going to have to turn the phone off now."

"Call me? When you get to Colorado?"

"Promise. Talk to you later."

The line went dead. Æquana looked at the window in the cell. **CALL ENDED.** God, could there be any two worse words in the English language?

She felt drained. Useless. She hoped it was the medicine making her feel this way. Tucking the phone into her jeans pocket, she went to see what Dr. Shipp had scheduled for that afternoon. As long as she could keep busy, the time would fly by. He said he would call her when he landed in Colorado.

Soon. She'd get to talk to him again soon, but it wouldn't be soon enough to suit her.

Separated

She was frantic with worry when the phone finally rang around six-thirty. "Talon?"

"What's your favorite color?"

"Dammit, Talon! Your plane landed two hours ago my time! I was getting worried!"

"Sorry, MG. We've been stuck in a holding pattern for over an hour. If you check the Weather Channel, you'll see we're being hit with a massive thunderstorm. Didn't mean to worry you."

Just hearing his voice was all she needed to soothe her ragged nerves. Almost as second nature, Æquana grabbed the remote and turned on the television, switching over to the Weather Channel and cranking up the volume.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"In my room. Can you hear me okay?"

"Yeah."

"They've had me monitored in here ever since—" She took a quick, painful breath, and stopped. Her whole body had gone

numb, cold, as she fought the memory. *No. No, no. Breathe deeply. Clear your mind.*

"MG?"

It's going to be okay. You're okay. Just put it in a pocket and zip it shut.

"Maja?"

At the sound of her name, Æquana opened her eyes. Her face felt wet. Wiping it with the back of her hand, she discovered she'd been crying.

"Maja, speak to me."

"It's... I'm okay. Sorry." Her voice was still shaky, but she could manage.

"What happened?" he asked. He was worried. Almost frightened.

"N—... nothing. Just a twinge. Uhh... green."

"Huh?"

"My favorite color? Green." She could hear the sound of a car engine go by. He was heading for the parking lot. "My turn. What kind of car do you drive?"

"Don't drive a car. I have a pickup."

"A truck? Get out."

He laughed. "What's the matter, MG? What did you think I drove?"

She shrugged, then realized he wouldn't see it. "I don't know. But a truck was somewhere at the bottom of the list. So, what's *your* favorite color?"

"Hey, no fair. I get to ask what you drive."

"Guess."

"It has to be something sporty."

"Okay. You're warm."

"Convertible."

She blinked in astonishment. "Who have you been talking to?"

Talon grinned into the phone. "It's my job to size up people, MG. How am I doing so far?"

"Keep going. I know somehow you're cheating. I just haven't figured out how yet."

"Sweetheart, you wear Ginobli shoes and a Buegentine watch that must've put you back a good four grand. You would not lower yourself to anything less than thirty or forty grand in a vehicle. You love speed. I saw the look on your face when you raced underwater. I would make a wild guess and say something along the lines of a Beemer."

It sounded like the phone had gone dead. "MG?" he half-laughed.

"You cheated," came the terse reply, then she laughed as well.

Talon found his truck without any problems, tossed his duffle into the front seat, and cranked the engine. He'd bought an earpiece for the cell at one of the airport shops while in Dallas. With the phone safely buttoned in his front pocket, he had his hands free.

"You didn't tell me your favorite color," she accused him.

"Red."

Her giggle was low, breathy. "Green and red. Sheesh, we sound like Christmas."

He pulled out of the parking lot and headed for the pay booth.

"Guess who called me earlier?" she asked him.

"Definitely not Slaw, or you'd already be telling me to get my butt back to D.C."

"Geoffy called me."

He waited for her next sentence as he paid the parking toll and slowly pulled away, heading for the interstate.

"Thank you, Talon. He told me you'd gone to talk to him. Let him get to know you. That means a lot to me."

"You're welcome."

He heard her sighing. In the background was the familiar singsong music that played whenever the local weather was on the screen.

They've had me monitored in here ever since—

He could feel his whole body tense up when she'd started to tell him. It hadn't helped matters when he heard her fighting the nightmare, fighting the tears, fighting to keep herself together long enough to regain a sense of calm.

He cursed softly where she wouldn't hear him.

"He likes you. He... he told me he felt relieved to have gotten to know you. And know you're going to be there for me, like he would be if he hadn't gotten sick." She hiccuped slightly. "I'm not making a whole lot of sense, am I?"

"Yeah," he answered. "You're making perfect sense. I felt it would only be the right thing to do. If the situations were reversed, I'd expect your new partner to come see me, and give me that same peace of mind."

A short silence followed his last remark. Talon took the opportunity to open his personal cell, knowing Æquana would hear his other conversation.

"Hey, Buck? Yeah, we had to wait out that storm that blew through. Look, I'm just now clearing 25. I should be there in a couple of hours. Okay, great. See you soon. 'Bye.'"

"You call your grandfather by his first name?" she asked.

"Yeah. Are your grandparents still alive, MG? Or do you know?"

"I never knew my grandparents, either side. I don't know if they're alive or dead." She gave another long, drawn-out sigh. "Is it still raining?"

"Little bit. Hey, MG? Other than when you've been on a mission, have you ever ventured away from that clinic on your own?"

"Sure. I go into D.C. shopping every so often. Why?"

"I meant out out. I meant have you ever taken a vacation outside of Washington?"

"Sure. A couple of times, after we'd finished an assignment, I got to stay an extra couple of days if I wanted to."

"No, MG. You're not getting it. That's not a vacation. That's an extended assignment. Have you ever gotten into your car, or on a plane, all by yourself, and just left the area to visit someplace where you've never been? Someplace to sightsee? Someplace where you may never be called to do a job, and see what there is about the place?"

"They won't let me. You know that, Talon."

Yeah, he knew that, but he had to ask anyway. "Have you ever thought about it?"

"Not really. Well... maybe once. Just to get away from this damn place." There was a brief silence, and her voice came back filled with a small sunrise of hope. "Do you think I'd ever get to see Colorado?"

"You never know. Would you like to?"

Talon didn't know he was holding his breath while he waited for her answer, until she replied, "As long as you take me there, I'd give anything to see Colorado."

The rain had started up again. Talon turned on the wipers. "Give me the number," he ordered briskly. She obeyed.

"Talon? How many minutes do I have left on this thing?"

"Don't worry about it. I paid for plenty. Of course, at the rate we're going, I'll be lucky if it lasts the rest of the week."

He could hear the squeak of the bed as she settled down into it. Her mouth drew closer to the receiver, and the sound of her breathing was a gentle rhythm in his ear. "Where are you now?" she whispered.

In the darkness with the road stretched before him and her presence filling his head, Talon could almost imagine her in his arms, the two of them lying together in the night and watching the sky pouring out the stars. "Are you lying in the dark?" he asked just as softly.

"Yes."

It was just too tempting. "I'm alone on this vast, empty highway. It reminds me of the ocean, how open and never-ending it seems. There are millions of stars overhead, Maja.

They're so bright, you could almost reach out and pluck one."

She sighed, and the sound of it sent little streams of warmth all through him. "Bet they're beautiful."

"Can you see the moon?"

"No. There's no window. Why?"

"It's almost full. Will be completely full in a couple of nights. But right now it's this huge, milky drop off to my left. Go outside and look at it with me."

"Okay."

He heard her getting up and opening the bedroom door. The sound of the television faded. It was late in the clinic; the regular employees had already called it a day and gone home.

She greeted someone. Probably the night guard. A flat slap sounded when she pushed on the bar on the outer door, and then an awed, "Wow. It's gorgeous!"

There was a crackle. He was beginning to go up the first incline, through the mountains. "MG? Can you still hear me?"

"Yeah, barely. What's happening?"

"We're starting to lose contact. We're going to have to close this down for the night."

"Talon... no." There was another crackle of static. He'd lose her any second.

"Sorry, Maja. I'll call you soon. Promise."

"Talon?" There was no mistaking the quiver in her voice.

"G'night, Maja. Tomorrow."

There was no response. Talon dug the phone out of his pocket, hitting a key so the fluorescent light in the window would come on. **NO SERVICE.**

"Damn."

He jerked the hands-free jack out of his ear and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. Quietly he replayed their last two conversations over and over in his mind, like a favorite song he wanted to hear repeatedly.

As he reached the summit, miles away to his right he spotted the blinking tower. Quickly he pulled his own cell out to check

his messages. There were none. Double damn. That meant Slaw didn't have anything for them yet.

Yet.

Talon slammed his hand on the steering wheel. *Look at me, he chided himself. I'm a complete wreck. Buck, you're going to have a fine time listening to me tonight. And it's going to be interesting to see if you're seeing what I'm seeing... or if it could be something else.*

Pushing the speed limit, Talon made good time, turning off the interstate just outside of Pueblo and taking the secondary road that eventually meandered long enough to where it hit the Santa Fe Trail. But before it did, tourists passed Buck's Emporium. The huge log trading post, with its gift shop and small café, was the perfect place to stop for a short while.

The neon CLOSED sign was on when he pulled up. Before he had shut the door to the truck, he saw his grandfather standing in the doorway, waiting and watching. "I thought that storm might put you back getting in on time," the old man commented.

"Turbulence was a bitch," Talon replied, walking into the building. He continued on through the store until he reached the café. He tossed his duffle into a booth and dropped into a nearby chair. As promised, the old man had a pot of coffee going. Buck poured them both a cup, and brought it over to the table to join his grandson. For a long minute Talon felt himself being scrutinized. The man had x-ray eyes. Talon wouldn't be surprised if he didn't read minds, as well.

"You're different," Buck stated flatly. He was answered with a tired sigh as Talon sweetened his coffee.

"Think so?"

"What's her name?"

Talon nearly dropped his cup. Damn! He'd never figure out how the man was able to see right through him. Smiling, he tried the evasive tactic first, knowing he was only postponing the inevitable. "You mean the person I'm working with now?"

"If that's the one who's got you floundering like a fish out of water, yeah. Her."

Odd, that his grandfather should pick that analogy. "Her code name is Æquana. Her given name is Maja. Van Der Beek."

"She pretty?"

"Yeah."

"Smart?"

"Yes."

"Is she in love with you, too?"

"Dammit, Buck!"

Buck burst out laughing. At sixty-nine, he still had all of his teeth, and they gleamed white in the sallow light of the café.

"Man, you got it bad. That's all I can say."

"She's a mermaid, Buck."

The old man didn't even blink. "A real one?"

"Well... yeah. She has gills. And flippers for feet. She's damn good at what she does."

"And you're working with her now? So what's the problem?"

Talon put down his cup and began to replay the entire sequence of events from the past two days, beginning with the fact that he still owed the military another fourteen months of active duty. Buck listened quietly, soaking up how his grandson was relating the story, as well as what he was saying. At one point he got up to refill their cups, but Talon waved it off.

"I've got to get some decent sleep."

"Sounds to me like you're not going to get any, and it won't be because of my coffee."

Talon gave the old man a pleading look, then rubbed his hands over his face. "Go ahead, Buck. Give me some sage advice. God knows I could use some right about now."

"You say she's pretty much a prisoner, right?"

"In a way, that's about the meat of it. Buehrig told me not to let anyone know if we were getting close. Because the moment

they get wind, they'll split us up. They don't want anyone coming between them and her. It's almost like slavery, Buck. And Maja... she has no idea what life is really like. She doesn't know what a home is. There's never been anything remotely normal in her life. Her bedroom used to be a storage closet, for crying out loud!"

The old man nodded, pursing his lips as he mulled. "Have you slept with her?"

"No. I haven't even... even touched her. At least, not in the romantic sense."

"You haven't spoken about how you feel?"

"No."

"Why not?"

The question was too funny not to laugh. "Why? Oh, Jesus, Buck! I've only known her for two days!"

"Sometimes, when the souls of past lovers finally find each other in their new lives, they know from the moment they first meet they were destined to be together."

"Shit, Buck! I didn't ask for any of your Indian legend spirituality crap!" Angrily, Talon got to his feet and reached for his duffle bag, when the phone began to ring. Talon froze. It was ten p.m. The shop had been closed for two hours.

"That's probably her again," Buck commented nonchalantly.

Talon turned to him. "*Again?* Dammit, Buck! And when were you going to tell me?"

He hurried for the phone as the old man cackled behind his back. Grabbing the receiver, he gave his grandfather a burning glare as he answered, "Buck's Emporium."

There was a moment's hesitation. "Talon?"

"Hey, MG. What's up?"

He heard the relief in her voice. "I just wanted to make sure you got there all right, what with the bad weather and all."

"Buck said you phoned earlier."

"I... I was just checking to see if it was the right number."

"Why? You think I don't know the number to my own grandfather's place of business?" he teased.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," she shot right back at him.

"I got here okay, and now I'm on my way to my place." It was after midnight in D.C. "You need to be in bed yourself."

A bubble of laughter escaped her. "I already am."

"Then tuck yourself in and say 'Goodnight, Gracie.'"

"Goodnight, John."

"Night, Maja. I'll call you tomorrow."

As he hung up the receiver, he could see Buck grinning like a toothpaste advertisement. "Oh, yeah. You got it bad."

"Well, unless you have any *helpful* advice, best keep the rest of it to yourself. I'm having a difficult enough time as it is, trying to cope."

"There's only one way you're gonna get through this, and keep your sanity," Buck told him, handing over the duffle. Talon refused to rise to his bait, opting instead to take the bag and head back to his truck. Used to his grandson's obstinance, Buck followed him outside. "It's a three-step process."

"Okay. I'll bite. What are the three steps?" Talon closed the truck door and rolled down the window.

"One, make sure she's also in love with you. Two, figure out if you're both willing to work toward a commitment. That's the hardest part."

"And three?" Talon asked as he turned over the motor.

"Marry her."

Mission

The banging on his front door woke him. That meant it could only be one person, because in his experience bad guys never knocked first.

It was still dark out. A glance at the clock by the bed read almost a quarter after five. "Damn, Buck. What's the hurry?" Talon grumbled to himself as he rolled off the bed, when ice water suddenly surged through his veins.

Maja.

He threw open the front door to see his grandfather casually standing under the porch light. Not too far away Buck's new Ford sat idling with its lights on and the driver's side door open.

"She's holding on the phone."

"Is she okay?" The night had turned cold. Talon grabbed his keys and a jacket before running out the door. The phone to the emporium was also fixed to ring in the old man's mobile home. That way, whenever he had to leave the store, he wouldn't miss a call.

"Something about a new job," Buck threw over his shoulder before climbing back into the cab of his truck, slamming the door, and pulling out. Talon was right behind him.

He remembered he'd told her his place was a little more than six miles to the store. That meant she would be holding for more than fifteen minutes. As they reached the main road and turned onto it, he wondered why Slaw hadn't tried to reach him instead. Surely Corinth had given the guy the store's number.

Talon tried to shake the weariness still clouding his mind as he tailed his grandfather's pickup. If it was nearly half past five here, it was seven-thirty in D.C. Yeah, they would have notified her first thing.

She was still holding when he reached the phone. "Talon, there's a seven a.m. flight out of Colorado and arriving in Baltimore before two. I'm to meet you there."

"I'll call you when I get a signal," he told her, and hung up. He turned around to notice the old man giving him a small, secretive smile. "What?"

"You might want to think about leasing an apartment until your year is over," Buck suggested. "Sure would save the taxpayers some money, not to mention wear and tear on the truck."

"I think that's the first smart thing you've said to me since I've been back," Talon drily replied, and hurried to return to the house. He was dressed and re-packed, and on the road in less than fifteen minutes.

He was coming off the big hill when both phones went off. Talon answered the disposable first. "Hold on a sec." Then he answered his personal cell. "Eagletalon. Yeah, Slaw, I got word. I'm heading back to the airport as we speak. What's the job? Uh-huh. Yeah. So tell me why the government is stepping in. Yeah. All right, I'll take care of it. I'll touch base with you at the number on my display as soon as I touch down in Baltimore. Yeah. Right."

Hanging up, he plugged the hands-free set into his ear. "That was Slaw."

"Not exactly the first voice I like to hear in the morning," she grumbled.

"How'd you sleep? Is your back still bothering you?"

"No. My back's doing well. I've already done a couple of timed trials this morning, just to make sure I'm back in shape." She coughed a bit. Talon knew she sometimes had to do that to clear the last few drops of water from her windpipe whenever her body automatically switched gears. "Sorry you had to do a U-turn."

"I'm not," he told her. She was silent as she digested his answer. "You'll need to make sure they pack us some fireproof gear. Slaw said a lot of what we'd need is already at the site."

"Why fireproof gear?"

"We're going to put out an oilwell fire."

"Please tell me you're joking," Æquana said in disbelief. Remembering his conversation with Slaw that he'd let her overhear, she repeated, "Why is the government stepping in?"

"We're doing this rather under the blanket, it seems," Talon relayed. A vivid mental image shot into his sleep-deprived mind, and he instantly regretted his choice of words. However, she didn't seem to have notice his slip. "The President has been real gung-ho lately about lessening the country's reliance on foreign oil. Have you been reading about it in the papers recently?"

"Yeah. He's trying to step up oil production in the U.S. to lower our dependency on overseas oil. Is this what this is all about?"

"Well, yes and no. Oil production is not the government's job, so therefore it's not their responsibility if something goes wrong. I don't understand all the politicking going on, but in short, there's an oil fire out in the Atlantic, and we're going out there to shut it down."

"Talon, we're not firefighters."

"No, but do you know how to turn a steering wheel?" He heard her snort of derision. Rather than give her a chance to

make a remark, he said, "There's supposed to be some kind of shut-off valve underwater. It regulates the flow of oil. You'll need to go down, turn the wheel, shut off the oil. Voilà. Fire is snuffed out quicker than you can say 'lefty loosey, righty tighty.'"

"What's the catch?" she asked. "Why do I have to go? Why not send down a regular diver?"

"Maybe it's too deep."

"Then why not send a submersible?"

"Hell, MG, I don't know. We'll find out when we get there. When are you supposed to get to the airport?"

"They told me around one. What? Huh?" She faded out for a moment. In the background Talon could hear someone telling her something. She came back on the line soon after. "They want to take some x-rays," she apologized. "I gotta go. I'm sorry, Talon."

"No problem. Keep me posted."

"Promise," she whispered before disconnecting.

By the time they were finished with her and she was able to call back, Talon was aboard his flight. He heard the faint beep and saw where she'd left him a message, but it was too late to return her call.

Changeover was in Denver this time. There was barely enough time to make his connecting flight, but he managed to listen to her short message.

"Thumbs-up on my physical. I'll be waiting for you when you touch down."

I'll be waiting for you when you touch down. They had only been apart for less than a day, and already it felt like a week.

Oh, yeah. You got it bad. Talon smiled at Buck's wise-cracking remark.

Yeah. He had it bad.

Talon swore softly when he discovered his hands were clammy as the plane's wheels screeched on the tarmac. This was getting worse than bad, he realized. He was nervous with anticipation, and more perturbed with himself than he was upset. He was acting like a damned hormonal teenager instead of a fifteen-year combat veteran and ex-captain with a drawer full of decorations.

He grinned to himself. Æquana had once made a disparaging remark about men with medals. Maybe it would be wise if he kept this little bit of information to himself until they got to know one another better.

Once he exited the plane, a lieutenant in camouflage dress met him in the waiting area. "Eagletalon?"

Talon nodded.

"Please follow me, sir."

Talon swallowed his grin. It had been a while since he'd been called "sir."

He was led through the airport until they reached a service elevator. Down at pavement level, a small electric cart was waiting, its driver also in greens. The cart took them directly to a hangar on the other side of the airport where a jetcopter was warming up. Æquana was waiting for him with a blue folder in her hands. This time there was no way either of them could resist a quick hug.

"Hi."

"Hi," he whispered back, taking in her sparkling eyes. "Let's go."

He followed her into the copter, tossing his duffle on the opposite seat, and taking his right next to her. The door hissed to a close as they snapped on their seatbelts, and the jetcopter lifted upward so quickly their ears popped.

Talon was very much aware of the woman sitting beside him, pressing up against him, her thigh along his. It sorely tested his powers of concentration as he opened the folder and tried to study their assignment, which did little to give him any more

information than Slaw had. Glancing at her from the corner of his eye, he noticed her apple-green blouse and khaki pants. A multi-green chiffon scarf was tied around her throat. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, in the same style as he wore his. She looked young and refreshing, when it hit him.

"Hey, MG?"

"Umm?" She opened her eyes from where she'd been leaning against him, lightly dozing.

"Aren't you a little overdressed for the job?" he teased softly.

"We're heading for a drilling platform filled with men. Give me a break, Talon. I have a bathing suit on underneath."

"Sir?" The lieutenant from the airport addressed him. "Our ETA is seventeen minutes."

Talon thanked him and relaxed back in the padded seat. Beside him, Æquana sighed, letting out a throaty little noise as she rested her head on his shoulder. The turmoil in his stomach grew. The ache in his heart reached out, until he finally caved in and snaked an arm around her waist, leaving his hand resting on her hip. She responded with a tender smile as she snuggled against his collarbone.

She was warmth and comfort and innocence. For the umpteenth time Talon marveled at the billion-and-one shot that had created her. He closed his eyes to let himself savor the feel of her on his skin. The subtle pressure of her head and thigh. The perfect curve of her hip in his hand.

There was a very faint scent about her. Vaguely he wondered if she ever wore perfume, or if it was residue from her soap. Or if it was simply her. He would let his mind wander tonight, imagining pressing his face into the hollow of her throat, or against the warmth of her skin, just to discover where the scent originated.

But for now he needed to keep his mind clear for the job ahead.

The rig was an big affair, larger than a city block. Its four massive legs were planted deep into the ocean floor. As the 'copter approached, Talon saw the orangish flame shooting out of the top of the spindle. At this distance it resembled a birthday cake with a single candle.

He gave Æquana a little shake to get her attention, nodding toward the window for her to take a gander, but he didn't remove his hand. He wouldn't, until he absolutely needed to. She didn't appear to mind, anyway.

The 'copter circled once, descended slowly, and touched down on the helipad. Talon had the door open the moment they were grounded. He jumped onto the deck, reaching around and taking Æquana around the waist, and lifted her down next to him. Behind them additional gear was being dropped off.

Although the fire was at the other end of the platform, the heat it generated was intense. Most of the non-essential crew had already been evacuated, with a few more going back this trip with the 'copter. What crew was left wore the bright silver firefighting suits, which made them resemble astronauts in training.

A stocky man in a bright red vest and a yellow hardhat moved up to greet them, holding out two more hardhats. "Glad you could come," he yelled above the sound of the engines. "I'm Ernest Nolen. Put these on and follow me. Hurry."

They put on the headgear and followed the foreman as the 'copter rose and took off. Around the deck another half-dozen or so men watched their arrival. Talon gave each one a quick inspection, but saw no reason to be on guard. However, it was abundantly clear that Æquana had caught their interest, with her sunny blonde looks.

He wasn't just her partner. He was also her bodyguard.

Nolen brought them to a small room banked by computers. A table stood in the middle of the floor, a chart unrolled across its surface. A window in the far wall looked out at the spewing oil

fire, and Talon wondered how hot it might be at the core. Once they were safely inside, everyone removed their hats.

"S.O.P. Wear the hats any time you leave a building," the man first said, then reached out to shake their hands. "You don't know how happy I was to get word they were sending someone to put this thing out. But I'll be totally honest with you." He gave Æquana a doubtful look. "The last thing I expected was someone like you."

"My name's Eagle Talon," Talon did the introductions. "This is Æquana. Tell us about the shut-off valve, and why you can't get the job done yourselves." His manner was brusque and all business. He sensed his partner glancing over at him with surprise. She had yet to see this side of him; he wondered what she was thinking.

"Very simply, when the eruption occurred, it knocked the pipe that brings up the oil all out of kilter. The valve is a wheel about yea big." Nolen held up his hands a little more than a foot apart. "It's orange. Once the valve is closed, the fire will snuff itself out."

"How far down is it?" Æquana spoke up.

"About six hundred feet. No diver can reach it." Nolen gave them a scathing look. "How are you going to get to it? I didn't see you bringing along any kind of submersible."

"But we were told you already brought one in," Talon said. "It didn't work."

Shaking his head, the foreman admitted, "We couldn't get to the wheel with the robotic arms. Pipe's been twisted back toward itself." He made an irritated sound, and added, "We figured there's somewhere around six to seven hundred million gallons of crude down there. Unless we can get this thing shut down, we're going to lose it all."

Æquana glanced up at her partner, noticing the calculating expression in his eyes.

"Is access to the valve straight down below us?" Talon questioned.

"Right underneath us, yes. You'll have to get to it from under the platform. Why?"

Rather than answer him, Talon turned to the woman standing so close beside him, they were almost touching. "Six hundred feet's not a problem?" She shook her head. "What if the wheel's jammed?" he asked the foreman.

Nolen shrugged. "If it's jammed, then we're SOL. But we have to take the chance that it's not."

Æquana saw Talon's brown eyes studying her. She knew what he was thinking. Reaching the wheel wasn't a problem. If it was stuck too tightly for her to turn, then it wasn't any longer their problem, and the mission wouldn't be placed in the negative column—she was their last hope.

No...his main concern was keeping her secret safe.

"Nolen, how are you and your men able to see what's directly underfoot?"

"There's a walkway descending halfway down to the surface. Once you reach the deck, a ladder drops down the rest of the way to a small floating dock. Why?"

"You sure there's just the one way down?"

The foreman pointed out the door. "The hatch is right outside this room. There's just the one way."

"Any windows looking down at the waters?"

Now Talon had the man intensely curious. "I don't understand what you're getting at," the man inquired.

"You want our help or not?" Suddenly Talon's voice had gone from businesslike to icy.

Nolen caved immediately. "No. No windows. And just the one walkway and ladder down, like I already told you. What do you need me to do?"

"I need the raft taken down and inflated. Make sure it's tied securely to the dock. I'll pull out the gear I want put into it. Once Æquana and I go down, the door leading to the surface has to be shut and remained closed until I call for it to be opened. Am I clear?"

"All right, but I don't see why the door—"

"Put a damn guard on it if you have to," Talon interrupted, his voice soft and serious. Æquana felt a chill go down her back when she heard it. "No one opens it, or even *thinks* about going down to the raft where we're working. Got me?"

"Okay." The foreman threw up his hands in surrender. "Okay. Sheesh. Governmental hush-hush. I get you."

"Is there some place where I can get into my swimsuit?" Æquana spoke up.

"Swimsuit?" The man gave her a look of disbelief. "Yeah. There's a head... yeah, through those doors. To the left." Nolen pointed to a connecting corridor that led to another part of the office. She left them to go slip out of her better clothes. Once she was out of the room, Talon followed the foreman outside to see where the hatch was located. Several men pitched in to bring their equipment, and within five minutes the inflatable raft was waiting for them below decks.

A quick glance at his watch, and Talon knew his partner was taking longer than necessary to disrobe. She already had her suit on, so what was the hold-up? "I'll be right back," he told Nolen, leaving the man standing behind the hatch as he climbed topside and headed for the office. Opening the door, he spotted her standing beside the table. She'd disrobed and was wearing a pale blue one-piece. The scarf and slippers were still hiding her uniqueness. "What's the hold-up, MG?"

"I... I can't go down there," she softly responded. She'd been waiting for him to come back for her.

Talon gave her a questioning look. "Why not? Is your back giving you problems?"

"No, no. It's not my back." She shook her head, and her ponytail swept across her shoulders. "John... I started my period."

"What?"

She raised defeated eyes to him. "I'm early. I wasn't supposed to start until next week. I'm sorry."

"Shit."

There was no way she could go into the water now, he understood. Sticking his head back out the door, Talon called to Nolen, "I need to make a phone call to the mainland."

"Next room," the foreman yelled back.

Talon took Æquana's arm and led her into the next room. The ship-to-shore was on the wall near the door. Talon turned on the radio and placed a call to Slaw's office, giving the satellite a moment to make the connection.

"Tell Slaw this is Talon. I need to speak with him now," he barked into the receiver. In less than a minute, the Rear Admiral was on the other end. "Slaw, we have to abort the mission. Why? Because Æquana's time of the month has come earlier than expected, and I'm not going to put her in the water when she's bleeding. These waters are shark-infested, in case you didn't know, dumbass."

Æquana watched as his eyes grew darker. It was like watching a thunderstorm gather. "You can't guarantee that," Talon snapped.

"Guarantee what?" she whispered.

"Slaw says your second suit will mask the scent." His head whipped back to the phone. "That's bullshit, Slaw, and you know it! Have you ever dove among sharks? *I* have. They can smell a drop of blood from over a mile away. The risk factor is too great. I'm aborting this mission."

Whatever Slaw's next comment was, it was too much for Talon to handle. Æquana watched wide-eyed, and waited for the yelling to begin. To her astonishment, her partner's voice didn't get louder. Instead, it turned inward, until it became a soft, almost crooning tone—crooning like a blade so precise and razor thin, she could feel her own fear rising sharp and piercing in her gut.

His was no longer the gentle voice teasing her in the darkness. This was the man the military had trained and honed into a perfect soldier. A perfect killing machine.

"I swear to God, Slaw. If something happens to her, I'm coming after you."

He hung up the phone, staring at the receiver for several long seconds before turning to her. "We have to green light."

"No!" Her face went paler than usual. "Why? What did he say? He wouldn't let us abort?"

"I was told that if I aborted this assignment, they were replacing me with someone who wouldn't go against direct orders, and you would have no say-so over their selection." His eyes glanced toward the door. "Let's pray the second suit gives you enough protection." Back to her, he asked, "Are you going to be okay?"

The dark eyes had not lost their fire, but now they also stared at her with undisguised worry. "Let's hope I don't have to be in the water long," she told him.

They left the office and hurried to the hatch, quickly descending the walkway until they came to the short deck before climbing down the narrow ladder to the dock and the raft tied below. The moment they'd disappeared below decks, Nolen closed the doorway. Talon paused long enough to check to make sure there were no prying eyes watching them. So far, so good.

Their descent to the ocean surface placed them in closer proximity to the three-foot pipe bearing the heat of the fire, but not the blaze. The flames, so far, were still restricted to the top of the spindle above the deck of the platform. Even so, it was like standing next to a furnace going full-bore.

By the time he reached the raft, Æquana had shed the rest of her clothing and was using the box her skin had been packed in to scoop up water from over the side and splash it on herself. When she was totally wet, she shook open her second skin and slipped it on. It was only his second time to see her transforming. Talon wondered if he'd be just as mesmerized to watch it happen the hundredth time. Or the thousandth time.

Once she nodded she was ready, he reached around and tied a thin string of monofilament around her waist. "I'll pay out the line. If you get into trouble and can't manage on your own, jerk hard three times fast and I'll haul you up. Are you ready?"

From the corner of her eye she could see the wetsuit and full tank he'd set aside. "Yeah," she told him reluctantly.

He felt as well as saw her hesitation. "Scared?"

Her blue eyes looked deep into his brown ones. "Yeah."

"So am I," he whispered, seeing how her chin trembled slightly.

There was no going back, no second thought to what he knew he wanted and would do next. He leaned toward her as she closed her eyes and waited for the kiss to her cheek. She gave a little gasp of shock when he caressed her lips instead. Lightly. Full and tender beyond belief. She almost dropped the glo-stick in her hand.

"Hurry, Maja," he told her, rearing back on his heels.

She broke the stick, shook it several times, and with a last look at him, slipped into the waves without a ripple.

The line began to fly through his fingers, the spool dancing around the bottom of the raft as it paid out faster than he could keep track of the black depth markers. Once it stopped suddenly, and a tightness threatened to squeeze his heart from his chest. But then it continued on, more slowly. When it finally stopped, a black-numbered spacing eased up into his palms.

She'd come to a halt at six hundred and fifty feet.

Emergency

Æquana raced downward, following the winding trail of pipe beside her. The green light from the glo-stick gave her enough luminescence to watch the distant water surrounding her. It was warm here, closer to the surface, but as she descended, the water grew cooler. Colder.

As her depth increased, she also began to feel the heaviness start to suffocate like a blanket that had been wrapped too tightly around her. Still she pumped her body to get to the orange wheel as quickly as possible.

He'd kissed her. A real, honest-to-God kiss. Her heart was beating so loudly, she could hear it echo in her ears. It was like he'd thrown her headfirst into a blender, turned on the electricity, and now she couldn't think, couldn't feel, couldn't control the thoughts that were filling her mind with wave after wave of images.

She had gone weak-kneed at the sight of him climbing out of that little electric car. He had come back to be with her, and

when he'd hugged her, it was as if he never wanted to let her go. Or, at least, she wanted to think that.

In the 'copter his thigh generated heat where it touched hers, sending little pulses of bright energy all through her chest and abdomen. Between her own legs she'd felt a surge of burning pain settle in her most private area. It had made her moan, but he didn't appear to have heard her.

His shoulder was there, wide and warm and inviting. How could she resist resting her cheek on it? How could she resist closing her eyes, like she'd dreamt of doing, and letting herself drift off as her lungs filled with his pleasant, earthy scent?

And then when he had put his big warm hand on her hip to hold her against him, it had taken everything in her not to crawl into his lap and cuddle under his chin.

Into his lap. The thought of what he had inside those tight jeans made her blush.

She was dizzy. She was overwhelmed by the sensations pulsing through her. It wasn't until her chest started hitching, threatening to choke her, that she'd been forced to shudder to a halt and grasp the pipe with her hands until she could clear her mind of him. Well, she couldn't clear him away completely, but at least she could make him stand still long enough for her to concentrate on what she needed to do.

Do the job, Maja, and you can go back topside. Get the job done, and hurry back. He's waiting for you. He's up there, looking down into the water, waiting for you. And worrying about you.

She tucked the glo-stick under her second skin between her breasts. It would leave her hands free to turn the wheel.

How long had she been down? How far down was she? Had she passed up the wheel in her mad dash? Æquana mouthed a curse word and kept moving. It felt like five hundred feet, and old memories dredged up.

"This is four hundred feet, Æquana," Dr. Shipp announced flatly. He reached out and turned a large knob on the console in front of him.

Beside her she could see the depth gauge plunging, its little red line slowly sinking. Her body felt smothered, but there was no pain. Not yet.

"Know what it feels like," Shipp continued to talk to her through the tank's sound system. "I'm going to gradually keep increasing the pressure. Coming up on four hundred fifty feet. Any discomfort yet?"

She shook her head. No discomfort, but her skin felt tight.

"Five hundred feet. Taste it. Touch it. Close your eyes and get the feel of it. You have to learn to tell your depth by sheer perception. No instruments. Nothing but yourself. Trust yourself. Five hundred fifty feet. Any pain, Æquana?"

No. No pain. It was getting a little bit harder to breathe. The water felt thicker, and she was having to suck it into her nose like a straw.

They'd continued the tests every day, and every day they'd added an extra fifty feet. Until that one day when they reached one thousand feet, and she couldn't go on. She couldn't take the crushing weight that wanted to take her body and turn it inside out. She had banged on the side of the tank, her arm striking the thick plexiglass in slow motion because of the excruciating pressure. She was pleading, screaming silently at the glass, begging him to stop and let her out of the tank. She couldn't cry because the agony was pressing her skin into her bones. Her heart was ready to cease struggling.

And that's when Dr. Shipp had turned the knob up another fifty feet. She remembered nothing after that.

In the glo-stick light the orange wheel looked yellow. Æquana looked upward, toward the surface, but there was nothing there. No light from the late afternoon sunshine filtered down this far.

Nolen had been correct when he'd said the pipe had twisted around on itself. Even she was having a difficult time getting a good purchase before trying to turn the valve.

It was freezing at this depth. Touching the forged iron was like holding dry ice. She gripped the wheel and tried to ignore the burning cold in her hands as she jerked on it. The wheel

wouldn't budge. Rather than try to hold it like a steering wheel, she wrapped her hands together on the right side and jerked downward.

It gave, but just a tiny bit.

Æquana lifted her flukes and braced her legs against the pipe. Taking the valve again in both hands, she strained to turn it. There was some give, and then it was as if the whole thing just decided to start moving. The wheel began spinning, almost of its own volition. She whirled the wheel, giving it another push as it started to slow down. When it finally came to a halt, just to make certain, she pulled on it one more time. The thing wouldn't budge. The valve was closed. The fire should be out.

But her body was telling her something. All the straining and stress she had placed on herself had left her a bit woozy. A shudder went through her. It was a vibration, followed by a feeling of warmth that made her abdomen clench.

Horror swept over her. Æquana leaned over to look down at herself, and at the small, darkish cloud floating in the water, lying against her thighs.

She started upward, but her body wouldn't work for her. It was wooden. Mechanical. It was as if the batteries had died, and she was unable to stop drifting away from where she was.

Something behind her flashed, and there was no way she'd could stop herself from whimpering. Shadows started coming from out of the dark like silent bullets.

Another flash.

She clenched her hands into fists as she kept rising. She was breathing in short, quick breaths, and that wasn't good. She had to keep her breathing long and regulated. A sob pounded in her chest, and a second later a black eye and a fin flew past her, inches away.

With every undulation, her body was sending out a distress call. To the bull sharks accumulating around her, she was a wounded fish. And their sole purpose in life was to rid the ocean of the ill and the weak.

At some point she remembered the monofilament line. Invisible underwater, she traced it with her hands and began wrapping it around her palm as she climbed upward. She tried to pull it, signaling Talon for help. There was a sudden ragged jerk, pulling her sideways for a dozen feet before it abruptly let her go. The line wrapped around her hand went limp. One of the sharks had snagged it or bitten through it. There was no longer any way she could let Talon know what she was facing. A scream rose in her throat, and Æquana started swimming for her life, praying she could out-race their rushing attack.

They were all around her now. Their black eyes were green, glowing orbs in the stick's light. They flickered in and out of her range of vision, moving faster and with increased activity as they readied for the feeding frenzy.

John!

There was a paleness seeping through the water, the first beginnings of light up ahead. The water was changing hue, going from black to dark blue. She was getting closer to the surface. Her body was spreading a trail of blood behind her like a beacon, drawing the bulls as surely as if she had been chumming the waters.

For a second she thought she could see another shape above her. A shape that didn't move, but it wasn't the raft. It wasn't the underside of the rig. But it was a shadow of some sort. Almost hu-

The twelve-foot shark slammed into her, rolling as it took her left hip and thigh in its gaping jaws.

Æquana screamed. And gulped. Sea water poured into her lungs as her body automatically shifted from water-breathing to air-breathing. The shock of drowning stiffened her body. She lost all consciousness the second her heart stopped beating.

The spear went deep into the shark's gills. A split-second later, a second hydrogen-propelled spear pierced the side of the creature's body. The bull shark opened its mouth as it started to thrash, filling the water with blood and rage.

Talon reached her, pulling her tightly against his chest as he cocked the spear gun for a third shot. He thought he had been in time, catching the animal in its most vulnerable spot before it got to her, but his timing had been off a fraction of a second too late.

His only thought was to get her to shore. The moment the filament had gone limp, he'd known something terrible had happened, and that was when he'd entered the water. The sharks were everywhere, and their movements told him they were angling for the kill. For *Æquana*.

He'd felt his insides completely shrivel into a tight, cold mass the instant the big male grabbed her. He saw her open her mouth as if to scream, saw her body convulse in a rigid death throes he'd seen too many times in the past, and knew she was gone.

Dimly he was aware of the sharks converging on the thrashing bull he'd speared as he reached the raft and tossed her limp body into it. Rolling in behind her, he threw off his mask and started CPR to get the water out of her lungs. Her gills were wide open and motionless, frozen in their movement when her body had shifted gears. Gently he flattened them with the palm of his hand and held them down every time he breathed into her mouth.

"NOLEN!"

His actions were automatic, drilled into him after countless training sessions and actual use. As he breathed into her mouth, he couldn't help but notice the flaccid texture to her skin. Her eyes were open and sightless. There was no heartbeat, no sign of life. She was dead.

The mermaid had drowned.

Blood poured from the puncture wounds in her side, a semi-circle of knife-like slits running around her hip to thigh, and behind into her buttock. If the spear had been a micro-second later, the shark would have had the chance to shake her in its mouth, and the sawing motion of its teeth would have shredded her in half.

"NOLEN!" Talon bellowed as his hands continued to pump two, three, four, five times, *breathe!*

The hatch flew up.

"CALL THE JETCOPTER! TELL THEM IT'S A CODE FOUR RED!"

He continued to work on her, urging the heart to start up again, praying for the lungs to empty.

...four, five, *breathe!*

His whole body was focused on her. The look of absolute terror on her face and in her glazed eyes was too much for him. "Come on, Maja. Breathe for me. Please, for God's sake, breathe for me!"

...two, three, four, five, *breathe!*

Her lips were like ice. Blood was pooling at the bottom of the raft. His legs, where he was kneeling over her as he worked on her, were coated with it.

Talon was vaguely aware of a figure coming down the ladder until a voice filled with horror said, "Oh, Jesus, she's a mermaid?"

He never looked up, never took his eyes off of her. "Where's that 'copter, Nolen?" he barked.

"I-it's on its way. They said twenty minutes."

Talon cursed, but there was no other choice. "Tell me the second you see it on the horizon!"

The man disappeared upstairs, leaving Talon to continue applying CPR to the unresponsive woman beneath him.

"Please, Maja. *Please.* Breathe for me. Anything! Please. Please. Please."

...four, five, *breathe!*

He saw the coil of monofilament line around her hand. The glo-stick, still shining, lay beside her shoulder where he'd tossed it when he'd jerked down the top half of her second skin so he could reach her chest.

...three, four, five, *breathe!*

He wouldn't give up on her. He wouldn't stop trying to revive her, even after the 'copter arrived.

Over and over the scene re-played in his mind, and every time he shuddered. When he'd seen the shark aiming directly for her, he'd known with every cell in his body it wouldn't stop. He saw the animal roll as its mouth clamped onto her, and he would swear he heard her scream as her body arched backwards. He saw her head jerk up, her arms fly outward, and then she went totally still when the cold salt water filled her lungs, shutting down all her switches, closing every circuit, and killing her.

Now he knew why she kept her mouth closed when she was underwater. Opening it would trigger her body to convert over from mermaid to human. It wasn't the shark attack that killed her; it was her scream of pain and terror that had ended her life.

One, two, three, four, five, *breathe!*

"Mr. Eagletalon! They're here!"

He grabbed a blanket and wrapped her in it, then tossed her over his shoulder as he quickly climbed the ladder to the upper deck and raced up the walkway. The 'copter was landing as he stepped onto the platform, rushing Æquana to the aircraft as the cargo bay opened its door. They were lifting off even as he was laying her on the bay floor to resume CPR.

Immediately two medics appeared beside him and lent aid. A defibrillator was unpacked as Talon kept breathing air into her lungs. Her lips remained flaccid and unresponsive, and he was unable to stop comparing them to her lips when he'd brushed a kiss across their vibrant warmth just before she'd entered the water. The second medic tried to stanch the flow of blood from the bite wounds.

"Clear!"

They moved back to let the electricity jolt her body.

No response.

"What is this? Is it her skin, or some kind of wetsuit?" asked the tech tending to her wounds.

"It's a suit. It peels down from the waist," Talon snapped, and went back to massaging her heart through her chest. The tech quickly removed the rest of her suit, giving him better access to the punctures.

"Clear!"

Another jolt. Talon pressed his fingers against her jugular. Faint, bright hope thudded in his chest. "I think I have a heartbeat. *Again!*"

Before the paddles could go down, Talon felt a tremor go through her. Quickly he rolled her over and pounded her hard between the shoulder blades.

Æquana retched. Sea water poured out of her mouth, mixing with the blood on the floor of the 'copter. She vomited again, then again, and every time water came up to splash on the floor.

Another shiver shook her entire body, and she started coughing as her body instinctively began to curl into a protective ball.

Talon grabbed a dry blanket from the locker behind him and wrapped her in it, then pulled her into his lap, cradling her in his arms, holding her against his warmth, and started to rock her. He paused only long enough for the medics to put her on oxygen and start an IV drip.

He couldn't talk, couldn't speak. There was no other thought in his mind but her, and the knowledge of how close he'd come to losing her. His body could do nothing except hold her tightly to him and lay his cheek against her wild, wet hair, until they landed at Dulles where an ambulance whisked them straight to the clinic.

She still gasped for air, despite the oxygen mask over her face, but she was alive, and he was not letting her go. Not until Draybeck ordered him out of the emergency room so they could work on her without him hovering around.

Talon remained outside the double doors and watched as they hooked her up to some plasma and a monitor. When they

wheeled her away, he finally relented to the intern's insistent request that he change out of the bloodied wetsuit.

After that, he started making phone calls.

"Honey, is that your office phone ringing?" inquired his wife.

David Slaw gave her a surprised look. They were entertaining two other couples with an informal dinner and a showing of a movie in their new twenty-seat home theater they'd just finished construction on. He paused to listen. It was his office phone.

A scowl of irritation came over his face. Nobody should be calling this time of day, much less on his personal line. That number was strictly off-limits. Excusing himself, Slaw hurried down the hallway to answer it, determined to give whoever was on the other end a severe tongue lashing.

Shoving the door closed behind him, Slaw grabbed the handset. "What? Who is this?"

There was a second of silence, then a soft voice hissed, "I warned you that if anything happened to her, you would answer for it."

Slaw felt his hand begin to shake. "Talon? Is that you?" he growled, trying to cover the effect that voice had on him. "What the fuck are you talking about? Who gave you permission to call this number?"

An icy hand seemed to reach through the receiver and grab him around the throat. "Call who you have to, Slaw, but know this. If she dies, so will you."

"What do you mean, die? Are you threatening me, Talon? That does it! You're off the project."

Talon's laugh was poisonous. "Go ahead, Slaw. It won't matter. I'm staying, and you can't do a damn thing about it. Oh, and know this...from now on I'm making the final call on all assignments. And if you don't agree with them, screw you."

The line went dead, leaving Slaw to stare at his receiver as if it had personally insulted him.

Funeral

Buck found his grandson stacking canned goods in the kitchen behind the café. He stood in the doorway, quietly observing the man mechanically doing the job, although it was clear his mind was not on the task at hand.

Talon had been back for two weeks, with no true idea as to Æquana's condition. Every time he phoned the clinic to check on her, they would just give him the same run-around type of response. That she was responding well to treatment. Or that she was all right, don't worry, they'd let him know if she took a turn for the worse. Or—and this one Buck hated the most—satisfactorily. One word: satisfactorily.

When Talon had returned from D.C., he had been a mental and emotional wreck. He broke down when he described what had happened on the mission, leaving Buck to wonder if there was ever going to be a happy ending to their relationship, business or otherwise.

Since then, there had been only one incoming call to the emporium in all that time. From a rear admiral named Slaw,

who left word with Buck to tell Talon that the project was being suspended until the time *Æquana* was well enough to resume. But, on the bright side, if one wanted to call it that, her sick days were being deducted from those he still owed, just as if they were still on call. When Buck had relayed that part of the message, Talon didn't seem too thrilled.

"I need to go to Pueblo to pick up my order from the slaughterhouse. You wanna go for me and let me run the place? Or would you rather handle the customers?"

"Who's on the register?" Talon asked, breaking down the cardboard boxes.

"Sheila."

"I'll go, then." He knew from the past that whenever things got busy, she wouldn't be able to handle the influx. It would be best if Buck stayed behind just in case, because he honestly didn't feel like doing it.

"You sure?" his grandfather asked.

"Yeah. I think I'll stop by the drive-through on my way back and grab a box of buckshot. I was thinking about going up over the ridge tomorrow and seeing what I can get." Tossing the cardboard into the pile near the back door, Talon took the check handed to him to pay for the meat, then headed out the door.

As he neared his truck, he patted the pockets on his vest for the keys, when his hand closed around his cell phone. He pulled it out, only to discover it wasn't his personal cell, but the disposable. It had become almost second nature to take it with him everywhere he went now. He didn't even think about taking it when he'd gotten dressed that morning.

His mind remained stuck in neutral as he stared at the cell. The barest moment passed when he thought about tossing it in the glove box, but for some unexplainable reason he shoved it back in his pocket. His personal cell was in the pocket on his other side, he found. He noticed the battery was low, and made a mental note to recharge it when he got home.

Pulling out of the parking lot, he turned onto the main road, heading for Pueblo. He drove in silence, rather than with the CD or radio blaring as he normally would. Sometimes he liked the peacefulness, especially with the window rolled down and the cool mountain breeze filling the cab. It gave him the chance to think. Reflect.

Remember.

He half expected his personal cell to go off when he came down off the main ridge. He wasn't disappointed. Glancing at the window display, he frowned. The number was unfamiliar, although it was from the D.C. area code. Somebody he didn't know was calling. Maybe it was a wrong number.

"Eagletalon," he answered.

"Talon? Dynamite."

Dynamite, aka William O'Dell. Talon had been under his command at Ful Ahmed Cabai when, during their recon assignment, they had walked into the ambush. Talon shuddered. To the end of his days he'll never understand how a woman could booby-trap an infant child.

They'd had no inkling what they were facing when the crying woman pleaded for help in her tongue, and handed the tiny baby to Klare. The bullets had begun to mow them down almost at the same instant.

Six of the Navy's finest made up Team Polio. Six men went down that day. If it wasn't for the Marines' tactical squad honing in right behind them, they would never have made it. Nevertheless, every man in Talon's unit had been critically injured to the point where the unit had been disbanded and every man given a medical discharge. But, thankfully, they all had survived.

Talon's injuries had been among the worst. A bullet had taken one of his kidneys, and rehab had taken longer than expected because of some damn unforeseen complications. Before Team Polio had gone their separate ways, every man had vowed to be there for each other if, sometime in the future, they

needed help. Talon knew the men were aware of his Colorado home base, but to his knowledge he had never given anyone this number. Didn't matter. Talon also knew how to get any number he needed.

"Bill. Good to hear your voice. How are you holding up?" O'Dell had taken a bullet in the leg and one in the lung.

"Glad to be on my own two feet. This isn't a social call, Talon." Straight to the chase. That had been and always would be their credo.

"What can I do for you?"

"It's more like what I can do for you," the man replied. "You're assigned to the Manatee Project, right?"

If the man knew the yellow-level code name for *Æquana*, he knew plenty more.

"What about it?"

"Word on the street is there's about to be a change in staff."

Talon pulled the truck over to the side of the road in order to concentrate on what the man was saying. "Go on."

Navy SEALs were a tight-lipped group, and fiercely protective of their own, no matter if the member was still attached to the detail or not. They watched out for one another, regardless. Talon was being given fair warning about something that would affect him, and he could trust that the information being passed on to him was one hundred percent accurate.

"Did you cross swords with Rear Admiral Slaw?"

"Yeah. And I can promise you, if you knew the details, you would have, too."

"He's behind this," O'Dell told him. "He wants you off the project, but he doesn't have enough backers. Watch yourself, Talon. There's no telling how far he's willing to push." There was a slight pause, and O'Dell snickered. "Did you really threaten to kill him?"

"Think slavery. Think torture in the name of scientific research." Talon paused, weighing his options, then said, "He had her working in shark-infested waters during her menses."

He heard an intake of breath on the other end. "So that's what's going on over there."

"What have you heard?" Talon quickly asked.

"Shark attack. Drowning. Victim's still alive, but has been on the ventilator ever since. Word is you were involved."

Talon shuddered. Ventilator? "Brain dead?" he barely managed to get out.

"Haven't heard. *Were* you involved, Talon?"

"I'm her partner. I tried to abort the assignment, but Slaw threatened to replace me right then and there and follow through anyway. I had no choice." He took a deep breath, hoping it would calm him down. "I witnessed the attack and got her out of there. Tried resuscitation. Once we got back, they took her away. I've been placed on suspension until they notify me."

Talon heard a low, slow whistle on the other end. "Need help?"

"Not at the moment."

"Just call me when or if. You have my private line now," O'Dell offered.

"Will do. Thanks, Bill."

As Talon closed the phone, for the first time in days he felt some relief. He hadn't intended on calling on his squad for help, but now that they had offered, he knew there was very little if any chance Slaw would accomplish what he had planned. Now if only he could get word about Maja.

Victim's still alive, but has been on the ventilator ever since. That could only mean one of two things. Either she was unable to breathe on her own, or she was brain dead, and they were keeping her alive through artificial means.

Pulling back on the road, Talon drove into Pueblo and got the emporium's order. On his way back, he swung by the gun store

and picked up some ammo to go hunting tomorrow. He was circling around the parking lot, about pull onto the highway, when his phone began to chirp, telling him the battery was about to crash.

He jerked the cell out of his vest pocket to shut it off so he wouldn't have to listen to the irritating beeping, when the window lit up and it vibrated. Talon stared at the display. It was another number he didn't recognize, also with the area code for D.C. "Eagletalon," he answered.

There was a soft breath, like a gasp for air, then a harsh, raspy voice whispered, "John?"

Talon slammed on the brakes. "Maja?"

There was another gasp, then a soft sob. "John..."

He could only stare at the phone, straining to hear what she would say next—if it really was her on the other end. Briefly he wondered why she hadn't tried calling the disposable, when he remembered it was turned off. "Maja...how do I know it's really you?" he whispered.

Another pause. The person on the other end was having a difficult time breathing. He knew in his heart it was her, but his head needed proof.

"Raft...you...kissed me."

He pressed his forehead against the steering wheel. "Are you okay?" he asked. His face felt hot, burning. The hand holding the phone was shaking so hard, he had to grip the cell as tightly as possible to keep it in his grasp.

"Geoffy's dead." She was trying to cry, but her throat and lungs wouldn't let her. Talon could hear her struggling. In pain. Alone. "John?"

"I'm here, Maja. Tell me what you want me to do. When is the funeral?"

"Tomorrow."

"Do you want me there with you?" To hell with them if *they* didn't want him there or not, Talon swore to himself. It was no longer their decision.

"Please?"

"I'll be there," he promised. He listened as she tried to take control of her emotions. His other hand curled around the steering wheel. There was so much he wanted to ask her, but he could hear how excruciatingly painful her efforts were. "Maja, you need your rest."

"Noooo...." It was drawn out in a hoarse moan. "Don't... go."

"Take your medicine, Maja. I'll call you tonight. Eight o'clock, your time. Got that?"

"Yes."

"On your phone."

"'kay."

"Maja..." He took a deep breath. "I'm on my way."

Buck only had one piece of advice to give his grandson as Talon packed his dark suit in a real suitcase, instead of his usual duffle bag. "If you don't bring her back with you this time, you may not get another chance."

"I have to play it by ear, Buck," Talon admitted. "Even if she does come back with me, they could trump up charges of kidnaping. Whatever I do, it'll have to be by the book, so there's no way they can interfere."

On his drive to the airport, he tried several different scenarios in his head, but every time he kept returning to the most obvious one. Slaw would be watching him like a hawk. Because he hadn't had the disposable on, Maja had been forced to call his personal cell, which meant their conversation could have been recorded. And because her pain and medication had kept her from thinking straight, they now knew there was a romantic link between them.

Raft...you...kissed me.

Oh, yeah, Talon told himself. Slaw would have him under surveillance the moment he got off the plane.

By six p.m. he was in Colorado Springs and waiting for the redeye flight to D.C.. Using the disposable, he dialed her. She answered before the first ring. "John?"

"I know you're still having difficulty breathing, so I'll do most of the talking," he told her, keeping his voice low. "If I need to know anything, I'll ask yes and no questions. Did they just take the ventilator out today?"

"Yes." It was a tight, breathless whisper.

"Are you in pain?"

"Yes."

Her throat was probably giving her the most trouble, he surmised. "The bites around your hip and thigh, are they healing?"

"Yes."

"Maja... do you remember anything about what happened out at the drilling rig?"

This time she inhaled with a shudder. "Yes," she answered in a tiny voice.

Talon closed his eyes. "Do you remember the shark?"

A soft sob. "Yes."

"Do you remember anything after that?"

"No."

So she remembered everything up to the attack. "Maja... are they treating you well?"

Her next answer made him ill. "No."

Talon groaned softly. "Do they know you called me about Geoffy?"

"Yes."

"Then they know I'm coming that way. Maja, can you walk?"

"No."

"Are you still bedridden?"

"Yes."

Which meant she would be attending the funeral in a wheelchair. Talon rubbed a hand over his face. She was still too

sick for him to try anything this visit. He would have to be patient a while longer.

"John?"

"What, honey?"

"Take me... to Colorado."

Talon felt himself dying inside.

As he expected, a tail began following him soon after he exited the jetway. Talon picked up a rental, keeping his actions casual and unsuspecting. Whoever the man was, he wasn't as good as Talon, which was a relief. Talon kept him just within reach, toying with him. That way, if and when he needed to ditch the guy, it would be totally unexpected. Talon never revealed his hand until it was absolutely necessary.

He checked into a hotel he'd never used before, and was settling in when the disposable went off. A glance at his watch told him it was nearly seven-thirty in the morning.

"Good morning, MG," he smiled into the phone.

"Hi."

"Any better today?"

"Some." Indeed, her voice seemed stronger.

"You're supposed to be using yes and no answers," he teased.

He heard a raspy breath. "Yes."

"When is the funeral?"

"Yes," he heard her say, and tried to chuckle afterwards. It cost her. "Ten," she finally managed to give him.

"I'll pick you up at the clinic at nine," he promised. "Be waiting for me."

"Yes," she said with a soft hitch in her voice. She was crying.

Talon ended the call and stared out of the hotel window. Without a doubt Slaw knew there was something going on between them, even though Talon knew nothing had happened.

Yet.

It was time he let Maja know how he felt. She had made her emotions crystal clear to him in that look she'd given him a

heartbeat before she dove over the side of the raft, and for Talon there was no going back.

They would get through this. Together. She was mending quickly, and once she was able to get back on her feet, he would make his move. Maja would get to see Colorado. Soon.

Soon.

Talon smiled as he opened his personal cell.

Confession

The intern helped her into the navy blue dress and zipped it up the back. While he slipped her shoes onto her feet, Æquana tied the silk scarf around her neck.

“Want a blanket?”

She nodded. She didn’t speak unless she had to. Dr. Shipp had told her it would take a few more days before the rawness in her throat went away, but it was a good sign her lungs were finally cleared to the point where they could take her off the ventilator. But the breathing treatments the therapist had her on were murder.

Her body was shaking. The intern gave her an observant look. “Cold?”

No, she wasn’t cold. She was trembling with anticipation. Talon was picking her up in—

Her eyes glanced at the clock by her bed.

—ten minutes. He said he’d there to get her by nine. It was nearly nine now, and every time the digital number changed, her trembling increased.

Be waiting for me, he'd asked her.

I'll wait for you, she promised him to herself. I'll wait as long as you need me to.

He was coming back for her, and he would keep coming back, even after his tour was finished. She knew it in her heart; there was no longer any doubt.

They hadn't told her anything about the attack, and all she could remember was up to the moment the bull shark hit her. But she'd overheard them talking. She found out Talon had given her CPR until the jetcopter had dropped her off at Dulles, and she was alive only because of him.

"Are you going to wear your hair like that?" the intern remarked. He didn't say it in a nasty way. She normally never wore it down. Today she didn't care. "It's supposed to be windy today," he reminded her.

Reaching into the top drawer of her vanity, Æquana pulled out a dark blue scrunchie and hastily pulled her hair back into a ponytail, giving the intern a heated "There. Satisfied?" look. The man shrugged and pulled back on the wheelchair's handlebars.

Her eyes raked over the clinic for the first sign of Talon. He promised he would take her to the funeral, not meet her there. That meant they would get to spend some time together, without a doctor or nurse hovering over her whenever the least little bit of discomfort came over her. She was mending rapidly, although her lungs had taken the worst of it. The bite marks in her side... they would eventually scar over. If she was lucky, they wouldn't be that noticeable. The shark hadn't hit any major arteries or internal organs, and Æquana had lost count of how many times she had been told she should thank her lucky stars.

She hadn't been in the water since the acc-... incident. Not accident. She refused to call it an accident. It was no accident when Slaw had ordered her to fulfill the assignment.

The man had no idea how much she hated him now.

They reached the front entry, and still there was no sign of Talon. Another intern opened the front door for them, and she was wheeled outside.

A tall figure in a dark blue suit and shades was standing by a black SUV parked in the driveway. Æquana felt her heart fly into her throat. Her eyes locked on the sunglasses that hid his eyes from her, but she saw the slow grin that turned up one corner of his mouth. Casually he sauntered over to take command of the wheelchair.

"Thank you, but I'll take over from here," he told the intern, and began walking her toward the SUV. He spoke not a word as he unlocked the passenger door, lifted her from the chair into the front seat, then went to stow the wheelchair in the back compartment. Once he slid under the wheel, he looked to see she had her seatbelt on before pulling away from the curb.

They drove several blocks in silence. Æquana reached over and placed a hand on his leg, finding it warm and solid. Comforting, just like in the jetcopter. She closed her eyes, savoring the contact, and the fact that he was with her. The knowledge he had come back for her.

They stopped at a traffic light.

"MG?"

She opened her eyes and turned to look at him when she became aware his nearness, his warmth, his scent, and she felt his hand gently lift her chin. Time stopped when his lips touched hers, not in the brief way they had in the raft, but for longer. Fully. And infinitely more tender. Her heart soared. They were so incredibly warm, covering her mouth as if he could sip her soul.

She had no idea she was crying until he moved back and wiped away the drops with his thumb. Slowly she lowered her head as he drove on through the intersection.

It was a thirty-minute drive to the small chapel on the edge of the cemetery grounds where the service would take place. Once

they reached it, Talon put her back into the wheelchair, covered her legs with the blanket, and wheeled her inside.

They held hands during the memorial. At one point, when grief overcame her, he drew her into his arms, and she curled up against him, against his wide chest where she could hear the steady beat of his heart thundering in her ear. Afterwards, he took her to pay her respects to Buehrig's family before they went outside for the graveside service.

His hands was always there, touching her, keeping her grounded and focused as they pressed down on her shoulder or arm, or steadied her around her waist. As the final prayers were given, Æquana felt the numbness start to swallow her once more.

It was over. It was time to return her to the clinic, and he would be leaving to go back to Colorado. Burying her face in her hands, she wept at the prospect of missing him as she felt the wheelchair bounce over the uneven turf bordering the headstones. He would not know why she wept brokenly. He would think she was still immersed in her sorrow for Geoffy, when the truth was nowhere near. But she couldn't tell him, no matter how loudly her heart screamed at her to tell him. *Tell him, damn you! What do you have to lose? Tell him!*

It was when he was lifting her back into the SUV that she nestled her face against his neck, against the starched collar of his pale blue shirt, and she kissed his warm skin. He paused, holding her in his arms, but only for a moment, before he set her on the seat.

They were on their way back to the clinic when she finally spoke her first word to him. "John?"

He glanced over at her but made no reply.

"I'm not ready to go back," she whispered. *I don't want to go back. I don't ever want to go back there again.* She wanted to say the words, but she couldn't. Besides, it wouldn't be of any use if she did. Her life was inevitable.

"Why don't we go someplace where we can talk?" he suggested. At her nod, he took the next off-ramp. It was then Æquana realized they hadn't been going back the same way they'd come.

"Where are we?" She glanced over at him.

"Close to downtown."

Downtown? The smile began in her eyes before it spread to her lips. He hadn't planned to take her back anyway. At least, not immediately.

She wasn't familiar with this part of D.C. There was just a small area where she was allowed to venture out alone, although she suspected there was always someone just out of sight, following her. Just for insurance.

They pulled up to a large marble and granite building where Talon handed the keys to the valet. Once he took the wheelchair out of the back, he came around and placed her in it.

The interior of the hotel was opulent, and he chuckled softly to see her response. He wheeled her into the elevator and pressed a button. Immediately after the doors closed, he flipped open his personal cell and made a call. "Got it? Okay. We're here."

"Who—" she began, when he smiled and held a finger up to his lips.

"Shh."

They rolled down the carpeted hallway, until Talon stopped in front of a door. He slid the keycard in the slot, but remained standing there, not going in. Obediently, Æquana remained silent.

It was almost a minute later when the hotel room door opened up, and a man she'd never seen before came out. He shook hands with Talon, gave him a wink, then turned and walked away toward the elevators. She raised an eyebrow at her partner, but he gave her the signal to be quiet again.

The room was easily ten times bigger than her own bedroom back at the clinic. She was staring around, taking it all in, when

Talon parked the chair beside the wardrobe holding the tv. She watched as he disappeared into the bathroom, where he turned on the shower. By this time her curiosity was eating her alive, especially when he calmly walked out of the bathroom, leaving the shower on, and closed the bathroom door behind him.

"Now we can talk," he grinned as he removed his jacket and hung it over the back of the chair beside the writing table.

"What was that all about?"

"A bug."

"Bug?" Her eyes widened. "You mean a microphone?"

"Yeah." He removed his tie, and unbuttoned the top two buttons of his pale blue shirt.

"What did you do with it?"

"I didn't destroy it, if that's what you're wondering," Talon told her. "That would alert them I was on to them, and then I'd have to worry about what they might do next." Leaning over her, he lifted off the blanket, tossing it onto the writing table, and bent down to pick her up. "Right now they're getting an earful of white noise."

"Who was that man—"

"Maja, didn't the doctors tell you to keep the talking to a minimum?"

"But you just said—" God, the man was exasperating!

She stared at him as he carried her over to the king-size bed and started to lower her onto it. To her astonishment, he followed down with her, until they were lying side-by-side, bodies touching, and he brought his free hand up to cup the side of her face.

There was no way she could anticipate the soul-breaking happiness that flooded her senses when he took her mouth. Possessively. Hungrily. Every pore in her skin drank of his touch and his heat as his kisses sent her over the edge of sanity. A whimper died in her throat when she felt him roll closer to her, until her entire length was trapped beneath him...and the whimper became a low moan.

Her mouth belonged to him, and he claimed her over and over. His tongue dove past her lips, tasting her. Invading her. She reached up, her fingers blindly seeking to touch him, caress him, and she found his face, his hair. Pulling out the clasp from behind his neck, she luxuriated in the feel of the heavy thickness as it fell over them. Dimly she was aware of the scent of spruce and some other kind of muskiness in the curtain of hair now shielding their faces from view.

When Talon released her lips, pausing above her to gaze down, Æquana finally managed to open her eyes to see him smiling at her. "What's so funny?" she whispered, smiling back.

"You haven't kissed many men in your life, have you?"

"Rather evident, huh?"

Her answer was his chuckle.

"You planned this, didn't you?" she half-accused.

"Guilty as charged."

"Thank you. Now, be a good boy and ki—"

He swooped down upon her like a bird of prey, taking her heart as he took her mouth, and this time his tongue dove deeper, more forcefully into the moist secrets behind her lips. He felt her body arch at the invasion, but her hands clutching his shirt told him the invasion was not unwanted. The air vibrated with their newly discovered passion.

Without warning, Talon released her mouth and began exploring the sweaty path under her chin and down her throat, tonguing her skin until she gasped for breath. When he reached the valley at the base of her neck, he licked the droplets of salty moisture gathered there, and fire roared through them both.

"John!" Her whisper was guttural. Raw with need.

"Remember this," he whispered into her ear, and dove back downward.

Æquana felt him lower the zipper in the back of her dress, then pull it forward, releasing her arms, before slipping it down past her hips and over her feet. She kept her eyes closed, waiting for his touch, for what his hands would do next. Hoping....

His fingers reached behind her back, finding and undoing the hooks on her bra. Gently, he slipped the straps off her shoulders, guiding them off her arms, and releasing her breasts. Tenderly he kneaded first one, then the other, teasing the dusky rose nipples until they puckered. When he closed his hot mouth over the nearest one, it was as if someone had shot a charge of electricity through her. Her hands clutched him, burying her fingers in his incredible blacker-than-night hair.

He calmed her with his hands, then aroused her with his mouth. Over and over she rollercoasted from sensory overload, down to calm, then back upwards in a climbing spiral to a point where she felt she could take no more. As she panted lightly, he trailed his tongue over her incredibly soft skin. When he reached the still-visible scars on her hip and thigh, he carefully kissed each wound to let her know they didn't mar her beauty in any way.

She looked down at where her hands were still wrapped in his hair, and tugged slightly to get his attention. Talon rose over her, moving himself between her thighs until he was centered directly above her, and gazed into the inflamed flush in her face. His weight was making her crazy. She wanted more, but at the moment she couldn't gather two meager thoughts together to find the words.

Her womb clenched, dragging a ragged shudder through her belly. Lifting her hips, she tried to ground herself against the growing hardness so close and so evident in the front of his dress pants. "Make love to me, John," she begged throatily. Her nearly nude body writhed beneath him, making the temptation all the more unbearable. She wore nothing but a flimsy bit of cotton for a pair of panties. Other than removing his coat and tie, Talon had remained fully clothed.

He shook his head. "I can't. Not this time."

"Why?" she cried out hoarsely.

Sighing through the trembling that threatened to overtake him, Talon lowered himself down upon her, relishing in the feel

of her, at the press of her womanhood against his own desire, now swollen and stiff with need. If she had been any other woman, he wouldn't have had a second thought about taking her down and pounding into her for the next hour or two.

But this was Maja. His delicate temptress. The woman who swam circles around his sanity and his heart.

"Maja, they know I brought you here. They're aware of the fact that you haven't come out of this room, and you won't for some time. They're going to suspect we've made love, and they'll find some excuse to give you a vaginal exam once you've returned to the clinic."

She froze, staring at him in amazement. "Why?"

"They need proof we're romantically involved. Otherwise they have no claim to separate us."

He watched as she bit her upper lip in thought. "What if you used one of those condom things?"

Talon chuckled. "One minute I think you're this innocent, inexperienced woman, and the next you make me wonder if there's more history than I believed."

She reached up to trace his mouth with her fingertip. He kissed the tip as it touched his lips. "John..." She was hesitant, afraid, and wondering how much she could bear to tell him.

"Shh," he hastily stopped her. Rolling onto his side, he gathered her in his arms and rolled her along with him, until they were lying on their sides, facing each other. He reached up to toss his hair over his shoulder before returning the hand where he'd had it, cupping her bottom. "No can do with the condom, either, my love. It has a spermicide, and they'll be able to detect that as well."

He saw tears welling up in her already swollen eyes. "Then will we ever... huh?" She hiccuped softly. "What did you call me?"

He kissed her forehead tenderly. "Maja... remember on the first day we met I told I like to have everything spelled out? No

assumptions. No ambiguousness. No chance for mistakes. Remember?"

She nodded.

"I'm spelling it out for you now. I'm in love with you, Maja, with every ounce of my being. With every breath in my body. If you're willing to have me, and willing to take the chance, I want you with me. To stay with me. I can't make any more promises or guarantees, other than the fact that Buck's already waiting to greet you with open arms."

She reached up for him, pressing her body along his as she opened her lips for his. Talon held her tightly, savoring her response as he cursed the fact that he couldn't have her. Yet.

"When?" she breathed against his mouth.

"The doctors will have to give you a medical release first. Until they declare you healthy enough to go back to work, you'll have to stay here." He eyed her carefully, and Æquana saw a strangely guarded look come over his face. "Tell me something first, Maja. And I'm reminding you, I'm an excellent judge of character. I'll know if you ever lie to me."

"What do you want to know?"

"Are you willing to be here with me only because I'm providing an escape for you, from the hold they have on you?"

She reacted as if he'd slapped her. Her hurt and anger flashed in her eyes to the point where she started to struggle to get out of his grasp.

"Maja."

"No!" Æquana stopped, gasping for air, her lungs unused to the exertion. Her head swam.

"Maja!"

"Stop it, you bastard! How... how could you even think that? How... oh, God." She collapsed, heaving heavily as she clutched the front of his shirt and buried her face against his neck where the collar lay opened. "John...." She had no more energy to cry, but neither could she fight him. In a muffled voice, she confessed, "I would have been happy if you'd just agreed to

keep working with me after your tour was over. That's all I wished for. It's the only thing I dared to hope for." Her body suddenly jumped. An unexpected muscular reaction. But afterward she tried to move closer to him, tried to crawl under his warm, mocha skin where she could be closer to his heart. He wiped her face with a clean handkerchief he produced from his pocket.

They lay quietly in each other's arms. Talon caressed her side and back with his free hand, keeping her body warm with his. Although she had on only a pair of panties and her slippers, she showed no sign of becoming chilled as he protected her. After a while a small voice under his chin asked, "Will you ever want to make love to me?"

He gave her a gentle squeeze. "I've wanted to make love to you ever since our first mission."

She moved slightly in his arms. "Really?"

"Yeah. Why do you think I bought us those phones? I couldn't bear the thought of not hearing your voice, or having any kind of connection with you between assignments. I know how tightly you're kept under guard. It was the only thing I could think of at the time." He chuckled lightly and dipped his head so that his mouth was closer to her ear. "A couple of times I've been tempted to make love to you over the phone."

This time she reared back slightly to look up into his face. "You know, I've always wondered how that's done," she commented matter-of-factly. The remark made him laugh aloud.

Rolling onto his back, Talon lifted her onto his chest until she was looking down at him. His dark eyes were turning darker; there was no way she could misinterpret the look in them for anything else than pure desire. For her.

He entwined the fingers of his hands with hers, and drew them up over his head. Æquana scooted slightly forward, until she gave a little breathy "oh!", her eyes widening. There was no mistaking what she was feeling being pressed in the valley

between her thighs, through the fabric of his dress pants. It was hot, long, and wonderfully hard against her skin. She tugged to release her hands from his, and to her surprise he let her go.

He let her explore him as she began to unbutton his shirt, moving slowly and enjoying parting the starched cotton to reveal the expanse of brown skin. She kissed him, trailing her lips and tongue over the hard muscle the same way he'd done with her, and she found she loved the way he tasted. The way he felt against her mouth. Tentatively she kissed the hook-shaped scar in the middle of his pectoral. "Does it still hurt?" she murmured.

"Naw."

"How'd you get it?"

"I'll tell you at a later time." His deep voice flowed over her like healing waters.

"And the others ones, too?"

"Anything you want to know," he promised, keeping his big, warm hands on her so she wouldn't become chilled.

When she took one of his chocolate-colored nipples in her teeth and lightly suckled it, she loved the way he groaned, like a deep rumble of distant thunder in his chest. A volcano of intense power ready to erupt without warning.

This was nothing like way it had been with Geoff. The sudden memory that came unbidden was both bittersweet and poignant. They had kissed, but he was not a seasoned lover. Despite his half-dozen past encounters, he could barely claim having any more experience than she could. Æquana knew that now. They had fumbled in the dim light, more curious than anything. He was her dearest friend, and what they had done that night had been more of an affirmation of their devotion to each other than anything else. There had been no passion, no lust, no raging heat between them. By the same token, there had been no agony in her heart whenever they were apart—not like this paralyzing hurt that swallowed her whenever she was with Talon... or when she wasn't with him.

It all made sense to her now. Geoff had found some respite, but she had been left empty and wondering where the glory was in such an act. Why did people make such a fuss over a little physical exertion? The next day, he had been the one to bring it up, trying to apologize. She had kissed him and given him a hug, and it was never mentioned again. Neither had there been any more desire to repeat the act between them. It was as though a question between them had been answered, and now it was time to move on.

It was not that way with Talon. She shivered, even when the gooseflesh was rising on his skin instead of hers.

"Are you getting cold?" he murmured, bringing his strong arms around her. Without waiting for an answer, he rolled them back onto their sides and enfolded her against his chest. She was comfortable and drowsy. She could stay like this... with him... forever.

"John?"

"What?"

"I love you so much."

"I know." He kissed the top of her head.

It was wonderfully peaceful, lying on the bed within the protection of his arms. Before she knew it, the stress of that morning slowly drained out of her, and Æquana slipped into a restful sleep.

Patience

She was surprised to wake up in his arms. His breathing was a slow, steady movement against her hands where they lay, curled up between them. His heart was a soft thumping against her cheek. Strong. Reassuring. Comforting.

It was difficult to believe she was lying in a hotel room, practically naked, with a man she hadn't known for a month. But it wasn't hard to believe the emotions that swept through her whenever she looked at him. Whenever he was with her. Whenever he touched her.

Æquana closed her eyes and sighed deeply. His hand went from where it had been supporting the small of her back to run fingers through her hair, stopping to cradle the back of her head.

"I guess I fell asleep," she apologized softly.

"So did I," he confessed.

She glanced up at him, bracing herself to ask the question that had been waiting in the back of her mind. "When do you have to leave?"

"Not until this evening." His eyes glanced over her, studying her, memorizing her. "Any regrets, Maja?"

"For what?"

"For anything. For how you're feeling. For what I've done to you. For where you are at the moment..." His voice trailed off as he gave her the opportunity to reconsider.

"Well... there's just one thing," she admitted. By the sudden tenseness in his body, she knew he was thinking the worst, and she grinned, unable to resist the temptation to tease him. "I barely ate any breakfast because I was so anxious to see you again. Now I'm famished. What time is it?"

Talon goosed her as he laughed aloud. He glanced at the clock on the bedside table as they both sat up on the bed. "It's after one. What say we go out to get something, instead of eating in the restaurant downstairs?"

"Sounds wonderful," she smiled, accepting her dress he handed to her. "I'm tired of being cooped up inside. Would you hand me my bra?"

"Nope. Sorry." He smiled as he got to his feet. Æquana watched as he casually tossed it in the metal wastebasket beside the desk.

"Hey! That's a forty-dollar Victoria's Secret!"

"She can keep her secret. You don't need one, my love. Besides, I want to be able to brush up against you and feel how natural you are," he admitted. He pulled a hairbrush from a small kit in his suitcase, and began to brush his straight hair back into a ponytail. When she had gotten her dress back on, he zipped her up and brushed her hair as well. "What are you hungry for?"

"You," she snapped hotly, then smiled.

"Other than that."

"Umm, fish?" She noticed he left behind the tie and coat. She also realized the shower was still running. "Gee, I hope you only used the cold water."

Rolling his eyes at her, he went into the bathroom and turned off the water. When he emerged, he held up the finger to his lips, as she knew he would, and walked over to the blinds at the window to replace the bug. That done, he tossed the blanket into her lap and wheeled her out of the room.

He took her to a seafood restaurant on one of the piers overlooking the Atlantic. Once they'd ordered, Æquana laced her fingers together and leaned over the table, closer to him. Talon noticed how the candle in the middle of the table made her glow, giving her pure white hair an almost angelic quality.

"You're going to think me insane for saying this, but even though I know you're leaving tonight, I can't remember when I've ever been this happy," she confessed in a low whisper.

"That reminds me. I'll need to get you another phone. I estimate you're about out of minutes." He paused, then reached into his pants pocket. "Excuse me," he told her, then answered his cell. "Eagletalon." A grin suddenly spread over his face. "Just a moment. I'll let *you* ask her." He handed over the phone to her, saying, "It's Buck. He wants to ask you something."

Maja took the phone, keeping her eyes on him. "Hello?"

"I just got one question for you," the gruff voice asked at the other end.

"What?"

"When are you gonna make an honest man of my Johnny?"

She cracked up laughing. "You realize that's a loaded question, don't you?"

"Hasn't he asked you yet?"

"Ask me what?"

There was a pause. Then a small voice grumbled, "Ohhh, shit. He's gonna kill me."

It was at that moment that she suddenly knew what he was talking about. Her whole body went tight with expectation, and her breathing almost shut down of its own accord. Eyes wide to keep the tears at bay, Æquana bit her lower lip even as her smile

grew wider. "It's okay, Buck. I think we already know the answer."

Talon gave her a curious look over the rim of his water glass.

She could almost feel the breath from the loud sigh that hissed over the phone line. "Keep it between us, and act surprised, would you?"

"Promise," she giggled. "You want to speak to him again?"

"Yeah. Give him the phone back."

"Bye, Buck. It's been nice talking to you. Speak to you again soon." She handed Talon his cell. Talon raised an eyebrow in her direction as he took the phone.

"Yeah. I'm taking the five o'clock flight. Should put me back a little after eight. I'll get home before ten. Okay. I will. Later." He closed the cell, putting it back in his pocket, and turned to her. "Okay. Give. What did he ask you?"

"He wanted to know if I was going to make an honest man of you. I told him he probably already knew the answer to that one," she giggled, reaching for her drink. It wasn't the whole truth, but at least she didn't lie. Fortunately, Talon didn't press the issue, and for that she was grateful. The way she felt now, she knew she wouldn't be able to keep her shriek of happiness from spilling out of her.

For the rest of their meal they talked of meaningless things: movies, books, tastes in music. An hour later when they were finished, Talon loaded her back into the rental SUV, and returned her to the clinic. But before they got there, he stopped at a store and bought two more disposable phones.

"Remember," he told her before the intern came over to retrieve her from the car, "we're going to make it. Just do what they ask, don't make any waves, and hurry up and get better. The sooner you're placed back on the active list, the sooner they'll assign us a new mission." He smiled. "And the sooner you'll get to see Colorado."

She nodded, accepting his hurried goodbye kiss, and turned to open the door. Talon watched her go with mixed feelings. On

one hand was his reluctance at having to leave her in this place that no longer looked upon her as a human being, but as an oddity they felt they could experiment on at their will, and with total impunity.

But on the other hand, his heart felt clean and refreshed. There were no longer any doubts about their feelings for each other, and now it was just a matter of time before all his plans began to fall into place. All he had to do was watch, wait for them to make the wrong moves, and be ready the moment opportunity presented itself.

She phoned him soon after he reached his hotel room. They had a brief hour to talk before he had to go to the airport and return the rental, but he had remembered to bring along the hands-free ear piece, so it was not a problem. As he had predicted, Shipp had scheduled a couple of tests for Æquana, citing the stress of the funeral as his reason to check her over, to be sure she was still doing well. Although Æquana knew a vaginal exam wasn't the norm, she'd kept her mouth shut and pretended to be oblivious of their concerns. Of course, she had to hide her smile when she overheard them discussing their findings, and she relayed that much to Talon during his stopover in Chicago.

"What did you tell them?" he asked, when she told him Draybeck had demanded to know what they'd done when they'd gone to the hotel room.

"I told him we discussed my accident. Then I talked about Geoffy. And that I cried some more. And then I fell asleep on the bed, until I woke up and you took me out to eat. I didn't lie, John."

"You didn't give them the whole story, either, but you did good. You're doing excellently, my love. I'm proud of you."

He heard her take a quick breath. Her voice was no longer hoarse, he'd noticed. It wouldn't be long before Shipp would give her a green light.

"I like it when you say that," she almost purred.

"Say what?"

"My love."

He heard a noise he didn't recognize, then a crunching sound. "What are you doing?" he laughed softly. This had to be one of the strangest long-distance romances on record, he chided himself.

"Eating an apple," she munched. "I didn't feel like supper, and now they're *really* talking about me. I tried to tell them about the huge lunch we had, but you know scientists." She took another bite as he listened.

They spoke a little while longer, until it was time for him to board. They made their goodbyes brief, relishing in the fact they would be reconnected as soon as he reached Colorado. Parting was no longer the sad ache it had been before, and Talon understood why.

Love didn't always have to hurt. Sometimes it could be a wonderful salve, too.

Snowfall

"How much money do you have in the bank?" Talon asked her.

Æquana mentally shrugged her shoulders. "I have absolutely no idea. I don't write checks."

"How do you know how much you can spend? Or how much they're paying you?"

He glanced out over the panorama beyond the windshield of his truck. Ugly gray clouds were sitting over the mountains in the distance, and an early heavy snowfall was being predicted for that evening. Already the temperature was dropping like a rock in water. Talon kept the engine in the truck running, to keep the heater going.

"I don't know, John."

"You need to ask sometime. You have a credit card, right? To pay for things when you go shopping?"

"Yeah, but I've never seen a bill. I... I never thought of it before. I'm sorry, John. You must think I'm a complete dunce."

"No, I don't." He shook his head, subconsciously knowing she couldn't see it. "If you're never taught these things, or given any inkling they even exist, how would you know to ask?"

"Why is it important?" she asked.

"More curious than anything. When you find out something, let me know."

"I will."

"Look, sweetheart, the weather's starting to look nasty here. I'm going to have to go so I can get back to the cabin before it hits."

"Okay," she replied, disappointment coloring her words. "I miss you."

"Soon, Maja. Soon. I promise. Remember, you just got clearance today. I wouldn't doubt Slaw giving me a call within the next seventy-two hours, if not sooner. Love you, woman. 'Bye."

"Bye."

Talon shut down the disposable, glancing into the rearview mirror as a car loaded with tourists heading for a ski resort drove past behind him to stop at the scenic overlook. His eyes caught the scowl on his face, and he sighed.

He already knew the answer to what he'd been asking her. It was only right she found out for herself, without him having to tell her, which was why he'd started her on her quest. Æquana had no liquid assets, no bank account, nothing. She was never paid for what she did, never allotted any monies other than the single credit card with her name on it. Yes, she was given free rein to buy anything she wanted, which explained a lot to Talon. Now the expensive clothing and the Beemer didn't seem so out of place, now that he'd come to know her better, and knew what she liked and didn't like.

She was never paid for risking her life every time she left the clinic. She was on no one's payroll. She was being treated no better than an animal in a zoo—given every luxury, every

convenience her heart desired, but in the end she was their property. And when they needed her to do something, she was expected to do it, or she'd be sent straight to her little cell-like room without supper.

Talon clenched and unclenched his hands in frustration. It had all started that morning when Buck had come up to him while he was reading the paper and having breakfast in the café.

"Hey, Johnny, have you checked your bank account lately?"

Talon glanced at him past the side of the paper. *"No. I know I'm not overdrawn because I haven't pulled that sixty grand out yet to put in a money market. Why?"*

Buck made a funny face. They both used the same bank, but had separate accounts. However, they could access each other's checking and savings online. Buck did the tracking for them both when he went on the computer to do the books or pay bills, especially since Talon was often away on assignment.

"Do you have any idea how much they paid you for that last job? The one at the oil rig?"

Frankly, no, he didn't. There was very little Talon spent his money on. There was little he needed or wanted, seeing as how Uncle Sam paid for everything whenever he was sent on a job. Only in the last month had he started to use his own infrequently used credit cards when he purchased his plane ticket to go back to D.C. for the funeral. That, and the hotel, and the meal when he took Maja out for late lunch. "Why don't you tell me?" he smiled.

"It's in five figures."

An eyebrow shot up. "For the one job?"

"Yeah. More than they paid you for the first one you went on. The bomb one. That one was less, but this one... I guess they gave you a bonus for saving her life."

It wasn't until he'd been paid for the first assignment that Talon found out he was no longer on a monthly payroll cycle, as he'd been when he was with the Corps. "I didn't save Maja for the money, Buck. You know that." He reached for his coffee.

"Yeah."

Talon watched his grandfather as the man's eyes seemed to search the ceiling for a clue. It was a habit the old man had whenever he was thinking, or trying to figure out a way to approach his grandson with a problem or question. "What? Spit it out."

"Oh, nothing. I was just wondering how much they paid her. I mean... how much do they figure her life is worth?"

That question had remained stuck in Talon's craw all day, until he was able to reach her to ask her.

Putting the truck in reverse, he pulled out of the overlook and headed back home.

They wouldn't even honor her with a straight answer. Giving Draybeck an icy look, Æquana slammed out of his office and went directly to her car. The temperature had dipped into the high thirties, but she didn't take the time to put up the top. She needed the cold wind to help calm herself down.

Yelling a curse word into the airstream, she banged her hand on the steering wheel. Why didn't the bastards realize that by not giving her an answer, it was an answer unto itself? Draybeck hemmed and hawed, and tried to come up with some sort of placating bullshit he hoped would suffice, but it hadn't fooled her. No more than those vaginal smears were to tell them something about her emotional state.

She understood now why Talon had brought up the subject. He needed her to find out for herself, to see what they were doing to her. They were royally screwing her, and she would have never known it, if not for Talon.

Æquana glanced at her watch. It was early afternoon in Colorado. Maybe, with a little luck, she could reach him. Pulling into a grocery store parking lot, she lifted the top on the convertible and made her first call to the cell. Immediately she got the message that all circuits were busy. Gritting her teeth, she tried the emporium. The same message came on. Dammit!

Maybe it was the disposable. Pulling out her own cell, she tried the emporium again, knowing it was the only “safe” line she could use, since they monitored all her calls on her own phone.

-We’re sorry. All circuits are busy. Please try agai-

“Shit.” It had to be the end-of-day Washington traffic. All those commuters taking up all available air space to see if the significant other needed any bread or milk on their way home from work.

She pulled out of the parking lot and made her way back to the clinic. Once she got there, she went directly to her room and locked the door behind her. Of course, they could still see her, still hear what she was saying. Æquana looked up at the ceiling, in the corner where the camera glared down at her with its little green light. She couldn’t reach it unless she had a ladder.

They knew she was talking to Talon. They knew, but there was nothing they could do about it. He was her partner, and if using the disposable was his way of “safely” keeping in contact with her, they had no way to object.

She was very careful to keep their conversations private. At the beginning she’d kept her voice low, her back to the camera so they couldn’t see her talking to him. Sometimes she’d hide underneath the bedspread. At other times she’d go outside and sit on one of the benches in the atrium. Then, when she’d learned about the shower trick, she’d go into her bathroom where no camera was present, and sit on the lid of the toilet while water ran in the sink. That worked out real well, even as Talon laughed when he found out.

Giving the camera the finger, she went into the bathroom and locked the door as well. She tried to make another call, but this time she got a different message.

-Your call cannot be completed at this time. Please make sure-

The weather’s starting to look nasty here. I’m going to have to go so I can get back to the cabin before it hits.

Emerging from the bathroom, Æquana turned on the tv and checked the Weather Channel.

“-is being hit with the first real Arctic blast of the season. It’s forecasted that as much as seventeen inches of snow will fall on the Pike’s Peak area tonight, with an additional ten to twelve inches predicted tomorrow.”

She stared at the screen, the phone lying limp in her hands. No matter how great modern technology became, Mother Nature would find a way to remind them that humanity would always be at her mercy. She couldn’t reach Talon. Not tonight. Not tomorrow. And this was just the first winter storm.

She’d done some research online. She’d read up about Colorado, and especially about the history of the Ute and Navajo tribes. Now she understood what Talon had been talking about when he’d mentioned Windtalkers. And the more she’d learned about his home, the more she ached to go there, if only to visit. If only for just one day. Or, please God, one night. In his arms. In his bed.

These past ten days had been sheer misery.

Curling up on her bed, she kept her eyes glued to the screen as the channel continued to keep her abreast of the situation developing in the Rockies.

How she came to the decision, she had no idea. How she gave birth to the thought, which became action, she couldn’t remember. But she was well. She’d been given the green light that morning, meaning the whole clinic knew she was back to a hundred percent. Which also meant that all the extra eyes they’d hired to keep watch on her while she recuperated would be gone. Or, at the least, relaxed.

There was one chance. Just the one. If she blew it, she’d never get another one.

Trying to act nonchalant, she got up from the bed and grabbed her purse and heavy coat.

"Hey, where you going?" the desk clerk at the front asked with a smile. It was his usual question if Shipp or Draybeck didn't let him know ahead of time that she was leaving.

She actually paused to give him a brief smile. "I thought I'd take in a movie. I'm feeling cooped up in here."

"Which one?"

"I don't know." She made a little gesture with her shoulders as she pulled on the coat and lifted the hood. "I'll make up my mind when I get to the cineplex. If I have a little time before the show, I'll probably run to the mall next door and pick up a couple extra pairs of socks."

"Well, have a good time!"

"Want me to bring you back some popcorn?" she offered.

The clerk, his name being Simmons, grinned. "Sure. I'd like that. Thanks."

She smiled again at him, and went out the front doors. "Fat chance," she muttered to herself once she was out of earshot.

There was a department store in the same strip mall where the movie theater was located. Æquana went inside and purchased a few changes of clothing, some toiletries, socks, panties—a tremulous smile touched her lips when she bypassed the bras—plus a gym bag like the kind Talon used when he wanted to carry on his things, rather than have to check a bag. She paid for her purchases with her credit card, knowing they wouldn't be keeping track of what she bought until the bill came in. But by that time, she prayed it would be too late for them to do anything.

Inside her car, she put the clothes in the gym bag and tried to call the emporium one more time. No luck. Sighing, Æquana pulled out the D.C. map from the glove box to find out how to get to the airport. Once she had a handle on which road to take, she left the mall.

She'd never done anything like this. Never attempted anything so rash before. She just prayed the hounds had yet to

be released to follow her. After all, she'd been under such tight security these past few days, even moreso when Talon had come back to take her to Geoffy's funeral. On the bright side, however, it wasn't unusual for her to take in a late movie. Or to go shopping whenever the notion struck her.

Æquana took a slow, nervous breath. *Please please please please... let me get away with this.*

She parked in the long-term lot and carried her bag into the terminal. The bank of television screens displaying departures greeted her once she was inside. Remembering which airline Talon usually went on, she went to the counter. By a stroke of luck, she walked right up to the employee.

"May I help you?"

"When's the next flight to Colorado Springs?"

"There's one scheduled to begin boarding in thirty minutes," the attendant told her, giving her a doubtful look.

"Are there any seats left?"

The woman checked her display. "You know that airport's about to be shut down up there, don't you. There's a big storm blowing in. Yes, there's a coach seat still available. Do you want to risk it?"

"Yes, please." Æquana handed over her credit card.

"Are you wanting to check any luggage?"

"No." She showed the woman the gym bag. "I'll carry this one on, if it's all right."

The attendant nodded, shuffling papers and sticking a boarding pass into an airline envelope. "Gate six. Better hurry."

Æquana signed the purchase slip, then glanced over at the long line parked before the security desks. There was no way she could get through the security check in time to make her flight. And then it dawned on her. Reaching inside her purse, she extracted her official wallet. "Excuse me, but I work for the government," she whispered, flipping open the bifold and handing it over. "Is there any way you can get me over to gate six quickly?"

The woman's eyes widened as she looked at the Special Ops badge and photo. She got immediately on the phone. In less than a minute a security officer was at the desk. He gave close scrutiny to the wallet, then motioned for Æquana to follow him.

They went through a side door, then into a smaller room where he quickly checked her and her personal effects with a hand wand. Handing her back her wallet, he escorted her to an electric cart and drove her immediately to the gate where boarding was already in progress. Æquana thanked him warmly and made her way onto the plane, settling in her seat as her stomach continued to do cartwheels.

No. She'd never done anything like this before in her life. And after tonight, she'd never be able to again.

But after tonight, she hoped she'd never be forced to try anything like it again.

Cabin

The plane was forced to circle above the Colorado Springs airport for nearly two hours before it was diverted to Denver. By the time Æquana disembarked, it was after ten p.m.

The hounds would be after her by now.

As she slowly walked through the airport, she tried to figure out how she was going to get to Talon. Everything was shutting down. Even Denver was starting to divert all incoming flights. Hers had been among the last planes allowed to land.

Up ahead, just past the gate, a cluster of four men were talking. They all wore official uniforms. One was a Colorado state trooper. She snagged his shirt to get his attention. "Excuse me?"

The man gave her a casual glance. "Is there something I can help you with?"

She motioned him aside and produced her credentials. "I'm on official government business. I need to get to Colorado Springs. It's very important. Is there *any* way you can help me?"

The man stared at her bifold, then looked up at her. "Where in Colorado Springs are you needing to go?"

"Well, not Colorado Springs, exactly. Pueblo. There's a place outside of Pueblo, off Highway 221 —"

"Two twenty-one? You're not talking about Buck's Emporium, are you?"

Faint hope lit a candle in her. "Yes. That's the place."

His eyes narrowed. "What kind of government business, if I may ask?"

"I need to get to my partner. It's urgent I get there as soon as possible."

"Who's your partner?" the man softly demanded.

Æquana paused only for a split-second. "John Eagletalon."

The man's eyes widened. "Is he expecting you?"

She shook her head. "No. Look... I'm afraid to say any more, but it's very, very important I get there as soon as possible. Please. Can you help me?"

The trooper gave her another quick once-over, then turned to the knot of men behind him who had been watching the couple. "Danny, come here a minute, would you?"

A man in a red jumpsuit came to join them. "Yeah?"

The trooper nodded in Æquana's direction. "She says she's looking for Talon. She says she's his partner, and she needs to get to him."

The one called Danny gave her a hard stare. "Come with me," he said, and started back down the corridor the way she had come. Quickly she and the trooper followed.

They were led to a small hallway where there was a door bearing an emblem and a plate that read "Emergency Rescue." Danny led them inside to an office. Once inside, he turned around to stare at her. "This had better be on the up-and-up," he warned. The trooper handed him Æquana's badge. The man studied it for a moment, then handed it back to her. "What business do you have with Talon?"

"He's my partner," she began.

Danny waved off on her. "The *real* reason. I don't care who you say you are. I'm not taking my chopper up without a damn good reason."

The candle began to flicker.

"*I am* his partner," she reiterated. "This evening I managed to slip away from the clinic where they keep me. I had to get away. I can't explain further."

"You were on the D.C. flight?" the trooper asked.

She nodded.

"How do we know you're telling the truth?" Danny demanded.

"I have his private cell number, but the phones aren't working," she thought aloud. A shiver ran through her. Slowly, she unzipped her coat and peeled down the collar of her turtleneck. Both men stared in open-mouth shock as she flared her gills.

"Jeez, would you look at those?" the trooper exclaimed in a hushed tone. "What are you? Some kind of fish girl?"

"I'm a mermaid," she admitted. The revelation was a milestone for her. Never before had she been forced to use that word to describe herself, although the description was used unceasingly by others. Covering back up, Æquana said, "By now they know I've gone AWOL. They're searching for me. When they find me, I..." The flame flickered out. "If I don't get to him, John will never be able to protect me again."

The two men glanced at each other. "Let me go see what the conditions are like," Danny said before he disappeared into a back room. It wasn't long when he re-entered the office. He had several sheets of paper in his hands. "If there's any kind of luck to be had tonight," he announced, "it's still holding. The wind's steady, and there's little chance of ice. Pueblo's airport went dark about an hour ago, but there's a small private landing strip just outside the city limits. I can get you that far."

The candle flickered to life once more. "Thank you," she told him, trying to ignore the tears. She also thanked the trooper

before she had to follow Danny to a flight of stairs leading down. At the bottom he grabbed a thermal jacket from a wall hook and put it on. He only glanced back once to see if she was keeping up with him. His eyes caught sight of the gym bag but he made no comment about it.

Mechanics were finishing their inspection of the red rescue 'copter when they arrived at the hangar. Danny helped Æquana inside, climbing in after her. She watched as snow beat futilely at the windshield as the man seated beside her put on a pair of headphones and warmed up the rotors.

It had taken her several minutes to realize these men weren't just taking these risks for her, or because she had the proper government credentials. They were doing this because of Talon. John Eagletalon. A shiver of anticipation tightened her skin. *How little I still know about you, my love*, she wondered to herself.

Lifting away in the darkness felt like rising from the depths of the ocean. Above the low-lying clouds, the stars were clear and crisp, like irregular slivers of frozen ice. Æquana stared wide-eyed at the panorama of cloud cover that resembled so much sea foam.

"So you and Talon are partners, eh?"

She glanced over at the man dividing his attention between the machine and her. "Navy," she called out over the loud throb of the overhead rotors. There was no mistaking the fact that the pilot had already assessed her from top to bottom.

"This isn't part of a mission, is it?"

Years of hush-hush sealed her lips before she could reply. Yet, if she lied, or refused to answer, there was the chance he would turn the 'copter around and take her right back to the airport with little conscience.

"No. I... we're not on assignment."

"This is personal, then?"

"Yeah."

To her shock, he didn't appear surprised. Just shrugged slightly and turned his attention back to the night sky.

The trip took less time than she thought it would. As the 'copter touched down on the short landing strip, Æquana was surprised to see a large, bulky machine sitting facing the runway, waiting for them. A half-dozen headlights came on to illuminate the snowy patch between them. Silently, Danny powered down and helped her out of her seat. The snow continued to fall, but the wind had died. They hustled over to the machine, where she was helped into the passenger side seat.

"I wish there was a better way to thank you," Æquana told the pilot.

Danny flashed her a big smile. "You got some guts, lady. Just tell Talon the Commander tells the Captain 'hello,' okay?"

"Okay!"

"Good luck!" he yelled, and slammed the door.

The machine began to move before the 'copter rose back into the darkness to return to Denver. Æquana glanced over at the man behind the wheel. He felt her eyes on him, and gave her a crooked grin. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Maja."

He stuck out a hand in her direction. "Foyle. Good to meet you."

She shook his hand. "What is this thing?"

Foyle kept his eyes peeled for possible icy patches as he maneuvered the big rig onto the road that would take them to the interstate. "It's a snowcat. You've never seen a snowcat before?"

"No. Heard of them but never seen one up close." She stared out at the darkness and the whirling snow that danced in the lights of the huge, bright lamps on the cab's roof.

"I can take you only as far as Buck's. He'll be able to get you over to Talon's place," Foyle told her. Giving her another long glance, he asked, "You really Talon's partner?"

Æquana nodded. "Why is it so hard for people to believe me?"

"I take it you don't have to worry about having a cover," Foyle commented.

She shook her head. "I'm...still in shock I was able to get this far. I'm..." She paused, and found she was staring down at her hands in her lap. The gym bag was resting on the floorboard at her feet. The heater in the snowcat's dash was gushing out a steady stream of warm air. Suddenly, everything seemed surreal, but inside Æquana could feel the candle begin to burn brighter and hotter. *My love... my love...* "I can't believe all these people know about Talon," she managed to say.

"Most of us know *Johnny*, but only a handful of us know *Talon*," Foyle corrected her. "People get to know people and their families around here. Their history. Their background, especially if they came from one of the reservations. My son joined the Navy the same time Johnny enlisted. We knew when he went into the SEALs. I went to visit him in the hospital after he got shot and was shipped back. Rumor lately was that he'd been ordered back to Washington for some kind of secret mission, but we know better than to ask questions." Foyle grinned. "Are you that mission?"

"I'm his new partner," Æquana insisted.

Foyle snorted. She could tell he didn't quite believe her.

They made good time, despite the weather and the mounds of snow collecting in drifts. The cat's huge tractor treads plunged on ahead, keeping a steady speed. The stretch of highway they were on had been shut down earlier that evening, so that they faced no traffic coming or going.

"You know, your timing couldn't have been more perfect," Foyle told her. "Before we left the airport, I'd gotten a bulletin that all hell would start breaking loose right before dawn. Kinda reminds me of that Indiana Jones movie, where he slides right under that moving wall, right before it slams down tight and traps everybody else left inside. That's you, Maja. You made it under the door by the skin of your teeth."

She graced him a warm smile. "Like I told Danny, I don't know how I'm going to repay you for all your help."

Foyle laughed softly, showing big, white teeth. "Hey, don't worry. We'll make Johnny foot the bill."

Æquana tried to check her watch when they turned off onto 221. She was now a bundle of nerves. Foyle saw her movements, and turned on the interior light for a moment. It was a little past one in the morning. "Damn," she exclaimed softly. She had been gone from the clinic for seven hours.

"Something wrong?"

"No. I just didn't know how late it was."

Nodding, Foyle commented, "We should be coming up to the emporium pretty soon now."

She felt sweat break out all over her body. The anticipation was becoming more than she could bear. Already her stomach was reduced to a hard little lump in the middle of her body. Even worse, an ache had begun in the lower part of her abdomen. An ache she couldn't explain or describe, but she knew that only Talon could take it away. It was steadily growing hotter and more painful, forcing her to press her thighs and her lips tightly together, and hope Foyle couldn't hear the plaintive, breathy moans escaping her.

They started up a small rise. Reaching the top, the snowcat leveled out, and the big white lights on top of the cab illuminated a long log building in the distance. The parking lot was covered in snow, making it impossible to tell where the road ended and the emporium began. But she gazed at it almost hungrily.

A narrow sign on the side of the building read BUCK'S EMPORIUM. There was a smaller sign on the outside of one of the doors. As Foyle drove them closer, she could read "Closed Due to Weather." The place was as dark and as empty as an deepwater trench.

He slowed the cat down until it stopped. "Well, this is it. You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah," she smiled. "Buck lives in the trailer in the back."

"Yeah, I know. Want me to wait, just in case he's not home?"

"I'll be fine. Thank you so much, Mr. Foyle." She opened the door to get out. Giving him one more smile, she slammed the door and started for the side of the building. She wasn't surprised that he waited anyway, giving her the cat's headlights to see by. Electric power had been lost hours ago.

She managed to tramp through the snow around the side of the building. Her coat was giving her plenty of protection, but the snow was soaking through the legs of her jeans and into her shoes. When she'd left D.C., she hadn't dared to put on her boots, for fear they might suspect something. And when she'd gone shopping, she hadn't thought to buy a new pair.

Rounding the next corner, in the distance she could just make out a mobile home. It was a single-wide, but a log addition had been built onto the side, making it bigger than it originally had been.

Æquana slowly made her way to the front door. Taking a deep, shaky breath, she banged hard on the door. There was no sound, no movement inside that she could tell, so she banged on the door again, using the side of her fist. After a long, cold minute the lock turned, and cautiously the door parted an inch. A thin stream of light filtered out onto the snow.

"Who is it? What do you want? Do you know what time it is?"

She instantly recognized the voice from the phone call. "Buck? It's me. Maja."

She heard his gasp of surprise. "*Maja?*"

The door opened wider, and a tall, gray-haired man holding a small lantern stared at her. "Oh, sweet Jesus. Come in!" He quickly ushered her in, closing the door behind her. He rushed to light another larger lantern before turning around to look at her with eyes wide in disbelief.

Æquana lowered the hood on her jacket as she stared the man who was Talon's maternal grandfather. The man who had raised him. He wasn't anything she had expected, and she

blamed the pictures on the internet for her mistake. Where she thought she'd see a wizened little man with long gray hair down to his waist, she saw a man a bit taller than herself with a weathered but still somewhat youthful countenance. He was wearing a pair of sweatpants and a white t-shirt. His hair, unlike Talon's, was cut short in a more modern style. The only thing she'd gotten right was the fact that it was gray.

He beamed at her. "Good God, woman! When... *how* did you get here? Johnny didn't tell me you were coming!"

She shook her head, and noticed his eyes taking in everything about her. He seemed especially interested in her hair. "That's because he didn't know I was coming," she confessed. Talon had told her his grandfather knew everything about what he did, including her. He was the one man he could trust completely. "I ran away from the clinic, Buck. They're searching for me now. They probably already know I came here."

Here. She was finally here, finally where she'd dreamed of coming, but somehow or someway she feared she was going to wake up and find out it all had been a beautiful but terrible dream. Her legs were getting too weak to support her, and before she knew what was happening, she felt herself falling to the carpet. Buck managed to grab her and help her over to the sofa along the wall.

"Let me get you some water. When did you say you left D.C.?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry... I... I can't believe I'm finally here. My plane... I left on the five o'clock flight, but Colorado Springs was closed down, so they diverted us to Denver." She took the glass and drank it down without stopping.

"You came from Denver? How? The airports must be shut tighter'n a doornail by now."

"They are. I grabbed a state trooper, and he led me to some guy named Danny who had a rescue helicopter. Danny told me to tell Talon that the Commander tells the Captain 'hello.'" She gave a little shrug. "Whatever that's supposed to mean."

Buck grinned. It was wide and toothy and infectious. She relaxed somewhat and smiled back. "Ah, you got a pretty smile," he said. "More water?"

"No, thanks. I just need to rest a bit. These past few hours have been... a bit much," she admitted.

"I don't doubt it, what with you just getting released from medical leave," the man commented as he took the glass into the kitchen.

Æquana stared at him. He saw the look and smiled. "Johnny tells me everything."

"I know. He told me he does. It just... it's just strange, is all, considering how I've had to be hush-hush all my life." She took another shaky breath.

Buck came and sat on the sofa next to her. "Can I ask a favor?"

"Ask away. But remember, you have to return the favor."

"Not a problem. Can I... can I see them?"

She knew what he meant. Unzipping her jacket for the second time that night, she rolled down the top of her turtleneck sweater. Buck leaned in close. Presently he gave a low whistle.

"Damn! Johnny was right. They *do* look like butterfly wings."

Æquana stared at him. "He said that?"

"Ask him if you don't believe me." Getting to his feet, he went over to the door and stuck his feet into a pair of high-top boots. "Got any other luggage besides that bag you brought in?" he asked as he laced up the boots.

"No. That's all. I had to stop and get some clothes on my way to the airport. I didn't dare pack back at the clinic, or else it would have made them suspicious."

"Where did you tell them you were going?"

"I told them I was taking in a movie."

Buck grinned. "Smart girl. That gave you a good two hours head start." He grabbed his coat hanging by the door. "Ready?"

Slowly she got to her feet. "I'm nervous, Buck."

"Why?"

"Because... John and I..." She looked down to see her hands twisting her gloves. She never expected the man to come over and give her a quick hug.

"He *still* hasn't asked you, has he?" Seeing her shake her head, he frowned. "I'm gonna hafta kick that boy's butt. I would've swore he would've asked you before now."

Æquana giggled softly. "Buck, please, for my sake. Are we on the same wavelength here?"

"Wavelength?"

"Are you telling me... oh, this is just too absurd." She backed down, afraid to go any further.

"What's absurd? That my grandson is going to ask you to marry him? How is that absurd?"

Her heart thudded in her chest, making it harder and harder to breathe. "Are you sure, Buck? One hundred percent sure?"

"Well, if he doesn't, I'm *definitely* gonna kick his butt!" He grabbed her arms and looked directly into her eyes. Lowering his voice, he told her, "Yes. He's gonna ask 'cause he told me he was. Now *when* is the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question! Look, we'd better get going before this snow makes it impossible to get over to his place."

He led her outside to where the truck was buried under several inches of powder. Helping her into the vehicle, he got in on the driver's side and started the engine. "Got the snow chains on just in time," he grinned, backing up.

He drove slowly, keeping an eye on the vast white expanse before them. Æquana had no way of identifying landmarks. Everything was covered in snow, and more of the same stuff was predicted to fall before the whole thing was over.

"Buck?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you think he's going to be angry with me for running away? I mean, they're coming after me. That's going to put you and him in danger. Oh, God..." She raised a trembling hand to her face. "I shouldn't have come. How could I have been so

stupid? Buck, I need to go back. I need to go back and not get you involved in this mess I've created."

"Maja? Maja, look at me." His voice suddenly was hard and authoritative. In it Æquana recognized Talon's take-charge tone. She raised a pale face to him. "Do you love my grandson?"

"Yes. Very much."

"Hasn't he protected you and taken care of you in the past? Hell, I *know* he's saved your life. What makes you think he isn't already aware of the consequences? He's planning on marrying you and taking you away from Dr. Frankenstein's lab. Don't you think there's gonna be hell to pay when he does? Okay, so you've pushed the time frame up a bit. We'll handle it. Right now, you've come all this way. You're tired, and you're probably hungry. When was the last time you ate?"

She had to think. "Lunch."

"That was over twelve hours ago. Don't worry. The snow is going to bring everything to a dead stop for the next couple of days, at least. You and Johnny, take this time to love and get to know each other better. Get to know your new home and see what it's like in the winter. Yeah, it can be a royal pain, but it's also the most beautiful sight in the world, up here on the mountain."

He pulled off onto a little trail she couldn't detect. For all the world it looked as though he was winding his way aimlessly between the trees, deeper into the forest. The woods around them were reduced to two colors: nighttime shadows and brilliant white snow. What little she could see was quickly swallowed up in the blackness. In the headlights she waited for her first glimpse of Talon's home with bated breath.

They came around a large grove of snow-dusted trees, and the red glare of taillights gleamed at them. Æquana gave a nervous little giggle. "He said he had a truck. I didn't... I just couldn't picture him with one."

Not far beyond the truck was the cabin. She sat back in the seat in surprise. "Ohmygosh."

It was two-storied. A hand-hewn log home, looking just as he'd described it to her. A porch faced them, and the vehicle's headlights hid the front door in shadow. Buck put the truck in park and hit the horn three times. The sound blared cold and lonely in the dark.

"What are you doing?" Æquana laughed.

"Waking him up! What did you think?" He slapped the horn again three times. "He's a light sleeper. He's probably already cursing my name every which way under the sun. Let's go."

He got out of the truck, and was helping her out of the cab when the front door opened, and lantern light spilled out across the snow. "Buck, are you out of your ever-loving mind? Do you realize what time it is?"

"Hell, yeah, I know, but I had to hand-deliver a present to you!" Buck yelled back as he grinned. "A present that came all the way from Washington."

Æquana stood still, framed by the truck's cab light. She could see the lantern coming closer. She could see Talon in a short jacket, holding up the light. The expression on his face was priceless.

"*Maja?*" he breathed.

She struggled to make her way toward him. She was home. After so many long, and after so many desperately lonely nights, she was here. With him. She was nearly at the porch when he hurriedly dropped the lantern and scooped her up into his arms.

The sobs wouldn't stop, even when he pressed kisses to her face and lips. He was still warm from being in bed, radiating heat like a living furnace. Although she knew her hands were like ice, she tried to bury them in the neck of his jacket as his hot breath washed over her face. Holding her tightly, he carried her back into the cabin. Buck brought the lantern in with him.

Talon sat them both down on his sofa and stared at her in disbelief in the soft light. Lowering the hood on her jacket, he raked his fingers through her hair, dusting away a stray flake on

her pale gold lashes. "What's going on, Maja. How in the hell did you get here?" He glanced up at Buck almost accusingly. "Did you know she was coming?"

"Swear on a Bible I knew as much as you. But you know they're probably on their way right this minute to get her back. Want me to send out the word?"

"Yeah, Buck. Do that."

"Okay! Maja..." He leaned down to give her a kiss on the forehead. "Welcome to the family—" He gave his grandson a glaring look. "—sooner or later." Setting the lantern on the coffee table, he closed the door behind him, leaving them alone as he returned to his truck.

Æquana stared at Talon, unable to grasp the reality of finally having reached him. His hair flowed over his shoulders, making her realize he wore it loose when he slept. Before he could say anything more, she launched herself against him. She was trembling so violently, his arms had to grip her tightly to help calm her down. His voice was a gentle balm to her ravaged heart.

"Maja. Honey, tell me what's going on. What did they do to you? How did you get here?"

She shook her head as her arms tightened around him. "Please," she begged. "Please. John. Love me." It was too much to bear, this loving him and needing him, and suddenly having him after all that had happened. She started to weep, her shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

Talon picked her up in his arms. She felt herself being carried across the room and up the stairs. At the top of the landing, he walked into what was his bedroom. Once inside, he lowered her until her feet touched the floor. There was a candle burning on the bedside table.

Talon unzipped his jacket and tossed it on a chair behind her. Keeping her eyes steadied within his own gaze, he reached out and unzipped her jacket, pulling it off and throwing it after his.

She could see he was wearing a pair of sweatpants like the kind Buck had been wearing, but he was bare-chested. When her gaze wandered, he quickly lifted her face to redirect her attention. "You wanted something from me before I left the last time," he reminded her in a low, smoky voice.

The memory washed over her—the hotel room. His lips. His hands. The hardness pressed between her aching thighs. *Remember this.* She closed her eyes as her heart threatened to shatter into tiny pieces.

He pulled the turtleneck over her head. Her hair floated over her shoulders and down around her bare breasts. She hadn't worn a bra since that day he had taken it off of her. The room was cool but not cold.

Kneeling before her, he removed her shoes and wet socks before he undid her jeans and slowly slid them down past her thighs. She stepped out of the wet clothing, her hands resting on his wide shoulders for balance as he continued to make a small pile of her things in the corner of the room. That left her in just her panties. She watched as he hooked his fingers over the thin elastic band and eased them down her legs. This time she closed her eyes and waited nervously for what he would do next.

He had seen her naked before, but this was entirely different. It was so... so very erotically different. When he rose to his feet, he did so by sliding his body up along hers, gliding warm, slow, and vibrant like a sunrise, his fingertips leaving tiny paths of molten fire up the backs of her legs, her buttocks, and her back, until he reached her lips. Slipping his arms around her, he leaned over to kiss her. Æquana whimpered, and lost herself in him.

The world went away to leave them alone in their discovery. She was in his bed, unaware of when he'd put her there. His body was a pulsing wall of heat against her, and her eyes flew open when she felt his bare legs twining with hers. Every inch of him was hard, ripped muscle, taut and sinewy from his years in the military. Against him she was putty, ready to be molded.

His hands explored her, cherished her, and touched her in ways that threw away all conscious thought. His mouth was a fire all unto itself, igniting the coals of desire that had been resting between her legs ever since that day in the hotel room. As her body reacted, Æquana closed her eyes and opened her heart. "I'm dreaming," she whispered, caught up in his passionate foreplay. His mouth was suckling her breast until she half-choked out a cry.

"No," he whispered back. "I am."

He rolled over on top of her and pressed his hard length against her lower belly. Æquana gasped, her hips unconsciously gyrating beneath his weight. A whimper bubbled out of her throat, and she somehow managed to reach down and run her palms over his tight buttocks. There, right above his left hip, she felt another scar. Long. Smooth.

"John."

"Ma... ja... my... love." The declaration was a warm breath against her neck. Before she could comprehend what he was doing, she felt his mouth carefully, tenderly touching her gills. The tip of his tongue gently licked the delicate, lacy edges. The sensation nearly rocketed her over the edge of insanity. Her groan of passion was pure and sexual, wrenched out of her lungs by the surge of lust that was drowning her, and he knew she was ready for him.

He spread her legs beneath him until he could fit above her. Slowly, cautiously, he began to ease inside her one gradual inch at a time. Her body arched beneath him. Her eyes widened in shock, and he looked down at her as he slid himself in another inch, then another. When she shuddered, he murmured, "Am I hurting you?" Her increasing wetness was helping her body grab him like a silken fist, but her almost virgin muscles retracted at his invasion.

She gasped loudly, lifting her hips as her fingers dug into his shoulders. The movement encased almost all of him. "Oh, God... what's happening to me?" she groaned. He was so much

bigger than Geoffy. Bigger. And thicker. And so damn incredibly hot. Immediately worried she was in pain, Talon began to withdraw. Æquana clutched his waist and tugged. "No... *no!*"

"I don't want to hurt you," he told her in a barely audible voice. But neither did he want to leave the unbelievable heat inside her. The way her muscles stroked him. It was mind-blowing, the way she was fitting him. Another inch, then two, and she clamped down on him like a steel trap. There was no way he could dislodge himself now, even if he had to. Even if he wanted to, and there was no damn way he would ever want to. Never again.

Talon looked down again and saw her gazing up at him, her face pleading. In the candlelight, her darkened blue eyes were dazed with her need.

"Love me, John. *Please.*"

He bent down to kiss her. "Maja, marry me."

Her eyes lost their glaze for a moment. "What?"

"Marry me. Stay with me. Here. For the rest of our lives."

He managed to pull out slightly before beginning to descend back inside her, back into her willing, trembling body. When he was finally and fully engulfed within her, he got up on his hands and arms so he wouldn't crush her with his weight. Æquana had her arms around his neck, holding back his thick hair.

"You haven't answered me," he teased her. Nose to nose, he kissed the tip. He dipped his hips, then lifted them. His shaft fit her perfectly. Sheathed as tightly as a sword in a scabbard. *This is heaven*, a little voice inside his head whispered. *And you're in love with an angel.* "Answer me," he demanded, sex roughening his voice.

"John," she hiccuped slightly. As he penetrated her again, making her take his whole, heavy length, she shuddered. Another low groan of pleasure came from her.

"Answer me," he teased again. Reaching back with one hand, he lifted one of her knees. The result gave him greater access to

her richest treasure. He dove deep and thick into her once more, and this time she responded with an unconscious undulation of her body.

The effect was like lightning on water. A lifetime of learning how to move her body through the water had also taught her how to make love. Talon felt his muscles go rigid a second before nature took over and all rational thought abandoned him. He began to move inside her, pushing himself faster and harder as she rode him from below. They both were breathing heavily, raggedly, as their bodies lifted above the waves in their frenzied search for the tsunami to come crashing down on them.

Over and over he pounded into her, pressing her deep into the bed, until he was also gasping from the sheer, pleasuring torment. His muscles bunched, preparing him for the inevitable avalanche of torturing ecstasy, and Talon strained to give her the release she desperately needed.

She was completely open beneath him, giving herself to him and begging for more. Her skin was flushed, glistening. Her inner muscles began to vibrate, and Talon found himself climbing with her. He lost himself, lost his sanity, and lost his reasoning. Everything was swept away as the riptide swallowed him whole, squeezed him until there was nothing left, and then launched him into the sky as a dry and empty shadow of himself. He cried out as she also screamed her release, dragging her nails across his shoulders.

Pushing. Pushing, as the sweet juices gushed, scalding them both until there was nothing left but smouldering ashes. Unable to do anything but wait for the world to settle back into place, and let feeling slowly flood back into his brain. Into his hands and legs. Into his chest, where his heart could begin beating again.

She was gasping in short, little gulping breaths as she lay spread beneath him, arms spread outward. Her gills were flared, her eyes closed. A drop of perspiration rolled down the

side of her face. In the light of the single candle, she was a creature of myth. Mysterious. Intoxicating. So damn incredibly beautiful.

"Maja." He nuzzled the angel-soft hair against her ear. Drawing her into his arms, he rolled her over until they could lie comfortably. Sated. "Maja, you never gave me an answer," he murmured lovingly.

"You couldn't already read the answer on my heart?" she teased, giggled, and gasped again. Lifting her head slightly, her lips brushed under his chin. "Wow. Buck was right. You really were going to ask me."

The room grew quiet, so quiet she could hear the snow striking the window above the bed's headboard. As they sunk into sleep, she heard her husband-to-be mutter grumpily, "I'm going to kill him."

It was the last thing she remembered before his arms wrapped her in total happiness.

Darkness

His brain was awake and evaluating the situation before his body shifted out of sleep mode. Old habits and years of training were hard to break, even after a few months' time. He knew he was home, at his place in Colorado. It was the first thing he clicked into. The first realization which kept his pulse slowed, instead of sending blood gushing through his system, loaded with adrenalin, and throwing his body into full-alert mode.

He'd had the most wondrous dream. Even now shreds of it remained spread out on the fringes of his consciousness, ready to envelope his mind again once he was certain all was safe and secure, and it was all right to go back to sleep.

Without thinking, Talon flexed his fingers. And he froze. The length of silk beneath his palm was not him or the sheets. Nor was it any longer a dream.

Barely breathing, he lowered his face until it encountered another warmth. An ear. A downy cheek. The flutter of a breath over his arm. A presence that squeezed tears from his heart.

Maja.

His brain did a double-take, and Talon quickly reassessed himself. He was lying at an angle, partly on his stomach, and partly on top of another warmth. His right arm was tucked beneath the pillow under his head, but it was his left arm that tingled along the expanse of bare flesh.

Maja... came to Colorado.

Careful not to awaken her, he brought his hand downward, barely caressing a perfect back. The pert, rounded bottom. She was asleep on her stomach, like him.

She was here. She was real. And suddenly memories of the earlier hours rushed back to him. Just as suddenly, Talon felt his whole body respond, sending the rush of blood to the center of his loins.

A pounding need beat a rhythm of lust in his head, resonating inside his skull, until every sense was attuned to the figure of the woman beside him. He could recall with crystal clarity the feel of her around him, her slick, hot muscles struggling to take him. Now, more than ever, he had to have her encasing him again. He had to feel her tight sheath enveloping him, making him crazy to the point where he wanted to throw all common sense and precaution to the wind and submerge himself totally within her incredible body.

His hand traveled lower to reach between her legs. There he found evidence of their earlier passion. With the electricity out, the water heater wouldn't be working, or else he would have gone into the bathroom for a warm cloth to clean her with.

A groan rumbled in his chest. To hell with the cloth.

Gently he proceeded to turn her over onto her back, toward him. Æquana stirred slightly in the coolness of the room, pulling in her arms and drawing her knees up to keep her chest and tummy warm. Talon quickly brought the quilts back up over them as he settled above her, between the most perfect pair of thighs he'd ever known in his life.

Now he could breathe her in, and he filled his lungs with her scent. She was all woman, despite her deformities. *No, not*

deformities, he chided himself. Her attributes which make her unique, very rare, and special.

His skin tightened as the after-scent of their previous coupling came to him. The sheer explosive carnal thought of plunging into her was overpowering, but he knew he couldn't do that to her. Not while she still slept. Not so soon after she'd arrived, and the hounds of hells still ravaged her in her nightmares.

"Maja." It was no louder than a sigh, but she moved. The minute slide of her skin along his sent bolts of flat, electric heat straight into his belly, forcing Talon to press his forehead into her hair. It felt as if his manhood would burst if he didn't get into her, and soon.

"My love."

She lifted herself, her body unconsciously seeking his, her legs drifting apart enough to where he could bring himself right to her entrance. Her hands sought his chest, then his shoulders, finally twisting fingers in his loose hair.

"John?"

He pushed into her, unable to wait any longer. He heard her quick intake of breath, and immediately she spread her thighs wider as she tried to pull him deeper inside her. Oh, God, she was already wet and ready for him, and his arms supporting his weight turned to jelly.

"Love me again?" she begged in that sultry voice she didn't know she had when her own desires overcame her.

He needed no further invitation.

Breakfast

This... is not my bed.

Æquana smiled. Her eyes were still closed as she extended her leg sideways, testing the size of the warmth she was lying in. It definitely wasn't the twin bed she'd known almost all her life. And the sheets were soft. Used, worn soft. Maybe flannel. And they smelled... *like spruce.*

She had awakened to silence, and for a terrifying span of a dozen heartbeats, she thought she had dreamed it all—her escape... her flight... Talon's beautiful hard body. Until she realized the bed just didn't feel "right."

Slowly she rolled onto her back. She never slept in the nude, but now she couldn't imagine ever putting a nightgown back on. Her insides felt like they had been poured into her skin. There was no way to describe how absolutely wonderful she felt.

Opening her eyes just a teensy bit, she looked around the room, now visible despite the cold, grayish dawn. There was the chair with her coat and his lying on it. She raised her arms over her head and stretched. *Oh, God, this is incredible!*

There was a stickiness between her thighs, making her grin even wider. Vaguely she wondered if she should clean up, or if it was all right to keep this little reminder with her. Was Talon still bearing traces of them?

To her right was a partially opened door. Just beyond it she caught a glimpse of a pedestal sink. The bathroom. There was another door on the same wall. Then a third closed door to her left, closer to the chair. One of them led to the stairs.

She sat up in the bed, hating the thought of leaving its comfort, but Talon was somewhere “out there,” and she was dying for a kiss. But first she had to use the ladies’ room.

The water coming out of the sink was liquid ice. Æquana shivered as she threw a double handful of it on her face and dried off with a fluffy, dark green towel. The bath held a large, glass-enclosed shower stall, but no tub, and she sighed. Smiling, she opened the mirrored cabinet door and looked at all the items stored inside.

All of these little observations were like finding buried gems on a treasure hunt. She discovered what color his toothbrush was, what kind of toothpaste he used, his deodorant, his shampoo—She flipped open the top and inhaled its scent. Evergreen. *Of course*. His hairbrush was on the counter. She used it to brush out her tangles, but stopped short of pulling the white froth into a ponytail, leaving it loose instead.

Walking back out into the bedroom, she shivered from the cold. A quick glance out the window revealed a wonderland of perfect white as the snow continued to fall.

She tried the door next to the bathroom. It opened outward to reveal a huge walk-in closet. Æquana giggled and buried her face in his clothing. There was so much happiness inside her, she wished she could save some of it. An old Denver Broncos t-shirt was hanging on a hook in the back. It was long-sleeve and faded yellow from repeated washings, but it was soft and swallowed her when she put it on. The extra-long hem went down to her

knees. And it still held his smell when she crossed her arms over her breasts.

The gym bag was sitting beside the one door she hadn't opened yet. A quick search inside found a pair of socks she'd purchased yesterday —

Was all that just yesterday? her mind mused. Another, darker shadow rose up, threatening to break her happiness, but she choked it down. She didn't have to worry about it. She was with Talon now, and he would take care of it. She was with him. Finally. In Colorado. In his home. Her home. Their home. And they'd made love. Dizzying, soul-soaked love. Not once, but twice. The second time in the earliest hours of the morning, with it pitch black in the room, and Talon waking her when he covered her and filled her and shredded all sense of time and place as he consumed her body. Now, there was nothing that could come between them. Talon wouldn't let anything happen to her. Hell would have to open up and swallow her first before she would ever be parted from him again.

Once the socks were on, she slowly opened the door leading to the stairs, and immediately she was aware of two things: something was cooking, and there were voices below.

Æquana cautiously descended the stairwell, peering down into the living area below. What she saw was like having her deepest dreams come to life. The living area was open and inviting. The color scheme was fundamentally masculine, the sparse furniture based in reds and blacks, as evidenced by the rug on the paneled flooring and the throw across the back of the black leather sofa. An enormous rock fireplace took up the entire wall on the opposite end of the cabin, and a fire was already crackling away. The kitchen area was to the right where it had been built to open up to the living room. Behind a horseshoe-shaped bar, she could see Talon cooking on a small gas range behind the counter top. He had on his sweatpants again that he'd been wearing last night, plus a white t-shirt. To

his back, an immense black enamel refrigerator sat against the back wall.

She could live here for the rest of her life here with the man, and never regret it.

Sitting on a stool in front of the bar, Buck was partaking of a cup of coffee. He was first to spot her coming down the stairs. "I must say, that shirt looks a lot better on you than it does on Johnny," he drily commented. "Good morning, Maja."

There was no way she could stop the blush from rising to her face. Her gaze traveled back upstairs when she realized he had to know what she and Talon had been doing last night, and she dropped her eyes in embarrassment.

Seeing her sudden reluctance to join them, Talon casually mentioned, "There's milk and juice in the fridge. Buck fixed the coffee, so I'd think twice about having some if I were you."

Mentioning the fridge, she glanced up and went over to take one of the stools for herself. "Is the electricity back on?"

"No. I have the generator going." He glanced at her over the counter. He'd noticed the socks on her feet as well, and the fact that her gills were tightly pressed along her neck, almost invisible in the dim morning light.

"What generator?"

Buck pointed to a narrow door under the stairs. "Down in the basement. For when we lose power."

"Are you going to be warm enough in that?" Talon asked, knowing how cold-natured she was.

"Yeah. I'm fine." She peered over the bar. "I didn't know you knew how to cook."

"How do you like your eggs?"

"Scrambled, if that's okay."

"Go ahead and get yourself something to drink." He gave her his slow, one-sided grin. "Make yourself at home."

For a moment she paused to stare at his lips, remembering the magic they'd performed on her the night before, the places they

had been on her body, and another blush crimsoned her face. Sliding off the stool, she went around the counter and opened the fridge. As she took the carton of orange juice to the counter, she caught a glimpse of the snow outside the French doors facing the rear of the cabin. She'd never seen that much snow so pristine and untouched before, even though she lived in a city that had its fair share of it fall every year.

"Wow."

Buck saw her expression. "Got fifteen inches of it last night. Should get another foot or more today. This whole area's come to a complete standstill."

Recalling something he had said when he'd brought her to the cabin, Æquana gave him a questioning look. "Are the roads impassible now?"

"Can't even get an eighteen-wheeler up here to bring deliveries to the store," Buck remarked.

Talon saw where her questioning was leading. "He used his snowmobile to make it over this morning."

Delight splashed across her face. "You have a snowmobile?" She threw the question at both of them.

"It's standard equipment when you live up in this part of the country," Talon chuckled. "Would you like to go for a ride later?"

"Boy, would I!"

Both men laughed at her undisguised joy. Taking another noisy sip of his coffee, Buck slowly shook his head. "Man, oh, man. You don't know how lucky you were to make it here last night."

She turned around after replacing the juice in the fridge to glance from him to Talon. "Did you fill him in?" she asked Buck.

"What he could," Talon told her. "So the Commander said to tell the Captain 'hello'?" At her nod, he snorted softly and placed sausage patties on a paper towel to drain. "D'Agustino's going to have a million and one questions for me. How did you manage to convince him to fly you to Pueblo, sweetheart?"

His use of the endearment in front of his grandfather sent a warm curl of happiness throughout her body. Without realizing it, she smiled. "I showed him my gills," she admitted, and waited for him to blow up. Surprisingly, his facial expression remained calm. "You're not angry?"

"Why would I be? You were fleeing for your life. Shipp has had you brainwashed for far too long, Maja. He's made you think the whole world is out to get you, when just the opposite has happened." He stopped what he was doing to give her a long look. "The bad guys are not 'out there,' honey. The bad guys already had you in their clutches. They've already been experimenting on you and putting you through all the imagined horrors they want you to believe still lie 'out there,' waiting to be performed on you if you went public."

"They're looking for me now," she said softly. "You know they are. And when they find me here...." A tremor ran through her and her eyes widened as she turned to gaze back out over the snowy landscape. She could imagine how Dr. Shipp was taking it. Retribution would be nothing like it had been in the past if he caught her. At the thought of those cold cuffs on her arms and legs, her body gave a violent little shake. "What are we going to do, John?"

She didn't hear him come up behind her until he turned her around and pulled her tightly against him, his arms warm, strong barriers of safety. He smelled of breakfast cooking... and something darker. Something more animalistic. Without realizing it, Æquana knew she'd gotten the answer to her earlier unspoken question upstairs, and she squeezed tightly against him.

"We're going to get through this," he murmured softly. "That's my job now. That, and keeping you with me."

Æquana giggled as her arms wrapped themselves around his neck. "You have one helluva job description," she whispered against the curve of his shoulder.

He drew back and leaned over to give her a soft kiss. "Right now we're off the clock, so go get your juice and sit down. Breakfast is almost ready." Letting her go, he went back to finish cooking the eggs. Æquana returned to the panorama of white.

"Do you have a pool?" she asked after another silent moment had passed. She could hear someone opening and shutting drawers, and the clinking sound of utensils.

"No. No pool. Not this high up in the mountains."

"Will you build me one after we're married?"

When she heard no answer, Æquana turned around to see Talon and his grandfather exchanging looks. Suddenly Buck pointed a finger at his grandson and burst out laughing. Talon's scowl deepened.

"You almost spoiled it, old man."

"Didn't matter. She didn't believe me anyway," Buck chuckled.

A faint smile came over Talon's face. "Well, see if I tell you anything again!" he threatened, and handed him a plate. "Now, shut up and eat." Setting a plate down for Æquana, Talon took the seat next to hers. She went over to join them.

"What are we going to do today besides go riding?" she began innocently... then stopped. "I mean..." A deep red blush overtook her, and Buck roared with laughter.

Ignoring him, Talon calmly replied, "I thought I'd take you up to see the springs. I promise, once you see them, you'll change your mind about having a pool."

"Is it far?" She shot Buck a chagrined smile; he grinned right back.

"Not really. We just have to make sure you're bundled up enough. Did you bring anything warmer to wear than your jacket?" As she shook her head, Talon enjoyed the way her hair floated over her shoulders like spring clouds. He sighed loudly. "Your life is about to get very complicated, Maja. Are you absolutely positive you're willing to go through with this?"

A glint of blue steel flashed in her eyes, and Talon smiled inwardly. As she'd warned him before, the cold bitch never strayed too far from under the surface. It was her armor and source of strength. It's what had gotten her this far, and he was proud of her accomplishment more than he could tell her.

"After what I went through to get here, you still have the audacity to ask me that?" she snapped.

"There's a lot more at stake here than just leaving D.C.," he told her in a gentler tone. "Stop and think. If you're going to be my wife, you're going to have to learn to pull your own weight. I'm going to teach you how to cook. And clean." A small smile came over his face. "Life up here in the mountains is idyllic only if you're willing and able to make the adjustments."

Æquana stared at her hands, at her fingers as she toyed with her fork, pushing the sausage patty around the rim of the plate. "But it's a life. And it's with you. I wouldn't care if you lived in Alaska on the frozen tundra, or in the hottest, sweatiest, densest part of Africa. You know, without me having to say it, that I wouldn't have lasted many more years if you hadn't come along."

She wasn't hungry any longer. She'd opened the gates, and her fears had raised their ugly heads from the pit where she'd kept them. Dropping her fork, she got up from the stool and walked over to the fireplace. The heat emanating from the hearth was soothing, but she couldn't shake the chill stiffening up her insides. Her arms tightened around herself, yet the trembling wouldn't stop.

A gentle hand caressed her back, sliding downward until it stopped at her hip. Wordlessly, she turned and put her arms around his waist, pressing her face into his chest.

She wept. With joy. With despair. For finally being with him, and for being warm and fulfilled and loved. For knowing it was such a short, beautiful dream that eventually had to end because someone once said all good love stories must end tragically.

Talon sensed the darkness trying to overtake her, leading her into depression—or worse. There was a lifetime of cruelty she'd been forced to endure, all in the name of science. He couldn't begin to imagine how she'd managed to survive. Even the small amount of knowledge he'd gained, as horrific as it was, was but a minuscule fragment of time out of her twenty-three years.

Talon swore to himself she'd never suffer at their hands again. It was time he called in all the favors he was owed. Shipp and Slaw had no idea what he was capable of. Nor did they know the extent of his hatred for them.

He shushed her, smoothing back her snowfall of hair, giving her his strength through his embrace. He knew there was only one thing he could do that would mend her soul. That would give her hope and happiness, and bring back the smile in her eyes and on her face.

Turning to his grandfather, he said, "If you'll excuse us, Buck. I think it's time I renegotiated my contract." That being said, he lifted Æquana into his arms and took her upstairs to the rumpled bed that beckoned like a fountain of life.

Vegas

White upon white upon white. When Talon brought the snowmobile to a halt, Æquana leaned back in the seat to stare down at the distance they'd covered. The sky had cleared for a short while, and the mountains in the distance were so sharply in focus, it was breathtaking.

She sniffed. The air was clean and cold, but not so much that it hurt to breathe. Talon turned around to check on her, and laughed. "Your nose is red."

"Yeah, well, at least the rest of me isn't... except for one part," she hinted coyly. Playfully, she pinched his bottom encased in jeans. Talon laughed again and gunned the motor.

They went flying over an embankment, hovering airborne for several long seconds until they landed with a muffled thump. Æquana laughed with delight as she held on tightly to his waist. She knew he was showing off for her, but she was loving it.

He stopped again and got her attention, pointing to a spot below them. She leaned over his shoulder to see a buck and two does foraging for winter grass underneath the drifts. Her mouth

dropped open without her knowing it as she watched them moving without any concern.

"Maja."

She looked at him just as his lips found hers. Their goggles bumped, but it didn't matter. He was warm and tasted... *incredible*. Giving her a smile, he turned back around, and they continued racing over the mountainside.

After Talon had taken her upstairs, they'd lost all track of time. He had made love to her with a passion that had left her unable to think, or to move. In the daylight he had made her watch their bodies uniting, melting into one another, as he slid his whole turgid length into her, and she had felt her response rise so fast and so hard around her, the earth had melted away like a single drop of water on the face of the sun.

Lying against him later, they had talked, but he'd kept one warm hand on her womanhood, his fingers playing with the tight curls the color of a newborn lamb. He'd slipped his fingers inside her, toying with her, playing with her, arousing her to a fierce fever pitch that suddenly swept over her with the force of a raging whirlpool. She remembered screaming as she clutched his arm, and then she'd cried as her body trembled beneath his.

She kept telling him she was waiting for it all to end. For the other shoe to fall. No one could be this happy and expect it to continue. No one was allowed to be this much in love, and hope the other person reciprocated in kind.

"Am I going to have to spend the rest of my life telling you how much I love you?" he teased her, nuzzling her neck. His tongue did that thing to her gills again, and she nearly went berserk. After that, he started to tell her where else he planned to make love to her. On the rug in front of the fireplace was at the top of his list. His truck was another, and that one made her giggle. "I don't want there to be any place I go that I don't have a memory of us to keep me warm," he murmured right before they fell asleep.

They had no idea when Buck finally left. Their nap had been short. He took her downstairs, and together they cleaned up the kitchen and washed the pots and pans from breakfast. It was afterwards that they dressed warmly and climbed aboard the snowmobile he kept in a small storage shed behind the cabin.

Æquana found she could reach certain ticklish and responsive parts of his anatomy as he drove them across the terrain. Before, she would have balked at such an idea. It wasn't that she was a prude. Heaven knew she'd read whatever she could get her hands on, hoping one day she would find someone she could become sexually active with. It wasn't until after....

Well, since then, she believed it no longer would be an option for her. She had been a bitter disappointment for Shipp when she'd failed to produce a copy of herself. When, afterward, the doctor had convinced her that no one would want a woman who could never again bear a child.

That was back then... until she had met John. The man who wanted her. Who showed her emotions buried inside herself she never believed existed. Who gave her happiness she never dreamed she was allowed to have.

It terrified her.

That was why she had to tell him the truth. She had to get it all out in the open. Let him know what had happened, and what could never happen. He deserved to know. Once she told him, a small part of her knew he would take back his offer of marriage. He would politely decline, or come up with some excuse to send her away, or whatever it was men did when they decided they no longer wanted to be tied to a woman incapable of giving them children.

She beat on his back to let him know she needed him to stop. Talon drew up next to a strand of birch trees and idled the motor. He got off the seat in one smooth motion, and took off his helmet. "Perfect timing," he smiled. "The spring is right over here." He held out a hand to help her off the seat. Æquana took

it and got to her feet, dragging off her helmet as well. Talon started off toward a slight rise where he wanted to show her the clear artesian water, but she held back, still holding onto his hand, signaling her reluctance. He stopped and turned to look at her. Brown eyes reflected his puzzlement, which turned to worry when he noticed the expression on her face. "What's wrong, Maja?"

"Honesty time," she started to tell him, and her breath hiccuped. Oh, God, she was going to start crying again, and if she did, she'd never be able to get it out. She pressed the heel of her palm against the bridge of her nose, keeping her head lowered. "You told me... all out in the open. No surprises. No ambiguous crap. Remember you telling me that?"

"I remember," he acknowledged. His voice was warm. Soft. Controlled. Waiting.

She had to avoid his eyes, or else she would never be able go through with this. She loved him too much to deceive him. "When I was eighteen, I tried to have a baby. I-I lost it. I failed. And now..." Her nerve was failing her. A scream was slowly making its way up through her body, rising up inside of her until she knew it would inevitably toss her back down into that black, black, dismal abyss that had taken her years to climb out of. She leaned over, clutching her stomach, rocking forward and back, afraid of throwing up, afraid of falling to pieces. Terrified she was going to lose him. "I can't have any more babies. I can't... . Oh, John... *John*... . I'm sorry. *I'm so sorry!*"

She collapsed, but he was there to hold her, to put his arms around her as she tried to get through the ache and the misery. He didn't say a word, but he was comforting her with his kisses and his hands on her skin. He cradled her and shushed her and let her cry out her fear and agony.

"I'm sorry, John. I'm so sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry about," he tried to reassure her.

"But I can't give you children. If you... if you..." The words wouldn't come out. They lay at a distance, stuck in the farthest reaches of her mind like a destination she couldn't reach.

"If I what, my love?" he asked. His warm, soft lips were on her forehead and cheeks. She shuddered.

"If you don't want to marry me now because of it, I'll understand," she finished in a voice so low, if he hadn't had his ear right next to her mouth, he would have never heard her.

Suddenly she felt herself being lifted, pressed tightly against his body, and her head tilted back until she could not avoid seeing his face or his eyes. "Honesty time," he reiterated.

She closed her eyes, praying her heart could take his next words.

"Maja, look at me," he ordered her in that voice she now identified with the Take-Control Talon. Her body was shaking uncontrollably. She couldn't stop it if she tried. But she opened her eyes to look at him.

"I already knew about the baby."

She felt his warmth. His strong, muscular body. And then she knew nothing as her legs gave way, and darkness dropped over her with a hot, suffocating blanket.

Maja.

It was so quiet, except for the steady pounding of a strong heart against her ear.

Maja. My love.

Feeling came back. Her fingers curled, and found themselves in her lap. She took a deep breath, and a loving hand cupped her face against the pounding heart.

"Maja."

He was sitting on the snowmobile's seat with her in his lap, holding her like a parent would hold a small child. How long he'd been holding her, she had no idea. It was hard to tell when the sun remained hidden behind the chalky gray clouds.

"Maja?"

Odd, but all the pain was gone. For now. She could breathe again. She tried to move but his hands kept her still and refused to let her go.

"Maja, listen to me."

"If you don't want to marry me now, I'll understand, John. Honest, I will."

"Shit!"

His exclamation was so unexpected, she jumped and turned to see his irritated scowl as he pulled his personal cell from his jeans pocket and threw it open. His next look at her said it all, especially when he answered the call.

"What, Slaw?"

He bent over, holding out the phone so she could hear.

"We know you have her with you, you sonofabitch. Consider yourself reassigned," the man told him.

"You can't reassign me," Talon calmly, coolly replied. "On what grounds?"

"You know the rules. No romantic liaisons between partners."

"She came here to escape you butchers," Talon told him. "She's frightened and half out of her mind. I'm her partner. She thought I would protect her. That's what partners do, you know. Or... no, I guess you don't know."

"If you've fucked her, we'll know. We'll be coming to get her as soon as we can get a 'copter in there."

Talon gave an amused laugh. "What is your problem, Slaw? Why are you so obsessed with sex? Is it because you're not getting any? She's just a frightened kid, for Crissakes! She's like my little sister! I don't know what your men have been doing to her, asshole, 'cause she won't tell me. But when I find out, I'm going to demand some answers!" His voice was derisive and scathing, and when Slaw came back on the line, there was noticeably less venom in his tone.

"How she doing?"

"She's fine," Talon replied tartly. "She's scared she's going to get sent to her room without supper when she gets back to D.C. —"

At the sudden flare of terror rising in her eyes, and the shaking of her head to let him know she wasn't going back to D.C. or the clinic, he shook his head to let her know not to fear. He then placed a finger on his lips for her silence.

"—Don't come down on her when she does, Slaw. You hear me? She's done nothing that a frightened teenager wouldn't do. She ran away from home. So don't you dare punish her, understand?"

There was a pause and a crackle of static. The connections was steady but not strong. Talon was surprised the signal got through. Then again, they were further up on the mountain, which was probably why the call connected.

"We have another assignment, if you can get a flight out," the Rear Admiral told him.

"Where?"

"Nevada. We have a missing diplomat, and we suspect he's at the bottom of Lake Mead. How soon can you get there?"

"Let me check and see if there's a flight we can get out of here. You may have to pay for a rescue chopper to lift us there."

"Whatever. Let me know if there's any special gear you'll need." The man was almost complacent now.

"I'll call you back in an hour."

Talon slipped the phone back into his jeans and gave Æquana a long stare. "We need to put an end to our previous discussion here and now," he stated flatly. "How do you feel?"

She shook her head. "I don't know."

"At least you're not going to pass out again. That's good. Maja... my love, listen to me closely. Geoffy told me about them forcing you to have a baby—Ah! I said to listen!" he nearly growled at her when she opened her mouth. When he was sure she would obey, he continued.

"You didn't ask to get pregnant. It was *their* idea. *Their* problem. Again, you were nothing more than a science experiment to them, not a human being. They've never treated you with any amount of dignity or respect, and they proved what a bunch of bastards they were when you lost the baby, and they turned all the blame on you. Blamed you for not carrying it to term. Blamed you for it turning out to be a normal little boy. Blamed you for not carrying over your unique qualities into the child. *It was not your fault!* So don't you ever again let me hear you accept responsibility for their failures, do you hear me? It's *bullshit!*"

He reached out with one hand and lifted her chin, until her lips were mere inches away from his. "I know what those assholes did to you, and I hate them with every bone in my body. I know they've made you incapable of having any more children. I know that. I knew it before I asked you to marry me. But I don't care, Maja. I still love you. I will always love you. Now and for the rest of our lives. Do you understand me, my only love?" He playfully tapped the knuckles of his other hand against her temple. "Get it in that thick skull of yours and keep it there. I'm not leaving you. And I'm not going to let you leave me. You won't be going back to D.C., at least not without me, and not as long as I have something to say about it. Now... have I made it abundantly clear to you? Or do you need more clarification?" To seal his promise, he stroked her mouth with his until he could feel her hands sliding up his chest.

"I love you," she brushed the words over his lips.

Talon laughed softly. "We need to get down off this mountain and tell Buck the good news."

Æquana leaned back to stare at him quizzically. "What good news?"

"Slaw has another assignment for us. At Lake Mead. It's a body search."

She shivered as she made a face. "Yuck. I hate those. How is Buck going to see that as good news?"

"You're not thinking, my wonderful *fiancée*," he emphasized the last word. "Where is Lake Mead?"

"I don't remem—oh! Isn't it near Vegas?"

"Uh-huh. Las Vegas. Home of gambling... nightclub acts... and..."

She stared at him for several long moments, when her eyes suddenly lit up.

Laughing, Talon knew she finally understood. "Yeah. Wedding chapels. If Slaw somehow manages to get his hands on you and has you checked out, it'll be too late. He won't be able to do a damn thing once we're married." He gave her a little shake. "*Then* will you believe me?"

Forces

By the time they motored back to the cabin, Buck was waiting for them on the porch. "You got some rear admiral named Slaw calling. He's phoned twice, and he sounds mighty pissed."

"We know," Talon told him as they got off the snowmobile. "He managed to get my cell while we were up on the mountain."

Buck tilted his head. "So? Are they sending in the Second Battalion, or what?" he asked as the couple entered the cabin. He tagged along behind.

"We have a new assignment," Talon laughed. "Lake Mead."

The older man made an exasperated sound. "That's it? What happened to pissed?"

"John convinced him I was like a little sister who'd run away from home, and he was the big brother being very protective of me," Æquana grinned as she warmed her hands near the fire.

"Tsk, ts. Shame on you, Johnny. They have a name for what you and your *sister* have been doing upstairs," Buck teased.

"Yeah, well, in the meantime you've gone senile. Think, Buck, *think*. Where's Lake Mead?"

"Don't call me senile," Buck shot back. "Any fool knows Lake Mead's near Hoover Dam."

"And Hoover Dam is outside of...."

"Las Vegas." His reaction was almost simultaneous. The next second, a huge smile erupted over his face. "Hot damn! You're gonna make it official?"

Talon shot Æquana a loving grin. "Oh, I think we can manage to spare a few minutes to tie the knot. Look, I need you to run back to the store and check to see if the Colorado Springs airport is open, and when the next flight leaves. With the weather cleared for the moment, I'm going to guess it is. We'll be by as soon as we're packed."

Buck nodded, still grinning, and hurried to his truck. Talon walked over to give Æquana a quick pop on the derriere. "Last chance, sweetheart, or else, before tomorrow morning, you're going to be Mrs. John Eagletalon. Back out now, or forever hold your peace."

She smothered her smile. "Well... if that's my final ultimatum...." She turned around, as if she was leaving, when he grabbed her arm and whirled her back around, holding her hard against his body as his mouth descended over hers. What began as a strong, forceful, yet playful kiss quickly grew hotter, sparking an aching moistness in both of them.

Talon groaned as his hands pressed her belly against his growing member. "Maja."

"You started it," she laughed throatily, seductively. She snaked a hand down between them and grabbed him, clenching and unclenching her fingers until he shuddered in her grasp.

"Damn, Maja!"

"No more lovemaking until you make me your wife, you hear me, *Talon*?" she whispered.

He turned eyes now black with desire upon her. "Your technique needs polishing, but for a neophyte you do manage to get the job done. Are you certain I can't convince you—"

"Very," she interrupted, smiling, and gave him another squeeze. "I want the next time we make love to be in our honeymoon bed. No ifs, ands, or buts. Do I make myself perfectly clear, Mr. Eagletalon? Or do you need further clarification?"

There was no ambiguousness in his answering kiss.

The airport in Colorado Springs was open for business, taking advantage of the temporary lull in the weather. Talon managed to get them seats on the eight-forty flight to McCarran. While they waited for their flight to board, he phoned Slaw to let him know when they would be arriving.

"And one more thing, Slaw," Talon told him, keeping his voice hard and edgy. "There will be no goons waiting to snatch her away when we land. I may no longer be with the unit, but I haven't lost my touch. And I'm pretty sure you don't want any kind of undue attention drawn in the middle of the tourists. You got me?"

"Don't worry," Slaw said. "Get the mission accomplished, and then we'll talk about Æquana coming home."

Once he hung up, Æquana gave him a worried look. "How can we be sure he won't go ahead and have some men there to take me away? How do we know there really is a mission?"

"I can remedy that right now," Talon told her, and opened his phone. Two calls later, and they had their answer. "Senator Ralph Mullins of Nevada. Missing since yesterday morning. Wife got a phone call, an anonymous tip, telling her they would find his body at the bottom of Mead. That's it. No further word or clue. Vegas PD and the FBI have had dive teams searching without any luck." He tapped the phone against his other hand as he gazed in the distance.

"What are you thinking?" Æquana asked him, smiling.

"I still don't trust Slaw. At least, not right at this critical moment."

"How is this a critical moment?"

"Because he can still whisk you away from me. Until we're married, you're still under his jurisdiction, even if what he's doing is nothing more than legalized slavery. And he can still have charges of kidnaping brought up against me."

"Kidnaping? How? I'm not underage," she protested hotly.

"Trust me, Maja. There's all kinds of legal red tape he can wrap us in. No... we're going to have to get married as soon after we land as possible. Hold right here, my love. I'll be right back."

He left her alone for a moment while he made another phone call. Within moments he was speaking with one of the flight attendants and the pilot, who also spoke to whoever was on the other end of Talon's call. During their discussion, Talon produced his credentials, and also motioned toward her. Within fifteen minutes, the intercom was giving the boarding call, and Talon came back to get her.

"Well?"

"I'll tell you once we're on board."

Once they were settled in their seats, he explained to her. "When the plane gets to the jetway, there's going to be a second ladder waiting for us at the rear of the plane. We'll disembark there, instead of going out through the airport."

"And then what?"

"Then we'll be taken by cart around to short-term parking where we'll pick up our car." He smiled at her confused expression. "What?"

"You're making no sense whatsoever. We didn't leave a car in short-term parking. Wouldn't we have to get a car at the rental lot?"

"Not this time. I have a friend who's leaving us his car. We don't want Slaw to be able to follow us at any time until I'm

ready for him to." Reaching over, he grasped her hand and gave it a little squeeze. "I think I'm more nervous than you are," he confessed.

"Really? Why?"

"I've gone from professed bachelor to doddering, lovesick groom in a month's time. What have you done to me, Maja?"

"Nothing that you haven't done to me," she smiled, leaning closer to him. "Look at me. I've gone from being trapped to becoming a willing captive."

He chuckled and pressed her fingers to his lips. "Here's a tidbit you might want to file under 'nonessential trivia.' Did you know eagles mate for life?"

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Gives a whole new meaning to the term 'love nest,' doesn't it?"

"Speaking of, Slaw told me he's putting us up at the Stardust. Wait 'til he finds out we've changed hotels. Ever been to Vegas, my only love?"

"No, but I've heard about it."

"It's glitz and glamor and bright lights, and a hundred thousand slot machines clinging and clanging. It's a gambler's paradise, and one very nice spot to honeymoon if you like watching the parade pass by."

"What if I don't want to watch the parade?"

"Then I guess we'll just have to stay in our room and make love until it's time to go out and find Senator Ralph Mullins."

The plane hit the runway two hours later. Talon and Æquana waited for the rear cabin to clear out. Once it was nearly emptied, they went to the emergency exit at the back of the aircraft where a ladder was waiting to let them onto the landing field. Talon thanked the co-pilot, and they hurried for the cart.

They were whipped around to the maintenance end of the airport, where they took an elevator up to ground level, which led directly outside to the parking lots. At the far end of short-term parking, they came across a Mercedes SUV. Æquana

watched in fascination as Talon gave the vehicle a quick shove forward in order to retrieve the key from beneath the rear wheel.

"That's a neat trick," she observed.

"I have my moments of genius."

She threw their duffles in the backseat as Talon pulled out and paid their toll before heading into the city. It quickly became clear to Æquana he knew his way around. "You've been here before," she accused with a smile.

"There's not many places I haven't been," he admitted.

Silently she watched the sparkle of bright lights pass by while he expertly maneuvered them through traffic. Although she knew this was not his first time in Vegas, she couldn't help but exclaim over some of the sights as they drove past them. Talon only grinned and nodded, enjoying her innocent enthusiasm.

By this time it was nearly ten p.m. Before she was aware of it, he stopped down a side street and parallel parked the SUV. He got out, going around to her side to open the door.

"Where are we?"

"Wedding chapel," he told her.

Æquana froze. Slowly she lifted her eyes to see the small white neon sign at the end of the block. When she lowered her gaze to Talon, her face was paler.

"Are you going to be okay?" he asked. His voice mirrored his concern.

"This is for real?" she whispered.

He started to answer her when he was distracted. Pulling out his cell from his pants pocket, Talon flipped it open. "Eagletalon." He glanced at Æquana and mouthed the word *Slaw*. "Yeah, we're here in Vegas. What do you mean we didn't come off the plane? Are you telling me you had us followed? Yeah. Yeah. Well, we're here and I promised MG I'd take her to see the strip, since this is her first time here. Yeah. Okay. The Stardust. Got it. I don't know, probably in another couple of hours. I was thinking we could do a little gambling. Why the

worry all of sudden, Admiral? Uh-huh. Right. I'll get back with you tomorrow." He hung up, sighing.

"Well?" she prompted.

"I was right. He had a couple of dipwads waiting for us to get off the plane. I don't know what their orders were, but seeing as how he's never done that before, I fear he may be sending out the bloodhounds right about now." His eyes bore into her. "Ready to get married?"

"I'm getting nervous," she confessed.

"That makes two of us." He opened the door to the back seat and unzipped the side pocket of his duffle, extracting a small case before zipping it back up. Æquana watched with curiosity.

"What are you doing?"

"Can't get married without a ring," he grinned.

Her eyes grew larger. "You bought a ring? When?"

"When I got back home after Geoffy's funeral."

"But... you hadn't asked me to marry you yet." She gave him a funny look. "You were that sure of me?"

"No." He shook his head, for once very solemn. "I was that sure of *me*."

The chapel was small, quiet, and very personal. The ceremony took less than ten minutes, with another waiting couple standing in as their witnesses. The minister who married them wore a regular robe and vestments, and he blessed them before they left the building.

Once they left the chapel, Talon drove to the Bellagio where they registered as Mr. and Mrs. An elevator took them to their room on the tenth floor. Æquana walked into the suite, unable to believe the size or grandeur of the room.

"Good heavens, John!" She stared wide-eyed as he walked over to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows and threw open the curtains. Below them, the strip was lit like a three-ring circus in the night. Slowly she walked up to stand beside him and gaze out at it. "Wow."

She heard him chuckle. "It's rather awesome when you first see it," he admitted.

Taking her hand, he turned her around where she would look at him. Giving her a tender kiss, he stared into her soft blue depths. "You are now my wife. Better get used to it." The corner of his mouth curled up impishly.

She giggled nervously. "Guess that also makes you my husband. This is all too unreal."

"Isn't it," he agreed, smiling. "And together, you and me, we're going to be stronger working as a pair than when we're apart. Like a synergistic force. Together, you and me, we can overcome any obstacles that come our way. Never forget that. Look, I need for you to do something for me."

"What?"

Reaching into his shirt pocket, he pulled out the hotel key card and placed it in her hands. "I have to go to the Stardust and retrieve the folder that has our assignment in it. You stay here. Listen carefully to what I'm about to say, Maja. I don't know what Slaw has up his sleeve, but I can assure you he no longer has any claim to you. You're free, my love. No more clinic. No more experiments. No more Dr. Shipp."

For the first time Æquana realized that what he was telling her was the truth. All of it was true. She had her freedom. And although some people might argue that she'd traded one kind of captivity for another, there was no way anyone could deny how much happiness and overwhelming love she was feeling at that moment. She reached for his face and gave him a deep, loving kiss. Talon reluctantly pulled away with a soft groan.

"You need to let me finish," he admonished her with a grin. "I don't expect to be gone more than an hour. It could be less; it could be more. But I'll be back as soon as I can without them tailing me."

"All they would have to do is check at the desk for us."

Talon shook his head. "The desk won't give them the information. Trust me. But come tomorrow morning, when we

make our appearance at the lake, you must be prepared for anything. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"Good." He gave her a quick kiss. "Keep the bed warm for us, my love." That being said, he slipped out the door.

Æquana remained by the window, watching the traffic flow along the strip. Again she felt a sense of surrealism. Of not really being there, but rather as though she was watching from afar, as if she was the viewer and not the participant.

The diamond band on her ring finger felt strange but comforting. Like it was meant to be there. Talon was wearing one as well, having told her he believed a commitment by two people should be visibly given by both husband and wife. Smiling, she walked over to the small bar in the room and discovered bottled water in the fridge. Going back to the window, she sat down on the carpet, kicking off her shoes and untying the scarf from around her neck as she made herself comfortable. Ready to watch the parade of lights pass by as she drank her water. And wait.

It was nearly an hour later when there came a sharp tapping on the door. Æquana hurried over to it and peeked out the spyhole, but whoever was out in the hall had blocked it. Biting her lip, she started to back away from the door when a sheet of paper was slid underneath, over the threshold. Curious, she picked it up and opened it. It was their marriage certificate. Laughing, she opened the door, to be swept up in his powerful arms. "You had me worried there for a minute," she accused, hitting him with the paper.

Talon locked the door and tossed the familiar blue folder on the writing table. "Sorry. I couldn't resist." He pulled her back in his arms and buried his face in her neck.

"Did you have any problems getting the folder?"

"Nope. None. Well... not much. It wasn't too hard to give his goons the slip, but by this time Slaw knows we haven't checked in. He's probably having a cow by now."

He was planting tickling kisses across her shoulders. Æquana held him tighter. Presently he lifted his head and cupped her face in his palms. His mouth was fire and promise and love, and he sent streams of it down into her belly, into the deepest part of her, where it spread out to tingle from the tips of her fingers to the ends of her feet. He wrapped his love so firmly around her, she found herself unable to breathe, and without thinking she flared her gills. Talon released her, laughing softly. "No fair. If my kisses leave you breathless, at least let me know." He bent down to tease her mouth, brushing her lips with his, tasting, tempting, until she reached for him.

"My love... my love."

She was warm and ready, trembling slightly with anticipation and desire. Lifting her into his arms, Talon carried her over to the king-size bed and lowered her onto it. He chuckled when her hands, firmly holding onto his shirt, made sure he remained with her.

"Can we stay another couple of days once our mission is over?" she begged softly as he tugged the tail of her shirt out of her pants, and his fingers wove patterns of dry fire over her skin until his hand cupped her breast. He lifted her shirt further up and lowered his head until his tongue found the succulent bud. A chuckle emanated from deep in his chest as it hardened in his mouth, and she arched her back for more of whatever he could offer.

This was to be their wedding night. Although they had already consummated their love back in Colorado, this time it felt different. It felt frighteningly real, yet wonderfully permanent. A door wasn't just opening for her. The whole damn drawbridge was lowering, and the gate of iron bars was rising.

Æquana smiled, no longer able to contain her passion or her love for this man who was her guide, her mentor, her partner, her best friend, her lover... and now her husband.

Abruptly, Talon raised his head and looked down at her flushed face. He had sensed the change in her. Even if he couldn't put a name on what it was, he knew she had finally managed to push away the last haunting image of her past and was ready to embrace their future. "When I made our reservations, I specifically asked for this room because of what it offered. Let's see if we got what I ordered."

"What?" Dazed, Æquana let him pull her off the bed and lead her into the bathroom. Talon turned on the lights, and she stared in disbelief at the huge hot tub sitting at the other end.

"Get undressed, Mrs. Eagletalon. I'm making love to you underwater."

Mead

The alarm on the cell phone chimed. Talon was awake almost instantly, trained to come fully alert after years of undercover work. Reaching to shut it off, his hand brushed over the vibrant body lying against him. From some unknown source, a light found the diamond solitaire in the band on his hand, and his eyes were drawn to the sparkle.

If someone had told me a month ago I'd be running off to Vegas to marry a mermaid, I probably would have called the state mental hospital and had them committed, he told himself.

He'd deliberately set the alarm a little early. After all, this was their honeymoon, and wouldn't it be nicer to face the challenge of the coming day after savoring a soft giggle, a softer kiss, and the softest pair of thighs ever created on the face of the earth?

She was rolled in the sheets like a butterfly in a warm cocoon. It was an odd little habit she had, as if she was swaddling herself into a protective sheath. Pulling up onto his elbows, Talon bent over and began to unwrap her. As he slowly uncovered her, he placed tender kisses on the exposed skin, until he reached the

center. By the time he uncovered her dimpled bellybutton, she was stretching languidly.

"Good morning, Mrs. Eagletalon." He nuzzled the bellybutton as he eyed the thatch of snowy silk not far from his cheek. She radiated heat. Heat and her unmistakable scent.

"Mr. Eagletalon," she rumbled breathily. "Time to get up?"

He grinned. "Oh, I'm already up." *Up... rock hard... and ready.* He could hear her sharp intake of breath, then a low laugh.

"You know... I've yet to find out if you like to take your showers in the morning or the evening," she commented. Her hands had found his thick, loose hair, and Talon closed his eyes, enjoying the feel of her fingers casually running through it. It was a simple gesture, her combing his hair, but it was one of those moments he enjoyed. Once she had braided it into one thick lock down his back, taking her sweet time, until she was satisfied with the way it looked before she asked him for an eagle feather to stick in it. She couldn't figure out why he had laughed so heartily at her request.

Giving him a little push, she added, "Of course, you like to take your *baths* any time that's convenient." Her tone of voice tickled him. It had been an experiment of his last night, to see if they could make love while she lay submerged in the warm water. For some unexplainable reason, he wanted to see if her gills reacted as she climaxed when she was breathing through them.

They did.

He closed his eyes, smiling, as he followed the trail of almost invisible hairs downward, below her navel. Their first night together in the cabin, he had discovered she'd never shaved her legs before in her life. Being such a naturally pale blonde, the tiny silken hairs on her legs weren't even noticeable until he'd rubbed his cheek against her calves. The discovery had been both a gentle surprise and a loving revelation. She was downy and incredibly soft.

Teasing the sensitive spot under her knees with his open kisses, Talon followed her inviting moistness to the secret of her inner thighs, making Æquana tense at the sensation of his mouth and tongue and warm breath heating the core of her womanhood. As her moan of pleasure filled the room, Talon moved over her, sliding his thickness into her, and she raised her hips to accept all of him. He bent down to take her mouth, aware of his long, black hair like ebony wings falling over her shoulders, and he smiled tenderly when Æquana clutched its heavy warmth.

Slowly they rocked in and out, forward and back, without the worry of rushing. Without any sense of urgency. Their joy, and the melting sensations filling them, could not have made it more perfect.

"Do you want to go out for breakfast, or have room service?" he murmured against her cheek. He was all the way inside her, holding himself there as her inner muscles gently swallowed him.

"Room service. That way I can have both things I want in bed, breakfast and you," Æquana smiled.

Talon raised his head and gave her a wink. "I like the way you think." He withdrew, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, and reached for the hotel room phone. They'd left the curtain open from the night before, and gloriously white sunshine was starting to make a pattern on the carpet. As he waited for room service to answer, his personal cell began vibrating, jitterbugging across the nightstand. Talon picked it up, tilting it to read the display, and grinned. "I'll let you answer this one," he announced as he handed her the phone.

Æquana glanced at the lit-up screen, and the single word on it. **BUCK**. Unconsciously throwing her hair back over her shoulder, she smiled at her husband and opened the phone. "Eagletalon."

There was a moment's pause. "Maja? Well?"

She glanced back up at her husband and smiled. "Well, what?"

"Well, is it official?"

"Yes, Buck. You now have a granddaughter-in-law," she giggled.

"Hot damn! Congratulations! Let me speak to Johnny."

She handed over the phone. "He wants to speak to you."

Talon finished ordering for them, taking his cell from her as he hung up the other receiver. "Anything else you're curious about, old man?"

It was like watching her husband shift gears, from loving bed mate to the unemotional military man suddenly beset with an agenda. "Yeah, I understand. Are *you* okay?"

Æquana felt a coldness rush through her at the question. She stared at her husband with wide, beseeching eyes. He saw her growing fear and shook his head.

"Okay. Listen, it doesn't matter now. They can't do anything to you, to me, or to her. We're going to be fine, Buck. It's going to get a bit rocky until they finally get it through their heads, but we'll be all right. Look, we need to get over to the lake, but I'll be getting back with you throughout the day to check up on you, okay? Okay. Talk to you later, Buck. 'Bye." He closed the phone with a heavy sigh.

"What?" she asked, seeing the hard anger in the set of his face.

"Either Shipp or Slaw sent a half-dozen men to the emporium and roughed up Buck."

"*What?*"

"He's okay," Talon hurried to reassure her. "They wanted directions to the house."

"Did he tell them?"

"Yeah. Buck knows what kind of work I was involved in when I was into the unit. He knew the danger, but this is the first time he's had to face any of it. He led them to the house, like I told him to do if anything ever came down. They confiscated the

sheets off our bed, what clothing they could find of yours, plus some towels. Then they left."

"When was this? Last night?"

"This morning, before daybreak," he said. A small smile curled the edges of his mouth. "I'll bet Shipp is fit to be tied right about now. Slaw's probably gotten an earful, too. I'm just wondering when it's finally going to dawn on the man that he made the biggest mistake of his career when he accepted the assignment here in Vegas."

There was a knock on their door. Talon slipped on his pants while Æquana hurried into the bathroom. Once the cart with their breakfast was wheeled in, and the porter sent on his way, she emerged and they sat down to eat.

No more was said about the pre-dawn raid in Colorado as they prepared for the day.

They took a taxi to the location stated in the folder where they were met by the constable who was currently acting as field commander, overseeing the search-and-rescue. "Jeters." He held out a beefy hand. "We've been expecting you."

"Eagletalon. This is Æquana. We were sent to give you some help."

"I'll be honest, Eagletalon," Jeters admitted, hands on his hips, "I don't know what kind of help you could give us, other than an extra couple pair of eyes. You're both divers, right?"

He eyed the couple, already prejudiced after being forced to accept further governmental interference. It was clear the Indian was ex-military by his stance and bearing. The cool blonde at his side, though, had him bumfuzzled. From their body language, there was no denying they were a couple, but never in a million years would he have put the two together if he'd seen them separately.

Talon nodded. "I'm an ex-Navy frogman. My wife is the specialist. We were called in because someone at the top felt we

could make a difference. Why don't you show me what you're looking at so far?"

Jeters led them to where a small tent had been erected. On a card table lay a map of the lake. He pointed out the areas circled in blue and red ink. Some sections were Xed out in pencil. "I'm assuming you've been briefed on what we're facing. We have no idea where the body was dumped, although by this time we're pretty sure we'll find him. The lake is pretty large, but we've managed to narrow down possible dump sites. These sections here in red are being dredged. The blue are being checked by individual divers. The sections marked out have been eliminated."

"What about these areas?" Talon pointed to areas circled with a black felt tip.

"Too deep for us to send down a diver, but too narrow for a submersible."

"What's your depth there?" Æquana asked.

The man shrugged. "Maybe four, four hundred fifty feet. Like I said, too deep."

"Not for my wife," Talon commented softly. Æquana shot him a startled look. His return glance was noncommittal.

Jeters snorted. "I said *four* hundred feet, Eagletalon."

Talon nodded. "Yeah, I heard you. MG, is *four* hundred feet going to be a problem?"

She moved a bit closer to him. "What are you doing?"

"Trust me," he whispered back, then in a louder voice, asked her, "Will it?"

She glanced at the dubious expression on Jeters' face. "No. It's not a problem."

Jeters gave a little huff. "You must be part fish, then, unless you brought some sort of special governmental secret something-or-other we know nothing about that'll get you down that far."

She could see the muscles in her husband's jaws clench before Talon answered, "We used to work for the government, but

we're getting ready to branch out on our own into private business. Yeah, we have a secret something-or-other that'll get us down that far. In fact..." His eyes swivelled up to hers. "She can go down about a thousand feet."

The man barked out a laugh as he crossed his arms over his chest. "You guys sure have a weird sense of humor."

Talon stood from where he'd been hunched over the map. "We're not joking," he said calmly. "Has our equipment arrived?"

Jeters eyed him, still chuckling. He threw a thumb over his shoulder. "Yeah. It's already loaded in the boat over there. It's not much. Just a single tank and some boxes—" He stopped in mid-sentence, pausing as his brain went back over what he'd just said. "A single tank."

"Have one of your men take us to those coordinates, and we'll concentrate our search in the deepest sections," Talon told him.

"Talon."

He turned back to Æquana, to see her attention directed to a spot behind him. Whirling around, he saw two men about thirty feet away, standing to one side and looking out of place but guarded. "Surprise, surprise. It's Tweedledee and Tweedledum."

"What do we do?" she whispered.

"Stay by me," he told her.

"Do you know those fellows?" Jeters interceded with an irritated look. As much as he detested the idea of further government interference, he downright hated suited goons who were sent to check up on their own.

Talon grimaced. "In a way. They've been trying to tail us since we landed last night."

"Are they from the government?"

"Let's just say they're from a division that has governmental repercussions," Talon told him. "Have they been here long?"

"Yeah," Jeters told them. "They showed up early this morning, asking if you two had arrived yet." The man's eyes

went from one to the other. "What's going on here, Eagletalon? If there's going to be anything to hamper this investigation, I want to know about it right now."

Talon gave him a quick scrutiny. "Who's going to pilot the boat out to these coordinates? Can you do it?"

Throwing a cautious eye at the two men, Jeters nodded. "I can."

"Good. Let's get moving. I'll give you the scoop once we're in safer waters." Talon took Æquana by the arm, and they followed the constable, boarding the twenty-foot patrol boat from the dock. The man gunned the engine and pulled away as Talon kept an eye on the men to see what they would do next. As he suspected, they made a phone call before they were lost to view.

"Want to tell me now what's going on?" Jeters yelled over the sound of the motor.

"Æquana was born with a special ability," Talon told him. "The people who hired those men have been using her for their own purposes, but they made a critical error. They hired me to be her partner." A humorless grin crossed his face. "They're not going to be happy campers when they find out they no longer have any control over her."

Jeters threw the man a guarded look, then glanced over his shoulder at the blonde beauty standing behind him. "What do you think they'll try to do? You said they were tailing you from the airport."

"They tried," said Talon. "They couldn't tail a T-Rex. But we suspect they might try something. I don't know what, but we're keeping our eyes peeled in the meantime." He looked back at Æquana and told her, "Get ready."

The boat skimmed over the waves as Jeters angled them over one of the deeper portions of the lake. Talon continued to study the map, checking its coordinates with the sonar on the boat.

"Some things don't make a lot of sense to me," Talon admitted, "but I'm starting to get a strong hunch about something."

"What's that?" asked Jeters.

"This isn't really part of our jurisdiction. We don't belong here. You've got your men, and the FBI. The government's already involved."

"But we have a missing congressman."

"True. Plus an anonymous phone tip saying he's in Lake Mead. Then we get a phone call telling us to come here and help you look for him, when our people know full well you've already got plenty of help. Æquana does only deep-water rescue and recovery. The majority of the lake can't be more than, what? A hundred fifty feet? That's child's play to an experienced scuba diver." Talon gritted his teeth. He glanced over to see she'd found her second skin, and was waiting for his signal to strip and put it on.

"So what are you thinking?"

Talon turned to the constable. "I'm thinking this is a set-up."

Jeters gave him a narrowed look. "You're thinking Mullins' body was deliberately dumped in the deeper section, so that only she could find him."

Nodding, Talon agreed. "What I don't understand is why. Why resort to such elaborate tactics? Why call us out here? They knew where we were. They knew how to get to us." He looked back at her. "How much further?"

"We should be about on top of it right now." Jeters gradually slowed the boat until it came to a full stop and rocked on the backwash. Double-checking the sonar and comparing it to the map, he nodded. "It kind of slopes down from a shelf about a hundred yards off in that direction." He pointed to a spot just off the bow.

Talon thanked him. "Now I need to ask a small favor. My wife needs to get into her gear, but I'll need to ask you to avert your eyes for a moment."

The constable gave him a small grin. "No problem. So, do those guys know you two got hitched?"

A pair of brown eyes calmly studied him. "What gave us away?"

"Hell, you practically told me you're expecting her to get kidnaped. You also said you slipped past their tail. This is Vegas. I saw the rings. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to guess you two tied the knot once you got here. Did you do it to protect her?"

"In a way. We also love each other, if that makes a difference," Talon told him tightly.

Giving a huge sigh, Jeters shrugged. "Let's just find Ralph Mullins. That's all I'm interested in."

"Talon."

He glanced at the back of the boat. She was ready, poised on the stern to go overboard. He held up a hand to stay her. "Jeters."

At the sound of his name, the man turned around to face them, and nearly fell forward.

Ignoring him, Talon walked over, searching through the boxes until he found the radios. They were mini-transmitters similar to ones he'd used in the past during recon missions. Resembling bulky wristwatches, he strapped one on Æquana's left wrist.

"There's two buttons at the bottom," he showed her. "Hit the green one a long time once you get down to the bottom. That'll give me a signal. I can talk to you, but you won't be able to respond except by using these buttons. Use only the green one to give me one short beep for no, two short for yes."

"What's the red button for?"

"It activates the transmitter. The battery has a lifespan of eighteen hours. Hit it only in case of an emergency and need help to come to you." He looked deep into her troubled blue eyes and whispered, "If you see anyone down there other than Mullins, you let me know immediately."

"I will," she promised.

"I'll be suited up here just in case."

"John... it's not even safe to go home now, is it?"

"Keep your mind on the job, Maja. We'll get through this. I promise." Giving her a quick kiss, he stepped back. Æquana gave her tail a flick upward to shift her balance, and she disappeared over the gunwale.

A long moment of silence passed between them before Jeters looked over to watch Talon strap his transmitter on his wrist. "What is she? A mermaid?"

Talon answered with a lift of an eyebrow as he reached for his wetsuit. "Yeah."

Barely five minutes had passed before the transmitter on Talon's wrist let out one long beep. Holding down the talk button, he asked her, "Are you at the bottom?"

Two beeps.

"She's down already?" Jeters asked. Talon nodded.

"Any problems?"

One beep.

"If you don't mind my asking, how does she breathe down there?"

Talon pointed to both sides of his neck. "Gills."

"No shit?"

Another ten minutes passed, when Talon held down the talk button. "MG?"

His answer was one long beep.

"Just checking in," he told her. This was always going to be the hard part, the waiting. Talon picked up the binoculars hanging on the wall inside the cabin, and checked the area. The closest shore was a good half-mile away, and deserted.

He also observed the surface for any telltale bubbles. Æquana didn't leave a stream of bubbles behind her like an air tank would. But he saw nothing to alert him. He started to press the

button again when a voice just off the port side said, "I'm over here. Nothing, Talon."

"How's the water? Too cold?"

She shook her head as she treaded water. "Warmer than where you are, my love. Just keep a blanket ready for me when I'm done. Where's the next hole?"

Talon looked over to where the constable was standing at the wheel. He could see the man's attention was riveted on her, moreso on the gills in her neck that were fluttering just below the water line. "Where's the next hole?" he repeated.

Jeters jerked himself out of his trance and studied the map. "It's about three-quarters of a mile. Does she need to get in?"

"No, thanks!" Æquana called out, smiling. "I'll race you there!" She flipped over and was gone from view, giving the surface a loud slap with her flukes as she disappeared, but Talon knew she wouldn't be too far below them. Seeing Jeters' stare, he grinned, nodding.

"Gun it."

Jeters pulled on the lever, lifting the nose of the cruiser as it raced through the water. Talon figured they had to be going a good six or seven knots, and he leaned out over the rail to see if he could spot her.

Before either of them was prepared for it, a silvery-white form leaped out of the water just ahead of the speeding boat. She turned, twisting slightly, then plunged back into the water. The sound of laughter floated above the waves. Talon saw the constable shaking his head in amazement.

A few minutes later they reached the second spot detailed on the map. Talon gave Æquana the signal to descend. Jeters came up beside him to watch. "How'd you two meet again?" he asked.

Talon pulled out the binoculars. "I was given a medical discharge after being injured in the line of duty, but I still owed Uncle Sam some contract time. Æquana's original partner got

too sick to work, so they started bringing in a bunch of guys, hoping to find one to team up with her. I happened to be the lucky one."

Nodding slowly, Jeters said, "You gotta admit, you two could be the original odd couple."

Talon smiled, lowering the field glasses. "Trust me. I didn't take the position thinking we were going to become a couple. It just happened."

One long beep sounded on his wrist.

"Any problems?"

One short beep.

Jeters opened his mouth to ask another question when Talon's transmitter emitted one long beep. He stared at it for a split-second. "Is there a problem?"

Two beeps.

"Damn! Did you find the body?"

Three beeps.

Talon started. Three?

Another long beep sounded.

"Come topside!" he yelled into the transmitter. "Come up now!"

"What happened? What's wrong?" Jeters followed him to the stern where Talon was throwing on his tank and fins.

Three more beeps sounded. A heartbeat late, *Æquana* breached off the bow, aiming straight upward as hard and as fast as she was able to climb. Talon watched as she shuddered in the sun, and he knew something was terribly wrong. Her body remained rigid, her back straight. No smooth, graceful arch. *Wrong, wrong, wrong!* The alarms were clanging at a hundred decibels in his head. Somehow he knew she would never re-enter the water tail first. Not intentionally. Never in a million years.

He was already in the water when she landed flat on her side, sending a wall of water upward in her wake. Right below the surface three divers were waiting for her. One was holding a

tranquilizer gun. All were wearing vaguely familiar rectangular backpacks.

Do you remember a little device called a "regenerative oxygenator"?

No bubbles. The damn breathing devices didn't give off bubbles!

Adrenalin swept through him as Talon's years of experience took over. He attacked the nearest man first, neatly breaking the man's arm in two places before he had the opportunity to get a grip on his opponent. As the man writhed with the pain, Talon went after the second man, the one holding the gun. Somewhere to his left, the third man had gone to retrieve Æquana, her muscles made lax from the drug pumped into her. But she could still breathe. And watch, unable to move or react to the scene before her as she was towed away.

There was a brief struggle as the gunman tried to keep Talon from taking away the tranquilizer. There was no way he could compete with the ex-soldier's strength. As the gun was torn from his grasp, he made the mistake of watching it sinking to the lake bed as Talon reached out and ripped the airhoses out of the re-breather.

Talon hurried to the surface. Jeters was standing near the bow, peering out over the water. "Have you seen the one who took her?" he yelled at the man.

The constable shook his head. There was no way he could. There was no way any of what had taken place below could have been seen from the surface.

Talon let out a stream of curse words as he hoisted himself back into the boat. He was livid, madder at himself than anything else. Jeters hurried over to him as he searched for his clothes, then dug in the pocket of his jeans for the cell. "What happened down there? What happened to your wife?"

"*Shh!*" Talon threw up a hand to stay the man's barrage of questions, waiting for his call to be answered. When it was, Talon held back none of his outrage from his voice. "Slaw. You'd

better listen very carefully because I'm only going to say this once. You have kidnaped my *wife*, you sorry sonofabitch, and I want her back. You have two hours to deliver her to me at the Bellagio or I swear to God I will bring down full retribution on you. Do you understand me? You've made the last mistake you'll ever make. Two hours, Slaw." Before the man could respond, Talon ended the call. Then he made a second one.

"Buck? They got Maja. Listen. Call Danny D'Agustino. Tell him I'm going Code One Black. Got that? Code One Black. Then call me back and tell me what he said." Closing his phone, Talon ordered, "Get us back to shore."

"What about the congressman?"

"The man isn't here!" Talon snapped, his eyes blazing. "It was all a ruse, just as I'd suspected. A set-up! Right this minute he's probably walking in his front door after being 'miraculously' released by his kidnapers."

As the constable turned the boat around and pushed it into high gear, Talon placed a third phone call, noticing that his hands were already starting to shake.

"Bill? Talon. I want to take you up on that offer. How quickly can we reassemble the team?"

Search

Two hours went by without any sign of her being returned. Talon was not surprised. But he hadn't wasted the time waiting. Besides making a few phone calls, he'd gotten two return calls, and two unexpected ones. One of which surprised the hell out of him.

"Talon? Rear Admiral Corinth. What the hell's going on?"

Talon held back, unsure if he could trust the man. After all, this was the man who'd stamped his contract as incomplete, and then sent him off to Slaw's office to meet Æquana for the first time. "Why should I tell you?" Talon spat back. He was in no mood for anything except to put a definite end to this whole sick game Shipp and Slaw had been playing, and to get his wife back.

"Because if it's what I think it is, then I can be held accountable as an accessory, and I value my tenure too much to have any part in it. I want the truth from you, Talon. In your own words."

"Okay. Here's the gist of it. Do you know what kind of house of horrors Shipp's been running all these years?"

"Blake Shipp has a reputation as sometimes working just outside the lines. I'm aware of that," Corinth admitted.

"And how well do you know Slaw? You two close golfing buddies?" His low voice was a whetstone, where every word he uttered was first sharpened across its surface before plunging into the other person's ear. Both his tactics and his mannerisms were finely honed steel when it came down to business. He hadn't been given the code name of Talon simply because it was part of his surname.

"We're military associates," Corinth corrected him. "Let's clear that up now."

"Well, your military associate and Shipp have been using Æquana as their own little personal bank account and science experiment these past few years." He filled the Rear Admiral in on the handful of atrocities he knew she'd been made to endure. If he sent out word he wanted to learn more, he was certain that what would be brought to his attention would make him sick for days.

"Are you ready for the final straw? They've kidnaped her, and I have no idea where she is, or what they're doing to her right this minute." He paused before dropping the bombshell. "Maja and I were married. That egomaniacal sonofabitch has my wife, and the line he just stepped over is going to get him a minimum of twenty years. More, if he's harmed her in any way."

Static separated them as Talon waited for Corinth's response. When it finally came, he was surprised by the hardness in the man's voice. "I can send a squad over to the clinic to be waiting for them if he brings her back to D.C. Is there anything else I can do for you? Just name it."

"No, Doug. You're taking care of that angle for me, but I have the sneaking suspicion he won't take her back there. He's smart enough to figure out we'll have the place under surveillance. Is there any way you can put the pressure on Slaw? Find out where else Shipp may have taken her?"

"I'll see what I can do. If I find out something, I'll call. Are you heading this way?"

"I'm staying put until I hear back from everyone," Talon told him, giving no further explanation as he hung up. He was back in their hotel room, where five other men were now gathered and had converted it into a temporary headquarters. Several sophisticated pieces of equipment had been set up, including a triangulator that hadn't even been made known to the military yet.

A lanky man in jeans and wearing a Boston Red Sox baseball cap came sauntering over to where Talon stood by the open window. He waited patiently for Talon to speak. "That was Corinth. He's sending a squad over to watch the clinic and labs, in case Shipp takes her back there."

"You know he won't. He knows you're on his tail. We'll get the bastard, John. There isn't any Teflon on this guy, I promise. Heard from Hurricane yet?"

At that moment Talon's phone vibrated. He looked at the display, then rolled his eyes up at O'Dell. "Speak of the devil," he muttered, and answered the cell. "Thanks for getting back with me."

"Yeah. Talk about knocking me over with a feather. What's the skinny, Talon? Are we talking about your partner? The mermaid? The one I airlifted over the other night?"

"It's a very long story. Bottom line, she's been kidnaped by the same doctor cum sadist who likes to play God and use her for whatever experiment pops into his head."

He could hear the man nodding. "What's your jurisdiction? After all, isn't she just a co-worker?" Danny mentioned.

"Not since last night," Talon told him. "She's now my wife. So I'm bringing in the experts. Team Polio has been reassembled, and we're in the process of hunting her down."

The reply he got on the other end was vehement enough to bring half a smile to his face. "That's why Buck called in a Code One. Where can I help?"

"I need clear and unlimited airspace once we locate her. Can you manage that?"

"It'll take me a little while to get everything together. I'll call when it's done."

"Thanks, Danny. I owe you big time. Twice."

Danny D'Augustino, aka "Hurricane," gave a short bark of laughter. "And don't you forget it. Hey, there ain't that many people who can say they're on the 'owed' end of John Eagleton. Later, bud!"

Closing his phone, Talon relayed the specifics on that part of their plan. O'Dell glanced outside as he raised the question once more. "She's got the transmitter on, but you said she can't activate it?"

"They shot her with something to immobilize her," Talon reiterated. "If she hadn't breached, I never would have gone into the water and seen them. Everything was a set-up... the kidnaping of the Senator, the bringing in of the FBI, setting the scene over at Lake Mead because they knew of its deeper troughs. All to provide a legitimate cover story and excuse to draw us there, and I fell for it like an amateur. Slaw is in over his head with this. Those re-breathers they were using are still filed under experimental. I checked not two hours ago. So there's no way Shipp could have gotten his hands on them without Slaw's help."

"What's Slaw's take on this, do you reckon?" another man spoke up from where he was standing at the bar, partaking of a soft drink from the room's fridge. "Shipp is easy to see. He doesn't want to hafta let go of his little nest egg. You know that every time he sends her out, he gets a nice little monetary package from the military. And he gets to keep playing doctor on her in the meantime. What I also don't get is why her father let them get away with that crap while he was still alive."

"I'm willing to bet either he didn't know about half of what was going on, or Shipp had him so thoroughly brainwashed, that daddy was the one who often had to break the news to her

about their next plan of action.” Talon glanced back out the window so they wouldn’t see the mistiness that suddenly rose in his eyes. “No. You can count on the fact that Slaw is getting paid handsomely for finding all these nice little assignments to send her out on. I’ll even go so far as to say he’s the one writing up the invoices, telling the DoD how much they owe her after she’s completed a job.”

He’d been leaning against the window frame. Straightening up, he accidentally kicked something, and Talon looked down to see what he’d struck. An empty water bottle rolled partway across the carpet, away from where it had been propped up against the window sill.

“It’s late. We haven’t had supper yet, my love. I bet you’re starving. Want to go down and check out the all-night buffet?”

It had to be close to two. They were both soaking wet and lying languidly in the hot tub’s bubbling water after their little marathon lovemaking session.

“I had a bottle of water while I waited for you,” Æquana told him as she lay across his chest. She was fascinated by the way his nipple pursed under her fingers when she played with it. “Other than that I don’t feel hungry... for food.”

He lifted her chin so he could see her want in her now turquoise eyes. Pulling her on top of him, he groaned and wondered what new position he could introduce to her as he demanded her mouth. God, she was so pliant. Supple. And eager to learn.

One of these days, after an assignment, he was going to ask her to keep that second skin on until they got home. And then he was going to peel it off of her one slow, seductive inch at a time.

Talon crushed the plastic bottle in his hand. Something had to open up, and soon. Otherwise he was going to explode if he couldn’t get out and do some major butt-kicking.

The hotel room phone rang. Montana strode over from the bar to answer it. “Yeah.” A wide smile came over his face, and he

caught Talon's attention with a nod of his head. "I'll tell him. Thanks." He hung up the phone. "That was Zephyr. Slaw's in custody. Military police just hauled his ass out of his office in front as many network camera crews as Zeph was able to assemble. The man isn't talking, but he's definitely scared. He wants to make a deal. One down, one to go."

It was a major accomplishment, having the front man in handcuffs, but to Talon, it was small comfort. He turned to look back out the hotel room window.

She was out there, at Shipp's mercy. Talon promised himself that if the man tried to get in one last experiment with her before they could rescue her, the doctor wouldn't be looking at twenty-five to life in prison.

He'd be looking at a pine box.

Containment

Whatever it was they'd shot her with, it did something to her muscles. She couldn't move anything other than her eyes. And breathe. But apparently the stuff also affected her being able to draw a decent breath. Twice the guy who'd kidnaped her had told whoever was on the other end of the phone calls that she was still alive.

She closed her eyes as the man put his hand on her again, running it up between her legs before trying to push it between her thighs. Either he was the stupidest jerkoff in history, and didn't know she was wearing a type of plastic sheathing. Or he knew it, and had been ordered not to damage the merchandise.

Since he carried her out of the lake and shoved her into car seat next to him, he'd done nothing but drive with one hand and roam across her with the other to his heart's content.

Æquana fought the tears, since she wouldn't be able to blow her nose if she cried. It wasn't like she hadn't been groped like this before. There were plenty of interns at the clinic who'd had their hands on her. Getting in their kicks as they positioned her

for an x-ray, or sonagram, or vaginal exam. Pinching. Licking. Shoving their mouths over hers and trying to stick their tongues down her throat. They seemed to like it best if she squirmed or cried out when they intentionally hurt her.

They had driven for hours. He stopped once to wriggle out of his wetsuit and put on a change of clothes, then got back under the wheel to keep driving. Æquana blocked out most of it, most of what the man talked about. His nonsensical bragging as he kept squeezing her breasts. It wasn't until they stopped the second time that he got out and opened the car door on her side. He slung her over his shoulder, got in one last grope up her backside, and took her inside the big concrete building.

He walked down several empty corridors, as if he knew where he was going. They finally arrived at a set of double doors that opened up like those at the clinic. When Æquana heard the laughter, she squeezed her eyes shut and shivered.

Nonononononononononono....

Jerkoff dropped her onto a padded table. "There you are, Doc. Pure as the driven snow, like I promised."

"Pure no longer, unfortunately," Shipp grumbled. Seeing the man was still standing there, his eyes centered on a certain part of her anatomy, Shipp gave him a little shove. "Get out, Vale," he barked.

The man hurried out the double doors. Æquana slid her eyes back to Shipp, who'd turned his back on her as he went over to a tray lying just beyond her field of vision.

"I'm very disappointed in you, Maja," the man commented casually. "Don't you realize that pulling a stunt like that is not only foolish, but unnecessary? Any judge will see your sham marriage for what it is, and will issue an annulment without question."

He came back within her range of sight. The hypodermic he was filling was almost ready. "No, I'm not mad at you," he answered as if she'd asked a question. "But I'm quite angry at Eagletalon." Shipp chuckled. There was no humor in the sound.

"He used you, and you fell for it. My dear, my sweet little innocent, when are you going to learn that men will use you for what they want, and then they'll discard you like old newspapers? Of course he promised marriage. Of course he went through with it. Wouldn't take an act of congress to get rid of you later on, don't you understand?" Shipp gave her a small smile. "You are now a glorious notch on his belt. No more, no less."

He shoved the needle in her thigh. The burning agony under her skin broke through her firm resolve, breaking down the wall she'd thought she'd erected. As the pain and fire spread into her back and legs, and steadily climbed into her arms and chest, she began to cry.

Shipp tried to soothe her with hushing tones. "Just lie back and let it do its job. You're going to be fine. I have to send you to another facility. It's too dangerous to try and put you in a truck or car, and definitely too risky to put you on a plane. That just leaves regular ground rate. This stuff will keep you drugged until I apply the second sedative. Once you go under with it, I'll be able to pack you in the container and have you picked up for delivery. Two days tops, Maja, and you'll arrive at our new home. You're going to love Utah, my dear. Since you like mountains so much, you'll have a delightful time at the labs I'm having constructed there."

Her skin was slowly peeling off her muscles. Her muscles were tearing themselves away from her bones. The pain was excruciating, but the sedative was doing what it was meant to do. Shipp would be able to pack her into the little container with little or no trouble, like stuffing a contortionist in a box, and she'd be transferred to her new home safe and sound, if not hungry and thirsty. That was why he was keeping her encased in her second suit. It would make packing that much easier.

He rolled her over onto her side, she guessed to make sure she was as unharmed as Vale had announced. She saw the look on his face when he picked up her left arm and saw the ring on

her hand. For a split second his fingers closed around it, as if he was going to tug it off, but he seemed to change his mind, and an ugly smile came over his face. The transmitter, however, he quickly unbuckled and threw across the room. Her last shred of hope went with it.

She was hurting too much to be aware of when he picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. He carried her around a corner, to where an enormous tank filled up the other leg of the L-shaped room. It took some effort, but he managed to climb the ladder up and over the huge plexiglass container. Æquana wondered for a second where the interns were who normally did this kind of work for him, until he dumped her on the floor of the tank. The jolt shot a hundred probes of searing agony through her. Unable to cry out, she was reduced to gasping, whimpering, as the tears rolled down her face.

From somewhere Shipp produced a thick collar with a sponge-like coating on the inside. He snapped it around her neck, checking to make sure it was loose enough to where it didn't impede her gills, but tight enough to keep her from slipping out of it. A small padlock secured it. Once he was satisfied, he let her go, and Æquana felt her body slide backwards until it came to rest on floor. She watched him climb out of the tank and go over to the wall where a hose ran from the side of the tank to a faucet.

"Until the capsule arrives for me to pack you in it, you'd be better off in there where I can keep an eye on you. I'm not taking the chance on you rolling off a table and crawling your way out." His voice was muffled. Thick sounding.

Shipp bent over the faucet and turned the little red wheel.

Quicker than you can say "lefty loosey, righty tighty." Sobs convulsed in her stomach.

Water began pouring into the enclosure. She found she had to lie very still, or else the collar kept her gills from opening all the way. It was cold. Almost unbearably cold. But what did he care? He didn't have to be submerged in it. When the water was near

the top of the tank, he shut off the valve, gave her a little wave goodbye, and walked back around the corner, out of sight.

The lights were turned off, plunging the room in total, unrelenting blackness. It grew still. Not a sound, not a vibration. Nothing penetrated the hated nothingness that had become just another sensory deprivation tank. Æquana was left alone with her fears and the awful pain.

And her memories.

John...

Rescue

Klare sat up in his seat with a jerk. He pressed the headset tightly against his ears, then turned around and yelled, "TRANSMITTER!"

Every man rushed over to the table as O'Dell threw himself into a chair and began to clarify the thin signal being streamed through the experimental triangulator. He strained, eyes tightly closed, listening with the headphones for the strongest pulse. Every man held his breath to give the communications expert the silence needed for his ears to do their job.

Talon could feel his heart ripping through his chest. Below, on Klare's computer screen, a tiny red dot flickered like a faulty Christmas bulb amid the grid-like pattern. The transmitter on Æquana's band was working, but something was giving the signal fits. There was a great chance they could lose it altogether, and soon. Without warning.

Another minute crawled by. Opening his eyes suddenly, O'Dell checked the readout on the triangulator's viewscreen. "Where's the map?" he asked sharply.

Talon was already hunched over it. "Go."

The man spouted off a pair of coordinates. Using a measuring tape, Talon used a pencil to draw the north-south and east-west lines. Standing back, he stared at where the lines intersected. He was breathing heavily, blood pumping adrenalin through his body.

The men began breaking down the equipment, silently, efficiently, without wasted motion, as Talon flipped open his cell phone and punched a speed-dial number. "Hurricane? She's in Arizona. We'll be at McCarran in twenty minutes." Closing the cell, Talon turned to grab both duffle bags, when his eyes lit on the bed. The sheets were still rumpled from when he and Æquana had slept in it. Made love in it. The sheet he'd unwrapped her from was still in a little heap on the floor on the side of the bed where she'd slept. They hadn't even been gone long enough that morning for housekeeping to come in and make it up.

Klare shoved the portable tracer in his arms. Talon turned his head to see the man's nod of determination before he hurried out the door. Taking one last look around, Talon closed the door behind him and ran to catch up.

They got to the heli-field at the far end of the airport runways to see a white jetcopter readying for takeoff. A man in a yellow jumpsuit and a UNLV cap opened the chain link gate for them. "Eagletalon?" he asked, his eyes searching the group of men.

Talon climbed out of the SUV and offered his hand. "I'm Eagletalon."

"Proffitt. You got the coordinates?"

O'Dell shoved the map at him as they all hurried toward the 'copter. "Can you get us there?"

Proffitt paused for a second to get a mental fix on their destination. "It's mostly mountainous territory in that area, but we won't know for certain until we get there."

They climbed into the jetcopter, buckling in, and Proffitt lifted off almost simultaneously. "What are we looking for?" he yelled over the sound of the engines once they were cleared of the airport.

"Anything!" Talon yelled back. "A building of some sort. Or maybe an entrance to some kind of underground facility. Like you said, we'll find out when we get there. How long do you estimate?"

O'Dell sat in the front passenger seat with the map. Proffitt studied the map again. "Twenty, twenty-five minutes, maybe, if I kick her into passing gear. Hold on, and don't puke on my new seatcovers!"

The pilot opened her up, and the 'copter seemed to go from off to on in a matter of seconds. Talon kept one eye on the terrain below that was flying by in a blur of speed, and one eye on the portable receiver in his hands. The tiny red dot slowly began moving from the upper left corner of the screen, crawling toward the middle. He was vaguely aware of Montana, Slates, and Ordaway pulling out the firepower from their cases. Klare handed him his pistol and belt, and Talon placed them in his lap as he gave his teammate a nod of thanks.

No one spoke as the 'copter raced south toward the spot where the two lines converged on the map. They passed over Lake Mead and Hoover Dam, continuing in a more southeasterly direction. Slowly but surely the little red light continued to pulsate, moving at an agonizingly slow pace toward the center of the receiver's readout.

"Talon! This is it!" O'Dell yelled out as his numbers matched the ones on the 'copter's panel. In Talon's hands, the little red flashing light was inside the tiny center square on the screen.

"Let's go down!"

Proffitt hit the mute on the rotors, killing much of the sound from the whirling blades overhead as he lowered the machine to the ground. Talon quickly gave the unit their instructions, but they already knew what to do. Even so, directions were always

repeated to avoid misdirection or confusion. That's the way it always was, and always would be. And that was why they had been as good at their jobs as they were known to be.

They hit the sand and flattened out as the 'copter lifted like a rapidly departing bird, hurrying to get out of sight. Talon pulled out his 'scope and looked around. In the distance, just over a small rise, was a concrete structure. A Suburban was parked to one side, but other than that there were no other vehicles. Talon raised his hand to signal for them to follow when Ordaway touched the back of his leg. Talon halted and glanced back. The man motioned off to their right.

A FedEx truck was rumbling down the pitted road toward the structure. Talon backed down. Best to let the truck do what it needed to do before storming the building, he figured, and signaled for them to hold.

Shipment

If there was anything that could be said for her being forced to lie perfectly still in the freezing cold water, it was that there was a small amount of warmth to be had in not moving.

A couple of times her legs had spasmed against the cramped fold she was in. When Shipp had dropped her backwards onto the floor of the tank, her tail had curled up underneath her. Now her knees were protesting from remaining in the unnatural position for a longer than normal period of time.

Æquana blinked. A shiver ran over her skin, and the piercing heat just below her nerve endings rose up to take a million little bites out of her. She tried to cry out from the never-ending burning, but the sedative wouldn't allow her to.

Again, Shipp had not thought things through, and she was unable to tell him where his plans were going wrong. Yes, the sedative had reduced her musculature to putty. He would be able to fold her into a tight little bundle and stick her into a capsule so he could ship her by regular mail carrier to her new home in Utah. But what he hadn't counted on were the tendons

and ligaments also present in her body. The tendons and ligaments and cartilage that would not be as pliable when it came time to stuff her into whatever crate or carton he had planned for her.

The suffering would be excruciating.

And there was no way she would be able to do a thing about it.

Closing her eyes, *Æquana* began to will herself to die.

Suffering

The FedEx truck would be there at any time now. Shipp grabbed the rest of what he thought he would need and stowed it in the back of the Suburban. For a second there he thought he heard the telltale rattle of a helicopter, but the skies were clear and unblemished by even a vulture.

Hurrying back inside the bunker, he finished destroying any evidence which might prove he'd been there. Once he got Æquana safely stowed away inside the capsule and sent off, he could drive at his leisure to the safehouse in Utah and have everything ready for her arrival in two days. And if he happened to get stopped by the Feds or police, they'd find nothing on him. No way to discover if he had or had ever had his hands on the missing little mermaid. And no reason to hold him without evidence.

Shipp scowled. He never should have trusted the man in the first place. Slaw had been right when he said that Talon was planning on seducing her. No matter which way they turned, no matter what traps they'd set, Talon had been quicker and smarter to figure them out ahead of time.

He'd still like to find out how the man was able to elude their tail in Vegas, and get Æquana to a chapel where he could marry her. What a flimsy excuse. Did the man actually think that marrying her would give him any stronger claim to her? Was the man stupid enough to believe his threats would mean anything to them?

Turning on the lights in the storeroom, Shipp went over to check on his package. She looked to be asleep. Good. That would make it easier for him when it came time to administer the second sedative. But first he had to call Slaw to find out what Talon was up to. That was the Rear Admiral's job, to keep tabs on the man at all times. That way they'd know when and where they could move.

He glanced over again at the woman lying at the bottom of the tank as he waited for the phone to be picked up. Granted, he'd been furious to find out Talon had spoiled their little girl. But maybe some good would come out of it. Give him a day or so to get past his anger, and he'd figure out a way to turn it to their advantage. Damn, but he never would have thought she would be able to make it all the way to the guy's place in the backwoods all by herself, and in the middle of a blizzard, at that!

"Rear Admiral Slaw's office," a female voice answered.

Shipp gave his phone a puzzled look. "I need to speak to Slaw."

"I'm sorry, but the admiral is in conference at the moment. May I take a message?" she responded, cool and professional.

This wasn't right. The number he'd dialed was Slaw's private extension. Slaw had even told him nobody but himself would be answering it, and no one else had.

Until now.

Shipp slammed the receiver down. Something had happened, and he didn't like the feel of it. Never mind. The truck would be here any time now. Better get the girl packed.

He went over to the tray where the second hypodermic was prepared and waiting. Making an exasperated sound, Shipp

bent over to untie his shoes and slip them off. He debated whether or not to go ahead and take off his pants and shirt, then decided not to. It would take too long for the damn tank to drain down low enough to where he could reach her. No, he'd either have to find a way to gaff her and pull her up far enough so he could administer the shot, or go down into the tank itself and get soaking wet. He knew he didn't have to worry about the girl hurting him. She was shot so full of the Adbropine, she wouldn't even be able to sneeze for three days. But neither did he relish the idea of getting wet.

As he turned the options over in his mind, his eyes roved around the room to see if he could spot anything that he might be able to use. In the far corner he saw a window hook, and his face brightened. When the bunker was originally built in the fifties as a bomb shelter, back in the heyday of a nuclear scare, the first story had been built underground, and what people normally thought of as the first floor, accessible at ground level, was really the second story. At the very top of the first floor, right below ceiling level, thin, rectangular windows lined the walls on three sides. They opened up at ground level, to allow in air. But because they were so high up off the floor, a long pole with a hook on the end was needed to open or close them with ease.

Shipp went to get the pole. He could hook the end around her collar and drag her up to the top of the tank. A quick shot in the buttocks, then he could just hoist her over the side like pulling a hundred-pound marlin into a boat. No problem.

Putting the hypo in his lab coat pocket for safe-keeping, Shipp climbed the ladder to the top of the tank and lowered the pole into the water. The hook caught on the collar without any difficulty. And she was so limp, she started to rise almost effortlessly.

Until she reached the end of the chain.

The pole jerked in his hands, and Shipp let out an expletive. He'd forgotten he'd shortened the chain considerably, as he'd

meant to keep her at the bottom of the tank. He'd have to go inside anyway.

He shed his coat, pulling out the hypo before tossing the jacket onto the floor. Carefully, gradually, he went down the ladder, immersing himself in the frigid water. Another choice word crossed his lips. The water was too damn cold. He was up to his neck, but she was still another four feet below him. He'd have to go under.

Shit.

Taking several deep breaths, Shipp held the last one and dove head-first. He reached out and managed to grab one of her arms. Giving it a jerk, he started to turn her around so he could reach her thigh, when Æquana floated up sideways and away from him.

Crap. It was like working weightless in space. He'd need to go up for air soon, so he made one more pass for her arm. He snagged it, and gave her a shove.

Æquana slowly rotated around until her face directly came even with his. Shipp gave a start.

She was staring right at him.

She was awake. And she was no longer afraid of him.

He was in her element now.

Shipp kicked out with his feet, reaching for the surface, but somehow her hand had gotten snagged in the sleeve of his shirt. He tried to jerk it away, but moving in the icy water was like performing in a slow-motion ballet.

He brought his other arm down, hoping he could at least inject her with some of the other sedative. It wouldn't be as effective in the arm, but it would at least loosen her hold on him.

He stared in shock as her other arm came up and stopped his other hand. Her fingers wrapped tightly around his wrist, preventing him from reaching her.

She continued to stare at him. Her eyes were glassy, and such a pale, washed-out blue, they were almost white. Strong fingers clutched him in a corpse-like grip, and Shipp gave her a shake to

try and dislodge her. He kicked out, trying again to reach the surface. Her body followed his until her collar reached the end of the chain, keeping her no more than four feet from the bottom of the tank. Keeping him six feet from the surface.

His air was depleted. The single breath was used up. He expelled bubbles of carbon dioxide and began to struggle. His body jerked and writhed as he fought her grasp. He tried to move his wrist, working the syringe with his fingers to see if he could at least nick her fingers or hands with the needle.

Æquana's hands tightened. Her face went paler, and Shipp could swear she was crying.

Now his lungs were begging for air. He tried to pull away, kicking at her, anything so he could reach the surface. She easily moved her body out of his range with a flick of her tail. At the last moment he lunged for her and tried to bite through her wrist. Almost effortlessly she moved her arm out of the way. She'd spent nearly her entire life learning and adapting to moving swiftly through the water. Even with her body screaming against the toxic poison he'd shot into her earlier, she belonged here in the liquid known to suffocate normal men.

Shipp, overweight and with muscles unaccustomed to exercise, flailed uselessly as his body gasped for oxygen. Unable to stop himself, he took a deep breath. The water rushed into him like a vacuum. In his last moments of life, he saw her smiling at him as her gills gently opened and closed like butterflies resting on pale pink petals.

When she was certain the man was dead, she let him go. At first his body drifted upwards before it hesitated, then slowly, gradually, sank to the bottom of the tank, coming to its final rest on top of the hook he'd dropped. The syringe remained clutched in his hand, and Æquana stared at it for many long minutes.

If she used it on herself, she knew without any doubt it would kill her. It would weaken her muscles to the point where her lungs would no longer be able to draw air, even with her gills. It

was a toss-up, she knew. She could slowly starve to death, or she could use the hypo. Either way would be painful beyond anything she'd ever been made to withstand.

Æquana sunk to the floor. Struggling with Shipp had hurt like hell. It was a miracle she'd been able to keep her grip on him.

Resting her cheek on the concrete, she closed her eyes. If she let herself rest, she could see Talon's face. She could see his funny crooked smile whenever he was teasing her. If she tried harder, she could feel his hands. His gentle mouth. His warm, hard body.

There was no way he could find her. Not out here in the middle of nowhere. Not without the transmitter Shipp had taken away from her.

John... my love... my forever love....

She was going to miss him so terribly, terribly much.

Sanctuary

Talon watched the truck through his 'scope. Beside him, Klare did the same. The driver got out of the truck and went directly into the building, empty-handed. *Not a delivery*, Talon thought to himself. Presently the man came outside, paused, then went around to the side of the building, momentarily disappearing from view.

"No pick-up," Klare said aloud what Talon was also thinking. Another minute went by before the driver appeared around the side he'd originally gone, climbed back into the truck, turned the vehicle around, and headed back down the pitted road. Klare lowered his field glasses. "Hmm. Not a pick-up or a delivery."

"He was here to pick up. But the person who was supposed to be giving him the package either didn't leave the package where it was supposed to be.... Something's wrong." Without thinking twice, Talon gave the signal for them to advance. In his hand, the receiver calmly beeped. The red light blinked steadily in the perfect center of the screen.

They moved silently. Smoothly. Without any words passing between them, they progressed with an efficiency borne of their training and of years working with each other. For every rock or ledge cleared, the next man moved forward to take point.

Talon entered the building first, keeping low, his pistol aimed straight out in front of him. There was only one hallway leading away from the entrance. O'Dell advanced ahead until he reached the first doorway. Montana took point as O'Dell checked the room. A shake of the head. Clear.

At the next door, Ordaway took point, and Montana checked the room. Again, nothing. Clear.

They reached an intersection where the hallway split. Talon studied the linoleum, pointing out to the others where dusty tracks from the dirt road outside led down the branch leading off to the left. The floor to the right had just one set of footprints. Pointing a finger at O'Dell, Talon had him peel off to check the lesser-used section. O'Dell nodded and turned right. The other four followed Talon to the left.

A flight of stairs led downward, coming to end in front of a set of double doors. So far there had been no sign of anyone being there, other than the tracks, and the fact that the lights were on. From the rear, Klare shook his head and shrugged. Something was definitely wrong.

Talon entered first. The large room was practically bare, except for a padded examination table, a few trays, a table, and some chairs. Keeping his back to the wall, he advanced cautiously, moving sideways until he could see there was no one present.

At his nod, the other three moved in and spread out.

"Clear." It came from Slates. The defeated sound in his voice echoed in all of them.

Talon glanced down at the receiver he'd clipped to his belt. The red dot was a single, solid light. Target met. He holstered his gun.

"Talon."

Glancing over at Slates, Talon saw the man pick up the discarded transmitter where it lay on the floor against the far wall. Quickly striding over, he snatched it from the man's hands and examined it. The red button sat half-depressed at an odd angle in the case. Whoever had thrown it against the wall had inadvertently activated the homing device. No wonder the signal had fluttered.

"She was here," Slates stated the obvious.

"Think Dynamite found something?" Montana asked softly, referring to O'Dell by his code name as he watched Ordaway finish the sweep of the room.

Suddenly Ordaway froze, his pistol held at shoulder level. Turning to look at Talon, he said, "You're not going to believe this shit."

They hurried over, weapons at ready, and it was there they discovered the alcove leading back behind the room. And the tank.

Talon rushed to the enclosure. His fingers spread across the plexiglass as he stared at the unmoving form at the bottom. From here he couldn't see if she was alive or breathing. She still had on her second skin; her hair fanned out loose across her back. He was vaguely aware of the other men coming up to stand beside him. "At least we don't have to worry about Shipp anymore," Slates stated flatly.

Talon's eye caught the splayed body in the far corner. The man's face was a mask of surprise and anger, eyes open and glaring, frozen in that expression at the moment of death. His arms hung out from his sides. There was something clutched in his right hand.

"How are we gonna get her out?" Ordaway asked softly.

Klare had already been checking out the ladder leading up to the top of the tank. "We'll have to climb down inside to get her," he began to say, when he caught sight of Talon moving away from the structure.

"Get back," Talon ordered, and pulled out his pistol. Bracing himself, he aimed the weapon with both hands as he sighted down the gun at the plexiglass. "You know how the sign on the side of the aquarium always says 'Do not tap on the glass'?"

"Yeah," Klare smiled, already knowing what the man was going to do.

"Fuck it," Talon said, and fired.

The Sig Sauer popped four times, putting four neat holes in close proximity to each other in the transparent wall. Water started gushing out, and the wall began to bulge. The side strained, pushing outward as the water continued to escape in four escalating streams. There was a flat, cracking sound, and the wall split and separated, spewing water and chunks of plastic glass over the floor and over the five men. Shipp's body washed out with the flood, rolling to a stop not far away.

Talon's jaw dropped as he watched his wife's limp body start out the same hole, but come to a sudden jerky halt when her collar reached the end of the chain.

"Mother of God, he had her *chained*?" Klare exclaimed in disbelief, momentarily too stunned to move as Talon rushed past them and started climbing into the tank with her.

Gritting his teeth, he fought the hot tears threatening to strangle him. He turned her over, searching for any sign of breath. Lifting the collar to where he could peer at her gills, a wave of relief swept over him as he saw the minute fluttering of the slits against her ivory neck. Flipping her face-down over his thigh, he gave her two quick swats between the shoulder blades to get her body to automatically shift from water- to air-breathing. He felt her move, then she took a deep gasp of air through her mouth before she started coughing up the residual water.

Unmindful of the water still left in the tank, Talon pulled her into his arms, resting her head against his shoulder, and he waited for her to become aware of him.

Her eyelids fluttered. Her pale gold lashes were dark against the pallor of her cheeks. She moved her head slightly, and her entire body went rigid as pain welled up inside her. Anger flared, making his face flush with suppressed hatred, and Talon yelled out, "Find out what that sonofabitch gave to her! She's still reacting to it!"

Slates climbed in, squatting beside them, a pocket-sized laser cutter in his hands. Within seconds they had the collar off of her, and together they lifted *Æquana* out of the tank. Talon was aware of their eyes watching her, studying her in silence as he wrapped her in a blanket Ordaway had found. As he pulled her back into his embrace, O'Dell came jogging in. The man's eyes swept over the destruction and the body lying in a heap nearby, and he gave a low whistle.

"Copter should be here within twenty minutes," Montana announced, closing his phone.

"Man, you would not believe what I found next door. Looks like our mermaid was about to take a trip, prepaid express, Talon." At the man's shocked look, O'Dell nodded. "Yeah. That FedEx truck was meant for her. He had the packing crate and everything all ready for her. Can you believe the balls on the man? Stuffing her into a box the size of a small dog carrier, then shipping her off to some place in Utah like a Christmas package, while he took the Suburban."

"If he'd gotten stopped at any one of the roadblocks, they wouldn't have been able to hold him for more than twenty-four hours," Montana commented. "Oh, dear God, what a monster."

Klare walked up to the team. In his search he'd discovered several vials, which he brought back to show them. "The vial of Selenadine is empty. It's a sedative. The bottle of Adbropine is also empty. If that's what he gave her, we need to airlift to a hospital immediately."

"How dangerous is it?" Talon asked, lifting her into his arms to carry her outside to the jetcopter.

"It's still experimental," Klare said, "but from what I've heard, over time it can liquify muscle tissue." He shuddered. "She must be in a shitload of pain."

Talon tried to push away the cold lump of fear filling his abdomen, and held Æquana tightly against him as they hurried out of the building and stood by the Suburban, waiting for the rescue 'copter. As they watched the skies, straining for the first sound of the bird's engines, Talon felt a slight movement in his arms, and an anguished hiss as she sucked in air through her teeth.

He lowered her to the ground, where he released his hold on her legs and brushed her damp hair out of her eyes. She tried to move again, but the effort was brutal on her nervous system. Tears squeezed out from under her lashes as she fought not to cry.

"Maja." He pressed his lips to her forehead, and continued lightly stroking her face, praying the touch of his hands on her skin didn't hurt her. "Maja. Honey."

Her body tensed at the sound of his voice, but she couldn't lift her face. Somehow, though, she managed to open her eyes to find her gaze directed downward. She knew she was no longer immersed in the frigid water, and there was a sense of warmth around her.

"Maja, can you understand me?"

The hand holding her arm was dark-skinned. Mocha colored, like coffee with cream. A wedding ring with a single diamond in the band winked on the third finger.

"J-John?"

He pressed her face against his chest, holding her there as his own tears found their release.

"Sh-... Shipp."

"He's dead, my love. You'll never have to worry about him again," Talon told her as the others standing beside them watched in silence.

"I know. I drowned him," she confessed.

Once the horror of what she'd been forced to do had subsided, Talon lifted her back up into his arms and got to his feet.

"John?"

"What, my love?" he murmured, lowering his lips to her ear.

"This... this makes t-two times you've saved... my life." Somehow she managed a deep, ragged breath. "Now we're even. Debt's been... repaid. I don't... own you... anymore."

She couldn't tell if the rumble in his chest was his laughter or something else. All she remembered before closing her eyes was the soft pressure of his mouth on her cheek, and his voice whispering, "How wrong you are, my only love."

By the time the jetcopter finally arrived to take them back to Las Vegas, the bunker was a blistering inferno in the Arizona desert. And when the bird lifted off, no one glanced back to watch it burn. Nor did they care to.

Goodbye

A week later the black rental pulled up outside the large complex that still bore the yellow police Do Not Cross tape across its doors. A D.C. patrol car was waiting for them, the officer patiently waiting inside his warm unit while the outside temperature continued to drop.

As Talon got out of the driver's side, Rear Admiral Corinth emerged from the back seat and walked over to confirm their identities with the officer. Wordlessly, Talon opened the passenger door, offering his hand and taking Æquana's to help her out. He could tell she was shivering, and a lot of it had nothing to do with the wintry weather. He finally broke the silence that had been with them ever since they'd deplaned at Dulles and checked out the rental, picking up Corinth at his office on the way. "Are you going to be all right?" he asked softly. His breath made for wispy clouds of steam in the gentle snowfall.

"Just don't let me go," his wife begged with a soft smile. He smiled and gave her hand a squeeze.

They walked up the long walkway, to the front doors where the others were waiting for them. After the officer broke the tape, they entered the clinic.

The lights were still working. Talon turned on two of the four on the wall lightswitch. When the reception booth came into view, he could feel Æquana's grip tighten slightly. He glanced at her, and was given a weak smile in return.

It had been her idea to come back one last time. There were a few things she wanted to get from her old room. Just a few things, she told him. A few silly items that held only sentimental value, things which would help her to keep alive memories of her mother and father. Otherwise she wouldn't have taken this trip back.

For Talon, he had to have a sense of closure as well. He wanted to look into the back labs for himself, even though he'd read and re-read the reports and descriptions of what the police had found in Shipp's clinic.

He was only aware of the first few hallways where the usual examination rooms were contained. As his wife led him further into the interior section of the building, he found himself frowning at the nameplates on the doors they passed by:

MRI

Caution: Radiation

Blood and Tissue

Too soon they came to a small room at the end of the hallway. There was no exit door, no way out except to go back the way they'd come. Æquana turned the knob, and they both stepped inside as she flipped on the bare overhead bulb.

As he'd suspected, it was a tiny, windowless room, never intended to be converted from a storage closet into a bedroom. It held a twin bed, a narrow wardrobe, a dresser, and a small table with a television at the foot of the bed. Talon felt his heart breaking as he realized how little there was here for her to take back with them. If it all fit in two boxes, it would be more than he expected.

"Well? What do you think?" She walked into the middle of the room and held out her arms, waiting for his comment.

"Are you going to need some boxes?" he asked gruffly, hoping she didn't misinterpret his surliness.

Smiling at her husband, Æquana shook her head. "I think I can fit everything I want to take with me in my suitcase." She went over to pull the aforementioned suitcase from under the bed, and tossed it onto the mattress. Talon noticed the covers were still mussed from when she'd last lain on it. With a start, he remembered she hadn't been here since the night she stole out to come to him in Colorado.

There was a door to the far right. "What's in there?" he asked. "The bathroom."

That explained why the room was so tiny. Part of it had been sectioned off so a bath could be installed.

As she folded clothes from the wardrobe and stuffed them in the suitcase, Talon walked over to look at a couple of photos taped to the wall at the head of the bed. One was of a blonde man in a lab coat, smiling as he stood next to some sort of plaque hanging on the wall. The other was a poised head and shoulder shot of a strikingly beautiful woman with even lighter coloring. Talon glanced back at his wife, who had stopped her packing to watch his reaction.

"Your parents?"

"Yeah."

Without asking her, he carefully pulled the photos off the wall and handed them to her to take with them.

"Maja, are you okay?"

She glanced up at him from the photos still lying in her hands. Her eyes were misted, but she managed to smile. "Yeah. I will be." She walked into his arms to let his love calm her fluttering heart. He was trying to protect her, knowing there were more bad memories of this place than there were good ones, and she loved him for it.

Lifting her chin, Talon looked down at her flushed face, at the color of her eyes in the single glaring bulb. They tended to change color, depending on her mood. As he half-expected, they were powder blue. She was coping well.

He kissed her, touching her lips softly, letting her lead him where she needed to go. Æquana answered him with equally gentle passion, until she rose up on the toes of her slippers and wrapped her arms around his neck. Needing more, and finding him ready to give her all she asked for as his hands pressed along her back. Leaning back slightly, she breathed on his now-moist mouth. "What was that for?"

"Honesty time. I wanted your last impression of this room to be a happy one," he admitted.

"Oh, you don't know *what* kind of impressions I had of you in this room," she giggled.

A dark eyebrow rose. "Oh?"

She nodded. "Nice, naughty ones. Especially when we talked on the phone. You know, you never did make love to me over the phone like you said you wanted to."

"Don't worry. It's still on my list," he promised, reaching for her lips once more.

They pressed tighter against each other, oblivious to the world around them, when a voice from nowhere cleared its throat, startling them.

"Looks like the monitoring equipment still works in this place," Corinth announced. "Talon? There's something I'd like for you to see... if you can tear yourself away for a few minutes."

Æquana giggled and buried her face in his neck. Talon scanned the room, quickly finding the camera up near the ceiling. "I'm on my way, but someone will need to lead me through this maze."

"Officer Ridgeway will meet you at the entrance."

She gave him a pat on his coat lapel. "Go. I'll wait for you at the front when I'm done."

"Sure?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "I don't want to go back there."

"I understand." He parked a kiss on her forehead before releasing her and leaving the room.

The policeman was waiting as promised to lead Talon into the bowels of the clinic, into the area where Shipp did most of his experimenting. When they reached a set of double doors, the officer indicated for Talon to enter without him.

Inside the brightly lit room, Talon stopped, feeling his gorge rise. Corinth came up beside him and paused. "Yeah," the Rear Admiral said softly, seeing the look on the man's face. "That was my first reaction, too."

"The man was sick," Talon whispered as he took in the contents in the room—the water tanks, the cabinets, the examination tables with their leather straps and buckles, the machines he couldn't identify.

The overhead myriad networking of chains and handcuffs meant to keep a young woman totally captive and immobile wherever he worked on her.

"Slaw was indicted today on fifteen counts, including involuntary imprisonment, kidnapping, intent to defraud federal officials—" The man had begun to tick them off on his fingers when he abruptly stopped. "You get the drift. He may not be found guilty on all counts, but with Æquana's testimony, he won't be seeing the outside of a prison for a nice chunk of time."

She had given her testimony on videotape, since she had been recuperating in a hospital bed when the indictments had been handed down. With the trial scheduled a little less than a year away, Talon hoped she would be able to face the man when it came time for her to take the stand. "What about Draybeck?"

"So far they've got five counts on him, but I know who he's hired to represent him. He might not see that much time behind bars. I'm guessing he'll get probation, but his reputation is pretty much ruined in political circles."

Talon gave him a dark look, then turned around and left the room without a backward glance. Once they reached the

entrance, she was waiting for him as promised with just the single suitcase in her hands.

"Is that all?" Talon asked, surprised.

"Yeah. The rest... I just took what I felt I was owed. What was mine."

Corinth accepted Talon's outstretched hand and shook it. "You should be getting the paperwork sometime next week," the Rear Admiral told him. "But as of last Monday, your tour of duty is officially over, and I've permanently closed and sealed the Manatee Project."

Æquana placed a hand on her husband's arm. "The BMW?"

"It's back at the office, along with the keys," Corinth told her. "Impound lot finally released it Tuesday. If you don't mind my asking, how are you getting it back to Colorado?"

Talon grinned. "We're taking a nice, slow drive back. Take in some scenery. Maybe do a little sightseeing along the way."

Corinth returned the grin. "Sounds like you're ready to put this all behind you, and I don't blame you one bit. So... any plans on what you two are going to do now? Any ideas?"

Talon glanced at his wife, who returned his warm smile with one of her own. "Yeah," he told the Rear Admiral. "First things first, we haven't had a honeymoon yet. That's at the top of the list when we arrive back home. Then, after that, we're going into business for ourselves."

Antigua

"You know, most people who go on vacation don't take their work or their laptops with them," Talon drily commented. He glanced over to where Buck was sitting in his lounge, busily tapping away.

"Yeah, well, most people when they go on their honeymoon don't take their grandfather along with them," the man fired back. "Just stay off my back, will you? You two get to do what you wanna do, and I get to do what I wanna do." He paused long enough to make his point. "Only difference is, I get out of my room more often."

Snorting softly, Talon narrowed his eyes. "What have you been working on, anyway?"

"I'm teaching myself how to make a website. For the new business. What do you think of the name Talon Incorporated? No, wait. How about Talon Industries?"

"Forget it, Buck. Sounds like I'm into making plastic bags or something. Why not just call it 'Æquana'? That should suffice."

"Think she'll agree to it?"

"I think she will. Why not ask her when she gets here?" Talon's gaze raked over the small cove where their bungalows were located. It was a private, well-hidden area on the isle of Antigua. There was a small trail leading back to the main lodge which housed registration, a restaurant, a bar, and several shops. Other than the once-a-day trek made by housekeeping, and the occasional room service, they were as isolated as castaways on a deserted island.

When Talon had made their reservations, he had hoped Æquana would enjoy the tropical climate, the soft beaches, and the warm, crystalline waters. He was right. Even now she was out there amid the coral reefs, frolicking like a dolphin. Or maybe even with the dolphins. After dinner he'd promised her he would go out snorkeling with her, and hopefully they could find some secluded or deserted spot where they could let the water lap over them as they made slow, bone-dissolving love on the pearlescent sands.

"Done!" Buck announced. He swivelled the screen around so Talon could see his accomplishment. Talon read aloud the display.

"'Æquana, Deep Water and Undersea Exploration, Rescue, and Recovery.'" He made an appreciative face. "Sounds good. Did you remember to order that toll-free line installed at the house?"

"Should be done by the time we get back," his grandfather said. "I just hope I'm not so *senile* that I answer the wrong line with the wrong name."

Laughing softly, Talon got out of his lounge and peered out over the water. She had promised not to be gone too long, but it already had been over an hour.

"She's fine, Johnny," Buck muttered.

A silvery flash in the distance brought a smile to his lips. "Here she comes now."

Without waiting for a reply, Talon tossed his shades on the seat and began to wade into the glassy water, stopping when it

washed up around the top of his swim trunks. The cove was pristine clear, all the way down to the floor, in some places as far as nine to ten feet below the surface. It made for uncanny visibility. He could see her flying just below the waves like a torpedo. She could move so swiftly, sometimes even he had difficulty keeping track.

Suddenly she exploded out of the water, arching up more than twenty feet into the air before she reached down to jackknife, and reentered the water with hardly a splash. The sound of her laughter glittered in the tropical sky.

"Whoo-hoo!" Buck hollered from the shore. Talon grinned. They were of like minds, only Buck was more vocal.

Steadying himself, Talon waited, knowing what she would do next, now that she'd seen he was prepared for her. The pale-colored shape angled toward him, her body now taking on a golden-white hue in the Caribbean sunlight. Then, without warning, she launched herself once more into the air, twirling her body like a dancer in pirouette. Talon caught her without any trouble, bending his knees slightly to break her fall.

Æquana was laughing delightedly as her husband carried her back to shore. He kept her in his arms as he sat down in the lounge, perching her in his lap. She flipped her tail at the old man in the seat next to them. "Are you at that thing again?" she teased.

Buck back-handed the glistening fin draped over the screen. "You're gonna get my keyboard wet, and if it short-circuits, you're paying for me a new laptop!" he threatened, even as a wide grin stretched over his face. "Look. I have the website ready for the new business. What do you think of it?"

She gave it a good, hard stare, even as Talon unobtrusively made sure her long hair was draped over her breasts, and he had a solid hold on her encased legs. He may tell his grandfather everything that was going on in his line of work, but now there were a few secrets he wanted to keep just between himself and his wife.

"You want to call the business 'Æquana'?" she looked at her husband.

He shrugged. "Why not?"

"Think people will mind having a mermaid doing what they need done?" she smiled into his darkening eyes.

"Not as long as she gets done what needs to be done," he breathed against her wet lips. He kissed her, tasting the salt and feeling her heat inside the second skin. Her mouth's response made every muscle in his body tighten with expectation. Her hands wrapped themselves in his loose hair, and she pressed her breasts against his chest. Talon found himself drowning in her growing need, but he was willing to pay the price.

Buck made an exasperated noise. "You two need to get a room," he griped.

Reluctantly, Talon broke away from her flushed face and turned to him. "We already have a room, old man. And you have your own. Now, if you'll excuse us, we need to go discuss the details of our... new business." *Like... how long could he keep her teetering on the edge of sanity while he slowly peeled her out of the second skin, before they both went mad and he was forced to rip the rest of the damn thing off of her?*

Buck watched them go as Talon carried her to the bungalow at the end of the stretch of sand bordering the beach. From where he sat, he could hear Æquana shriek softly, and Talon's loving laugh that followed. Chuckling to himself, he went back to working some more on the webpage. He hoped to have it up and running by the time they got back to Colorado. There were already two jobs lined up for them, but neither was an emergency, thank goodness. And with Talon's connections, there would never be any lack of income.

Another fit of giggling echoed over to him, making him smile with happiness. Buck sighed loudly, pleased with the way things had finally turned out for his grandson and new wife.

As the faint sound of a door closing floated to him on the breeze, he finally gave in to the feeling of contentment.

Oh, yeah, he said to himself, shaking his head as he grinned again with smug satisfaction. *They got it bad.*