

MY STRENGTH
MY POWER

My Love

Linda Mooney

My Strength, My Power, My Love
by Linda Mooney

Whiskey Creek Press

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

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"Linda Mooney has done a top notch job of world building. You get a story that will make you laugh a little but mostly it will twist your heartstrings to pieces. You may want to keep a box of Kleenex nearby while reading [HeartCrystal]."

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Runner's Moon: Jebaral

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Sandeflay

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Dedication

Hey, Diana!

This one's for you!

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Synergy—

When the sum of two objects together is greater than the sum of each part separately.

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Chapter 1

Ceremony

The banging on the door startled her. "Hey, Grey! Move your ass, woman, or you'll be late!" Persia opened the door and stuck her head into the cubicle. Spying her friend standing in front of the reflective glass, she motioned for Grey to come on. "Girl, you would be late to your own funeral!"

Sighing, Grey took one last look at herself in the white jumpsuit. White. For unmated. But not for too much longer. The realization sent chills through her body.

"Grey!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" she answered as she ran her fingers through her unruly hair. Today she could let it hang unbound and not tied back as she usually kept it when she was in training. The weather forecasters promised no wind today and mild temperatures, so it should be okay. Besides, there was little else she could do with it. Damn stuff was too thick to style. And the golden streak running from above her right eyebrow all the way to the ends was too noticeable to even think about hiding. Grey made a face in the glass. "All right. I'm ready."

"Finally!" Persia groaned. She grabbed her friend's hand, and together they jogged for the chambers where the ceremony was to take place.

The immense room was already swarming with people when they arrived. Grey couldn't help but observe the people in their vari-colored jumpsuits. She especially noticed the

conspicuous lack of green. Until last month, before she was blessed with her first menses which signaled her entrance into adulthood, she had worn the bright green jumpsuit. That part of her life was over now. She was a full-fledged Synergian. And it was time for her to find her union mate.

The Academy auditorium was almost filled to capacity. Persia led her over to a row of seats where Venn was already holding spots for them. "You took your damn time," their brunette friend hissed, then added a smile to take the sting out of her words.

"Couldn't help it," Grey snapped back. "Computers must have gotten my measurements wrong. It's too snug on top." To prove her point, she tugged on the tight bodice. Her breasts felt like they were encased in cloth cages.

The girls snickered. "Don't worry about that," Venn teased. "Boys like tight tops."

Persia responded with an elbow to the young woman's ribcage. "Men, Cadet Varsi. Men. No more boys for us." She got a nod of agreement from the others as an elderly gentleman climbed the podium and called for attention. The vast auditorium hushed.

As the Administrator began to welcome everyone to the ceremony, Grey's eyes wandered around the room, seeing if she could spot anyone she knew. Of course she already knew all of the Academy graduates. She had been taking classes with them since they all were children. It wasn't until each student reached that magical thirteenth birthday that the females were separated from the males.

Grey made a face. So many of the boys she'd played with and studied with had changed over the years. She wondered if she would be able to recognize any of them. Or if they looked anything like they had when they were children.

A quick jab in the ribs reminded her she was supposed to be paying attention. Shooting a deadly look at Persia, Grey settled back in her chair and obediently listened.

"...this very special day." The Administrator beamed at the big crowd.

Probably delighted to get another group of us out of their hair.

"Within the hour this class will be allowed to mingle. And from there we hope and pray that each candidate will be able to find their Synergistic mate, thus granting us a larger and more forceful presence in the galaxy."

Enthusiastic applause answered him, Grey and her friends among the supporting crowd. The attacks on their planet were becoming more frequent and more deadly. In the past two years alone there had been three different entities swooping down on their world, bent on conquest or domination. But the incredibly powerful army of Synergistically mated couples had been able to beat them back with few casualties.

Next to her, Grey overheard her friends conversing. "Think you'll find your union today?" Venn whispered.

"I don't really care if I do," Persia murmured back. "I'm just looking forward to getting laid!"

Venn covered her mouth with her hand and giggled. Someone behind them made a shushing sound, and Grey

stared down at her hands. For twenty, almost twenty-one years, she had been waiting for this day. Her parents had been overjoyed to discover the baby girl they had been blessed with carried the Synergistic gene. They had readily handed over their child to the Academy right after Grey's third birthday. Just like all the other parents of Synergistic children had.

From that point on she had been taught and trained for this moment. For this time when she finally reached adulthood, and her body was ready to find that one special male who would complete her. A male whose body would meld with hers, and together they would become a force so new, so different, and so powerful that it would be used to help keep their world safe from invaders and other species bent on conquering and dominating their planet.

Then why wasn't she more excited about the prospect of finding her union mate? Why didn't she feel the same giggly effervescence as her friends did?

She tugged on the binding top. The white jumpsuit didn't stretch or allow for any kind of leeway. She felt like it was keeping her from drawing a full breath of air. Furthermore, this place was stifling, keeping her from concentrating on what was going on. Her head was beginning to ache from all the pomp and circumstance.

The body of graduates rose to their feet. Startled, Grey stood with them. The Administrator was showing them off. Twelve women and fifteen men made up this month's roster. With luck most of them eventually would find their mates, but in reality the odds were more like one in every three.

Synergistic unions were not rare, but the odds of Grey finding that one male in this particular bunch of graduates were very slim. She would have a better chance once she was allowed to mingle with the earlier graduates now employed in the military. Or with the next several classes of graduates who would be joining them in the months to come.

If truth be told, she wanted to enjoy her new freedom a bit more before seeking her mate. Right now the majority of graduates had only one thought on their minds—the freedom to begin copulation. Two dozen oversexed and horny graduates would no doubt lose their virginities today and tonight, and maybe a handful of them would find their Synergistic other halves.

The idea of lying beneath a sweaty male and hoping he was her destined other self was simply too unrealistic for her to imagine at this point. No matter what had been drilled into her throughout all her biology classes.

Her eyes swept the vast audience of friends and family who encircled the small group facing the podium. Somewhere out there were her mother and father and younger brother. They would be smiling and clapping, and accepting the accolades of their neighbors and friends. They came to visit her every now and then, when it was allowed. Yet, somehow, Grey never felt truly close to her parents. It probably had to do with the fact that she didn't remember much of her infant years when she had lived with them.

The graduates were asked to sit, and the sound of over two dozen crisply clad bottoms taking their seat whispered in the warm afternoon.

Grey kept her eyes on the people standing on floor level, just beyond the graduates. She had no inclination to listen to the Administrator, who was currently describing to the audience the types of classes and physical training all Synergians underwent. She was more interested in the teachers and instructors standing over there, watching. She immediately located the one figure she had been seeking, and when her eyes locked on him, she felt her entire body go on high alert.

Rowe Maine stood with his hands behind his back. His dark red jumpsuit stood out among the rest like a beacon. But it did little to disguise the fact that the man had been carved from the roughest stone. His shoulders and thick neck could have been sculpted from any woman's fantasy. His chest was wide but not overly muscular like some of the younger men often sought during their workouts. Slim hips, a flat stomach, and powerful thighs filled out the lower portion of his suit. Grey licked her lips and tried to control the fluttering feeling inside her chest cavity. By the gods, he was the most wonderful thing she had ever set eyes on. Too bad he was one of the Unmatched.

"...want you to meet each of our graduates." The Administrator stepped to one side, and the student body rose to their feet once more. Persia poked her in the ribs and hissed for her to move her ass. Numb, Grey followed the row ahead of them, keenly aware of the thousands of eyes watching.

They marched up to the podium and waited their turn to be called. Again, Grey searched the small group of teachers

who remained at floor level. Amid the deep purple suits of the couples who had found their Synergistic mates, Rowe's blood-colored suit was easy to spot. Seeing the hard look that he wore like a mask, she felt her heart soften. The poor man.

"...Grey Dansis."

Persia gave her a shove forward. Grey stumbled slightly, but she quickly regained her footing and walked toward the podium. Her eyes sought the red-clad figure once more, but this time the look on his face had changed. His eyes were drilling into her, through skin and muscle and bone, all the way into the very center of her being.

Grey felt a flash of lightning explode inside her stomach. Streaks of pure heat raced outward, sizzling to the tips of her fingers, her toes, and the roots of her hair. His dark eyes bored further into her, until she was certain he could read her every thought and feel every emotion.

She saw his eyebrows lift, almost as if he was surprised by her reaction. His arms lowered until his hands perched on his hips. And Rowe Maine slowly let his gaze take in her whole body.

This is wrong. It was wrong on so many levels. The feelings she was experiencing were the kind that she and everyone in her class had been taught would come from her mate. Her Synergistic other half. Her other soul, as the teachers often referred to it. They had said that her body would let her know who it was compatible to. A look, a touch, a taste, or maybe the simple sound of his voice would fire off rockets in her head and between her legs. All she had to do was listen and wait for that magical reaction to consume her.

That would be how she would know she had found her other self. Their first kiss would confirm their beliefs, and the sexual part, their first consummation, would cement those feelings. And then they would be able to discover what kind of power and potential they produced from their union.

She caught a gesture off to one side. Obediently Grey stepped down off the podium and returned to her seat. But the fiery rush of heat that made her skin break out in sweat still lay beneath the surface like a thin blanket.

Ever since that first day she had seen Rowe Maine, she had been feeling this incredible sense of warmth and excitement surging through her. At the time she had no idea what it meant, or why she was having these wonderful reactions. Not until her instructor began class with the rudiments of sex and sexual fulfillment.

"Before you ever touch, your body will tell you he's the one." The woman, Karrel, was a well-known Synergian. She and her mate, Tonn, had fought in the last three major wars, earning several commendations. Together the couple could shoot fireballs from their hands. Huge, swirling, condensed masses of heat and gas so powerful and intense they would melt the skin off any invading aircraft or ship. Grey had never seen them in action, but vids of their exploits, along with vids of many of the other Synergistic couples, were shown to them on a daily basis.

Tyven had raised her hand. "What if you think he's the one, but he's not?" she'd questioned the woman and her mate. So few males were allowed into the female populace. Only those men who were already unionized, those who had

lost their mates, or those deemed Unmatched were granted access into the segregated classrooms and dorms.

Tonn had smiled, as if they had been asked that question countless times before. Grey bet they had. "Then he's not the one, and all you have to show for it is a very nice sexual meeting."

A very nice sexual meeting. Grey winced. That was the payoff, she told herself as she looked around at the graduating class. Everyone could go off and have gods know how many liaisons from now until they found their true mates, and all without condemnation or guilt. A true union mate was only solidified upon consummation. Until then, it was speculation or guess that brought two people together to see if they were compatible.

But for some unexplainable reason, having the absolute freedom to screw any Synergian male that crossed her path was not something she planned to do, or looked forward to. No, she wanted to be absolutely dead-on certain that the man she gave her body to was Him, and only Him. Call her stuck-up. Prude. Deviant. Grey Dansis did not want to be any man's conquest or lazy afternoon bedmate.

The Administrator announced them all as graduates, signaling the group to rise to resounding applause. Persia and Venn hugged each other then turned to include her in their congratulations. At that point the instructors and teachers ventured toward the group to help herd them into the antechamber where family and friends could share a drink and edibles for the next hour or two. And after that, after the Academy closed its doors to the outside world once again...

Sighing loudly, Grey followed along behind her friends. Behind her she could hear several of the male graduates boasting over how many females they could lay between now and tomorrow's dawn. She frowned. One of them wouldn't be her, she almost said aloud. No, sir. Not her.

A flash of red at the corner of her eye caught her attention. Almost instantly her heart jumped into her throat. The palms of her hands went clammy, and she wiped them on the thighs of her jumpsuit. He was following the crowd, watching from the fringes. She desperately wanted to turn her head to look at him, but there was no reason why she should. After all Master Maine was off limits. Unmated. That, and the fact that he was one of their top instructors at the Academy, gave him every right to mingle among the female populace now.

The thought of the man's non-approachable status dug sharp pinpricks of pain inside her, puzzling her even further. Why the hell should I care? Why do I get these feelings whenever I look at him? Why? Why?

Digging her fingernails into the palms of her hands did not assuage the pain, but at least she could drop her eyes and follow the rest of the crowd in silence. It was going to be a helluva long afternoon. Grey hoped the reception wouldn't last too long. All she wanted to do at this moment was go back to her little apartment and sink her nose into a good literary vid. She would even be willing to tackle another one of Master Corr's tactical manuals if that was what it took to pass the night in peace.

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But she had little hope of getting a good night's sleep. Not with two dozen ultra-horny graduates ready to "seek" their union mates on their first evening of sexual permissiveness.

Shaking her head with reluctant acceptance, Grey lifted her head and began to search the room for sight of her parents.

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Chapter 2

Unmated

The decision hadn't been a hard one to make. Rowe flatly hated red. But not every shade of red. Just this color, the color of his jumpsuit. The dark blood color he now was required to wear because of his new designation.

Unmatched. Unmated.

The words tasted rancid on his tongue.

He watched with thinly veiled disinterest at the crop of graduates heading for the pavilion. There they would receive congratulations from friends, family, and the Academy Administrators. Afterwards they would go into the reception hall to toast each other with good luck at finding their union mates. And then, that night, all of them would go on a wild orgy of unrestrained sex under the guise of finding their Synergistic mates.

Rowe blinked. Five years ago he had been one of them. Like these new graduates, he had gone sexually berserk. After years and years of being celibate, he had gone through his choices like a hot wind, subconsciously hoping the woman he was laying at the time would turn out to be his mate. But one by one, each female failed to excite him. Failed to electrify him. Failed to sizzle over his skin like a rocket out of control as he had been told it would feel like.

As the years rolled on he had been more selective over whom he approached. The rejections piled up. Then, before

he knew it, he was called before the Academy Academia and given the bad news.

"You know why you've been summoned, don't you, Cadet Maine?"

Rowe stared at the table of four men. Yes, he knew why he had been brought before them. So make the pronouncement, damn you all, and cut this short.

"Yes, I do, Master Mintin," he responded quietly. No emotion, no sign of regret must show on his face. It would be a weakness he couldn't afford to let them see.

"You have completed your fifth full year as a Cadet, but you haven't found your mate." It was Master Toggert who had been tapped to give the bad news. The man tried to smile, but it came out weak. "We have discussed in length your current assignment, and it's our decision that your rank be changed to Unmatched." The man gave another watery smile. Obviously he detested this part of his job. Rowe didn't blame him. "Starting tomorrow morning you will be required to wear the red suit signifying your new status."

The proclamation washed over him like freezing water. Rowe felt his skin shrivel, tightening over his skeleton. Unmatched. It was almost a death knell. Unmated. A Synergian who had failed to find his mate. A potentially powerful weapon now lost.

"Do you have anything to say, Cadet?" Master Forch asked.

Rowe cast his eyes in the man's direction. Anything to say? Like what? Don't do this to me? Don't relegate me to the refuse pile, like a puzzle piece that no longer fit?

"No, Master Forch," he managed to reply. His voice was still strong, still forceful. He'd be damned if he'd show them any emotion at this time. Curse them all.

"But we do have some good news we hope will off-set the bad," Master Mintin continued. A disk had been sitting on the table in front of him. He picked it up and held it out to Rowe, who took it. "We've been following your job assignment ever since you went over to Fleet. Your work at the Academy has been exemplary. In fact, you have surpassed every expectation we had for you, and then some. Our fellow academicians have been impressed beyond words." The man tapped his fingertips together for a few moments, then added, "As much as we hate to admit it, we were rather hoping you wouldn't find your union mate, Cadet Maine."

The admission stunned him. In the next instant cold fury filled him. He could feel the heat rising to his face, but he twisted his hands into fists and refused to bite. The cool disk bit painfully into his palm, but he ignored it. "Oh?" was all he could manage to say. And that much cost him dearly.

Master Forch took over. "We want you to head our fleet of repellant aircraft."

This news was enough to make Rowe take a mental and physical step backwards. "Master Girdy has that honor," he started to protest.

Master Forch waved it off. "Master Girdy has expressed to us that he wishes to retire, and soon. You are aware he has been in less than good health recently. And with the rise in attacks upon our planet, we need someone with a superior head on their shoulders to take over his command."

Rowe shook his head. "Masters Britt and Ambercram are Master Girby's seconds. One of them should take the chair."

"Your seating was their decision," Master Mintin bluntly told him. "Your scores are phenomenal. You are in prime physical condition." He tapped the table in front of him with his middle finger. "We need your answer."

"What is my alternative if I reject your offer?" Rowe questioned. To his surprise, the four men moved uneasily in their seats and glanced at each other.

"Well, we had hoped there wouldn't be a rejection," Master Forch answered. "But in the event you decide not to accept this position, there is a slot in the Academy that you are welcome to fill. It would be teaching the cadets on basic and elementary flight, including tactical skills at the helm. Because you excel in that area, it would make no sense to assign you elsewhere. Either way, your re-classification stands."

Rowe could feel the muscles in his arm starting to protest from the strain. Slowly, he forced his heart to calm, forced his fingers to unclench. They had taken away one reason for living, but were offering him a suitable substitute. Although he knew he no longer could look forward to the warmth and joy of having a mate, at least he could take pride in his ability at the helm of a battle flit.

"I accept your offer, Masters of the Academy," he solemnly said. I accept your offer. Hearing those words, the men at the table visibly relaxed and smiled. And from that moment on he was no longer Cadet Maine, but Master Maine.

Sighing, Rowe forced himself to watch the graduation ceremony. As one of the academia he was required to help chaperone the young men attending. And because he was now signified as being Unmatched, he could also mingle among the free females. They would feel safe, knowing he was there to render aid or answer questions if any of the young men grew overly attentive.

His eyes swept the interior of the auditorium, when he spotted her staring straight at him. He had seen her before on the other side of the transparent wall that divided the school between the two sexes. The first time he had laid eyes on her, on the abundant brown hair with the unusual golden slash running from temple to tip, and her equally rich brown eyes, he had felt something stirring in his gut. At the time Rowe had dismissed it. There was no reason to think any more about it.

Her face was pale. Her eyes were turning glassy. His body reacted with a vengeance. The flash of heat zipped to the top of his head, down to his toes, and out through his fingertips. His fingers literally burned at his physical response.

Worse, he could feel himself becoming physically aroused. Hard aroused. Uncomfortable aroused. It was as though she had sent him a silent signal, and he had answered in kind.

Astonished, Rowe continued to stare at her. It was impossible. There was no way his body could be reacting to a mere glance from the young woman. No way. No ... way...

They arose as a group and began walking toward the podium. The woman's attention was diverted. It was like a switch turning off. Rowe took a deep breath as his body

relaxed from the subliminal grip. But his erection continued to torment him. He adjusted his stance, hoping to keep it from being noticed.

He moved to where he could get a good long look at her when she was called up. Where he could hear her name when it was called out and memorize it when he watched her step forward.

"Grey Dansis."

Her eyes shifted, locked on him, and the current between them was like being pumped full of adrenaline. It was so intense Rowe nearly fell to his knees.

This was insane! Insane! What would happen if he touched her? What would he feel if he simply put his hand on her bare skin? What kind of reaction would he get then? More importantly, was she also sensing the same mind-blowing response?

The cadets took their seats and the Administrator resumed his memorized recitation. Rowe found a spot along the back wall where he could see the woman seated in her chair without appearing too obvious. He couldn't help but realize that she appeared completely uninterested in the proceedings. She kept fidgeting in her seat, twisting her hands in her lap.

The two women on the other side of her had to be friends or acquaintances. They tried to pull her into their conversation but the woman—

Grey. Dansis.

—seemed as eager as he was to have this whole ceremony over with as soon as possible.

Rowe frowned. Why? Was she waiting for the moment when the cadets were allowed to commingle? Was she hot and eager to spread her legs for the first male cadet to swear he was meant to be her union mate?

At the thought of her allowing herself to become a prized plunge for the entire graduating class of males, Rowe felt his heart thud to a complete standstill. Pain flashed through him, burning and twisting like nothing he'd ever felt before in his life. Gasping aloud, he turned away from the group and clutched his chest.

This was insane!

The Administrator gave his final congratulations, and the entire auditorium rose in applause. The clank and clatter of the graduates leaving their seats and filing toward the reception hall alerted him, and Rowe wiped a hand over his sweaty face.

This was wrong. It was wrong on so many planes. It was difficult to know where to begin. But one thing was deadly certain—Grey Dansis affected him like no other woman ever had in his life. Rowe swore to himself he would find out why.

He was a man five years past seeking his Synergistic mate. Five years, the Academy declared, was the limit. The cut-off point. After that length of time, any cadet who had not found his or her union was considered Unmatched. Unable to find their mate. And therefore no longer allowed the option of seeking one.

Five years. Five damn lonely and hopeless years. Followed by a lifetime of them.

But ... what if the Academy was wrong?

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Chapter 3

Pressure

The first hour was tolerable. Grey's mother and father swooped down on her the moment she entered the reception hall, kissing and hugging and doing all the things parents do when they really want to embarrass their offspring. She accepted their congratulations, but the snide remarks made by her father were a bit too much. In fact, they were starting to turn her stomach.

"What I wouldn't give to be a Synergian tonight," Bayer Dansis loudly proclaimed, not caring who heard him. He was a lot like some of the other parents, she realized. Boastful. Obnoxious. Clearly using his parentage of a Synergian as his one bright moment in history, and using it to its fullest extent. Grey patiently waited for him to continue, knowing that if she tried to get him to shush or lower his voice, her request would have the opposite effect.

"Oh, yes. To be young and at your sexual peak, and totally inexperienced. Ready for every man. Hopping from bed to bed. Hot, horny, and—"

"Bayer, I think we all know what the process is."

Grey glanced over at her mother. Good old Momma. Diplomacy and patience. Two skills Cammin Dansis excelled in. Skills Grey knew she would never polish as well as her mother had after nearly twenty-eight years of marriage.

It was odd to think that two mismatched people like her parents could have produced a child with the rare Synergian

gene. The odds of having the gene were astronomical, her teachers had explained. Practically one in one million births. Which was why two Synergians finding their true mates was an event to celebrate. Without the partnered pairs and their incredible powers that resulted from their union, the military force on Bellac would be nonexistent.

Refreshments continued to flow into the room. Nothing addictive was served. It was against Academy rules. But that didn't exclude stronger drink from finding its way into the dorms after hours.

To make matters worse, the room was growing stuffy. Grey tugged again on her tight bodice and wished she could go outside where she could get some fresh air. Between the milling and pressing of bodies, and the warm early evening, it was getting difficult to breathe. She glanced at the glass of unfinished juice in her hand then set it on the nearby serving table. If things didn't lighten up soon, she would be spending the night nursing a splitting headache.

"What say, Mother? Ever thought our little girl would be riding these big male studs?" Bayer boasted proudly.

Grey shot him a dark look, which he didn't miss. Cammin saw the exchange and quickly stepped in. "I say it's none of our business how Grey goes about trying to find her mate."

"Yeah, Father," Grey added, making the tone of her intent very clear. "Maybe I want to wait a while. After all, if he's out there, it won't matter if I find him tonight or tomorrow night. Or next month. Or next year."

Bayer gave her a reproachful look. "Now, now. Aren't you the least bit juicy between the thighs, Grey?" He gave a little

wiggle of his backside, which totally disgusted her. Grey had no qualms making a face to let him know.

"Listen. I'm very tired. It's been a long day," she began when Bayer interrupted her.

"That's right! Mother, we need to be going so our little girl can get herself ready for these nice prime males." He dropped his glass on the serving table and leaned over to give Grey a wet smack on the cheek, oblivious to the way she quickly wiped it away.

Shaking her head, Cammin opted for a hug. "Forgive your father, Grey. You know how he can be at times."

"Yeah. I know, Momma."

"And he's so very proud of you. I am, too. And so is Nally."

At the mention of her older brother, Grey looked around the room. "Where is he?"

"Probably talking military with some of the instructors," Cammin Dansis laughed. She grabbed her daughter by the shoulders and gave her a close, scrutinizing stare. "Are you going to be all right tonight?"

"Yes, Momma. Don't worry about me."

The woman bit her lips, running a hand through Grey's wealth of dark hair. "If you need anything, you'll message me, right?"

"Promise," Grey assured her, adding a quick smile.

Nodding, Cammin grabbed her husband by the arm and practically dragged him away. Grey watched them disappear through the back door, out into the Academy entryway which led into the open square and the city.

Good. With them gone she could slip out through the opposite door and make her way back to the dorms. If she was lucky she might be able to slip unobtrusively into her apartment where she could take a shower and a sleeping aid, and spend the rest of the night in a sweet comatose state while her neighbors and friends did the wild horizontal all night long.

Throwing a loose strand of hair over her shoulder, she turned and slowly began making her way across the room. She was nearly at the exit when she heard her name shouted. Surprised, she paused. A second later Brem Pollit and his two cronies swooped down on her. By the flushed look on their faces, she had no doubts what they were up to.

"Hey, Cadet Dansis," Brem breathed, pressing closer.

"You're invading my space," Grey snapped. A good defense always began with a good offense, she'd learned from her lessons. Make the enemy understand where they stood with you from the first encounter. Brem Pollit was the enemy even if he was a Synergian. Smart, brash, and intelligent, yes. Good-looking, most devastatingly. But the man was also self-centered, overbearing, and vindictive. Grey pitied the woman who would be his mate.

"We're just wanting to share congratulations," Filo Torie grinned. He had approached from behind her, blocking her escape out the exit. A glass of juice was shoved into her hand. Grey stumbled, nearly dropping it, and glanced over to see Deev Mallod wearing a smear of cake at the corner of his mouth.

"You're not going to be inhospitable and not share a celebration drink with us, are you?" Deev grinned.

They had her pinned inside a triangle, with her in the middle. Grey sneered, shoving the glass back at Mallod. "You boys have been pushing me ever since simulation class. Can I help it if my score outranked yours? Get over that childish fit of jealousy!"

Brem moved closer, pressing himself along her. Grey glanced down without realizing where her eyes were roaming. The enormous bulge in his jumpsuit told her more than she wanted to know. "Oh, we got over that a long time ago, didn't we, my friends? No. We're here because we're all feeling that little tingly sensation all over our bodies. Isn't that odd?" The young man stuck his face closer to hers. "What are the chances all three of us would think you might be our mate?"

Grey stood her ground even while her heart pounded furiously. She was not the mate to any of them. They knew that as well as she did. All they were wanting was to get her flat on her back as quickly as possible and make good the insinuations they had been plying her with ever since her simulator score knocked them out of the competition.

"I'm not your mate," she hissed, looking boldly at all three of them. "Not yours, or yours, or yours."

"How do you know?" Deev asked, pressing closer. He rubbed himself against her backside, giving her a taste of his thickened manhood. "Maybe this is one of those cases where you don't know for sure until after a little love play."

Grey managed to swallow around the lump in her throat. It was possible. That scenario had been explained to them about

mates not knowing they were meant for each other until they relented and had sex. Yet she couldn't wrap her mind around the possibility that one of these three could be her predestined other half. Not only was it impossible to accept, the idea made her physically ill.

Giving Deev a shove with one hand, she tried to slip away. They saw what she intended and quickly gathered back around her. "Come on," Brem breathed in that overly-sweet tone of voice she had heard before. "Come on, Grey. A little quickie, just so we can be certain. Huh? Maybe take on all three of us at once, if you want to get it over with in a hurry?"

His suggestion stunned her. Grey could only stare at him in shock.

"Just let us take you outside real quick like, over against the wall where it's nice and dark. On your hands and knees, Grey. We'll be short about it. Promise," Filo murmured in her ear.

She tried to turn around but they were pressing too closely now. Rubbing their erections against her. Along her hips and thighs, against her back and belly. Fingers were combing her hair. Pinching the sides of her breasts where her arms didn't cover. More fingers were thrust between her legs, trying to separate them and throw her off-balance.

Their touch was making her nauseous. Her head was pounding, and she was growing terrified she would black out. If that happened, she knew they would take every advantage of her. And in the morning she would find herself gods knew where, naked and bruised, and totally without pride.

She tried one more time to stop them. "You're breaking Law Three!" she cried out. "You can't coerce me! Leave me alone, please!"

"Is there a problem here?"

The voice was deep and accustomed to being obeyed. The three young men took a step away from Grey, but only a step. Brem eyed the red jumpsuit with obvious disdain.

"No, Master Maine. We were proposing to Cadet Dansis that we felt one of us could be her union mate."

Although no taller than the rest of them, the Academy Instructor projected an aura that cowered them all. He shot the three cadet males a look that said he didn't quite believe their story, then turned to the trembling woman in the center.

"I thought I heard you call for Law Three, Cadet Dansis. Did you?"

"No, she didn't," Filo started to interrupt when Rowe almost took his head off.

"When I ask you a direct question, you will answer me, cadet. Otherwise you will keep your mouth shut!" He glanced at the other two to see if they dared to challenge him.

"Master..." Deev hesitantly said.

Rowe's gaze burned holes into him, but he allowed the cadet to continue.

"Master, we were only fooling around. Dansis was teasing us when she said that."

Rowe turned back to Grey. "Is that the truth? Or did you call out for Law Three?"

She was aware of the tension building between the men surrounding her. There was no telling how furious they would

be if she told the truth. But she was damned if she would lie to an Instructor. Especially this one. The one whose nearness was already beginning to affect her. Good heavens, even her fingernails felt like they were tingling!

"Yes, Master Maine. They were trying to coerce me into having sex with all of them. I said no."

She could feel their anger like little waves of heat coming off of them. To her relief the Instructor nodded, believing her story over theirs.

"You three are hereby on report," Rowe informed them. "Go immediately to detention."

"You can't do that!" Deev yelled, backing away. "It's graduation night!"

"You broke Law Three. Serve your detention quietly, and you'll be out by this time tomorrow night." He signaled for a military guard when Brem turned on him angrily.

"We weren't going to hurt her," he hissed. "You have no right to deny us tonight. We've waited years for this moment. Just because you ended up unmatched is no reason to take it out on us!"

Grey stood in open-mouthed shock, unable to believe Pollit would throw something like that in an Instructor's face. Not only was it rude, but it was an unspoken rule that the physical state of a Master was both personal and off-limits.

She glanced up to see Rowe slowly narrowing his eyes. When he finally spoke it was in a voice that sent cold shivers down her spine.

"When you get assigned to your task force, cadet, you had better pray it's not on my drill. Because if I ever see your face

again, I personally guarantee that you'll be worked so hard and for so long you'll wish you were never born a Synergian. Guards?"

Two military elite took a position behind the three cadets. The room, now hushed as they watched the drama unfold, watched as the small group was escorted out the side door leading to the detention cells. Once they were gone, the room immediately resumed its noisy celebration.

"Did they hurt you?"

Grey started, looking back up into eyes she could see now were a dark brown. Darker than hers. So dark she could see her reflection.

"Just my pride. Thank you, Master Maine."

"Do you need an escort back to your apartment? Or ... or is there another male present you planned on leaving with?"

The hesitant question surprised her. For a moment Grey got the impression he didn't want her to admit to leaving with another cadet.

"No. I mean, no, there wasn't someone else I had planned on leaving with." She managed a genuinely relieved smile. "I would be very honored to have you escort me back to my apartment ... if it's not any trouble."

Damn! The man was trying to hide a smile! She would bet her life on it! Seeing the minute tilt at the corner of his lips was a delightful revelation. Grey continued to stare at the Instructor's lips, even when he spoke to her again. They were nice lips. Kissable lips. They moved, showing strong teeth. It took her a second to realize what he was saying.

"Cadet?"

Her eyes shot back to his. A blush began to warm her face. "Sorry. What?"

This time one corner definitely grinned. "Are you ready to leave now? Or would you prefer to stay here a bit longer?"

She glanced around. There was no telling where Persia and Venn were. Hell, they could be back at their place, or in some male cadet's room right now for all she knew.

It didn't matter, though. She was tired. Worn out. Her thought processes were foggy.

"I'm ready to go now, if that's all right."

Rowe nodded and proceeded ahead of her, opening the door for her to pass through ahead of him. They exited into the evening air where Grey stopped momentarily to take a deep breath. He waited silently for her to rejoin him. Together they began walking toward the women's dorm.

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Chapter 4

Walk

The night was slightly breezy. The stars seemed unusually bright, as did the two moons.

Rowe kept his hands clasped tightly behind his back. He didn't dare touch her, or even her jumpsuit, for fear of knowing what he would feel. But walking this close to her he was acutely aware of everything about her. Her scent was light, almost seductive. Her skin looked softer than flower petals. Her hair, thick and glimmering in the moonlight, begged for his hands to weave through the dark brown locks. And that golden streak...

He stifled the groan rising inside his chest. Those idiot cadets were asking for a swift meltdown, and he had no compunction about giving it to them. Breaking Law Three was a serious offense. They knew damn well that forcing a cadet to give in with sexual favors was not a crime easily overlooked. No union mating ever occurred through coercion. Those boys knew it, had had it drilled into them, and yet Rowe knew there would always be at least one randy cadet who would test the limits of the law.

He had spent the evening standing in the shadows and watching Grey. Watching and studying how she interacted with her parents. And, more importantly, how she responded to the other cadets. Was there a male out there she was already attracted to? Was there someone she was waiting to meet once her parents left the reception?

The moment the trio of cadets had surrounded her, he had sensed her reticence. It was almost as if the tart, brittle taste of her fear had transferred over into his mouth, choking him, turning his stomach. Rowe shook his head, and the memory of how close the threesome had come to practically raping her shriveled into a hard knot in his gut.

She was tough, though. Stood her ground and gave them her best, in spite of the fact that they could have easily overwhelmed her physically.

He chanced a sideways glance at her. Her arms were crossed over her chest. Her breasts, a little voice corrected. His body responded immediately. Shit. To make matters worse, the moons' light shimmered over her white jumpsuit. Her thighs, her hips, her pert buttocks, and her tiny waist were emphasized by the form-fitting garment.

His erection pressed hard inside his own jumpsuit, and for the first time ever Rowe was glad the dark color of his uniform helped a little to shadow that part of him.

"Sir?"

Rowe nearly jumped at the unexpected sound of her voice. "Yes? What?"

"Thank you. For what you did back there." She sounded tired.

"I take it they aren't friends of yours." He tried to make light of the incident, hoping she wouldn't have nightmares about it.

Grey shook her head. "Never were, sir. They didn't know I existed until my simulation score knocked them out of the competition."

Nodding, Rowe couldn't help but smile. He remembered. She was damn good behind the controls. In fact, he knew she would be as good, if not better, once she sat that provocative butt into a cockpit and trimmed flaps for real.

"Have you put any thought into what you want to do until you find your union mate?"

It was a tricky question, but one Rowe felt he had to ask. Synergians couldn't assume they would find their other half the first night after graduation. Therefore they had to plan on an alternate career they could excel in until that moment arrived. He continued to watch her as she mused.

He'd noticed she had a steady if somewhat distant connection to her parents. It was very typical. Strong bonds normally weren't formed with the parents or siblings because Synergians were shipped off to the Academy around the ages of three or four. Closer bonds were usually formed between classmates who, along with teachers, became surrogate families.

He took a deep breath. This brisk walk was helping to clear his head. It was also helping him get a better feeling about the woman striding less than a foot away. With each passing second he felt his cells shifting as her nearness called to him. His blood heated, dredging up long-dormant desires.

It had been over a year since the last time he'd had intercourse to determine if the woman who'd piqued his interest could be his union mate. Since that time there had been no one to catch his eye. Or raise his struts ... until tonight.

A touch. A single, simple touch, and there would be no more doubts. But at this moment he had no reason to touch her. If he reached over and did something as innocent as brush her hair back over her shoulder, she could cry out Law Three just like she had in the reception hall. And his ass would be hauled off to stand trial quicker than he could blink.

"I think ... I think I would like to be part of the fleet, Master Maine."

This time he had no choice but to come to a halt in the middle of the walkway. Her decision literally knocked the air out of his lungs. Gradually, he forced himself to start breathing again as Grey patiently waited for him to catch up to her. A tiny smile graced her lips. Rowe realized her decision had not been made lightly.

"I'm not an easy taskmaster," he almost growled at her, needing to see if she rose or cringed at the bait.

Instead, Grey nodded. "I'll do the best I can, sir. If not better."

They were nearing the women's dorm. Automatically, Rowe turned on the narrow sidewalk leading to the first set of outer doors.

"No, sir. My apartment is on the other end." She pointed to the far corner of the building. Rowe backed around, and they continued down the walkway.

"Master Maine, before we part company, I want to thank you again for coming to my assistance earlier." Her head was bent low, as if she was studying the pavement beneath their feet. Rowe smiled to himself. She was troubled. Thinking. Searching for the right words. And none of it had to do with

what had gone on at the reception. He could feel it pulsing through every inch of him. The truth was staring at them with luminous eyes, but now was not the time or the place to discuss it. Neither could they pursue it further.

Not now. Later. But before they could approach each other, there was one very critical factor he had to take care of first.

"It was my job, cadet," he murmured, just to give her some sort of reply.

Her head suddenly rose. She stared at him with those beautiful eyes the color of rich, fertile loam. "Was it?"

"What?"

"Your job to save me? Was that why you were there? Is that why you've been watching me so intently all evening?"

Dear gods, how did she know?

He stared at her, surprised beyond words. His brain refused to function, leaving him with only the ability to frown back. "Was that your impression?"

Was that your impression? What the hell kind of answer was that?

She stopped again, this time at the junction between the main walkway and the sidewalk leading up to the next set of outer doors. "Something's going on, Master Maine. I-I can't explain it, or even try to understand it. But..." She paused, biting her lower lip.

"But it upsets you?" he volunteered.

"No." Grey gave a little shake of her head. "No. It doesn't upset me. It confuses me."

"How does it confuse you?" he softly urged, curious.

"Because it's impossible."

The confession struck another chord inside him. The heat in his blood rose another degree.

Rowe started to question her again when Grey readjusted her arms over her chest and gave a little shrug as she shook her head.

"Forget it. Forgive me. I'm talking nonsense. It's been a hard day, not to mention what almost happened tonight." She glanced back up at him. This time he could see the fire banked in her eyes, and his heart soared. She was fighting it, fighting him, fighting this unbelievable attraction between them. "Thank you again for stepping in and for walking me back to my place. Have a nice night, sir. See you around."

With a toss of her head, she pivoted and began walking toward the building. Rowe stood and watched her go until she disappeared inside. Only then did the heat begin to cool and his erection begin to soften. Without her scent filling his lungs or her nearness throwing his hormones into overdrive, he could think again. Breathe again.

The window panels brightened. Rowe remained on the walkway to see if she would peek out and check to see if he was still there. He had the feeling she would—

There. Her moonsglow face appeared briefly before disappearing. Pleased, Rowe turned and headed directly for the administration dorms. There was one man he needed to talk to. One man who was the closest thing to family, a brother, and confidant.

Rowe checked his watch. It was late, but this was graduation night, and all Instructors were on round-the-clock

call in case of emergencies. Dommon wouldn't be asleep, which was fine with him. There wasn't a chance in hell he would be able to get any decent rest tonight anyway. Not only that, but he seriously doubted he would be able to sleep peacefully any night after this until the truth was out.

Because there was no doubt in his mind now that Grey belonged to him.

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Chapter 5

Confession

The lights were on in Dommon's apartment. Rowe walked into the building and took the stairs to the second floor. While he waited for the door to announce him, a familiar voice came over the address system.

"Now how did I know I'd see your ugly puss tonight?"

The door hissed open. The burly ammunitions master was sitting in his lounge, watching a vid. He made a languid gesture for Rowe to join him. "What's on your mind that couldn't wait until tomorrow?"

"What I have on my mind might shock you," Rowe told him with a smile.

Dommon raised an eyebrow. "It would take quite a bit for you to shock me. I've known you how long?"

"Since we were five, and you know that." He took a seat in the plush chair across from his friend.

"Sweet?"

"No, thanks."

The eyebrow ascended another fraction of an inch. "Stars! It must be urgent!"

Rowe tugged on the thighs of his jumpsuit before crossing one ankle over a knee. Dommon was in non-regulation pants and top. Normally the man wore the bright blue jumpsuit of a displaced Synergian. A mate who had lost a mate. Casha had been a beautiful, passionate woman. Always ready with a smile. Able to tell a good joke, whether it was raunchy or

clean. She was the perfect antithesis to her no-nonsense husband. Together the pair had been able to generate tremendous winds that could blow down entire buildings.

Rowe knew Dommon would mourn her loss for the rest of his life. In a strange way, he and his friend were much alike now. A Synergian who had lost a mate would forever remain single. An unmatched Synergian would never know a mate. But not for long, he reminded himself.

"What do you think my chances would be if I went before the Administrators and asked for an extension?"

Dommon gave him a puzzled look. "An extension? For what?" Suddenly the answer struck him like a blow to the stomach. "Oh, dearest gods! You haven't!"

The smile stretched him from ear to ear. Unable to answer, Rowe chuckled as he nodded his head.

Dommon whirled around in his lounge, feet pounding when they hit the floor. "Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure?"

Rowe managed a deep breath. "As sure as I can be without touching her. Stars, Dommon! I can't think straight when I'm around her. My body isn't mine. My dick feels like a tree's rooted in my groin." He shook his head. "But I'm forbidden to approach her when I'm wearing this..." He made a disgusted gesture at his suit and sucked in a breath through his teeth. "Tomorrow I plan to go to the Administrators and ask for a hearing. I can't ... I can't turn away from this opportunity."

"That's why I sensed a difference in you when you came in. But you know that what you're planning on asking is

impossible, don't you? Do you know how many have gone before the Admin to ask for an extension? Nearly everyone who's been relegated to unmatched status! Do you know how many have been granted an extension? None!"

"Yes, but how many of those people asking had found their union mate? How many of them were able to point out their Synergistic other half and say, 'That's her. That's the woman you have condemned me from claiming because you made a proclamation. A proclamation that means nothing because my body and hers were meant to meld. But you and your idiotic laws are preventing us from fulfilling our destiny and our duty!' The proclamation is wrong, Dommon!"

Rowe sat back and made an exasperated sound. "Five years? Why five years? Where did the Academy come up with that number? Why not seven? Or ten? Yeah! Ten! It's a nice round number. Let's make it ten!"

"They had to come up with some cutoff point," Dommon insisted. "Look, I'm not siding with the laws, but the cutoff point is necessary. You know that without me having to explain it to you. The five year limit is meant to be a psychological stop-gate because without it a Synergian would go on and on and on, seeking his other half. His work would suffer, and eventually so would his physical and emotional health."

He leaned forward, closing the gap between him and Rowe. "Listen, I'm not telling you not to go ask for an extension. You have a very valid case because you can produce ... what's her name?"

"Grey. Dansis."

Dommon blinked. "Isn't she the one who aced the simulator trials? The one with the streak in her hair?"

Rowe smiled. "That's her."

Dommon gave a low whistle. "She's good. Hell, she's top of her class. And you're certain beyond a doubt?"

"Dom—"

"Sorry. I ... I ... shit, Rowe." He scratched the back of his head. Heaving a loud sigh, he shot Rowe a worried look. "All right. Let's go with worst case scenario. What will you do when they deny you an extension?"

Rowe snorted. It was a question he had also asked himself. "I'm not asking for a year's extension. I don't even want a month's. I want a day. One day. That's all. One day to wear the white so I can legally approach her, and touch her, and let destiny run its course."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Yeah. I know." He slowly shook his head. "If they deny my application, I won't have any choice but to obey. But something's got to give. We can't be together and work together day after day, and be able to ignore what's happening between us. Gods ... Dom, what happens between Synergistic mates who don't create their union? What happens?"

"I don't know, Rowe," the man shrugged. "You'd have to talk to the physicians." His face took on a surprised look which quickly shifted into concern. "Great stars! Rowe ... how are you handling this?"

"Not well." Leaning back in the seat, he rubbed his face with both hands. "I can't rest. My whole body is on high alert."

I literally have to force myself to steer away from her." Getting to his feet, Rowe walked over to one of the windows and looked out into the night. From where he stood he could see down the walkway, all the way to the women's dorm. There was a tiny light shining from the corner room. Grey's room. As he stared at it, the light suddenly went dark. She had gone to bed.

Bed. Did she sleep under the covers or on top of them? Did she wear the regulation pajamas, or did she lie in the moonlight in the nude? Was her skin the same creamy consistency all over her beautifully shaped body? Ready for his touch. Ready for his possession. Ready for fulfillment.

Lust rolled sluggishly through his veins. The reaction was uncontrollable, and he pounded the pane with a closed fist. "She just went through her first menses. I'm five years her senior. Could I be wrong, Dom?"

"Hey, hey, hey. Why the sudden doubt? Or are you trying to talk yourself out of the truth? You know the Synergian gene affects our bodies in ways that go against normal physiology. You know we don't hit puberty until we're almost twenty years of age. Hell, I personally know some people who didn't hit it until they were twenty-two! Maybe that's why we go all crap-shit sex crazy on graduation night. We're making up for all those delayed post-pubescent years. Yeah, I know that's a theory, but we all believe it. All right, so you're five years older. You just sat over there not ten minutes ago and declared that the five year law was unfair."

Getting to his feet, Dommon walked over to where Rowe stood staring out the window. He laid a hand on the man's shoulder and started to say more when Rowe spoke.

"What if I'm never able to claim her? What if ... dammit, this is eating me alive, Dom. What if they order me to remain apart from her? What will happen to Grey?"

"Well, Rowe, if she is your union mate, you don't have to worry about her being claimed by someone else," Dommon stated. He was surprised by the venomous glare he got in reply.

"No, I don't. You're right about that. But what about the men she'll lay with because she thinks they might be the one? How am I supposed to handle that?" He shuddered involuntarily. "Gods, I'm losing it." His voice dropped, reflecting his misery. "What will happen to her? How will she be able to manage? Will she ... will it be as painful for her as it is for me? Should I tell her we're mates? Or do you think she already suspects it?"

"Hey. One step at a time, Rowe. Just take it one step at a time. Tomorrow you go before the Admin and request a hearing. Three, four days tops, and they'll call you in. You explain the situation, you tell them you've found your union mate, and then you surprise the shit out of them by asking for a one day extension. One day, my friend. Not the year they'll be expecting to hear. You tell them you want one day in your old whites to prove she's yours."

Rowe gave a humorless laugh. "And when they deny me, then what do I do? I'm already falling apart inside. Another four days, and I'll be a total wreck."

Dommon leaned closer to his ear. "One step at a time, Rowe. That's all we can plan ahead for."

"Yeah. Well, some fleet master I am. I should have at least one full battle plan and two alternatives ready to launch if I'm to prove worthy of my designation."

He glanced up into the sky and noticed the secondary darkness ascending over the city. Rowe frowned, wondering why the weathermakers had decided to schedule showers this time of night. He felt the pat on his shoulder before Dommon moved away and headed for the kitchen.

"Can I offer you a drink? I have some sauza."

"No, thanks. I need to get to my place. Maybe take a sleeping aid, although I doubt it'll do me any good." He continued to watch the storm clouds as they billowed black upon black, slowly blocking out the stars one light at a time.

"Hey, Dom?"

"Yeah?"

"Didn't the weathermakers say it would be clear tonight in honor of the new graduates?"

"Yeah, they did. Why?" The man walked up beside him, a cold drink in his hand. He peered out into the night sky.

"Then why would they suddenly change their minds and build up enough clouds for a full-fledged storm?"

As they stared upward, the answer came to them at the exact same moment the sirens began to blare out the alarm. Dommon dropped his drink and raced to the bedroom for his jumpsuit. Rowe was already ahead of him, running out of the apartment building before heading for fleet headquarters.

My Strength, My Power, My Love
by Linda Mooney

But first he had to make sure Grey would be where he could watch over and protect her. He prayed she would obey him without asking too many questions, because there wasn't time to explain.

Not when their world was coming under attack by enemy ships.

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Chapter 6

Attack

The room was stuffy. It was getting harder and harder to breathe. Grey tugged again on her tight bodice and wished she could go outside where the air was clean.

Brem and his two cohorts were looking at her. No, they were coming toward her. They had a strange, feral gleam in their eyes. A pissed-off look. Yeah. Pissed off because she had knocked their puny-ass scores out of the ranking. They were coming over to her, and they weren't going to be friendly.

Oh, they would make a good show for the others to see and hear. But their real intent would be something far worse. Something far more disgusting and hurtful. She was their target, and Grey knew they didn't plan on letting her get away with what she'd done without some sort of retribution.

A glow. Faint. Misty. Reddish. It reminded her of a beckoning fire, promising warmth and protection.

Brem towered over her. His eyes were hateful, as was the smile on his face. He was speaking to her but she couldn't hear him. All she could hear was someone in the distance calling her name. She tried to look around Brem to see who was calling to her, but someone was rubbing his body against her buttocks, against her thighs. Brem was pressing his big bulge that protruded from his jumpsuit, against her stomach. They wanted to humiliate her in the worst way. They wanted her to squirm and cry out in fear and disgust because they

knew she was better than they were. They knew they would never be as good as she was, and that was why they were going to use graduation night to punish her. Punish her for an ability she had no more control over than she did about being born with the Synergian gene.

The reddish glow grew closer. It was coming toward them. Grey felt its warmth as it approached. She reached out toward it, seeking its help.

The glow became more distinct. It took on a shape. A form. A face. A name.

"Grey!"

There was pounding on the door. What door? Where was the door? Grey tried to see where the frightened voice was coming from, but Brem and his buddies were pushing themselves closer and harder against her. They had her trapped—they knew it, and she knew it. She wouldn't be able to escape. Not until they were ready to release her. Not until they'd had their fill of her, damn the consequences. Damn the Third Law. Damn her for being who she was, for what she could do, and for being female.

"Grey!"

She moved restlessly. Her skin was pale and slick with sweat, and her breathing was becoming more erratic.

"Help me!" she called out.

Brem sneered. "No one will come help you because it's graduation night. Everyone else is too busy getting laid. Just like you."

"No! No!"

"Door! Emergency override on my order! Confirm voice print and open!"

A shrill, explosive roar rocked the ground. Grey felt the bed tipping slightly as every piece of furniture in the room jiggled several feet across the room. Awards and mementoes fell off the shelves, some smashing brightly when they hit the floor.

The door verified the owner and designation of the override, and slid back into the wall. Groggily, Grey blinked at the sudden brightness filling her small apartment. The red glow had coalesced into a man. A man whose face and figure made her heart kick start. Her body fought the sleeping aid that still drugged her.

Another explosion came from outside. It was further away, but the resulting tremors could still be felt vibrating the walls and the floor.

"Grey! Wake up! Emergency evacuation! Go to Bunker C! Grey!"

She took a deep, shuddering breath and blinked. It was him.

Her eyes widened. It was him!

She saw him reach out and knew he was going to touch her. He was going to grab her by the arm or the wrist to pull her to her feet. To get her moving against the effects of the drug still releasing its sleeping agent into her body. To get her out of the dorm and to a place of safety.

Rowe wrapped his fingers around her wrist and pulled.

Burning agony erupted between them. It lapped over their skin, turning it into blackened ash. Sizzling, scorching,

searing, the fire spread through their internal organs. It seeped into bone and fried the marrow until there was nothing left.

Grey screamed against the unbelievable pain, when she felt strong arms enfold her tightly and her face was pressed against a wide, hard chest.

The drug sizzled as it evaporated from her bloodstream, leaving Grey clear-headed and intensely aware of what she was doing, who she was with, and what had just happened.

A third explosion came from the opposite side of the Academy, in the direction of the platform.

"Grey, are you awake now?" the deep voice asked from above her head.

"Yes," she barely managed to squeak.

Rowe pushed her away from him, but his hands never released her arms. Suddenly she dreaded the moment when he would. Looking upward, she could see his face staring down at her. By the lights still burning behind his eyes, she could tell the flames that had flashed between them continued to smolder inside him, the same way they continued to simmer inside herself.

"We're under attack. Go straight to Bunker C. Do you understand me?"

This time she could nod. "Yes."

His eyes glanced over her pajama-clad figure. A single second of time hung between them, suspending them from the rest of the world as their eyes locked and refused to look away.

"How..."

"I'll try to explain later," Rowe promised, his voice low and roughened. "Go now."

"Will I—"

"Yes," he promised before she could ask him all of her question. He gave her a little shake, as if he needed that impetus to release her. Finally his hands dropped away.

She watched him step back as a chill wrapped around her, replacing the heat she had thought was going to kill her. Now this coldness was replacing it, and Grey realized she wanted his warmth back whether it destroyed her or not.

Rowe ran out of the room just as another loud boom nearly deafened her. Grey followed after him as the building shook around her.

She burst through the outer doors to see others running every which way, seeking safety or their assigned battle units. Because she was a new graduate, her assignment hadn't been made. That would have come tomorrow, after graduation night. After the Administrators had verified the formation of any unions from the night before. Those couples who had Synergized would be shipped off for training to find their powers. Find them, hone them, and discover ways to utilize them. The rest of the graduates would be assigned specific occupations.

But she had no occupation. Not yet. That's why she had to run to Bunker C, the one closest to her dorm. And, coincidentally, the bunker attached to the fleet unit.

An explosion behind her knocked her to the ground. Grey landed heavily on her right side, ripping her pajama sleeve and leaving a good bruise on her hip and thigh. Whoever was

attacking was aiming directly for the Academy, but that wasn't surprising.

Grunting, she got back on her feet and kept running. She was a good sprinter. Between her reaction to Master Maine's—

Rowe.

—touch and the attack, her body was humming with adrenaline overload.

She burst into the main corridor leading down to the bunker. Already there were nearly a dozen other Synergians gathered. A few were in their white jumpsuits, but the rest were in various states of undress. Grey followed them down to where they could watch the action on the vids.

Overhead she could hear the muffled booms of more explosions. Someone at the rear of the bunker yelled out, "Who's attacking? Any word yet?"

"I heard they're a new race!" someone responded. A male voice. His reply got a chorus of groans.

Grey sought out the vid of the platform where the Synergian couples congregated to apply their powers. Eighteen couples were already on their marked spaces. Eighteen couples in their deep purple jumpsuits prepared to strike back.

She immediately spotted Forge and Dio standing on their assigned section. He stood at her back. His arms were wrapped tightly about her waist, his face sunk into the back of her neck. Dio lifted her chin as her arms reached upward, and a dark vortex of power slowly began swirling between her open palms. Grey watched, mesmerized, as the vortex grew

larger and blacker. Suddenly the vortex shot upward toward the invaders. At the same moment a huge fireball shot upward from behind them.

Grey turned to look at the next screen. On it she could see Karrel and Tonn poised to attack. Karrel was sitting flat on the stone platform, between Tonn's legs. Her hands gripped his, and the intense fireballs formed in front of his chest before launching upward at the enemy.

Another fireball zoomed skyward, eliciting a reaction from the small crowd gathered in the bunker. In the distance, bright blooms of light thrust upward.

The outer doors behind them were sealed. Everyone was ordered to punch in their ID to find out who was missing. Grey tapped in her code as she and the rest of those in the bunker remained glued to the sight of the Synergians

Overhead they could barely make out the outline of the strange invaders. Someone voiced what many were thinking. "Where are the other ships? Is this the only one?"

Suddenly a voice blared out over the address system. "Fleet craft ready?"

Another voice answered. Hard, no-nonsense, and dark, the sound of it sent icy shivers through her body. "Fleet launching!"

Grey grabbed the nearest empty chair and collapsed in it. This time her eyes were drawn to the sight of more than two dozen winged flit fighters soaring straight upward before spreading out like a fan.

It had been Rowe's voice answering, and hearing it brought back the memory of when he had touched her. The

heat, the flames that sucked the moisture out of every cell in her body—the pain had been unlike anything she had ever felt or heard of happening. But it had proven to her one very real truth.

Rowe Maine was her Synergistic other half.

The knowledge left her more confused and terrified. Master Maine was Unmated. His time was over where he was allowed to search for his union mate. Then why did her body literally adhere to his when he pulled her out of bed? Why did his touch blister her?

An explosion drummed overhead. It sounded like the building above them was disintegrating. Bits of plaster and concrete rained down on them in a cloud of white debris. Through the speakers Rowe's voice came again as he spoke with Flight Command.

"We have the enemy ship in view."

"Acknowledged, Fleet Leader. Can you identify them?"

"Negative. We have a new species."

"Can you establish contact?"

"Negative, Command," a new voice answered. "They do not respond."

Grey could see the ships firing on the immense craft hovering almost directly overhead. On the speaker Rowe snapped out positions to each individual flit, and the ships, looking tiny against their opponent, maneuvered like minute insects. Their guns were meant to sting, irritate, and annoy. Make the enemy take a misstep. Create holes in their shields.

In short, the fleet was there to give the Synergians time to prepare and defend. As one Instructor once told Grey and her

class, "The fleet marinades the enemy. The Synergians roast them until they're well done."

The enemy ship got off one last blast that landed just short of the Academy. Thirty-eight paired Synergians attacked in unison. Incredibly, Grey watched in horror as the ship deflected every weapon tossed at it as if they were no more harmful than snowflakes.

Then, as quietly as it had entered their atmosphere, the big ship headed straight up into the mesosphere. Once there, it paused for a moment. A split-second later it disappeared, leaving behind the vague, twinkling residue of a ship entering hyperlight.

The pairs of Synergians stood staring at where the ship had vanished. Grey glanced from vid screen to vid screen. The address system was totally silent. The fleet hovered, still in battle formation. No one could believe what they all had seen.

Never in all the history of Synergians had an enemy ship left the battle unscathed. But tonight they had witnessed the impossible. The enemy had attacked, and nothing they had done had been able to stop it. The enemy had left of it's own accord, but not because of the firepower directed at it. In that micro-second when the ship had hovered above the planet, it had thumbed its nose at the mighty, undefeatable Synergian force.

"Fleet Leader, respond."

"Fleet Leader, ready," Rowe answered.

A shiver ran through her. The mere sound of his voice was affecting her ... but in a good way. She smiled. There were so

many questions she wanted to ask him. So much she wanted to say to him. And do to him. Do with him.

He's your mate, her conscience told her.

He can't be. Another voice argued. Common sense reared its disapproving head, making Grey frown.

Oh, yeah? Conscience challenged. Then how do you explain the heat? The fire?

Common sense shrugged. The attack. The drugs. The man is Unmated. There's no way he could be your Synergistic other half.

"Screw it," Grey murmured to shut them up. It was a simple mix-up. A mistake. Someone made a mistake and put Rowe Maine in a red suit too soon. Either that or...

Grey lifted her face to watch the fleet as it began landing back at Command.

Either that, or the Academy was wrong. Which meant the five year law was wrong.

And if the Academy was wrong about that, what else could they be wrong about?

Another shiver went through her. Every nerve in her body was pulsing. She was cold and growing colder by the minute, and her reaction had nothing to do with the temperature field in the bunker.

She needed Rowe. She needed his arms, his hands, his body.

His mouth.

A kiss.

Next to copulation, the kiss was the ultimate reinforcement. One kiss would declare to all the world that

they were union mates, although she already believed it beyond any doubt.

She glanced down at her wrist where he had grabbed her. Right there was the imprint of his hand and fingers. Like a raw, scalded bruise, she could see how his grip had circled her wrist. The heat and the pain had been real, but it would be nothing next to what they would feel when they consummated their union.

The thought of Rowe entering her body, sliding himself between her legs, and the mixture of pain and pleasure they would endure together sent her into overdrive. She could feel the wetness slicking the insides of her thighs. The little pulsing points of her nipples rasped against her pajama top, sending more electrified currents zipping straight to her innermost core. Bowing her head, Grey shivered again at her body's reaction.

"Control, we're all accounted for. No damage to report."

Rowe's announcement brought forth a round of applause from those inside the bunker. Everyone was safe. All fleet ships and pilots had escaped serious damage or injury. There would be no eulogies given this week.

The next step would be to begin cleaning up and rebuilding what had been destroyed. The majority of that would be done by those employed by the Academy from the regular human work force. The Synergians would go about their daily business as usual. Which, for Grey and the other Unmated singles from graduation, would mean a job assignment.

Fleet.

She was number one in her class, placing first in every competition.

And then it came to her like a thunderclap. Master Maine—Rowe.

—was the new Fleet Master. The announcement had been made a few days ago, right after the Academy dropped the news of Master Girdy's retirement. At the time, however, she hadn't paid much attention.

The bunker doors were unsealed and opened. It was still dark out, but the pungent smell of something burning lay on the night air. The crowd slowly filed out, leaving Grey behind.

She turned to stare at the vid when the screen blanked out. The danger was over. All unnecessary systems were being shut down. It would be up to Administration to worry over who had attacked, and why, and what to do when they returned. If they returned.

Which meant, as Fleet Master, Rowe would be included in those meetings.

"Rowe." The sound of his name tingled on her lips. "Rowe."

Getting to her feet, she climbed the steps to the open doors. The women's dorms had sustained damage, but her room looked to be intact.

Slowly Grey walked back to the building, glancing over her shoulder every few steps to see if she could spot a familiar red jumpsuit. It wasn't until she reached the dorm's outer doors that she realized he wasn't coming. He wasn't going to check up on her. Wasn't going to wish her good night or anything like that.

Her body hummed with the memory.

My Strength, My Power, My Love
by Linda Mooney

Exhausted mentally and physically, she entered the dorm to get what little sleep remained in the night. She was totally unaware of eyes watching her from a distance.

Eyes that burned with hate.

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Chapter 7

Purpose

The arguing grew steadily louder. Rowe rubbed his temples and wished he had something he could take to lessen the pounding inside his skull. Better yet, he wished he could walk out of the room and retire. He had yet to go to bed or get any sort of rest. Between the graduation ceremony, the attack, and the discovery that Grey Dansis was his Synergistic mate, he felt ready to melt into a quivering puddle.

"Something has to be done!" Master Diofi jumped to his feet. "It's unheard of!"

"We've gone over this," Administrator Plees reiterated. "We can talk about this until we're blue in the face, but it doesn't change the facts, gentlemen! It doesn't change what happened out there tonight."

"So what are we going to do about it?" Master Tollcrid stepped in. "How will the people react when they find out the Synergians failed to stop this latest enemy?"

"They're not going to find out," Plees firmly stated.

Rowe snorted as half a dozen Instructors fought to be heard. He had to give Plees credit, though. The woman was tough. She could take any issue and untangle it until things flowed smoothly once more. Only this time the web she was attempting to unsnarl was a bit too sticky.

Master Ovarra got permission to speak once the melee calmed down a bit. "Were all the couples out there tonight?"

Plees turned the question over to Administrator Kogle, who sat to her right behind the immense table. Kogle was the personal overseer of the unionized mates. He nodded. "All thirty-eight, yes. And every one of them fired off multiple rounds."

"But they had no effect on the craft!" Tollcrid pointed out for the third time. Or was it the fourth? Rowe had lost count.

An icy shudder unexpectedly ran up his spine. It was immediately followed by intense weariness ... and wistfulness. Whoa.

Blinking, Rowe sat up a bit straighter. Wistfulness?

Dear gods! Grey is thinking of me!

The realization morphed into a bolt of pure lust lunging into his pants. His body reacted, tensing, as the need to take her physically became an urge that steadily grew stronger.

The men continued to argue, challenging the efficiency of the Synergians. They were frightened, and Rowe could understand why. Mated Synergians had protected their world for hundreds of generations. Bellac sat directly in the midst of an interstellar road that lead from one vastly wealthy galaxy to another. There were constant uprisings and resurgences going on between solar systems. Planets were always on the verge of being conquered, the peoples being taken hostage. Or killed.

Bellac, with its fertile lands and clear water oceans, was a prime jewel every civilization with hyperlight drive capable ships wanted to own. But the Synergians prevented such takeovers. Had and would as long as the elusive gene continued to pop up, and the people born with the gene

continued to find their mates. Together, these mated pairs were gifted with extraordinary powers. Incredible powers that, used together, had defended their world and prevented other races from achieving domination.

After thousands of years, knowledge of the Synergians had spread throughout their corner of the cosmos. Although Bellac continued to be eyed as an unobtainable treasure of immense value, those sentient races who passed by the green planet knew that to be its enemy was not a smart choice. And races using the road for the first time were quickly forewarned.

Rowe smiled to himself. Yes, there were always species who ignored the warnings, or thought they had better firepower. And there were races who believed the stories and rumors were either false or grossly over-exaggerated. They quickly learned differently.

Master Valt was arguing the validity of putting the Synergians out in plain sight of the enemy, thus making them open targets. Rowe had heard that argument before. But he also realized their fear, and the basis behind this called meeting, was to discuss what their next plan of action would be if the enemy returned. No, not if they returned. When.

That was what was keeping them frightened and shivering in their chairs. It wasn't that Bellac's unique Synergian military force hadn't been able to stop the ship. It was the certainty that the enemy would return with reinforcements. And when they did, they might not leave until they had done their worst. Because tonight, Bellac had discovered there was no longer any way the Synergian mates could stop this new enemy.

Now that it had been brought up again, Rowe could feel himself drifting, partly because of his weariness and partly because he felt as if half of himself was lifting off the ground. Like a leaf captured by the wind and tossed toward an undetermined destination.

Rowe squirmed in his seat. It was a feeling he'd never experienced before. Hell, too much had happened in the past few hours than he had never experienced before. If Grey was thinking of him, was it possible he could sense something else from her?

Dammit! Why was he here? Why wasn't he over at the dorm seeking her out? Better yet, why wasn't he contacting her to meet him at some safe place where they could—

Heavy prickling sensations tingled across his skin. His manhood jerked and pressed against the fabric of his jumpsuit. A sensation, uneasy and heavy, gripped his stomach.

To hell with this!

His nerves felt raw, exposed to a hailstorm of rioting hormones. This wasn't right, having to wait. No Synergian had ever been forced to wait once they recognized their union mates. No couple had ever been made to maintain a distance from each other after that initial, soul-blending first contact.

Grey had gone directly to the bunker as he had instructed her to. Knowing she was safe was the only reason he had been able to focus his mind on his job. She was safe, no matter how many times the enemy craft fired upon the Academy.

Nodding to himself, Rowe agreed with Valt. It was suicidal to put the Synergians out on that open platform. But the couples needed room to produce their firepower. Many alternatives had been suggested. Many of them had been tried. Unfortunately none had worked as well as setting each pair onto a sectioned-off twenty-by-twenty-foot square platform and giving them the freedom to do what their bodies had been born to do.

Once he and Grey were able to figure out what their power was, and how best to produce it, he wondered how he would feel the first time they had to fight, and Grey stood exposed to the enemy's weapons. A twinge of fear twisted inside him. There had to be a better way. A safer way. For the first time Rowe understood what Dommon meant when he'd once confessed, a few days after Casha's death, that the worse part of fighting the enemy was not facing them. It was having to deliberately and repeatedly expose the woman who was his whole life to the possibility of being killed. A possibility that became all too real when a piece of shrapnel took Casha's life six years ago.

Killed.

His eyes suddenly refocused, and Rowe saw his jumpsuit's deep red sleeve. There had to be a way to claim Grey despite the law which now condemned him to a life without her. When he finally was able to go before the Administrators, he had to prove that he wasn't asking for an extension to look for his mate. He had to convince them he had already found her. The only problem Rowe could foresee was having to stay away from Grey until he was granted the extra time, because

while he wore the red, the laws were very strict about relationships between Instructors and Cadets.

But how long could he keep himself from her? How long could Grey force herself to stay away from him?

It's madness, a little voice spoke out. There is no precedence for keeping clear of one another. Not only could it be dangerous to his and Grey's health, but there could be other repercussions the longer they were made to hold off until they were finally able to consummate.

Cold rage raced through him, clouding his mind and impairing his thinking. Well, fuck the law. Fuck the law and whoever made the determination to place the Unmated rule at five years. He had to be with her. He had to find Grey and pull her back into his arms. He had to drag those damn regulation pajamas off skin so sensuous he could drown in her, and bury himself to the hilt in her wetness.

What was she doing now? If he tried, could he reach her through whatever kind of connection was forming between them?

He closed his eyes and tried to reach out mentally and emotionally to see if he could catch something from her again, when a hard voice intruded.

"Isn't that correct, Master Maine?"

The here and now slammed back into him. Thank the gods he was able to keep a straight face. Squaring his shoulders, he cleared his throat as he lifted his chin. "I'm sorry. My mind was on other things. What were you asking?"

Neither Master Jurofin nor the others gathered sensed anything amiss, for which Rowe was grateful. "The fleet used significant firepower, isn't that correct?"

He would have risen to address them, but the hardwood tree rooted in his groin was too obvious at the moment, especially in a room full of his peers and superiors. Rowe nodded, hoping they would interpret his nonchalant attitude as weariness.

"At the final count the fleet fired five hundred twenty-one rounds. Nearly half of that was quasi-proton roughheads."

"And there was no significant damage to the enemy ship?"

"None that we observed."

Several Instructors and Administrators immediately broke out in loud argument. Plees tried once again to regain order, but to Rowe it was the same thing over and over. It was nearly dawn, and he'd had enough. Tired, horny, and definitely in need of something to drink, Rowe decided it was time for this crazy meeting to end. Time for it all to end. Now.

"Enough!" he bellowed, getting to his feet. "Enough of this!"

The room hushed almost immediately. Rowe was not known to cause a scene like this. Neither was he the kind of person to interrupt important proceedings. Rowe waved them off.

"We've had a bad night. We're still reeling from the attack, and we all need rest and a chance to get our heads back on straight." He cast a meaningful glare at the Academy Administrators. "We have nearly two dozen new graduates to place in the morning. Not to mention cleanup and rebuilding.

You can bicker all you want, but I'm not staying here any longer and listening to it."

Administrator Plees took the reins. "It appears Master Maine is the only one here showing any common sense. We can't make any decisions now when our immediate attention is needed elsewhere. I declare this meeting on hold until we can assess the damage and obtain more information as to what happened tonight."

That being said, she arose from her seat and proceeded out of the room. Rowe was almost out the side door before she left.

The first faint rays of dawn were coming up over the distant horizon. Clouds of smoke and ash hung overhead. The air was rank.

Already crews were cordoning off sections of the Academy where buildings had been damaged. Rowe thankfully acknowledged the fact that the fleet hangar and training halls were still intact. Tomorrow he would ... no, today. Today he would gather his teams and work on a new strategy. They had to be prepared for when the enemy reappeared. They had to find the strange craft's weakness and zero in on that target. The fleet's job was to aid the Synergians, and, dammit, that's what Rowe intended to make them do.

He paused in mid-step. Somehow, during all he needed to do, he had to find time to approach the Academy and request the extension. He wouldn't have to meet with them. It was required that he first make the request and present a valid reason. They would respond with a date and time they could meet with him, normally a three or four day waiting period.

Further down the walkway, several lights had been set up as a barrier, marking off the worst-hit areas. Rowe's heart skipped a beat when he noticed the destruction to the women's dorm, but the main damage was to the second floor, on the opposite end of the building from where Grey's room was located.

He let himself relax. She would be asleep by now. So should he, he prodded himself. There wasn't much nighttime left, and breakfast call was at oh-seven-thirty sharp. If he was going to get anything accomplished today, he had to get whatever shut-eye he could.

Stopping on the walkway where he normally turned to go to his apartment, Rowe paused. His eyes automatically sought out the corner room he now knew was hers. The windows were dark—

A face appeared, peered out, then disappeared, all within a split-second of time.

It hadn't been Grey. Another person had looked out. A face Rowe immediately recognized. A face that sent danger signals like flares into his bloodstream.

Rage exploded in his veins. Rowe bolted for the women's dorm, a roar of anger riding like a thick clot in his chest.

They would pay, he swore vehemently to himself. They would pay. And if they had hurt her in any way, they would pay even more dearly...

With their lives.

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Chapter 8

Revenge

The smoke and ash from the aftermath of the attack coated the inside of her throat with a fine, gritty layer. Grey coughed and held a hand over her mouth as she stood outside the dorm and surveyed the damage done by the enemy craft. Normal lighting had either been extinguished or knocked out. The blue emergency lights cast their dim glow over the grounds, giving everything an eerie sense of surrealism.

At first glance it appeared that the ship's attack had missed many crucial targets. The dorms and the school had suffered considerable structural loss. The administrative hall had lost portions of its roof and most of the far wing. But the hangar and main battle stations were mostly intact.

She frowned. That couldn't be right. In fact it made no sense at all. Why would the enemy come in, put on that kind of show of force, but not attempt to take out the whole compound where the fleet remained in contact with base?

It wasn't unusual for the enemy to bypass the cities and set their sights exclusively on the renowned Synergian Academy. After all, why waste firepower on the rest of the populace who couldn't fight back?

But the enemy's lack in targeting their most vulnerable and strategic areas didn't make sense, either. It's like they were testing us. They wanted to see what we had. What we could do.

Turning, she glanced over where the fleet ships were docking. Rowe was over there, seeing to his men. Checking and double-checking to make sure every man and craft was accounted for. Right now he was probably ordering every flit to be reloaded for the next attack.

At the thought of him, that now-familiar fluttering in her lower abdomen began to fan her need back into flames. Her body remembered all too well the surge that had passed between them when Rowe had held her wrist, and it took her a moment to calm her racing heart.

Shaken, she ran a hand through her hair. To her disgust, her fingers came away coated with grime. Grey winced. A bath would do wonders, she determined. A nice, long, hot shower would uncoil her tight muscles and relax her enough so she could actually get some decent rest in the little time that was left before morning wake-up call.

Turning to the outside door, she waited for them to open. When they didn't budge, Grey frowned and hit the manual override, but the doors remained shut tightly. She cupped her hands to peer through the tiny glass insert. The entry was dark, as well as the interior.

"Damn."

Apparently the others had used the doors on the opposite end of the dorm. Most of the women did, since that entrance was closest to Bunkers A and B, and to the classrooms. Grey set her jaw and decided to try once more before dragging herself around to the other side. Reaching inside the narrow indentation on the front panel, she grabbed the small emergency handle and tugged. The door slid open an inch. It

was scraping heavily after being knocked off its runners by the attack. Using both hands, she gave it another jerk, and the door parted enough to where she could squeeze inside.

The interior of the building was musty. The atmosphere generators must be off-line, she figured. Which meant the rooms would quickly grow humid and uncomfortable until everything was brought back up to full functioning status. She hoped the showers were still operable.

The door to her apartment was also off-line. She managed to pull it aside far enough to where she could go in, but by this time she was too tired to wrestle with the door to close it. An inner voice argued with her about safety, but Grey ignored it. There was three hours' worth of sleep left in the night. Everyone was either in the same shape she was, or they were already busy with repairs. Anyway, who would try to break in?

The room was a mess, as she knew it would be. Only a single little light panel provided any source of incandescence, but it was enough to see the extent of the damage. Giving a little exasperated groan, she picked up the biggest pieces that could cut or trip her if she walked on them and dumped them in the disposal. The rest of the debris she haphazardly swept into a corner using an old pair of pants. It wasn't long before she was wearing another fine layer of silt.

She eyed the bed, debating briefly whether to forego the bath and just climb under the covers. But the tacky feeling of dust and ash on her skin wasn't something she wanted to get on the sheets. Much less roll around in if she wanted a couple of hours of rest.

Grey shook her head as she made her decision, and more light powder filled the air. Tomorrow was going to be a major clean-up day. That much was certain. Besides, she would feel a lot better after a quick bath, and maybe it would be enough to allow her to fall asleep quickly.

Inside the small bathroom she finally got a good look at herself in the wall mirror. Her face looked pale underneath the layer of dust. She definitely couldn't go to bed in her current condition. Flaky particles clung to her pajamas like magnetized bits of metal. Quickly she shed the torn pajamas and stuffed them into the disposal. She checked the faucets and found the shower still worked, thank the heavens. Setting the stall to medium density, Grey stepped under the invigorating spray.

A groan escaped her as the liquid sluiced over her. Muscles she didn't know she'd abused cried out. There was a nice dark bruise forming on her hip where she'd fallen. Good thing the jumpsuit would cover it up.

For several long minutes she stood motionless inside the shower until a sudden chill shuddered through her. Grey wrapped her arms around her chest and ducked her head underneath the nozzle. Despite the heat inside the stall she was beginning to feel cold again. Vaguely she recalled a comment made by one of her instructors during her last class on mate identification.

"Separation will be painful," Master Ainson said. "In the beginning you'll crave each other, almost to the point of ferocity. You'll burn at his touch, then feel intense cold when you're apart. Don't worry, it's natural."

All right. She could accept what was supposed to be natural. "But what if the man you crave can't be with you?" Grey whispered into the warm spray. The quickly evaporating liquid puddled around her feet. Bits of stone and dirt made odd patterns on the tile floor before flushing down the drain.

In her mind's eye she could see Rowe in his blood-red uniform. The color was supposed to be both a message and a sign. In his reds it told everyone he was a full-fledged Synergian, with all the rights and privileges given to those born with the rare gene. But the color also revealed he had not found his mate. Had not and would not ... at least, according to the laws of the Academy.

Grey's brows drew together as she tried to think back. Had there ever been an Unmatched Synergian who eventually found his or her mate? Grey could not recall that topic being discussed in her classes. She could distinctly remember being told the importance and duties of a red-clad Master. At least Rowe had earned that title, and for that she was glad. Unmatched Synergians usually weren't granted a Master's status. They usually took jobs or positions among the normal populace. Some even took wives or husbands, although their spouses were not Synergian themselves. It didn't matter, though. Once a Synergian was declared Unmatched, it simply meant there would be one less matched pair and weapon to help protect their planet.

The odds of a true Synergian match occurring were one in three. Grey didn't know how she felt about those odds. If truth be told, she knew she ultimately wanted to find her union mate. But if luck ran against her, she had set her sights

to become a flit pilot and join the fleet. That was why she had practiced her drills and honed her skills night after night, even while her friends and fellow classmates were off partying. Pilots were skimmed off of the top of the list, the best of the best. And after their first set of simulation trials, and hers had come out with a perfect score—the only perfect score—Grey could finally hope for an invitation into the pilot program.

However, mated Synergians didn't become pilots. And it was that dilemma that Grey kept turning around and around in her head as the cleansing fluid flowed down her back and buttocks with almost human-like caresses.

She and Rowe were meant to mate. Thinking of him, envisioning him with his strong face and chiseled body, caused a tickling sensation between her thighs to interrupt her ability to concentrate. Almost immediately the tickling tightened and hardened, forming a knot of dark desire in her lower abdomen. She felt her inner muscles clench. Involuntarily she reached between her legs and slipped two fingers between the tender folds. Slowly, she rocked her hand back and forth, teasing the taut nub as her mind tried to strip that damn red jumpsuit off the figure of the man demanding her attention. She'd noticed his excitement. There was no way she was going to be able to forget the sight of his erection straining the seams of his uniform when he'd held her wrist, or the way their desire rose up between them like an enormous monster ready to devour them both.

What would it be like to open herself to him? More importantly, what would it be like to be in love with a man that strong and that unique?

Her hand moved at a faster pace. Grey kept her eyes closed and tried to shift her inner focus onto the dark-haired man her heart had already chosen. It was so easy to understand now why she had been unable to keep her attention off of him. Why she had always searched the crowds for him. Why she had gleaned every bit of information she could about him, without trying to appear too obvious. Her fingers picked up the tempo ... without success.

Her soft whimper echoed within the narrow shower walls. It wasn't working. Hoping for some meager relief, Grey had to admit to herself that self-satisfaction would no longer suffice. When Rowe touched her, he had claimed her for life. From that moment on only he would be able to give her relief. All that remained was for them to claim each other sexually, and the mating would be cemented.

She would no longer be able to find any kind of sexual release on her own. Her body belonged to Rowe Maine ... and Rowe Maine was forced by law to no longer seek a mate. Nor could he claim one even if he swore he'd found one.

Grey had never felt so trapped or so alone as she did right at that moment.

Oh, shit. Shit shit shit shit!

"What are we going to do?" she murmured below the level of sound created by the shower flow. "Rowe ... what are we going to do?"

She sniffed and realized she was crying. Oh, great. A lot of good that would do. She and Rowe didn't need tears. They needed answers. Someone had to explain to them what happened to people in their situation.

Opening her eyes, Grey lifted her head in surprise. Had there been a situation in the past like theirs? Had there been a union mating between two Synergians after one had been pronounced Unmatched?

She looked toward the door leading into her bedroom. One of the Masters ... was it Master Corr? Or maybe Master Ellia? Yes! Master Ellia taught the courses in Synergian law. She would have the answer. Or at least be able to give Grey an idea where she could find the answer.

Grey, you're not getting anything accomplished standing here, her little voice derided her. Which was true. Morning was quickly approaching.

She finished washing out her hair before scrubbing the rest of her body. Turning off the spray, Grey stepped out of the stall and heard a cracking sound coming from the bedroom. Well, it was her own fault. She should have cleared off the shelves before anything else fell off. But she was too damn tired to care. It could wait.

Fluffing her hair, Grey walked naked back into her bedroom when a pair of thick arms suddenly clamped around her waist and lifted her off the floor. Another pair of hands grabbed her wrists as she instinctively began to struggle. A pair of legs hooked over hers, keeping her immobile.

A face loomed into view—a face that wore a pleased smile as he stuffed something into her mouth to prevent her from making a sound. "Time for a little payback," Brem Pollit whispered, bringing his face nose-to-nose with hers. "And if you thought revenge was a bitch, then you're in for quite a shock, Cadet Dansis."

Her mind refused to comprehend the danger she faced. All she was aware of were the arms pinning her to a tree trunk body. Deev, a faint voice identified. Filo stood to the side, holding her arms out so she couldn't hit or scratch in defense. His eyes roamed over her nude body, and the expression on his face was enough to turn her stomach.

"Hey, Brem, it looks like she was getting ready for us."

Brem tilted his head as he followed an invisible line down to her breasts. His smile got wider as he nodded. "Yeah. Just as I imagined they'd look like." Reaching out, his fingers took a nipple and cruelly twisted it.

Grey screamed, but the sound was muffled. She tried to struggle, but the hands and arms holding her were too strong. Her throat spasmed. The gag inside her mouth was going to slip into the back of her throat at any moment and cut off her air, choking her to death.

Brem ran a hand down her belly until he reached her mound. Deev's erection jabbed between her buttocks, revealing the fact that the man was already naked, which disgusted her more.

"I'll bet you're so tight, I'd get stuck like a cork in you," Brem whispered. And to prove his point, he dipped his hand between her thighs and shoved a finger up inside her. "Oh, yeah. Prime."

Grey struggled again, unable to escape the man's probing fingers. Hot tears ran down her face as she tried to breathe through her nose. Brem laughed as he rammed another finger into her.

In the back of her mind she realized that somehow these men had managed to leave detention. Amid the attack and subsequent destruction, it probably had been childishly simple to escape during the confusion. Brem and his buddies were covered in dirt and grit. They must have found someplace to hide. Somewhere that was safe where they could make their plans. The attack on the Academy had given the trio the perfect opportunity to exact their revenge on her.

"Come on, Brem, what are you waiting for? Hurry up and fuck her so we can get our turn!" Deev hissed near her ear.

Chuckling, their leader leaned over, ramming his mouth onto hers, grinding his lips across hers, biting and nipping the tender flesh until he drew blood. Grey continued to struggle, even when she heard the ripping sound of a jumpsuit being undone. These men intended to hurt her. They didn't care whether or not they were brought to justice afterwards because by then they would have enacted their revenge. The damage would be done. They would have shown Cadet Dansis how wrong she had been to knock them out of flight school, and she would never forget this humiliation for the rest of her life.

A hand grabbed one breast and squeezed it painfully as more hands began prying her legs apart. She whimpered again as she fought them, but they were too engrossed in what they were planning to do to care.

"Grey!"

She blinked in disbelief, and the room exploded in a swathe of red.

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Chapter 9

Power

There were three of them, but even so they never had a chance. Not only were they violating Law Three in the most despicable sense, they were breaking Law Two. And that act alone would land them in more trouble than they could even begin to fathom.

An instant after he saw Cadet Torie's face peer out Grey's apartment window, cold fire reached up under his skin to clutch his heart and lungs. He was nearly to the ruined outer dorm doors when her terror pierced him. Rowe grabbed his chest and gasped.

He had yet to kiss her. Had yet to make love to her. But already their union was becoming as strong as any mating he was aware of. As far as he knew, this tentative connection should be fragile, almost imperceptible at this stage. So why were her most powerful emotions as heady as strong drink?

The dorm doors stood open where they had been manually pried apart and left hanging at an angle. Grey's apartment door was off its runners but propped to appear as if it was closed. Rowe moved quietly. He feared what the men would do to Grey if they knew he was coming for her.

A wave of disgust, burnt and nauseating, roiled in his stomach. Rowe clenched his teeth. Their actions were long past inexcusable. Now they were in territory that promised a lifetime of misery.

Carefully he peered through a tiny crack between the door and the jamb. In the near-dark he could see the huddle near the bed. There was a movement, and the huddle shifted. In the pale glow of a single light panel Rowe noticed Cadet Pollit had one hand on Grey's thigh. The other hand was holding his erection free of his jumpsuit. His two cadet accomplices were holding onto Grey as tightly as possible while the woman continued to fight them.

The word escaped him before he was aware of his actions, and he shoved aside the door, racing inside the room.

"Grey!"

Pollit turned in surprise, his hands still preparing to follow through with the rape. Rowe rammed his right elbow into the man's ribcage. Pollit gave a grunt as he stumbled away.

Cadet Mallod threw Grey to the side where she landed on the bed. Rowe's eyes widened to see the cadet already naked, his member primed and weaving like the head of a snake. Mallod growled and launched himself at Rowe.

There were three of them, but they were facing a man empowered by his awakened Synergian gene while theirs' still lay dormant. Rowe was aware of the third man, Cadet Torie, scrambling away from the scene and heading for the open doorway.

Mallod grabbed Rowe's red jumpsuit and tried to head-butt him. Closing his hands into a single fist, Rowe swung his arms upward and caught the man under the chin. There was a sharp cracking sound. Mallod's head snapped backwards, and the man toppled, landing flat on the floor. Out cold.

Torie disappeared out the door. Rowe was aware of the man's getaway, but it didn't matter. The man would not be able to escape for long. Eventually he would be captured and made to face his punishment.

Pollit had managed to get back on his feet. His jumpsuit dangled open, his manhood lay limp. His arms were wrapped around his middle. The man was gasping for breath.

"This isn't over, Maine." He was panting. Apparently Rowe had broken a rib, and the bone was embedded in a lung. The man needed hospitalization. Rowe wrote the cadet off.

"Yes, it is. Grey, are you all right?" Rowe turned to look at where she had been thrown. She peered up at him and slowly nodded, when her eyes suddenly widened.

"No!"

Rowe whirled back around as Pollit launched himself at his back. A sliver of something with a sharp point descended downward, aimed for Rowe's neck or shoulder. Dark, hot pain lanced down his arm as the makeshift weapon pierced the skin. Rowe gave a cry and grabbed the cadet, swinging him around. His left hand continued to hold the man's wrist, shaking it until Pollit dropped the shard. His right arm drew back, hand closed in a fist, and Rowe aimed to bury the blow in the middle of the cadet's face.

Pollit snarled. He lifted his other arm from where it had been clutching his stomach. The red light of a paralysis pistol sparkled in his hand just as Pollit pressed the trigger.

Rowe heard Grey's scream. He saw the pistol with its range set for high. The beam would hit both him and Grey, and there was no way they could avoid it. In the micro-

second he had to think, he knew that it would hit both of them or just him. Either way, Grey would be vulnerable for Pollit to complete his revenge. And the man was psycho enough to do it in front of Rowe, where he could witness Grey's complete humiliation while he lay awake but unable to move.

Cold fingers wrapped around his right wrist as his hand descended toward Pollit's face. They stood directly in the beam's path. Rowe waited for the numbness to swallow him, dropping him where he stood.

Instead, a halo of white light ringed their hands. It pulsed, fanned outward, and caught the red glow of the pistol dead-on. There was a sizzling sound like a drop of water on a hot rock. The halo of pure light never wavered as it absorbed the power of the paralysis beam, leaving Rowe and Grey unscathed.

Pollit stood, stunned, mouth open in shock. He recovered and raised the pistol to fire again when Rowe drew back his arm and threw the punch. Except he stopped his swing, jerking it back before it connected.

The white halo flew away from their hands like a speck of dust being flicked from the tip of a cracked whip. It struck Pollit in the center of his chest, and the man was lifted off his feet and thrown full-force against the far wall. Pollit's head cracked against the masonry, knocking him completely out. Rowe watched as the cadet's limp body slid to the floor.

Grey released his wrist as if their contact pained her. Rowe turned to see her face twisted in agony as she stared at the unconscious man lying a few yards away. He quickly looked

down at her naked body, at the bruises already forming. At the marks their brutal hands had made on her petal-soft skin.

"I'm sorry, Grey."

Her eyes snapped back to him. Tears were already filling their brown depths and spilling onto her cheeks. She raised her arms toward him, and Rowe wrapped himself tightly around her.

Warmth. Wave after wave of healing warmth washed over him. Over them. Grey continued to cry, but he knew they were tears of relief. A shudder went through her, making her clutch him tighter.

He chanced a glance back at Mallod. A small trickle of blood ran down the side of his mouth, but the man was totally out of it.

Grey shifted in his embrace. Rowe closed his eyes as her body's curves aligned themselves along his body, adjusting to him, fitting him. Molding against his.

"You need to call the guards," he murmured into her hair. That wondrously thick hair that smelled clean.

A thought went through him. A bath. She was naked because she had taken a shower. The scenario became clearer. Grey had been in the shower when Cadet Pollit and his cohorts made their way into her apartment. They had waited for her to come out, but in the meantime they had scanned the area to make sure they could do their disgusting deed in complete secrecy. Somehow during the attack the cadets had managed to escape detention, but that fleeting sight of a face in a window had signaled to Rowe something

was terribly wrong. Those few seconds had been enough to keep them from completing their plans.

Rowe knew that if he hadn't acted until that first flash of pain and anger had swept through him, everything would have turned out differently. Horribly different. He moved his arms to hold her closer, and one palm slid over the curve of a buttock. Her reaction, and his, was instantaneous.

Grey lifted her face from where it had been burrowing into his uninjured shoulder. Her face was clear, her eyes searching his. In their depths glittered a growing hunger and need that equaled his. She sniffed. "Rowe..."

Rowe raised his other hand to stroke her cheek with the back of his fingers. This woman was his miracle. In more ways than he could count, Grey Dansis was helping him to create something he had never heard of, never dreamed of, and never imagined.

Somewhere in his subconscious a little voice was telling him that simply being where he stood was against rules. Holding her was not allowed. Holding her naked body was definitely a violation.

It didn't matter. The Academy was wrong. He should not be wearing the red. He belonged here. With Grey. With her in his arms. With her beautiful, nude body fitting so perfectly along his.

Brushing a lock of hair away from her searching eyes, Rowe lowered his face to taste her lips.

Time and time again, during training and classes, and almost every conversation he'd had with Syngerized mates,

he had been told that the first kiss would tell him the truth. If Grey was his mate, the kiss would ultimately decide.

They both paused as their mouths met. They both waited for some sort of blinding light or pulse of heat, or whatever it was that would overcome them. When nothing occurred, Rowe pulled back slightly to find her staring back at him.

But her lips were too tempting to ignore. Wet, flushed a deep pink, and full, he slanted his face the other way and kissed her again, this time taking his time to experience their delicious texture. He stroked her mouth, tasting her sweetness, and his body tingled from her responsiveness. She kissed him back, opening her mouth to allow him full access. Digging her fingers into the front of his jumpsuit to hold him closer. Her breath was warm and fragrant. Her taste was potent. Honeyed and spicy, it left him craving more.

Grey moaned softly. It was no more than a puff of wind into his mouth. That was the moment Rowe began to sense something unfurling inside him. It was like a creature had been dozing all its life and was just now beginning to awaken. Grey gasped and began to tremble. Her fingers clutched his jumpsuit until her knuckles turned white, and she pulled away to breathe.

"What..."

He kissed her again, deeper this time, penetrating the moistness with his tongue until hers finally answered. She licked his upper roof, and the sensation shot straight to his brain where it exploded like a festival rocket. The creature inside him stood and stretched, and a feeling began to suffuse every cell in his body. Raw, untamed power started to uncurl

in a spot just below his heart. It reached out and slipped underneath his skin like a hand slipping on a glove.

Power—sharp, exact, and limitless. It stripped the weariness from his muscles. It cleared his head, heightened his senses, and suddenly Rowe began to experience things with an entirely different perspective.

Grey muttered his name, pulling back a second time to stare up at him in amazement. "Is ... that...?"

A little laugh escaped him. "Yes," he smiled, nodding.

Her expression grew more serious. "How?"

"How?" Gods, she was breathtakingly beautiful. Rowe realized she could tell how much his body was lusting for her. That damn tree was rooted back in his groin, and the thing had sprouted a dozen limbs.

But her simple question brought him back to the rules that governed him. That prevented him from taking her fully and claiming her as his union mate. It was almost painful to take a deep breath, a breath that was filled with her essence.

"I don't know how. Or why. Grey ... did you feel it?"

She nodded and shuddered. "Rowe ... I want to soak in you."

I want to soak in you. That's exactly how he felt. To him she was a pool of absolute perfection where he could lie beneath her surface and soak up her scent, her experiences, her passion.

Her love.

He brushed his mouth across her forehead and breathed her in. She responded with soft kisses under his chin, following a trail down to the hollow of his throat. The tree

hardened, lengthened, and became impossible to ignore. If he didn't separate from her now, there was no telling where this moment would end. And this was neither the time nor the place to have their first sexual exploration. Not when there were two unconscious men lying a few feet away.

"Rowe..."

"Shhh."

Reluctantly he started to pull away from her when she gave a tiny "No!" and grabbed him around the waist, shoving herself tightly to him. "No! Don't leave me! Don't ever leave me again!"

He dared to look down into her beseeching eyes, and that proved to be his undoing. Her mouth found his, her lips sucking, teasing, and demanding more. More of him, more of his body, more of everything. A heavy blossoming in his groin made his hips jerk, then he ground into her. Grey responded by giving a little jump and wrapping her legs about his hips.

Her weight threw him off-balance. Rowe turned to find the wall. He threw a hand outward, found the divider between the bedroom and bath, and pushed Grey up against it. Now he could rub himself into her hot mound, pressing his aching member between her folds, knowing that a simple flap of material separated him from paradise.

Grey's soft moans filled his ears and his head. His hands held her solid so she wouldn't slip. The hand that had been molded to her butt cheek found the curve in her ass, and his fingers clenched without realizing it.

His hips jerked. His body sought relief in her depths. But the jumpsuit kept them apart and unfulfilled. A tear dropped

onto his chest and cooled there. Sharp little nails skimmed down his chest where she had parted his suit.

"I hurt, Rowe. Take me. Take the hurt away."

"Gods, Grey. I want to. I want to." He traveled down her face until he found her lips. Each kiss went deeper; each one opened a door to another part of him, another part of her, allowing them to explore virgin territory.

Her hand found him. She reached down into his jumpsuit until she could wrap her fingers around the root of his manhood. Rowe almost came apart.

Her fingers gripped him, tightened, and before he could take her wrist to pull it away, she pumped him once. Once. Rowe felt his balls crawl up inside him as sweet release sat right on the edge. Grey whimpered again, and her fingers adjusted around him. A cold dampness brushed over the head of his penis, and shock of feeling the wetness told him how too damn close he was to losing it

This wasn't right. Their first time couldn't be here, Rowe argued with himself. And especially not like this.

"No. No, Grey. Gods..." He grabbed a silky thigh and pulled her leg from his hip. Slowly, carefully, regretfully, he untangled himself from her. Somehow she realized what he was doing, and understood why.

"When." Her breath hitched. She almost sobbed. "Why can't we, Rowe? We're mates. We were meant to have each other."

"I know. I know, Grey. But if we make love when I've been declared unmatched, there could be enormous repercussions, perhaps fatal ones." Cupping her face in his palms, he stared

into her eyes. She was flushed and sweating, just as he was. He inhaled a shaky breath. "I have a plan."

Her eyes widened. "What plan?"

A faint sound caught his attention. One of the cadets moved slightly.

"Not here. Later. I promise. Right now you need to call the guards and report the three cadets who attacked you."

"Rowe—"

"Later, Grey. I promise we'll have our moment, but not here, and not now. Later. Trust me." He leaned in for a final kiss and tasted her trust. Her hand rested on the cut in his shoulder. Rowe jerked back in pain.

"Take care of that," she ordered him. "Take care of yourself. For me. Please."

He gave her another nod before releasing her and stepping back to put some distance between them. Quickly he re-fastened his jumpsuit, gave her one final look, and slipped out of the apartment.

Rowe went directly to his apartment where he ignored the damage and stripped, jumping into the shower to rid himself of the stench of the attack. Afterwards he slapped a self-healing patch on the cut on his shoulder and threw himself on his own tiny bed. He had two hours of rest left in the night. He had less than that to run what had happened over and over in his head while he waited for the guards to contact him. They would need his testimony to corroborate Grey's, and insure Pollit and his men would get the maximum penalty for what they had tried to do. Cadet Torie may have escaped Rowe's wrath, but he wouldn't be able to stay hidden for long.

He could still taste her on his tongue. Her scent remained on his hand and on his skin, despite the bath.

The kiss confirmed it. Their power was there, so strong that it had revealed itself before they had made love. Rowe swallowed loudly.

Their power was there, and it was immense even in its embryonic state. In his mind's eye he saw the white halo of light as it lunged toward Pollit, striking him squarely in the chest, then literally pile-driving him into the far wall.

Oh, dearest gods. What kind of power do we hold?

He threw an arm over his eyes, unable to escape the memory of the feeling that overcame him when that halo launched from his hand. He had wanted to kill Brem Pollit for what the man planned to do to Grey. He had wanted to pulverize the cadet so hard that his brains splattered across the wall. The halo of power nearly did exactly that, except it had been tempered by Grey's forgiveness and fear. Otherwise the man would likely be dead.

By the heavens, what kind of power will it grow to become?

Rowe was about to drift to sleep when the message console beside the bed began to chime. That would be the military police. Groaning, he sat up and reached for the switch to answer the call.

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Chapter 10

Assignment

The interrogation lasted less than an hour. Rowe found enough valid excuses to remain at the station while the military police questioned Grey, took holo shots of her bruises, and scraped her for evidence. Twice he saw her glance at him but she remained calm, answering their sometimes embarrassing questions with a detached state of mind.

Cadets Pollit and Mallod were carted over to the hospital where they were recuperating under guard. Torie was quickly found within the city. Rowe snorted softly. The Synergian gene made locating any of them as easy as finding a lurching two ton amandasaur in a child's swimming pool.

"What made you decide to go to Cadet Dansis's apartment in the first place?"

"I was walking back to my apartment after a meeting at Admin, and I happened to glance over at the damage to the women's dorm. I knew Cadet Dansis had the corner apartment after walking her home earlier from the graduation reception. That's when I spotted Cadet Torie's face peering out of her window."

Master Sergeant Bladett nodded. He was already aware of the earlier incident between Grey and the trio. "When you saw Cadet Pollit attempting to rape Cadet Dansis, what was your first reaction?"

"I ran into the room and pried him away from her."

"Did you throw Cadet Pollit against the wall?"

"No. He fell backwards on his own."

The Master Sergeant gave him a quizzical glance. Rowe didn't need to look down to see what the man was reading from the interrogation log. Rowe spoke the truth, but the machine would register a slight fluctuation. Rowe knew he personally didn't throw Pollit against the wall. The power halo from his and Grey's hands had done that, but he wasn't about to comment on it. And neither would Pollit when the man finally awoke. Chances were good the man wouldn't remember it, anyway.

"Did you strike Cadet Mallod until he was unconscious?"

"Yes."

"What charges are you calling against Cadets Mallod, Pollit, and Torie?"

"Premeditated Law Three."

Grey was wearing a pair of light blue pants and a faded blue top. Comfort wear. Off-duty clothes. She looked vulnerable and feminine in it. Her shoulder-length hair hung loose about her face, and the lighter streak caught the rays of the morning sun as they exited the station. Rowe paused with her on the walkway. The air was considerably clearer, but in the early light the severity of the damage done last night was easier to see.

"Breakfast call is less than an hour away. Want to go on and head for the dining hall?"

Grey continued to stare out at the destruction, but she nodded in response. Rowe started for the hall, noting how she kept even with him. After a short silence, she finally spoke.

"I guess I'll have to keep calling you Master Maine." Before he could answer, she breathed deeply and expelled it with a loud sigh. "I want to make love to you so badly I'm one giant ache inside. Please tell me it's like that for you, too." Now she chanced a glance at him to see how he reacted to her comment. Less than two feet separated them, but it might as well have been two light years. While they were out where others could see them, they had to be very careful about what they said or did around each other.

Rowe could still feel the softness of her lips. He could still feel her heart racing against his chest. "Yes. It's that bad for me, too, Cadet Dansis."

"Why did this have to happen to us?"

He frowned slightly at her, and Grey shook her head. "You know what I mean. I don't have to explain anything to you anymore ... do I?"

No, she didn't. He understood her perfectly. One long kiss and that much between them was no longer fog-bound.

"I'm going back to the Academy to ask for an extension," he told her.

"Today?"

"I want to, but it depends on what I'm ordered to do at the fleet. The Academy didn't reach any decision last night about the enemy who attacked. We still have no clue as to who they were, or why they attacked."

"Yeah. Wasn't that freaky, how they just hit us and ran as soon as the Synergians fought back? It was like they were testing us or something."

Exactly what he had thought when their fleet failed to elicit any responsive fire during their own attack. "One thing is certain. Nothing the couples did made any difference. And neither did our fleet."

Grey stared in surprise at him. "Does that mean we're helpless against them if they come back?"

"Not if, Grey," he said, lowering his voice. "When."

They reached the dining hall and entered together. The few patrons already getting their breakfast or sitting eating quickly got quiet to watch Rowe follow Grey to the nearest serving counter. It was not uncommon for Instructors and Masters to eat at the hall with the other cadets. But Rowe knew this time the others were silent because news of last night's incident at the reception had already reached them. Once the latest bit of gossip hit the circles, his and Grey's lives would fall under intense scrutiny.

It would only be a matter of time before the truth came out. Either he or Grey would slip and reveal their mating, or someone would make the connection and signal to the world that a declared Unmatched had crossed the line with a white-clad Cadet.

It was a moment Rowe dreaded to even think about.

Grey had just ordered her breakfast when two women approached her and literally dragged her over to their table to talk. Rowe recognized the two giggling females as the same ones who had sat with Grey during the graduation ceremony. Good. She would be safe among friends.

He quickly ate by himself and left the hall to go back to fleet headquarters. Master Britt was in the hangar, filling in assignments.

"Du."

"Rowe."

"What's the status on re-loading?"

Master Britt handed him a portable reader. "All flits are ready to go, for whatever good it'll do us."

Frowning, Rowe checked the duty roster. "Well, until the big brains over at the Academy can give us something we can aim at, we're completely at the enemy's mercy."

Britt had given him the preliminary assignments for the new crop of graduates. Rowe noticed the three cadets currently being held by the police were not on the list. They wouldn't be allowed to be reassigned until the station released them. But after their second attack on Grey, Rowe knew it was very likely those three would never be allowed back into the Academy. They would be declared Dropped and be released back into the normal population, and that black mark would follow them for the rest of their lives. He and Grey would never have to worry about them again.

However, Rowe frowned when he saw where Grey had been placed. Britt noticed his displeasure. "Problem?"

"Maybe. You have Cadet Dansis paired with Master Varrandi."

"Yeah."

Rowe looked over at the older and more experienced flit pilot, his mind racing. "Coven is a tactical expert."

"Yeah. So?"

"Have you seen Dansis's last set of scores?"

"Of course I have," Britt answered, crossing his arms over his chest. "Her percentages in the tactical fields were her highest. I don't see the problem, Rowe."

"I'd rather see her in the pilot program. I feel she needs to be in a cockpit."

Rowe could see the man chewing over his suggestion. Yes, Grey's scores were higher when it came to battle maneuvers and strategies. But if she was placed in the cockpit of a flit and allowed full access to its weaponry, he felt she could better hone her skills in actual one-on-one combat.

More than that, he wanted her with him. Until this dilemma with his ranking was resolved and they could openly declare their mating, Rowe didn't want her leaving his side.

"You want her to be a battle tech," Britt commented.

"Yes. Put her in a flit, Du. I have a feeling Dansis works best on pure instinct."

"If she does, she would be a major bad-ass thorn in the enemy's side once she gets accustomed to the controls." Britt nodded to himself, and Rowe could feel a smile trying to tug at the corners of his mouth. "We have a small problem, though. I've already paired up all my combat pilots. Let's keep her with Coven, and when there's a new opening with a pilot, we'll move her over."

A tiny amount of irritation seeped out, coloring his words, but Rowe didn't care. "Du, we have an enemy ship out there reconnoitering so it can come back here and level the Academy to a pile of dust. We need every available person who has any amount of skills to be sitting with a pilot and not

wasting their talents at a holo table fielding battle information. If there are no pilots left to take Dansis, then I'll take her on."

"Whoa. Hold on there, Rowe. You're fleet master," Britt started to argue.

"Yeah. So show me where it says I can't work with a training cadet."

Master Britt hesitated. Rowe knew the man couldn't argue that one. Although it was unheard of—the fleet master taking on training duties with a cadet—it wasn't improbable. And Dansis's scores were irrefutable. It had been several years since the last time a cadet had earned perfect scores across the board. In fact...

Rowe saw the surprised look on the Academy Master's face as Britt came to the same realization.

The last time a cadet had swept the exams with perfect scores had been a quiet but serious-minded young man by the name of Rowe Maine.

Britt reached for the portable reader. Rowe handed it to him. "I'll put her under your wing," Britt stated. "Were there any other assignments you felt needed a second look?"

Rowe shook his head. "No. The rest of the roster looks good. Thanks. Where's Ambercram?"

Britt gave him a grin and a nod. "Over at the main hall. He should be here shortly. All right, I'll post the new assignments. That new class should be ready within the hour. Will you be here if I need you?"

"Yeah. I'm going to run a maintenance check on my flit first. Then I'll head over to the hall."

Britt gave him a little salute and headed for the training hall to announce their new assignments to the latest crop of graduates. Rowe paused, remembering what it had been like for him that first morning after graduation when he and the other Synergians who hadn't found their mates the night before had gathered in excitement to find out where they would be going. That overpowering sense of expectancy had filled them when they finally discovered where they would be spending their next months or years of life until they found their unions.

Like Grey's, his scores had been off the charts, and he had been assigned to flit piloting with Master Ferris. Four short months later, he was given his own craft, and Rowe began his climb up the ranks.

Through the years most of his fellow graduates found their mates. Those that didn't, like him, remained at their jobs, doing what they were skilled to do, and doing it well. Rowe did his job better than well. Which was why, after he was declared Unmatched, to off-set the disappointment and depression that usually came with the new designation, he was given the rank of Fleet Master. That, and because there was no one else even remotely equal to his abilities.

Sighing, Rowe entered the hangar and went directly to his ship. The small but powerful flit was already in perfect condition, but each pilot developed the habit of checking out his craft on his own. Running a hand over its textured outer hull, Rowe immediately compared the feel of it to Grey's softness.

Bad idea. His body instantly reacted, and Rowe moaned softly. He could still feel her fingers gripping him. Could still sense her firm mound perfectly aligned against his groin, awaiting his penetration.

If he and Grey were allowed to mate, if somehow his Unmatched status was temporarily lowered, even for an hour, Rowe knew his time as Fleet Master would be over.

The thought of losing his battle ship hurt. But the thought of finally having a mate more than compensated for the loss. He couldn't take a ship to bed with him. He couldn't share dreams or ideas with a ship. Most of all, a ship could not give him the hope of children, of a family. Children who may or may not be born with their parents' unique gene.

In less than an hour the newest crop of graduates would be winding their way toward their new assignments. Rowe knew Grey would be surprised to find where she was going. Then again, maybe she wouldn't be. The shock wouldn't come from seeing she was assigned to the fleet, but from learning who would be her training partner.

Or ... maybe not.

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Chapter 11

Training

The board listed every new graduate, along with their field of specialty and trainer. Grey stared numbly at the heading of Fleet. There was her name at the top. And next to it was the name of her trainer.

Master Rowe Maine.

How in hell did he manage to pull that one off?

Someone punched her in the arm, and Persia giggled in her ear. "Oh, you lucky so-and-so! The Fleet! And with the Fleet Leader, on top of that! Oh, I'm so happy for you!" The woman gave Grey a hug of delight.

Somehow Grey managed to smile as Venn punched her as well. "Well, I'm not surprised! You know damn well why she got the fleet leader, don't you?" Venn insinuated. Grey and Persia turned to look at her. Smirking, the brunette explained, "You got perfect scores, Grey. That hasn't happened in over five years. And you know who the last person was who got straight aces before you, don't you?"

Suddenly Grey knew. She knew now, and it made perfect sense. As the girls continued to exclaim over their new assignments, she stared once more at the bold, black letters giving her hope.

She would be with Rowe, learning from him as well as spending hours at a time with him up in space. She had gotten her wish and her heart's desire, all neatly wrapped into one very masculine package.

They would have to be very careful when they were around the other pilots and cadets. Until Rowe was granted an extension by the Academy, they couldn't make any gestures or remarks that might be overheard by others. By the same token, she had to be equally careful.

But once we're alone, up in the freedom of space ... just him and me...

"Hey! Unglue your feet from the floor and get to the hall," Venn urged her with a shove. The push against her bruised arms made her hiss in pain. Grey grabbed her arm and winced. Immediately her two friends flanked her in concern.

"What's wrong?" Venn whispered as they slowly made their way toward the training room. "Did I hurt you? If I did, I'm sorry. Geez, girl."

Grey shook her head. They would find out sooner or later. "This morning after the attack, Brem and his buddies broke into my bedroom and started to harass me. They ... grabbed me and pretty much tried to intimidate me again."

"Like they tried to do at the reception?" Persia said. "What happened?"

"I ... called the police. They were arrested. End of story." End of story, yes, but not the whole story. For many reasons Grey couldn't tell them everything. Not now. But it didn't matter. They would hear all the grisly details sometime in the near future. The whole truth just wouldn't come from her.

Right now the memory of how Rowe had come to her aid warmed her like a gentle caress. Not to mention the shock of seeing the purest band of white light coming from their joined hands, and how it reached out and pummeled Brem Pollit into

an unconscious heap. If that light was a portent of the kind of power she and Rowe would find, she couldn't wait for the moment when he finally took her, man to woman, and they discovered its full extent together.

The look on his face and the feel of his body pressing her against the wall in her apartment continued to taunt her. She could still taste his kisses. She could still smell the slight tang of flit exhaust on his jumpsuit.

Her body went into overdrive as she reminisced. Her nipples tightened to where the rasp of her shirt over them only made things worse. The crotch of her pants was wet, as were her inner thighs. If she didn't find relief soon, she would go insane. But not just any relief. Her hand was no longer enough. Nothing would satisfy her now except for Rowe.

A vivid image of his erection straining the front of his jumpsuit flashed in her mind's eye. She flexed the fingers of the hand she'd wrapped around the base of his manhood, recalling its girth and its rigid but satiny texture. The memory only made her more horny than she already was. Fortunately the noise and hubbub in the training hall managed to mask her groan of frustration.

"Hey. Meet you in the commissary after training?" Persia commented.

Venn shook her short curls. "Sorry. Got a hump date with Cadet Sitt."

"Ooo! You lucky thing! He's so yummy! How did you manage to hook up with him?"

Grey watched and listened as the two young women began to pour over the cadet who would be training alongside Venn.

Even after they took their seats the two continued debating the possibility that the man might or might not be Venn's union mate.

Grey glanced around the rapidly filling room. She recognized many faces from her graduation class, and she frowned as she tried to recall who might not be present. To the far left were the double doors leading to the training rooms. The flight school was located through them, at the end of the long hall. She was vaguely aware of the girls giggling when the doors opened and the instructors began entering the room. The noise diminished immediately.

Rowe was fourth coming through the door. Although he didn't look directly at her, Grey realized he knew exactly where she was sitting. A little shiver went through her.

"Greetings, cadets."

Grey tore her eyes away from Rowe to concentrate on Master Britt, one of the head academicians. The moment she turned her head, she could sense Rowe finally locking onto her. It was becoming like a little game between them—when one of them moved away, the other would resume watch. She smiled, and immediately a tiny curl of warmth caressed her. He had stroked her as real and as solidly as if he had touched her with his hand. Grey shut her eyes and waited to see what he would do next, when Master Britt's words filtered through her consciousness.

"...this time to meet your teachers. We are dispensing with the usual pep talk and preliminary applications. After last night's attack we feel it's imperative to place you immediately at your new posts. When I call your area of training, file out

through the doors to my right where your trainers will take you to your departments. Starting with Tactical."

A good dozen cadets left their seats and began filing out of the room. Grey watched them go in surprise. It was unheard of to take raw cadets and place them directly into training. But as Master Britt had explained, current events were changing the way things normally proceeded.

"Flight."

Grey arose as Venn and Persia wished her good luck. She gave them a quick smile and followed the other cadets through the double doors. The sound of their footsteps echoed in the hallway as they neared the training rooms. They entered the dressing area where they were ordered to don oxygen suits. Grey noticed their suits were white, just like their cadet uniforms. Once they were ready, Master Demecia took a sudden turn and opened a set of large doors the cadets were unfamiliar with.

Along with the rest of the group, Grey gasped at the sight of the flits sitting inside the immense hangar. The building was filled with people moving about, working on the ships and preparing them for combat.

"Cadets, please line up along that wall and your instructor will be along to tag you," Master Demecia ordered before disappearing back down the hallway.

Grey followed the others and stood with her back to a rack of engine parts. The seriousness of the work being done filled the air with tense expectation, and Grey understood why. The enemy ship could return at any time, without warning. And

when it did, the fleet had to be able to launch at a second's notice.

"Cadet Priddum, report to bay four. Cadet Gri, report to bay eighteen."

To her right Master Ambercram was moving down the line, giving out assignments. When he stopped in front of her, she noticed he gave her a solid stare. "Cadet Dansis, report to bay one."

All right. Bay one. "Acknowledged," she replied smartly and practically leaped from her spot.

Overhead but just below the watch room was the landing chart pinpointing each flit and its position. Bay one was at the far end of the hangar, right in front of the enormous hangar doors. Or right behind them, depending on which end you're looking at, Grey corrected herself with a grin.

Behind her she could hear the other cadets meeting their instructors. Protocol had been tossed out the window. The usual formalities she'd heard about, the pep talks and preliminary get-togethers, followed by intense simulation training, and finally actual cockpit flight—all were being scratched for the time being. This was a down-in-the-dirt hands-on training.

She spotted the red jumper long before she reached bay one. Grey snorted. Apparently flit pilots had to wear oxygen suits the same color as their uniforms. He stood out among the rest like a beacon.

His head was buried underneath the belly of the flit, and by his body posture he appeared to be unaware of her presence. Grey knew differently. Smiling, she took a proper

stance in front of the ship's nose and waited ... and sent him a little probe meant to tweak his libido. The effect was instantaneous.

For a split-second Rowe froze, then he casually rolled out from underneath the aircraft and lifted an eyebrow in her direction. "Cadet Dansis," he greeted her, sounding almost bored.

"Master Maine. Reporting as ordered."

"Get up into the cockpit and call out the shield output."

She quickly scrambled up into the front of the two-seater as he rolled back beneath the underbelly. The feel of the ship's interior was immediately comforting and familiar. The simulator used real flits that were no longer in service, and sitting in front of the instrument panel felt like a natural extension of herself.

"You're at sixty-two percent," she called out.

"Bleed from auxiliary," he ordered.

She did as she was told. "Negative reaction. Still at sixty-two percent."

A curse word was muttered from below, causing her to smile. Shield output was tricky, and she'd had her fair share of it to contend with in the past, too. Except that her experiences had been part of the simulations. This was no longer make-believe, she told herself, running her hands over the straps hanging from the cushioned seat. Make a mistake here, and she couldn't reset the computers and start all over again.

"What's the readout now?"

"Uhh, sixty-seven percent." Still not good enough. The shields wouldn't even begin to be minimally effective until they were at least seventy-nine percent. "Uhh, Master Maine? May I make a suggestion?"

She could swear she felt his surprise. "Go ahead," he finally relented, making it obvious he was at the point where he would listen to just about anything.

"I once jury-rigged the pulse rifle into the secondary screens. It was enough to give me a few more amps."

"I've done that too, Grey," he admitted so softly she would be the only person to hear him. "Unfortunately, when you do that, you lose your main weapon."

"I know. But maybe if it gets to the point where it's either your shields or your weapon, wouldn't it be wiser to turn tail and run for it?"

Rowe pulled out from underneath the fuselage and gave her a disapproving scowl. Grey shrugged, unaffected by the look. Deep down she knew he was more curious than angry at her at that moment. "Are you ready to go up?" he finally spoke after another silent minute.

Grey brightened. "You mean out? Outside up?"

"I mean buckle in and power up. I'll get our helmets." He dumped his tools in the nearby tray and sauntered over to the cabinet where the oxygen helmets were kept, returning shortly with two of the teardrop-shaped head gear. Rowe watched her closely as she put hers on and sealed it, then climbed into the seat behind her.

His nearness was like being enfolded in a blanket of hot spice. Tiny electrical currents seemed to crawl over her skin,

setting her teeth on edge and doing incredible things to her body. As the massive hangar doors parted to let them out, Grey automatically went through the pre-flight checklist as she fought the urge to turn around and see if he was just as affected as she was.

"Bring the nose around, Dansis." His deep voice echoed from the speaker below her ear.

"I thought I was being trained on the weapons."

"Crash course, cadet," he corrected her. "You're being trained in everything. Watch your fuel mix. Steady ... just like in the simulator. Base, this is A Master Red in launch position."

"Acknowledged, Fleet Leader. You're clear to go."

"All right, Dansis. Take her up," Rowe spoke. The helmet made his voice sound as if he had his lips right next to her temple. She shivered at the thought.

The flit lifted smoothly, like a thin silver knife slicing through the air. Grey steered the powerful little craft directly up and out beyond the stratosphere until she heard his voice quietly ask that she level off.

"Nice handling. You have an instinctive feel for the controls."

"Thank you."

Suddenly she was aware of an approaching warmth. A moment later an arm reached past her and flipped a switch near her shoulder. Rowe let out a heavy sigh.

"Gods, this is going to be harder than I thought."

She tried to glance back at him, but there was no give in the seat. "What..."

"I turned off inter-stellar communication. We can speak without anyone overhearing us. How are you feeling?" he asked.

Lifting a trembling hand from the panel controls, she wasn't surprised to see how unsteady she was. "I feel like a thousand tiny creatures are running over my skin."

"Same here. It has to be from the delayed mating. Grey, I personally requested you. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

She nodded, not interrupting. Outside their ship the blackness slid around them like a shell lined with sparkling bits of glass. It would have been breathtaking if Rowe hadn't been with her. Instead, the sense of him behind her was more intoxicating than the view.

"They were going to put you in tactical, but I convinced them to let me train you on weapons. My reasons were purely selfish."

"That's all right, Rowe. I can't imagine not being with you, either. But something's got to give. Sooner or later I'm not going to be able to ignore this ... this feeling that's eating me up inside."

She wanted him to touch her. To slide his hand over her flushed skin and rest his fingers between her thighs. The mere thought of him kissing her the way he had kissed her in her apartment was enough to wring a soft moan out of her.

"Grey ... maybe I was wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Maybe you should be in tactical. Maybe—"

"No! No, Rowe!" Tears sprang into her eyes, and she tried to look back at him, but the headrest and narrow confines of the cockpit prevented her from doing so. An arm slid between the ship and the seat, and a hand clutched her arm. Grey grasped his hand with her own. "Don't send me away, Rowe," she begged in a small voice.

"We need help, Grey. I don't have the answers. I can't think or concentrate when I'm not with you. But when you're with me, I can't keep my mind on my work either."

She sniffed, damning the fact that she couldn't wipe away the tears while she wore the helmet. "What are we going to do?"

There was a long pause before she heard him answer. "First we need to go through the basic drills. After we land, I'm going straight to the Academy to petition for that extension."

"And then what?" She held onto his hand which continued to grasp her arm as if he was afraid of letting go. The contact helped to relieve some of the burning need slowly oozing through her system. But nothing would stop the pain until they made love, and kept making love until their bodies were on the brink of total exhaustion.

"And then ... we wait," he said in a voice filled with regret.

Grey responded with the same curse word he had used earlier in the hangar. She smiled to hear him chuckle, but neither of them felt any joy.

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Chapter 12

Request

The interior of the Academy reminded Rowe of a temple. Huge stone arches held aloft crystalline windows that created patterns of such intense color that they could almost blind a person staring at them straight-on. Today some of those windows were lying in carefully swept and collected piles gathered along the white walls. Most of the damage to the building was superficial, just like the rest of the Academy grounds.

Rowe continued down the aisle toward the little room off to the right. As he neared the door he felt a sickening sensation in the pit of his stomach. His life now rested in their hands, with their decision. If they didn't give him the answer he was seeking, there was no telling what would happen next. He only knew he and Grey couldn't continue this charade much longer. Not only was it destroying them physically, but also emotionally. They were living in a hell of denied consummation, which, for a Synergian, was like denying them air or food. And somehow he had to convince the academicians of that fact.

A young man in green was waiting for him when he opened the door. "Master Vistrop has agreed to hear your petition," the man announced and gestured toward the inner door. Rowe nodded his thanks and proceeded into the next room where an older man was sitting in one of two chairs in the otherwise empty room.

Rowe paused past the doorway. "Master Vistrop, thank you for granting me this hearing."

"All Synergians have the right to petition. Do you know who I am?" the old man asked in a strong voice.

The man's suit was pale yellow. He was not a Synergian, but one of the Commissioners elected by the common people to sit on the Council to help oversee the rare breed of humans.

"You're a Commissioner," Rowe stated as he took his seat.

Vistrop nodded. "And I am one of five entrusted to enforce Synergian Law." The man was all business, but Rowe could sense some decency about him. Vistrop took his job very seriously, but he obviously was not without compassion. Rowe swallowed his fears for the time being.

"I think I can already guess why you've requested a hearing, Master Maine. It has to do with your current status, am I correct?"

"I believe the five year law is too strict. I would like to ask for an extension."

"Of course you would," Vistrop said smiling. "Practically every Unmatched has requested one. In fact, it's almost become standard procedure."

"In my case, however, I have a valid issue," Rowe continued.

"So does everyone else." The man acknowledged almost sympathetically. "Go ahead and give me your validation."

"I found my mate."

Vistrop paused to stare at Rowe. From the puzzled look on his face it was clear the man had not been prepared for that excuse.

"Repeat that again, Master Maine. Did you say you wanted to look for your mate?"

Rowe shook his head. "No. I said I've found her."

"And you want an extension ... to look for her?"

Vistrop wasn't quite understanding the concept. And why would he? Rowe asked himself. What the Commissioner was being asked had probably never been asked in all of Synergian history.

"I found my mate. She's here at the Academy."

A frown darkened on the man's face. "How can you claim you've found your mate when you are in status red?"

It was a trick question, and one whose answer Rowe had rehearsed for some time.

"We both are feeling a strong physical attraction. We've discussed the possibility that we may be mates, and that's why I've come here. I would like an extension not for a year as I've been told is usually requested, but for one day."

The frown morphed into deeper puzzlement. "One day?"

Rowe nodded. "I respectfully request to be demoted back into white so that she and I can confirm our beliefs."

"And what will you do when the mating proves false? Will you come back here asking for another 'one day' the next time a pretty face catches your eye?"

The remark stung, but Rowe had expected it. "I'm not asking permission for sexual freedom among the cadets," he started to argue.

"No. You just want it with one cadet," the Commissioner replied brusquely. "This time."

"There will be no other time." Rowe fought to keep his voice even and not show his irritation. Too much was riding on this one interview, and already he felt as if he was losing ground. "The signs are all there, Maser Vistrop. All the clues we've been taught are present.. at least the ones we're allowed to explore."

"Have you touched her?"

"With permission, yes." He couldn't admit he'd kissed Grey, or even that they had come close to consummating their relationship. What they had already done was too far into illegal territory.

"And you both felt a reaction?"

"Yes." Rowe backed off, forcing himself to remain silent. One slip of the tongue, one admittance too many, and he would be facing serious time in prison. Not to mention permanent expulsion from the Academy. And if that happened, he and Grey would forever be lost to one another.

Vistrop stood and walked over to the opposite side of the narrow room. After several long minutes he spoke. "You know, you've come up with an entirely different approach, I have to admit. It's true all the others have asked for another year's extension. A few have even claimed that the Academy was too hasty by several weeks or months in reassigning them. They said our clocks were off. But you..." He gave a soft chuckle. "You've found a brand new way to pique my curiosity, Master Maine. One day? Because you've already found your mate?"

"I'm not lying, Master Vistrop."

"No." The older man shook his head. "No. I never accused you of lying. But I do believe you're mistaken, all the same."

The air around him suddenly became impossible to breathe. Rowe opened his mouth to respond when Vistrop held up a hand to silence him.

"I believe you're grasping for any reaction you feel for this young lady, whoever she is, and you've managed to convince yourself into believing it's because of your gene. You've convinced yourself and her that this is the real thing. A true union mating. When the truth is you're chafing from the red uniform."

"I'm not denying my distaste for the red," Rowe admitted. "But I'm telling you the Academy is wrong. The five year law is wrong! I have found my mate, and the fact that we can't consummate our union is slowly driving us both to the brink of sexual insanity!"

The Commissioner paused and stood a few feet from where Rowe sat on the edge of his seat. The man appeared torn between his duty and Rowe's request. "The brink of sexual insanity? Master Maine, are you declaring instability?"

"No." The word popped out of his mouth without thought. An unstable Synergian was a deadly force to contend with. There had been stories flying about the Academy for years about the various forms of madness which could occur in a Synergian when the gene unexpectedly went berserk.

Gripping his hands into tight fists, Rowe took a slow, deep breath before replying. "Commissioner, will you give the Academy my petition and at least consider it? Please?"

"You seem sincere, Master Maine. I will tell you that I had a look at your record before agreeing to meet with you. You show no history of fabrication. And as I said before, your request is a first. Yes, I will give your petition to the Academy, but don't expect the final outcome to be what you want. Nearly every person who's been ruled Unmatched has tried to fight the Five Year Law. I don't think I need to tell you how many of them have succeeded."

"None."

"That's right. None." After another minute, the man resumed his seat and leaned over, resting his elbows on his knees as he clasped his hand together. "The red uniform is not a ban on all sexual activity, Master Maine," he continued in a gentler tone. "You're still free to pursue a wife or bedmate from the normal populace. Many Unmatched have formed families that way."

"I know that," Rowe said. The initial tenseness was going away. At least he'd gotten a promise that his petition would be brought before the Academy council. It was a step in the right direction. "But Master Vistrop..."

"Yes?"

"Tell me one thing."

"If I can, I'll try. What is it you want to know?"

"If Synergian mates are not allowed to consummate and thus create their own power ... what happens to them? How do they cope with the separation?"

Vistrop sat back in his seat. "I don't understand."

"Then let me re-phrase my question," Rowe said. "I'm burning alive inside. My mate is in white, and I can't make

love to her. She's in as much pain as I am because the law prevents us from consummating our union. Has a Synergian ever died because he or she was denied that mating?"

"The question is irrelevant," the Commissioner snapped.

A smile came over Rowe's face. He knew what the man would say, but he had to trap him into saying it nonetheless. "Why is it irrelevant? Why won't you answer my question?"

"Because Law One specifically forbids anyone or anything from preventing a true union mating."

"Exactly. That's why the Academy has to grant me an extension. Because if they don't, I may be forced to bring them all up on charges of violating Prime Law One.

He watched in silence as the blood drained from the older man's face. Vistrop slowly got to his feet as anger replaced his shock. "You're treading on very dangerous ground, Master Maine. Very dangerous ground."

"I don't care," Rowe admitted softly as he also arose to stand. "Go ahead and threaten to Drop me. What is real cannot be denied. I have found my true union mate, and we are abiding by the law as best we can until the Academy grants me permission to love her. But don't be surprised if the wait becomes too unbearable."

He turned to leave when the Commissioner called out, "If you touch her sexually before we grant you permission, and that's if we grant you the extension, you could lose everything. Dropping you out of the Academy is never out of the question, Master Maine. It doesn't matter if you're Fleet Leader or not."

Stopping in the doorway, Rowe turned around one final time. "How long before I can expect the Academy to give me their answer?"

"We meet the day after tomorrow. You should have your answer in three days."

Three days. It would feel like three lifetimes. Rowe started to nod when Vistrop added, "Once the Academy rules, you'll be summoned and given their answer in person."

"Very well. Thank you again for hearing me." Bowing his head slightly in deference, Rowe exited the room, but not before he caught the man's parting words.

"Good luck."

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Chapter 13

Futility

The damn shields were frozen at seventy-seven percent, and nothing she did would make them move another iota. Grey tweaked the expansion nozzles again for the umpteenth time before glancing over at the readouts.

Seventy-six percent shields. Fuck. Now she'd lost ground!

Enough was enough. Frustrated, she threw the wrench on the cockpit floor and buried her face in her hands. What was the use? She couldn't concentrate. Her mind was in turmoil, and every nerve in her body ached. She'd had very little sleep, not to mention the attack on the Academy and that incident with her three would-be rapists. And to top it off, she was worried sick about Rowe.

Twice she'd sensed his anger. She'd tried to send him back a measure of her strength, hoping it would calm him. Their lives rested on the Academy's decision. And although she trusted he would approach them with tolerance and dignity, she wondered if the Masters there wouldn't look upon Rowe's request as just another feeble attempt by an Unmatched to have one last fling in the cadet pool.

Grey dragged her fingers through her hair. Things looked so different now from where she sat. In the past, whenever the cadets had been aware of an Unmatched petitioning the Commissioners for an extension, the students had giggled and made fun of him behind his back. The rumors were inevitable; the poor guy was trying to find any excuse to

bring fresh meat to his bed. What a bunch of assholes we were. It was innocent cruelty, she admitted to herself, but cruelty all the same.

A twinge bit inside her chest. Rowe was fighting his temper. Despair quickly followed, and Grey felt the warm sting of tears. Oh, gods, what would she do if they denied his petition? How could she cope? How would Rowe cope?

Before she could stop herself, a flood of pity swept over her. It was safe down inside the cockpit, out of sight. She could cry all she wanted to without having to explain herself. She needed the release almost as much as her body needed to feel its sexual release against Rowe's body. Between her frustrated hunger, the growing headache, and Rowe's threads of anger seeping into her ... and the damn shields...

Someone cleared his throat.

Her head jerked up in shock to find a man's head floating just above the cockpit ledge. Concern filled his eyes. "Excuse me. I'm sorry to disturb you," he barely whispered above the din in the hangar. "I'm here to refuel your weapons."

Grey hastily wiped her eyes and nose with the back of her hand. "Go ahead. Don't mind me."

He reached an arm over to flip the valve release. She couldn't help but notice he was wearing dark blue. He was a de-mated Synergian.

Sniffing, she kept working at getting the shields up to par, but she knew the man was watching her as he tapped into the plasma core of the ship. On top of that she was intrigued by his status. During training at the Academy none of the cadets had been in contact with any of the de-mated

Synergians, although it wasn't uncommon to see them working outside the school's perimeters.

"Can I ask what you're doing?" the man inquired suddenly. Grey almost dropped the wrench.

"I'm trying to get the shields' percentages up."

"Where are they now?"

"Uhh, seventy-three percent." She double checked. "Yeah. I can't seem to get them any higher than seventy-seven. The more I try, the more they slip backwards."

A soft sob unexpectedly escaped her. Slapping a hand over her mouth to cover it didn't help. In the next instant another tear rolled down her cheek.

"You're Grey Dansis."

Speechless, she could only stare back at him and nod.

"He kissed you, didn't he?"

Stunned, she refused to answer. She couldn't let anyone know Rowe had touched her, much less kissed her. It was against the law and could bring untold retribution down on both of them if anyone found out. However, the weaponry engineer continued to give her a sad stare. "I'm Dommon Ridge. Rowe and I are best of friends. Don't worry, Grey. He's told me everything."

She continued to watch him. The need to protect Rowe was overwhelming, and she wasn't about to comment, even after the man's sincere-sounding confession. The man seemed to understand her reluctance. "You are his true mate. I can sense it all around you. Here." He held out a hand and beckoned to her. "Hand me that thing before you blow a gasket. I'll get your shields up."

He took the wrench and disappeared down the side of the ship. Crawling over to the cockpit lip, she leaned over to see what he did to bring up the percentages. "M ... aster Ridge, what has Master Maine told you?" she asked softly.

The man looked up at her. "Other than the fact that he's in shock over finding you, very little. Rowe helped me get through the roughest part of my life after I lost my mate. I owe him more than I can ever repay. Your secret is safe with me." He went back to dealing with something in the ship's underbelly. "Argh! Damn gyros. Okay, there. Tell me what you have, Grey."

She glanced over her shoulder and gasped in surprise. "Eighty-two percent! Master Ridge, you're a genius! Tell me what you did, in case I have problems again."

"Did you try re-directing the expansion nozzles?"

"Yeah, but it didn't work."

"I meant down here," he said, pointing to the underside.

Grey shook her head. "No, and a lot of damn good that'll do me if I lose volume in flight," she pointed out.

"Well, it's working this time." He handed back the wrench and started to descend the ladder. Grey watched him leave.

"Permission to speak?" she inquired before he got to the floor. Dommon paused and looked back up at her.

"Granted."

"What are you doing re-energizing the weapons? I thought the cadets did that."

"They normally do. But right now every spare pair of hands in the corps, with the exception of the Synergians and flight, are involved in cleaning up after the attack. So that leaves

just me and my three top men to get the flits powered up and ready for when the enemy returns."

"So you think they'll be back, too?" she wondered aloud.

The man gave her a wise look. After a moment's pause, Dommon spoke. "I lost my Casha in the last big war six years ago. You probably don't remember much of it."

Grey admitted that she didn't. Whenever the Academy was attacked, everyone went underground. The younger Synergians especially were kept secluded.

"We almost lost that one. In fact, every confrontation could have been our last. We don't have top-grade weapons, yet there are worlds and species out there who are continuously improving and creating new ways to try and kill us so they can have Bellac. If it weren't for Synergians, we would have become an enslaved race long ago. Or worse."

She cast him a small grin. "You sound like Master Jellil."

"Old Doom and Gloom Jellil?" Dommon laughed. "Good for her if she's still managing to scare the shit out of the cadets." He pulled the connection from the ship and nodded. "You're all powered up. Look ... Grey..." His voice dropped as he moved up the ladder, drawing nearer so his words wouldn't be overheard. "I can't begin to imagine what kind of agony you and Rowe are going through. Law One wasn't created on a whim. Our scientists are well aware of the pain caused when two destined mates are kept apart. But I also know how unique your and Rowe's situation is." He shook his head. "Personally, I can't believe the Academy would be stupid enough to deny Rowe's request if there's even the remote possibility he could've found his mate. That's why Synergians

have loudly denounced the lack of one of us on the board of academicians, because we would be able to tell in a heartbeat if another Synergian is telling the truth or not. I'm standing here, and I can feel your skin crawling."

Nodding slightly, Grey moved away from the lip she had been clinging to with sweaty hands. Wrapping her arms around herself did nothing to assuage the burning she had been feeling ever since Rowe kissed her. "I hurt all over. I can't think straight. My head's pounding." Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she managed to look back at him. "You know Rowe specifically had me assigned to him, don't you?"

Dommon smiled. "I do now, but it doesn't surprise me. Union mates are inseparable, especially in those first few consummation months. Do you think you'll be able to work together in this tiny space?"

"We don't have a choice." Now she could read him. She could tell his concern was genuine, as well as his friendship for Rowe. At first she hadn't been able to tell what the signals meant that she felt coming off of him. The trainers had said her true abilities wouldn't emerge until she had unionized with her mate, but the power she and Rowe had already experienced before consummation was opening her abilities sooner than anticipated.

Running a hand nervously through her hair, Grey added, "It was like an itch I couldn't reach to scratch. Then he kissed me. Now it's ... gods, I'm hurting so bad." A soft sob escaped her before she could stop it. "And Rowe ... he's fighting so damn hard so we can be together, but it's useless. It's useless! Oh, gods, Dommon, what are we going to do if we

can't..." Her body jerked as she fought to stifle the sound of her tears. There were no words to explain the misery she felt, yet the Synergian understood her pain even though his had been of a different kind.

He reached out and touched her. Not being her union mate, Grey found his hand to be warm and steady. "If there's something I can do for you and Rowe, anything at all..."

She managed to dredge up a thankful smile. "Thank you. To be honest, just to be able to talk to someone about it who we can trust ... I'm sorry. I'm babbling. I ... thank you." She sniffed again and wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

"A word of warning," Dommon told her. "Whatever you do, Grey, don't go to the clinic for anything. Not even to accompany a friend. That includes the Academy, too. Because the moment you do, and a mated Synergian gets within a couple of feet of you, he's going to know. A mating is one thing you can't hide from one of us. It's like holding up a great big sign over your head."

Grey hiccuped slightly as she stared at him. "But we haven't made love," she tried to protest.

Dommon frowned. "I don't know what it is about you two, but you're putting out some really hard vibes, Grey. All you've done is kiss?" When she mutely nodded, his frown deepened. "Good gods, no telling what kind of power you'll emit, then. It's not spoken aloud very much, but the theory is the more frenetic the union, the greater the power. Of course, I can't vouch for anyone else but myself." He patted her arm in a fatherly manner. "Rowe knows where to reach me. Tell him I'll

do what I can to help." A strange expression suddenly crossed his face but was gone the next instant. "I need to go. I have to finish reloading the rest of the ships as soon as possible. Grey ... be careful."

She gave a little wave as he pulled away from the flit and went to the next one to refuel its weapons. It was lucky he had come by and told her about steering clear of other Synergians. She hadn't been made privy to that bit of Synerigian capabilities, and figured it was because it was something the others figured she'd learn for herself once she found her union mate. No wonder renegades were so easily caught. Mated Synergians could home in on them with ease.

It's not spoken aloud very much, but the theory is the more frenetic the union, the greater the power. She almost groaned, remembering the pulse of energy coming from their joined hands that almost killed Brem Pollit. Then, afterwards, they had kissed. And that was when the hard, piercing heat began to slowly devour her from the inside out.

Because of a kiss.

Dear gods, if we ever make love, what's going to happen?
Will we ever be granted the moment to find out?

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Chapter 14

Secrets

There was a message waiting for him when Rowe returned to the hangar and found Grey gone. "Come by my place. We need to talk."

Rowe started to dismiss Dommon's request when he heard the second part of the message. "Me first, Rowe." The man had known that when Rowe returned to the hangar and found Grey had already left for the day, he would seek her out.

Me first, Rowe.

"All right, but it better be important."

Dommon's apartment door slid open before Rowe had the chance to announce himself. His friend had been watching for him.

"Get in here. Now."

"What's going on?" Rowe asked as he walked into the room and turned to listen to Dommon's explanation. He was met with a bewildered frown.

"Could you broadcast it any louder?" the man remarked.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Instead of answering, Dommon asked, "Did you pass any mated Synergians on your way here?"

"What does—"

"Or any from the Academy halls? Or the flight bay?"

"Make your point!" Rowe almost growled. He needed to see Grey and talk with her. All afternoon he'd felt his skin peeling away from his body one strip at a time. Being with

her would be another form of torture, but at least he would find some small measure of relief when he held her. And kissed her again. At least it was worth a try. He clenched his teeth. "What's so damned important it couldn't wait?"

Dommon poked a finger at Rowe's chest. "You're the point, my old friend. You're the issue. Now, answer me, dammit! Has another mated Synergian pass you recently?"

"No! After I left the Academy, I went straight back to the hangar where I got your message. What do you mean, I'm the point?"

"Did anyone ever tell you that being mated is like sending up flares where the whole planet can see you? Both of you are fired up like plasma beacons!"

Rowe angrily knocked Dommon's hand away. "We haven't mated," he snapped.

"Oh, I believe you," Dommon replied. "Grey told me you've only kissed, but you're pulsating as strongly as if you've already mated."

Rowe stared at him as he tried to comprehend what the man was saying. How did he know they'd only kissed? Why would Grey reveal herself to Dommon when he was a total stranger to her? Worse, what else did she tell him?

Dommon gave him a patient look and motioned toward the living area. "Sit down, Rowe. It's time I let you in on a few secrets." As they took their seats, he inquired, "How about a cold one?"

The question seemed to release some of the tension that was sitting in little hard knots on Rowe's shoulders—at least for the time being. He sighed loudly and nodded, and watched

as his friend retrieved two drinks from the cold unit. He accepted the bottle gratefully.

Dommon waited for the first few sips to settle before continuing. "How did it go at the Academy?" he first inquired. "Who did you speak to?"

The drink cooled his parched throat, but was useless against the heat building under his skin. "Master Vistrop."

"He's a good ally," Dommon commented.

"Perhaps. He didn't offer me any kind of hope, but neither did he shoot me down. He was surprised that I only wanted one day's extension." Staring at his friend, Rowe added, "What was so important you had to send me an alert?"

Dommon stared at the bottle in his hands as he arranged his thoughts. When he finally spoke, his words were kept carefully unemotional. "You know, they train us in what to look for when we're seeking our mates. They tell us how we'll feel when we first come in contact. Then how it'll feel once we mate. Rowe, there's no way they can describe how fucking fantastic it feels when your power comes together. When you and Grey finally make love, it won't be like anything you've ever experienced before. You'll realize that every sexual encounter you've had before then was minuscule compared to what you're going to feel with her. And this is the kicker. Once you two connect, you're going to see the world in a way they never warned you about."

Rowe frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean those of us who have mated, we look different than unmated Synergians. We ... glow."

"Glow? Like with a light?"

Dommon shook his head. "No. Hell, I could get in a shitload of trouble for revealing this much."

"Why?"

"Because it's the Academy's way of knowing who's been breaking the laws, that's why. It's why I have to warn you. You and Grey aren't glowing, but you two are definitely sending out some very heavy signals. The mated Synergians will be able to spot you in a heartbeat. And if any of them have a beef with you, they're going to report it to the head academicians. Before you know it, you're going to be placed in permanent isolation, or banned."

Rowe jerked to his feet. "They can't do that. We haven't broken any laws."

"No." Dommon shook his head. "But you are an anomaly the Academy's never had to contend with. You are a declared Unmatched who has found his union mate, and it's going to scare every ounce of crap out of them. Do you know why?"

"Because I'm proof the five year law is wrong," Rowe stated simply.

"That's exactly the reason. No one has ever challenged that law the way you have. If they allow you to mate with Grey, then they will have to go back to gods know how many people and re-evaluate them. Then they'll have to figure out where to reset the time limit. Should they make it six years? Or ten? Or should there be a ceiling at all?" Dommon sighed loudly. "Are you following me, Rowe?"

"Yeah. It's going to completely throw everything out of balance."

Dommon snorted. "More than that. It's going to turn this whole Academy upside-down. If the time limit is thrown away, then where's the safety net to allow teachers and cadets to inter-mingle? Who will teach the cadets if there's the possibility that an instructor and a pupil might decide to do some extracurricular bed-hopping because they think they might be union mates?" He finished his drink with one loud swallow. "Grey's already exhibiting signs of being mated, but at the same time she's sending out mind-numbing vibes of pain and desperation. A true union mate will read her in an instant, just like I did. I believed her when she told me you two have only kissed because there isn't a shred of falsehood in her voice. Gods, Rowe ... I can't begin to imagine what you're having to endure. If you two are pulsing like this now, what in hell are you going to exhibit when you've mated? What kind of power are you two going to produce?"

Wiping a hand over his face, Rowe tried to find his voice. "We've already had a taste of it, Dommon," he softly admitted.

The man stared at him as if he had just sprouted wings. "What?"

"Grey and I ... we've already produced it. Or-or a token demonstration of it."

"When? Where? How?"

"The other night when I left here, I happened to glance over at her apartment and saw Cadet Torie staring out of her window. I knew immediately something wasn't right.

"Torie. Torie. Wasn't he one of those cadets who attacked her?"

"Yeah. Torie, Mallod, and Pollit. They were about to gang rape her when I intervened. I starting tearing them apart with my bare hands. Almost managed to do it, too. I had Pollit in a position where I was about to put my fist through his face when Grey stopped me." He wrapped his fingers around his wrist the way he remembered her doing. "Pollit got up and started for me, and this ... this ring of white light sort of flew away from my fist. It expanded wider and larger, until it was the size of a door when it hit Pollit square in the chest. Knocked him clear across the room and slammed him into the wall so hard it knocked him out." Rowe shook his head. "We were shocked, but it felt like the greatest thing in the world. That's when I kissed her. At least the teachers were right about that. Once we kissed, I had no more doubts."

Rowe paused, then slowly got to his feet and set his empty bottle on the window ledge. "Okay. Let me see if I'm understanding all of this. Grey and I are sending out signals that we've mated, even though we haven't."

"Yeah. Strong ones. But they're spotty. Sort of like intermittent signals you can only hear bits and pieces of. That tells me you haven't had sex, but the two of you are definitely mates," Dommon said.

"And if another Synergian who's been mated sees her or me, he'll immediately know?"

"Between the two of you, he could probably detect it yards away. Normally it's not that noticeable until you get up close, but you two..." He shook his head again. "By the way, an unwritten rule says that the greater the attraction between

mates, the greater the power. Have you thought about what you're going to do if the Academy denies your petition?"

"Yeah. I'm going to take them to court for violating Law One." Rowe smiled to himself to see his friend's reaction.

"You can't prove ... shit, you can't, but you can. That's unheard of, Rowe!"

"If they won't give us our day, I don't have any choice but to take them to Synergian court. Grey and I have to have our mating. If we don't, you know the consequences."

Dommon swallowed hard and noisily. They both knew the consequences. They had seen the old vids of Synergians who had been denied their mating back in the days before the Three Laws had been enacted. Back when the common people thought they could determine who could marry whom, and who could mate with whom. In a way, the Council of Academy academicians were the last vestiges of that barbaric time. After seeing countless men and women die under excruciating conditions because they had not been able to consummate with their true union mates, the Synergians had formed an uprising. It was pure coincidence that the powers between mated Synergians came into being. Less than a decade later, the Academy was erected, the Council of Academicians was formed, and the Three Laws were enacted.

Rowe stared out the nearby window at the activity still going on outside. The rubble from the recent attack was almost completely cleared away. It would take several more weeks, however, before the minor damage was fixed, and several months before the worst hit sections were operational again.

He didn't want to bring his case into the courts. Unfortunately, the Academy might force him to. The need to take Grey as his mate was already affecting his work, not to mention being in his thoughts every moment of the day. He could find no rest. His mind wouldn't stay focused, neither could he concentrate long enough to do his job.

More than anything, Rowe feared the moment when they had to go up together in that tiny flit and face the enemy. She was new to everything—the controls, the ship ... the enemy. Yeah, she had bested the computers to the point where her scores ranked impossibly high. But Rowe knew that simulations and games paled against the real thing. How would Grey be able to handle herself against a foe bent on destroying them?

How could he place her in front of an enemy ship and risk her life?

Fear and dread ran through him like ice water. He was torn between two prospects: keeping her with him in spite of the dangers and the risks, or leaving her here on the surface where she would be in just as much danger of being in the path of the attacks. Because he was forced to make a decision, he chose to keep her with him. If it came down to the last moments of their lives, he had to be within range to touch her, to have final contact with her, and to tell her...

Rowe blinked. To tell her he loved her. Now, when in hell did that happen?

For that matter, when did he realize he missed her? Not physically. That was all the time now, even though they had yet to consummate. But simply to see those beautiful brown

eyes, and to hear the sound of her voice. Or to watch how that golden streak in her hair glistened under the lights.

Rowe turned around to see his friend silently watching with a grin on his face. "You're smirking," Rowe accused the man.

"Your glow just changed," Dommon replied rather smugly. "So?"

"So, you've had an epiphany. What was it?"

Rowe growled softly. "Damn you. Stop doing that."

"Doing what? I'm not doing anything that any other mated Synergian wouldn't be able to do." Dommon's grin suddenly grew bigger. "Damn. You realized you're in love with her, didn't you?"

To answer him, Rowe turned his back on the man.

"That's another little secret the teachers don't tell us," Dommon continued. "There you are all hot and heavy to screw each other's brains out, and thinking this enormous power will build up inside you. It never occurs to you that at some point you're going to realize you honestly miss each other when you're apart. And then the first time one of you comes across something threatening, it kicks in. The love part. Most people believe mated Synergians are together only because of the sex. They never understand that love is what starts to draw the two of you together."

Rowe glanced back at him. "I remember the gossip when I was a cadet. The others used to say the reason there's no such thing as Synergians getting divorced is because there's a law preventing them from diffusing their power. And that there are some Synergian couples who have flings and

romances outside of their marriages, only they're kept very secret."

"None of it's true." Dommon shook his head. "Never was, and never will be."

"I believe it. Now." He tried to take a deep breath, but failed. "Thanks, Dommon."

"Don't mention it."

"You know that Grey and I won't be able to dodge the union mates for long," Rowe pointed out. "Sooner or later we'll be noticed."

"Yeah. Let's hope it's later. Why don't you turn in? You look like you're on your last legs."

"I am. I got no sleep last night. But I need to stop by and see Grey for a minute." Rowe reached the door when his friend made a suggestion.

"Don't risk going over there, Rowe. You had a perfectly good excuse the last time, but unless you're wanting to risk everything for a kiss and a hug..."

Another frown darkened his face. "That kiss and hug are all we have right now to keep us surviving," he commented bitterly.

"I understand," Dommon replied softly, sympathetically. "But you have to listen to me. Go back to your place and call her. You'll be surprised how much relief you'll get just from talking to her on the communicator. It won't be the same as a kiss and a hug, but at least it's a thousand times safer." That wide grin came back suddenly. "You might find out there's a lot of things you can do or discuss that'll surprise you. When was the last time you had vid sex?"

Snorting softly, Rowe nodded. "All right. Because you asked me, I'll go home and vid her up. We'll see."

He slipped out the door and went straight to his own apartment. There wasn't any need to worry about meeting a mated Synergian in the vicinity of the men's dorms since all union mates were housed in a separate area at the Academy. Which was a good thing, considering his exhaustion at the moment.

Once he arrived, he stripped and climbed into the shower, setting the controls on sleep. However, he wasn't prepared for the way his body reacted to the somnambulance-inducing spray. The stress of not being able to mate was taking a greater toll on him than he realized. Whenever he was around her, whenever he thought of her, his body went into overdrive, gunning his motor until he was almost reaching light speed. Rowe glanced down. Yes, even in the shower he was forced to contend with a suffering hard-on.

After less than half a dozen hard pumps with his hand, Rowe gave up. His erection remained as turgid as ever, but the satisfaction of self-manipulation was gone. He needed Grey's sweet-smelling warmth to put him over the edge. It would take her body and her hands, to bring him. He cursed between clenched teeth.

When he finished drying off, he went into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. Rowe started to reach for the communications controls to call Grey when his vision began to blur. The next moment he could feel his consciousness sliding into darkness. In less than five minutes he was sound asleep.

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Chapter 15

C'u Govin

The blare of the emergency claxons lifted Rowe from the depths of sleep. He lost several precious seconds getting his abused body out of bed and struggling into a clean jumpsuit before running for the flight hangar. He noticed it was still dark out, but the lights were finally back on over at the school. That told him that the wake-up call had sounded, rousing the hundred or so cadets. Dawn was less than an hour away.

Something had happened to him overnight. He could feel a difference in his body. A delicate chill had replaced the heat under his skin. The air was filled with a prickling sensation that was almost painful. His head was clear, but he couldn't quite pinpoint the full effect. Not yet, but soon.

Foremost in his mind was Dommon's warning about not letting other mated Synergians spot him. That much he didn't have to worry about. The majority of the time they were either training the cadets in the classroom or out doing their own form of training to keep their powers at peak efficiency.

However, that didn't include the de-mated Synergians like Dommon, the ones who had lost their mates. Although they weren't commonly seen around the flight hangar, there were always a few at the dining hall or walking to and from the same dorms he lived in. If Dommon could sense his change, so could the others.

The horns on top of the wide, squatty buildings continued to shriek their warning. It was a series of long blats which signaled a Stage Two. Danger, but not imminent.

Rowe.

He was about to enter one of the back entrances which lead directly to the bay when he heard his name whispered softly. It was spoken in his head rather than aloud. No. Correct that. Not spoken, but understood.

Rowe?

He turned around to look for her. Grey was nearby, but he wasn't able to get a firm grasp on where. Already he could feel his body begin to respond to her silent call. Adrenalin started trickling through his system, melting away the last shreds of sleep.

I'm near the bay.

Wait for me?

I will.

Okay. That went several levels above strange. He ran his palm over his face and felt the stubble he hadn't had time to remove. He answered her unconsciously, and the moment he did he felt her leap of joy when she received it. It was ... crazy. Crazy, yet too wonderful for words. What else had the teachers kept secret? What other frightening yet incredible things would he and Grey experience?

She came around the corner, flushed and out of breath. Rowe's heart did another little jump for joy, and he almost mentally kicked himself. When their eyes met, something sparked between them. At that precise instant Rowe understood how much he already cared for the woman. How

much he needed her to complete him and to complete his life. And to make the world wholly sane, he knew that she loved him in return.

How? When did she reach that conclusion? Did she wake up and discover it? Or did she turn around during an innocent conversation like he had and found the truth staring her in the face?

He watched as she trotted up to him, her smile making her whole face light up. There was no thought to his next action, or to her response when he cupped one cool cheek with his hand and dipped his head to kiss her.

She was a drink of the purest water, giving him life and purpose. Grey kissed back, still inexperienced but more than adamant in passing her desire to him. When he drew back slightly to gaze down into her warm eyes, there was no need to speak. No need to greet each other. No need to share a thought.

Because they already knew how the other felt. And they already understood.

Someone gasped. Rowe felt his body tense as he jerked up his head and spotted Pellen Obrion standing a few feet away. The man was pale, his mouth hanging open in shock as he stared at them.

Rowe blinked, then blinked again. Obrion was a mated Synergian. His deep purple jumpsuit was visible even in the growing light of dawn. Too late Rowe remembered the man's mate was currently assigned off-duty until the birth of their first child. Which meant Obrion was relegated back to his

original post at the flight hangar until he and Doray could reunite.

Grey's fear was like a streak of acid cutting through him. Quickly he bundled her toward the door.

"Rowe, he—"

"Hush. Get inside."

He closed the door and urged her to keep moving, guiding her into the interior of the hangar and hoping to blend in among the others. If they were lucky, Obrion would seek him out for an explanation. If they weren't, all it would take to have Rowe arrested would be for the man to file a report with the Academy. Rowe knew he had never exchanged any harsh words, or had any uncomfortable dealings with the man or his union mate, but that didn't preclude Obrion from filing a report. After all, the penalties were almost as severe for witnesses who didn't come forth as they were for the guilty. And the act of an Unmatched Synergian kissing a cadet was a violation of more than a handful of rules.

But the man had also witnessed that glow or shine that Dammon swore was around them. If that were true, then Obrion had seen the truth between Rowe and Grey.

"Rowe, he saw us," Grey hissed. "What are we going to do?"

He winced. If he and Grey had been union mates, nothing would have come of the kiss, and there would be nothing to fear. Synergian mates were often seen kissing or hugging, holding hands, or nuzzling. Everything but the physical act itself was allowed in public because it was expected of them. This world placed the specially bonded couples up on

pedestals to cherish as examples of love, devotion, and companionship. Every Synergian cadet wanted to find his union mate. And every non-Synergian wished he could be one.

To him and Grey, they were already mated in every way, in every sense of the word, except through the final act of consummation. It was the red suit which condemned everything they did together, even though they both knew in their hearts they were innocent of any wrongdoing.

Rather than answer her, Rowe continued to push her toward the main briefing room where the rest of the flight instructors and crew, plus the newly appointed cadets, were gathering. He led Grey to a far corner of the room where he hoped his red jumpsuit would be less obvious. More so to block as much of the telltale shine he now knew could give them away, even if he and Grey were apart. If Obrion was looking for them, he would search first for sight of the red suit in the room full of predominantly blacks and whites.

The alarm had ceased blaring long ago. Nervous chatter filled the air, giving him the chance to speak to the woman trembling beside him without having to worry about being overheard. It took every effort not to put his arms around her to give her solace, even though to any other mated pair he would have been expected to comfort her. Fighting the impulse, Rowe crossed his arms over his chest instead.

"When this is over, if there's no emergency, go back to your apartment and wait for me."

"Rowe, he saw us kiss. Master Obrion—"

"Leave him to me, Grey, and try not to worry." He spoke low, hoping to calm her with his tone and his words.

She rolled her eyes up at him. "Tell me how to do that," she whispered heatedly. "And while you're at it, tell me how to get a decent night's sleep when all I can do is lie in bed and ache for you."

He glanced down and studied her face more closely. Now that he looked for it, he could see the pinched expression around her eyes. The tiny lines forming around her mouth. The stress was sapping her vitality faster than what he was experiencing.

The Academy had to give them the right answer, and soon. Or else, not only would they be facing charges of violating Law One, but Rowe would see to it that every member on the Council personally paid for the agony he and Grey were forced to endure.

"May I have your attention, please?"

The room immediately silenced at the request of the man standing on the small dais at the head of the room. Rowe recognized Master Groff, head of the security task team. Even at this distance the man appeared terrified. When a tendril of apprehension curled through him, Rowe realized Grey had also seen and comprehended what the man was about to say.

"Please make note of this called meeting. What is being said here is being broadcasted throughout the planet, as per Special Council Edict."

Rowe mentally nodded. Whatever had come about would affect their entire world, not just the Academy. Special

Council Edict insured that when such news presented itself, it was shared with all.

"We have been in communication with the ship that attacked us three days ago." Master Groff took a deep breath, hoping to calm himself in front of the multitude. The man failed miserably.

"Our enemy calls themselves the C'u Govin. They are a nomadic species. Their home world was destroyed eons ago when their sun went nova. They roam the galaxies searching for supplies and energy, and they believe they've found an ample amount of both here on Bellac."

So far nothing Master Groff said surprised Rowe. Bellac had always been and would always be a ripe fruit ready for plucking. Its core was almost pure rhontanium, its fertile land an almost unending source of foodstuffs. Even the planet's freshwater oceans contained life-energizing minerals.

"The C'u Govin state that if we surrender all rhontanium ore and enough supplies to feed them for the duration of one century, they will leave the populace alone. However, if we deny them access, they promise to destroy all sentient life on Bellac and take what they want. The C'u Govin say they have tested the strengths and abilities of the Synergian forces, and find them to be non-threatening. We've been given one hour to come up with an answer."

Immediately a hand shot into the air. Groff gave it a nod. "Master Cholton."

"Is the ship that attacked us their only vessel? Or are there others?"

"I can't answer that," Groff said. "The C'u Govin would not give us any information other than what I've just read. They ignore our repeated requests and questions."

Another hand signaled for attention. Groff pointed to its owner. "Master Dumoin."

"Will the C'u Govin attack one final time? Or will they target individual areas or communities, and try to destroy them over several days?"

There was no doubt what the Council would tell the enemy when the deadline was up. Bellac had never bowed to outer forces, and never would. War was inevitable. Bellac would fight for its existence, and the entire galaxy would be watching closely to see how the Synergians were able to repel this new threat. Should Bellac fall, once the C'u Govin gorged themselves on the planet's resources, the rest of the galaxy would fall upon the small world and devour what was left—scrabbling and fighting over the scraps.

Master Groff paused before replying. "We don't know. We can't tell you if they will attack the moment we give them our answer, or if they'll wait to hit us without warning. Our hour will be up in just over twenty minutes. We're sounding the battle call. Everyone is called into ready status immediately."

Rowe and Grey, and the entire room, bolted from the room as the claxons started blaring out the short blats signaling a Stage One alert, the call to battle. There was no reason to worry about being seen now. He grabbed her hand to keep her with him as they were jostled by the crowd of people hurrying toward their assigned stations.

They entered the dressing room and quickly donned their flight suits. Rowe snatched up two helmets and followed Grey into the bay where flits were already warming up. As she slipped into her seat in the cockpit, he gave her a helmet and took his seat behind hers, locking himself into place as she engaged the engines.

"Flight crew, confirm. Flight crew, confirm," the automatic address system echoed through the earpiece. Rowe heard Grey confirm them.

"A Master Red ready."

"Affirmative, Flight Leader," responded a male voice. The automatic call had switched over to the Battle Crew. "Confirm identities."

"Master Rowe Maine helming. Cadet Grey Dansis on tactical," Grey smartly snapped. Rowe smiled to himself as he brought the flit around to face the launch pad. That was the voice he had heard when she had gone into the simulated trials. All business, determined, and confident.

"Affirmative, Cadet Dansis. Switching you over to the War Room."

"War Room affirmative," a new voice interceded. "Master Maine, you are confirmed to launch. Repeat, you are confirmed to launch."

"Affirmative," Rowe replied. "Launching in three ... two ... one ... firing sequence begun."

The flit jumped from its pad like an animal springing from a crouch. Before the ship reached the outer atmosphere, Rowe swung the nose of the craft into an arc. The C'u Govin were somewhere out there, nearby, waiting for Bellac to give

them an answer. The space battalion had to have a plan of attack, and Rowe quickly pulled it onto his viewscreen.

"Flight Leader in formation," he transmitted. "Proceed immediately to Plan Three. Proceed immediately to Plan Three. War Room, confirm."

The War Room answered as it sent out Rowe's plan number three to the rest of the spacecraft. He had already anticipated the enemy craft might not be in sight when the flits were launched, and Plan Three was brought into play to anticipate their reappearance.

Rowe caught a movement in front of him. Grey was signaling for silent communication between just the two of them. He reached over to flip the switch. "What, Grey?" The use of her first name would tell her they could speak privately.

"Rowe, if this is going to be our last time together—"

"Don't think that," he angrily interrupted. "You can't think negatively."

"I know." Her voice was soft but laced with her fear of defeat. "But, just in case, I have to tell you. I've been in love with you ever since I first saw you two years ago."

Stunned, Rowe stared at the back of the seat, unable to answer. He knew she loved him now, but not that she had felt that way for so long. Two years? She had known for two years? Two years ago he had still been a cadet. If he had seen her then, or known—

"Flight Leader, confirm sight of the enemy spacecraft."

"Negative, War Room. Damn." He flipped the switch back to interstellar. "Negative, War Room," he repeated.

"Confirm sighting. Council is in communication with the enemy."

"Affirmative, War Room," Rowe replied. "All flits in battle formation. All flits in battle formation. It's a waiting game now, everyone."

Grey signaled for him again. He flipped back to the private channel. "Yes?"

"I love you."

"I know, Grey. I know." He started to tell her the same when a shout blasted in his ear.

"Enemy ship at six mark two zero five! We have sighting!"

As he reached to switch over their communications, the C'u Govin ship rose from where it had been hovering behind the planet and opened fire on the Academy.

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Chapter 16

Battle

The enemy ship hovered over Bellac like a giant pitted moon. This close to the craft Grey could see the scars created over eons of traveling from one solar system to another in its never-ending search for food and fuel.

Behind her she could both sense and feel Rowe handling the flit's controls as he barked out orders to the other pilots. Her job was to take care of the weapons and shields. Nervously she glanced down at the controls, noting an eighty-two percent hold in protection. "Weapons ready. Shields at eighty-two percent," she told him.

"Noted."

She could hear the other pilots relaying their information to Rowe. He brought them around into the planned formation while the War Room coordinated the Synergians on the ground. How he was able to keep track of it all in his head amazed her. Tactical was her strongest ability, but she could already tell Rowe out-stripped her by miles.

The C'u Govin fired directly onto the planet. Like the first one, the blast was aimed at one of the more populated cities, not at the Academy. Grey frowned at the ploy. The enemy wanted the Synergians to fire back at them. The C'u Govin wanted to see what the planet dealt in return. They were being toyed with, and Grey bristled with anger.

"Hold fire, cadet."

Rowe knew she was eager to enter into the battle. In one way it would be a form of release, funneling her fear and frustration toward the enemy. But the flits weren't in final position yet, and neither were the Synergians.

A gentle pat landed on her shoulder, and warmth seeped into her. Even through the spacesuit and jumpsuit his touch was able to transfer a sense of controlled calm. She nodded slightly to let him know she appreciated the caress.

"Flight Leader, section B in place."

"Affirmative," Rowe responded. "Section A in place. On my mark, commence round one for fifteen seconds. Three ... two ... one ... fire!"

Simultaneously the Synergians and the flits opened fire on the C'u Govin ship. The combined Synergian forces covered the craft's lower section as the flits flooded the upper section with plasma rays. For several seconds the enemy ship remained in stasis, unmoving and unresponsive. Grey listened as Rowe counted off the seconds.

"Cease fire!"

She released the trigger, along with the other ships, and watched to see if they had managed to do any damage to the vessel.

Ponderously the big craft swung around until its weapons bay pointed at the first gathering of flits. Grey knew instantly what was about to occur as Rowe roared into his mic, "Squad Six! Code One! Disperse!"

The formation of five immediately started to fly off in five different directions, but the C'u Govin's weapon sent out a ray set to wide dispersal, catching the flits in its greenish light.

Grey shuddered in horror to see the little spacecrafts blink out of existence.

"They're using some sort of disintegration beam!" Rowe roared. "Proceed to Emergency Plan A! Code One! Emergency Plan A!"

Grey felt her stomach do flip-flops as her partner dropped the ship into a nosedive. Voices babbled senselessly in her ears as everyone took immediate action to get out of range of the C'u Govin's weapon.

"They have to have a weakness," someone shouted, discernable even amid the controlled chaos.

"Hold, Jenner! Pull back and hold!"

"An advance from their rear isn't doing shit! Permission to fly by!"

"Hold, Ketting!" Rowe called. "Emergency Plan A! Pull up your viewers!"

Emergency Plan A? Plan B? Plan what? What were the plans? Too much was happening that she wasn't ready for, hadn't studied for, or been privy to learn. Although she had done excellently in dealing with these kinds of situations during her simulations, deep down Grey realized it had all been fake. Every life and death decision hadn't dealt with actual life or death. Not like this. Not like now.

The C'u Govin fired again at the planet, ignoring the tiny flits as if they were no more important than a swarm of irritating insects. Grey adjusted her grip on the weapons while keeping at least one eye on the shields. Rowe settled their craft behind the huge ship's lower hull. From here the enemy

couldn't shoot at them unless it took off part of its own extensions.

The War Room was calling out tactical maneuvers to the ships. Vaguely Grey could envision their positions in her head. They were being spread out around the lower lip of the big craft, and on Rowe's command, they would swarm up and over the edge, firing simultaneously at a designated target. All she needed were the coordinates for that target.

"Dansis, six two zero by four four seven," Rowe snapped, as if he had read her mind.

"Six two zero by four four seven," she returned automatically.

"On my mark! Three ... two ... one ... advance! Fire!"

They lifted as one over the rim of the lower hull and fired at the location where the C'u Govin's weapon was pinpointed. Almost instantly a small fireball erupted from the turret, and some people cheered.

"Fire!"

She sent a second burst of energy at the ship. Their concentrated beams licked across the array of C'u Govin weapons. Two ports exploded outward. Someone whooped for joy.

Behind her Grey heard Rowe growl. "We got in a good bite, but we haven't disabled it," he called out. "Fire!"

They sent out a third stream of energy.

The pitted ship began to turn. It couldn't fire at the ring of tiny craft swarming so close to its hull for fear of taking itself out. But the enemy had found another way to cause havoc.

Gradually it continued to swing in one direction until Grey realized what it was doing.

"It's turning upside-down!" she called out. "It's reversing itself!"

"Aim for the weapons! Aim for the weapons and fire at will!" Rowe ordered.

With the tiny flits almost adhered to its hull, the C'u Govin had decided to ignore them and go for the bigger target. The enemy planted their ship in a head-down position where their weapons could swivel with ease across the planet's surface without interference. Yes, the Bellacian fleet would manage to do some damage, but Grey could see the enemy was willing to risk it as they swept the planet. It was just a simple matter of who could do more damage in the same amount of time.

The Synergians continued to throw their best at the C'u Govin ship. Grey could not imagine what the enemy must look like from ground level. Rowe was bringing the craft around to give her the best advantages. She took all she could find, aiming for every portal and slit she spotted and sending a series of shots through the viewers. Several times a resulting gout of flame gave testimony to her success.

It took a bit of concentration to ignore the sounds coming through her earphones. She locked her sights on her weapons and the shields, and locked the rest of her mind on Rowe. Whether he knew it or not, he was sending her signals. Sitting this close to him in the cramped confines of the ship's cockpit, her body could read him with unmistakable precision. In the back of her mind she could tell the Synergians were making headway with the enemy craft. So was the fleet. Still,

the C'u Govin continued to fire across the planet in wide, golden swaths.

Grey blinked. Golden? Something about the ray—

Another viewport lifted into her line of sight. She swung the guns, aiming toward it, when the glassy black emptiness suddenly disappeared in an explosion of white. Grey screamed as the beam hit the flit. This close to the enemy, there wasn't enough time or room to maneuver out of the way.

The tiny ship shuddered but miraculously held together. She forced herself to release the triggers as Rowe flipped the little ship backwards. Another blinding beam of light from the C'u Govin hit them, but this time it struck their nearly impervious bottom hull, the strongest portion of the ship. Instead of destroying them, the beam of unknown energy acted like a propellant, blasting the flit away from the planet and into space.

She could sense Rowe fighting to regain the controls. The laws of space physics were absolute: unless he could get the engines to obey, they would continue to rush aimlessly through the void until they either struck something or went far enough to eventually slow down. If they hit something, at this speed they would disintegrate on contact. If they traveled far enough to begin slowing down, they wouldn't have enough fuel to get back home.

The shields read fifty-six percent. They'd held, thank the heavens. They had kept that strange white ray from dissolving them. But the ship continued to tumble end-over-

end, like a gyroscope gone rampant. The stars tilted and rotated crazily across their screens until Grey felt nauseous.

"Engines are out!" Rowe yelled.

The mics were also out. She couldn't hear anything through her headset even though Rowe continued to call out their status. Without the engines he couldn't steer and couldn't stop their deadly ride. Either the controls were frozen, or the relays were burnt. If the C'u Govin had managed to hit the engines or the weapons tanks, the flit would have exploded in a puff of effervescent glory.

At the last possible second she remembered not to touch the controls until Rowe had the ship stable. She barely managed to glance up at the screen as darkness blanketed the craft. The surface of a solid body loomed like a rapidly growing missile.

Grey screamed Rowe's name as the flit struck the surface of the planetoid, plowed nose first through sterile soil, somersaulted onto its back, and finally came to rest upside-down.

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Chapter 17

Stranded

The temperature inside the ship was rapidly growing colder. Rowe's suit kicked on the heat, and the gust of warm air going up his nose was enough to rouse him. He fought the foggiess and moved each limb slowly to check for any sign of broken bones or internal injuries. Gods, he hurt, but there wasn't any sharp pain to let him know something wasn't right.

His next thought was of Grey. He couldn't sense anything from her, and fear reared its ugly head. Rowe panicked.

"Grey!"

He reached for the seat when his arms started drifting upward. It finally sunk in that they'd crashed, but somehow the flit had miraculously remained intact. At the moment they were hanging upside-down in their seats, held into place by their harnesses.

It was also pitch dark.

Rowe reached for the interior lights and flicked the switch. A barely perceptible blueish glow filled the cockpit. Unbuckling his harness, Rowe slowly slid out of his seat and eased onto the cockpit roof. In this position he could crawl underneath Grey and check her vitals.

His hands were trembling when he lifted her helmet to gaze at her face. A tiny amount of condensation fogged her faceplate from the inside. The knot inside his chest eased,

allowing the tears to sting his eyes. She was alive. Thank all the heavens, she'd survived the crash.

"Grey, can you hear me?"

The crash must have severed communications. He grabbed her shoulders and gave her a little shake. Her head lolled back and forth, but she remained unresponsive. Bits of frost were starting to form inside her faceplate, which told him her suit wasn't functioning properly. Unless he could fix it, she could freeze to death.

He glanced down at the instrument panel. The readouts were black. It was impossible to tell what, if anything, still worked. First things first, though. He had to get Grey out of her seat and into someplace warm.

He unhooked her from her harness and let her drop into his arms. There was no longer any need to watch where or how they touched. They'd crash landed gods knew where, and if they had any chance of surviving long enough to get back to Bellac, they needed to use any and all skills available to them, including the ones they had yet to discover as union mates.

Her left arm hung at an awkward angle. Lowering her to the roof, he carefully checked it from wrist to elbow. It was definitely broken. The bone in her lower arm moved unnaturally. He managed to scramble to the back of the ship and find the emergency aid kit. Taking the single small cuff, he slipped it over her arm before inflating it. The cuff would keep her arm rigid enough to allow the bone to knit. There was little else he could do for her until she gained consciousness.

Giving a huge sigh, Rowe tried to open the secondary hatch in the bottom of the cockpit, which had gone from being the floor to becoming the ceiling. He had to beat on the lock before the dented door finally relented. Using both hands, he had to shove the panel inward to create an opening big enough to let him squeeze through.

The first thing that struck him was the total absence of light outside the ship, which meant they were either on the dark side of whatever they'd landed on, or it was nighttime. The sky was brilliantly clear, cluing Rowe onto the fact that this rocky place held no atmosphere.

The heater sent another rush of warmth through his suit. Checking his own controls, the outside temperature read nearly three hundred degrees below zero, yet there was dirt beneath his feet, not ice. They were either on a planetoid or a moon which saw some periodic source of heat. Otherwise at these temperatures the ground would remain solidly frozen.

Time was imperative. He and Grey couldn't remain in the ship. It wouldn't sustain heat, and Grey's suit's heating elements were on the fritz.

Thankfully all flits carried the basics to erect temporary shelters. Rowe found the equipment in the ship's belly compartment. It had been almost five years since he'd had to pass his survival course, which included building a shelter. Gritting his teeth, Rowe prayed it would come back to him.

The bubbles were first. The four heavily lined plasticine domes quickly inflated, reinforced by tylonium rods which secured the structure to the ground. Next he opened the air jet on the flit to help spread the wet foam which would cover

the domes with a layer of nearly impervious rock-like flakes. Once the foam hardened, the structure could withstand anything short of a direct hit, while the plasticine inside provided adequate insulation.

Twice he'd gone back to check on Grey. Both times he found her still out. The second time he checked, the temperature gauge on her suit read twenty-six degrees. She was freezing to death, and still she didn't respond to him.

Their suits were equipped with emergency air valves. Without hesitating, Rowe locked his valve onto hers and cranked the heat up in his suit. Long minutes passed as some of the warmer air in his suit was transferred into hers. Slowly her gauge climbed into the thirties before he resealed the valves and disengaged their suits. It was meager warmth, but the suit would hold it for another couple of hours. Long enough to finish the shelter and move her inside.

The shelter was built, but it wasn't ready for habitation. It still needed circulation and heat, and those would have to come from the flit.

The domes included seals. The emergency shelter kit included hoses to run from the ship to the domes. Rowe attached them as per directions printed on their surface. When he was certain the seals would hold, he flipped the switch inside the cockpit and worriedly waited. Without the dials working he wouldn't be able to tell if the flit would keep the shelter warm or provide adequate air circulating inside. The coils on the ship had an average lifespan of sixty years, so there was no need to worry about the loss of energy.

Instead, he prayed the coils had not been damaged in the crash to the point where they couldn't produce.

After a few minutes he took the chance and entered the first bubble. The domes were built in quadrants. The first bubble contained an airlock; the second was a storeroom for equipment and supplies. The third bubble was the main living and sleeping area and the fourth area handled the sanitary issues. If compared to his apartment back on Bellac, all four bubbles would fit inside it. But the emergency shelter wasn't meant for long-term habitation. Space was a premium. Security and survival were the shelter's main objectives.

Once the airlock signaled itself closed, Rowe checked his suit for air content and temperature. The small readouts showed the place contained a sufficient, breathable atmosphere, and the room held steady at forty-nine degrees. Still cold, but survivable. He slapped the airlock to let himself out so he could retrieve Grey. After he was sure she was comfortable, he could begin to check out and determine the extent of the damage to the flit.

Grey never moved during her short trip from the ship to the shelter. Rowe carried her inside to the storeroom where he removed her spacesuit, keeping her in the white jumpsuit and transferring the cuff back onto her arm. Normally he would have kept her in the more protective outer suit, but since the heating element had stopped working, she would be warmer without it.

The interior was blacker than space. Taking her helmet, he turned on its inside light and set it to the side to act as a makeshift lamp. Small air mattresses inside the main living

area were quickly inflated. They contained their own heating and cooling apparatus, which Rowe activated. He then gently placed her on top of the mattress and sealed the thick membrane covering to help retain warmth.

Rowe stopped to reconnoiter. They were alive. The shelter was in place and operational. The flit contained enough emergency supplies to last a while. The ship was damaged, but hopefully it could be repaired enough to limp back to Bellac. If there was a Bellac.

No, don't go there. Have faith that either our forces were strong enough to hold off the C'u Govin, or the enemy backed off to attack again later.

Weariness pulled at him. His back and shoulders protested vehemently, and his head felt woozy with exhaustion from the aftermath of the crash. Slowly he peeled out of his suit, dumping it over by the bubble's membranous hatch.

The second air mattress was invitingly cozy. Crawling into it, he gave Grey one last look to make sure she was lying comfortably. She hadn't moved from the position he'd placed her in, but her breathing appeared regular and there was a spot of color in her cheeks. Satisfied, Rowe collapsed on the mattress lying adjacent to hers and fell instantly unconscious.

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Chapter 18

Passion

The mattress jiggled slightly. Grey felt herself slowly climbing out of the darkness.

Either she had been hit broadside by a wild hoarhog, or something had crashed down upon her from overhead. Her body was lighter in weight, and the whole place smelled like newly solidified plasticine.

Grey opened her eyes then blinked in disbelief. She was lying on an air mattress inside some sort of enclosure. The soft but steady whoosh of air against her ear was comforting, as well as the warmth enveloping her whole body. Slowly she rose up on one elbow to look around.

The place was dark except for the helmet sitting nearby. Its interior light was on, giving the place an eerie shine. No wonder she smelled plasticine. She was inside a bubble of some kind.

A bubble.

She started. Bits and pieces were floating back to her, forming a cohesive whole she was beginning to make sense of.

Reaching down to help pull herself into a sitting position, a scorching pain shot up her left arm. Grey whimpered and clutched the injured arm to her chest. Someone had placed an immobilizing cuff on it. Someone...

Rowe was lying on the mattress next to hers. Flat on his back, his face was turned toward her. Like her, he was still

dressed in his jumpsuit. She could tell from watching him that he was in deep sleep. Now it was beginning to make sense. They were inside an emergency shelter. But where?

The battle. The C'u Govin. That bright, blinding light that struck the ship.

She rubbed her forehead. There wasn't much she could remember. It was mostly fog and dim fear. The enemy ship had fired on them, but the shields had absorbed most of the energy. Still, the impact had been enough to launch them away from the planet. The last thing she could recall was something dark looming in the viewscreen.

They had crash landed, but they had survived. Apparently Rowe had regained consciousness first and erected the survival shelters. In a way Grey felt relieved. If he managed to build the bubbles, then he likely didn't suffer any life-threatening injuries. Obviously she didn't fare so well.

Carefully she examined herself, searching for any other broken bones. Other than her arm she appeared whole. No dislocations, no torn or pulled muscles or ligaments. Her upper chest area felt sore and tender. That had to have come from the harness.

Sighing, Grey unsealed the membrane which acted like a blanket covering. She carefully rose to a standing position and took note of her weight. Gravity here was less than that on Bellac, which meant they were either on a small moon or a planetoid.

She walked over to the other side of the small bubble. Rowe's red spacesuit lay in a pile by the hatch. A glance back over her shoulder revealed that he hadn't moved. He

remained unaware of her awakening. Maybe that was a good thing. She remembered the time when she had to erect the same kind of shelter during her training. Although it wasn't too complicated if one followed the detailed instructions, it was hard work.

Slowly she made her way into the smaller sanitary bubble where she undid her jumpsuit and crawled out of it. She had to transfer the cuff from the sleeve to her bare skin; it was a one-handed effort that caused her some pain. In the dim light coming from the helmet in the next bubble she could barely make out the dark splotches around her upper body. Bruises. No telling where else she had them, but they were a good sign considering the alternative. She was damn lucky not to have suffered any debilitating injuries, not to mention death.

The sanitary bubble was so small she couldn't extend her elbows on both sides before touching the opposite walls. Quickly she found the preformed cup to relieve herself. That done, she opened the valve to let a small amount of water flow into the bottom of the well which formed the bottom of the bubble. Taking one of the compressed soap papers, she tried to clean up as best she could. The water was limited, but it would be recycled through a filtration system after each use.

Grey sighed, enjoying the warm water covering her feet. She let the liquid trickle over her face, smiling at the way it refreshed her and cleared away some of the remaining haze in her head. She was unaware of anything going on outside the little bubble until a shadow passed in front of the pale helmet light.

The walls of the bubbles were fluidly transparent. Not crystalline clear, but enough to where light could penetrate into every compartment. Grey blinked at the darkness standing on the other side of the wall. Rowe.

She turned to face him, suddenly aware of her skin tightening. Her nipples puckered as tiny shivers raced through her, only to gather in a moist knot between her thighs.

He peeled back the doorway and stood looking at her, raking his eyes over her nude body. It was too dark to read the expression in his eyes, but the growing bulge between his legs spoke volumes.

"How do you feel?" he asked in a soft, rough voice.

"Fine."

He gestured silently toward her arm. Grey barely glanced at it.

"It doesn't hurt if I leave it alone."

Rowe nodded. The only sound was the constant whoosh of warm air circulating through the enclosure. Grey trembled as the air slid over her wet skin. Without thinking, she squeezed more of the warm water over her breasts and stomach. The shivers were becoming prickly sensations running rampant over her body. Her breathing sped up, but she couldn't help it.

"Is there room enough for two?" Rowe softly asked.

She answered with a nod and watched as he slowly peeled himself out of his jumpsuit. It landed in a heap on top of hers, and Grey was struck by the symbolism. She and Rowe were going to become lovers tonight. Like the two jumpsuits, he would lie on top of her, and they would finally be able to

assuage their hunger for each other without fear of being seen or being caught.

She was drawn out of her thoughts by the sound of him closing the flap behind him. Straightening up, he remained standing mere inches away from her. So close, she could feel his heat radiating from him.

A well-muscled arm reached past her and snagged a sponge. Slowly he bent down, barely brushing her thigh with his cheek, and wet the sponge before rising. Grey's eyes were drawn to the swollen erection just grazing her belly button. If he took a step closer, it would sink itself into her stomach.

Tentatively she placed her hand on his bare chest, amazed by the firmness and texture. His nipples were dark, like rich, edible fruit. Unable to take her eyes off of them, she whispered, "Can I touch them?"

"Yeah. Please."

They were flat. Not at all like hers. And smaller in size, although the outer ring was almost the same. Soft black hair sprinkled across his pecs, and a thin line of short curls threaded its way down his belly to connect with the crop of curls between his thighs. Grey drew her fingertips through the hair, loving the way it felt. Enjoying the way his skin tightened under her caresses.

Warm droplets touched her face. She jerked her head up to find him intently watching her.

"Are you afraid?"

"N-no." Dammit. Her voice shook, even though she'd spoken the truth. She wasn't afraid. She was rapidly growing crazy with need.

The wet sponge touched her forehead and cheeks. Water trickled over her skin, tickling as it fell. She licked away a droplet from the corner of her mouth, and Rowe groaned. "Gods, that's the sexiest thing I've ever seen you do."

"Are you going to make love to me now?"

The question came out of nowhere, but she wasn't surprised by the fact that she had said it aloud. In fact, she loved the gentle smile that spread across his face as he moved closer to her, and his hot erection vibrated along her abdomen. He cupped her cheek in one hand.

"How many men have you had, Grey?"

"None." Swallowing hard, she shook her head and repeated, "None."

Rowe seemed genuinely shocked. "None?"

"I ... I haven't found anyone I wanted until I saw you," she admitted.

His surprise grew. "But you first spotted me two years ago."

"Yeah." Grey nodded and tried to swallow again.

Rowe took a small step back. She searched his eyes and tried to imagine what was going on in his mind. Sometimes it wasn't difficult, but right now it seemed impossible.

"Talk to me, Rowe."

Their combined breathing had grown as loud as the air unit. He squeezed another stream of water over her shoulder. This time his eyes shifted to watch the trickle run over her breasts.

"Grey, if I inadvertently hurt you, please tell me." His voice was gruff again. He dropped the sponge and reached for her.

His warm hands on her shoulders sent desire scorching through her. She reached up and locked her good arm around his neck as he gathered her against him. Rowe clamped his mouth over hers and breathed in her moan.

The unit was too tiny to lie down in, but that didn't preclude pressing up against the bubbled walls. Their first time would be rushed, and they both knew it. Their bodies had been craving each other for too long to allow them any time for slow exploration or foreplay. That would come later. Much, much later.

She felt him lift her legs over his hips, then reach down between them to guide his erection to her entrance. Strong fingers glided over her pubic lips that were already drenched with her juices. Before she could say anything, Rowe shoved her back against the cushioned wall and rammed himself inside her.

Grey cried out. Her mouth was partially blocked by his wide shoulder, but it didn't matter. He pulled back slightly to slam into her again, and again, and again. It took all her strength just to hold on as he relentlessly pummeled her. His warm hands were holding her thighs, keeping her legs raised and spread as he plowed inside her, yet their hunger continued to grow until their need consumed them.

Virgin muscles screamed at the invasion. At any time she knew she would split in two from his hammering, yet she craved more. Fire was erupting where they were joined, and the combustion soon had them both drenched in sweat. Her back made squeaking noises as it rubbed against the inflated bubble-like pillows that protected her from any harm. She

could only breathe in short gasps between his hard, powerful strokes. Somehow she managed to hook the back of her heels on his buttocks, giving her another sensation to experience—the rhythmic clenching and unclenching of his buttocks.

Her left arm burned where the cuff held it immobile. Not the kind of burning that filled her with this insatiable craving for Rowe, but an agonizing pain almost too searing to withstand. She tried to call to him, to tell him about the torturous fire in her arm and to beg him to rip the cuff off of her, when another unbelievable force reached up and swallowed them.

There was no time to think, no time to call out, or even to adjust her grip. She could hear his voice panting her name every time he dove into her. The inferno continued to spread until it burned every nerve leading into her brain. Something was about to happen, and she couldn't understand what it was, or why. Neither could she warn Rowe as his shoulders began to tense and his thrusts became faster and more erratic.

She felt his mouth on her shoulder, on her neck. Breathing became impossible. Nothing existed except for the two of them and the wet, sucking sounds audible over their mutual gasping. Faintly she heard him whisper that he loved her.

And then the world shattered.

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Chapter 19

Emotions

The soft lapping of warm water across her buttocks was the first thing she was aware of. Water continued to trickle into the minuscule well in the bottom of the chamber, and its steady rhythm brought her out of unconsciousness.

Rowe still held her, but their positions had shifted. Apparently they had both blacked out during the culmination of their release, but the tiny cubical with its air-filled pockets lining the walls had prevented them from going anywhere except down.

Slowly Grey took stock of how she was semi-reclining, with her good arm still wrapped around Rowe's neck and her legs encircling his waist. She had slid down the wet wall so that Rowe now rested at an angle, almost on top of her. His face was buried along her neck and his gentle breathing tickled her shoulder. His hands continued to clutch her thighs, although his grip had slipped. Fingers no longer dug into her flesh.

Grey gasped softly. They were still melded together. If she squeezed certain muscles, she could feel him inside her. She squeezed again, and something stirred. Rowe stirred. Or rather, his rising erection did. She could feel it start to harden again.

Rowe moved in her embrace. He took a deep breath and pulled back until he could see her face. For several seconds they stared at one another in silence. "Did I hurt you?" he gruffly whispered.

She started to reply "no", but he decided to kiss her instead of waiting for her answer. It was a tender kiss filled with a gentleness she didn't believe men were capable of showing. But this man was her union mate. Truly and fully her Synergian other half.

Hopefully, the man she could live the rest of her life with, but...

Reluctantly she pulled away from his lips and placed a hand on his cheek. "Rowe."

She could feel his smile. "What?"

"Forgive me for asking, but what just happened to us? I mean, are we really union mates now?"

His chuckle tickled her breasts. "Really. Forever. What would make you think we aren't?"

His hips moved, slowly grinding himself against her and inside her. She could feel his penis enlarging and filling her with its length and heaviness. Grey answered with her own movement, and she was rewarded with a hiss as he sucked in air between his teeth.

"I'm still starving for you, Grey."

"I have to have more of you, too ... but does that mean we're true mates?"

He brushed the hair out of her eyes. The pale light on the other side of the wall reflected on his face, and she could finally read him. He understood what she was asking. He was the one with the experience, with a source of prior knowledge that he could use to compare. Whereas, she...

"Grey, do you recall all those lectures about what it would be like when we found our mates?"

She nodded. So much of it didn't make sense back then, although the teachers had assured the class that it would when the moment occurred. "Is it really like that? I mean, when we love, and when we can feel what the other is feeling? That's part of being mates? No one else can do that?"

His hands were fondling her breasts, molding them, allowing them to fill his palms. Her nipples ached to be touched. She opened her mouth to beg him to play with them when his thumbs danced over the turgid points. Pinpoints of pure, hot desire ripped into her.

"No, my beautiful Grey," he murmured, drawing closer to her mouth. "No one else can do that, and no one else can do it with you ... or with me." His lips brushed hers, sending another shiver through her. Her womb clenched involuntarily, and Rowe hissed again. "You're making me insane," he growled playfully.

He lightly moved his hands down the sides of her body. Fingertips stroked the sides of her breasts. Grey closed her eyes and arched her neck. Rowe ran his mouth over her skin, tasting her, savoring her, nuzzling where he found a particular spot to enjoy. His hips bucked, and instantly the embers blossomed into another all-encompassing bonfire. This time, though, he was on top of her, planting his arms and elbows in the water as he began to ride her, sliding in and out with long, deliberate motions.

Something wrapped around her heart. Something warm and sweet and forever. Opening her eyes, Grey realized she was feeling his love. For the first time she was getting a true sense of how much this man cared for her. The stories she'd

heard about union mates falling in love before they consummated was true, then. The gods knew she had been in love with Rowe Maine for the past two years, only she'd been too frightened and too innocent to be sure. Or to admit it even to herself. Yet, it was true. And now with him starting to lift her back into the heavens, tears rolled down her cheeks. She tightened her grip on his neck and held on. He would show her all there was to learn about lovemaking. And in return she would show him how much she loved him, and that she was willing to sacrifice everything for him.

Their second release was less intense, but it still threw their bodies into rigor. For several long moments they lay on the floor of the shower and gasped for breath as their nerves and blood vessels hummed in unison. Their bodies were changing, and they both understood and accepted that fact. Grey felt Rowe run his hands through her hair again, following it with a soft kiss to her brow. "That gold streak just kills me," he admitted, giving her a grin when she opened her eyes.

"Momma has one, too, but she tries to keep it covered up." A yawn caught her by surprise.

"Tired?"

"Umm ... not really. Help me up, would you? I think I'm starting to wrinkle after lying in the water for so long."

He finally pulled out of her, and Grey instantly regretted it. As he distanced himself a few inches away and held out a hand to help her up, she no longer felt the sense of completion she had experienced when they were united.

Union mates. The phrase now held a whole new meaning for her. Smiling, she reached back to push against the wall when Rowe paused, his eyes widening. "Grey?"

"What?" She struggled to get to her feet without slipping when Rowe reached under her arm to give her support.

"That didn't hurt?"

"What didn't hurt?" she queried, giving him a puzzled look. She saw his eyes slide over to her injured arm, and a brow lifted to question her. Grey started to look down when she realized what he was referring to. She was lifting herself using her broken arm to support her weight.

Her broken arm. A memory resurfaced.

...the pain was almost too agonizing to withstand...

Releasing the cuff, she pulled it off and examined her arm. The skin was red after wearing the immobilizer. Carefully, she prodded the limb, expecting to feel another sharp knife slicing across the bone.

"Nothing?" Rowe questioned.

She shook her head in reply. "It's impossible. I've never healed that quickly." Biting her lower lip, she added, "That's why my arm hurt so badly when we were making love that first time."

"Maybe that's another one of those little secrets that were kept from us," he commented.

Grey frowned. "Secrets?"

"Yeah." He turned his back to her and reached inside the supply closet for one of the big paper sheets. The shelter was self-sustaining to a degree. The sheets could be recycled and re-formed into fresh paper whenever they needed it. "Clean

up and dry off before you chill. Then go get back in bed, and I'll join you in a minute."

She obeyed without question and hurried back to the warmth of the air mattress. Crawling beneath the thick plastic blanket, she watched as he finished up in the sanitary bubble before joining her. "Move over."

A little giggle escaped her as she tried to scoot over enough to allow Rowe room for his bigger bulk. Her buttocks fit nicely into the curve of his groin; his legs intertwined with hers as he laced himself around her. His heat was potent, but instead of making her drowsy, it heightened her awareness of his sculpted male body—especially the thick rod quickly encasing itself between her butt cheeks. She wasn't shocked when he undulated himself against her, and the rod expanded further.

"You know, you hear a lot of rumors and stuff at the Academy about union mates. You know what I mean?"

He grunted in reply. Warm hands reached around her and cupped themselves over her breasts. Before she could say anything further, his fingers began to tease her nipples, playfully pushing and flicking them as they grew thicker and expanded outward in response. The rod widened and shifted further down. His hunger was growing and feeding hers at the same time.

Clearing her throat, Grey tried to make conversation again although she had a sneaky suspicion talking was the last thing on Rowe's mind at the moment. "They say that if you bed a cadet who's not your mate, after you have him you don't crave him anymore. But if you do bed your mate, you

can't stop craving him. He'll become an itch you can't scratch enough."

Oh, gods, the things he was doing to her were driving her mad! Rowe had started mouthing the back of her neck, actually using his teeth to scratch and nibble her skin. One hand had left its breast and was meandering south. She gasped when his long fingers found her mound and dove into the soft, curly hairs.

"Rowe?"

"Yeah?" His tongue replaced his teeth. Muscle over muscle, it glided like wet velvet under her ear. When he spoke, his voice was sluggish. "I feel drugged, Grey. You've drugged me, and I want more."

A whimper escaped her. They had already made love twice, but she hurt as badly as ever, as if those other times never happened. The fingers slipped between her pubic lips and found the tightened nub. Rowe pressed it.

Grey cried out and bucked her hips. Her body bent forward, and Rowe released her other breast to guide her hips toward him. Locking one leg under hers, he lifted her bottom, giving him easy access to her from the rear.

Slowly, tantalizingly, he ran the tips of his fingers over the glistening folds. Her juices ran thick, oozing over the end of his erection that lay at her entrance. She could hear him softly suck his fingers. "Sweet, sweet cream, Grey. Gods, this is incredible. I never dreamed you would taste this wonderful."

"Rowe ... please." She gave her bottom a little bounce. Already her hands were clutching the side of the mattress.

When she tried to look over her shoulder at him, her body cast a shadow across his face. But she could feel his need rising fast and taking hers with him.

He pressed into her, burrowing the thick head through her still-tight channel. The absolute perfection of it brought tears to her eyes. Throwing her head back, Grey begged for more. Begged for him not to stop. For him to love her over and over until there was nothing left in either of them to give.

She had no recollection of him getting up on his knees, or of him pulling her up on her knees as well. She couldn't remember what it was he said to her as he fiercely pumped himself into her so hard and for so long that their combined juices were running down the inside of her thighs. Or that afterwards Rowe clutched her so tightly against his chest that she almost couldn't breathe.

She could only remember the tenderness of his kiss after he turned her around to face him. And that he called her his beautiful love when he cradled her in his arms, right before they both fell asleep.

And she knew that he honestly meant it.

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Chapter 20

Repairs

The feel of her lying in his arms, asleep and totally dependent on him for her wellbeing, was the most perfect thing in his life. His Grey. His Synergistic mate.

His miracle.

Although the helmet light continued to give out its dim light, his eyes had grown accustomed to the semi-darkness of the bubble shelter. Grey's head was tucked beneath his chin. The golden streak running through it almost glistened with its own ambience.

Her breathing was slow, regular. If he was careful he could readjust her limbs and slide out from underneath her without disturbing her.

Exhaustion had claimed them both. They were mates now, in every sense of the word. When they got back to Bellac, they would face whatever punishment the Academy deemed, but they would do it together. Rowe knew he had the Three Laws backing him if push came to shove, but for the moment they didn't have to worry about that. No, the next hurdle to overcome was basic survival. Food and water. Rowe smiled. Not a problem there.

As he moved away from her he could feel his body responding to the distance. It was like a silent warning going off in his head, telling him not to go too far. To keep her within sight, within their mutual safety net. He smiled again. It was becoming clearer why everything was new to them,

and why so much had been kept secret. For one thing, there were too many details to describe. Like the way her scent lingered on his skin. Or how the sound of her breathing continued to resonate inside him like a second pair of lungs. Reluctantly he grabbed his jumpsuit and his containment suit from the sanitation bubble, and went into the outer airlock bubble to dress.

He slipped into his clothes and double-checked his seals to make certain he was ready to venture outside the shelter. He sensed Grey turning over in bed and reaching for him. There was a moment when she almost roused herself, until Rowe sent her a lingering reassurance to let her know he was still nearby. She accepted his loving mental touch and drifted back to sleep. The next time she sought him, he hoped to be back from examining the flit and bearing what emergency rations were kept aboard.

The airlock hissed as it sucked the air from the entry. The bubble had self-sealing doors, preventing anyone from accidentally trying to enter the first room if the atmosphere had been removed. Likewise, if Grey was inside the airlock when he tried to return, the bubble would keep him out until the pressures were equalized.

No, the only danger facing him and Grey at the moment was basic survival—having enough food and water to last them until either a search ship discovered them, or they were able to repair the flit enough to make it back to Bellac. Before that could happen, however, a hundred questions had to be answered.

The outer door parted slightly, letting him know he could exit the bubble. Rowe stuck his head out a tiny bit to get a glimpse of what he was facing. It would be careless of him to walk out into the unknown open without a quick scan of the area. No telling what could be out there. Fortunately the scene looked pretty much like the way he remembered it: white, chalky rock; powdery earth; and low formations in the distance, all sitting like shapeless haunts in the near dark.

They definitely had to be on the back side of a small moon. If this were a planetoid there would have to be a bit more definition to the landscape. Possibly including other life forms, or evidence of such.

What if they were on Keeran, one of Bellac's outer moons? Rowe wondered. It would explain several things, including the continual darkness. Keeran's orbit mimicked Bellac's, so she only showed one side of herself at all times.

The lifeline leading from the flit to the shelter remained undisturbed. That was good. It meant there weren't any beings or creatures to contend with.

Rowe walked over to the downed craft and began examining it more closely. The ship had landed on its belly, digging a shallow canal several hundred feet until it flipped upside-down, which might have cracked the overhead transparent dome encasing the cockpit. He would know more once he got the flit turned over.

The wings were intact, thank the heavens. He gave one a hard jerk and walked around to the other side and did the same thing to its twin. On the other hand, the tail had been damaged, apparently by the ray that hit them. The

communications band was gone, which explained why they'd lost contact.

He gazed up into the sparkling canopy. How were the others back at the Academy taking their disappearance? Had he and Grey been written off as casualties of the assault?

For that matter, what were conditions like on Bellac at this moment? How far had the C'u Govin taken their attack? Those two questions were uppermost in his mind. If he and Grey were able to get back to Bellac, what would they find?

Rowe blinked. A heart sped up, breathing increased. Awake and aware, Grey was rising from their bed. She moved quickly to join him. He sent a silent message for her to check and re-check her suit. After all they had been through to finally culminate their relationship, a simple, stupid, mindless accident shouldn't be a threat. While he waited for her to join him, he dove into the belly of the ship to retrieve the packets of food and water.

"Do the stars seem different to you?"

"Huh?"

"Look up at the sky, Rowe. Tell me if they look different."

He paused and glanced upward at the ink-black universe. She was right. The stars appeared to be twirling on their axis rather than blinking like they normally did. "Dom said our senses would become enhanced. It's one of the side effects of mating."

"Like the way my arm healed?" He heard her softly laugh. "Wonder what else we'll discover?"

Rowe went back to his search without answering her, knowing she hadn't been seeking a direct answer anyway.

Presently she spoke again. "How long can we stay?" Despite the tinny sound in his ear, Grey's voice simmered with more than one emotion. She came up on the other side of the ship and was examining it for damage.

Throwing the packets on the ground as he found them, Rowe gave a quick inspection to the cockpit interior. "Count those, would you?"

Grey came around to where he was halfway inside the ship and began gathering the scattered packets into a neat pile on the ground. "...eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one. There's twenty-one."

He climbed out and tossed the last one to her. "Twenty-two. Divided by two, that's eleven. Eleven days of rations, Grey. We have eleven days to either get the flit in flying order, or pray we're found by a search ship." He peered through her helmet to find her staring back at him. He tried to read her, but her emotions were clouding up her thoughts. Uppermost, she was frightened. Of what, he had no clue, but he could make a good guess. "Tell me what's bothering you," he asked in a gentler tone.

"What are they going to do to us when they find out?" she whispered.

Her question stunned him. His thoughts had been on Bellac's survival and on its chances of defeating the C'u Govin, whereas Grey had taken their risks down to the personal level. The import of what she asked him both surprised and humbled him. Instead of mulling over the battle with the enemy ship, he needed to be focusing on their newfound mating. On their future. On the future of their

children, if they were to be blessed. Whether or not Bellac continued to exist was moot. They were together, alive, and now bearing a very viable and powerful weapon. A weapon they had yet to test to its fullest.

"They can't divide us. Law One guarantees that."

"Yes, it does," she agreed, "but we broke laws to become mates."

"No, we didn't. I broke it. I will be held accountable, not you."

She gave him an angry stare. "What affects you affects me, and you damn well know that," Grey snapped. "Stop thinking solo and start acting like a mate. It's you and me from now on, for everything."

He couldn't help but snicker at her riled attitude.

"What do you find funny, Rowe Maine?"

Rowe Maine? That was something else he had to adjust to—the name change. Once they were accepted as Synergized mates, they would no longer have a last name. From the moment he and Grey made love, Rowe Maine and Grey Dansis ceased to exist. As of now they were simply Rowe and Grey. As a couple, the historians and all of Bellac would know them and refer to them by their paired first names.

Rowe and Grey. The sound of it brought another smile to his face, and it was not lost on the woman standing a few feet away.

"That's another one," she commented with humorous sarcasm. "I swear I've seen you smile more these past few

hours than I've seen in all of the past two years, Master Maine."

He shook his head. "Drop the Master, Grey. Might as well drop the Cadet part, too, while you're at it. You accuse me of thinking solo when you're just as guilty. From now on we're Rowe and Grey ... or did you forget?"

The surprised look on her face was amusing. "Oh, gee. That's right."

Rowe snorted. "Come grab this spoiler and help me turn the flit over."

Grey got underneath the back of the wing, and together they managed to get the craft right side up. It bounced on its landing gear, sending puffs of the fine white powdered soil around them. At first glance it appeared the cockpit dome was intact.

"Want me to check the controls?" she asked, already climbing up into the compartment.

"I'll close the underbelly. The tail's missing its rudder, and the communications band is missing."

"Think that ray took it out?" She had disappeared down into the ship, but he could still hear her through the tiny speakers in his helmet.

"I know it did. That's why I couldn't control the ship when it hit us. I had no way of taking us out of that spin."

A viciously spat expletive rattled his speakers. Rowe almost laughed to hear it. Instead of asking her what she'd found, he crawled on top of the slanted wings and peered over into the cockpit. He found Grey on her back, the upper portion of her body slid underneath the display panel. "The

board's fried," she responded to his unspoken question. Not good news.

"What?"

He saw her jerk her arm downward, then she slid back out and held up the relay board for him to see. The long, thin piece of metal should have been a shiny blue color. It was muddy brown instead. Rowe echoed her curse.

"What are we going to do?"

"We'll have to fly blind," he said.

"Oh, please tell me you're joking."

Frowning, he shot her a serious look. "I'm not joking. You've done at least one or two simulations without your display, haven't you?"

"Sure! But they were simulations. If I screwed up, I could get up out of my seat and take my fifteen demerits. This isn't a simulation," she argued, suddenly frightened at the prospect of having to fly with a totally black weapons display.

"No, it's not a simulation. Don't worry, Grey. We'll manage a way around it."

She shot him another look of disbelief then slid back under the cowl.

"How does the rest of it look?" he asked as he closed the hatch leading to the underside of the ship.

"I'll yell if something else pops up," she promised.

"I'm going around back to check the damage."

He slid back to the ground and went around the rear to see how badly the tail section was damaged. If there was any luck to be found, he might be able to take the spoilers off the wings and refashion them into a makeshift rudder. Of course,

that would leave them without any way of guiding the ship with any amount of finesse. They would barrel through space like a rampant meteor. And forget trying to bring the flit down directly on top of the landing pad. That is, if they landed somewhere. Which led him right back to the possibility that that there may not be anything left on Bellac to return to. Rowe mentally shook himself. One problem at a time, old man. No sense taking on the army when you really need to concentrate on defeating each soldier as you meet him.

The flaps were in good shape. With the basic tools in the flit, he could reshape them into a new tail within a day or two.

Fuel. Fuel shouldn't be a problem. Even if they had been knocked a few light years from Bellac, they would have enough to make it back home.

That left the engines. Were the engines in working order? Forget the weapons and the shields. A little bit of judicious evasion would get them back in Bellac's atmosphere and under the Synergians' protection before—

"Rowe!"

The scream was pure fear. He whirled around to dash back to the front of the ship when he saw it.

The C'u Govin ship hovered directly overhead like an immense thundercloud. It was so close to the surface, he could see the burns and scars left from its encounters with other worlds. With Bellac.

Grey came up behind him and wrapped her arms about his waist. She was shivering. "Rowe, what if—"

"Shh!" Giving her shoulder a squeeze, he watched to see what the ship would do. Out on the surface, just the two of

them with their untried power and a damaged ship, they had no chance against the behemoth.

The huge alien ship continued to hover less than a mile from the surface. Frowning, Rowe tried to figure out what was eating at him. Why was the ship here? If it had defeated Bellac, why wasn't it over there depleting the planet of its rich mineral deposits? The damn thing was almost invisible, and if Rowe didn't know better, he would swear it was using the moon as cover.

As cover.

Cover.

"Back to the shelter, Grey. Now." He ran over to where the supply packets were stacked and scooped up an armload. Grey was right behind him, snatching up the ones he'd missed and hurrying to the shelter. Once inside the airlock they remained silent until the inner doors parted slightly to let them know it was safe to enter.

Rowe dumped the packets inside the doorway and removed his helmet.

"What?" Grey questioned him finally. "What are they doing here? Did they see us? Are they going to fire on us, do you think?"

"They didn't see us, Grey. They don't even know we're here."

"Then what are they doing here? I thought surely by now the C'u Govin would have defeated the Synergians and the fleet."

Nodding, Rowe agreed. "So did I, but apparently we were able to hold them off." He took a deep breath then added,

"The C'u Govin are using this moon as a hiding place. That's where they went the first time after they appeared. They're hiding here to recharge their weapons or to assess damage, or gods know what. But once they're ready, you know they're going to go back and finish what they started."

Grey stared at him wide-eyed. "What are we going to do, Rowe? If we try to fix the ship they might spot us."

"Then we'll have to work on the ship and wait for them to leave before we try firing the engines." Dragging a hand through his hair, Rowe grimaced. "One more thing, Grey. We can't experiment with our power. It's too risky to do anything inside the shelter, and I was wondering how we were going to be able to practice within the confines of our suits. But with the C'u Govin sitting on top of us, that's out of the question."

"So we're going to have to work on the flit in the dark and hope they don't see us. Great. Just freaking great." She undid the seals on her suit and slid out of it, dropping it against the bubble wall. "Now what do we do?" she asked, looking over at him.

"Well, for starters, I suggest we eat something. I'm hungry, and I know you are, too."

Their eyes met, and in the space of a heartbeat their hunger morphed into a need they no longer were forced to deny. She melted against him as they struggled out of their jumpsuits. His last conscious thought before he plunged into her to put out the uncontrollable heat burning through him was that whatever time they had together was not going to be wasted. They had endured too damn much. If they had any chance at survival and a future, they had to be prepared.

My Strength, My Power, My Love
by Linda Mooney

Prepared and well-loved.

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Chapter 21

Reaction

"There's something I've been wanting to ask you."

Rowe stared up where Grey was sitting propped up against the bubbled walls. They were almost finished with their meal and would soon be going back outside to continue working on the damaged flit.

Unfortunately, they had lost all track of time. Without anything to mark the passing hours, and because the side of the moon they had crashed on never saw any delineation between day and night, Rowe had no idea how long they had been there. They slept when they were tired, ate when they were hungry, and worked when they weren't eating, sleeping, or making copious love. As a result, work was progressing slowly on the craft. Fortunately they weren't having any difficulties in doing the repairs. They had the right tools, and after a little more checking, found out the engines were in relatively stable condition.

The hovering enemy ship was their greatest fear. It hadn't moved from where it initially docked, but it prevented Rowe from firing the engines or weapons to check them.

But what kept them from accomplishing more than they were was because neither he nor Grey could go more than two or three hours at a stretch without their bodies sliding into an almost painful form of withdrawal. They were frequently forced to drop whatever they were doing and hurry

into the bubble to assuage their need, which could take an hour or more before they were satiated enough to resume.

Sometimes Rowe wondered how other Synergians were able to cope, not that he or Grey were complaining. There was very little he knew about what happened to union mates once they found each other. But one thing was becoming very clear. Newly mated couples were known to disappear for weeks, sometimes months. At the time Rowe had dismissed the whole thing. What they did in that time was their business, and it was obviously very personal. Now he had more of an idea of what they went through, if it was anything like what he and Grey were experiencing.

This time around they had decided to have something to eat after another frenzied bout of lovemaking. Rowe grinned. No matter how many times he and Grey coupled, she continued to enthrall him. Everything he taught her, every position he introduced to her, was like an exciting new toy to her.

She continued to astonish him with her freshness and naiveté. He still had a difficult time getting around the knowledge that she had never allowed herself to be with another man. Grey had known for two years he was meant to be her mate, although during that time she didn't totally comprehend her feelings.

Two years. During that time he had been wasting himself and his energy, but she had known, although at the time she wasn't aware of how important her discovery would become.

"Rowe?"

He glanced up again. She was peering down at him from a most flattering position. Her feet were braced on the mattress, her knees raised, her legs parted in front of his face. The view afforded him was of paradise itself.

"Forgive me. I was thinking. What did you want to ask me?"

"When did you first realize you were attracted to me?"

Gods, he couldn't tear his eyes away from the sweet promise poised less than two feet away. Already he could feel his dick getting heavier, almost searching again for her silky hot depths.

"At your graduation," he answered. Digging inside the packet for some of the pudding he'd been eating, Rowe reached out and spread a small amount on her mound. Grey jumped and stiffly sat up.

"What are you doing?" Her voice held curiosity and a giggle. "And when during my graduation?"

He grabbed her ankle and pulled her slowly toward him. Her enticing bottom squeaked across the plasticine mattress. "Do you remember turning around and looking at me during the commencement address?"

"Yeah. Rowe!"

He had scooted closer to her, between those thighs which continued to amaze him with their soft yet firm texture. Slowly, he twirled a finger through the pudding. Then, raising his eyes to watch her expression, he lifted the finger and placed it in his mouth. Her eyes got wider as he licked the finger clean.

"You got my attention then. Enough so that I had to stick with you to find out why." Making a soft sucking sound, Rowe gave her a wicked grin. "That tasted fantastic, Grey. And here I thought survival food was bland. How wrong I was."

She laughed out loud. "You're nuts, you know that?"

"I'm in love," he corrected her.

"In love, in heat. Same thing. Now what are you doing?" Grey giggled again.

A dab of pudding was smeared on one beautiful breast. Some sat on a peaked nipple like a tiny cap. Before he could ask her to move further down the mattress so he could reach it with his mouth, Grey anticipated what he wanted and slid next to him. Rowe made certain his tongue did as much damage as possible as he spoke between licks and nibbles.

"I couldn't take my eyes off of you. It was like my body was answering some inaudible call. So I stayed as close as I could without appearing too obvious. I couldn't arouse anyone's suspicions. Not any of the other teachers or cadets, or yours. But when I saw those three cadets heading for you, I knew they were up to no good."

His mouth left her breast with its rock hard tip and slowly lapped up the pudding he continued to squeeze from the packet onto her skin, down her belly and onto her mound. He sensed Grey throwing back her head as she let the sensations travel over her.

"It wasn't until I kissed you that I was certain you were my mate. You probably had your doubts, too, until then. When I went to talk to Dommon about you, he was the first to realize

I had fallen in love with you, and he pointed it out to me. Mmm, you're making my mouth water."

Mixed with her scent and skin, the normally tasteless pudding had become the second most delicious thing he ever put into his mouth. The first was Grey herself, and she always would be. Closing his lips over her clit, he used his tongue to mix the pudding with her succulent juices, alternating licking with sipping the concoction.

Grey moved onto her side and swung one leg over his shoulder, which gave him greater access to her entrance. Rowe was about to shift onto his hip when one cool hand grasped his engorged rod and gently squeezed.

"Gods, Grey, what are you—" He didn't get to finish what he was about to say. Her wet mouth closed over the head of his erection, making him groan from the perfect feelings racing through him.

"Got any more of that pudding, mate?" she purred. The vibrations over his taut skin nearly drove him mad.

"Fuck the pudding," he groaned and dove into her womanhood to attack it with relish. In retaliation Grey began working on his erection, pulling and tugging on it until it grew unbelievably stiff and thick. Her little tongue lapped around the crest. But when she started to lightly nibble the bulbous head, it proved to be too much. Rowe felt his hips buck involuntarily, and his pulsing rod slid into her mouth nearly halfway. At the same time her thighs clamped down around his neck, pinning his head and face in place.

Rowe tunneled his tongue into her core as deeply as he could reach. Her wetness covered his cheeks and chin with

her heady, musky scent. It was enough to make him so hard he felt as if his dick would split apart. To make matters worse, her inexperienced mouth and tongue had his balls at the point where he felt they were on the edge of exploding at her next touch.

Grey must have sensed his thoughts. Slender fingers slid between his clenched thighs and clutched his sacs. She squeezed them, rolling them around in her palm, and at the same time her mouth pulled hard on his manhood.

He never expected his release to be this forceful or this concentrated. There was no pain, but neither did he feel the mind-reeling joy that normally swept through him whenever he came. Rowe cried out from the fiery, almost blistering blast leaving his body.

Grey's little nub in his mouth went rigid, signaling her orgasm. Her body arched under his hands, and his tongue was coated with her indescribably wonderful cream. In the next instant she screamed. Echoes of her pain ripped through him.

"Rowe! Gods, Rowe! It hurts! It hurts!"

They rolled apart. Rowe reached back for her but Grey slipped away from him. Her arms clutched her chest and stomach, and she whimpered as she stumbled toward the bubble hatch. "Why is it hurting? Make it go away, Rowe. Please make it stop hurting."

Burning pain clawed in his chest. Breathing was like dragging his lungs through an inferno. Every breath blackened inside his throat.

Something was very wrong, yet he fought to go to her. To find a way to help her through whatever she was feeling. Blindly Rowe reached out to touch her, but she managed to get to her space suit.

"Grey? What are you doing?"

She was totally naked and climbing into her gear. It was unheard of to disregard her jumpsuit first. Tears glittered on her cheeks as she fought the pain.

Getting to his feet, he lurched toward her, but moving only brought on more agony. "Grey, stop! What are you doing?"

"I gotta stop the pain, Rowe. It hurts something awful!" She hiccupped then gave a low moan. "We've done something wrong, and it's ... it hurts!"

He felt it, too, like a rising fire that continued to burn hotter and brighter inside him. He was beginning to choke on the smoke as his heart and lungs began to melt from the blaze.

But running outside wasn't going to assuage the pain. Terrified she might do something terrible in the coldness of space, he tried to lunge for her again. This time he managed to grab her arm, and Rowe clamped his fingers below the elbow. Grey tried to jerk away but his grasp held firm.

"Take this hurt away, Rowe! Why is this happening?"

He started to beg her not to leave the safety of the shelter when he heard her gasp. At the same moment he glanced down and saw what she was staring at.

His hand holding her arm was pure white, lit from inside with an almost ethereal glow. Rowe could see the outline of his bones and blood vessels. But beneath his hand he could

see Grey's long, extended arm bone. The pain of fire was excruciating.

"What..."

Grey cried out again and jerked her arm from his grasp. The glow vanished, blinding them both in the darkness. Rowe reached for her again as he heard the outer airlock hiss. Yelling her name, he hit the bubble hatch but found it sealed shut. She had gone outside. In pain and seeking any relief possible, Grey had slipped into the airlock and was heading out of the shelter.

He found his spacesuit where he'd dropped it and hurried into it, also leaving his jumpsuit behind in his haste to re-connect with her. By the time he managed to get his helmet on, the inner door parted. Rowe rushed inside the airlock and slapped the de-pressurizing panel.

Her voice was raspy, gasping for air even though he knew her suit had enough oxygen. What frightened him more were the repairs he had made on the suit to stabilize its inner heating mechanism were roughshod and could go out altogether if she fell or ran into something. If the heat went out, she could freeze to death within minutes if she was too far from the shelter.

"Grey! Stop! Listen to me, Grey! Don't run. It'll only make it worse! Do you hear me? Grey ... my love!"

"Make it stop hurting!" she called out again, but weaker. The pain was sapping her strength, and Rowe prayed she hadn't gone too far.

The outer doors parted. Rowe burst through them and out onto the surface. He spotted her near the flit, bent over with

her arms clasping her waist. Clouds of her pain settled over him, almost doubling him over as well. He grunted. Sweat popped out over his face as he gritted his teeth and tried to reach her.

"Grey!

He was less than a dozen steps away from her when the world brightened. Greens, blues, reds, and whites splashed across the surface of the moon, painting it with colors so intense Rowe fell to his knees in partial blindness. He heard Grey calling for him, but this time it wasn't because of the burning.

The C'u Govin ship was making itself known.

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Chapter 22

Ready

The enemy ship was coming back to life, but after a moment of heart-stopping fear, Rowe realized its focus was not on the two small creatures running around on the back side of the moon. It was firing itself up to return to Bellac and finish what it had tried to accomplish on its last attack.

On his knees, he watched the immense craft slowly pull away from the satellite. Cramps were doubling him over as he tried to suffer through his pain and Grey's. Absorbing what he could from her to help alleviate her agony was proving to be too much. Gasping for breath, Rowe fought the raging fire tearing him apart inside. Sweat dotted the inside of his helmet where it dripped off his face. A thin mist was beginning to build up inside the clear dome as well. Seconds later the suit's cooling system kicked in.

"Grey!"

When Rowe finally managed to look up, he spotted her. She had collapsed on the ground and huddled into a little ball as she fought the debilitating effects. Whatever was causing them such suffering had to have been brought about by the Synergistic gene.

Fighting it one foot at a time, Rowe managed to crawl over to where she lay, convulsing from whatever was attacking their bodies.

"Grey. Grey, talk to me!"

She answered him with a whimper. Her eyes remained tightly squeezed shut, her lips pressed together. Sweat ran down her face.

"Grey, the enemy lifted off. They've gone back to Bellac. Now's our chance to see if the engines are alive. We can't stay on this rock!"

"Rowe..."

"Come on! Help me, Grey!" He grabbed her arm, and again he saw the bright, intense glow shine from within. Bone and blood vessels were outlined as clearly as if the outer tissue never existed. It had to be because of their power, he told himself. Something about their power also had to be causing them this ungodly burning inside their bodies.

They struggled to their feet and made it over to the flit where Rowe managed to boost her into the cockpit. "Fire up the engines!" he yelled as he circled the ship, detaching the cables and hoses which had been feeding the bubbled shelter. The low roar of the engines coming on line lifted his spirits. There was hope they might get back after all.

After double checking to make sure all was secure and ready for takeoff, Rowe finally climbed up into the cockpit and buckled himself in. In front of him Grey sat with her hands on the trigger pins, but her head leaned forward. The pain was still with them, but its forcefulness had diminished.

He reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder. As he expected, the white glare of light reappeared. Although he had been prepared to see it, its unearthly glow was still disconcerting. In the next instant Rowe realized that every time they connected, every time the light appeared, some of

the pain evaporated. He was unaware of Grey's reaction until she reached up and placed a gloved hand on top of his. The shining bled through her hand as well, filling the entire cockpit with an opalescent brightness.

"Rowe, what's happening?" Her voice sounded stronger.

"I think it's our power. I think it's ... evolving."

"Huh?"

Reluctantly he released her shoulder and all contact with her. The glow vanished, leaving them in inky darkness. "Let's get the hell out of here. Heading up. Watch your sights, Grey. This is going to be some dirty flying with that makeshift tail."

The flit wobbled as it lifted off its struts. Rowe fought the controls. They were both flying blind without their boards or any navigational cues. Even worse, they had no idea how much energy was in their shields. If the C'u Govin managed to get in a good burst, and the ship was below the minimum efficiency range, the burst could literally melt them out of space.

They pulled away from the moon. Below, the shelter shrunk into a tiny spot until it disappeared from sight. Grey sighed deeply with regret. "I'm going to miss that place."

Tiny threads of comprehension filtered through to him. It wasn't the crash or the emergency survival she was going to miss. It was the fact that the tiny bubble had become their intimate sanctuary. Their love nest where they'd finally found pleasure and strength in each other. Rowe smiled. Oddly enough, he was going to miss it, too.

"Trust your instincts, Grey. Don't fire unless you're dead certain you'll hit a vital organ."

"All right. Just be sure to keep us out of range of that damn thing's sights."

Following the C'u Govin ship wasn't difficult. Its rhontanium-burning engines left a wake a blind man could track. The enemy didn't care about or even notice the minuscule ship trailing behind it.

There had been no way for Rowe to repair the communications band on the flit. They were heading back to Bellac, unable to call down to the planet to warn them or even to let them know he and Grey were still alive. At least they could join in the fight once the enemy was sighted and the fleet assembled.

"Grey, how are you doing?" He knew she would understand his question.

"The pain's not so bad. Was it because of that light? Did the light bleed it out of us?"

Did the light bleed it out of us? A very apropos description, Rowe realized. "It either bled it out of us, or it absorbed the pain from our bodies."

"Absorbed it? Does that mean the light is from our power?"

"That's my guess." He saw her shifting in her seat. Again, he wished there was a way he could see her face from where he sat.

"Rowe, what is our power? What is that halo thing?"

"I think the halo is the way it manifests itself."

"Then why does it hurt so damn much? The teachers never told us about any pain. And when I watched the other mates in action, they didn't look like they're hurting. Why is it hurting us, Rowe?"

They were sticking right on the C'u Govin ship like space dust. In fact, it was very possible Rowe could slip the flit right up to the craft's weapons cowl and give Grey dead-zero access to their ports. It was tempting, but also suicidal if their shields were below capacity.

"I don't know the answer to that, Grey. Maybe the pain will eventually go away once we're able to learn how to correctly use our power."

"If we're able to learn about it," she replied bitterly.

Rowe bit his lip. She was right. If they managed to survive this attack and land back on Bellac, there was going to be hell to pay for becoming mates. For every law they broke, another law supported them. In an odd way Rowe was looking forward to the ruckus that would emerge from their union. There would be no doubt among the populace, especially from the other mated Synergians, that he and Grey were meant to be together. Synergistic matings could not be forced or faked. Neither could the power which resulted from their coupling.

Maybe some good would come out of this issue, he told himself. Maybe the Academy would see that the Five Year Law was wrong and be forced to rescind it. Or at least change it to a lengthier term. Either way, he prayed for him and Grey to remain together. That was all that mattered. It was all they wished for.

"Rowe?"

He jerked out of his reverie to find themselves rapidly advancing toward the enemy ship. The C'u Govin were slowing down as they reached Bellac's outer atmosphere. Bringing their flit nearer to the ship's pitted surface, Rowe felt

the barest hesitation in the engines. Damn, he wished he had his readout panel so he could get an idea where they were lacking!

"Engines cutting out?"

"Yeah," he answered with a chuckle. "Sorry. Didn't mean to imply it was something funny. I'm still getting used to the way we're able to read off each other." He heard her answering giggle.

"Keep your eyes peeled. I'm heading closer. The fleet should be responding by now."

"Will they be able to spot us without our communications band working?"

"Don't worry about that. Whoever eyes us first will have our signal on their panel. They'll let the War Room know we're back. It won't take long for them to realize we're incommunicado."

"Rowe?" Her voice had dropped even though she knew no one else could hear them.

"Yeah?" Like her, he lowered his voice.

"Just in case ... I love you."

"The last time you said that, we survived a direct blast. Maybe it's a good sign." He grinned and waited for her to answer when a light glinted off of something coming up behind them. "Fleet's here. Head's up, Grey!"

He kept the flit adhered to the enemy ship. With him no longer directing the fleet, Rowe surmised Ambercram and Girdy would be in charge. If that were true, he had an idea what plans the men would be using.

Within seconds a second flit had lined up beside the first one, which had placed itself in wing formation beside Rowe. At this distance he knew they could see the damage and cobbled repairs on A Master Red, and he could imagine what was being said over the communications bands.

"They're going with the wing formation, aren't they?" Grey whispered.

"Yeah. Hold your fire."

The C'u Govin ship bucked slightly, signaling the Synergian attack from below. Rowe kept his eyes directed at the ship across from him. It was too dark and too far away to see who was in the cockpit, but it either had to be A Master Blue or A Master Black.

The immense ship jumped again. The enemy knew the fleet had to be somewhere nearby. Rowe watched as the weapons turret ponderously swivelled around, looking for them.

"I have a target!"

"Not until they fire first," he snapped. "Go for their weapons."

Before the words were out of his mouth, the enemy fired upon the planet. A wide, golden ray sizzled past them. From where they were he couldn't tell what kind of damage was being inflicted. He started to yell for Grey to fire when she pulsed out a stream of plasma bombs. The opening in the enemy ship immediately flared, dissipated, then within seconds an explosion rocked the ship.

"Gotcha, you son of a bitch! Whoops!"

Rowe jerked the flit away from the enemy ship, rocketing backwards in case there were other repercussions. The suddenness of their release somersaulted them, and Rowe fought to bring the flit back under control. Behind and beside them the rest of the fleet resumed their formation. Then, as one, they advanced on the C'u Govin in a classic wing stance. Driving point-down like a barrage of deadly silver knives, the fleet dove, firing, intent on slicing into the ship. The wing formation would wedge itself into the ship, literally dividing it in two.

The weapons turret on the enemy craft swung back around to face the tight formation. Rowe could see a greenish glow building within the black depths of the ship, and in the next heartbeat he felt Grey mentally take his hands on the controls and tear them away from the pack.

"Grey!"

"The rays! The color of the rays! I understand now!" she screamed.

"What are you talking about?" He was fighting the flit again, struggling to bring it back around. The engines were giving him fits again, nearly stalling at one point until he poured more power into them. Through their headsets he could sense Grey trying to calm down enough to answer him.

"The color of the rays! Different colors for different intensities!"

Rowe dropped the flit into a dive, out of the line of direct fire. "Explain!"

"The yellow rays are destructive! The white I think is from their shields! But it's the green rays that kill, Rowe! The green

color dissolves! We have to let the fleet know to avoid the green rays!" Her terror was a harsh, foul-tasting phlegm coating his tongue, clogging his throat with more rising fear. Even as she spoke again, he knew what she meant. "If they hit us with the green, the shields will destruct on contact!"

At optimum setting, the shields on the flits always held, had always managed to deflect back whatever the enemy threw at them. This time, however, the enemy had come up with a weapon that didn't need to puncture the shields. It could completely disintegrate the entire fleet on contact.

Memory of their last encounter, and the sight of five ships sparkling out of existence, came back to him. Without thinking, he took the spacecraft into another power dive and aimed directly for the nearest flit. He didn't recognize the helmeted head or the insignia on the ship, but he gave the cockpit a warning signal as they passed by. The pilot gave an acknowledgment and pulled away in the opposite direction. Rowe cursed softly, detesting the fact that they couldn't communicate with the rest of the fleet.

With the fleet pulling away, the C'u Govin ship turned its attention back to the barrage of power coming from the planet. The Synergians were hitting the enemy vessel with everything they had.

"Rowe. What if we go over the top?"

"What?"

Even as he asked he could envision what she meant. Bellac was attacking the bottom of the ship, which was the most heavily shielded section. The fleet was rearranging itself into a pincer formation meant to come at the enemy from both

sides simultaneously. Unless the C'u Govin had weapons all the way around the ship, there was no way it could defend itself from such a coordinated attack.

Once the fleet started their advance, one very vital area on the big spacecraft would still be vulnerable—the cowl. The overhanging section protecting the enemy's weapons. In his mind's eye Rowe could see himself taking the flit up the back of the protuberance and across the top until they could peer over the edge of the cowl, straight into the mouth of the weapons bridge. It was risky and extremely dangerous, but it might work if Grey could drop one fully charged string of plasma bombs into the bay. Rowe had no doubt she could manage it, but first he had to get them in that position.

"I gotcha, my love. I'll bring us over. When you're ready, go for it," he whispered, already bringing the flit around and bypassing the fleet. He knew the commanding leaders would wonder what in hell had gotten into him, but it wouldn't take long before they understood his plan of action. To the fleet his move would appear suicidal, and it would be if he and Grey were not mates. But they were, and every cell in their bodies was ramped up a thousand percent. Senses, thoughts, muscular coordination—everything in him and Grey had reached a point where they were moving and thinking as one entity. A Synergized, fused whole.

The flit lifted smoothly, although Rowe had to fight the stabilizers. Muttering under his breath, he struggled to keep the craft from listing. The repairs weren't holding as well as he wished. Then again, he'd had to make do with what he had on hand to re-fit what had originally been built for the wings

onto the tail section, with a partly demolished one, at that. It was a miracle the repairs were still holding together as well as they were.

In front he was aware that Grey knew everything going on behind her. A gentle touch in his chest let him know she was there for him, no matter what the outcome. Rowe sniffed, took a deep, calming breath, and brought the flit up behind the enemy ship.

The fleet advanced from both sides. Already the C'u Govin were changing their strategy, tipping the ship to give the fleet less room to maneuver. Three plans down the drain, Rowe realized, curious to know what the fleet leaders would do next. If it was his call, Rowe would pull everyone down to planet level and combine forces with the Synergians to hit the enemy with everything they had.

To his surprise he saw the tiny ships circling around past him, giving him plenty of room to do what he intended and being especially careful not to give away his position. They were heading for planet-side, leaving him alone. In the back of his mind Rowe knew the pilots were wishing him luck.

The enemy continued to fire the golden yellow rays in wide, thin beams, sweeping over the planet in slow, steady arcs. Their intent was clear—take down as much of the populace as possible and trust that the ship withstood the brunt of the attack. Sooner or later they expected the Synergians and the fleet to give up. But would the C'u Govin allow the survivors to regroup and leave while there was still the possibility of survival elsewhere?

This was Bellac's last stand. An enemy they finally couldn't beat had challenged them and the legendary Synergian forces, and was winning. But not without the planet giving as good a fight as they could.

Somehow Rowe knew that his and Grey's future rested on what they could do to slow the C'u Govin. Somehow they had to either slow the enemy or damage the enemy—anything that might give the Synergians that edge that would tilt defeat in the C'u Govin's direction.

The flit eased over the top of the cowl. Being such a tiny ship, the enemy had made the mistake of thinking small size meant small power. Even the youngest student knew that the atom was among the smallest bits of matter in the world, yet it contained the most devastating magnitude when it came to power.

One plasma bomb the size of a thumbnail could wipe out the entire Academy. Figuratively, a string of a hundred plasma bombs could be held in one hand. Flits carried the strings in bundles of a thousand.

"How many bombs do you think we have left?" he asked aloud.

"Maybe a couple hundred strings," she estimated. It was her best guess without the console to verify. "Put them all in?"

Rowe didn't answer. He didn't need to. Grey already understood.

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Chapter 23

Halo

"They're moving again."

I know, he mentally acknowledged as he fought to bring the little flit into firing position. She didn't mean just the C'u Govin, but the entire fleet, as well. Fighting in space was nothing like warfare on solid ground. Space was liquid, ever-changing and never constant, and moving in all three-dimensional directions, which was why there had to be at least a dozen or more attack plans always available to call up on the screens. Unfortunately in his case, their screens had been burnt into blackness.

The window left for him to get the flit over the enemy's cowl was quickly growing narrower. If there was any chance for Grey to dump the last of their ammunition, they had to take it now.

Rowe shoved the controls into forward while simultaneously hitting the brakes. The little fighter ship dutifully started to up-end itself until its nose was almost perpendicular to the edge of the cowl.

"Now, Grey, now!"

"A little more! A little more! Hold it! Wait!"

The sound of the weapons discharging was a string of loud pops, followed by shrill whines as the plasma bombs rotated through matter. The moment he knew she had emptied out their cache, Rowe tried to lift the craft off and away from the enemy ship. The flit wobbled but obeyed. However it

continued to move sluggishly, and Rowe could feel his control over the craft slowly deteriorating.

"Rowe, get us away from here!" Grey turned her head in his direction. Her panic slipped over him like a suit of ice.

"I'm trying! The engines are cutting out on me!" He struggled with the controls and pumped the engines for more power, but he knew it was a losing battle.

Grey slid out of her harness and dove underneath the console to see if there was anything she could do to bleed out a little more energy. After a handful of seconds she slid back into her seat. "I can't see anything! It's all fried!" she confessed, near tears.

Rowe chanced a glance out of the cockpit shield. The C'u Govin were maneuvering their ship for what looked to be a final strike. The cowl was partially visible from where he sat. Precious seconds ticked away as they prayed their shields would be strong enough.

"Hold on, Grey!"

The plasma bombs erupted in a beautiful array of oranges and reds. They were immediately followed by another rippling explosion that shredded the cowl, tearing off immense chunks of the hull with ease and tossing the fragments into space like confetti.

The force of the eruption slammed into the flit, hitting it at an angle and sending it spinning like an insane gyroscope. Rowe kept his eyes tightly shut to keep from becoming dizzy. With both feet firmly planted on the tail and wing controls, he fought to bring the craft under control. The flit rotated, bucked, and finally ended up facing the enemy ship.

His muscles were reduced to soft putty. Every joint ached from the intense strain of trying to keep the ship level, but it still wasn't enough. They had been lucky. The enemy ship had absorbed most of the plasma blast, but that didn't necessarily mean they were defeated. Worse, the flit was still too damn close.

"Rowe? Are you okay?" Grey's voice was shaky but without any hint of pain.

"I'm fighting the engines. I think they were more damaged in that first encounter than I realized. How about you?"

He saw her head nod. "I almost threw up, but I'm all right now."

"Was that all we had?"

"All of it," Grey acknowledged. "Our weapons cache is empty, and I have no idea what the status is on our shields. What little power we had in them probably got punched out with that last explosion."

That was exactly what he was thinking. Gritting his teeth, Rowe continued to struggle with the slowly responding flit. It was like paddling in thick soup; their movement could be measured in inches rather than in miles.

"Rowe?"

The sudden panic in her voice made him look up from the throttles. The enemy had managed to turn their ship around enough to where the weapons section could be seen. Evidence of the plasma blast reflected raw and ugly in the light of the double sun. Debris and dead bodies could be seen floating around the C'u Govin's hull. For the first time Rowe

could see what their adversary looked like. Amid the destruction it wasn't pretty.

"We failed."

He glanced over at the back of Grey's seat. Like him she was watching the enormous ship swinging itself around to face them. And, like him, she had reached the same conclusion. Their attack had brought a lot of damage to the enemy. Unfortunately, whatever the C'u Govin had been using to create and fire the yellowish dispersal beam over the planet was not the same weapon that spouted the more destructive green rays. Like Grey, Rowe had mistakenly believed the rays were different settings fired from the same weapon, and that mistake was now going to cost them. As the ship continued to turn they were finally able to see inside the weapons bay of the enemy craft. One entire area was demolished beyond recognition, but one section, although damaged, still remained viable.

With their golden ray destroyed, the C'u Govin were unable to fire upon Bellac. The golden ray was meant to bring the planet to its knees. The green ray, however, would totally disintegrate it. If the enemy used the green ray on the planet, it would completely obliterate the orb from existence. Every resource, every rich treasure offered by the planet would disappear, leaving the enemy with nothing to gain in plunder.

With the big ship coming around to face the fleet of tiny flits, Rowe knew what the C'u Govin planned to do. They would use their only weapon left to eradicate the entire fleet, then slowly descend to Bellac's surface to finish what they started. The green ray would be used sparingly in the hope

that, in the end, enough of the planet's natural resources would be left for them to take.

To Rowe it was clear the Synergians would be the first target of the C'u Govin's green ray. The enemy would not have any second thoughts about permanently removing the last remaining weapons on the planet.

During the past few minutes it had become evident the Synergians were tiring. Their powers and weapons were weaker, and salvos were coming fewer and farther apart than they had at the beginning. What Rowe and Grey had done had not been enough to stop the enemy, or even weaken it enough to allow the Synergians to gain victory.

Grey was right. They had failed.

The flit shuddered once more in his hands. A second later the familiar low roar beneath them cut out and ceased altogether. Rowe sat, stunned.

"The engines—!"

The rudders were frozen. Without any power, they were floating helplessly in space. Rowe tried to move the controls, but they were locked.

"Rowe?" Grey whispered again, her fear growing. "Rowe, what happened to the engines?"

"We lost power."

"How?"

"I don't know how!" He struggled to bring the flit back online but nothing responded. The ship was literally dead.

Without the engines to keep them moving, they couldn't stay stabilized, either. Outside the cockpit window the C'u Govin ship appeared to be floating across their main screen,

but Rowe knew it was an illusion. It was the flit that was moving.

A glitter caught their attention. A brief sparkle the color of grass. Rowe heard Grey gasp, and he sensed her fighting her rising fear.

"They're going to take us out," she whispered, unable to hide her feelings from him.

"Yeah, they are."

The rest of the fleet had to be somewhere behind them. Without their screens neither he nor Grey could see the other flits, but Rowe knew at a time like this the fleet would place itself between the enemy and the planet as a last-ditch effort to try and defeat the C'u Govin. When he and Grey had made their advance on the enemy, the others had faded back to give them room. The ploy almost worked.

"Rowe?"

The enemy was facing them now. The green glow glittered eerily within the remains of the weapons bay.

"Rowe, I don't want to die!"

He unbuckled his harness and slid up behind her seat. Wrapping his arms around her, he adjusted his helmet until their heads were side-by-side. She was trembling as she clasped his arms with her hands.

"At least we found each other," he murmured. "At least we knew some of the happiness the others have found. I can't ... I couldn't have wished for anything more."

Grey sniffed and gave his arms a squeeze. She was crying unashamedly. "I love you, Rowe."

"I love you, Grey."

The greenish beam intensified. Within the bowels of the enemy ship they could see how much damage they had done. At least Rowe could find some satisfaction in knowing they had accomplished that small bit.

He gave her another tight hug. The whitish glow he halfway expected did not appear. Rowe felt some disappointment, but regardless they would not let each other go. At this final moment in time they would be together, as close as was possible.

"You sure there's nothing left in the weapons cache?" he asked, needing to keep some kind of communication going. The silence would destroy them faster than the green ray.

Grey gave a tiny shake of her head. "Nothing."

"Not even the pulse rifles?"

He felt her stiffen slightly. "I haven't tried the pulse rifles."

"See if they're online. Use everything. Empty out the ship."

"Pulse rifles won't have any effect on that ray," she started to protest. He cut her off before she could go any further.

"Let's give them everything we have, Grey."

He watched as she punched the buttons which would divert the artillery over to the pulse rifles. Grey was right; the rifles would be ineffective against the C'u Govin. Normally they were used for target practice and during simulation.

Gripping the triggers, Grey sighted into the black maw of the enemy ship and picked her targets. The rifles spit, and Rowe felt some justification when the blister ports crumpled, exposing more of the interior of the ship to space. The slight wavering around the punctured ports was evidence the ship was losing its precious atmosphere.

Good girl, he sent to her and felt her answering smile before he saw it.

She managed to get another half-dozen well-aimed shots in until the triggers clicked emptily. Grey thumbed the rifles again, but there was nothing left.

"I'm out."

In front of them the ship finally came to a halt. The weapons bay faced them dead-on, and the green glow of the enemy's most devastating weapon brightened.

Suddenly Grey screamed, hitting the dark console in helpless fury. "No! It's not right! I finally have you, and we have to die?" Weeping loudly, she beat the console again. "Two years, Rowe. I waited two whole damn years to finally get to meet you!"

Tears burned in his eyes as Rowe hugged her again. "I know, my love. It isn't fair. I searched for you for five years, always hoping. When they condemned me to wear the red, I can't begin to explain how that strips everything out of you. I felt less than a man, but I never stopped hoping. I think ... now that I think back, I believe I somehow knew you were out there. Most unmated give up by the time the five year rule comes around. I fought it. Something inside me refused to give up. Maybe it was because the gene knew you were out there waiting for me. I don't know. But you are and will forever be my whole life, Grey. No matter what happens to us, I will never stop loving you."

The green ray intensified. At any moment it would lash out at them and melt them out of space as if they had never existed.

Grey cried out again and beat her fists on the firing grips. Her rage bled into his, and the strength of her love flowed through him to where he felt as one with her in their mutual anger, fear, and grief. Rowe wished he could kiss her one last time. One final time.

"Fuck it." Letting her go, he reached up and removed his helmet, then leaned back over the front seat to un-do hers. Grey never questioned his decision. It was no longer necessary to worry about the dangers involved when piloting a ship in space without their protective gear. In fact, it was no longer necessary to worry about anything else in life.

Throwing an arm around her, Rowe reached for her face with his other hand and lifted her chin so he could look into her beautiful brown eyes. The last thing he wanted in life was the sight of her gazing back at him.

"I love you," he whispered, glad to finally be able to say it aloud where she could hear it directly and not through the helmet mics. "My Grey. My mate."

Her eyes never left his face. "My Rowe. My mate."

The kiss was tender. Rowe refused to let her go, refused to look back up at the enemy ship that would strike at any moment and obliterate them. He filled his lungs with her scent as he filled his senses with the feel of her mouth on his.

The pain was back, centered in his chest before it flowed out of him. But this time it burned cold. And it felt ... indescribably fantastic. Grey whimpered into his mouth, and he barely opened his eyes to see the glow was back.

His eyes widened and he lifted his lips from hers.

The shining light was exuding from their pores, pressing out through the spacecraft, past the flimsy exterior until they were surrounded by it. Faintly Rowe heard Grey say something, but the sound was distant and muffled.

The whiteness continued to expand until they were able to make out its shape—roundish, expanding wider as it left the ship, facing the enemy.

A halo.

"Rowe!"

He jerked as Grey screamed. The C'u Govin ship fired a lethal greenish beam of energy.

The halo hovering in front of their flit caught the beam almost dead center. There was a blinding flash of green that reached out in every direction...

...and then there was nothing.

The darkness of space temporarily blinded them as he and Grey stared at where the halo had been. At where the halo had...

"It absorbed the ray," Grey uttered in shock. "Rowe, it absorbed the ray!"

"Yes, but it was also destroyed." He immediately hunched over the back of her seat and embraced her again. "Again, Grey. Let's see if we can do it again!"

Her mouth was back, hungrily seeking his lips. Rowe felt himself succumbing to the perfection of her kiss, at the soft texture at the corners of her mouth, at the way her tongue sought his. He could also feel his body reaching for hers until his erection nudged the back of the seat.

The ring of light lifted away from them like the first one had. It floated freely through the tiny cockpit and out into the void of space, placing itself directly in the path of the enemy's weapon.

"Will it toward them, Grey. See if we can will the halo toward the ship!"

She buried her face in the crook of his arm and focused all her energy on the searing bright circle protecting them. Rowe's lips found her lock of golden hair and kissed it as his arms tightened around her. Silently he counted the seconds. On ten, he opened his eyes.

The halo had advanced closer to the ship. As they looked up, the C'u Govin fired again. The flare was so intense he and Grey were forced to cover their eyes. But when the blinding light disappeared, so did the ring of white light.

Grey swallowed thickly. "I don't understand, Rowe. How are we doing that?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. Our power is keeping us alive, and right now that's all that matters. Again, Grey, but this time let's throw everything we have at them. Let's see what happens when one of those halos touches the enemy ship."

In the back of his mind Rowe estimated the amount of energy contained in each halo. The first one had been weaker. They had produced it as they kissed. Yet the second one had been stronger, and to create it both he and Grey had felt the first stirrings of desire. That could only mean that the halos formed as their bodies were seeking that purest union.

Grey watched, mouth open in mute surprise, as Rowe undid her spacesuit and then undid his own latches. "Touch me," he ordered her.

"What?"

"Touch me and kiss me."

Despite the awkwardness and the limited amount of movement, Grey managed to reach inside his suit and find his growing erection. Her touch was almost electric, sending a shockwave clear up through his spine and into his brain.

He managed to find her breasts with one hand and arm. Slowly his other hand dipped between her legs and delved under the seat until his fingers parted her velvet lips. She was growing wetter at his touch, and without further thought Rowe dipped two fingers into her moist heat.

Beneath his mouth she gasped. Her nipple tightened into a hard button; her legs clamped around his wrist, entrapping him. Almost simultaneously he began to masturbate her as her hand did the same to him. Rowe dove into her mouth with his tongue, drawing hers between his lips so he could suck it and play with it.

Grey moaned, wriggling her hips against the mind-numbing torture being produced by his touch. Suddenly she broke away, gasping. "Oh, gods, Rowe. I want you in me!"

He lowered his face to seek her mouth once more when she shifted around. A moment later Grey's mouth closed over the head of his erection, and his brain froze at the sensation.

Rowe cried out softly. His hands and fingers continued to stroke her, building her toward her orgasm. At the same time she was quickly pumping him to his own conclusion. It would

be a race to see who would bring whom first. Unable to reach any of her delectable parts with his own mouth, he satisfied himself by burying his nose in the back of her neck and breathing in the scent of their combined musk, occasionally dropping soft kisses to the sweaty skin.

This time the ring of white light was so intense it filtered through his eyelids, almost blinding him with his eyes tightly shut. Grey let go of him and lifted her mouth away from his erection.

"Rowe?"

"Keep your eyes closed and keep doing what you're doing," he choked. Her mouth was killing him. If she'd had more expertise in what she was doing, he would have jacked off long before now. But her inexperience was keeping him hanging right on the rim, slowly driving him insane. Just when he thought he was about to burst, she changed tactics or techniques.

Or maybe she's sensing you coming and is instinctively switching to stop that rush.

Or maybe...

Rowe felt his hips jerk, shoving his engorged member deeper into her mouth. Her taut little nub quivered in his palm, and he automatically slipped a third finger into her tightening channel. Grey sobbed around his flesh.

Almost...

They were almost there...

Rowe opened his eyes. The halo flowed so close to the enemy ship it nearly brushed against it. The outer rings were immense, nearly three times larger than the last halo, and

definitely bigger than the enemy ship beside it. He started to bring it to Grey's attention when, without warning, their bodies exploded with joy.

The C'u Govin fired.

His body jerked. Grey cried out as her mouth released him.

The halo absorbed the green ray without any sign of being dispersed. It shimmered like a new star, casting its glow over the planet and surrounding space. Then, slowly but inexorably, it advanced on the C'u Govin.

The enemy ship was not prepared for the ring of whiteness descending over it. Later, when Rowe thought about what he'd witnessed, he wondered if the C'u Govin had ever faced an enemy that made them back away. Regardless, the halo floated down on top of the enemy craft.

They carefully detached themselves, and Grey pressed her forehead against the cockpit window to watch the C'u Govin struggle against a force it couldn't destroy. Silently they observed the halo bearing down on the big ship at an angle. Moments passed before they realized the C'u Govin weren't being destroyed or incinerated as they first believed. The huge craft was being pushed.

"Like Cadet Pollit."

Grey nodded silently.

The halo continued to press down on the C'u Govin slowly, slowly, but noticeably. Twice more the enemy fired their only weapon left, the green disintegration ray, but the halo never showed any sign of being affected.

"Where's it taking them?" she whispered.

Rowe glanced back in the direction the halo was taking. "It depends on how long the ring of light remains. The Sim Nu Abbala system is a little over three hundred light years in that direction, I think."

"Could it ... could that halo push the C'u Govin that far?"

"I don't know, Grey. I don't know, and I don't care as long as it prevents them from coming back." He looked over to see her glance up at him. Her mussed appearance reminded him they were still half-clothed and sweaty.

A movement overhead caught his attention. A flit was rushing toward them to render aide. Quickly and silently they both tucked themselves back inside their spacesuits and resumed their seats.

As Rowe notched his helmet into place, he wondered what kind of reception he and Grey would face when they arrived back at whatever was left of the Academy.

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Chapter 24

Arrest

Their disabled flit was towed back to Bellac and landed with the rest of the fleet amid what was left of the Academy. Little conversation passed between them during the seemingly endless trip back, but every now and then Rowe would feel Grey reaching out to him for comfort, which he gladly gave.

Once they reached the lower atmosphere, evidence of the C'u Govin's attacks was horrifyingly evident. Very little was left standing in the city and the Academy. The enemy's golden ray had blasted everything into rubble, including trees and anything that stood over a few feet high. Rowe could not begin to imagine how many lives had been lost in the carnage, or how many people remained trapped beneath the debris, waiting to be rescued.

The Academy itself was leveled. Makeshift tents had been erected to provide a modicum of shelter. The more Rowe saw of the devastation, the more he realized how close Bellac had come to defeat.

They were nearing the landing pad outside the destroyed fleet hangar when Grey finally spoke.

"Rowe, what will happen if they separate us?"

Leaning over, he placed a gloved hand on her shoulder. The contact was no longer padded by their suits. It was like touching her bare skin. "We have to ride this one as it comes. Hell, we've routed the C'u Govin. That has to account for

something." He chuckled, trying to make light of the situation.

He felt as well as heard her sigh as she reached up to clasp his hand. "Do you honestly think it'll make a difference? What about Master Tollcrid and those with him? Remember how he and his group of Synergy haters have been trying to downgrade our kind for the past few years?"

How could he forget? The head of the Academy board had made it very clear how he felt about the Synergians. For at least three decades Vallus Tollcrid had pounded into the populace's head that Synergians didn't deserve any special treatment outside of what other people received, and that the Academy was a flawed and extravagant example of over-indulgence to a few minorities. Although regular Bellacians continued to hero-worship the Synergians, Tollcrid had managed to sway many people's opinions. In addition, it was largely due to his efforts that the Academy continued to be ruled by those elected from the normal population, and no Synergian was allowed to serve on the Council.

This last encounter with the C'u Govin would definitely provide Tollcrid with enough vile fuel to push a few more weak-willed people over to his camp. On top of that, any time a Synergian broke a rule or law, he always demanded mandatory and maximum punishment, declaring non-preferential sentencing.

Rowe wondered how much longer the man would remain head of the Academy. Probably as long as he had minions like Deefast and Lang to protect his interests, and other wealthy and influential people from the general population who poured

their time, effort, and money into the coffers to keep him there.

By the time the fleet touched down, Rowe knew by the looks on the faces of the crowd gathered around the perimeter that they were aware of what had happened. They were also aware of who was involved and the implications.

Standing off to one side were several Synergians looking exhausted but still showing a commanding presence in their dark purple jumpsuits. Rowe stared at them, blinking several times to make sure he wasn't imagining what he saw.

They were glowing. Not brightly like a filament or flame, but from within, much like the soft luminescence he and Grey had witnessed whenever they began to exude their power. He turned to see Grey also staring at the union mates, her mouth slightly open in shock.

"Dommon told me one of the untaught secrets of Synergians is that mated couples glow. He could see the beginnings of it in me, and that's why he warned me to stay away from any mated Synergians at the beginning."

She glanced over at him. "That's why Master Obrion was so surprised. Not because he caught us kissing, but—"

"Because he saw the glow," Rowe finished with her in unison, adding a smile. "They'll know the truth even if the Academy and Tollcrid and his brotherhood try to deny it."

For the hundredth time Rowe wished they hadn't lost their communications band. Right now he was dying to know what the other fleet pilots were saying or had said during their descent back to Bellac.

Once the flits were docked and powered down, Rowe undid the cockpit roof and let the two halves fold down into the craft. Already he could hear the crowds cheering, but his focus remained on Grey and the small contingency waiting on the opposite side.

"Maybe it would be safer to go back up and face the C'u Govin," Grey quipped softly before she removed her helmet. Rowe snorted in answer as he removed his.

By now he knew the other mated Synergians could see him and Grey. They could see the soft fluorescence coming off of them, as well as the stark red color of his spacesuit. The two symbols clashed as loudly as exploding plasma bombs.

He climbed out of the disabled craft first, then gave his next action brief thought before shrugging it off. Screw them. What was done was done. From this point on there was no longer any need for him to follow the Five Year Law or to be ruled by its edicts. As Grey climbed out of the cockpit and onto the wing, he reached up to help her down to the ground. He could swear he heard several gasps of disbelief come from the assembly when he put his hands around her waist.

"Hey, Maine! Dammit, man, we thought you were space dust!" Arrie Bablinn was the first to run over to them and slap a hand across Rowe's back. His grin was so wide it nearly split his face in two. "Shit, where were you? Where did you land? How the hell did you manage to get A Master Red back together?"

"Fuck the repairs! What the hell was that ring of light we saw coming off your ship?" Keelo Darkke demanded, his smile

undeniable. "What happened, Maine? How'd you manage that?"

More of the flit pilots came over to congratulate them and to exclaim over the miracle of their survival. More than that, they wanted to know about the white halo they had seen take the C'u Govin out of their territorial space and literally shove the enemy ship away from their galaxy. Amid their questions Rowe kept a firm grip around Grey's waist. The simple act was a flagrant violation of the law, but he dared to find out who would be the first to comment on it. He didn't have to wait long.

"Rowe Maine."

Not Master, he realized as Master Plees approached the tight-knit group still standing on the landing platform. The other pilots parted to let the head academician through, along with the four other Academy members accompanying her.

The woman wore no robes of state except for the amulet marking her status. A cast protected her left arm, and she was also suffering burns to her shoulder and neck. A quick glance at the others behind her showed Rowe that very few had escaped some kind of injury. He locked eyes with the woman, refusing to back down.

"Master Plees."

She sighed, and for the first time Rowe realized she was not delighted to be carrying out this part of her job. "I must ask you three very important questions. You do understand the penalty if you lie, don't you?"

Rowe nodded. "I do."

"All right. My first question is this: Did you knowingly and willfully break your status as an Unmatched Synergian?"

"Yes, I did."

Around them the majority of the crowd responded. There was no way to tell if their response was positive or negative, or a mixture of both. Rowe tried to ignore them as a trickle of fear from Grey oozed under his skin.

Master Plees nodded, expecting that answer. "Second question, did you mate with Cadet Dansis?"

"Yes, I did."

Amid the crowd's whispering he sensed a growing anger, like a wall of unrest, coming from behind him. Quickly he shot a glance in that direction to see the mated Synergians intently but silently watching the tableau unfold. He frowned. They were obviously upset over the fact that a declared Unmatched had dared to break the laws and mate with a cadet. But they were also aware that he and Grey were Synergized. Unable to make sense of their irritation, he turned back around to find Master Plees waiting on him.

"Rowe Maine, my final question. Please be careful how you answer. Did you and Cadet Dansis provide the energy force which took out the C'u Govin spacecraft?"

"Yes, we did."

"Liar!" The scream came from Master Tollcrid standing behind Master Plees. "He's lying! There's no way mated Synergians can produce their powers anywhere other than on the ground!"

"I'm not lying," Rowe responded in a calmer tone of voice.

"We made those halos when we touched," Grey spoke out in their defense. Rowe knew she was trying to hold back and let him fend for them both. Technically she was innocent of any charges and would inevitably be allowed to go free. They both knew she had broken no laws; the bulk of the Academy's fury would be on his head. Still, he gave her waist a little squeeze to let her know he appreciated her support.

However, Master Tollcrid would not accept her word. "When you touched? There's no way you can touch each other in those dinky little machines!"

Grey snorted, a sound that was not lost among the others. Rowe fought the smile rising inside him. His mate may not be held accountable for their union, but she wasn't about to go quietly. He opened his mouth to reply when he caught the Academy head looking over his shoulder, behind him. Quickly Rowe glanced back in time to see Jonnas and his mate Daryan give a nod. He whipped around to catch Plees' response.

She knows. So ... the little secret of how mated Synergians identified others of their kind wasn't such a secret after all if Plees was aware of it. With a single affirmation Jonnas had confirmed Rowe's claim that he and Grey were mated and that it was very possible they had created the force which had insured the Bellacians' victory. He waited for the woman to make eye contact with him again. When she did, he made it very clear he knew what she had done. Plees never flinched.

"You do realize, Rowe Maine, that by admitting you've had sexual relations with Cadet Dansis, you've also admitted to breaking the law?"

Rowe grinned. "That's four questions, Master Plees, and she's no longer Cadet Dansis. She is Grey. We are Rowe and Grey now, mated Synergians."

This time he saw a flush of color rise into the woman's face. "You are nothing until the law allows it," she retorted quickly.

"The law does not control our Synergian gene!" Grey shot back. Her body had gone rigid with anger, her hands gripped into fists as she made a motion toward the woman. "We're mated, and there's nothing you or anyone in the Academy can do to deny it!"

Master Tollcrid raised an eyebrow at her. "Oh, we're not denying anything, Cadet Dansis," he calmly said, emphasizing her old rank and name in an attempt to discredit her new title. "We're saying that laws were broken. Rowe Maine will have to answer for his actions, and appropriate punishment will be served."

"Punishment?" Grey took another step, this time toward the man. Rowe tried to calm her.

"Grey, not here. Not now."

"But he's talking about punishing you!" she objected, angry tears already wetting her cheeks. "We saved his arrogant ass, and now he wants to punish us for breaking some fucking law that a non-Synergian decreed?"

"Grey."

"Cadet Dansis," Master Plees interjected.

Grey whirled on her. "I'm not Cadet Dansis anymore. Why won't you accept that? We are one. We're Rowe and Grey, got that? Rowe and Grey! Don't you realize the miracle that occurred today? Rowe and I crashed on the back side of that moon, and we should be dead. But we didn't die. We survived, and made love, and discovered something so miraculous it allowed us to come back here and help save our world! Since when do you punish someone for doing that?"

"We're not saying we're not grateful for what you did," Master Lang spoke out finally. "We're saying the proper steps weren't taken before you ... uhh ... decided to disregard the Five Year Law."

Rowe started to object and let Lang know he had gone to the Academy to ask for an extension when Master Showl stepped out from where he had been standing behind Tollcrid. "Why are we arguing this out here in front of witnesses? Let's take this inside one of the tents."

Rowe balked. "No! You made these accusations out in the open in front of witnesses, and you had me answer to them. Grey and I are allowed equal justice in defending ourselves, so I say 'no'. Until a reasonable solution is met, we remain outside!"

The rising murmur of support from the crowd was enough to force Showl to step back behind Tollcrid's shadow. Plees was not blind to that fact. "It would seem we are at an impasse, Rowe Maine."

"There's no impasse, Master Plees. All I'm asking is a fair and impartial jury of our peers to listen to and determine our outcome. Peers meaning other mated Synergians. I refuse to

bow to the laws set upon Synergians by non-Synergistic heads of state who haven't the foggiest idea of what it's like to exist in pain day after day because they were told it's against the law to make love to the woman who has become your entire life."

"Are you telling us you will no longer obey the laws and commands of the Academy?" Master Tollcrid asked, his eyes narrowed. The question hung in the air like an evil presence ready to pounce.

Mentally squaring his shoulders, Rowe answered, "I will no longer obey the laws and commands of the Academy as long as those laws are made by non-Synergians over the affects of Synergians and union mates."

Master Tollcrid stepped forward, past Plees. "Then we do have an impasse. And you, Rowe Maine, have just laid the foundation for you to be Dropped from the Academy."

"No!" Grey screamed and lunged forward at the academician. Rowe caught her before she could escape his hold. She sobbed and reached out to bury her face in his chest, either unaware or not caring how the others around took their intimate moment. "They want to Drop you, Rowe. They can't do that. They can't."

He tried to soothe her, stroking her back as he placed gentle kisses into her hair. "It was always a possibility," he reminded her.

"Then I'll come with you." Lifting her tear-stained face, she gazed at him with those brown eyes that would never cease to melt him. "If they Drop you, they'll have to Drop me, too."

"I know, Grey. I know, but hopefully it won't come to that."

Master Plees cleared her throat for their attention. "It's getting late. I know everyone is exhausted, and there's a tremendous amount of work ahead of us before Bellac is back the way it was. Rowe Maine, would you follow us, please?"

"Not without me," Grey started to protest.

From out of nowhere two Academy militia appeared, ready to separate the couple if force was the only other option. Rowe saw the two guards and decided not to challenge them at the moment. There was no way he would risk any harm coming to Grey. Turning her around so he could speak privately to her, he first brushed a strand of that golden streak out of her eyes. "Go find Dommon. He'll take care of you until I can get this mess straightened out."

"But..."

"Shh. Trust me, my love. We haven't lost yet."

She sniffed and gave an almost imperceptible nod. "Will I be able to come see you?"

"I don't know, but you can try." Pressing a kiss to her forehead, Rowe released her and took a step back to separate them. The guards took that as their cue and gestured for him to accompany them to where a small camp had been erected.

Grey's fear and loss followed him all the way to the small holding area where he was left to wait out the Academy's next move. Sitting on the tiny stool, Rowe buried his face in his hands and tried not to admit defeat.

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Chapter 25

Support

The hours dragged by. At some point a guard came to request Rowe's spacesuit. When Rowe explained he had nothing on underneath, the man left and soon returned with a jumpsuit. A red one. Rowe changed out, and the guard left without a word.

Very little noise penetrated through where he was being held. Exhausted, Rowe finally sat on the ground with his back to the wall of the shelter and tried to get some rest, but Grey's tearful face and the haunted look in her eyes kept floating before his face. Still, he managed to catch a few short moments of peace.

Two guards remained outside the semi-solid tent. Every so often he was aware of them changing out. Once he was left a tin of food and a bottle of water. Otherwise they left him alone. Ironically his prison was another bubble shelter similar to the one he had constructed on the moon, except for the plasticine interior. Apparently whoever had erected it had not been concerned about keeping the interior of the shelter airtight. With most of the buildings and domiciles destroyed by the C'u Govin, any sort of shelter was a luxury until new, more permanent habitats could be constructed.

It was growing dark when there came a shuffling noise at the hatch. Rowe dismissed it as another changing-out of the guards when a familiar figure entered the room, carrying a

lantern. Blinking against the sudden glare, Rowe stared at his friend.

"How are you doing?" Dommon asked.

"How's Grey? Did she seek you out like I told her to?"

The man nodded, taking a seat on the ground near him and placing the lantern between them. "Yeah. Thanks, Rowe. It meant a lot to me, knowing you trusted me with her safety. I won't let you down. She's doing all right, considering. Now tell me, how are you doing?"

"I'm worried," Rowe admitted. "I'm starting to feel that ache again." He slid his eyes over to his friend. "You know the one."

Dommon nodded. "Yeah. The one that feels like something's crawling all over your skin until it gets under it. That's when it starts to burn. Grey told me she was starting to feel that way, too. I'm sorry, Rowe."

"Don't be. This isn't your fault." Rowe gave a humorless little chuckle. "Hell, it's no one's fault. Grey and I are only experiencing what every other mated couple have felt ever since the first Synergian gene was discovered." He ran his palms over his face. "What's going on outside, Dommon? Talk to me."

He heard his friend groan, then laugh softly. "I don't know where to begin."

"How about when you found out Grey and I were still alive?" Rowe smiled. "Or maybe you want to start where we produced that halo and shoved the C'u Govin out of our territory."

Dommon's mouth dropped open. "You could have knocked us across the face, and we wouldn't have felt it!" he exclaimed. "You weren't shitting me when you said you'd already experienced a taste of your power!"

"Neither were you when you commented that, if our power was that strong already, what would it be like once Grey and I mated?" Rowe pointed out.

"Well..." Dommon crossed his legs and settled himself into a more comfortable position. "Let me start with the Academy and all the rumors coming out of there. Basically the whole damn place is divided between two camps, Plees and her followers, and Tollcrid and his minions."

"Grey and I figured as much. Let me guess. Plees is willing to let me go with a slap on the wrist, but Tollcrid wants my blood?"

Rowe watched as a dark look came over his friend's face. "It goes deeper than that, Rowe, and you're probably already aware of why. You broke the Five Year Law. That's enough to earn you some solid jail time. But you also saved Bellac."

"Me and Grey. But not without you guys, too."

"Granted, but we all know you two were our last hope. So how can the Academy punish you for doing that? If you hadn't broken the law, you and Grey wouldn't have been able to do what you did." Dommon sighed. "Gods, it gets even more complicated. At least four more declared Unmatched Synergians have demanded extensions. Plus two Unmatched have declared the Five Year Law to be detrimental to Synergian law, and have demanded it be abolished."

"How do the other union mates feel?" Rowe asked. "I sensed they were rather upset with me for violating my status."

Dommon frowned. "Better get those sensors checked, my friend, because they don't feel anything like that."

"What? But I—"

"We're not mad at you, Rowe. In fact we're damn proud of the way you stood by Grey. We're proud of the way you stayed beside her and held her, in spite of what Tollcrid and his idiots, or the Academy, would think. We're especially proud of the way you pressed the issue about non-Synergians making the laws to govern those of us with the gene. We've been fighting those fucking mandates for too long. It's about damn time we challenged their validity once and for all."

"Did you hear Tollcrid? Does the man realize I tried to go through the proper channels? I wonder if the Council ever got around to evaluating my request."

"It doesn't matter now."

Rowe shook his head. "No. You're right. It's a moot point." He fingered the leg of his jumpsuit as his mind wandered around other issues. "Dom, what'll happen to Grey if I'm sentenced?" He raised his face to find the older man staring at him from across the lantern. "The longer they keep us apart, the worse this pain is going to get."

"Yeah, it is, and they know that, but they're not us. They've never felt it eating away at them. And because they've never experienced the pain firsthand, they don't realize the damage they're causing by not acknowledging it. They're too wrapped up in their own self-importance to do

their job properly, and no one's been able to penetrate that thick skin."

He tried to take a deep breath. It was difficult, like trying to draw water through his nose. "Dom? Does the pain ever go away?"

"Yeah. After a while it does, but never the need. Or the love. The love never goes away," the man replied with a break in his voice.

The moment hung in the air, giving Rowe another glimpse into his friend's sorrow. Anger quickly surged through him. "They're breaking Law One," he flatly said.

"Yeah, they are, and that's the kicker."

"Kicker? How so?"

"It's like playing cards, Rowe," Dommon stated. "You have the winning hand, and they know that, but they're damned and determined to up the ante anyway. They can't afford to lose, but there's no way they can beat you. They know that someday someone or something's going to call their bluff, but they'll never admit to it. One way or another, they'll find a way to make you pay for the uprising that's about to occur. And when they make their announcement, all shit's going to explode big time, my friend."

Surprised, Rowe asked, "What do you mean?"

"I came tonight not just as a friend, but to let you know the Synergians, especially the mated ones, are backing you and Grey to the fullest extent of their powers. In all the history of Bellac we've never used our abilities against the Academy. But if they try to separate you and Grey for any

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reason, or for any length of time, I swear to you the Council is going to have to go through us first."

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Chapter 26

Trial

"They can't keep the public away," Dommon commented to Rowe the next morning.

Rowe stared in shock at the thousands surrounding the plaza where he had been brought. It was unheard of for a trial to be brought this soon to the forefront, but Dommon explained why.

"We Synergians wanted to bring this thing to a head now while the memory of your defeat of the C'u Govin was still fresh in everyone's mind. The public loves their heroes, and right now you and Grey are on their pedestal. Besides, they would've had to show it on the vid, since it is a public hearing. With the power grid destroyed, this was the Council's only other option."

"I don't want Grey exposed to the Council's hatred, especially Tollcrid's," Rowe demanded.

At the mention of her name, something inside his chest burst into brightness. Instinctively he sought her out amid the throng of mated Synergians gathered to one side of the plaza—the same plaza where they had taken their stand against the enemy ship that had almost destroyed them. He found her sitting next to Beddow and Aranda. She didn't try to hide the redness around her eyes, and he could sympathize why. Last night had been excruciatingly painful without being able to make love to each other and assuage

the pain. Even now the cramps continued to pile-drive into his abdomen. Without realizing it, Rowe gasped in agony.

"Withdrawals?"

"Yeah," Rowe managed to whisper. "I don't know how much longer Grey and I can stand this. I don't suppose the Council would give us a few moments alone in my detention area, do you?" He found a smile somewhere inside him and added it to the end of his remark. To his surprise, instead of answering him, Dommon left and disappeared into the crowd.

Bellacian law demanded that each accused be allowed to defend himself. By the same right, Rowe would be faced and questioned by only one person, the one who had brought charges against him. As the Council began to walk into view and take their places under the open tent, he wondered which of the Academy heads would accept the challenge. Of particular interest were the number of Academy guards taking a stance around the outer perimeter of the plaza. Rowe wondered if they were placed there to keep order among the crowd, or to protect the Council.

"Rowe."

He turned around to find his friend had brought Master Physician Kornwalt with him. Raising an eyebrow in question, Rowe waited to find out what Dommon had in mind.

"Let him examine you."

"Why?" Rowe asked as the physician removed a small scanner from his pocket.

"Just humor me," Dommon replied.

The scan took a few seconds. Afterwards Dommon thanked the man, and the physician disappeared back into the crowd.

"You know you're allowed to have one guidance counselor, don't you?" Dommon asked.

"Yeah. I was kind of hoping you would be my voice of reason," Rowe said.

Dommon started to reply when Master Verrett stepped forward to begin the proceedings. The crowd hushed into near-silence.

"We call this hearing into order. Due to unavoidable circumstances it cannot be held in the usual location. So we are requesting that all who are attending help keep the peace, or else you will be bodily removed from these proceedings and refused re-admittance." He paused to give the gathering a chance to settle further. When he felt they were ready, Verrett continued. "We are here this morning at the request of the Academy to determine the status of one recognized Synergian. Rowe Maine, will you please present yourself."

Rowe got to his feet and faced the Council. A warm hand almost living in its presence stroked him. Grey. Almost immediately he felt some of his shakiness vanish.

"State your name, current status, and rank."

"Master Rowe Maine. Master Fleet Leader. My current ordered status is Unmatched," he replied crisply, adding, "but my current physical status is mated."

The crowd burst into a low murmur, surprised by Rowe's remark. But he wanted to make it clear up front that there was no longer going to be any subversion or glossing over the specifics. Not anymore. He meant to challenge the Academy's authority once and for all. Either history and the norm would

be changed by the end of the trial, or the Synergians would forever lose any chance at fair and impartial representation.

More importantly, he could lose Grey, and that could not happen.

"Thank you," Master Verrett called out over the noise. He allowed a few more moments for the public to quiet down before he continued. "Who has brought charges against this man?"

"I have."

Stunned, Rowe watched as Master Plees rose from her seat and walked over to the small stool where she would be allowed to challenge. As the woman moved across the plaza, she refused to meet anyone's eyes, but kept her face averted to avoid the accusing faces.

"Rowe Maine, are you ready to proceed?"

"Yes."

"Master Plees, are you ready to proceed?"

"I am."

"Very well. Since you have temporarily abdicated your position as head of Council, it is the Academy's decision to appoint a temporary head to replace you. Who has been tapped to represent the Academy?"

This time when Master Tollcrid rose to accept, Rowe was not surprised. There was a nudge at his elbow and Dommon whispered, "Plees must be planning something. We always believed she was sympathetic to Synergians."

"So did I," Rowe replied. "It would have made more sense to me if Tollcrid took the accuser's seat instead of Plees."

Tollcrid came to the front and immediately began proceedings. "Master Plees, face the accused and inform him why he has been placed under arrest."

Plees remained seated due to her injuries but turned a stone-hard face to Rowe. "I accuse you of violating the Five Year Law. I accuse you of flagrant violation of Academy law, and I accuse you of manipulating circumstances in order to declassify yourself."

Rowe nodded to himself. It was all true. None of what she said was outside of what he had done, and he could not deny it.

"Rowe Maine, how do you answer?" Tollcrid demanded.

"Say 'false'!" Dommon hissed.

"I can't. Everything she says is true." He faced the Council. "It's true. All of it is true."

Tollcrid stumbled slightly as the crowd began to argue with itself. The guards quickly silenced the people.

"Then why are we having this trial?" Tollcrid asked, pale but peeved. "If everything you're being accused of is the truth, and you already accept that fact, then let's just call for a vote now and go immediately into the punishment phase!"

Rowe was instantly on his feet. "I claimed it was all true, but this trial is not about what I did, Master Tollcrid. This trial is not about me. It's about you! It's about the Academy and the Council! It's about what you forced me to do because you are not Synergized! Because no one on the Academy board or on the Council is a Synergian, and therefore any rule you make regarding my kind is unjust, unreasonable, and potentially life-threatening!" Pointing a finger directly at the

represented head of Council, he added, "I challenge you by association, Master Tollcrid, and I directly accuse the Council and the Academy of conspiracy. Right now, right this moment, you are in violation of Prime Law One, and I hold you personally responsible for any ramifications that arise as a result of your actions!"

The crowd roared its approval as Tollcrid almost fell backwards into his chair. Dommon grabbed Rowe's arm and squeezed. "Excellent start!" he almost had to yell in Rowe's ear. Rowe barely heard him above the melee. Instead he was focused on the warmth spreading through his chest, a warmth put there by the slender figure seated less than twenty yards away. Grey gave him a trembling smile. He returned it with a nod.

Across from him Master Plees remained seated. The expression on her face never changed, but Rowe got the impression that she had placed herself there deliberately. That her taking the accuser's chair was not so much because she was obligated as Council head, but because she had another agenda. What that agenda was, Rowe had no idea. Not at the moment, anyway.

The plaza finally settled enough for Tollcrid to resume. "Master Plees, present your case."

The woman nodded. "I call forth Obrion!"

Rowe jerked around to see the Synergian emerge from the cluster of union mates and walk over to stand on the small insignia that was equal distance between the Council, Plees, and Rowe.

"State your name, current status, and rank."

"Obrion, once Obrion Dumark. My current status is union mate to Doray, once Doray Sheef. Rank, mated Synergian."

"Mate Obrion, six nights ago the general public was called to an emergency meeting. On the way to attend you witnessed Rowe Maine and Cadet Dansis. Tell the Council what you witnessed," Plees demanded.

Turning back to the Council, the Synergian replied, "I witnessed Master Maine and Cadet Dansis kissing."

Giving the murmur time to quiet down, Plees asked, "Why did it take you two days to report the incident?"

"Because I also saw that they were mates."

The Synergian never turned to look at Rowe. Something was going on that Rowe didn't quite grasp, but knew that somehow the other Synergians were involved.

"How did you know Rowe Maine and Cadet Dansis were mates? Did they tell you?"

"No, they didn't tell me. They didn't have to tell me because they were glowing."

Plees glanced over at the Council, yet her questions remained directed at Obrion. "So, you're telling the Council that at that time Rowe Maine and Cadet Dansis were mated?"

A firm hand on his arm prevented Rowe from speaking out. Sliding his eyes over at Dommon, he caught the man giving him a tiny shake of his head.

"No, Master Plees," Obrion corrected. "I'm saying they had that glow that proved to me they were meant to be mated."

Master Tollcrid signaled for the floor. Plees deferred to him.

"Mate Obrion, explain what you mean by 'that glow'. What does it have to do with becoming a mate?"

"Everything, Master Tollcrid. True Synergian mates, when they initially discover each other, begin to emit a glow."

"So this glow is evident from the first time they consummate?" Tollcrid concluded.

"Usually, but if the attraction is strong, and if the possibility of their power is equally strong, sometimes that glow becomes evident before they consummate," Obrion explained.

"Then it's possible Rowe Maine and Cadet Dansis had already consummated their relationship by the time you saw this glow?"

Obrion shook his head. "No, Master Tollcrid. The glow was not a consummated light. It only proved they were meant to be mates, but that they hadn't sexually confirmed it."

The academician made a sound that made Rowe think the man wasn't quite believing everything he was being told. "Are you telling me that union mates have a glow before and after they consummate?"

"Sometimes before, yes."

"And that you saw the glow? You personally witnessed it?"

"Yes."

Tollcrid turned and gave Rowe a good hard stare. "Is Rowe Maine glowing now?"

Finally Obrion turned and looked his way. "Yes, he is. Quite strongly, in fact."

"And what about Cadet Dansis?"

"Her, too. Just as strongly."

"Is it the same kind of glow as you saw that night?"

"No. It's different. It's stronger, and it's different," Obrion quietly replied.

Tollcrid cleared his throat. "Frankly, Mate Obrion, I don't believe you."

Rowe sensed the Synergians rising to the forefront. Like a great wall of strength, they sat poised behind him, ready to shield and protect. Cutting his eyes to Dommon, the older man only smiled.

Master Plees stepped in. "Mate Obrion, why is it you can see this glow but we can't?"

"Because you're not a Synergian," he bluntly told her.

Plees nodded. "Can any Synergian see the glow?"

"Yes."

"Even un-mated Synergians?"

"Rarely. Only mated ones can."

"Do non-Synergians see the glow?"

"No. Nor do they have one."

"But that still doesn't explain why you waited two days before reporting what you saw. Why?"

"I had to make the decision whether to obey Academy law, or to violate Prime Law Two." As the discussion among the crowd began to rise, Plees dropped her last question at Obrion's feet. "As a Synergian, which law did you feel was more imperative to obey?"

"Prime Law Two," the man told her without hesitation.

The resulting uproar was enough for Tollcrid to call a temporary halt in the proceedings. Dommon and Rowe were

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returned to the prison shelter until the trial was ready to resume.

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Chapter 27

Symptoms

The pain was becoming more intense. Noon meal had been delivered for both of them, but Rowe was unable to eat more than a few bites.

"You look like shit."

Shakily lifting his head to look at this friend, Rowe said, "You've told me that before."

"Yeah, well, what are friends for?"

"How much longer are they going to make us wait?" Rowe wondered aloud, more to himself than to the man sitting next to him. "Gods ... Grey..."

"You've challenged the Council and the Academy in front of the general population. That's never been done before," Dommon said. "These trials have always been held behind Academy doors, even though the public's been able to watch them on the vids. It's not the same thing, though, being exposed to general sentiment, and the Council's beginning to realize that now. They're having to deal not just with this trial, but with the public's reaction, too." Moving closer, he laid a hand on Rowe's arm. "Hang in there, Rowe. I have a feeling this won't take much longer. Yes, you're guilty on all counts, but I think the public is finally understanding that the laws you're accused of breaking should never have been mandated in the first place."

The shelter door parted, and a guard stuck his head in to let them know the trial was resuming. Dommon helped Rowe

to his feet and offered his support back to the plaza and their assigned seats. Glancing around, Rowe could swear the crowd had grown in size. Behind him the mated Synergians remained stoic and unmoving. He couldn't see Grey in the cluster. Worse, he couldn't sense her. A thread of panic began to weave through him.

"I can't feel Grey," he whispered to Dommon as the academicians took their seats.

"Maybe she's asleep."

"That's a line of shit if I ever heard one," Rowe hissed back in anger. "You know fucking well we can still sense each other even when one of us is asleep!" The pain had made him short-tempered. Fortunately Dommon understood. The man started to reply when Master Verritt called the trial back to order. Dommon helped Rowe outside to resume their seats.

"Master Plees, call your next witness."

"I call forth Master Du Britt."

The man came forward from where he had been waiting at the periphery of the crowd. He gave Rowe a quick glance, then took his place to face Master Plees.

"State your name, current status, and rank."

"Master Du Britt. Assignment Master and trainer for the Fleet. Current rank, third in command behind Masters Maine, Ambercram, and Girdy."

"Master Britt, do you recall a recent incident where Rowe Maine asked you to change any specific assignments you had already made?"

"Yes, I do."

"Give us the details of that conversation."

"After the first attack by the C'u Govin, the Academy notified Fleet that regular training procedures were to be aborted or drastically shortened. There had been a graduation the day before, and the new trainees needed to be assigned immediately to their new posts.

"As per my duties, I gave the list of assignments to Master Maine so he could see which trainees had been designated for the Fleet. He remarked that Cadet Dansis had been relegated to tactical, but that he felt she belonged in Fleet instead."

"Did Rowe Maine specifically request that Cadet Dansis be assigned to him?"

"No. At first I argued why I had placed her in tactical until Master Maine pointed out that, although her scores in tactical were impeccable, she would be able to better use those skills in actual combat inside a flit. Once I thought about it, I realized he was right."

"How so?"

"Because the last time someone made those kinds of marks during the simulation trials, that person had been placed with the Fleet and excelled."

Rowe could swear he saw a tiny smile come over Master Plees' face. "The last time someone made those kinds of marks? You mean, the last time the trials were finished with perfect scores across the board?"

"Yes. Perfect scores across the board," Master Britt replied.

"And who was that person who accomplished that almost impossible feat before Cadet Dansis?"

"Master Rowe Maine, five years before."

The crowd responded, but not too loudly. Plees continued. "Let me clarify, then. Rowe Maine told you to put Cadet Dansis with Fleet, but not necessarily with him?"

"Not quite. He ordered me to change her over to Fleet. At the time, however, all training positions had been filled. There was no one left to take on Cadet Dansis' training."

"Did you tell that to Rowe Maine?"

"Yes."

"What did he say in response?"

"He said he would train her if there was no one else left. Personally, I felt it was an excellent solution, putting two top scorers together."

"Master Britt, is it possible that Rowe Maine already knew all the teaching slots were already filled when he asked you to re-assign Cadet Dansis? And that by ordering you to place her in fleet, that it was inevitable he would be able to have her with him ... his destined mate?"

"Gods, she's good," Rowe whispered to his friend. "Where is she headed with this, though?"

"Just wait," Dommon smiled.

"At the time, no. I never felt I was being manipulated when I placed Cadet Dansis with him, if that's what you're inferring. I believed putting Cadet Dansis, who had the highest marks in the most recent class of graduates, with Master Maine, who had obtained the same marks, was an excellent decision. I still do."

Master Plees nodded. "Council, any questions?"

Given a shake of the head by Master Tollcrid, Master Verritt said, "No. Master Britt, you are dismissed. Master Plees, your next witness."

"I call forth Master Vistrop!"

Rowe wasn't surprised to see the man leave the ranks of the Council to take his stance. Plees was nothing if not thorough.

"State your name, current status, and rank."

"Master Joen Vistrop. I am the people's elected representation on the Council. My rank is non-Synergian."

"Master Vistrop, you listened to Rowe Maine's request for an extension from the Five Year Law, correct?"

"Yes, I did."

"Why were you the one to hear his request?"

"The Academy gets a request for an extension from nearly every declared Unmatched Synergian once they reach the statute of limitations and become subject to the Five Year Law. In almost every case the request is for one year's grace. The members of the Council take turns listening to those requests and submitting them for approval. By luck of the draw, I got to hear Master Maine's request."

"For a year's extension?"

"To be honest, I was stunned to discover that he didn't want the year's extension. He wanted only one day's extension."

Master Plees shook her head as if in disbelief. "One day?"

"One day. When I asked him why that short amount of time, he said it was because he had already found his union mate."

"Cadet Dansis."

Vistrop shrugged. "He didn't mention her name. He only said that he didn't need any more time other than the one day so that they could consummate their union."

"So Rowe Maine requested one day's extension because he already knew who his mate was? What was the Academy's reply to his request?"

"We gave him no reply because we were attacked soon after by the C'u Govin, and Master Maine was presumed killed in action."

"I understand. But if Master Maine had not disappeared during the attack, do you believe the Academy would have granted him that one day's extension?"

"No."

Plees froze. "No? Why not?"

"The Five Year Law is non-negotiable," Vistrop said.

"Yet you said nearly every declared Unmatched Synergian has requested an extension."

"That's true."

"So, what you're telling me is that every person who's ever asked for an extension has been denied?"

"Yes."

"Has any other Unmatched requested just one day's extension, or told the Academy he or she had already found their mate?"

"No." Vistrop shook his head. "To my knowledge, Master Maine is the only person to ask for that amount of time and used that reason."

Plees glanced quickly at the Council. "In other words, Master Maine followed protocol before he and Cadet Dansis were blasted away from this world during their confrontation with the C'u Govin."

Vistrop nodded. "Yes, he did."

"Thank you, Master Vistrop. You are excused. I now call forth Master Dommon Ridge!"

To Rowe's shock, his friend didn't seem surprised to hear his name called. Numbly he watched the man take his stance on the insignia in the middle of the plaza.

"State your name, current status, and rank."

"Master Dommon Ridge. Once Dommon, mated to Casha, once Casha Tree. Currently Ammunitions and Weapons Master. Rank ... De-mated Synergian."

Plees gave a slight nod in his direction. "My condolences on the loss of your wife, Master Ridge. You were an excellent pair. Now, tell us, how long have you known Rowe Maine?"

"Since we were five years old. We were brought together as roommates when we entered the Academy learning facility. We've been friends ever since."

"That's quite a long time. You must have quite a history together."

"We do."

"Master Ridge, three days after Rowe Maine and Cadet Dansis disappeared during our struggle with the C'u Govin, you approached the Academy to file a report. For the public, tell us what that report consisted of."

"I reported that Maine and Dansis were Synergizing, and that it was possible they might still be alive after the attack."

"You wanted a search party to go out and hunt for them?"

"Yes. I suggested that if the search party took along a union mate, there might be a greater chance of finding them."

"Because you knew Rowe Maine and Cadet Dansis were on the verge of mating?"

"Inevitably, yes."

"How did you know? Did he tell you they were?"

"No. I knew because the pain was growing too intense."

"What pain?"

"The pain that occurs when true union mates are denied consummation. The same pain that occurs when mated Synergians are denied further consummation." Dommon's voice was tight and carried through the crowd. The plaza was hushed to the point where Rowe could hear the breeze fluttering overhead.

The cramps were relentless now. Bending over and clutching his stomach no longer helped. His skin was burning. His mouth was parched, his tongue swollen. It was worse than it had been before he and Grey had mated, and Rowe understood why. Again he looked up and searched for her where the Synergians were gathered, but again he couldn't see her. He sent out a silent thought to her, without success. The lack of even feeling her presence worried him.

"Master Ridge, what happens to union mates who are kept apart?" Master Plees quietly asked.

"They die," Dommon answered with the same quiet voice. "They die a very excruciating death, and the Academy and Council know that. Right at this moment the two people who

were instrumental in keeping our world from being overtaken are slowly dying because a governing panel of non-Synergians determined they broke a law mandated by non-Synergians who haven't the first inkling of what it's like to possess the gene!"

His voice had grown louder and more energetic as the noise from the crowd increased, threatening to drown him out. The guards tried to hush the gathering swell, without success. Rowe managed to look up after another brutal spasm to see Master Tollcrid signaling for the floor. It took another full minute for the crowd to settle enough so they could hear him.

"Master Ridge, according to your testimony you were aware that Rowe Maine planned to disregard his ranking and the Five Year Law, and mate anyway with Cadet Dansis?"

"Yes, I was aware of his plan."

"Yet you didn't report him, even though you knew there is a penalty for aiding and abetting this crime?"

Dommon expression turned hard. "In my opinion, there was no crime."

"No crime?" Tollcrid gasped. "Deliberately planning and breaking the Five Year Law isn't a crime?"

"In my opinion, the Five Year Law is unjustified and therefore doesn't exist."

Guards quickly pressed the crowd to remain silent. Tollcrid waved them off as an annoyance. "Do you realize that what you've just said makes you guilty of heresy?"

Dommon smiled. Rowe could see his friend's reaction grated on Tollcrid's nerves. "It does? Well, then, maybe you'd

better lock me up. And while you're at it, lock up every mated Synergian, too, because I'm only stating what we all feel. As of this day, we mated Synergians will no longer abide by any rule or point of law that contradicts with what we physically and mentally must endure."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Rowe felt the wall of force behind him come to the forefront. It swept over him and around him, and the pressure of their invisible touch relieved some of the agony he was going through.

Master Tollcrid stared in mute anger at the man standing a few feet away, and then he turned to Master Plees. "Call your next witness."

Rowe blinked. Dommon had challenged the Council, and they were ignoring the challenge? How was that possible? How could the Academy dismiss the man's declaration as if he hadn't said it?

"I call forth Master Physician Kornwalt!"

Dommon remained standing on the insignia. Seeing him still there, Tollcrid snapped, "You are dismissed, Master Ridge!"

Giving the man a mocking salute, Dommon walked back to take his seat next to Rowe. He stayed silent but gave Rowe a crooked grin. Something was definitely cooking, and Rowe could already smell it coming to a boil.

The physician emerged from the populace and took his stance.

"State your name, current status, and rank."

"Prad Kornwalt, Master Physician at the Synergian Academy. Rank, non-Synergian."

"Master Physician Kornwalt, is it your duty to take care of the health and well-being of the Synergians, especially the union mates?"

The man nodded. "Yes. I am specifically ordered to keep the mated Synergians in prime condition in the event of an attack on our world by outside enemy forces."

Plees nodded. "Did you recently examine Rowe Maine?"

"Yes, I did."

"Why?"

"Because he was exhibiting the signs of a mated Synergian going through withdrawal. I took samples to compare them with samples from other union mates to verify it."

"At the time did you believe Rowe Maine was mated?"

"Yes, and the tests confirmed he is."

Tollcrid called for the floor. Master Plees readily handed it over. The acting head of Council wasted no time making his opinion known. "Why did you call this witness, Master Plees? The Academy and Council have no reason to doubt that Rowe Maine and Cadet Dansis are mated. That's not the issue."

Plees got to her feet to face him. "Actually, it's very much the issue. May I continue questioning my witness?"

Waving her off, he resumed his seat. Plees nodded her thanks and turned back to the physician. "Master Physician Kornwalt, you said you took samples from Rowe Maine? Why?"

"Because the man is dying. Tests were made to see how much longer the man will survive without his union mate."

The crowd began to stir. There was no way Rowe could hide the pain he was enduring as he rocked on his seat.

"Tell the Council what your tests revealed."

"Master Maine has two days at the most. But if Cadet Dansis expires first, and my tests on her give her an eighty-two percent chance she will, that will cut Master Maine's survival time to a few hours."

...if Cadet Dansis expires first...

Cold horror filled him. Grey was dying. Her torture had to be more excruciating than his. That was why he couldn't feel her. He managed to grasp Dommon's arm. "Grey! I have to see her!"

Dommon laid a hand over the one clutching his arm. "You can't."

"She's dying, damn you! Is everyone so calloused that they won't let me see her?" Rowe started to sob when the overwhelming blanket of strength he had first felt coming from the gathered Synergians now became a warm ocean of calm that filled every pore. He felt himself drowning, yet he sensed their insistent need for him to hold on. It wouldn't be much longer. He had to hold on and trust them.

Across the plaza Master Plees continued. "Master Physician Kornwalt, over the past six years you have been working on a special project for the union mates, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"What kind of special project?"

"It's a synthetic form of the Synergian gene. Given to non-Synergians, they are able to experience what union mates feel and see."

"How successful is this synthetic form?"

"Quite successful," the man answered proudly.

Plees cocked her head at the physician. "Why would the Synergians want you to develop this synthetic gene? Wouldn't its success possibly put the union mates out of business? What I mean is, if the gene was successful, then we wouldn't need Synergians, would we?"

"Unfortunately, that's not the case, although I had looked into that possibility," the physician replied. "The synthetic gene is temporary. There's no way a non-Synergian's body can withstand it for any extended length of time."

Once more Master Tollcrid signaled to be heard. Given permission, he asked, "Then if the synthetic gene can't be used to make Synergians out of normal people, what's the purpose in having it? Why are we even having to listen to the physician's testimony?"

A subtle shifting occurred. Rowe felt the change even though he couldn't describe it. He started to ask Dommon when his friend re-directed his attention.

Master Physician Kornwalt shrugged. "With your permission," he said.

"Go ahead," Tollcrid replied, totally unprepared for what happened next. The physician walked over to the temporary head of Council, removing his hand from where it had been resting inside his jacket pocket. Tollcrid remained blind to the physician's actions until the man placed the hypodermic gun to his arm. The slight hiss was audible to everyone.

Tollcrid immediately stumbled backwards in surprise. "What in hell did you just do?"

"We're proving a point, Master Tollcrid," Master Plees calmly replied as the man began to crumple.

"Oh ... gods ... what's happening to me? What the fuck have you done to me?"

Rowe could see, in a few brief seconds, the man's face had turned pasty. Beads of sweat were already beginning to roll down his face as his expression went from shock to agony. The physician adjusted the hypo-gun to a different setting.

"What you're feeling is what union mates feel when they're separated. What you're going through is what Master Maine and Cadet Dansis were forced to endure before they consummated their union, and what they are suffering this very moment," Kornwalt explained.

"I don't believe you," Tollcrid managed to say.

"If I do not give you the antidote within the next few minutes, your body will collapse upon itself. The pain will grow more agonizing until your heart literally stops."

"Give me the antidote!"

"Not until you and the rest of the Council allow this man and woman to be reunited!"

"Guards!"

Plees threw up her hands. "Guards, hold!"

Tollcrid was incensed. "How ... dare you! You'd let me die?"

"We ask you the same question, Master Tollcrid," Plees replied calmly. "Are their lives so much less important than yours that you'd let them die?"

Tollcrid struggled to maintain his dignity and failed. "All right. Reunite them! And give me the fucking antidote!"

The ocean of strength that had been supporting him suddenly vanished. As Rowe felt his tenuous grip on

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consciousness sliding away he heard his friend's voice in his ear say, "We've won, Rowe! It's almost over!"

Almost over? He reached for reality and lost.

Grey...

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Chapter 28

Release

The simple touch of her hand was all it took to bring him back.

"Rowe?"

She saw the muscles in his face twitch as he mentally reached out for her. It took a while for him to finally open his eyes, but once he did, he sought her out. "Grey?"

He reached for her, oblivious of the fact that someone had placed them here inside a tent-like structure that resembled the shelter they'd used on the moon. Except there weren't any plasticine bubbles covering the interior. Instead, someone had brought in several blankets before laying them on top of the makeshift bed and removing their clothes.

The intense fire continued to burn inside her, but their intimate contact—skin upon skin—while they were unconscious seemed to alleviate some of the worst pain. The heavy cramps that felt like someone's fist was clutching and squeezing her intestines were gone. So was the inability to breathe or think. However, the raging need inside of her continued to pummel her abdomen. Her thighs were slick and sticky from waiting.

She was already leaning over him. When his hand sunk into her unkempt hair and pulled her face downward for a kiss, Grey naturally swung her leg over him and settled herself on top. Quickly she slid over the throbbing erection

that was seizing both their attentions as their mouths came together.

Hungrily they suckled on each other's tongues, letting their mutual heat settle over them like a soothing blanket. Before she was aware of it, Rowe had lifted his knees to provide a back support. His actions also raised her rump just enough to where he could slide his thickening pole into her.

Grey moaned loudly and broke from his kiss to sit up. He was helping her ride him while she slowly pumped him, letting the turgid glide of his hard, silky extension draw out the last remnants of pain. Up, down, up, down. Over and over, sliding up and out. She could feel her wetness increasing as they savored the excitement that was replacing the dissipating ache.

His large hands slid over her stomach, fingers playfully twirling the dark brown curls between her legs. "I can't tell where yours end and mine begin," he murmured in a hoarse voice, giving her a loving smile.

Grey giggled softly, bending over to give him another kiss. She felt his hot hands take her breasts, cupping them and tenderly squeezing them. When she finally broke away from his mouth, she let him guide her over him just enough to where he could sink one breast past his lips. His hands massaged and manipulated her firm flesh while he simultaneously drew hard on the stiffened nipple, sucking it and dragging his tongue over it until she whimpered.

"Rowe." She had to clutch his shoulders, her head thrown back as they both reveled in each other. Seeking each other's strengths as weariness and injuries faded.

Without warning, Rowe released her breasts and, grabbing her hips, rolled over until he was on top. Inside her mind she could sense what he wanted and how he needed her, and she positioned her body without him having to say it aloud. With her feet perched on either side of his neck, Rowe raised up on his knees to begin taking her with deep, penetrating thrusts.

Grey cried out, overwhelmed by the rapid climb already spiraling through her body. She clutched his hands where they were holding her and gave herself up to him. Their hunger clawed, ravenous and screaming for fulfillment. There was nothing she could do but to let him bury himself inside her as fast and as repeatedly as he could work her. The fire of need was replaced with the sizzling burn of sexual escalation. Rowe continued to ram himself into her, his face twisted in a mask of sexual gratification.

It overcame her suddenly and with a vengeance. Rowe continued to hammer into her, drawing out her bright orgasmic flare until she screamed. On and on he rode her, keeping her skating across that silvery edge of perfection for as long as possible. And when her body began to flutter back to the earth, his release rammed into her womb so deeply, she could swear she felt his seed filling her soul.

Breathing heavily, she knew when Rowe finally pulled out of her and eased down on the blankets beside her. His sweaty face cuddled along her shoulder, and he wrapped an arm around her waist to drag her against him. Sleep hung suspended over them, ready to descend and envelope.

The last thing she remembered before things got too foggy was his soft kiss on her earlobe. But she could have also

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sworn someone peeked in on them from the doorway as they succumbed to the healing darkness.

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Chapter 29

Reason

The world slowly came back, and it smelled like...
...food.

Grey opened her eyes the same time Rowe stirred beside her. Lifting herself up on one elbow, she stared past the tangled pool of blankets that made up their bed and saw a tray sitting just inside the hatch doorway. On the ground next to the tray were two more jumpsuits, clean and folded.

"Why do I smell sweet rolls?" a deep voice breathily asked along her neck. A kiss punctuated his sentence as he started to rouse himself.

"Someone left us breakfast."

"Breakfast?" Slowly he sat up next to her and ran his fingers through his tousled hair.

Grey stared at him lovingly, noting the strength in his face. "You know, you look devilishly handsome after a night of uninterrupted sex," she teased. "Makes me jealous."

He snorted in response and threw back the blanket covering them. "I wonder what time it is?"

"Don't ask me. These shelters don't come with windows or timepieces, remember?" Grabbing the blanket, she snuggled back underneath for warmth and watched as Rowe ambled over to glance at the tray's contents. Dammit, how could he look that handsome first thing in the morning? He also looked yummy standing there buck naked with those muscles. She

was particularly fond of the one very potent muscle sprouting between his legs.

"Spice rolls and a bottle of hot mulled templar juice." Without asking, he poured her a cup and took it back to her. Grey sat up to accept the mug, sipping the almost scalding drink as he went into the sanitary area.

"Are you coming in?" he called.

"Uh! You just gave me some juice!" She sipped again and winced. "Very hot juice."

"By the time our shower's over, it should be cooled enough."

Grey made an exasperated sound and propped the mug on the blankets before hurrying to join him. Their mutual shower was brief even though Rowe tried to make things more difficult than usual by pretending Grey's ample breasts were flit throttles. Laughing, she continuously batted his hands away, finally exiting the chamber without drying off first.

The sight of the figure standing inside the shelter's doorway made her freeze in shock. Rowe was immediately aware of her discomfort and joined her seconds later, handing her a towel to use as cover as well as for drying off.

"Forgive my intrusion," Master Plees asked. Her eyes raked over their naked bodies. Then, without comment, she bent down to pick up the clean jumpsuits and held them out. Grey took them, giving Rowe his. "I came to let you know we're resuming the trial within the hour."

"I thought a minister of the council would come to tell us that," Rowe commented as he dressed.

Plees nodded. "Normally, there would be, but I wanted to see for myself if you were capable of attending. That you weren't ... suffering."

"Why? If you're wanting to know if we're doing well, the answer is yes." Grey tilted her head as she squinted her eyes at the woman. "Why would you be concerned about our well-being? I thought you were trying to have us punished for breaking the Five Year Law?"

Rowe answered before the Council head could respond. "She's concerned because she's helping us to fight the Academy against unlawful representation, isn't that right, Master Plees? You're helping us by making it appear you're prosecuting us. It took Dom and I a while to catch on to what you were doing. Very unique strategy."

"In private I wish you would call me Cotrine. I was hoping my intentions weren't so obvious."

"They aren't," Rowe assured her, finishing with the last of his latches. "You knew Tollcrid would be tapped to head the Council if you stepped into the prosecutor's seat. What I can't figure out yet is how you managed to gather all those witnesses in so short a time." He paused, then smiled.

"Forget I asked. The union mates?"

The older woman nodded, a tiny smile gracing her lips.

"But why?" Grey insisted.

Plees stepped to one side and leaned back against the shelter wall. "My grandson, Branson, is fourteen months old. My daughter found out last month he's a Synergian. I've tried all my political life to keep the balance and peace between Synergians and non." She took a deep, shaky breath, and

crossed her arms over her chest. "Finding out Branson is one of you has drastically changed the way I look at things now." Giving Rowe a steady look, Plees said, "I watched you two trying to cope. I saw how the other mates tried to help. I couldn't begin to imagine how painful it was for you.... Pardon me for asking this, but is it true you fell in love with each other before you made love?"

"I've loved Rowe ever since I first saw him two years ago," Grey told her.

"Yes, it's true," Rowe confessed with a grin. "Once Dom held a mirror to my face and made me see for myself. I was in denial for so long after I met Grey and suspected she was my mate. I admit I fought the feelings."

Plees nodded. "We're always told a Synergian loves once for life. I want ... I want that for my grandson. But more than that, I want him to have every chance, every opportunity, to find his mate. I want to see the Five Year Law abolished, so that if his mate doesn't appear for five, or six, or gods know how many years it may take, that he'll still have that chance. There's an eight year difference between my husband and me—"

She stopped abruptly, lifting her face as if she heard something. Suddenly she was all-business—the brusque, efficient head of Council. "I'll inform the Council and Academy you're well enough to resume testimony." Without explaining her mood change, the woman vanished through the hatch.

Rowe turned to help Grey latch the upper portion of her jumpsuit. Grey did her best to look presentable before

someone came to escort them. "I'll have to sit with the union mates again, won't I?" she asked him, trying to catch his eye.

Frowning slightly, Rowe kept his head down as he struggled with the closures. "It's for the best. They'll protect you in case we're hit with another case of withdrawal. What's wrong with this jumpsuit?" He gave the neckline another tug.

Grey laughed, pulling on the jumpsuit. "Damn computers can never get my bosom sized right. They must think I'm a size smaller. Rowe?" She grabbed his hands that were combing her hair into a reasonable mess and forced him to look at her. "Rowe, will the Council make their decision today?"

"Most likely. There's a lot of cleanup and rebuilding facing our world. It's better all around to get this over with as soon as possible so that Bellac can get back to normal."

"What do you think they'll decide?" she whispered, trying to sense whether he was feeling hope or despair. He was shielding something from her, but she couldn't tell what, and it was irritating. "You think they're going to Drop you, don't you?"

When he opened his mouth to reply, she interrupted. "If they Drop you, I'm going to leave, too. If we're both out of the Academy, then we can still be together. Even if we can't fight as Synergians, we can still have a future together outside, out among the normals. Can't we, Rowe? Can't we?"

"It's ... never been done. But if I have you, if we can remain together, anything's possible." He leaned over to kiss her, his lips lingering softly against hers. "I'm no longer afraid of what they might do to me, Grey. Just be there waiting for

me, and we'll make a life together no matter where or how. Promise me you'll wait for me."

She pressed herself against him in a silent promise. If the Academy dropped them, banishing them from the protection and safety of the other Synergistic mates, they would be faced with having to find a livelihood among the regular populace. It was a terrifying thought, wondering what two trained flit pilots and tactical weapons experts would do to survive in the city. Where to live, where to work to earn an income...

There was an unobtrusive knock at the hatchway entrance. Rowe refused to remove his arms from around her as he ordered whoever it was to enter. This time one of the Council minions stuck his head inside to let them know their escorts were ready.

After sharing a final tender kiss, they exited the shelter hand-in-hand where they walked together back to the plaza. Grey felt Rowe watching her as she took a seat amid the other union mates, and his eyes never left her until the Council re-entered the plaza to resume the trial.

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Chapter 30

Truth

"The prosecution rests their case," Master Plees announced as soon as the Council had reconvened the trial. Master Tollcrid, looking fully recuperated from the injections, turned to Rowe.

"Rowe Maine, do you wish to call any witnesses in your defense?"

Grey watched as Rowe got to his feet and faced the Academy. "Yes, I do. I call forth Grey Dansis."

Her mouth must have dropped open because Lillien reached over to lift her chin. "Go," the older woman softly said, giving her arm a nudge. Tossing the Synergian a fearful glance, Grey felt a surge of reassurance coming from the other union mates. She pasted a smile on her face and rose to walk to the center of the plaza where the seat was waiting for her.

Her eyes never left the figure standing a few feet from the chair. In the morning light his red jumpsuit was almost a beacon, drawing everyone's attention to the couple. She couldn't sense anything coming from her mate. His face was calm, his emotions held in check. For the time being their bodies were in a state of satisfaction; the raging pain from yesterday was a memory easily forgotten.

Grey acknowledged the Council and took her seat. When she looked back over at Rowe, she noticed Dommon had joined him.

"State your name, current status, and rank."

She cleared her throat. "Grey, once Grey Dansis. My current status ... I used to be Cadet Dansis, Graduate Imperial in Tactical and Weapons, recently assigned to Fleet. Now I am union mate to Rowe, once Rowe Maine. Rank..." She smiled brightly. "Rank is mated Synergian."

Rowe briefly returned the smile, yet his eyes retained their warmth. "Grey, when did you first realize I may be your union mate?"

"Two years ago. I was outside during break time and decided to walk over to the dividing window. That's when I saw you for the first time. You were talking with some of the other cadets."

He nodded before turning around to face the public. "For the benefit of those of you who may not be familiar with the layout of the Academy, males and females stay in communal dorms until they reach the age of thirteen. Then they are divided into separate housing and schools for the rest of their education until graduation. The young men and women are not allowed to interact in any way, not even to talk face-to-face, until after they leave the Academy. There is a fifteen-foot wall separating the two schools, with large windows placed every few hundred feet. The males and females can observe each other, but any form of communication is forbidden."

Rowe turned back around to face her. "You said you spotted me talking with some other cadets two years ago?"

"Yes."

"Do you recall what color jumpsuit I was wearing at the time?"

Grey started. What color jumpsuit? "I-it wasn't red, if that's what you're asking," she managed to answer in surprise.

"That's correct," Rowe told her, glancing at the Council. "I was still in my cadet whites. You spotted me, and is that when you had your first inkling I might be your union mate?"

"Yes."

"How could you tell?"

"Because of the way I felt when I saw you. Because our teachers had told us what to look for in the way we reacted. After that first time, whenever I managed to catch a glimpse of you, I had those feelings again."

She watched as he lifted a hand to his lips. It was a habit he had whenever he was thinking, a habit she had become aware of when they were on the back side of the moon. The memory made her smile.

"Let me reiterate what you said. You knew I was destined to be your mate because the feelings you were getting and the reactions you were having were the same kinds of signals your teachers said to be watching for. Because those reactions would tell you when you had found your union mate, correct?"

"Exactly," she said, adding a nod.

"Then why didn't you approach me two years ago and let me know?"

Grey frowned at him. "I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"It wasn't allowed. We hadn't graduated yet so we couldn't meet."

"Who said it wasn't allowed?" Rowe pushed.

"Hell, I don't know! The rules said so!"

"Who made those rules that said we couldn't talk to each other?" he persisted. "Who made the rules that kept us apart for two years, until my time as a cadet ran out and I was relegated to Unmatched status?"

"I said I don't know," Grey repeated firmly, until a tiny spark came to light. "The Academy?"

The sudden silence was thick with expectation.

Rowe gave her a tiny smile. "Yes, Grey. The Academy."

A rush of noise flooded the plaza as the crowd reacted to the revelation. Grey watched her mate to see if she could tell what he was planning, but he was deliberately distancing himself from her. She trusted he knew what he was doing.

"Grey," he began again and waited for the public to hush. "Grey, prior to what happened after we crashed on the moon, did I at any time disregard the Five Year Law? And please remember that everything you say will be scrutinized for the truth."

She bit her lower lip, trying to think of a way to answer the question. Rowe gave her a steady look. "The truth, Grey."

"All right. Yes. Yes, you did."

Guards went immediately into action to keep down the noise. The wait wasn't long.

"Explain what you mean, Grey," he asked, sending her a slender thread of warmth to let her know she was doing well.

"Uhh ... when the first attack alarm went off, you burst into my apartment and grabbed my arm. Later, after those cadets tried to attack me, you kissed me. Then, when there was the all-call, and we had to go to the flight center, you kissed me again and held on to me. Three times. You disregarded the law three times."

Rowe turned his back on her to face the Council. "To elaborate, on the night of her graduation Grey took a sleeping aid. When the C'u Govin first attacked, I admit to needing to see to her safety first before heading for the fleet hangar as I should have. I had to grab her to wake her enough so she would seek shelter."

Master Tollcrid signaled to comment. "Did you know she had taken a sleeping aid before you went to see if she had left the dorms?"

"No, I didn't. It's ... somehow I must have known. I realize that now. Our tenuous connection let me know I had to awaken her, or else she could have suffered injury during the attack."

Tollcrid waved for him to continue.

"The second time I touched her, three cadets were on the verge of raping her. They were intent on revenge for a past incident involving Grey. They had approached her and disregarded Law Three by their actions against her at the graduation reception. I stopped them and had them placed in custody, but they managed to escape detention during the first attack." Rowe paused for a second. "I was heading home when I noticed one of the cadets staring out of her apartment

window. I went to stop them, and in the process Grey and I had our first indication of what our power entailed."

"What happened?" Master Plees interrupted. She was out of line by not following protocol, but no one called her on it.

"I was on the verge of beating one cadet to a pulp when he pulled out a paralysis pistol and fired. Grey's hand was on my wrist. From out of nowhere we saw this halo of white light fly from my fist and strike the cadet in the chest. It struck him so hard he was thrown against the wall on the opposite side of the room. It was after that when I kissed her for the first time."

"Why?" Tollcrid interceded.

Grey hurried to answer. "Our teachers tell us that if a man and woman believe they're meant to be mates, and the couple cannot or are unable to consummate at that time, their first kiss is just as reliable in letting them know the truth." The moment the plaza exploded in chaos, she realized she had said more than she should have.

Yelling over the fracas, Tollcrid demanded, "Are you saying the debauchery and sexual escapades that occur right after graduation are unnecessary? That a simple kiss can make the same determination?"

"That 'debauchery', as you call it, occurs because of the unbending rules and regulations the Academy has placed upon the students!" Rowe growled back.

"You don't see normal children having orgies after graduating!" Tollcrid barked angrily.

"Non-Synergian children are not placed under the kind of stringent regulations we're made to follow!" He started to say

more when Dommon stepped up to him and whispered in his ear. Grey could feel Rowe's temper soften. After another moment, he shook his head and went back to his seat nearby, leaving Dommon to take over the questioning. She reached for him mentally when his apology drifted into her head.

My fault.

Hush. She flashed him a smile. He gave one back, then switched his attention to Dommon. By that time the crowd had calmed down enough to continue.

"Grey."

"Yes, Master Ridge?"

"Prior to that first time Rowe touched you to awaken you from your drug-induced stupor, did he make any advancements toward you?"

"No."

"Do you have any idea when Rowe first noticed you, then? When did he first begin to believe you might be his mate?"

This one was going to be simple to answer. During their time on the moon, she and Rowe had spent a lot of after-sex time talking and getting to know each other better. "He first noticed me during the graduation ceremony. I,uhh, I was staring at him, and he spotted me."

"You were staring at him?"

"Yeah. Ever since that time two years ago, I've watched him whenever I could. Only this time he saw me looking at him, so he looked back."

"Did he approach you after that?"

"No. Not until Cadet ... not until those three cadets came up to me and started intimidating me, trying to get me to have sex with them."

"So, it wasn't until you were in trouble that he finally came over to you?"

"Yes."

"What happened after he sent the cadets to detention?"

"I told him I wanted to go back to my dorm and go to bed. He offered to walk me there to make sure I arrived safely."

"That is how he knew what apartment you were in." Dommon crossed his arms over his chest. "At any time during this walk, did either of you bring up the possibility that you might be union mates?"

"No."

"When did you finally discuss it?"

"After the first attack by the C'u Govin. The three cadets broke into my apartment and tried to rape me. Rowe came into the room and stopped them, and that's when we saw the first sign of our power together."

"And after that he kissed you?"

Grey shrugged. "He didn't kiss me. We kissed each other. It was mutual."

"What do you mean, it was mutual?"

"I mean by that time my body was reacting to his, and his was reacting to mine. So we both kissed to find out if we were meant to be mates." In the back of her mind she could remember the feel of his erection desperately seeking access to her vagina. How he ground it against her and almost into

her as their mouths sealed. A flush of heat crept up into her face, but Dommon pretended to ignore it.

"You kissed, and that's when you both realized the truth. So the kiss behind flight central, the one Obrion witnessed, was a simple mate's kiss, correct?"

Grey shook her head. "I don't know what a mate's kiss is." Her remark got a titter of laughter from the gathering of union mates.

Dommon smiled. "A mate's kiss is basically a simple greeting between union mates after they've been apart for a while. It's usually accompanied with a mental greeting."

A mental greeting? She frowned slightly as she thought back. "Yeah. Come to think of it, yeah, we did kind of talk to each other without saying anything out loud. At least not until Obrion caught us."

"All right, Grey. Now I'm going to ask you a couple of extremely personal questions. They're about what happened after you crashed on the moon." Dommon glanced over his shoulder at Rowe before he returned to her. "Evidently the two of you consummated your union. At any time did Rowe comment that what he was doing was illegal, and that he would have to pay the penalty if and when you managed to get back to Bellac?"

"Yes," she nodded, "he did. We talked about it."

"What were Rowe's feelings on the matter?"

"The same as mine. If the Academy chose to Drop him, I was going to leave the Academy, too."

Dommon hesitated. "Grey, please explain to the public what being 'Dropped' means."

"It means you're kicked out of the Academy. It means the Academy no longer feeds you, or clothes you, or gives you a place to live. You have to go out among the normals and find a job and a place to call home because you're not recognized any longer as a Synergian, which is stupid."

"Why do you say it's stupid?" he smiled.

"Because it is. Just because they don't call you a Synergian any longer doesn't automatically remove the gene. You're a Synergian all your life, whether they admit it or not."

"That's right. So you and Rowe made plans in the event he was Dropped?"

"Yes."

"But what did you plan to do if he wasn't Dropped? What if he is incarcerated instead?"

Grey stared at him in shock. "Incarcerated? You mean ... separated?" She turned to give Rowe an accusing look. "H-he didn't mention incarceration. He said he'd be punished, but he didn't mention separation. You didn't say anything about being separated," she said directly at Rowe.

"Why not incarceration?" Dommon continued. "Why only Dropped?"

Grey tried to shake off her growing fear. "Being Dropped is the ultimate banishment. We looked at it as worse-case scenario."

"But, Grey, for a Synergian, being Dropped is not worse-case," Dommon told her. "Incarceration is."

"How long would that be?" she asked innocently.

"A minimum of five years," Tollcrid interrupted.

Rowe was immediately on his feet. "Since when? It's a minimum of fifteen months probation, up to a maximum of twenty-two months in detention."

A smug grin spread over the older councilman's face. "The Council voted two months ago to increase the penalty to a minimum of five years ... without probation or visitation rights."

The crowd gasped. Behind her, Grey could hear an angry buzzing coming from the other Synergians. Already she could feel the cold chills of dread trickling through her bloodstream. The face she turned back to Dommon was quickly paling. "They would do that to us?" Now the trembling was overtaking her as her body began to react to the very real possibility that Rowe wouldn't be Dropped. Dropping, usually the ultimate degradation for a Synergian, would have been a blessing in disguise for them since she could also leave the Academy. But the mere thought of being separated from Rowe for days ... or weeks. Oh, gods, or months! Years!

And no visitation rights? No way to ease the pain that would encase them when they were separated? This soon after they had become mates and come into their power, any extended length of time apart from each other would kill her and Rowe.

Grey reached a hand out toward Rowe as the trembling increased. Tears began to roll down her cheeks as she struggled with the idea of a future without him. A very short, debilitating future.

He was suddenly there, wrapping his arms and his love around her as he tried to assuage her fear. Somewhere in the

distance she heard Tollcrid snidely say, "It makes no sense. Why does the mention of a few years incarceration terrify her, but the threat of being Dropped and having to live the rest of their lives out among the regular populace doesn't?"

"If you separate union mates, Master Tollcrid," Dommon vehemently replied, "even for a few days, without allowing them any personal contact, they will die. Dropping us doesn't frighten us. Not when we can still be with the person we love."

The crowd's roar drowned out Tollcrid's reply, but Grey didn't care. All that mattered at the moment was the strength of Rowe's love keeping her sane.

The temporary head of Council snorted. "You lost your union mate, but you're still alive," he pointed out.

Dommon refused to temper his growing anger at the man. "I'm alive because of Rowe Maine. Look around you, Master Tollcrid. Tell me, how many blue uniforms do you see? Not many, right? That's because the majority of mates who lose their partner die soon after. Only because of Rowe am I alive today. But it's not a happy existence. I am not a happy man. In fact, I'll never be a happy man again."

Tollcrid called for order to be restored. After a few more minutes the noise died down enough to where he could directly address the defense team. "Are you finished with this witness?"

Rowe answered him. "Yes."

"Then dismiss her and call your next one."

Grey saw a look pass between the two men. As Rowe helped her back to the security of the Synergian mates, Dommon announced, "I call forth Master Yuclos Tollcrid!"

The man looked ready to blow a blood vessel. "You cannot call a councilman to the witness chair," he replied in defiance.

Plees stepped away from her seat to face him. "The defense is able to call anyone they feel is necessary to plead their case. Take the seat, Master Tollcrid."

Several hands reached out to touch Grey and send her waves of calm. Before he left her to rejoin Dommon, Rowe pressed her hand to his lips. "Soon, Grey. Soon," he promised, his love shining in his dark eyes.

Soon what? This will be over soon? "Gods, I hope so," she murmured to herself as she watched her mate walk away. The emptiness inside her continued to grow.

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Chapter 31

White

The crowd quickly silenced, eager to find out why the acting head of Council had been called to the witness stand. Once Tollcrid was settled, Dommon took over the questioning.

"State your name, current status, and rank."

"Master Yuclos Tollcrid. My current status is Council member and academician. My rank is non-Synergian, and proud of it."

Dommon lifted an eyebrow at the man. "Oh? Why?"

"You're like candles. You burn out too soon. The life expectancy of a Synergian is usually less than three decades. That's not a life."

Dommon glanced back at the union mates still huddled around Grey. They were helping to keep her mentally and emotionally in check.

"It may not be what you would call a life, Master Tollcrid, but for us it's far richer than any a non-Synergian will ever experience. Tell me, how long have you been with your mate?"

The man looked surprised. "Twenty-eight years."

"Twenty-eight years." Nodding slightly, Dommon casually strolled around the man seated in the witness chair. Tollcrid eyed the man with obvious distrust. "You have three children, correct?"

"Yes."

"And three grandchildren?"

"Yes."

"Do you love your mate?"

Tollcrid made a rude noise. "That's a stupid question."

"Just answer it," Dommon pushed.

"Yes, I love my mate!"

"And do you love your children?"

"Yes!"

"And your grandchildren?"

"What is the point of all this?" the Council head demanded.

"How would you feel if they were all taken away from you?" Dommon asked, unaffected by the man's irritation.

"The question is irrelevant." Tollcrid spread another smug grin. "I see now where you're going with this. Forget it, Master Ridge. I'm not the one who broke the law."

Dommon nodded. "You're right, but please answer the question anyway. How would you feel if they were all taken away from you?"

"I would be upset. Lost. Heart-broken. There, is that what you were wanting to hear?"

"Master Tollcrid, how many years older are you than your mate?"

"Eight years."

"Uh-huh. Then let me ask you a hypothetical question. Let's pretend the Five Year Law isn't just for Synergians. Let's pretend it's for the entire population of Bellac. Master Tollcrid, if everyone was bound by law to the Five Year limit, you wouldn't have a mate. Or children. Or grandchildren. At least, not the ones you have now."

The murmuring in the background threatened to swell. Grey felt as if she were poised on the edge of a giant chasm, ready to either fall in or be dragged back to safety.

Tollcrid eyed Dommon with undisguised disdain. "All right. You've made your point. But it doesn't change the present circumstances."

"Of course not," Rowe stepped in. "But maybe it's time Synergians were allowed to begin dictating the law for non-Synergians."

Giving a snort, Tollcrid made it clear what he thought of the man's suggestion. "It'll never happen."

"Why not?" Rowe beamed to the crowd. "It's only right, seeing as how non-Synergians are making the laws for us."

"That's idiotic."

"Why do you say that, Master Tollcrid?" Dommon asked.

"What do Synergians know about what happens to the general populace? You're holed up in the Academy all your lives."

Leaning close to the man, Rowe whispered loud enough to be heard by all. "That's exactly the point we're making."

The swell of noise rose and fell in the space of a few short seconds, negating the need for the guards to step in.

"You're dismissed," Rowe told the councilman and turned his back on him. Tollcrid quickly resumed his seat with the rest of the Council. "The defense rests its case."

"Very well." Tollcrid rose back to his feet. It was clear to all the man was eager to bring the trial to an end. "Master Plees, you have final say. Are you ready, or do we need to break for a short recess?"

"I'm ready," she replied, standing. At his nod, she turned to face the populace. "I will make this brief. Rowe Maine broke the Five Year Law. He was not allowed by Academy law to seek his mate, although his mate was already aware of his existence, and by Academy law was unable to communicate with him. Each and every time Rowe Maine broke the law, which he confesses he did numerous times, it was because he was bound by a second set of laws which contradicted the Academy laws."

Turning to face the Council, Plees lifted her voice to carry throughout the plaza. "Master Tollcrid, as Head of Council, I remind you that, although you have been dismissed from the witness seat, you are still under obligation to answer with the truth. Will you please tell us what the three prime laws are?"

Tollcrid frowned. "Why?"

"For the public's knowledge, please state the three prime laws."

"The prime laws are for Synergians only. The general population isn't bound by them."

"I understand," Plees nodded. "Still, it would be nice if they were aware of them."

Shooting her another angry look, the man complied. "Prime Law Three states that no Synergian shall force another into sex with another for the sake of proving or disproving the fact that they may be mates."

"Which is the same as our general laws which consider rape a crime," Plees explained to the crowd. "Go on."

"Prime Law Two states mated Synergians will be given free access to pursue their powers and abilities, without obstruction or criticism."

"And Prime Law One?"

"Prime Law One says that mated Synergians cannot be separated for any reason, be it length of time or jurisdiction."

Plees nodded again. "Who came up with these prime laws, Master Tollcrid?"

"The Synergians did."

"Why?"

"It was one of the conditions of the treaty between Synergians and non after the Uprising of 6044."

"Would you say the prime laws supersede Academy laws?"

Tollcrid grimaced. "That's been a hot topic for years, Master Ridge, and you know that."

"But it's the truth, isn't it?" Rowe pushed. "The Academy decides whether or not Synergian law shall be relevant, or if Academy law should prevail instead. In any event, the punishment for breaking either is very stiff. Who determined the penalties for breaking prime laws?"

"The Academy."

By this time the crowd was growing angry and restless. Grey could tell they hadn't fully comprehended how far-reaching the Academy was in determining justice.

"Are you quite finished?" Tollcrid asked. At Plees' nod, he turned to Rowe. "Are you ready to sum up your case?"

"Yes."

The older man gave a wave of permission to continue, but instead of facing the crowd as was expected, Rowe remained staring at the acting head of Council.

"Master Tollcrid, Council Head, the final decision rests with you, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then I have only one thing to say. When you find me guilty, which I am, and you determine my punishment, which you must, I will have no choice but to have you arrested."

Tollcrid paused. "On what grounds?"

"For breaking Prime Law Two and, more importantly, Prime Law One."

Behind her Grey could hear and sense the rising wall of anger coming from the other Synergians. It was a dark energy unlike anything she had ever experienced in her life, but it filled her with hope.

"As I said before," Tollcrid said calmly, undaunted by the fact that every Synergian had risen to his and her feet, "in my opinion, Academy law prevails over Synergian law."

"Exactly," Rowe smiled. "In that case, when Grey and I die after you break Prime Law One, you will be guilty of murder ... and that, Master Tollcrid, is an Academy-created law which you will be accused and convicted of. And the last time I checked, premeditated murder is punishable by death."

"Premed—" Tollcrid glanced over Rowe's shoulder at the union mates rallying behind him. "You're not serious."

"Are you willing to take that chance?" Dommon demanded, standing firm next to his friend.

"Are you threatening me?"

"It's not a threat. It's a promise."

Seconds passed in tense silence. Plees finally cleared her throat to add, "You know, Master Maine did go through the proper channels before the C'u Govin attacked and forced him and Grey into consummating."

Tollcrid shot her a desperate look. He was trapped, and there was no way he could avoid it. His pride would not allow him to back down or give Rowe a lenient sentencing. Grey could almost feel the sweat running down his body underneath the heavy robes of state. "What are you implying, Master Plees?"

"I'm implying nothing. I just stated that, given the unusual conditions regarding Rowe Maine's request for a one day extension, if the C'u Govin hadn't attacked, and if the accused hadn't been disabled and made to seek shelter on the moon ... maybe the Academy would have granted him his request?"

Dommon stepped forward. "Master Tollcrid, did the Academy ever issue a final ruling on Master Maine's request?"

Throwing a look at where Master Vistrop was standing, Tollcrid caught the shake of the man's head. "No. No decision was reached because it was assumed Master Maine had been killed in action."

"Then this case cannot proceed any further until the Academy finishes up old business first, before it tackles this issue," Plees stated. "That's also a point of Academy law."

Another long stretch of silence fell over the hushed crowd. Rising to his feet, Tollcrid announced, "Rowe Maine, you are ordered to attend where we will make our decision regarding

your request for an extension. This hearing is summarily placed on hold until our decision is made."

Before anyone could protest or comment, the man hastened toward the large shelter which had been erected to act as a temporary headquarters for the Academy. The rest of the Council quickly followed him inside.

Rowe gave Grey one final loving glance then allowed the guards to escort him inside.

Grey collapsed into her seat. Her body was running hot and cold. Her emotions felt dead. These past few minutes she had tried to keep up with the back-and-forth interrogation, but the more she heard, the more confused and disheartened she became. Law this, law that—where was it all going to end?

"Why didn't anyone mention the fact that Rowe and I managed to shove the C'u Govin out of our air space? Huh?" She swivelled around in her seat to look up at the other union mates. "No one said anything about that. If we hadn't made love, we wouldn't have been able to make that halo. We would be dead now, and all of this crap..."

She buried her face in her hands, unable to hold back the tears any longer. Several warm hands reached out to offer comfort, which she gratefully accepted. She had lost contact with Rowe and knew he was deliberately shielding her from the Academy's decision.

What was the use of hoping any longer? Tollcrid's reputation was unblemished and his dominance in the Council was absolute. The man was determined to keep the Synergians under stringent and unfair guidelines as long as

he had a hand in the process. He would find a way to get himself out of a murder charge, if it ever came down to that. He might even be able to grant himself exoneration.

Someone grabbed her wrist and gently pulled one hand away. Grey raised grief-filled eyes to Dommon. To her surprise, Master Plees stood beside him.

"We tried," the woman softly said. "If the outcome means your deaths, I promise to do everything I can to change the laws. This trial may be over, but its ramifications will be felt for decades."

"If Rowe is sentenced in a way that will bring about his and Grey's death, we Synergians will no longer accept the Academy's decisions," Tonn spoke up. The other union mates around him nodded silently. "The Academy has to learn once and for all that we cannot blindly follow their laws any longer. We cannot, and we will not."

"Those ramifications won't last for years," Karrel, Tonn's mate, promised. "They'll last from this day forth."

"They're coming back out!" someone yelled from the crowd.

"Already?" Master Plees said, surprised. "How? It hasn't been half an hour!"

At the sight of the robed figures, the noise from the populace grew louder as the academicians somberly walked out of the shelter and returned to their seats. Grey was on her feet with the rest of them, intently scanning the line of councilmen for one beloved face.

"Where is he? Where's Rowe?" An ugly thought came to her, nearly choking her with fear. "Please tell me they didn't already take him away!"

"They can't," Dommon assured her. "He has to present himself before them when they pass judgment."

The Council finally found their seats. At the head, Master Tollcrid sat quietly. The crowd settled, waiting.

"Where's Rowe?" Grey asked again, rapidly blinking away the tears. She reached for him through their connection without success. She tried again, and this time she got a response.

I'm here.

"Here?" she echoed softly. She looked across the crowd for any flash of red, without success. "Where? Where are you, Rowe?"

The Council reached a decision, he sent to her, along with a thread of tenderness.

"Wha-? How?"

"How, what?" Plees asked. "Grey?"

"Rowe says he's here but I can't see him! He says the Council has reached a decision." The tears were falling again, harder and hotter. She swiped at them with the sleeve of her jumpsuit as Master Plees left the Synergians and approached the Council.

"Has the Council reached a decision?" the woman called out loudly, not disguising her rising anger.

Tollcrid nodded. "It has." For what he had just gone through, the man appeared overly confident and calm.

"Well?"

A figure detached itself from where it had been standing near the crowd and began approaching the center plaza, heading directly for the Synergians' sitting area. Grey cried out, her shriek ringing in her ears as she finally caught sight of him and stared in disbelief at the man walking toward her wearing a loving smile...

...and a white jumpsuit.

"Rowe!"

She leaped out of the seating area and ran to him, throwing herself into his waiting embrace. As their mouths met and sealed both their love and their fate, they remained oblivious to the Council's announcement. And if the crowd responded, neither of them heard it nor paid any attention to it.

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Epilogue

"There. That should do it." Rowe gave her neckline one final tug, making Grey giggle.

"It's no use, Rowe. The damn computers will never make me a uniform that'll fit my boobs. I'll have to spend the rest of our lives trying to breathe with a giant bandage over my chest."

He eyed the firm swell of flesh peeking out from the jumpsuit and grinned. "You sure you don't want to me try adjusting that again?" he asked, reaching for her.

Laughing, Grey swatted his hands and stepped back for his approval. Holding out her arms, she made a little twirl. "Well? Think it's my color?"

"Purple is definitely your color," a voice from the hatchway replied. Rowe and Grey turned to see Master Plees stepping into the shelter. "Are you two about ready? The crowd's getting restless."

"Aw, well, look at how quickly things have changed," Rowe stated. "A few days ago we were on the Academy's shit list and on trial for our lives. Today they want to honor us for tossing out the enemy."

"I think it's called fickle fate," Plees laughed. "I'll tell them you're on your way out." She vanished out the doorway, leaving them alone.

Grey stared into eyes that could signal so many emotions, and make her laugh, cry, or melt without him having to say a

word. Right now those brown depths were letting her know how beautiful he found her.

"What did Master Girdy say when you told him we were keeping our assignment with A Master Red?"

Rowe ran a finger through the golden slash in her hair as he answered. "He was dubious. After all, union mates aren't known for delivering their powers from the cockpit of a flit."

"Neither are union mates known for masturbating each other in order to fully engage their powers." She closed her eyes to savor his gentle touch as her senses were filled with the overwhelming strength of his love. "I wonder what would happen ... I mean, how strong do you think..." His fingertips were stroking her cheek and jawline. Light, tickling caresses that were meant to pleasure her.

"Having problems concentrating?" he breathed into her ear.

Grey nodded, savoring the feel of his face against hers. "Gods, you know I melt whenever you do that to me." Taking a deep breath, she tried again. "I was wondering how strong our power would be if we tried to produce it while we were actually making love."

His body grew closer until she felt a familiar nudge along her abdomen, and Grey giggled. "Rowe, we don't have time for that."

"You mean you don't want to?" he asked petulantly, teasingly.

"That's not what I said, and you know it. There are a million people out there waiting for us, waiting to cheer for us."

She didn't need to open her eyes to know he was undoing the latches on her jumpsuit. Grabbing his hands, she finally looked at him. "Rowe."

He grinned. "You want it as much as I do. Admit it." To prove his point, he bent over and ran his tongue over the curve of one breast. It was enough to ignite the fire between her legs all over again.

"Rowe!"

"Shh! Five minutes, tops," he promised in a voice that drenched her in his need.

"How?" she asked as he began to work on his own amethyst-colored latches.

"These purple suits have a little more give than the old white ones did. Let's see if we can't do it with our clothes on. Save us a little time getting re-dressed."

"But ... the commendations?"

Instead of answering, Rowe dropped to his knees and dove his mouth between her legs, much to her delight.

The award ceremony would have to wait, Grey decided, awash in bliss. For that matter, screw them. She and Rowe had a lot of lost time to make up.

In that case, his sultry voice murmured inside her head, screw me instead.

Okay, she silently giggled in reply, and did.

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About the Author

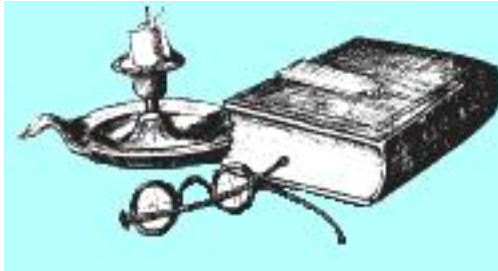
Linda loves to write romance with a fantasy or science fiction flair. Her technique is often described as being as visual as a motion picture or graphic novel. By day she is a Kindergarten teacher, wife, and mother of two who lives in a small south Texas town near the Gulf Coast. But at night she delves into worlds filled with daring exploits and sensual, erotic romance.

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